

Freedom's Blind Spots: Figurations of Race and Caste in the PostColony

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South Africa was the last country to experience the ascendance of a national liberation movement, India was the first. The movements shared the word Congress, a word that was shared early in the 20th century after Mahatma Gandhi's turbulent stay in South Africa¹. By the 1910s after the Boer War when the Briton and Afrikaner excluded the majority from the Union of South Africa on the basis of race, African leaders turned with interest to the Natal and Transvaal Indian Congresses that the diminutive lawyer started in 1894.²

Both movements represented what was one of the most redeeming features of modernity: the search for a balance between freedom and equality. Unlike many other national movements these ideas were taken with a requisite seriousness although they were slow in coming. Yet, 69 years on in India, caste, and 22 years on in South Africa, race, remain persistent and pervasive realities and sources of polarisation. Racial derogation and invective is getting louder there and caste-based violence continues to be endemic here.

It was a burning issue that surfaced strongly in Durban in 2001 during the UN-sponsored World Conference Against Racism (WCAR) both on its main stage where the USA and Israel walked out and on the fringe where inside a gigantic tent, NGOs and movements representing victims of derogation, discrimination and racism, presented their case. There Dalit movements insisted that caste discrimination was racism to deaf ears.³

To put it bluntly, despite declarations of human rights that were seen to be appropriate after the 2nd World War's victors decided to foreclose the possibilities of another Holocaust, the West does not have the stomach to deal with the consequences of its very own modernisation: the result of foraging, land grabs, slavery, settlement, colonialism.

These are things of the past, it was said as the future had to be about another story⁴ - the symbolism of having the event in South Africa after its democratic transition and in the city that produced a Mahatma, should have been enough as the publicity made obvious. The theatrics of dissensus that followed between country representatives resulted in a compromised document that identified racism as a problem and included caste as an additional problem. The Review of the resolutions in 2009 dropped caste from its report altogether. Why is this so? Why is there a reluctance to deal with the past?⁵

¹ See Fatima Meer (1996-ed), *The South African Gandhi*, Durban: Madiba Press. This is an omnibus edition of his writings and speeches and also includes articles that reflect on this connection. Maureen Swann (1985) *Gandhi: the South African Experience*, Johannesburg: Ravan Press, offers a critical assessment of his role. This is amplified further by Goolam Vahed and Ashwin Desai's (2015), *The South African Gandhi-Stretcher-Bearer of Empire*, Stanford: the University Press.

² Andre Odendaal's (2015), *The Founders: The Origins of the ANC and the Struggle for Democracy in South Africa*, Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, offers the latest scholarship on the African National Congress

³ For a summary see, Chris McGeal, Africans Back Down at UN Race talks, *The Observer*, Sunday September 9, 2001.

⁴ WCAR (World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance) UN Official Website for Proceedings and Records.

⁵ Ibid. 2009 Durban Review

What is also common between India and South Africa is precisely the need to imagine and create a post-colony. The borders drawn on maps did not follow any contours of native feeling. India was drawn bit by bit through British East India's foraging and later Britain's Colonial Office.⁶ To be governed, populations had to be classified, differences wherever they existed had to be codified⁷, deviants had to be defined and sorted, natives photographed⁸, souls had to be trained and opium had to be grown.⁹

And, in Southern Africa, Boer and Briton, especially after the "discovery" of diamonds and then gold, had to fight their way into a truce, called the Union of South Africa and in the same flick of the pen exclude the African majority who as Natives needed to be cleared off by now white lands and placed into well mapped reserves.¹⁰ And of course, made to work for diamonds and gold.¹¹

There is much in common between the two countries but it would be a mistake to imagine that the patterns of domination were identical. Be that as it may, in both countries the stirring of anti-colonial national movements brought with them the aforementioned need to imagine and create a post-colony. And as an imagined indigenerality¹² to set about to find the balance between freedom and equality most appropriate for the people trapped in that colonial or apartheid borderline.

To an outsider like me, this search in India seems gruelling: with anyone from Tagore's syncretism or Kamini Roy's feminism; from Gandhi to Nehru or Bhagat Singh, from Ambedkar to EMS Namboodripad; from Jinnah or Hedjewar, the country has been involved in this often hash and violent work. And in both countries the constitution that launched the post-colonial, warts and all, was to be about the eradication of race and caste¹³.

At first, it did mean self-rule/self-determination in India and enfranchisement of the black majority in South Africa. In both cases there is a tangible reality about it. India despite its contradictions did not remain a vassal state and did not succumb to neo-colonial arrangements- nevertheless it was a turbulent transition that led to bloodshed and partition. Furthermore, it did not champion an

⁶ See Niall Ferguson (2004), *Empire*, London: Basic Books. The critical literature on this encounter begins from Dadabhai Naroji's (1901) *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India*, Delhi: Commonwealth Publishers. See also Bipan Chandra's *Essays on Colonialism*, (New Delhi, 1999)

⁷ See Radhika Singha (1998), *The Despotism of Law, Crime and Justice in Early Colonial India*: Oxford: the University Press

⁸ See also Sumangala Damodaran (2013), "Deviance and the Making of Modern India" in Ari Sitas *et al*,(2013), *Gauging and Engaging Deviance, 1600-2000*, Delhi: Tulika Press

⁹ Martin Booth (1996), *Opium: a History*, London: Schuster and Schuster Ltd.

¹⁰ The account of this pariah status in the land of your birth is articulated vividly by Sol T. Plaatjie (1914), *Native Life in South Africa*, London: PS King and Son, Ltd. For an overview of South African colonisation, segregation and Apartheid see William Beinart (2001) *Twentieth-Century South Africa*, Oxford University Press.

¹¹ Frederick Johnstone (1976) *Class Race and Gold: A Study of Class Relations and Racial Discrimination in South Africa*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul...

¹² See Ari Sitas (2010), *The Mandela Decade 1990-2000: Labour, Culture and Society in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, p26-28.

¹³ Barbara R. Joshi (1986). *Untouchable!: Voices of the Dalit Liberation Movement*. Zed Books. London; Cristophe Jaffrelot (2004) *Ambedkar and Untouchability. Analysing and Fighting Caste*. New York: Columbia University Press. See also Bipan Chandra *The Making of Modern India: From Marx to Gandhi*, Orient Blackswan, 2012

isomorphism, i.e. the idea that all are equal and individual units alone but it created a syncretic mix of diverse social ensembles partly in line with prior colonial categories, partly with new ones.¹⁴

Similarly South Africa despite the isomorphism of individual and social rights it allowed for an admixture of race-based ensembles and customary/ethnic ones.¹⁵ Usually, this is seen by Western Sociology as an anachronism, as a sign of underdevelopment, an insufficiency because mature democracies are about individuals with rights of association; ensembles emerge or ought to emerge out of such free association.

This brings us back to the necessary discussion about freedom and equality: this search of a balance between them was not inherent as a constitutive part of this so called modernity- this emerged despite violence, massacres, genocides, bombs and technological wonders based on wars. It was never a given when the forays of European powers into the majority world started. This entanglement from the 15th century onwards was not about that at all and there is no inherent teleology in the search for it in the Indies or China. Freedom and equality emerged as deviant notions, and emerged out of defiance and struggle. We owe their modern take to the black slave in rebellion and the leveller who went to the rack for challenging the illusions of power.¹⁶

So what could freedom mean? What is this eleftheria, uhuru, azadi, innkululeko? It cannot be the unconstrained and individual self-realisation, this much the Ancients knew quite well and they also knew that it presupposed human agency on the one hand and a state of human flourishing on the other. I recall from my philosophy classes at the University of the Witwatersrand that Epicurus captured this well: he argued that despite causal determinism there was a human capacity to search for *ataraxia* (peace and non-constraint) and *aponia* (the absence of pain and suffering).¹⁷ Could such human flourishing be reached without a reconciliation with a regrettable past? Could it be only about mastering necessity in the present to reach new realms of freedom?

No matter what, freedom was not and is not an event, an abolition of a yoke, a celebration of the rights endorsed by a constituent assembly but it is a process of unshackling, a process of liberation through which each and all of us remove constraints that inhibit individual and collective forms of flourishing. We might disagree about the meaning of such flourishing or what of the constraint needs removing. So freedom is that process and the debate (indeed the discursive discord) about it. It is the movement from formal reciprocity to reciprocity proper.¹⁸ It is about articulating the following-“even if I am not contented with what you say or do...for X and Y reasons, I am committed to the right to say or do so” ...So it would go like this: “Mr Khanayia Kumar I am not contented with what you expressed on the 9th of February and JNU I am not contend with what your students do, but there is an imperative to defend your right to do so”... or “I am contented with what you say or

¹⁴ Granville Austin, (1999), *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation*, Oxford University Press and DL Sheth, (Nov 1987). "Reservations Policy Revisited". *Economic and Political Weekly* **22**: 1957–1962. See also, Bipan Chandra, Mridula Mukerjee and Aditya Mukherjee (1999), *India Since Independence*, (New Delhi) and also Bipan Chandra's (2009), *History of Modern India*, (Orient Balckswan),

¹⁵ See Albie Sachs (1990) *Protecting Human Rights in South Africa*, Oxford University Press

¹⁶ Ari Sitas et al (2013) *Gauging and Engaging* op cit;; See also, Orlando Patterson (1985) *Slavery and Social Death*, Harvard University Press; CB Macpherson (1962) *The Theory of Possessive Individualism*, Oxford University Press.

¹⁷ Epicurus (1993). *The Essential Epicurus : letters, principal doctrines, Vatican sayings, and fragments*. Eugene O'Connor, trans. Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books. Tim O'Keefe, (2009). *Epicureanism*. Berkeley: University of California Press

¹⁸ See on this Ari Sitas (2004), *Voices that Reason: Theoretical Parables*, Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, p. 104-113

do but...for x and y reasons I am in discord” because these views ignore the undeclared war against BYX, but for XYZ reasons let us move on.

Therefore the reflection, critique and dissonance and sometimes sheer animosity is as much part of the process as the actual removal of constraint. It is precisely this that baffles me about the attack on JNU that is festering in India at the moment. As a University which has taken seriously its role as an inclusive custodian of the national question, of its difficulties and its antinomies and the ability to nurture the freedoms promised, it is branded as anti-national.

But quite soon, it becomes obvious that such freedom is impossible as any metaphorical or real Leveller would know from time gone past, all the way down to one of the most serious levellers of all, the very Ambedkar we are remembering today or Mandela whom we have buried recently. And why? It cannot be achieved without equality or at least a growing equality. The hard and unyielding structures that reproduce it, the institutions that embellish it and the practices that create its opposite: a pervasive and persistent economic, social and cultural differentiation have to give. Here Ambedkar’s insistence that class and caste inequalities and their co-habitation were freedom’s nemesis in India needs no further elaboration.¹⁹ Unequal people cannot be free.

But leaving it there we are trapped by a very Eurocentric dialectic of freedom and progress. The customary trope is Hegel’s dialectic of the Master and Slave which tells a distorted story.²⁰ In Hegel, two equal wills meet on the terrain of history in mortal combat. One succumbs and is subordinated from there Hegel weaves a story of contradiction that moves his narrative through history in a dynamic way of interdependence and conflict. In the end, there is reconciliation and mutual recognition and an end to both Mastery and Slavery in emancipated civil society. Marx commented on its idealism and pointed to the need to stand Hegel right-way up so the material relations between people and nature and within the ruses of mastery and slavery- the overcoming of which would be communism.

This is an enticing parable of unfolding freedom but it is not the real story of the majority world- the primordial encounter in the process of foraging, settlement and colonisation. The Other was never an equal will: the Other was seen as a non-person and therefore exterminable. The Other was seen as useful and therefore enslave-able; the Other was seen as a non-us and therefore excludable. I will call them regimes of existential derogation. Each one entails a *racial* derogation but their nuance is different. It starts with the justification of plunder and slavery, moves to classification and codification of difference and through that it excludes with impunity.²¹

First category of people were those who, due to inherent qualities were surplus people who were to be exterminated and/or moved off tracts of land and by the same logic cease to exist. These “savages” have been turned into 72 First Nations and they are at the heart of mobilisations for cultural and land rights. Their ideo-forms are unassimilable because they violate the very national mythologies of settlers. They subsist as minorities in their respective countries: at first constructed as existential deviants *suis generis*. Their dialectic of freedom is one of withdrawal, abjection and

¹⁹ Ambedkar’s (1979) *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*- Writings and Speeches Vol 1, Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra. and his (1936) classic *The Annihilation of Caste*, were the most consulted texts for this essay.

²⁰ Ari Sitas, (2007), *The Ethic of Reconciliation*, Durban: Madiba Press, p.13

²¹ Ari Sitas *ibid*, p.10-11 For a rigorous contemporary take, see Gerard Mare (2015) **Declassified: Moving Beyond the Dead-End of Race in South Africa**, Cape Town: Jacana

exclusion. Their demands are collective, and their claims quite distinct about loss of a past, of land in turn all inserted into a homelessness which allows such communities to deal with self-hate, blame and which allows them to be assertive about their unassimilability. The litmus test of whether this could be transformed is occurring in Latin America and constitutionally in Ecuador and in Bolivia.²²

Secondly there is the largest of categories: those who were “useful” Others in a variety of ways. African slaves through the Middle Passage and the Arabian sea, Africans used as colonial labour on the continent; castes classified, codified and made to work on the Indian subcontinent; indentured workers from various destinations.

The former, let us say in the USA or in Brazil were homogenised as black slaves no matter where they came from, their ethnicities and languages. Their discrimination during slavery and thereafter has its own voice and alternative forms of consciousness. Whereas in South Africa for example, indigenous populations were classified and homogenised as Natives and then broken up as tribes. Their emerging voice was different.²³

The Indian situation brings in its own complexity through caste: the complex hierarchies around ritual and the division of labour, made Dalits and OBC’s an excluded category within the colonised Other and there to have the contempt as impure others. Although derogation and discrimination at a broad level seems of the same family, the responses from below were varied.

Thirdly there are the Non-Us and the therefore excluded: migrants and immigrants, refugees, unwanted minorities, colonial subjects in the colonial motherland (until 1974 in Britain) to the more contemporary forms from Filipino domestic and housekeepers to larger and larger refugee cohorts.²⁴ This applied too freed slaves too until they won the right to vote. Most of their claims have been around institutional assimilation but preserving cultural difference.

The national in other words in the colony differs: it is born at the very moment where you and I, breathing, eating, talking, singing, falling in and out of love find that we have just become Others in the land of their birth, little pariahs, some kind of estranged classification, and then say No we are not other and start imagining and creating the “we” that is the horizontal bond that binds us all.

This process of articulation and praxis- in transforming material and symbolic conditions, in addressing the sources of suffering, fear and meaning is always governed by some idea of the “as not yet”, something that most serious anti-colonial movements have provided a rich trove of alternatives.

These forms of derogation make the ease through which the dialectic of freedom unfolds complicated. It reminds one of Adorno’s dictum that we need to address the “waste products and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic”²⁵ How could the dialectic of freedom and progress deal with the Holocaust?-Adorno wondered. In also, EP Thompson’s words, we must save those moments of emerging self-definition from history’s condescension²⁶: abjection, in-cendence into backwardness, flight, ambiguity and rejection that defined the response to Mastery by the so-called Others. Remember as I just argued those “Others” were people who woke up as pariahs on the very

²² See Ana Esther Cecena, (2015) *Ecology and Geography of Capitalism*, in Immanuel Wallerstein (ed), *The World Out of Joint*, New York: RRaradigm Books

²³ See Paul Gilroy (1993) *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London: Verrso.

²⁴ So much so that the European Union has set up an Observatory (RAXEN) that monitors and reports on Race and Xenophobic violence in each of its nation-states.

²⁵ Theodor W Adorno (1974), *Minima Moralia*, London: New Left Books, p. 15

²⁶ Edward P Thompson (1974) *The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, p. 12

same ground they were born, walked, tilled and called home. There is an asymmetry of claim and counter-claim which gives a different character to how we define freedom and what needs to be equalised. It is not a dialectic but a poly-lectic response that is appropriate if the blind spots brought about by settlement and colonialism in the world.

So the formal assertion of freedom can never be enough- the constitution and more decisively the constitutions of India and South Africa define the perimeters of action and the compulsion to redress caste and race. They also provide the framework for the absencing of both and yet at the same time preserve classifications that reproduce both. And the context impels people to mobilise through such classifications to achieve a semblance of equity. But in formally abolishing the institutional props that sustained it in law, it cannot do much as such categories and discriminations proliferate in all the planes of sociality.

In both countries the character of race and caste has changed: I am mindful of the work of Nandini Sundar on Adivasis and Surinder Jodhka's on caste²⁷, in both the issues are quite complex. In the latter, it is quite obvious that regional dynamics have altered caste relations, that caste is reproduced in the new economy in hundreds of new ways and depending in which region the competition of castes brings about violence. But if we take the four main spheres of sociality- gendering systems, livelihoods systems, signifying/communicating systems and value systems both caste and race have reproduced themselves in uncanny ways- the annihilation of caste is far from becoming a reality. Indeed it is a shifting barrier.²⁸

Whereas South Africa has recognised diversity and equality in diversity and has endorsed linguistic pluralism, it still preserves the apartheid categories of White, Indian, Coloured and Black. So claims of equality and equity are played out in terms of colour and with that a range of categories of disadvantage (involving also gender and disability). The scarcity of resources and regional dynamics lead to further collective endeavours: for example sub-ethnic groups and clans among the Zulu²⁹. But to make the case of differentiation as an example: within the coloured community in South Africa, a Khoisan movement is on the ascendance and demands recognition³⁰. As first people and victims of settler exterminism, the Khoisan have a case which threatens to turn all other South Africans as impostors. Like first nations everywhere they are a minority and those closest to ancestral traditions are also some of the poorest in the country. How could such claims be met in an equitable manner?

But then there is the caste system which reproduces Adivasis and Dalits and Other Backward Castes which enshrines a collective system of mobility and its rejection. If it was about sensitive cultural negotiation at the time of Srinivas's studies of the system³¹, it is by now a political negotiation through insurgency as the latest events in Haryana show.

²⁷ See Nandini Sundar (2007), *Subalterns and Sovereigns: An Anthropological History of Bastar*, Oxford University Press ; Surinder Jodhka (2014), *Caste in Contemporary India*, Delhi: Routledge India

²⁸ Sukhdeo Thorat (2004) *Caste, Race, and Discrimination – Discourse in International context (edited) (with Umakant)*, Rawat Publication, Jaipur; and (2006) *Untouchability in Rural India* Sage, 2006 (with G. Shah, Harsh Mander, Satish Deshpande & Amrita).

²⁹ Mbongiseni Buthelezi (2012) "Sifuna umlando wethu" (We are Looking for our History): Oral Literature and the Meanings of the Past in Post-Apartheid South Africa, PhD Thesis: Columbia University

³⁰ See Bekezela Phakathi, Khoisan Reclaim Roots and Rights, *Business Day*, 05/Oct/2015.

³¹ I have consulted heavily NM Srinivas's early work, *Caste in Modern India and other essays* (1962), Asia Publishing House; but also his later work, *Social Change in Modern India; Dimensions of Social Change in India*; Such themes were picked up later by Deepankar Gupta's, (2000). *Interrogating Caste: Understanding Hierarchy*

Given the complexity of regional caste dynamics the meanings of all this become overwhelming. Nevertheless, if the Ambedkarite vision was to annihilate caste, the opposite seems to be afoot: marriage and gender relations, ritual practices and intricacies in the division of labour reproduce it and its upper caste referents. So much so it is present in the interstices of working life that Mary John has proposed a stigma theory of value as opposed to a labour theory³². Despite successes here and there, the correlation of Banya castes and ownership of the means of production and Brahmin castes and the educational, professional and knowledge echelons of society seem undisturbed.

In short in most post-colonial settings there are powerful collective non-class demands for equality in an unequal world. How then can one move to the annihilation of caste or better, to a Post-Race and Post-Caste society?

First of all, inequality and competition over resources in a capitalist economy exacerbates differentiation rather than diminishes it. It is only in the counting house that capitalism is colour or caste-blind. Whatever the social character of production, circulation and exchange in the end, the extraction of surplus and therefore profit, metamorphoses all differences into an undifferentiated abstraction. But the actual processes occur within circuits of economic power that may be ethnic, racial, national or religious. And it is within that context that derogations and exclusions, inclusions and differentiations operate.

So it is only by moving reality away from the need to gain collective shares and resources in a competitive game that may create an alternative. It means the socialisation of the economy (not necessarily its nationalisation) and social ownership in equitable assets can create the appropriate distributional grid. It has to be a socialist politics of inclusion that can break the reproduction of self and other that defines the parameters of closure in race and caste systems.

Secondly, it is the cultural act of recognition that the past was regrettable. It is the duty of the historian to be ruthless: no teleological dialectics of progress and no golden pasts, important and meaningful pasts, yes but the bones must reek despite decomposition. The blind spots must be illuminated, harshly.

Thirdly, it is the subordination of ritual to law: that the right to worship by anyone cannot be denied anywhere and by no one.

Fourthly, free, compulsory and high quality secular education. Fifthly, planning- that the targets of affirmative action need to be met within a decade at which point the reservation system may be abolished.

But we are not here to reflect on plans but to draw out ideas that might help human flourishing. What have the derogated voices whisper to us faintly at times from the thicket of regrettable time?

I would say five:

We have learnt from First Nations and their philosophers that the separation of subject and object in history brought about by theocratic proxy elites and particularly intense in the monotheistic religions which makes the non-us all sentient beings and insentient matter the objects of our anthropocentric

and Difference in Indian Society. Penguin Books India. Reading that As a backdrop the work of Andre B eteille, Andr e (2005). Gupta, Deepankar, ed. *Anti-utopia: Essential Writings of Andr e B eteille*. Oxford University Press India were also consulted.

³² Mary John (2013) The Problem of Women's Labour, *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*.

desire is false. There are other ways of dealing with people and nature, in nature and that human flourishing is about a broader eco-dependent us³³.

We have learnt from first nations, black and dalit struggles, slave rebellions and reflective discontent that ontologically race and caste do not exist. We are all assemblages of cells shaped by epigenetic processes where colour or chromatic variation is a marginal modification. Their amplification in our contemporary period, the figurations of race and caste in the post-colony, and the increase in derogation is a sign of civilizational pathology rather than a naturalised response.

We have learnt from the slave, the wage-earner and the contemporary precariat that class is a civilizational constraint and the days of capitalism's synonym for progress are way gone in the mists of time.

We have learnt from the artists and writers that refuse to deal with the human abstract and the playfulness of form that there are deeper than human rights a set of living rights: not to be bombed, exterminated, categorised, used, raped or broken.³⁴

We have learnt from all their voices that we are bio-diverse and to play with the limits of the word, the "dialectic" is not adequate, rather a polylectic, approach may do!

Ambedkar was and is part of the story of freedom, equality and self-determination, he will continue to disturb the shine of India and the very idea of progress. It is shocking that 125 years on we still have to re-confirm his relevance.

"Equality might be a fiction" Ambedkar argued, "but nonetheless one has to accept it as a guiding principle".³⁵ Let us disagree on what human flourishing may mean but let us keep talking and doing something about it. It is a long road there but every step however tired gets us a tad closer. Make this University a refreshment station for those who walk, think, live and who are convinced they are here like you, to take us there.

³³ Ana Ester Cecena, op cit.

³⁴ Ari Sitas (2007) *Ethic...* op cit... For a view that argues the importance of justice first, see Deepankar Gupta,(2011). *Justice before Reconciliation: Negotiating a 'New Normal' in Post-riot Mumbai and Ahmedabad*. Delhi: Routledge India.

³⁵ See Ambedkar's (1979) , *Essays on Untouchables and Untouchability*, Speeches and Writings, op cit