‘Race might be a unicorn, but its horn could draw blood’: Racialisation, Class and Racism in a Non-Western Context

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Abstract
In this article, the concepts of ‘racialisation’, ‘racial projects’, and ‘racisms’ are deployed to analyse the social construction of distinctive groups and the dynamics of group conflicts in India where the white vs. non-white binary as the key element of race relations does not exist. My main argument is that in India the racialisation of specific groups constructs racial categories that intersect with class relations, to produce inequalities and struggles over material and non-material resources. A related argument is that despite the seemingly seamless braiding of race and class, it is in fact class that plays a more significant role in producing as well as sustaining racialised social inequality.

Keywords
Sociology of race, race and ethnicity, racialisation, global racisms, race and class

Introduction
But you cannot do away with racism by rejecting the concept of race. . .it is practice that defines terminology, not terminology the practice. The meaning of a word is not ‘the action it produces’. . .if so, to destroy the word would be to destroy the act – and that is metaphysics. On the contrary, it is action that gives meaning to a word – it is in the act that the word is made flesh (Sivanandan, 1981: 293).

Despite the periodic resurgence of discredited 19th-century dogmas derived from ‘scientific racism’ in their many guises, the fact that racial categories are socially constructed and that races do not have an ontological existence independent from the practices and ideologies of racism is axiomatic for race scholars (Emirbayer and Desmond, 2015; Ignatiev, 1995; Maghbouleh, 2017). Social as well as natural scientists recognise that rather than being a biological, ontological entity, race is a social construct that is indeed very real in its consequences, created and sustained as it is by specific social structures and seamlessly braided with institutional power, culture and ideology (Amor, 2010; Baber and Bryant, 2010; Burton, 2012; Du Bois, 1903; Gould, 1981; Livingstone, 1962; Long and Kittles,
2003; Miles, 1989; Mills, 1999; Rattansi, 2007; Visweswaran, 2010). In Omi and Winant’s formulation, the racialisation of human groups occurs via ‘racial projects’ that involve the simultaneous social construction of ‘races’ and the redistribution of social resources – material and symbolic – along racialised lines (Omi and Winant, 1994). Along the same lines, Kamala Visweswaran (1998: 77) has argued that ‘races certainly exist, but they have no biological meaning outside the social significance we attach to biological explanation itself. . .to say that race has no biological meaning is not to say race lacks meaning.’ The fact that race and racial categories do not correspond to any biological or genetic facts, also complicates the existing analytical distinction between race and ethnicity. While race is generally associated with the social significance accorded to “phenotypical” or somatic features, ethnic categories usually derive from distinctions based on language, religion, national origins, ‘culture’ etc. there is considerable overlap particularly when presumably inherited traits imputed to specific ethnic and cultural groups. Indeed, for Howard Winant (2008: 535), sometimes ‘ethnically defined groups are racialised as in the case of the former Yugoslavia, Britain and Ireland, Nazi Germany, Rwanda and Burundi etc.’ As the famous ‘Thomas Theorem’ enunciated by W. I. Thomas and Dorothy Thomas (1928: 571) over eight decades ago posited, if humans ‘define situations as real, they are real in their consequences’. Or in the pithy formulation of Anthony Kwame Appiah (2014: 113), ‘the concept of race might be a unicorn, but its horn could draw blood’.

The axiomatic status of the social construction of race perspective notwithstanding, the idea that biological, genetic or phenotypical factors play some, even if minimal role in the genesis and sustenance of racial categories refuses to perish. Given the fact that the ascription of stereotypical traits and characteristics that are ideologically deployed for the construction of racialised groups and the production and reproduction of material and symbolic inequalities, one would expect the proliferation of analyses of contexts where racism does not necessarily involve groups that are socially constructed as ‘non-white’ and ‘white’. However, despite some notable and outstanding exceptions (Bonnett, 2018; Dikotter, 1997; Kobayakawa, 2020; Kowner and Demel, 2015; Lie, 2008; Wagatsuma and De Vos, 1966; Winant, 2001), the binaries of ‘non-white’ and ‘white’ have dominated and indeed continue to dominate analyses of racial inequality. More often than not, any systematic discrimination of racialised groups is either denied or a number of euphemisms such as ‘communalism’ and ‘sectarianism’ are routinely invoked to label conflicts that are identical to racism in contexts involving socially constructed ‘non-white’ and ‘white’ groups (Chakrabarty, 1994).

Against the prevailing trend in the analyses of race and racism, the main argument forwarded in this paper is that obvious phenotypical differences are not necessarily the constitutive ingredients of either the construction of distinctive racial groups or racial conflicts. Rather, given certain material conditions, class and power differences, religion, language, region and ethnic differences can all be singled out and deployed for racialising human groups. Indeed, as many race scholars have repeatedly demonstrated, depending on specific material and ideological contexts, phenotypical differences are malleable and not fixed and immutable indicators of race (Du Bois, 2017; Hacking, 2006; Ignatieve, 1995; Maghbouleh, 2017). Seemingly seamlessly braided with a variety of structural and material factors including class, division of labour and access to resources, racism thus is not exclusively about conflicts over status and identity per se. Racisms of various kinds are invariably intertwined with, anchored in and generated by the competition and struggles over material resources such that both, material contexts and social identities, are continually dialectically produced and reproduced with real consequences for social inequality (Roediger, 1992, 2018).

### Racial Projects and Racialisation in India

In India, as indeed elsewhere, covert and overt contests and conflicts between different groups occur in a variety of guises as well as disguises—between different castes, religious, regional and
linguistic groups. While on the surface these contestations and conflicts appear to be fueled and precipitated exclusively by differences over caste status, religion, region and language per se and do not appear to be about ‘race’; in fact, the social mechanisms of the demarcation of groups as well as the dynamics and consequences of conflicts over material and symbolic resources are identical to what is usually recognised as racism involving socially constructed races.

Caste and Casteism in India

In India, through the production and reproduction of systemic inequality, domination, and persecution, the caste system and casteism constitutes the prime examples of ‘racism without races’ (Baber, 2010; Slate, 2011). The origins, functioning and consequences of the caste system, like any complex institution, have unsurprisingly been the subject of robust debates. While Louis Dumont (1974) focused primarily on the role of ideologies, for others (Ram, 1992; Singh, 2008, 2014; Teltumbde, 2011, 2018; Thorat and Newman, 2010; Yengde, 2019; Gupta, 2000), the structural context, the division of labour and the monopolisation of resources – material as well as symbolic – are at the heart of the emergence, consolidation, and persistence of the caste system. As with any complex social institution, material factors and ideologies are of course dialectically intertwined in the practices of casteism. Despite all the regional variations and some transformation as well as flexibility through history, at the heart of the caste system in India is a structured hierarchical and unequal division of labour that like any other institutionalised system of inequality, despite the transformations and changes, is constantly reinforced and justified by a wide range of practices such as the division of labour, endogamy, social sanctions, force, violence and religious ideologies. Unsurprisingly, as active agents, members of the lower castes have historically resisted and continue to resist and shape their lives via a variety of social movements and political mobilisation against overwhelming structures of upper caste domination and exploitation (Ambedkar, 2014; Cherian, nd; Dreze, 2020; Gore, 1989; Gough, 1982; Jaffrelot, 2002, 2005; Nagaraj, 1993; O’Hanlon, 1985; Omvedt, 1994, 2017; Prashad, 2001a, 2001b; Zelliot, 1992).

The issue of casteism as racism in India or racism as casteism in non-Indian contexts has been a perennial source of contentious discussions and arguments (Berreman, 1979; Cox, 1948; Davis et al., 1941; Dollard, 1937; Rajasekhar, 1987; Warner, 1936; Wilkerson, 2020a, 2020b). In the Indian context, the issue came to a head with the 2001 United Nations World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR) in Durban, South Africa, that provided an opportunity for Dalit activists and their supporters to present their case at a prominent global forum (Berg, 2017; Betelie, 2004; Macwan, 2004; Natarajan, 2007; Pinto, 2001; Thorat and Umakant, 2004; Visvanathan, 2001). Even though the Dalit activists and their political allies had a very strong presence at the conference, the official representatives of the government of India successfully resisted the inclusion of casteism as a form of discrimination in the final document that was released at the conclusion of the conference. The official position of the government was partly derived from the intervention Andre Beteille and Dipankar Gupta – two prominent and influential Indian sociologists – in the debates. Both pointedly ignored the full title of the conference that included not just ‘race’ but ‘racism’ and ‘related intolerance’ as well and insisted on arguing that ‘caste is not race’ – a claim that none of the Dalit activists and their allies had ever made (Beteille, 2004; Gupta, 2001). Sociologist Dipankar Gupta went against the consensus of scholars that even though races are indeed socially constructed but they have very real consequences to claim that that ‘caste is . . . not as immutable a category as race is’ (Gupta, 2001). The point of the Dalit activists and their supporters was of course not the pedantic yet political observation that caste and race or casteism and racism are identical. Rather, their important point was to draw attention to the quite obviously similar social consequences, effects and outcomes of the
practices of casteism and racism. Andre Beteille (2004) also pointedly ignored the social construction of races perspective and expressed exasperated bewilderment at the activists’ and scholars’ attempt to contest racism in India. According to him, the existence and experience of racism in India is apparently impossible because despite their concerted efforts, the early British colonial anthropologists, despite their formidable arsenal of anthropometric tools and techniques, had failed to find any conclusive scientific evidence of the existence of races as discrete ontological entities in India (Bates, 1995). To take this logic to its obviously illogical conclusion, one would have to concede that apparently the practice of casteism too is impossible since caste, a social and institutional construction that it is, quite obviously also does not have any ontological existence that is amenable to scientific measurement and categorisation. One could also claim that nationalism surely is literally a figment of the nationalists’ imagination since nations, as Benedict Anderson has famously argued, are ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 1983). As Gerald Berreman once wryly quipped, ‘there is a tendency among those who study and analyse them to intellectualise caste, and in the process to squeeze the life out of it’ (Berreman, 1972).

In the Indian government’s official position that caste discrimination and inequality issue was an internal, private family affair that could be addressed without public ‘internationalization’ there were more than echoes of the response of the Truman administration to the 1951 petition to the United Nations by the NAACP, the National Negro Congress (NNC) and the Civil Rights Congress (CRC) against anti-black racism in the United States. Framed by the context of the Cold War geopolitics, the movers and supporters of the petition – including W. E. B. Dubois – were predictably and pointedly accused of being ‘disloyal’ and of washing dirty laundry on the international public stage (Martin, 1997). In 2006, the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh repudiated the earlier position of the BJP-led government of India and became the first and the only prime minister of the country to acknowledge that ‘Dalits have faced a unique discrimination in our society that is fundamentally different from the problems of minority groups in general. The only parallel to the practice of untouchability was apartheid’ (Berg, 2017; Rahman, 2006).

Having made the argument that in its unequal outcomes, casteism is not substantially different from racism, it is of course, important to move from the particularisms of specific modalities of sustaining a variety of supremacies to more general, universal formulations. Thus, to think of casteism as a unique Indian form of the racisms putatively present in ‘the West’ alone, reduces – perhaps unintentionally so – India to the Orientalist caricatures that Edward Said (1978) so eloquently criticised. If the institutionalised discrimination and unequal allocation of material and symbolic resources inherent in casteism is indeed a form of racism, as many, have rightly insisted, then caste and casteism are also to be found in non-Indian societies (Davis et al., 1941; Gopal, 2018; Khilnani, 2020; Loomba, 2009; Pandey, 2013; Wilkerson, 2020a, 2020b). If the salient and defining characteristic of casteism is the monopolisation and transmission of material and status privileges intergenerationally, as indeed it manifestly is, then caste and casteism cannot be thought, as a particularly Indian peculiarity. As Isabel Wilkerson (2020b), even though her idealism ignores material factors, puts it, ‘caste and race are neither synonymous nor mutually exclusive. They can and do coexist in the same culture and serve to reinforce each other. Caste is the bones, race the skin. . .caste is the powerful infrastructure that holds each group in its place’. In the same vein, Ashley Montagu observed that, ‘when we speak of the ‘race problem’ in America, what we really mean is the caste system and the problems which the caste system creates in America’ (Montagu, 1942 cited in Wilkerson, 2020a, 2020b). It is not at all surprising that when Dr. Martin Luther King visited India, he was introduced to a group of students whose families had been untouchables, as a ‘fellow untouchable from the United States of America’ (Wilkerson, 2020a, 2020b). Although he was at first puzzled at the analogy, he later asserted, ‘yes, I am an untouchable and every negro in the United States of America is an untouchable’ (Wilkerson, 2020a, 2020b). If caste and casteism
cannot be confined to India alone, by the same token, race and racism cannot be restricted to only those contexts where the socially constructed ‘white’ vs. ‘non-white’ binaries obtain. Extending the analytical canvas much more widely, Thomas Piketty has recently analysed in great detail the emergence and consolidation of neo-feudal classes under contemporary neoliberal capitalism, that, because of their control over and monopolisation of the intergenerational inheritance of wealth and status, are not that different from different from caste and casteism (Picketty, 2017).

**Racial Projects, Mining Projects and the Adivasis**

The approximately 70 million *adivasis* or the original inhabitants officially referred to as the ‘scheduled tribes’ of India, are also subjected to relentless racialisation processes and ideologies that draw upon and deploy colonial discourses and practices of the dispossession of land and other natural resources (Nag, 2019; Sundar, 1997, 2009, 2016; 2019 Sundar and Sundar, 2014). Indeed, Jaipal Singh Munda, the influential Adivasi intellectual, activist as the captain of the Indian Olympic hockey team, pointedly criticised ‘racialism’ that lent ideological support for the dispossession of the Adivasis through history (Kumar, 2018: 129; Munda, 2020). In contemporary India, they are subject to the standard stereotypes and tropes such as ‘primitive’, ‘savage’, ‘child-like’, ‘innocent’, ‘rebellious’, ‘irrational’, ‘lazy’ etc. During the British colonial period, particularly in the aftermath of the Permanent Settlement Act (1793) that fixed the level of taxation on cultivators regardless of the fluctuations in productivity, the ideology of the ‘civilising mission’ was deployed to justify the eventual dispossession of forests and lands from the many tribes of India led to the rapid transformation as well as destruction of their existing social structures and cultural practices. Many *adivasis* under the new tax regime had to borrow money from non-tribal money lenders who had moved in. Unable to pay back their loans, many ended up as bonded laborers, particularly on the tea plantations of Assam (Sharma, 2011) and the coffee plantations of the South India (Philip, 2003). The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 generated, codified and deployed colonial stereotypes of the putatively inherent and biologically inherited propensity for crime to entire groups of *adivasis* to further justify their subordination and for making them institutional targets for coercive ‘civilising missions’. Over time these racial stereotypes acquired institutional reality that continues to structure the lives of many *adivasis* in contemporary India. The institutional domination, subjugation and dispossession of the *adivasis* did not, of course, go uncontested. Depending on the structural and political contexts, these policies fuelled a number of rebellions and revolts that were dealt by the colonial administration with a mixture of harsh repression as well as concessions to some of their demands. The major Adivasi rebellions include the Kol Revolt (1832), The Khond Revolt (1850), The Santhal Revolt (1855), the Naga Revolt (1879), the Munda Revolt (1895) and the Kuki uprising (1917–19). After independence in 1947, Tribal Advisory Councils (TAC) were formed in states that had a large proportion of *adivasis*. Whatever little constitutional power they initially had was slowly whittled away over the years. Currently, twelve states have Tribal Advisory Councils set up for the ‘welfare’ of the *adivasis* and ostensibly to ‘protect’ them from land encroachment and dispossession. However, the Tribal Advisory Councils role is to simply report and make recommendations to the Governors of the states and they do not have any independent constitutional powers to act (Nag, 2019).

Despite concerted resistance, the policies, bureaucratic structures and organisations created and deployed during the colonial period continue to contribute to domination, subjugation and dispossession for the *adivasis*. Over the past few years, the vast amounts of mineral deposits under the forests and the lands on which many *adivasi* communities subsist have been targeted by powerful mining corporations. A vast majority of the *adivasis* are caught in the middle of many levels and layers of political machinations and overall, they are more marginalised than ever. These actions,
processes and outcomes have been aided by the structures of local and global neoliberal capitalism’s demand for cheap mineral resources in the tribal areas and by the racialising ideologies that construct the *adivasis* as obstacles to ‘modernisation’ and ‘development’. As was the case with the native aboriginal groups in North America in another era (Schissel and Wotherspoon, 2003) there are now a number of ‘residential schools’ or ‘factory schools’ for the *adivasis* funded largely by the very corporations that are after the minerals and ores in the region, that seek to continue the colonial ‘civilizing mission’ of ‘modernizing’ and inducting the indigenous people of India into the capitalist wage economy (Santoshni, 2019; Sundaresan, 2020) even as activists who resist these developments are labelled as ‘terrorists’ and targeted by state authorities (Xaxa, 2021).

The Racialisation and Othering of Muslims

The racialisation of Indian Muslims constitutes yet another prominent example of ‘racism without races’ (Baber, 2010, 2004). The rise of *Hindutva* or ethnic Hindu nationalism has triggered, nourished and sustained what is officially and in the Indian mass media, referred to as ‘communalism’ or the simultaneous construction of and the fuelling of conflict between communities demarcated from each other by religious differences (Engineer, 1989; Hansen, 1999; Jaffrelot, 1996). In terms of actual, substantive consequences – employment rates, rates of incarceration, residential segregation, lynching by mobs etc. – ‘communalism’ against the Indian Muslims possesses all the elements and features of systemic and overt racism that is easily recognisable and labelled as such in contexts where domination and subjugation occurs between members of putatively phenotypically distinctive ‘races’. As the distinguished Indian historian Sumit Sarkar (1996: 77) observed, ‘communalism here veers close to everyday racism, with the Muslim – like the black or colored immigrant – felt to be a biological danger, a threat by being born, giving birth – even dying’. The last bit about ‘even dying’ references the oft-heard labeling of the burial practices of Indian Muslims as a strategy for claiming, grave by grave, the territory of the nation.

Although the othering of Muslims might appear to be a case conflict over religious and doctrinal differences per se, it actually displays all the features of racialisation and racism in general. These include the lynching of Muslims and Dalits (Ellis-Peterson, 2020; Filkins, 2019) the de facto as well as planned residential segregation (Kazmin, 2004), the difficulties Muslims face when trying to rent living space (Bhat, 2020) as well as the recent introduction of the ‘Unlawful Religious Conversion Act’ (the so-called Love Jihad laws) in some states where the *Hindutva* BJP party rules (Biswas, 2020; Katju, 2020; Rao, 2020) and forced sterilisation of Muslims and Dalits during the Emergency imposed by Prime Minister Mrs. Gandhi in the 1970s (Plys, 2020a, 2020b). These are all well-honed strategies for the simultaneous racialisation of and racism against human groups ostensibly distinguished by religion, caste and region. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has observed, ‘the possibility that the current Indian Hindu-Muslim or upper versus lower caste conflict may be, in a significant sense, a variant of the modern phenomenon of... “race” is seldom entertained... “racism” is thought of as something the white people do to us. What Indians do to one another are variously described as “communalism”, “regionalism” and “casteism” but never racism’ (Chakrabarty, 1994). Given the key claim made in this paper – that racialisation and racial projects can be found in any situation where relations of domination, subordination, exploitation and monopolisation of resources are present – it is hardly surprising that among the Indian Muslims too, the lower status Pasmanda Muslims are racialised and subjected to discrimination by the dominant Ashrafs (Ahmad, 1973; Alam, 2007; Ansari, 1960, 2009; Bashir and Wilson, 2017).

‘Regionalism’ in the quote from Chakrabarty above is deployed in the Indian context is usually deployed to refer to the stereotyping, racialisation of, tensions and conflicts between people who migrate from one culturally distinctive region to another. One such major long-standing ‘regional’
The Conflict stemming from the colonial period that is very much still alive today is in the state of Assam (Saikia, 2014; Weiner, 1978). The recent passing of the discriminatory Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC) has reignited emotions, tensions and conflicts not just in Assam but all over India (Nag, 2018). In addition to the pre-existing tensions and conflicts over access to resources between the Assamese and the Bengalis, the exclusion of Muslims from the Citizenship Amendment Act has also accelerated and intensified their racialisation and categorisation as the Other.

The Racialisation of Indians from the Northeast Region

In addition to casteism where phenotypically undifferentiated individuals are racialised and Othered with obvious consequences for extreme social inequality, the phenotypically distinct people from the northeast part of India are also frequently at the receiving end of racial projects and racism, including violent attacks in the rest of India. The racist slur ‘Chinky’ is commonly used by non-Northeast Indians to simultaneously construct racialised boundaries and otherise them. As Baishya (2013) puts it, in view of the tremendous cultural diversity among the peoples from the Northeast, the ‘Chinky’ slur serves to ‘homogenize them from without’ by according social significance to distinctive phenotypical features, languages and cuisines (Nongbri and Shimreiwung, 2017). As portrayed in the recent movie *Axone* (2020) women from the Northeast are particularly stereotyped as ‘westernized’, ‘sexually available’ and constantly subject to sexual harassment. In the post-COVID-19 era when racist anti-Chinese and anti-Asian hostility is resurgent in many parts of the world, physical attacks against people from the Northeast region have been reported in many parts of India (Chanu and Chakrabarty, 2020). Throughout history, people from the Northeast residing in other regions of India have been particularly susceptible to be labelled as culturally ‘non-Indian’ and racialised as the Other. Largely as a consequence of the dominant perceptions of them as culturally as well as phenotypically different from other Indians, a large majority of them are employed and ghettoised in the hospitality and retail sectors of the economy – mostly restaurants, bars and the fashion boutiques in the new malls. According to one store attendant from Nagaland working in New Delhi, for many non-Northeast Indians, ‘it is like going to Bangkok for shopping. . .we look the same but some of us can speak Hindi’ (McDuie-Ra, 2013). The concentration of Northeast Indians in the service sector in many large cities of India caters to a ‘de-Indianized aesthetic without the need to import foreign labour’ (McDuie-Ra, 2012: 33). Racialised stereotyping, marginalisation, frequent abuse and racist attacks is a common experience for many people of Northeastern India.

The other major regionalist movement in India was and continues to be in the state of Maharashtra. The ethnic chauvinist Shiv Sena party, formally launched in 1966, was a movement as well as a political party that claimed to defend the interests of the so-called sons of the soil Maharashtrians against ‘outsiders’ (Gupta, 1982; Katzenstein, 1973; Lele, 1995). The movement originally targeted South Indian migrants who were routinely portrayed as criminals and were blamed for taking away jobs from the ‘sons of the soil’ or the putatively ‘native’ Maharashtrians. Later, the same movement turned its focus on migrants from the Hindi speaking provinces of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh of North India. In addition to the charge of depriving ‘native’ Maharashtrians of jobs, the migrants from the Bihar and Uttar Pradesh regions were also and continue to be stereotyped as criminals and accused of spreading disease in the state of Maharashtra. Although the nativist movement always had and continues to have multiple political goals, its constitutive feature was its strident ‘racialising’ and the othering of South and North Indian migrants and its frequent deployment violence in tandem with electoral politics to achieve its ends (Gupta, 1982; Lele, 1995).
The Social Construction of the ‘Hindu Race’

The othering and racialisation of the populations discussed above are dialectically connected to concerns about the socially constructed ‘Hindu race’ that is ideologically promoted as a putatively neutral norm for the nation and as a counterpoint to the Muslim other. In addition to the conflicts in the medieval era, British colonial rule proved to be a major catalyst for the racialisation of Hindu identity and the Othering of Muslims and Dalits (Ballantyne, 2002; Cherian, nd; Dhavan, 2004; Robb, 1997; Trautmann, 2005). Orientalist scholarship, focusing among other things on the concept of an Indo-Aryan linguistic family, the Aryan Race and the Golden Age of Hinduism presumably terminated by the Muslim invasions, contributed to the ‘racialisation’ of Hindu communal identity. Spurred by the structural and ideological impact of colonial rule, a number of Hindu activists drew on the writings of Orientalist scholars on India to call for the resurrection of the ‘Golden age’ that was, according to colonialist narratives, destroyed by the alien ‘race’ of Muslim invaders (Thapar, 1996; 2005). The ‘racialisation’ of identities through the construction and deployment of an identifiable discourse of quasi-biological, immutable differences was well underway (Baber, 2000, 2007).

As early as 1860, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, the founder of the Hindu revivalist organisation the Arya Samaj, drew upon Max Muller’s translation of the Vedas to generate and orchestrate the ideology that the Hindus were the descendants of the Aryas who themselves were an elect and primordial people. Dayananda concluded that the Aryas originated from Tibet and settled in Aryavarta or North India before spreading and dominating the world (Jaffrelot, 1996: 330). These narratives were further amplified by a number of prominent ideologues of that period. One of them, U.N. Mukherji, represented a particularly influential voice of that period. His text Hindus – a Dying Race (1909) sought to ring the alarm bells about the imminent demise of a once dominant Hindu ‘race’. Elaborating on the specific qualities of Muslims, Mukherji held them up as a community worthy of emulation because the ‘superiority of the Mohammedans is entirely due to their religious revival and systematic moral training’ (Mukherji, 1909, cited in Datta, 1993: 1307). Mukherji traced the decline of the ‘Hindu race’ and the proliferation of Muslims to the alleged proclivity of Hindu widows for marrying Muslim males (Datta, 1993: 1307). Skillfully deploying existing stereotypical images of the Muslim male as particularly lustful and sexually driven, a construction that can be traced to Renaissance Europe (Said, 1978), Mukherji sought to simultaneously create and tap into a reservoir of patriarchal guilt among the allegedly effete Hindu male who was accused of being unable to defend his motherland and ‘his women’. This view of the Hindu male drew upon the entrenched British stereotypes of the Hindu Bengali male. For the influential colonial administrator Thomas Babington Macaulay, ‘the physical organisation of the Bengalee is feeble even to effeminacy . . . his pursuits are sedentary, his limbs delicate, his movement languid’ (cited in Gordon, 1974: 6). The attempt to contest the colonial construction and deployment of the stereotype of the effeminacy of Hindu males, their physical weakness, their ‘emasculating’ later became a dominant component of Hindu nationalist discourse. Unsurprisingly, militant and proto-fascist Hindu organisations such as the Rashtrya Sevak Sangh (Organisation for the Protection of the Nation; the RSS) devote a lot of energy to the grooming of male body and the cultivation of hyper-masculinity (Alter, 1992; Basu, 1994; Sinha, 1995).

V.D. Savarkar, a major ideologue and proponent of the ‘Hindu race’, drew upon the writings of Herbert Spencer, Huxley and the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel who had explicitly justified racial domination, to compose the agenda-setting text Hindutva – who is a Hindu? in 1923. Referring to the Hindus and drawing on the essentialist concept of ‘blood’ as the key ingredient of racial purity, Savarkar claimed that:
They are not only a Nation but also a race-jati . . . all Hindus claim to have in their veins the blood of the mighty race incorporated with and descended from the vedic fathers . . . (Savarkar, 1969: 100)

Discussing the wide diversity of castes and communities that comprised Hinduism, Savarkar insisted that:

. . . we are all Hindus and own a common blood. We feel that the same ancient blood that coursed through the veins of Ram and Krishna, Buddha and Mahavir . . . courses throughout Hindudom from vein to vein, pulsates from heart to heart (Savarkar, 1969: 89)

During the time he spent in London, Savarkar introduced the ritual of a daily pledge that was recited by the inmates of India House. Exhibiting the obsession with racial and ethnic homogeneity as the precondition for an exclusive Hindu nationalism, this ritual consisted of collectively chanting ‘One God, one nation, one language, one race, one form, one hope.’ In 1938, during the course of a public speech in Delhi, V.D. Savarkar congratulated Hitler for pursuing his policies and the newspaper Hindu Outlook with which he was associated and continued to shower praise on Franco, Mussolini and Hitler throughout that period (Jaffrelot, 1996: 336). Indeed, the next president of another militant Hindu nationalist organisation, the Hindu Mahasabha, K.P. Moonje, had in fact met Hitler and Mussolini during this period and on his return to India established a military school in Nasik that was explicitly organised along the lines of fascist schools of Italy (Jaffrelot, 1995: 336).

Savarkar’s conception of an essentialised ‘Hindu race’ figured prominently in the influential tract We or Our Nationhood Defined (1938) penned by the leader of the RSS, Guru Golwalkar. Expressing admiration for Hitler and his policy of racial genocide, Golwalkar wrote:

German pride has now become the topic of the day. To keep up the purity of the Race and its culture, Germany has shocked the world by purging the country of the semitic Races – the Jews. Race pride at its highest has been manifested here. Germany has also shown how well nigh impossible it is for races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindusthan to learn and profit by (1947[1938]: 43).

Golwalkar held up the Nazi model of a nation infused with special racial qualities as a strategy for regenerating the Hindu nation that according to him had once been powerful but was now under threat by other races. Referring to the German experience he wrote:

The ancient Race spirit which prompted the Germanic tribes to over-run the whole of Europe, has re-risen in modern Germany. With the result that the nation perforce follows aspirations, predetermined by the traditions left by its depredatory ancestors. Even so with us: our Race spirit has once again roused itself as is evidenced by the race of spiritual giants we have produced, and who today stalk the world in serene majesty. (1947[1938]: 21)

As Jaffrelot (1996) has convincingly argued, in his formulations, Golwalkar drew explicitly on the eugenic core of European fascism. Golwalkar’s demand that minorities, racialised in his narrative, must either assimilate or be eliminated was derived from a fairly long tradition of racism in Europe. In the above ideological reconstruction, the emphasis on a specific conception of the Hindu ‘race’ was fused with the particular notion of the nation to account for the causes of decline from a presumed Vedic Golden Age. The goal was the simultaneous regeneration of both race and nation. In re-defining India as a Hindu nation, Golwalkar explicitly drew upon the racial theories of Gumplovicz and Bluntschli’s The Theory of the State to argue:
A nation is a union of masses of men of different conceptions and social states, in hereditary society of common spirit, feeling and race bound together especially by a language and customs in a common civilization which gives them a sense of unity and distinction from all foreigners, quite apart from the bond of the state (Golwalkar, 1947[1938]: 21).

The ideas of Savarkar and Golwalkar, although formulated over sixty years ago, reverberate in the current discourse of Hindutva or Hindu nationalism in contemporary India where an exclusivist ethnic nationalist project seeks to dismantle and replace the civic nationalism espoused by Nehru and enshrined in the Constitution of India.

**Racialisation and the Internment of the Indian Chinese**

Through history as well as in contemporary India, migrants of non-Indian heritage have been the targets of ideologies and practices of racialisation. The people of Chinese heritage who have a long history of residence in India, particularly in Kolkata but also in most cities have been at the receiving end of overt as well covert racism. Hostility against them came to head during the 1962 India–China conflict when over three thousand members of the Indian Chinese community were interned (Griffith, 2013; Ma and D’Souza, 2020) They lost their jobs, businesses and homes and post-internment resettlement was a long struggle. Many chose to or were pushed into migrating to Canada and Australia where some, in addition to other occupations, run restaurants selling Hakka or Indianised Chinese food (Oxfeld, 1993; Pan, 1999). The racial slur ‘Chinky’ frequently hurled at Indians from the Northeast region, references the obvious fact that the Indians of Chinese descent who either chose to stay or were unable to migrate after the experience of internment, continue to be Othered and racialised.

**The Africans in India**

Finally, there is the persistent anti-Black racism as well as overt violence against African students who reside in the major metropolitan cities of India. Many African male students subjected to racist slurs such as ‘Kallu’ (black person) as well as epithets such as ‘pimps’, ‘drug dealers’ and ‘cannibals’. Female African students are frequently accused of running illegal drug and prostitution businesses. In 2016, a Tanzanian woman was reportedly stripped, paraded and beaten up in Bangalore after a traffic accident; in early 2014, no less than the law minister of the local Delhi government, Somnath Bharti, led a high-profile raid without a warrant in a residential area where many African students live (Anand and Raj, 2017; Cherian, 2020; Malghan, 2020; Malhotra, 2014). During a televised discussion of the periodic violence against the African residents of India, another prominent politician denied anti-African racism in India by ironically drawing upon the pervasive colour consciousness the infuses much of Indian society. As he put it, ‘if we were racists, why should we have the entire south which is you know. . .completely Tamil. . .why do we live with them? We have blacks, black people around us’ (Jyoti, 2017; Singh and Kalam, 2017).

South Asia in particular and Asia in general has a long history of African presence. Both India and Pakistan have substantial communities of an estimated total of about three hundred and fifty thousand South Asian Africans locally referred to as ‘Siddi’ or ‘Sheedi’ (Bhatt, 2018; Harris, 1971). They were brought in as slaves, domestic workers, fighters and guards during the Delhi Sultanate period during the 13th and 16th centuries. Some were also brought in as slaves by the Portuguese colonialists. While during some Indo-Africans were able reach prominent positions of power in the medieval period, most now eke out a precarious, marginal existence as labourers and casual workers in the regions of Gujarat, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh in India and the Sindh region of
Pakistan (Harris, 1971). Some prominent exceptions from the past notwithstanding, the long history of domination and marginalisation plays a not insignificant role in the ideological scripting and marginality that many African students experience in contemporary India (Bhatt, 2018; Harris, 1971; Jayawardene, 2016; Obeng, 2007; Prashad, 2001a, 2001b).

Conclusions: Class, Caste and Race

The main argument articulated in this paper is that even though in India as indeed elsewhere, races are socially constructed, they have very real consequences for material and symbolic inequality. Although the assumption that race is socially constructed is axiomatic for most race researchers and anti-racist activists, more often than not, race scholars usually do not shift their analytical lens away from skin colour and other phenotypical features that, despite the social constructivist turn, are still assumed to be the crucial and necessary ingredients for race and racism. Significant though the attachment of social significance to phenotypical features is, as the case of India demonstrates, the understanding of the dynamics of racialisation could benefit from the expansion of the analytical canvas to include the intricate braiding of social structure, material context ideology, culture and agency in contexts where phenotypical differences are not that prominent or even entirely absent. Some scholars such as Arif Dirlik (2008) have expressed concerns about ‘conceptual inflation’ that could result from expanding the racialisation canvas to cover contexts that do not appear to be examples of racism. However, if the main concern is the analysis and understanding of exactly how material and status inequalities are accumulated, monopolised and inherited over generations, fidelity to conceptual purity need not constitute an obstacle to such goals. Indeed, the general phenomenon of racialisation, racial projects and racism can provide an analytical alternative analytical framework for making sense of and resisting the contextual as well as conceptual specificities of the competition over resources – material as well as non-material that lies at the heart of the dynamics of prejudice, stigmatisation, domination and exclusion of humans in societies around the globe.

The point of focusing on the Indian case is obviously not to argue that the form, scale as well as the contours of racial projects and racisms in particular historical and social contexts can be attributed to allegedly universal, biologically hardwired universal imperative for distinguishing and demarcating the in-group from the out-group. Rather, the goal of the paper has been to argue that despite distinctions between the in-group and out-groups that indeed exist in all societies, the specifically modern form of racism and including the so-called ‘scientific racism’ was incubated, forged, crystallised and spread globally in the brutal crucible of colonial conquests, empires, industrial capitalism and the development of so-called scientific racism (Baldwin, 1962; Gopal, 2020; Gould, 1981; Malik, 1996; Mamdani, 2012; Taylor, 2013; Calhoun, 2007). Depending on the specific conjunction of historical, structural and political circumstances in India and elsewhere, the various ideologies of racism are interpreted, reformulated, internalised and selectively deployed by the dominant classes and elites of these societies to pursue their own interests and hegemonic projects that produce new forms of racialised class inequalities. Even though in the case of India the twin lenses of caste and religion rather than ‘race’ are salient when it comes to demarcating group identities, it does not necessarily follow that the processes of racialisation and racism – understood here as the attribution of certain allegedly inheritable cultural characteristics that are deemed to be negative and inferior for the purposes of claiming and monopolising material and non-material resources – do not exist. While an emic perspective or the conceptions members of any society have of themselves is certainly extremely important, the etic or the outsiders’ understanding of any social phenomenon is also necessarily an indispensable component of any sociological analysis. There is no reason why any sociological analyst, instead of deploying a dialectical methodology,
should be compelled to choose between either an emic or an etic perspective. The people of India may not have specific concepts for the phenomena and despite the very real challenges of the ‘lost in translation’ problem when it comes to complex social issues, the speakers of Urdu-Hindi-Hindustani do frequently deploy the terms nasal (breed, ancestry, blood-line, race) and nasal-parast (discrimination, partiality based on breed, ancestry, blood lines, race) *jaati or zaat* (sub-castes) and *jaati-vaad* and *zaat-paat* (casteism; discrimination based on ancestry) for both caste and casteism as well as race and racism respectively. Overall, as A. Sivanandan (1981: 193) has so eloquently formulated the crux of the matter, when it comes to race and racism, ‘...it is practice that defines terminology, not terminology the practice. On the contrary, it is action that gives meaning to a word – it is in the act that the word is made flesh.’

A related argument forwarded in this paper is that despite the pervasiveness of the intersectional perspective of many race scholars and despite the notable exceptions (Bonnett, 1988, 2018; Du Bois, 1998; Roediger, 1992, 2018) perhaps due to the fear of being labelled and possibly dismissed as ‘crude’ economic reductionists by self-proclaimed ‘nuanced’ scholars have unfortunately downplayed the central and crucial role of class in structuring and conditioning institutional racism and racial inequality. The point of course is not at all to equate much less conflate caste or race with class. Indeed, the argument made in this paper is that while the trajectories, practices and consequences of racialisation and racisms are relatively autonomous, they are not completely unhinged and disconnected from class and the larger social structures in which they operate. In other words, the need for a dialectical perspective in which race is not reduced to class nor class to race, but where the production and reproduction of race, caste and class inequalities can be grasped by focusing on the seamless yet analytically distinct braiding of social structures, ideologies, cultures and practices. While it is true that in India caste plays a dominant role in structuring status, identity and power in social relationships, it would be a mistake to return to the older culturalist and idealist paradigm of Wiser and Wiser (1963) and Dumont (1974) among others whose focus was primarily on reciprocity, stability, purity, pollution and hierarchy and where, as Hira Singh (2008, 2014) has pointed out, the issues related to the division of labour, exploitation and indeed the anchoring of caste relations in the material context were either ignored or were tucked away in unobtrusive appendices. Despite the enormous contributions of anti-caste scholars and activists (Nagaraj, 1993; Prashad, 2001a, 2001b; Teltumbde, 2011; Thorat and Newman, 2010; Yengde, 2019), in the current political situation in India, the resurrection and resurgence of the deeply problematic idea that the caste system could contribute to social stability is not unthinkable. At the same time, the left and progressive movements in India do indeed have a sordid history of not only sweeping caste under the rug, but of actually retaining and practicing casteism within their organisations (Shepherd, 2018). Without denying the significant role of racialised caste in framing and structuring social relations in India it is equally important to simultaneously recognise the crucial roles class and the capitalist economy in general play in the production and structuring of material and cultural inequality. Unlike caste and race that are socially constructed and eminently mutable categories depending on the context, history and ideologies (Ignatiev, 1995), class is primarily a structural relationship that neither depends upon and nor is it influenced by perceptions and ideologies alone. In contemporary India, as elsewhere, members of the economically marginal classes within racialised communities bear the major brunt of domination, subordination, exclusion and exploitation.

Given that fact that race is so commonly assumed to be connected primarily to issues of identity and status alone, the salience of identity politics in many parts of the world is unsurprising. The way forward, of avoiding falling into the conceptual trap of culturalism or the equally paralysis-inducing choice between culture or the material context, has been addressed by many including Marvin Harris (1989, 2001) and Terry Eagleton (2018). One such formulation for racism in general that would include all forms of systematic discrimination including casteism and religiously based
so-called ‘communalism’ or ‘sectarianism’ has been provided by A. Sivanandan (2001: 1) and deserves to be quoted at length. In his words,

Racism has always been an instrument of discrimination. And discrimination has always been a tool of exploitation. . . But it manifests itself, first and foremost, as a cultural phenomenon, susceptible to cultural solutions such as multicultural education and the promotion of ethnic identities. Redressing the problem of cultural inequality, however, does not by itself redress the problem of economic inequality. Racism needs to be tackled at both levels - the cultural and the economic - at once, remembering that the one provides the rationale for the other. Racism, in sum, is conditioned by economic imperatives, but negotiated through cultural agency: religion, literature, art, science, the media and so on.

Indeed, it was precisely this framework that W. E. B. Du Bois (1998) deployed when he used the concept of the ‘racial wage’ in his Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880.

Or as Marx – committed to dialectically dissolving and transcending well entrenched dichotomies and dualisms that hinder critical analyses – formulated it, ‘the discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalised the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production’ (Marx, 1977: 915). In these surreal and desperate times when most societies seem are increasingly sucked into the global neoliberal vortex, Marx’s critical methodology in which all the various levels of society – from the most intimate experiences and social identities to the equally impersonal as well as the now seemingly uncontrollable structures of the economy – are conceptualised as dialectically interconnected to make sense of the ongoing production of history, inequality, the necessarily transient present and possible futures, is more relevant and needed than ever.

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