



# Caste, gender, race: Signposts of a feminist anti-caste approach

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## Abstract

This commentary responds to the essay by Suraj Yengde titled ‘Race and Caste in the Making of US Sociology’, picks up a few threads in Yengde’s argument and attempts to unravel them in the interests of deepening this conversation on an issue that has returned to the foreground of global sociology and anthropology. Given the thin and tenuous disciplinary separations between sociology and social anthropology in India, especially evident in studies on caste, this commentary straddles these two disciplines in the Indian context and points to some interesting disciplinary intersections in the American context. Specifically, Yengde’s discussion of questions of caste, race and class is extended to look at Indian and diasporic contexts to speak to the specific intersections of caste, race, gender, class, region and temporality in contexts of caste formation drawing on the work of Joan Mencher and Gail Omvedt, among others.

## Keywords

Caste and gender, caste and race, caste discrimination, Indian diaspora

The essay by Suraj Yengde titled ‘Race and Caste in the Making of US Sociology’ examines the historical trajectories of sociological interest in the category of caste and its relations to the theorising of race in mid-20th-century American sociology. In this commentary, we pick up a few threads in his argument and attempt to unravel them in the interests of deepening this conversation on an issue that has returned to the foreground of global sociology and anthropology. Given the thin and tenuous disciplinary separations between sociology and social anthropology in India, especially evident in studies on caste, our reflection

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straddles these two disciplines in the Indian context and points to some interesting disciplinary intersections in the American context. Specifically, we extend Yengde's discussion of questions of caste, race and class in the work of Oliver Cox, Gerald Berreman and Gunnar Myrdal, among others, and follow through his reference to Ambedkar's theory of caste and its exclusion from the sociological corpus, to speak to the specific intersections of caste, race, gender, class, region and temporality in contexts of caste formation.

Our attempts to historicise the debates on caste, race and class in South Asia and the United States must bring back (and build on) the early moves by anthropologists and sociologists like Joan P. Mencher (b. 1930) and later Gail Omvedt (1941–2021) who insisted on de-essentialising social–anthropological–ethnographic lenses in understanding the realities of caste in Indian society, and the construction of this institution in the western academy. Most importantly, through their scholarly interventions, they re-imagined an intellectual history based on anti-caste resistance and insurgent ethnographies on the Indian sub-continent and recognised the criticality of gender as a category central to an understanding of caste. Mencher specifically notes the importance of speaking to women of different castes and examining the workings of castes (and women's place therein) in different locales in order to gain a fuller understanding of the phenomenon. Significantly, she also marks her own location and experience as a Jewish American female ethnographer/anthropologist as distinct from the experience of male anthropologists shaping the formation of anthropological knowledge on the graded hierarchies of caste, in her work with Namboodiri Brahmin women, matrilineal Nayar women and Ezhava/Thiyya women in the south Indian state of Kerala in the 1960s and 1970s (Kannabiran, 2021; Mencher, 1974, 2017).

Joan Mencher's (1974) essay in *Current Anthropology*, provocatively titled 'The Caste System Upside Down, or The Not-So-Mysterious East', focuses on the 'untouchable laborers' in Tamil Nadu in South India and the 'untouchable castes' generally, who at the time constituted 'a little over 2% of the total world population' (Mencher, 1974: 469). Her suggestion of occupying a different vantage point remains critically relevant:

From the earliest writings on the subject until the present, with very few exceptions, the Indian caste system has been viewed – by lawmakers, writers of all vintages and points of view, and, in recent times, sociologists and anthropologists – from the top down. (B. R. Ambedkar, the writer of the Indian Constitution – an untouchable by birth – was one of the exceptions.) . . . I want to view this system from a different vantage point and to show that there are important differences, both qualitative and quantitative, depending on one's perspective. Looked at from the bottom up, the system has two striking features. First, from the point of view of people at the lowest end of the scale, caste has functioned (and continues to function) as a very effective system of economic exploitation. Second, one of the functions of the system has been to prevent the formation of social classes with any commonality of interest or unity of purpose. (Mencher, 1974: 469)

The same issue of *Current Anthropology* carried 22 detailed comments by scholars (Mencher, 1974: 478–489), mostly Western (4 Indian), and a response to the comments by Mencher (1974: 489–491). Drawing on the work of the first Dalit woman sociologist of India, C. Parvathamma (1927–2006) (see Kumar, 2007), Mencher, in her response, asserts:

[a]t the risk of repeating myself, I should point out, in response to several commentators, that the majority of Harijans do not belong to specialized castes, but are landless laborers, and were so in the past. Many anthropologists who have worked in India are so fascinated by the jajmani system that they tend to ignore demographic facts . . . (see Parvathamma, 1969). (Mencher, 1974: 490)

Importantly, and leading to our second point on intersections, she points to Dalit solidarity in the face of collective violence by the ‘higher castes’ where in several instances she encountered on the field, ‘helping their fellow Harijans was decidedly not in their own personal interest, but was done because of their commitment to the ideals of Dr. Ambedkar’ (1974:490). She concludes her response with a reference to the Kilvenmani massacre of Dalits in December 1968, where ‘42 Harijans mostly women and children were burned alive in a hut’ and yet the 23 accused were acquitted by the courts, cautioning anthropologists to be attentive to the need to ‘distinguish between the belief that men are by nature unequal and the recognition that one is up against superior power’ (Mencher, 1974: 491).

Our second point concerns the heuristic value of ‘intersectionality’ in contemporary analyses of caste, especially by Dalit feminist scholars in India and the diaspora. Dalit women’s movements in India have straddled several struggles simultaneously, occupying an intersectional political position shaped by multiple and interlocking systems of oppression that emanate from, or draw on the logic of, the graded caste order – religion, state, patriarchy and capitalism, for instance. Forging solidarities across race, caste, class and gender at local, national and international levels in advocacy and scholarship through the use of both international soft law mechanisms (that may destabilise the normative) and theorising intersectionality in caste contexts drawing on critical feminist race theory have been at the core of Dalit women’s political organising (Kannabiran, 2006). Robust scholarly work on caste/class/gender/race more recently has broadened and layered the construct geographically and historically (Anandhi, 2013; Purkayastha and Iwata, 2023; Romero, 2023).

Importantly, these and other scholars point to the ways in which we might assemble writing on caste and its kinship with race and gender – beyond work that explicitly names caste (or race) as the subject of its explorations (see Jodhka and Naudet, 2023; Mitta, 2023, also Ayyathurai 2021). In India, Gail Omvedt, who was closely familiar with African American histories of resistance against racism and with Dalit movements, focused on the interlocking oppressions of caste, gender and violence against women. She emphasised ‘questions of the interrelationship between violence, exploitation and sexuality – and their patterning among different social sections of women – [which] go to the heart of the question of violence against women’ (Omvedt, 1990: 6–7). Notably, early on, Omvedt deployed the lens of intersectionality (without using the term) in *distinctive ways* to better understand the interlocking oppressions of violence against women, and caste.

Our third point is about the diasporic iterations of caste. In 2018, Equality Labs in the United States published a keystone report on caste and race in the South Asian diaspora in the United States, which traced the early beginnings of the *practice* of racialization of caste. Hindu men of Indian origin, according to this report, challenged their failure to

meet the standards of whiteness test set out in the Immigration Act, 1924 in Immigration courts in the United States:

the first cases were brought by ‘upper’ Caste immigrants, A.K. Mozumdar and Bhagat Singh Thind, both of whom argued that they passed the whiteness test because they identified themselves as ‘high Caste Hindu, of full Indian blood’. They explained that because they were ‘upper’ Caste, they had pure ‘Aryan’ blood and that those racial origins were something that they historically shared with Caucasians.

Mozumdar succeeded in securing citizenship (Zwick-Maitreyi et al., 2018). This was close to a decade after the publication of B.R. Ambedkar’s ‘Castes in India’ (Ambedkar, 2002 [1917]).

Finally, campaigns – national and global – challenging racial discrimination have historically drawn significant comparisons between caste and race as fuelling servitude and injustice. Three examples will suffice: In the 1942 publication of a two-part series titled ‘The “Negroes” of India’, in *Crisis*, the magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Harry Paxton Howard described Ambedkar as ‘a beacon-light not only to the Untouchables of India, but to pariahs and outcaste peoples throughout the world – *which might serve, indeed, as a new and militant program for Negroes in the United States*’ (cited in Rangdrol, 2018: 314, emphasis added); the World Conference against Racism held in Durban, South Africa in 2001 provided an inflection point to Dalit *anti-caste* mobilisation in India and abroad, as distinct but comparable to race (Kannabiran, 2006); and the growing movement in several states in the United States to outlaw *discrimination based on caste* (Krishnamurthi, 2023) points to the specificity of caste orders in the diaspora.

Suraj Yengde’s observation that while caste does offer a comparative framework to examine racial formation, it is unique and distinctive in the ways it rationalises ‘colour, tribal, nationality, linguistic, and ethnic differentiations based on the indigenously developed modes of control and flow of power dynamics’ (Yengde, p. 15), which may shift somewhat without disrupting the dominance, in India and in diasporic contexts, remains critically important and bears reiteration.

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## Résumé

Ce commentaire répond à l'essai de Suraj Yengde intitulé « Race and Caste in the Making of US Sociology » (Race et caste dans la formation de la sociologie américaine). Il reprend quelques fils de l'argumentation de Yengde et tente de les démêler dans le but d'approfondir le débat sur une question qui est revenue au premier plan de la sociologie et de l'anthropologie mondiales. Étant donné le caractère mince et ténu des séparations disciplinaires entre la sociologie et l'anthropologie sociale en Inde, particulièrement évident dans les études sur les castes, ce commentaire fait la synthèse entre ces deux disciplines dans le contexte indien et met en évidence certaines intersections disciplinaires intéressantes dans le contexte américain. Plus précisément, l'analyse de Yengde sur les questions de caste, de race et de classe est étendue aux contextes indien et de la diaspora indienne pour parler des intersections spécifiques de la caste, de la race, du genre, de la classe, de la région et de la temporalité dans les contextes de formation de la caste, en s'appuyant, entre autres, sur les travaux de Joan Mencher et de Gail Omvedt.

## Mots-clés

caste et genre, caste et race, diaspora indienne, discrimination fondée sur la caste

## Resumen

Este comentario que responde al ensayo de Suraj Yengde titulado 'Raza y casta en la creación de la sociología estadounidense' recoge algunos hilos del argumento de Yengde e intenta desentrañarlos con el fin de profundizar esta conversación sobre un tema que ha vuelto al primer plano de la sociología y la antropología globales. Dadas las delgadas y tenues separaciones disciplinarias entre la sociología y la antropología social en la India, que se hacen especialmente evidentes en los estudios sobre castas, este comentario comprende estas dos disciplinas en el contexto indio y señala algunas intersecciones disciplinarias interesantes en el contexto estadounidense. Específicamente, se amplía la discusión de Yengde sobre cuestiones de casta, raza y clase para analizar los contextos indio y de la diáspora con el fin de hablar de las intersecciones específicas de casta, raza, género, clase, región y temporalidad en contextos de formación de castas, a partir del trabajo de Joan Mencher y Gail Omvedt, entre otros.

## Palabras clave

casta y género, casta y raza, diáspora india, discriminación de casta