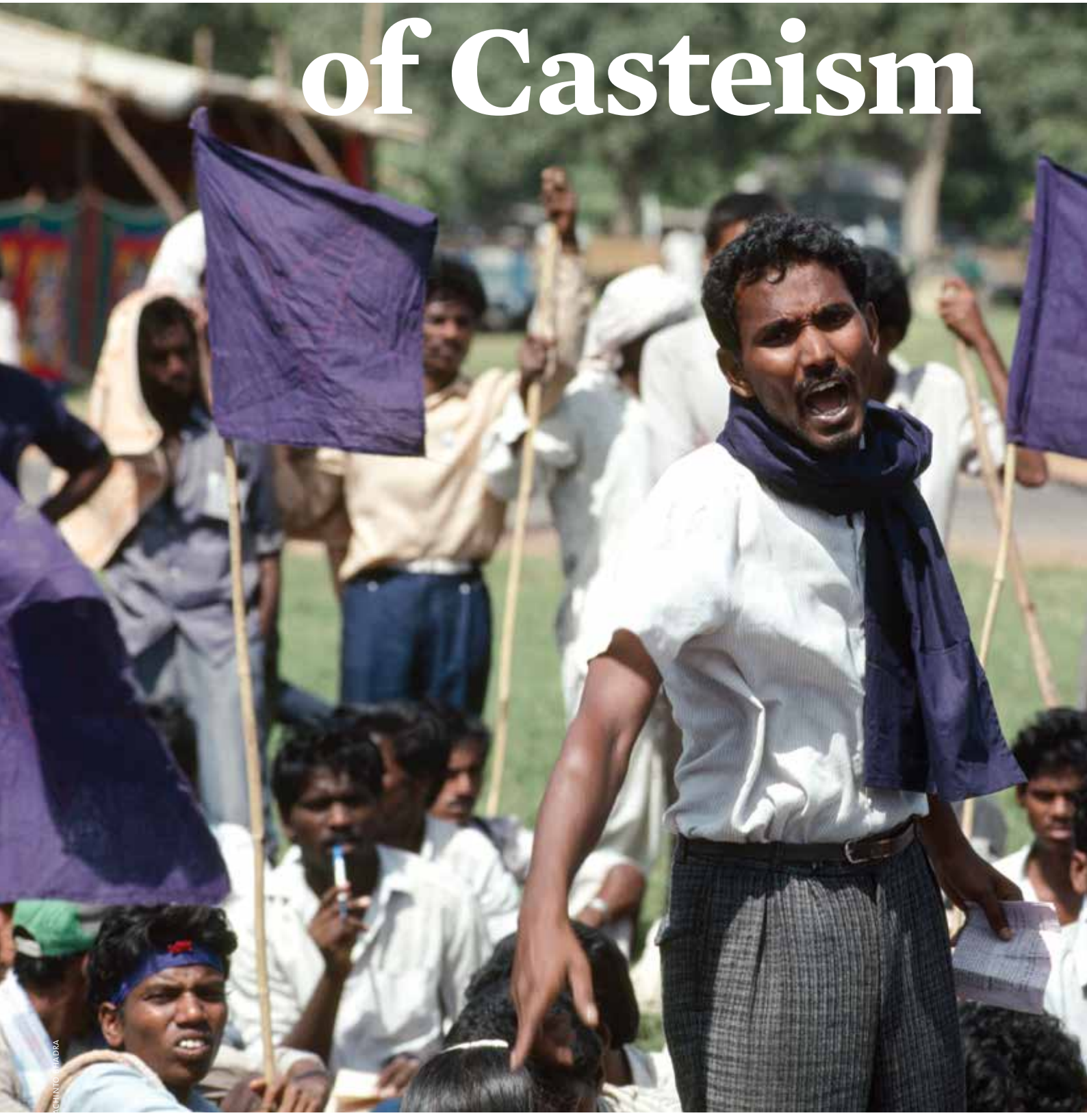
The Harvest of Casteism



Race, caste and what it will take to make Dalit lives matter

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COVER STORY / CASTE

SURAJ YENGDE

ON A WEDNESDAY EVENING in July 1967, two white police officers dragged a black man, John William Smith, into their precinct building in the city of Newark. Smith, a taxi driver, had just been arrested, for the alleged crime of improperly passing the officers' car, and had been beaten so brutally that he could not walk. Residents of a housing project saw him dragged in, and a rumour set off: the cops had killed another black man. A crowd formed, and resorted to attacking the precinct building. For five days, violence tore through the city, with a toll of over two dozen lives. Some called it rioting—others a rebellion.

That was just one flashpoint of what came to be known as "the long, hot summer of 1967." The United States saw over a hundred and fifty "race riots" that season, with police brutality against black people a common spark, extending a long lineage of rage—Chicago in 1919 and 1935, Harlem in 1943 and 1964, Watts in 1965, Hough in 1966, and on and on. The US president, Lyndon B Johnson, already battling public anger over the invasion of Vietnam and faced with a fresh crisis, formed a committee to answer three questions: "What happened? Why did it happen? What can be done to prevent it from happening again?"

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The Kerner Commission, as part of its work, hired a group of social scientists to bolster its research. Their draft submission to the commission echoed the radical language and ideas of the rising Black Power movement, and came to some alarming conclusions. Under the present course, the researchers wrote, the United States was headed for a full-blown race war, with "guerilla warfare of black youth against white power in the major cities of the United States." The only way out was a radical programme to tackle the poverty and socioeconomic stagnation facing black communities, to reform the police and other institutions that plainly discriminated against black people, to make drastic changes that went far beyond the "token concessions" to the community so far. "There is still time," the researchers added, "for one nation to make a concerted attack on the racism that persists in its midst." If it did not, "The harvest of racism will be the end of the American dream."

This document, with "destroy" scrawled on its front page, was consigned to oblivion, until it was discovered in an archive and published half a century later. The researchers were all dismissed. Still, as the historian Julian E Zelizer notes, much of the data they collected survived in the commission's final report, and added to its judgments. The commission presented its "basic conclusion: Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal."

The report rejected any notion that the riots were part of some grand conspiracy, or that the people on the streets had been anyone other than

ordinary black people sick of waiting meekly for change. It did not place much hope in Johnson's social programmes, as the president had hoped it would, or lament the crumbling of the "Negro family" in line with an earlier government study, the Moynihan Report. Instead, it located the causes of the riots in police violence, institutional exclusion, unemployment and segregation, and called for "a commitment to national action—compassionate, massive and sustained, backed by the resources of the most powerful and the richest nation on this earth." And while the causal factors were complex, "certain fundamental matters are clear. Of these, the most fundamental is the racial attitude and behavior of white Americans toward black Americans. Race prejudice has shaped our history decisively; it now threatens to affect our future."

Johnson effectively disowned the report, but could not stop it from becoming public, in March 1968. For many black leaders, its frankness was a thing of incredulity. Martin Luther King, Jr, described the acknowledgment of white racism as "an important confession of a harsh truth." The civil-rights activist Floyd McKissick thought it was a historic landmark: "It's the first time whites have said, 'We're racists.'"

KING WAS ASSASSINATED the following month, after delivering a speech to striking sanitation workers in Memphis, and mass riots broke out again. Johnson did not stand for reelection later that year, and was replaced in the White House by Richard Nixon. The new president would not hear of "national action" to curb racial discrimination and inequality. He talked up "law and order," pandering to white fears of increased black assertion, and fuelled the trend the Kerner Commission had condemned when it complained that, in several cities, the main official response to the riots was not to address the causes of black discontent but "to train and equip the police with more sophisticated weapons."

Nixon's template, with occasional exceptions, has survived for half a century. Even when a black man was voted into the White House, it never lost its place in American public policy. The Kerner report was a runaway bestseller when published, but the country clearly did not take its message to heart. And now, generations later, with the police killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd and a rebellion in the streets, the United States is confronting the same ugly truths.

Many are looking back to 1967 and 1968 to try and make sense of the present, perhaps to wonder what might have been. There are parallels, and there are differences. One contrast stands out: the number of non-black people standing up and speaking up to say Black Lives Matter.

Black people had allies across racial lines in the 1960s and earlier, but never on this scale. Today, black people remain the main power behind the protests, but conspicuous alongside them in the streets and online are young white people, Hispanic people, South Asians, East Asians and many others—not to mention people from across genders, sexualities and religions. This diversity is a testament to the work of the activists who fought, especially through the years when so few were listening, to expand the American conscience.

The wide support still requires a critical view. Much of it is genuine, but many are not yet fully confident about white protesters' "performative solidarity." As the black writer Stacey Patton has asked, "Are white people protesting because they are in honest solidarity—or because it helps to soothe their own conscience or assuage their guilt?" The question applies just as much to the brands and corporations suddenly paying tribute to the black struggle—many of them with far too few black people in their own offices and boardrooms, and some directly complicit in repressive policing.

Yet the recent flood of public statements of support, whatever the motives behind them, still forms an unprecedented archive. Across the United States, people—most often white people, of a certain liberal bent—are confessing that they have not done enough, and pledging that they will do better. Even given the benefit of the doubt that they personally mean no ill, they recognise that the institutions and communities and systems they inhabit have created two societies, separate and unequal. Few will speak the bluntest truth, but its echoes are clear in what has been said. America—*white* America, where white people dominate power, wealth and the population—is racist.

The power of the Black Lives Matter movement has taken it far beyond the United States as well. Demonstrators have gathered in England, Germany, Belgium, Australia and many other countries with racist pasts and presents, to send strength to those marching in the United States but also, crucially, to press their own societies to settle historical accounts. The #BlackLivesMatter hashtag, if not the protests, arrived in India too—but here, the movement has prompted barely any self-examination at all.

Of the Bollywood stars who posted against racism, several have endorsed skin-lightening creams. Of the media outlets that carried news of the protests, all except a very few have done nothing to hold the police to account for their role in the anti-Muslim riots in Delhi just months ago, or to call out the ruling Hindu-supremacist government of Narendra Modi for presiding over

BELOW: A protest meeting in 1956, during the civil-rights movement. The Civil Rights Act arrived in 1964, but the exclusion and marginalisation of black people continued under new guises.

a massive spike in atrocities against the country's oppressed castes and ethnic and religious minorities. Many of the global corporations now speaking out against racism have extensive operations in India, but none has ever taken a stand for the rights of Dalits. Nor has any of India's own corporations. It is no exaggeration to say that the case of George Floyd has received more attention in India than any of the recent incidents in the country's endless onslaught of caste crimes. In the state of Uttar Pradesh, the young Dalit Vikas Kumar Jatav was shot after he dared to pray at a village temple, and the Dalit politician Chhote Lal Diwakar and his son were shot after an argument over land. In both cases, the murderers were dominant-caste men. In Kerala, a young Dalit man had his hand hacked off by the brother of the dominant-caste girl he loved. Government records show that hundreds of Dalits are losing their lives to caste crimes every year.

Some commentators and social-media users cared enough to point out this hypocrisy, and to ask the obvious question: when will India have its equivalent of a Black Lives Matter moment, a realisation that Dalit lives matter, that Adivasi lives matter, that Muslim lives matter, that the lives of all those pushed to the margins of Indian society have great worth? They pointed correctly to the hurdles, including casteist, racist and religious hatred. But when it came to placing responsibility where it really belongs, they missed the mark.

The tendency in this moment, as in many others, is to speak of India as a unitary mass. Of course it is not, and the largest share of those writing and posting and reading about Black Lives Matter represent a specific part of it. That part is fluent in English, digitally savvy, and well-versed enough in US politics to understand the issue at hand—a combination of traits almost wholly exclusive to the country's social and economic elite. And that elite is almost wholly drawn from a narrow set of "twice-born" castes that form the three highest tiers of the four-tiered Hindu varna system—the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas. These castes constitute a minority of the country's population, yet in all the institutions of social, cultural, political and economic power, they are the dominant majority. They are the people who run the country.

GREY VILLET / THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION / GETTY IMAGES

It is a strange sight for me, a Dalit—an outcaste—to see the dominant castes decry "Indian" racism and casteism and religious prejudice. The country is not innocent of any of these things, but these problems, especially when it comes to these castes, are not so "Indian" after all.

Consider the example of the United States. It is easy to speak of racism as an American problem, but framing it this way obscures a more specific story. In the United States, racism is a *white* instrument that holds down *black* people. Every turning point in the history of American racism, even if imperfect and incomplete, has required a change in white belief and behaviour, in parts voluntary and in parts enforced by the state.

The nation, founded by white men, was never meant to be universally democratic and equal—the continuation of slavery was taken for granted. Black people never needed to be convinced of the evils of slavery, but white people did. The American Civil War was their moral reckoning with it. Even after the slaves were freed, the white elite found ways to strip black people of their rights, their intelligence and their character. Decades of black activism forced white America to reconsider legalised segregation and secured the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination by race, colour, religion, sex or national origin. But again the exclusion and marginalisation of black people continued. More than half a century since the Civil Rights Act, black people remain in an economic stranglehold that maintains a yawning gap in wealth and opportunity between blacks and whites. Redlining policies pushed masses of black people into ghettoes, and biased police and courts pack black people into prison at a rate five times higher than for white people. Black Lives Matter has forced another moment of truth upon the white-dominated country. Which is why—though it is essential to remember the black scholar Khalil Gibran Muhammad's caution that "Americans have short memories and long appetites when it comes to racism"—this moment holds real promise.

In India, sweeping talk of "Indian" prejudice shields the real architects of the social order from liability. The forces that give life to caste are clear. The Hindu holy books enshrined the varna system, and they have been preserved and propagated for millennia by the Brahmins, exercising their monopoly over priesthood and vast power over social thought. The other dominant castes have surrendered their minds to brahminical beliefs, and joined the project of translating these into reality. The equations between the dominant castes have seen various configurations over time, and so have their relations with changing political rulers across historical periods, but their collaboration in shaping the present state of affairs is indisputable.

Racist and religious hatred is deeply enmeshed with caste belief. By the rules of caste, all those not born into the varnas are subhuman, and their mere proximity or touch is a source of spiritual pollution. This explains the ostracisation of many of the country's ethnic minorities—most notably the indigenous Adivasis, ranked alongside Dalits in the Brahminical hierarchy. Huge numbers of Indian Muslims, Christians, Buddhists and Sikhs are from these outcaste groups, having converted to try and shake off the stigma they carry in Hindu eyes. But the dominant castes do not forget that stigma so easily, and brand them with an added taint for the supposed sin of abandoning the Hindu religion. Even in their new faiths, which espouse human equality in the eyes of god, Dalit and Adivasi converts find that a narrow elite, often converts from higher castes, continues to shun them.

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Colour comes into the picture too, even if skin tone does not set apart the oppressors and the oppressed as neatly in India as it does in the West. A common belief, though not always true, associates darker skin with lower caste. Slurs of caste and colour overlap and pair together in Indians' vocabularies. Darker groups—south Indians, Siddis, Africans and others—face rampant discrimination. Most often, the people with the privilege to determine their treatment—police and government officials, landlords, employers—come from the dominant castes. So do those in the media, film, advertising and other cultural industries with the greatest power to shape cosmetic ideals. It can be argued that the local fetish for fair skin owes a good deal to the complexes left behind by colonial rule, but this cannot be used to deflect from indigenous prejudice. The Indian elite hold up the fact that they have been subjected to racism by white people, whether in the past or the present, and from this base claim solidarity with black people. But, whether in India itself or in the Indian diaspora, this is the only form of discrimination they are willing to critique.

Casteism, racism and religious hatred in India are Brahminical instruments of the dominant castes for holding down Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, Christian and many other lives. The refusal by the dominant castes to acknowledge this is what keeps Black Lives Matter from having any real impact here, and prevents any national introspection on how this society debases the lives of its oppressed ethnicities and castes and religious minorities.

The wicked genius of the caste system lies in what BR Ambedkar, the great Dalit thinker and leader, described as its "graded inequality." The Brahminical order thrives on a seemingly infinite fragmentation of castes and sub-castes, the position of each dependent on its discrimination and violence against those it claims superiority over in the endless quest to defend and improve its rank. It is a near-perfect guarantor of hierarchy—self-enforcing, self-expanding and self-perpetuating, with a built-in mechanism against the unity of the oppressed. The system has survived for thousands of years without any change to its essential structure, impervious to political revolutions and ideological challenges, able to transplant into new religions and lands.

OPPOSITE PAGE:
A Black Lives Matter protest in Miami in March. Black Lives Matter has forced the United States to confront plainly the racism that has shaped its entire history.

If the elite castes ever care to confront religious hatred, racism and casteism, they will have to find the decency to attack the foundations of caste. The foundation stone itself, as Ambedkar pointed out, is the Brahminical religion, Hinduism, so centred on the varna system that it cannot survive without caste—or, put another way, that the annihilation of caste depends on the dismantling of Hinduism. To idly wonder when Dalit and Muslim and Adivasi and so many other Indian lives will matter while glossing over this reality is an obfuscation of the Hindu religion and of Indian history.

India's oppressed castes have taken inspiration from the black struggle in the United States for over a century, seeing parallels between the evils of caste and of race, yet dominant-caste thinkers have tried to undermine claims to solidarity and shared experience. Before and since the creation of an independent India, the oppressed castes have repeatedly asked the dominant castes to recognise their plight, acknowledge their part in it, and redress the injustice. Yet at every step, the dominant castes have refused them empathy, and undermined their efforts for change. In the United States, black people are asking white people to hold themselves accountable, and they are being heard. In India, we have been asking the same thing of the dominant castes for a long time, but all we hear back is dismissal or silence.

"DALIT," BY ITS PREVALENT MEANING, is a caste-specific term of assertion for those once called untouchables and now officially designated the Scheduled Castes. When it first emerged in Marathi in the 1920s, "Dalit"—literally "broken people"—was reserved for the untouchable castes, but the word has taken on a wider meaning over time. The scholar Anand Teltumbde has observed that Ambedkar "used 'Dalit' as a quasi-class term," including "within its ambit the downtrodden and poor." But Ambedkar often preferred other terms for the oppressed—underscoring the difference between touchables and untouchables—and it was in the 1970s, many years after his death, that the use and political gravity of "Dalit" exploded.

Credit for this belongs to the Dalit Panthers, the radical anti-caste organisation founded in Bombay in 1972, inspired by the Black Panther Party in the United States. Their legacy, largely ignored by mainstream Indian history, is hugely relevant today, beginning with their definition of "Dalit." As defined in the Dalit Panther manifesto, the term takes in not just the oppressed castes, but also the Adivasis, or Scheduled Tribes, and "the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion." Part of this definition is explained by the Panthers' avowal of socialism, but the acknowledgment of injustice based on gender and religious identity challenged the class-bound programmes typical of the socialists and other leftists of the time.

The Panthers, as a relatively small group founded in reaction to caste-based violence and injustice, centred their politics and their vocabulary on furthering oppressed-caste unity, organisation and pride. The wider coalition suggested in the definition never came together under the Panthers' watch. Yet its foresight and importance remain undiminished.

According to the 2011 census, the Scheduled Castes comprise roughly seventeen percent of the Indian population. Combine them with the Scheduled Tribes, who form another nine percent, and the Panthers' definition of Dalit already represents a quarter of the entire country. Add the oppressed religious minorities—with the Muslims forming the largest number of them, representing almost fifteen percent of the Indian population—and the term encompasses over forty percent of India.

By the criteria of economic and political exploitation, the Panthers' understanding of "Dalit" also includes large numbers of the Shudras, largely grouped under the Other Backwards Classes, who form the last of the four tiers of the varna hierarchy. Shudras are looked down upon by the dominant castes and confined to middling ranks of society and power, but are ranked above the Dalits and Adivasis, who are considered to belong to no varna at all. At least one government survey has put the OBC population at forty percent. By the official reckoning of the Mandal Commission, which in the early 1980s wrote a landmark report on the social condition of the OBCs, only a small minority of this highly stratified group belongs to "upper" Shudra castes with significant wealth and power. The rest have little of either.

The exact demographic weights of all these communities are debated, but there is every reason to think that Dalits, understood as the Panthers defined them, form something at least approaching three-quarters of the Indian people. The Mandal Commission estimated that the dominant castes account for barely more than seventeen percent of the population—roughly a sixth of the total.

Indian society must be understood in this light. The massive majority of castes and ethnic and religious minorities are held subordinate by a small religious and caste elite. In the United States, by contrast, black people account for under a sixth of the population, and white people for almost three-quarters. There, the dominant majority is being made to shed its denial of the wrongs done to the minority. In India, the dominant minority holds such disproportionate privilege that it can

WOOSLER DELISFORT / IRIS PHOTOCOLLECTIVE


STOP KILLING

THIS SPREAD: After the police killing of George Floyd in the United States (right), the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag trended in India. A video from the recent communal riots in Delhi showing police assaulting five Muslim men—one of whom, Faizan, later died—provoked no widespread outrage.

still comfortably turn away from the damage done to the oppressed majority.

The Panthers' definition set a precedent for the political imagination necessary to challenge this. Others would go on to prove the power of the oppressed majority in electoral terms—most notably the Dalit leader Kanshi Ram. After first organising the Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti—roughly, the Dalit and exploited people's struggle committee—in 1984 Kanshi Ram founded the Bahujan Samaj Party. This meant an expansion of the group he wanted to bring together, with strong overlaps with the Panthers' definition. The Bahujans—the majority, or the many—included not just the oppressed castes, but also Adivasis and converts to minority religions. By courting voters and alliances across these lines, the BSP has risen to power multiple times in Uttar Pradesh, and is expanding its strength and presence across the country.

The Dalit Panthers' imagination holds other lessons in political imagination and solidarity too. They imagined a fruitful connection between the black and Dalit struggles—even if in their case, as through much of the last century and a half, that connection was never made material.

The precedent for this connection goes back to 1873, when Jotirao Phule, the iconic Shudra thinker and anti-caste reformer, wrote *Gulamgiri*—literally, Slavery. In the book, Phule attacked the scriptural bases of the varna system and described the condition of the oppressed castes as a kind of inherited slavery. He also made a weapon of the English language, understanding its power to carry his message beyond the confines of India's vernacular tongues, where the dominant castes jealously policed access and ideas. *Gulamgiri* was published in Marathi, but to make sure its point was not lost to English speakers the book carried a translation of its full title—*Slavery In The Civilized British Government Under the Cloak of Brahminism*—and an English dedication and preface. The dedication read:

> To the good people of the United States as a token of admiration for their sublime disinterested and self-sacrificing devotion in the cause of Negro Slavery; and with an earnest desire, that my countrymen may take their noble example as their guide in the emancipation of their Sudra Brethren from the trammels of Brahmin thraldom.

Phule was writing less than a decade after the United States adopted the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery in 1865, and evidently before the country's revised regime of racism could dampen his admiration. Still, the spectacle of legislative action against an abhorrent and pervasive system of inequality was a legitimate cause for wonder in a land where the caste order flourished unimpeded. When India got its chance after Independence in 1947, it passed a constitutional ban on the practice of untouchability, but never outlawed caste itself.

Phule had no open avenues of communication with the United States, and could only draw inspiration from afar. Ambedkar, born in 1891—the year after Phule's death—got to know the country more intimately, spending some of his student years in New York City. Decades later, after he had returned to India, Ambedkar exchanged letters with WEB Du Bois, the towering black intellectual and civil-rights leader.

"I have been a student of the Negro problem and have read your writing throughout," Ambedkar wrote by way of introduction. "There is so much similarity between the position of the Untouchables in India and the position of the Negroes in America that the study of the latter is not only natural but necessary." He asked Du Bois to share a copy of a petition submitted to the United Nations on behalf of black Americans, since the "Untouchables of India are also thinking of following suit." Du Bois obliged, and in a letter dated July 1946

replied, "I have often heard of your name and work and of course have every sympathy with the Untouchables of India. I shall be glad to be of any service I can render if possible in the future."

As far as known records show, the correspondence between Ambedkar and Du Bois ended there. But Dalits once again drew inspiration from the black struggle with the emergence of the Dalit Panthers.

Ambedkar's death in 1956 had left the Dalit cause cast adrift. Many Dalit leaders were drawn into party politics, where they succumbed to infighting or were co-opted by the ruling establishment, most prominent in the form of the Indian National Congress. Atrocities against the oppressed castes continued on a massive scale—rapes, murders, whippings, deliberate contamination of their water sources—without any political or official pushback. This was acknowledged by the Elayaperumal Committee, appointed to look into untouchability and the condition of the Scheduled Castes, in a report submitted to the government in 1970. By 1972, continuing reports of the ostracisation of Dalits and attacks against them—in one case, two Dalit women in a village in Maharashtra were stripped and beaten for attempting to drink from a well reserved for the dominant castes—were provoking violent outbursts among young urban Dalits, including against the existing Dalit leadership. The Dalit Panthers were formed in Bombay to try and channel the anger towards real change, led by a bold group of Dalits including Raja Dhale, Namdeo Dhasal and JV Pawar.

The Dalit Panthers' imagination holds other lessons in political imagination and solidarity too. They imagined a fruitful connection between the black and Dalit struggles.

There are some parallels here to the emergence of the Black Panthers. The organisation was born, in 1966, out of a frustration with the limitations of the civil-rights movement. The movement's non-violent activism had delivered the Civil Rights Act, but seemed powerless in the face of the unrelenting economic inequality and racial violence that fuelled the riots in its aftermath. The Black Panthers made it clear that enough was enough, and proposed radically new methods of black assertion.

The Dalit Panthers acknowledged their debt to this spirit of radicalism in the choice of their name, and also in adopting the American organisation's symbol of a snarling black panther as their own. In their manifesto, they wrote, "From the Black Panthers, Black Power emerged. The fire of the struggles has thrown out sparks into the country. We claim a close relationship with this struggle." There were other overlaps too: mass gatherings, fiery rhetoric, the broad goal of liberating oppressed people. Significantly, both groups responded to their governments' abject failure to stop violence against their communities, and frequent complicity in the attacks against them, by trying to take their defence into their own hands. The Dalit Panthers' founders even drew on some slivers of the same cultural heritage as the Black Panthers—Dhale translated numerous black poets, including Langston Hughes and Robert Hayden, into Marathi. But in many ways, the Dalit Panthers and the Black Panthers were actually more different than they were alike.

Where the Black Panthers were a political party—originally the Black Panther Party for Self Defense—the Dalit Panthers were not. The Black Panthers aligned with Marxism-Leninism, while the Dalit Panthers were never wholly taken by the proponents of any political ideology other than Ambedkarism. And while the Black Panthers had many women in their leadership, the Dalit Panthers had none—a serious impediment in their politics and reach.

Nehru became the darling of the post-colonial world. The reality that vast numbers of Indians continued to live under caste oppression, their socioeconomic position dictated by birth just as in any racist colonial regime, did not sit well with this project.

The Black Panthers were proponents of Black nationalism, and the Dalit Panthers had their own Dalit nationalism. But beyond the shared ideal of self-respect, Dalit nationalism took a very particular shape. Earlier, Ambedkar had proposed the establishment of separate settlements for Dalits where they could be free from dominant-caste oppression and own the land. This was not a separatist project, but was to be achieved within the framework of the Indian Constitution. When I spoke to JV Pawar, he told me that when the Dalit Panthers raised demands for a "Dalitsthan," they had in mind such settlements along Ambedkar's lines, as a way to guarantee Dalits' economic and social development in pursuit of a casteless society.

The Black Panthers put great emphasis on social aid—most famously through their scheme of free breakfasts for children. The Dalit Panthers, though a social organisation, had nothing similar, and never gained the resources or the scale required for such action. They had to confine themselves to changing minds without being able to address Dalits' material conditions. When it came to self-defence, the Dalit Panthers put together some bands to resist dominant-caste violence, but these were typically loosely organised and barely armed. This could not compare with the uniformed organisation and the almost military discipline that became synonymous with the Black Panthers, or the gun-carrying squads they sent out to deter police violence in black neighbourhoods, exercising the right to bear arms under US law.

These departures are not surprising. There was no real relationship between the groups, no two-way exchange. Each worked separately, responding to the specific and divergent circumstances of India and the United States. Yet the Dalit Panthers, to a greater degree than Phule and Ambedkar before them, showed the potential the black movement had to pollinate ideas and action in the struggle against caste. There was possibly much more of this potential than was realised, but the time to explore it soon ran out. The Dalit Panthers were disbanded in 1977, undone by a mix of repression and the jealousies and ideological quarrels of its founders. Even in their brief heyday, they never gained a strong presence outside the state of Maharashtra, let alone internationally. The Black Panthers, repressed by the US government and rocked by internal schisms and violence, dissolved in 1982. They managed to establish some international chapters and ties with several foreign governments—the communist regimes in Cuba, China and North Korea, for instance—but paid little attention to India. Because the budding Dalit understanding of the resonance between the Dalit and black struggles for dignity was not reflected in the Black Panthers' worldview, they had no reason to try and establish contact.

COURTESY RAMESH SHINDE ARCHIVES

AS WITH EVERYTHING THEY DID, for the Dalit Panthers to imagine common ground between black people and the oppressed of India required a defiance of the Indian government. The terms of international cooperation established by the Brahmins of Indian foreign policy after Independence did not allow for any solidarity between the victims of racism and the victims of caste.

When Jawaharlal Nehru became the first prime minister of India, he also assumed the post of foreign minister. He held on to it for the rest of his life, until 1964. For all of this period, his sister, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, led India's delegation to the United Nations. Nehru and Pandit charted a diplomatic course based on neutrality towards both the United States and the Soviet Union, and

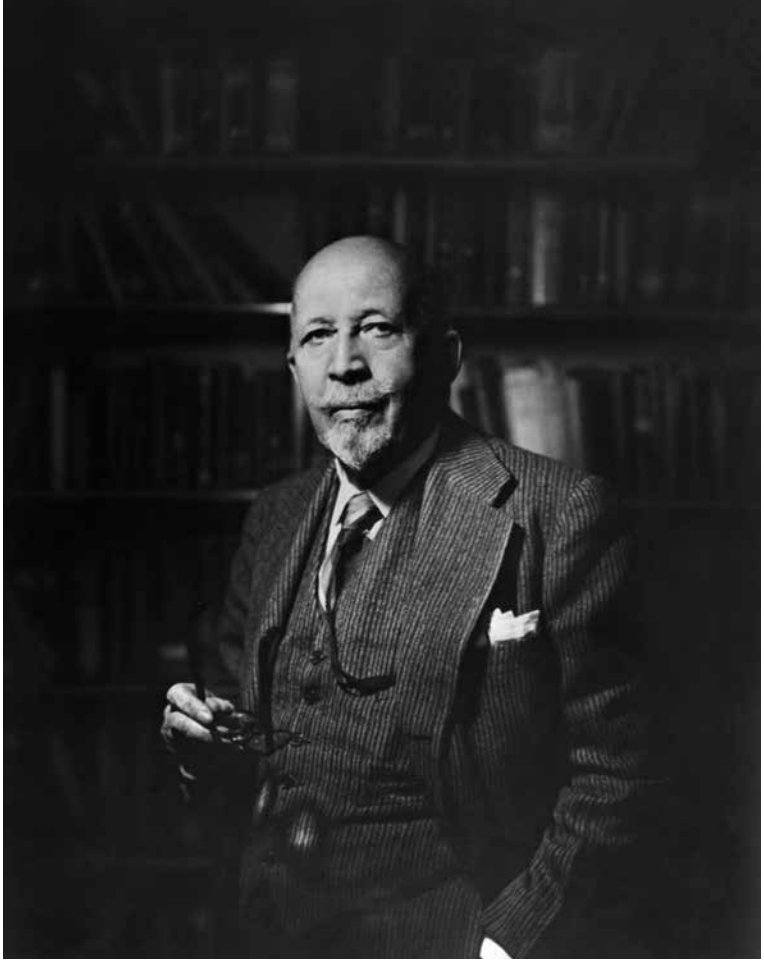
put India at the forefront of the "non-aligned" countries—the so-called Third World. India's main partners in this bloc came to include Ghana, Indonesia and Egypt, and its politics was premised heavily on the unity of the formerly colonised and racially oppressed. Nehru became the darling of the postcolonial world.

The reality that vast numbers of Indians continued to live under caste oppression, their socioeconomic position dictated by birth just as in any racist colonial regime, did not sit well with this project, and any discussion of it on the global stage was anathema. For both domestic and international consumption, overwhelmingly dominant-caste officials and scholars and businessmen cultivated a romanticised picture of India where caste was not a problem—an act of subterfuge that continues today. The petition Ambedkar was considering when he wrote to Du Bois never materialised, but if it had the Indian government would not have welcomed it. When Ambedkar resigned as the law minister in Nehru's cabinet, in 1951, one of his complaints was that he had been frozen out of key cabinet committees, including the one on foreign policy.

In the second half of the 1940s, India gained acclaim at the UN for leading the charge against South Africa as the country's system of apartheid hardened into law. India's specific complaint was the discrimination against South Africa's Indian-origin population, racially segregated and denied full citizenship, and not the similar subjugation of all non-white peoples in the country. In return, South Africa developed a habit of calling out caste-based violence and discrimination in India, which it described as racism in another form. India denied any comparison—setting a precedent it has stuck to furiously ever since. The inconvenient fact that Phule and Ambedkar had thought the comparison to be valid and relevant was disregarded.

In September 1949, before the UN General Assembly, India called for UN intervention in aid of Indian South Africans. Meanwhile, Ambedkar pointed out before the Indian parliament that the "tyranny and the constant and shameless resort to violence by Hindus" made the position of Dalits "far worse than the position of Indians in South Africa." He punctured India's grandstanding on racism: "South Africa is replicated in every Indian village."

Despite diplomatic deadlock, India managed to pressure South Africa into preliminary talks on the issue. With the General Assembly still in session, BN Rau, India's permanent representative to the UN, approached his South African counterparts to propose a compromise, with the Indian government's permission. The South Africans reported the conversation to their capital in an astonishing "private and secret" memorandum uncovered by the scholar Vineet Thakur.



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MARGARET BOURKE-WHITE / THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION / GETTY IMAGES

OPPOSITE PAGE: **The Dalit Panther manifesto defined "Dalit" to include the oppressed castes, Adivasis, "the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion."**

THIS PAGE: **BR Ambedkar (left) and WEB Du Bois exchanged a single set of letters. Ambedkar saw great similarity "between the position of the Untouchables in India and the position of the Negroes in America." Du Bois had "every sympathy with the Untouchables of India."**

BELOW: JV Pawar, one of the founders of the Dalit Panthers, at a meeting in 1974. "From the Black Panthers, Black Power emerged," the Dalit Panthers wrote in their manifesto. "We claim a close relationship with this struggle."

OPPOSITE PAGE: The Harlem office of the Black Panthers in 1970. Born out of a frustration with the limits of earlier black politics, the Black Panthers proposed radically new methods of black assertion.

Rau, who had worked with Ambedkar to draft the Indian Constitution, lamented to the South Africans that "the feverish attempts in his country to destroy all caste inequalities were resulting in what in actual practice amounted to discrimination against the erstwhile ruling castes such as the Brahmins, to which he belongs." He added that the Indians who had moved to South Africa—primarily indentured labourers from the Dalit and Shudra castes—"did not belong to the best type." He thought South Africa's treatment of them "might be fully justified and that in fact India would not mind discrimination against our local Indian community if only it was not based on racial lines." Rau proposed that South Africa offer citizenship to "a small number, say 10, of the cultured and best type of Indians"—likely from among the higher-status, non-labouring "passenger" Indians—"as a token to the world that the racial equality of Indians was recognised." In effect, as Thakur has pointed out, India wanted a casteist solution to a racist problem. South Africa did not take this idea forward.

By the time of the Dalit Panthers, India had aligned firmly with the Soviet Union. This lay the ground for alliances against American imperialism—with numerous African nations, for instance—but this framework also left no room for connection between anti-racist and anti-caste struggles. India was ready to admit to the problem of mass poverty, but not to the problems of caste discrimination. For Indian diplomacy, Dalits as an oppressed category were not supposed to exist. The Panthers dared to think internationally anyway, connecting themselves with a larger struggle for universal human dignity even while they fought localised oppression. In their manifesto, they claimed membership of "the Third Dalit World, that is, oppressed nations."

Other Dalits have since tried to do what Ambedkar and the Panthers never got to—bring the issue of caste to international attention, and connect it to global anti-racism struggles. In 1965, the UN had adopted the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. India signed and ratified the document, which defined racial discrimination as "distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impair-

COURTESY JV PAWAR

ing … human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life." But the treatment of India's caste-oppressed groups was not considered to fall under this definition. Dalit activists objected, and several of them put their views across to UN bodies in the following years—EV Chinniah in 1968, Laxmi Berwa in 1982 and Bhagwan Das in 1983. After decades of lobbying, the UN finally acknowledged the oppression of Dalits and Adivasis in 1996, when the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, or CERD, accepted that the conditions of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes fell within the scope of the convention. The Indian government continued to protest this.

In 2001, in Durban, the UN convened the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance. Its goal was to identify and recognise forms of discrimination so far excluded from the ambit of the UN's work, especially those based on criteria that did not fit within Western notions of colour and race. Dalit leaders and intellectuals headed to Durban to defend the recognition of casteism alongside racism, and to challenge the Indian government's downplaying of caste discrimination before the world.

The government stayed true to form. Before the conference, the foreign minister, Jaswant Singh, said that caste-based discrimination was "not a matter for any international initiative or intervention." Omar Abdullah, a minister of state under Singh's ministry, declared, "You cannot equate casteism with racism." The official delegation to Durban—led by India's attorney general, Soli Sorabjee—stuck to these points through the bitter feuding that followed at the conference, and opposed any mention of caste in its programme. Between Singh as a dominant-caste Hindu, Abdullah as a Kashmiri Muslim of Brahmin ancestry and Sorabjee as a member of Mumbai's Parsi religious minority, none of those shaping the official Indian position came from Dalit backgrounds. The final declaration and plan of action agreed by the conference made no reference to caste-based discrimination.

Even so, the following year, the CERD affirmed that "discrimination based on 'descent' includes discrimination against members of communities based on forms of social stratification such as caste and analogous systems of inherited status."

JACK GAROFALO / PARIS MATCH / GETTY IMAGES

It made it clear that such discrimination violated the 1965 convention.

There have been voluminous debates on the similarities and differences between race and caste. The two are not exactly alike, but they share this overriding similarity: both form the foundations of systems of discrimination, propped up by socially constructed notions of unequal human worth, where the targets of prejudice are selected on the basis of biological descent. As the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights noted after the Durban conference, "Whether or not caste is the same as race, the reality is that caste is a basis for discrimination on par with racism and apartheid and severely reducing the quality of life for at least 160 million of India's own citizens." The crucial choice is either to foreground these similarities, and commit to global and local action to eradicate both these heinous notions, or to fixate on the differences as a distraction, and so shield casteism from the same scrutiny and censure as racism.

As the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights noted, "Whether or not caste is the same as race, the reality is that caste is a basis for discrimination on par with racism and apartheid."

STAN WAYMAN / THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION / GETTY IMAGES

The Indian government, just like countless dominant-caste leaders and thinkers, prefers the second option. In a submission to the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism in 1997, the government wrote, "there is ample evidence of persons belonging to different castes having the same racial characteristics. ... Persons who belong to the Scheduled Caste communities are today considered different from others because of their social, economic and educational backwardness, not because they belong to a separate 'race'." What went unsaid is that social position is pre-determined by the caste one is born into, and caste identity then dictates access to educational and economic opportunity. The varna system does not allow for any caste mobility—a person is meant to die in the same social rank they were born in, no matter what they achieve in life, akin to the black experience in the United States.

The government also stated that caste "has its origins in the functional division of Indian society." It did not say that this euphemised "functional division" forces the oppressed castes, as part of their supposed spiritual duty, to provide manual labour to the dominant castes and perform the most degrading tasks—such as cleaning human excreta with their bare hands.

In 2007, an official Indian delegation met with the CERD to again press the case that caste discrimination does not come under the 1965 convention. The delegation included the sociologist Dipankar Gupta, who presented academic arguments for why caste discrimination is not racial discrimination. The scholar Balmurli Natrajan later deftly punctured these in the magazine *Seminar*.

Natrajan noted that by "framing the discussion as 'caste is not race'," Gupta had constructed a straw-man argument. When it came to the real question—"How similar are the discriminations based upon caste and race?"—Gupta had nothing to say. Gupta's claims included the absurdities that "caste is not about descent," and that "each caste equally discriminated against other castes." Natrajan wrote, "While it is quite feasible to argue that in a casteist (or racist) society, everyone can be prejudiced, it is simply not true that everyone's prejudice has equal impact. Would Professor Gupta equate the daily humiliations, lynching, and rapes of dalits by all castes who wield power over them, with the presumed prejudice that dalits might hold against other castes?"

In 2009, the UN held a conference to review progress towards the goals agreed on in Durban. A statement by several Dalit and human-rights groups noted that even if caste had been excluded from the Durban declaration, the CERD's subsequent affirmation that discrimination based on descent included caste-based discrimination meant that it should be up for scrutiny at the review conference. India disagreed, and all consideration of caste was blocked, as it was again at another follow-up conference in 2011.

In 2010, anti-caste activists won a major victory when Britain's House of

Lords passed an equality bill that recognised caste discrimination as a form of racism. The Indian government and Hindu groups protested, and in 2018 the British government announced that it no longer planned to bring the bill into law. Dalit activists campaigning for caste discrimination to be punished under existing anti-racism laws in the United States have been frustrated by similar opposition. But this June, the government of California took the technology giant Cisco and two of its dominant-caste employees to court for alleged discrimination against a Dalit engineer. The landmark case argued that Cisco "engaged in unlawful employment practices on the basis of religion, ancestry, national origin/ethnicity and race/color," setting up a showdown over caste and descent-based discrimination in US courts.

The UN's general-secretary and high commissioner for human rights have spoken out repeatedly over the last decade, in UN reports and global forums, about the need to stamp out the menaces of caste. The Indian government's opposition to action against caste discrimination on the international stage remains unchanged.

THE MYTH OF A UNIVERSAL SOLIDARITY between black and "brown" people eclipses this history, and also much more. In India, the myth is exposed by the appalling treatment of black people. African students frequently experience harassment and physical assaults. The West Indian cricketer Darren Sammy recently spoke out about how, during his time with a franchise in the Indian Premier League, some of his Indian teammates used a slur referring to his colour as his nickname. Such behaviour is so normalised that few in India see it as a problem. Across the country, black people are stereotyped as "Nigerean" drug peddlers or sex workers, and are the targets of unwarranted public scrutiny and police attention. Celebrities and government ministers sometimes condemn such racism, but their words are never followed by concrete change.

GIDEON MENDEL / CORBIS / GETTY IMAGES

OPPOSITE PAGE: Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru (left) with Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah in 1961. While Nehru promoted unity among the formerly colonised and racially oppressed, vast numbers of Indians continued to live under caste oppression, their position dictated by birth just as in any racist colonial regime.

LEFT: Police in Johannesburg arrest a trade union leader, Moses Mayekiso, in 1985. As South Africa's system of apartheid hardened into law, in the 1940s, India objected to the discrimination against the country's Indian-origin population, but not to its subjugation of all non-white peoples.

It is only outside India that the sense of solidarity, established on the principle of universal human dignity, survives. This is possible because of ignorance of India's social realities, and of how caste—also pervasive in the Indian diaspora—militates against social equality. If justice for the oppressed is the true shared goal, the spokespeople of the brown world, almost exclusively from the dominant castes, must be made to confront the monster within. As it stands, the dominant castes, acting on an ingrained exceptionalism while espousing progressive values, have been happy to benefit from black activism that has challenged their own

OPPOSITE PAGE: Dalit demonstators at the World Conference Against Racism in Durban in 2001. The Indian government rejected Dalits' insistence that casteism be recognised alongside racism, and blocked any mention of caste in the conference's final declaration and programme of action.

mistreatment under racist systems, while simultaneously undercutting the solidarity of black people and the caste-oppressed.

In the United States, the Indian diaspora owes a huge debt to the black struggle. The arrival of Indians in significant numbers was only possible after 1965, when a new immigration law barred discrimination by race, sex, nationality, place of birth or place of residence. The Asian American Commission of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, in a recent statement of solidarity with Black Lives Matter, acknowledged that this breakthrough "was shaped by other Black-led civil rights victories," while also recognising the roots of a shared history in how "the Dalit Panther Movement found inspiration from the U.S. Black Panthers." Indian Americans have also benefited from other victories for racial equality that could never have come without black activism—including the policies of affirmative action that have opened the doors of employment and education to so many of them.

Yet the Indian diaspora's relationship with black people has been ambivalent and often hostile. The black novelist Toni Morrison once said that when European immigrants got to the United States, the moment "they got off the boat, the second word they learned was 'nigger'." Without black people, she explained, "immigrants would have torn each other's throats out, as they have done everywhere else." Taught to share a common hatred, they "could all say, 'I am not *that*.' So in that sense, becoming an American is based on an attitude: and exclusion of me." Indian Americans have been part of the same process, and Morrison could just as well have been talking about them too.

Indian Americans, after no more than a few generations in the United States, are now the "model minority"—highly educated, renowned for their work ethic, with a considerable political footprint and the highest median household income of any ethnic group in the country. Black people, after centuries of exploitative toil, have the lowest median household income, and are very often denied decent education, employment or healthcare. The model minority—given this tag by white people because it has modeled itself on white people—chooses to look away from this awkward scene. The diaspora has not used its rising capital in the service of justice for black people. Indian Americans are plentiful in the tech companies and corporations where black people barely find room. In numerous cases, they even lead them.

It is important to understand the socioeconomic background of the diaspora. Especially during the earlier waves of immigration, the largest numbers of new arrivals were from the dominant castes. With few exceptions, India's oppressed castes and ethnic minorities, as well as the marginalised converts to non-Hindu religions, did not have the wealth to fund such a move, or access to the English-language education that eased the way to integration and employment in the United States. Nor were they welcome in the family and caste networks that quickly took shape in the diaspora, and facilitated the arrival and success of more and more dominant-caste Indians.

Much of the diaspora's community life came to centre on temples run by Brahmin priests, who recited religious texts extolling caste, and on festivals celebrating gods and classical art forms that the dominant castes had monopolised for centuries. Social inequality and segregation, celebrated as part of the dominant-caste tradition, was accepted in the new country like in the old one. The only oppression the dominant castes would not tolerate was their own. The number of oppressed-caste immigrants from India has gradually grown in recent decades—especially since the 1990s, when reservations in public education and the liberalisation of the economy gave them some new opportunities—but the casteist shape of diaspora society remains unchanged. The Indian American identity leaves almost no room for Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, Christians and Sikhs. The diaspora sees it as a victory that Diwali is now commemorated in the White House. It does not care that this celebration of the "good" Hindu goddess Durga's killing of the "evil" Mahishasur is deeply offensive to many Dalits and Adivasis, for whom Mahishasur is an ancestor.

The diaspora, while it cares little for caste inclusivity and diversity within, has taken advantage of the idea of racial diversity. Universities admit dominant-caste children and corporations hire dominant-caste workers to increase racial diversity in their ranks. When Indian Americans call for the promotion of their fellows in public and corporate life, it is most often a case of the dominant castes cheering on their own. Meanwhile, large sections of this same diaspora are hostile to India's limited system of affirmative action for the caste-oppressed in public education and employment, mirroring the attitude of the dominant castes in India, as also to any demands for equal rights from the country's Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims and other oppressed groups.

Even within the United States, the Indian American fondness for racial diversity has its limits. Harvard University is locked in a legal battle with Asian American groups claiming that its admission policies discriminate against the growing number of highly qualified Asian American applicants in order to promote greater racial diversity in the student body. Numerous Indian American groups are part of the case, with little concern

The number of oppressed-caste immigrants has gradually grown, but the casteist shape of diaspora society remains unchanged. The Indian American identity leaves almost no room for Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, Christians and Sikhs.

MIKE HUTCHINGS / REUTERS

for the heavy cost that an end to racial considerations in university admissions would bring for the most disadvantaged racial groups—especially black and hispanic people—that already struggle to get a chance at higher education.

The myth of black and brown solidarity does not need to stay a myth. The first step to making it a reality in the United States is for the diaspora to ask soul-searching questions of itself—about its view of black people, its relationship to whiteness, and its social values. This will require conversations on race, and, crucially, on caste. Many young Indian Americans, including many from the dominant castes, have come out in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. Some have gone beyond simply declaring solidarity to start asking questions of themselves, their families and their communities. This must expand and accelerate.

The black movement can help this process by better understanding caste and its consequences. A major hurdle to this is the airbrushed image of India, and of Hinduism, that many in the movement currently hold. One clear symptom of this is the esteem reserved for Mohandas Gandhi.

The uncritical admiration of Gandhi owes a lot to his valorisation by Martin Luther King, Jr, and the American civil-rights movement. King saw Gandhi as the world is used to seeing him—as India's non-violent saviour from colonial and racial domination, an exponent of Hinduism's supposed belief in universal respect and peace. But this image, cultivated by Gandhi and now tended to by the Indian state, blots out a lot of Gandhi's beliefs and politics.

Though Gandhi opposed untouchability, he defended the caste system itself. Just like many dominant-caste thinkers today, he idealised traditional Indian society. The caste system for him was a legitimate method for the division of labour, and an irreplaceable part of the supposed harmony of Indian civilisation. During colonial rule, when Indians could elect their own representatives to provincial legislative councils, Ambedkar championed separate electorates for the oppressed castes, to guarantee their political representation and autonomy in a system where they were otherwise frozen out by the dominant castes. When the

Ambedkar continued to see Gandhi and the Congress party as adversaries of the oppressed castes. When freedom from the British was achieved, he still saw the liberation of India's people as an unfinished project.

FINE ART IMAGES / HERITAGE IMAGES / GETTY IMAGES

RIGHT: Mohandas Gandhi (in white shawl) and BR Ambedkar (fourth from front) at the Second Round Table Conference in 1931, after which the British government established separate electorates for the oppressed castes. Gandhi went on a fast unto death to oppose this, in what Ambedkar saw as an act of blackmail.

British government agreed to this, in the early 1930s, Gandhi began a fast unto death. Ambedkar described this as a form of blackmail: there was a great risk that if Gandhi died over the issue, the dominant castes would hold the oppressed castes collectively responsible and initiate mass slaughter. He backed down, and the oppressed castes have had little more than token representation in Indian legislatures ever since.

Ambedkar continued to see Gandhi and the Congress party as adversaries of the oppressed castes. When freedom from the British was achieved, he still saw the liberation of India's people as an unfinished project. Ambedkar spearheaded the writing of the Indian Constitution, but, stymied by a largely dominant-caste constituent assembly, he could include only limited safeguards against the caste system. Just as the Constitution was coming into power, he warned presciently that "we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. In politics we will be recognising the principle of one man one vote and one vote one value. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man one value."

Before he rose to prominence in India, Gandhi made a name for himself for confronting the British colonial government in South Africa. His quarrel there was not with the discrimination against all non-white people, but with the treatment of Indians—especially dominant-caste and passenger Indians—as inferior to the whites. India's post-Independence diplomacy followed his example.

Gandhi bought into the racist theory that white people came from a superior Aryan stock, and was convinced that the dominant castes shared the same Aryan blood too. His own writing is replete with anti-black racism—a realisation that has sparked a belated reassessment of his legacy. In 2015, during student demonstrations in South Africa, a Gandhi statue in Johannesburg was vandalised in protest. A statue of Gandhi gifted to the University of Ghana by the Indian government was removed from the campus in 2018 following protests by students and faculty. During the Black Lives Matter protests, the word "racist" was spray-painted at the base of Gandhi statues in London, Amsterdam and Washington, DC, and there were calls to remove his statues in numerous cities in the West.

The admiration for Gandhi goes hand in hand with a lack of awareness of anti-caste thought. Ambedkar and other anti-caste thinkers are barely read in the United States, including among the

black intelligentsia. When I met Bobby Seale, a founding member of the Black Panthers, he told me he was aware the Dalit Panthers had existed, but did not know much more about them. Angela Davis, also a former Panther, admitted during a lecture in India in 2016 to "profound misreading ... and reductionist understandings" of the Dalit cause by the black movement. One instance of this, she said, was Martin Luther King's endorsement of India's ban on untouchability without holding the government accountable for its broader tolerance of caste. Another was the Black Panthers' understanding of the Dalit struggle as one against racialised colour oppression—"as if that is the only way that connection becomes legible." Such gaps of understanding are to be expected in light of the circumstances of both movements so far, and the powerful forces that have always resisted their growth, but it is time now to bridge them.

There are already some examples to point the way. One of these is VISION—Volunteers in Service to India's Oppressed and Neglected—a pioneering multi-caste, multi-religious organisation formed in the mid 1970s and led by Dalit professionals. While the group focussed on its main mission of promoting the ideals of Ambedkar in North America, it also forged some early links to the black community, despite the hurdles. Yogesh Varhade, one of VISION's founders, told me the group was "keenly observing the black movement and saw apparent parallels," including with the Black Panthers. But many black activists at the time were being watched and harassed by the US government, and Varhade and his colleagues hesitated to reach out. "We were trying to establish ourselves and could not risk anything," he explained. But the group did what it could, as Dr Laxmi Berwa, an oncologist and another of VISION's co-founders, recounted.

Such gaps of understanding are to be expected in light of the circumstances of the black and Dalit movements so far, but it is time now to bridge them.

By Vanessa Barnes-Hillian — The Washington Post

Indians from Toronto join in the untouchable caste protest outside the White House where Prime Minister Gandhi was meeting the president.

Indian Caste Aims Protest at Gandhi

By Caryle Murphy
Washington Post Staff Writer

When Laxmi Berwa of Clinton heard that India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was coming to Washington, he saw an opportunity to deliver a personal plea on behalf of India's most downtrodden class, its 14 million "untouchables." Berwa, a physician who is an untouchable, wrote Gandhi a letter asking to meet with her.

In a short reply, Gandhi chided Berwa for criticizing her government, adding that "it does not help for those who are living in affluence abroad to comment on situations about which they have little knowledge." Berwa was told Gandhi was too busy to see him.

Yesterday morning, Berwa and about 20 other Indian immigrants gathered outside the White House while Gandhi met inside with President Reagan. Like Berwa, the protesters were members of the untouchable caste, the lowest rung on India's social ladder. They were there to register their disapproval of what they see as the Gandhi government's indifference toward the caste.

Their protest will probably be regarded as a minor wrinkle in an otherwise smooth and cordial visit by the Indian prime minister to this country. Tomorrow she is scheduled to meet at the Kennedy Center with 2,500 members of the 22,000 Indians living in the Washington area in what is expected to be a very friendly affair. By contrast, Berwa estimates there are about 200 untouchables living in this area and about 4,000 in the United States and Canada.

But yesterday's demonstration touches a tender nerve in the Gandhi government because it relates to one of the most intractable social problems facing the prime minister, and one that causes embarrassment overseas.

For centuries, the untouchables, who make up one-seventh of India's population, have been regarded as "unclean" by their fellow Indians, assigned to the dirtiest, lowest paid jobs, shunned socially by other castes or classes of society, and neglected in social services and education. Their position at the bottom rung of Indian society was endorsed by the religious precepts of Hinduism, the dominant religion of India.

When India became independent in 1947 the government outlawed discrimination against the untouchables and embarked on an affirmative-action program by reserving a certain number of elected posts, civil service jobs and educational scholarships for them. The results, however, have been mixed.

Spokesmen for Gandhi say the government is doing the best it can to eliminate discrimination whose roots go centuries back in Indian society. "We don't deny the problem exists, but its existence spurs us on to efforts to eradicate this problem," said Indian Embassy press spokesman Deepak Vohra. "Some people say we do not do enough but it's a question of attitudes which are difficult to change overnight."

As an example of those efforts Vohra noted that India's ambassador to the United States, Kocheril Narayanan, is from the untouchable caste.

But progress in uplifting the untouchables has been spotty and critics like Virendra K. Chaudry, a New York engineer and of the untouchable caste, who was also at the demonstration yesterday said it is not enough. "It's eyewash," he said.

Some American scholars of Indian politics say that despite the laudable intentions of India's antidiscrimination laws, the implementation of those laws has been weak. They criticize a lack of governmental pressure to end an increasing number of violent attacks on untouchables in recent years, particularly in the countryside where 85 percent of them still live.

"We want to tell Mrs. Gandhi we are not living in the 18th century, we are in the satellite age, we know what is going on at home," said Berwa. "We really want to voice our concern about the atrocities on untouchables in India. It is our moral obligation to do it."

ARCHIVES OF LAXMI BERWA / COURTESY SURAJ YENGDE

Petey Greene, a popular talk-show host in Washington DC and black activist, was one of Berwa's patients. Greene was drawn to caste issues in their conversations, and introduced Berwa to black networks. This led to numerous media appearances and talks at meetings and conferences, Berwa said, where he introduced audiences to the Dalit struggle.

Years later, Sulayman S Nyang, a professor of African studies at Howard University, a historically black university in the US capital, introduced Berwa to Randy Short, a graduate student with an interest in the Dalit cause. In 1998, Short and Berwa organised an event to mark Ambedkar Jayanti at Howard—the first such commemoration of Ambedkar's birthday on a on a historically black US campus. A poster of the event introduced Ambedkar as "India's Martin Luther King, Jr," and called for unity with Dalits to "break casteism's 3,000 year grip."

While it was building such alliances, VISION also campaigned to bring caste oppression to the attention of international bodies—Berwa was among the first Dalits to approach the UN—and of the US government. In 1982, the Indian prime minister, Indira Gandhi, made state visits to Canada and the United States. In both countries, she was met by protesters who demanded to speak to her about atrocities against Dalits in India. When this got no response, Berwa, then the VISION president, got a member of the US senate's committee on foreign relations to agree to take the matter up with Gandhi. The prime minister sent a letter to VISION in irritation, which Berwa has kept to this day. "It does not help for those who are living in affluence abroad to comment on situations about which they have

little knowledge," she chided. Berwa hit back with a letter accusing Gandhi of "arrogance, meanness and indifference," and condemning her "callous attitude for the scheduled castes." VISION made it a habit to protest during visits by future Indian prime ministers too.

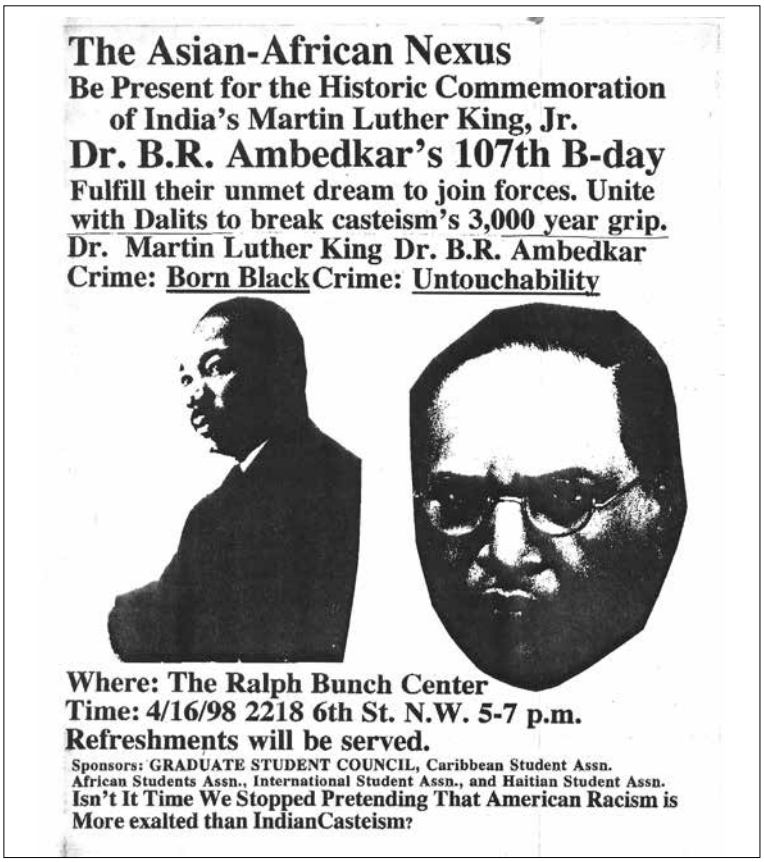
Besides VISION, another example is Raju Kamble, the founder of the Ambedkar International Mission in the 1990s. Kamble gained recognition in Ambedkarite circles for building up a network of Dalit activists across the world, but what is less known is that he also established ties with black activists in Texas, where he was based. A growing number of young Dalit activists are following in Kamble's footsteps. I helped facilitate a symposium on the black and Dalit struggles in partnership with the Boston chapter of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2017. After the killing of George Floyd, numerous Ambedkarite groups issued statements in support of the Black Lives Matter protests.

In India, the activist Bharathi Prabhu has been responsible for another pathbreaking effort in solidarity. For the last decade, in the city of Chennai, he has been organising special graduation ceremonies for Dalit and African students, emulating the tradition of black graduation ceremonies in the United States. These events celebrate icons of the black struggle side by side with Dalit heroes.

Another lesson in how those oppressed by race and caste can share inspiration is Dalit History Month, an effort to highlight the Dalit movement with events across the world every April. It is modeled on Black History Month, celebrated every February in the United States since the 1970s. First conceived in the early 2000s by D Ravikumar, a literary intellectual and former state legislator from Tamil Nadu, Dalit History Month originally ran from Ambedkar's birthday on 14 April to the birthday of another anti-caste hero, Iyothee Thass, on 26 May. The effort builds on the Ambedkar Melas started in the 1980s by Kanshi Ram and the Bahujan Samaj Party, which roamed across the north of India for two months after Ambedkar's birth anniversary every year, celebrating Dalit history and spreading Dalit thought.

DALITS HAVE AN INVESTMENT in the protection of black lives because they see their suffering mirrored in that of other oppressed people. On a personal level, they feel the pain that black people are voicing, and empathise with the constant diminishing of their humanity by the skewed standards of dominant groups. Black people cannot be angry because they are overreacting, cannot protest because they are rioting, cannot demand a fair share of wealth because they are freeloading, cannot talk about the past because they are self-victimising. They cannot cry because they are faking, they cannot laugh because they are loud, they cannot be expressive lest they are annoying—even when their sisters and brothers are being killed in the streets. All of these are also facts of Dalit survival.

On a systemic level, the US criminal-justice system is notoriously biased against black people, who are imprisoned at far higher rates than any other group. Police brutality against black people has gone on for centuries, with impunity even for police officers with long records of troubling violence. Numerous cases have emerged of avowed white supremacists infiltrating the ranks of law enforcement. In India, Dalits, Adivasis and Muslims—who account for significantly less than half of the population—made up just over half of all prisoners as of 2018. Police brutality, including torture, is endemic. The National Campaign Against Torture reported more than one thousand and seven hundred deaths in police custody last year—at a rate of over five deaths per day. Most of the dead were Dalits, Adivasis and Muslims. During the communal riots in Delhi in February and March, multiple reports accused the police of aiding anti-Muslim mobs, and of attacking Muslims themselves. One viral video showed policemen surrounding five badly injured Muslim men, beating and swearing at them as they were forced to sing the national anthem. One of the men, Faizan, later died.


The Asian-African Nexus
Be Present for the Historic Commemoration of India's Martin Luther King, Jr.
Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's 107th B-day
Fulfill their unmet dream to join forces. Unite with Dalits to break casteism's 3,000 year grip.
Dr. Martin Luther King Crime: Born Black
Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Crime: Untouchability
Where: The Ralph Bunch Center
Time: 4/16/98 2218 6th St. N.W. 5-7 p.m.
Refreshments will be served.
Sponsors: GRADUATE STUDENT COUNCIL, Caribbean Student Assn. African Students Assn., International Student Assn., and Haitian Student Assn.
Isn't It Time We Stopped Pretending That American Racism is More exalted than IndianCasteism?

ARCHIVES OF LAXMI BERWA / COURTESY SURAJ YENGDE

OPPOSITE PAGE: **A clipping from the *Washington Post* in July 1982, during a visit to the United States by the Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi. Gandhi chided the Amberdkarite group VISION's for protesting caste atrocities in India. In reply, Laxmi Berwa, Vision's president accused her of "arrogance, meanness and indifference."**

ABOVE: A poster for an Ambedkar Jayanti event at Howard University in 1998. This was the first such commemoration of Ambedkar's birthday at a historically black US campus.

OPPOSITE PAGE:
Relatives mourn two children killed after dominant-caste men set fire to the home of a Dalit family in the village of Sunped in 2015. Every year, tens of thousands of crimes against Dalits and Adivasis are registered under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act.

In 2018, there were roughly fifty thousand crimes against Dalits and Adivasis registered under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. This included nearly a thousand murders and almost four thousand rapes. Even ignoring the underreporting of casteist atrocities, this means that at least two Dalits or Adivasis are killed and more than eight Dalits and Adivasis are raped in India every day. The latest rates of atrocities motivated by religion are unknown—the Modi government stopped releasing numbers on lynchings and religiously motivated killings in 2017.

The number of Dalits and Adivasis in the police falls below required government quotas in much of India. Muslims make up less than three percent of the police country-wide, despite comprising almost fifteen percent of the population.

As the Black Lives Matter movement has made undeniably clear, the state and the police in the United States have been acting as instruments of a racist society. Dalits, Muslims, Adivasis and other oppressed groups have always known that the state and the police are agents of the casteist order.

Growing up in a Dalit neighbourhood in Nanded, in Maharashtra, I was painfully aware that the police kept us under constant watch, just like the Muslims who lived in another colony nearby, and were especially ready to swoop down on young men. This is just one of the parallels between the experiences of race and caste oppression, and parallels like this make it natural that the caste-oppressed turn to Black Lives Matter for inspiration and hope, just as they have always turned to the black struggle. But what of the dominant castes, in India and the United States, who have sided with the black movement?

Black Lives Matter has more to teach the dominant castes than the caste-oppressed. The Dalit struggle does not need to be reminded of the principle of universal human dignity that has always been at its foundation. It does not need to be reminded of the core methods of Black Lives Matter, which match Ambedkar's call for the oppressed to educate, organise and agitate. It is the dominant castes who need to recognise that they are carriers of a social and religious creed that cannot tolerate human equality. It is the dominant castes that need to do more to educate themselves about their privilege and violent prejudices, to organise and agitate against the caste system rather than for it. When they oppose the racism of white people, the dominant castes simply consolidate their own elite position. They cannot be allies of equality and social justice until they confront their own casteism, racism and religious hatred.

The oppressed know that Indian institutions—temples and universities and corporations, the police and the courts and the constitution—need drastic overhauls to root out casteism. It is the dominant castes, as they watch the institutional reforms in the United States in response to Black Lives Matter, who need to come to the same realisation. India's oppressed know their suffering is tied to the caste system and its place in the Hindu religion, just as black people know that racism is tied to slavery and its place in the story of the United States. It is the dominant castes, like white people, who do not see their privilege tied to history and inheritance, and hide their culpability in the suffering of the oppressed behind fairy tales about their innate superiority. In the United States, black people have long spoken about reparations to correct generations of racial bias, and it is white people who are only slowly waking up to this need. In India, Dalits have long demanded land for the oppressed to correct millennia of caste inequality. It is the dominant castes that still need to be convinced of this.

Black people have always known where white hatred comes from. It comes from white fear—fear of supposedly savage and unruly black bodies, which they need the police to shoot down, fear of black knowledge and success, to which they shut the door at every step. White fear is cowardly, and denies everyone a fair shot. White fear demands black death, because without the torture and mutilation of black bodies the white public does not feel powerful and secure. The United States has raised a society based on this fear.

A century ago, WEB Du Bois diagnosed the condition in an essay he called "The Souls of White Folk." "I see in and through them," he wrote, "for I am native, not foreign, bone of their thought and flesh of their language. … I know their thoughts and they know that I know." What Du Bois knew was this:

> So long, then, as humble black folk, voluble with thanks, receive barrels of old clothes from lordly and generous whites, there is much mental peace and moral satisfaction. But when the black man begins to dispute the white man's title to certain alleged bequests of the Fathers in wage and position, authority and training; and when his attitude towards charity is sullen anger rather than humble jollity; when he insists on his human right to swagger and swear and waste—then the spell is suddenly broken and the philanthropist is ready to believe that Negroes are impudent …
> After this the descent to hell is easy. I can see on the pale, white faces … a writing of human hatred, a deep and passionate hatred, vast by the very vagueness of its expressions.

SANJEEV VERMA / HINDUSTAN TIMES / GETTY IMAGES

To claims of the superiority of white culture, Du Bois answered with the carnage of the First World War. "This is not Europe gone mad; this is not aberration nor insanity; this *is* Europe; this seeming Terrible is the real soul of white culture ... This is where the world has arrived—these dark and awful depths and not the shining and ineffable heights of which it boasted."

This was Du Bois's gift to white people—the gift of self-knowledge. Perhaps the reason Ambedkar admired him so greatly was that so much of what Du Bois said about white fear also describes dominant-caste fear, and the murderous heart Du Bois found at the centre of white culture has its equivalent at the centre of Brahminical dominant-caste culture—more commonly known as Hinduism. The gift of Black Lives Matter is to give white people another chance to know and abandon the monstrosity they have created. Its gift to the dominant castes is the chance to recognise their own reflection in this monstrosity. They need to take it. The Dalits will not wait any longer. ■

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