

In recent years, the fight against racism has become an important struggle in the world. Race, ethnicity, ethnic groups, and caste have become more and more talked about. Interestingly, they have started being compared to each other.

Caste is something that in many ways is unique to India. There are many different castes in India. There are four classes generally in Indian society, the Brahmins, who were the philosophers and priestly people, the Kshatriyas, who were the rulers and political class of society, the Vaishyas, who were the merchants and farmers, and lastly the Shudras, who were the labourers and workers. There were also a fifth group, a fifth caste, the untouchables, who were seen as so low that they shouldn't even be touched. These are also referred to as Dalits. Untouchables is a negative and derogatory word for the Dalits. People are born into these groups, they cannot choose what group they belong to, in many ways similar to ethnicity and race.

Many people in India and in other places have started seeing the caste system as similar to racism in Europe and America. In other parts of the world, like Indonesia or Myanmar, there are ethnic groups that some people say have different value in society. These situations can all be compared to each other. Or can they? Can we compare the situation between ethnicities in Malaysia and racism in England? Can we compare the caste system in India to the struggles of Black people and native Americans in the USA?

This module gives students an opportunity to study forms of hierarchy and social injustice based on race, caste and origin.

Geographically, the module will focus on Anglophone locations in the Americas, Europe, Africa and South Asia, thereby enabling comparative conversations about the legacies and afterlives of the British Empire and the social and political struggles that they continue to engender. The module draws on work across a range of disciplines and should be of interest to students of political theory, international relations, history, anthropology and related fields.

Lesson 1

Analogies and Entanglements

How and why have race and caste been placed in conversation with each other?

In India, casteism touches 1.35 billion people. It affects 1 billion people. It affects 800 million people badly. It enslaves the dignity of 500 million people. These are the words of Suraj Yengde. In "Caste Matters" Yengde writes that caste is a "measure of destruction, pillage, unaccounted rape, massacre, police brutality and loss of moral virtuosity for 300 million Indian Untouchables".

Caste, Yengde argues, is an absolute sanction – of the dominant class over the dominated. It is a system of control and oppression. It strictly divides society, and privileges a group over others, and at the bottom are the Dalits or the untouchables.

Even despite the commonality of caste, there are groups within groups, sub-castes and sub-sub castes. There is a diminishing capacity to love – because of what Cornel West described as a spiritual blackout, due to market-oriented pressures which dominate our integrity, honesty, decency and courage with the presence of naked violence and deceit.

In many ways, India, according to Yengde, is a loosely knit community, it's not really a nation. Different groups are separated from each other, hostility exists between these groups. The more insecurities hit society, like unemployment, poverty, and corruption, the stronger caste and group nationality grows.

India for example is very different from Sweden, where ethnic riots rarely take place. The idea there is that the more equal society is, in terms of culture, social privilege and economic equality, the less there are hostilities between groups. In India however, the privileged castes and groups, defend against any such discussion because that would put their own privilege in jeopardy.

To do this, hostilities are stirred between groups. Yengde writes, "this is how fractured India tries to protect itself as a unified diverse India."

So what happens then is a 'caste-neutral' definition of the nation state is created by the state, while at the same time holding on to the caste system for dear life.

The nation as a liberal state, where every human is equal, every vote is equal, is in this way a weapon or shield against real change to the oppressive system. So the states use these ideas, so that they don't have to get rid of racism or the caste system.

These ideas which state that every human is equal under the law, which we call liberal ideas, come out of a tradition in Europe which is called the Enlightenment. This was a movement in the 17th and 18th centuries, when philosophers and political activists started demanding rights for people of a state. For example, ideas about the social contract began during this period. One of the main political philosophers during this period was John Locke. John Locke was an English philosopher and one of his claims was that there was a social contract between the people of a country and their rulers. This contract was not a real contract, but an unspoken one - People accept the rulers being the rulers, and they accept some limitations to freedom, for example you cannot just take what you want. In exchange, the rulers protect the rights of the people to the most important freedoms.

These liberal ideas, like the ones from Locke and others from the Enlightenment period, are seen by many people as being completely the opposite to racist ideas, or ideas about caste or ethnic hierarchies. To say that one ethnic group belongs in a nation more than another group goes against these liberal European ideas. But some people say that actually, the liberal ideas are the ones that really made the world believe in racial difference.

Here we bring in the work of Lisa Lowe.

In the first chapter of her book, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, Lisa Lowe writes that there is something that connects colonialism in the Americas, the American slave trade, the East Indies and China trades in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Lowe continues in the tradition of many before her, like CLR James, who writes that the slave society in San Dimongo connected Europe, Africa and the Americas. He said that it was the funds raised by the slavery based societies in the Americas which gave rise to the French bourgeoisie, which then gave rise to the enlightenment ideas of the “rights of man”. So the enslavement and oppression of many gave rise to notions of liberal ideas of freedom.

In simple terms, Lowe’s argument is that liberal philosophy, culture, economics and ideas of government have been deeply involved in colonialism, slave trade and imperialism.

How it does this is to firstly, celebrate the freedom’s of man, create systems where man is allowed to be free from state oppression, to express oneself, where man’s rights are respected. But, at the same time, some people are not included in the category of ‘man’. These people are relegated to geographical and temporal spaces that are seen as backward, uncivilised and unfree.

Lowe writes that the social inequalities of our time are a legacy of these processes through which the ‘human’ is ‘freed’ by liberal forms, while other subjects, practices and geographies are placed at a distance from the ‘human’.

Even as it proposes inclusivity, liberal universalism effects principles of inclusion and exclusion; in the very claim to define humanity, as a species or as a condition, its gestures of definition divide the human and the nonhuman

The story of modern liberalism is therefore a story of modern race . This doesn’t mean that the people who were liberal thinkers and philosophers were colonials or racists, they were very often. But that their thought is involved in the enslavement.

For example, in theory, Locke’s natural law would allow native Americans the right to their own land where they hunt, gather and labour, but because Locke also allowed everyone the right to punish the transgressor of the law...to preserve the innocent and restrain offenders, this allowed the oppression legitimacy. Because Indians as they were called, were not inhabited by liberal people, by Christian people, they were antithetical to human civility, and the liberal civilised people were in continual war with them.

This is why, the native resistance to European settlers wasn’t seen as people defending their natural rights, but as transgression of infidels, and savages.

Locke’s definition of right to property, where it was Labour that gave people the right to the land. This immediately excluded the natives who were not seen as to do enough cultivation to justify their ownership.

In the same way perhaps as the casteless notions of nation are shields that the powerful use against the powerless, liberal philosophies maintained and even created systems of oppression. The new geographical regions which were taken over by Europe, in Americas, Asia and Africa, were the condition of possibility for Western liberalism to think of these concepts of universality of human freedom, of human rights, but... much freedoms for slaves, colonised, and indigenous peoples were precisely exempted by that philosophy.

So, Lowe's argument is that it is wrong to see liberal philosophy as lifting us from enslavement, or reacting against the enslavement and oppression of the state or religion, but rather it is both liberal freedom and colonial oppression happens side by side. There are 'zones of exception' with which these liberal ideas co-exist.

But are we doing the right thing to focus our attention on Europe? Is it wrong to try and understand racial structures in Myanmar or Malaysia for example, by looking through a global prism? According to Ania Loomba, this global prism, is most of the time a Western prism.

Loomba shows that people sometimes say, it's wrong to call what we had in Europe in the Middle Ages as racism, because difference between people were seen as rooted in culture and not nature. The nature part came later with the scientific studies, and slavery. In the same way, many people do not see the Indian caste system as relevant in a discussion on racism, the same thing in Latin America.

Stuart Hall warned for example against seeing racism as one large structure. But Loomba also warns against not seeing some commonality, warning against for example states using this to say..."our situation is not the same as yours, you don't understand". This is what Israel did at the UN in 1975, when Zionism was being discussed as a form of racism.

The same is done, as discussed in India. Dalit activists argued that not only is caste, like race, a hierarchy based on lineage and descent, but it also involves a particular construction of the Dalit body and mind. They are seen as polluted, untouchable.

One of the way this is done, is by saying that some of these issues are different because they are based on culture or religion – while the racist ideologies say that "racism is based on science". This according to Loomba is wrong, because racism is only based on science, because racism *decided* that it was only based on science, that culture was separate. We cannot use racism's own terminology.

Today, Loomba argues, race has become a term that functions as a universal marker of discrimination, even as it is often understood in that narrow way. We can, Loomba argues, compare the oppressive structures in Israel, India, USA, UK and Myanmar but we must do so carefully.

For the next session you can consider these questions:

Is it useful for you to think about the caste system in India as comparable to the different ethnicities and their relations in Myanmar? Do you find it useful to call the system of ethnic groups in Myanmar today as a racist system?

Readings for this module were Chapter 1 of Sujar Yengde's *Caste Matters*, Chapter 1 of Lisa Lowe's *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, and Ania Loomba's article "Race and the Possibilities of Comparative Critique".

In the next session we will discuss slavery, indentured labour and how that created the modern world.