

Caste discrimination a worldwide problem for all black people and collective resistance is needed to defeat it

23 October 2006 Deborah Gabriel

The African Diaspora in the Indian subcontinent

Few people are aware that India's 160 million untouchables or Dalits are descendants of Africans who once ruled the Indus Valley. But caste discrimination affects all black people, who are regarded as untouchables, even in the US and UK.

It may seem ironic to many that India's untouchable castes known as Dalits, who are despised and condemned in Hindu scriptures for the colour of their skin and who are oppressed and exploited are distant relations to Africans, who were dehumanised in order to justify their enslavement to enrich the West.

But two papers published by African scholar and physicist Cheikh Anta Diop in 1955 and 1967 were translated from French to English and published as : **The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality** in 1974. In this book, as well as establishing the African origins of Egypt, Diop also revealed that Africans known as Dravidians created the Indus Valley civilization.

Dravidians are a linguistic group under which many different groups fall, but many scholars aside from Diop, including: Chiek Tidiane N Diave, S R Santharam and U.Pupadhyaya Susheela O.Uphadyaya, have found both linguistic and cultural links between Dravidians and Africans.

Diop wrote: **"...The Indo-Europeans never created a civilization in their own native lands: the Eurasian plains. The civilizations attributed to them are inevitably located in the heart of Negro countries in the southern part of the northern hemisphere: Egypt, Arabia, Phoenicia, Mesopotamia, Elam, India. In all those lands there were negro civilizations when the Indo-Europeans arrived as rough nomads during the second millennium."**

Diop described Dravidians as a type of the black race with: **"Black skin, often exceptionally black, with straight hair, aquiline nose, thin lips, an acute cheekbone angle. We find a prototype of this race in India: the Dravidian."**

But the real irony of the caste system is that is that it is a corruption of a social system invented by the early African civilizations, according to a 19th century French anthropologist called Francois Lenormant, whom Diop refers to in his book: **"The Aryas of India...adopted it, borrowed it from the Kushite populations."**

Today, the descendants of the Dravidians live under the scourge of what is often referred to as: **"India's hidden apartheid."** In a 1999 report by Human Rights Watch called: **Broken People: Caste Violence Against India's Untouchables** , the extent to which the caste system affects the lives of a population almost three times the size of the UK was revealed:

"Untouchables may not cross the line dividing their part of the village from that occupied by higher castes," the report stated. But segregation is just the tip of the iceberg. As well as Dalits being forbidden to worship in the same temples as other castes, from using the same wells, and drinking from the same cups, they are denied land that is legally theirs, made to perform degrading tasks and are often subjected to violence, including the rape of Dalit women.

Horen Tudu was born in Bangladesh into the Santhal tribal group but grew up in the USA. He is a researcher and staunch Pan Africanist who has written extensively about African descendants in the Indian subcontinent. Asked whether Dalits are aware of their African heritage, he told Black

Britain: **“I do believe that they are starting to understand that the upper caste function from the paradigm of the Indo Europeans and that the Dalits and the tribals themselves are indigenous and that the proto Australoids are African.”**

But aside from the Dalits, India’s tribal groups make up another 84 million of its population. Tudu told Black Britain: **“When you come to the tribals there is absolutely no controversy regarding the race of these people. They are clearly, physically, Africoid, they are linguistically distinct, religiously distinct; you can connect their spiritual systems to the spiritual systems in Africa – there is no ambiguity there.”**

Caste Discrimination affects black people everywhere

The Bhagwan Valmiki Trust (BVT) is a community organisation based in London which aims to promote development, education and awareness among the Valmiki community in the UK. A Dalit sub-caste, Valmikis are descendants of the sweeping class from the Punjab region of Non-Aryan groups including Greeks that came into the sub-continent. Because of their non-Aryan ancestry they were placed into the lower caste groups. They traditionally carry out menial and degrading jobs such as cleaning toilets, removing human excrement with their bare hands.

Maria Dass, a member of BVT told Black Britain that in India the relationship between Africans and Dalits is really only known among the **“intelligentsia”**, as opposed to the majority of Dalits who are uneducated. He said they had **“lost their cultural identity,”** and see themselves as Indians rather than African descendants. But Dass said that he would welcome an alliance between Africans and Dalits to collectively fight against caste discrimination.

Discrimination against Dalits is not restricted to India and as Dass explained to Black Britain: **“Is very much alive in the UK.”** In July of this year, a report called: **No escape: Caste discrimination in the UK**, by the Dalit Solidarity Network outlined the extent to which caste discrimination manifests itself in the UK among Indian communities both at school and in the workplace.

Dass told Black Britain: **“Even at the hospital where I work as a supervisor I can see clear caste discrimination between two groups.”** One female worker aged 55 told Dass: **“If my son marries from that caste my father will kill me.”**

He told Black Britain: **“That is why we say that caste discrimination is worse than racism, because it is violent and direct but hidden. You cannot see the enemy.”** Yet higher caste Indians who are often in positions of power are able to exert control over the lives of Dalits living in the UK.

Dass told Black Britain: **“If they do employ Dalits it will be on less wages and there is no kind of interaction. Temples are separate; there is no inter-dining or inter-marriage.”** But he said that even among Dalits themselves there is little interaction. **“Bhuddists look down on Ravidassis and Valmikis,”** he said.

Dass added: **“I have been to many places, colleges, churches and ordinary places, campaigning against these issues...we know what we need and what we can do. We try to bring them (Dalits) together.”**

BVT have been liaising with networks in India and is hoping to establish a Dalit reconciliation centre in the UK in order to unite the various Dalit sub-castes for the purpose of strengthening the Dalits as a whole to collectively fight the caste discrimination that affects them all. Black Britain asked Dass whether he felt it was important for Dalits to know their history and the origins of the caste system that put them at the bottom of society: **“Yes it is very important for our movement,”** he said.

Tudu pointed out that because of poverty among Dalits in the Indian subcontinent, it tends to be higher castes individuals who actually travel, but wherever they go their socio economic caste system travels with them. He told Black Britain in the USA the first wave of Indian immigrants never interacted with African Americans and: **“Always treated them with contempt.”**

The reason for the hostility is because: **“They actually see the Anglo Saxons as super Brahmins or ultra high caste Hindus...within their perverse world view, in terms of social status, race and skin colour. So they have always had this irrational hatred towards the African Americans that the African Americans themselves do not really understand.”**

Tudu went on to relay a familiar picture in the UK which has caused underlying racial tensions in Birmingham, London and other areas where Asians live in close proximity to Africans and African Caribbeans: **“A lot of Indian shopkeepers and other Pakistani groups have come into the US, gone specifically into depressed urban areas and have made money off the local people and treated them very badly. You have to also understand that most upper caste Hindus view Africans, African Americans or African Caribbeans in the UK as untouchables. That’s a distinction that must be made.”**

The important thing to note here is that it is not just Dalit immigrants from the Indian subcontinent who are victims of caste discrimination in the UK and USA but continental Africans, African Caribbeans and African Americans. Citing Hinduism as the basis for this discrimination, Tudu told Black Britain: **“It is obsessed with racial purity and the keeping of the race separate in order to also endorse white supremacy.”**

Caste Discrimination and White supremacy on the Indian subcontinent

The legacy of the early Aryan invasion on the Indian subcontinent, much like chattel enslavement has left a legacy of obsession with skin colour. Tudu told Black Britain that Unilever markets a skin bleaching cream called: **Fair and Lovely** which he noticed on a recent visit to Bangladesh in a television advertisement: **“They show this ...girl with dark skin who can’t get a job, can’t get married, is doing poorly in her studies and all of a sudden she uses this bleaching cream and her life is much better – and they’re marketing this kind of stuff.”**

Tudu said that the aim of marketing bleaching creams in the region is: **“To destroy the self-esteem of the local people.”** He branded Bollywood as **“Openly racist...because they don’t allow anybody who is dark skinned in there and they are 100 per cent Brahmins.”** Bollywood producers are **“Ashraf Muslim ethnicities who are descendants of non-black people,”** he said.

Tudu told Black Britain that Pakistanis are also non-black people closely related to people in the Middle East : **“And also have contempt for Africans and blacks.”** Upper caste Indians and Pakistanis have even gone to the extreme of creating their own ethnic group called **Desi** , because they are so desperate to believe they are Caucasians.

He told Black Britain: **“I find this skin colour issue to be very debilitating, if you look at the psychological state of the indigenous people. They are being pounced on in every single way,they are really trying to destroy these people inside out [and] it’s very shameful.”**

In Bangladesh dark skinned, short people assume a lowly status in society, despite the fact that 80 per cent of its population is of that appearance: **“But you have individuals of foreign origin who are ruling the country and who are not indigenous to Bangladesh, but they are promoting their white supremacist ideals on the local people,”** Tudu said.

Bangladeshi women suffer most from self-loathing and a lack of confidence, despising their broad, flat noses and fuller lips and comparing themselves less favourably to the fair-skinned women portrayed in Bollywood movies: **“It’s very, very sad to see a group of people with so much self-**

hatred and so much of a lack of consciousness [because] they have no concept of their history,” he said.

One form of resistance chosen by Dalits as a means of escape is conversion to Buddhism, an action advocated by Dr B R Ambedkar, an Indian who was born into the Dalit castes who overcame discrimination to become a scholar, lawyer and architect of the Indian constitution as well as the political leader of the Dalits. He was also a Buddhist revivalist who advocated conversion to Buddhism as a means of escaping discrimination.

Diop suggested that Buddha was a black Egyptian priest who was driven out of the City of Memphis by Cambyses. Iniyen Elango, M.D, is the author of a book called **Without Malice: The Truth About India** . Elango suggests: **“Gautama Buddha, the Black revolutionary who founded the egalitarian religion of Buddhism to counter and destroy the bigotry of Hinduism, was a Black prince. But the Hindus highjacked Buddhism and killed Buddhists in large numbers. The Buddhist missionaries fled to other parts of Asia and spread the message of the Buddha in China and other parts of Asia. Those indigenous Dravidians who were loyal to Buddha and resisted the caste system became the untouchable outcastes (Dalits).”**

Horen Tudu concurs with this view describing Buddha as a tribal from north-east India: **“He protested against this racism coming from the Brahmins and the Hindus and he created his own spiritual system that was for the black people and for the indigenous people there.”** Tudu also feels that Hindus appropriate these indigenous beliefs, incorporating them into the Hindu system as a means of control by trying to pass off the Buddha as a Hindu god.

Speaking to Black Britain about the reason Dalits choose to convert to Buddhism, Doss explained: : **“Today most Dalits feel that they should be Buddhists.”** But many state governments in India have introduced legislation to prevent Dalits from converting.

Black Britain asked in what way converting to Buddhism would change the fortunes of the Dalits if they remain in the same caste even after conversion. He explained: **“As a community of Buddhists together, they are quite different – very strong. It empowers them socially and economically and they would proudly say they are neo-Buddhists.”** Doss admitted that whilst conversion to other religions **“hasn’t helped”** , conversion to Buddhism **“is helping and creating an identity.”**

Some Dalits, especially in Bangladesh have turned to Islam because of its absence of caste and to escape oppression whilst others have converted to Christianity, sometimes merging it with their indigenous beliefs.

The African influence on Dalit resistance

Given the fact that Dalits are closely related to Africans and that globally Africans are victims of caste discrimination (whether they are aware of it or not) makes them natural allies in resistance of it. Tudu told Black Britain: **“If you go to Bangladesh, for example, you’ll find in various regions that you cannot distinguish those people from [Africans]. You’ll see people darker and more physically African than any person in Sub-Saharan Africa.”**

He also feels that in terms of the political development of Dalit organisations: **”I think you can compare these movements directly to the struggles of the African Americans in particular.”** Since the 1970s resistance movements modelled on black pride have sprung up all over the Indian subcontinent including the Dalit Panther party, based on the Black Panthers which has several branches.

Tudu told Black Britain: **“This kind of consciousness among the Dalits is making the upper castes and Hindu fundamentalist parties very scared.”** He explained that many people are unaware that the Dalits are descendants of Indian tribals that fought against the Aryans who were later brought into the caste system by force.

But in terms of politicised Dalit groups: **“They mentally function from this indigenous African paradigm.”** Scholars like Runoko Rashidi who is US based is essentially the voice of the Dalits in the US. He has written several books on the subject, most notably **African Presence in Early Asia.**

Rashidi has worked with many African American scholars including John Henrik Clark as well as other prominent Dalit scholar activists such as V.T Rajshekar. Tudu explained: **“There are quite a few Dalit intellectuals who are promoting this African centred belief. In fact, I believe all of them function from an African centred paradigm.”**

Periyar E.V.Ramasamy is considered the father of the Dravidian Nationalist Movement and founder of **Dravidar Kazhagam**, the first Dravidian political party in India. He pioneered the idea of self-respect among Dalits: **“That is, why should an indigenous person or black person within the Indian subcontinent accept low status within this Aryan supremacist framework? They should have self respect and promote their own identity,”** Tudu told Black Britain.

Tudu believes that many radical elements in Dalit movements: **“Were influenced by the struggles of African Americans,”** but furthermore that the time is right for a resurgence of Pan Africanism to deal with white supremacy and the oppression of black peoples. Commenting on the way that Marcus Garvey was able to mobilise millions of Africans across the globe in the last century, he told Black Britain:

“We need something like that to unify the world’s oppressed and fragmented black masses. If you look at any country in the world, you’ll find that the poorest members of the society, the persons that have the lowest social status have African origin.”

This particularly applies to indigenous people such as the Africans on the western coast of Mexico who are descendants of slaves and the tribals in India and Bangladeshi who have become victims of oppression in their own country. Commenting on the upper castes in India Tudu remarked: **“We regard these people as foreigners. I myself am a direct descendant of the indigenous people – black people of the Indian subcontinent and I consider those individuals to be foreigners and I see all African people worldwide as my brothers and sisters.”**

Like Doss, Tudu is adamant that resistance and the solutions for black people lies in education of self: **“I think the critical effort should be directed toward the education of [our] people. We need to have our own scholars doing this research [and] we need to resurrect our history. We have to know where we come from – all of us worldwide.”**

Tudu told Black Britain that the ideology of Pan Africanism has a major role to play: **“All of us can take credit for each other’s accomplishments and that we are one people. That is all African people are one united people, not fragmented based on language or tribe, we’re all the same.”**

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