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Caste, Privilege, and Postcolonialism: Reflections on Decolonising the Curriculum

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SHUBRANSHU MISHRA, SEP 15 2020

On June 30 2020, California's Department of Fair Employment and Housing took Cisco Systems Inc. to court on the charge that two senior Indian origin managers of upper-caste background discriminated against a Dalit engineer. The federal lawsuit is a milestone in prioritising the discussion on caste-based discrimination in regions beyond India and South Asia. In many ways, this case bares open the proximity of upper-caste communities that aspire to whiteness and ally with white supremacy and thereby punctures the tendency to represent the South Asian diaspora as monolithic, homogenous and casteless. Across the pond, in 2010, the House of Lords began the public consultation process to make caste discrimination in the UK illegal and voted twice to provide legal protection to approximately 400,000 Dalits (the 'untouchables' in the caste hierarchy) living in the UK. Reluctant to legislate caste-based discrimination, the UK government agreed to amend the Equality Act (2010) to consider 'caste to be an aspect of race' in 2013. However in 2018, under pressure from the powerful Hindu lobbies, the government believed that it was unnecessary to provide 'additional statutory protection in the Equality Act' and as a result failed to legislate caste discrimination in the UK.

Researchers and activists who have been producing scholarly work on the far-reaching effects of caste prejudice are currently looking closely at the Cisco dispute and hoping for a precedent to be set. At such a critical time, it is essential to foreground the category of caste in our teaching for its contiguity and intersections with race, gender, class, and sexuality. Given the disproportionate representation of British Asians and possibly South Asians within the BAME cohort and the large proportion of Indian students in British higher education institutions, it is imperative that there are wide-ranging discussions on the role caste plays in the western academy. The growth of movements like 'Decolonising the Curriculum' and 'Building an Anti-Racist Classroom/University' across the world provides an opportunity to link, not equate, race and caste debates in order to dismantle connected ideologies of white supremacy and brahminical patriarchy. Employing a decolonial praxis in this article, I will discuss examples of how I was able to generate thinking around historical and contemporary inequalities through the knowledges produced in the Global South or by minoritised communities, and how it can be further decolonised by centering the intersections of caste and race. In so doing, I will highlight what a practitioner's response to understanding caste-based discrimination might look like within the University.

Based on concepts of descent, endogamy, pollution and purity, caste is a centuries-old system of social stratification regulating social, cultural, and economic relations between hierarchical communities. Unlike class, caste hierarchy does not allow any upward movement even if lower-caste communities were to achieve financial security. As an outspoken critic of the caste system, the Indian social and political reformer Dr B R Ambedkar had warned that 'if Hindus migrate to other regions of the earth, Indian caste would become a world problem.' It is estimated that '4.5 million South Asians and other communities living in the UK belong to or are attributed to a caste.' As colonial subjects and postcolonial migrants, South Asians have been variously journeying across the globe as soldiers serving in imperial armies, as indentured workers transported to 'sugar colonies', as 'unskilled' workers brought to rebuild the British economy after the Second World War, and as 'skilled' immigrants working in the health and IT sector etc. Through these travels, they carried and continue to carry with them their immediate and well-preserved identity, that is caste – an identity passed on to second and third generations. Consequently, caste discrimination takes place in British society – however, there are no legal protections for Dalits residing in the UK. Unfamiliarity with

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the entrenched system of caste has resulted in employers, including schools and universities, taking no concrete measures against such discrimination.

Last month, students undertaking the 'Decolonising the Curriculum Review' at my department, informed me that the module I teach, *Introduction to Postcolonialism*, was being considered as one of the model curricula following a decolonial and inclusive approach. While I was thrilled to learn about this, this also resulted in much introspection. In this module, we begin our discussions with a shared sensibility that postcolonialism as a field of study is intrinsic to understanding world politics and this standpoint helps us to examine the colonial subjectivity and power relations through the intersecting categories of race, class, caste and gender. Introducing students to the pioneering works of Frantz Fanon, Stuart Hall, Ashis Nandy, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, among other seminal texts, opens up whole new worlds of knowing and understanding. Having said that, this scholarship is laden with internal hierarchies, competing ideologies, and varied responses to the postcolonial condition. Such complexities point to the broad scope for improvement in the 'Introduction to Postcolonialism' module, anchored by the following questions:

Is the 'Introduction to Postcolonialism' curriculum inclusive enough to be considered a benchmark? Have I sufficiently foregrounded knowledges produced by Black and indigenous scholars beyond key texts? As someone drawing his research and teaching from a South Asian context, and as a savarna scholar, have I put the spotlight on the problem of caste discrimination as a global problem? In my effort to highlight the work of scholars in and of the Global South, have I inadvertently provided more space to South Asian scholars of upper-caste background making it intrinsically a space of the 'twice-born' castes and thereby silencing the Bahujans or non-savarnas, particularly Dalits and Adivasis? It is important to note that the postcolonial scholarship emerging from South Asia, including the groundbreaking and oft-cited work of the Subaltern Studies Collective, has been a space occupied mainly by upper-caste scholars with a few exceptions. Modules examining colonial subjectivity and marginalisation through categories of race, class, and gender have often neglected the profoundly engaging and compelling scholarship of scholars like Gopal Guru, Kancha Ilaiah Shephard, Anand Teltumbde, and Babytai Kamble among others on Dalit subjectivity. Likewise, there is little introspection on the ways in which popular feminist discourses hailing from South Asian academia have nevertheless silenced the diverse understanding of oppression and liberation from Dalit women's perspectives. When discussed beyond a South Asian studies context, the debate around caste is often restricted to cursory mentions of Dr Ambedkar's seminal work, *Annihilation of Caste*.

While an introduction to postcolonialism requires a close reading of foundational texts by Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakravathy Spivak, to name a few, it is also important to recognise that decolonial engagement requires a more deep-rooted analysis. Going beyond Northern epistemologies to include perspectives and resources that have been dismissed as not being universal or mainstream enough, discussions in the postcolonialism seminars I lead focus on how the experience and practice of colonialism constitute the contemporary global order. These decolonial epistemologies include looking beyond the usual sources and uncovering the nature of power relations in the texts produced by scholars based in the global North. Let me provide two examples of how this paradigm can be dismantled.

First, as part of the module, students undertake a field trip to sites of postcolonial encounter – the British Museum, Dishoom restaurant and the India Club. The tour allows the students to critically analyse the institutional and everyday structures of colonial power, nostalgia, and resistance. While the Museum is the site that preserves and valorises the empire, the India Club represents a stark contrast to the Museum, given its history as a radical space that became the hub of anticolonial resistance in metropolitan London. The spatial, emotional, and political dimension of the tour allows the students to critically analyse the meanings of aesthetics, representation, trauma, and identity in multicultural Britain. Second, the agenda of Decolonising IR requires perusing different sources – that is, to go beyond written records and utilise oral narratives, poetry, theatrical performances as a means of enquiry. Approaching questions about history and international politics through cuisines, students are encouraged to write gastronomical histories in their essays. The recipes or ingredients they choose to write their essays on are intimately linked to histories of indentured labour, African American Muslim resistance and structures of the caste system that distinguished what the most marginalised could cook, be served and eat. These cuisines are inextricably associated with race, class and caste, and their essays raise issues of privilege and prejudice, diasporic experience and exclusion, and everyday violence.

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To me, these pedagogical techniques and decolonial methods are essential to decentre the mostly Anglo-Saxon text from its pedestal of 'academic' analysis. The indigenous, colonised, and besieged subjects theorise in 'unconventional' ways – through the music they compose and sing, the clothes they wear and weave, and the food they eat or are allowed to eat. Examining these sources have taken us to underexplored terrains and archives – utilising Nina Simone's musical genius and Faiz Ahmed Faiz's revolutionary poetry to think about blackness and resistance, engaging with Shailja Patel's *Migritude* performance to think about migration and memory, and studying the histories of Dal Puri, Rakhti or Bunny Chow to think about race and caste apartheid. This is not to say that the marginalised have not been writing, using the tools of the master to resist and theorise their experience, but to emphasise their absence from curricula. Not least because of the gatekeeping practised by major publishing houses that tend to privilege white male experiences as universal and reject others as regional – thereby invisibilising scholars of colour, particularly from marginalised sections of society.

Students in the 'Decolonising the Curriculum' review describe decolonising as a process of 'reorientation of pedagogy' that 'seeks to challenge inequalities.' In solidarity with this spirit, I have been further examining the ways in which my focus on postcolonial-decolonial politics needs to pay more attention to the internal hierarchies it tends to underplay. Despite their focus on categories of race, class, and gender, Postcolonialism modules frequently occlude a meaningful engagement with caste and caste-like systems of subjugation around the world. This is compounded by an insufficient engagement with the works of indigenous, and Dalit scholars. By restricting the texts written by Dalit scholars to modules explicitly focussing on India or topics exploring caste violence in South Asia, such an approach reiterates the 'area studies' dilemma. Young scholars like Suraj Yengde, Yashika Dutt and Chinnaiah Jangam have been instrumental in bringing the issue of caste discrimination out of the regional/area studies realm to the international stage. Recently, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Isabel Wilkerson's book, *Caste*, has made a compelling case to understand intersections between caste and race. Their scholarship centred around the problems of inequality and social justice is a significant continuation of developing transnational solidarities between Dalit and Black movements – much like the intersections between Ambedkar, King and Du Bois.

In December 2019, Brandeis University became the first US University to ban caste-based discrimination to safeguard the interests of its diverse staff and student profile. Although there are as yet no widespread reported cases of caste-based discrimination at universities in the UK, it is vital to acknowledge the relevance of caste prejudice – especially at a time when the universities are looking to increase BAME representation and promotion among staff. Given that British Asians and South Asian scholars in western academia are predominantly upper-caste, and Indian students at UK higher education institutions are making up the second-largest group of all international students, it is inevitable that their caste will travel with them. The University will be better equipped to handle cases of caste-discrimination in future when we teach caste as a category to understand marginalisation and address the lack of adequate support, solidarity and mechanisms against caste prejudice. Resistance to casteism and whiteness in multicultural Britain is the battle that will have to be fought together through collaborative solidarity, teaching and action.

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