

## **The Scourge of Caste: Hindu and Christian**

by Nick Gier

*Let the Negro have the crumbs that fall from the white man's table.*

—Thomas Pearce Bailey, *Race Orthodoxy in the South* (1914)

*Hindu caste is even more dangerous than the coronavirus.*

—NewsClick Report (May 3, 2020)

In 1992, I was on sabbatical at Punjab University's Department of Gandhian Studies in India. When I arrived on campus there were hundreds of students protesting about something that really shocked me.

### **Indians Protest against Affirmative Action**

In 1990, the Indian government had established employment quotas in the public sector and enrollment set asides at public universities for Dalits, formerly known as "untouchables." The "outcaste" Dalits number more than 160 million in India's population of 1.4 billion people.

Higher caste students and citizens were enraged at this decision, and nation-wide demonstrations (sometimes violent) went on for several years. At Delhi University, Rajiv Goswami was so upset that Dalits might finally get a chance to succeed that he set fire to himself in protest and his suicide led to other student self-immolations.

### **Christian Dalits (Untouchables)**

In 1995, I returned to India to continue my research at United Theological College in Bangalore). There I met a Christian student by the name of Johnson Roosevelt Petta. Christian Indians usually have biblical names (avoiding everything Hindu), but Johnson's family obviously had great affection for two American presidents.

Since the arrival of British missionaries in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, millions of Dalits converted to Christianity primarily to escape the caste system. Some converts were higher caste Hindus, and they naturally became leaders in the native churches. Tragically, caste discrimination was reintroduced in many congregations.

I was amazed to learn that Johnson was a Dalit Christian, and he described to me the church he attended in Hyderabad. A heavy dark curtain hung down the center and there were separate entrances and toilets for Dalit worshippers. Every Sunday the high caste minister led "integrated" services.

When they get the opportunity, Dalits must work at least twice as hard to succeed. Johnson's father became an attorney, represented his people in their grievances, and established his own Dalit church. Johnson wrote a prize-winning dissertation on Dalit pastoral theology at the University of Denver, and one of his sisters and his Dalit wife became registered nurses.

### **Atrocities against Dalits**

Violence against Dalits was so widespread that in 1989 the Indian Government passed the Prevention of Atrocities Act, but it had little effect. Here is a sampling of current headlines

from Indian newspapers: “Dalit boy beaten to death for plucking flowers”; “Dalit tortured by cops for three days”; “Dalit ‘witch’ paraded naked in Bihar”; “7 Dalits burnt alive in caste clash”; “5 Dalits lynched in Haryana”; and “Dalit woman gang-raped, paraded naked.”

Writing for Human Rights Watch Smita Narula states: “Dalits are not allowed to drink from the same wells, attend the same temples, wear shoes in the presence of an upper caste, or drink from the same cups in tea stalls.” Until employment quotas and student matriculation requirements were in place, Dalits were banned from most workplaces and schools.

### **Caste Explains Better than Race**

When I started reading Isabel Wilkerson’s book *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents*, I was initially skeptical about her use of a term so closely associated with Hinduism. I’m now convinced that caste, which deals with oppressive structures of society, is a better way to explain systemic discrimination against the downtrodden.

Wilkerson proves that it is caste, not race, that explains the reason why in 1922 a Black man Jim Rollins was exonerated of the crime of miscegenation when authorities found out that his white wife Edith Labue was a Sicilian woman, a person of the inferior “Iberian race.” This is casteism, not racism, where undesirable white people were put down by high caste Anglo-Saxons. Furthermore, it is totally unscientific to speak of race in this manner.

This is an expression of the myth of Anglo-Saxon superiority, which still infects right-wing discourse. Anglophile Ben Franklin worried that the rising number of Germans in Pennsylvania would make it a “colony of aliens.” Again, this is casteism not racism. It’s also ignorantly ironic: the Angles and the Saxons originally came from Northern Germany.

### **Divine Will and Caste**

Wilkerson lays out “Eight Pillars of Caste,” and I have space to comment on only a few. The first is “Divine Will and the Laws of Nature,” and on this issue the Hindu scriptures are very clear about the four distinct castes of brahmins (priests and teachers), kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), vaishyas (merchants and craftspeople), and shudras (farmers). The Dalits are “outcastes” and as such they have few rights and no privileges.

European slave holders also appealed to divine will to justify their domination over people of color. Because Ham didn’t avert his eyes from a naked and drunken Noah, God condemned him and his sons to be “the lowest of slaves” (Gen. 9:25). The Book of Leviticus established slavery as divinely sanctioned: “You may buy male and female slaves from among the nations that are round about you (25:44).

Many Europeans and Americans read Genesis 9 and drew the unwarranted conclusion that Ham’s descendants were dark skinned. (In the ancient world just as many slaves were white.) Confederate leader Thomas Cobb stated that God, in “his wisdom and mercy (found) them thus suited to the degraded position the Negroes were destined to occupy.”

### **Moscow Minister and his Neo-Confederate Ally**

In their book *Southern Slavery as It was*, Moscow minister Doug Wilson and neo-Confederate Steve Wilkens declare that “there has never been a multi-racial society which has

existed with such mutual intimacy and harmony” (p. 24). Wilson and Wilkins acknowledge that the Bible approves of owning other humans, so they argue that slave holders only sin when they treat their chattel inhumanely. For more see [webpages.uidaho.edu/ngier/wilsonslavery.htm](http://webpages.uidaho.edu/ngier/wilsonslavery.htm).

### **Prohibition of Intermarriage**

Another pillar of caste is the prohibition of intermarriage. The word for caste in Sanskrit is *varna*, which means “color,” but as we now know from genetics, migrating light-skinned Aryans from the north intermarried with darker indigenous Indians for at least 1,500 years. Therefore, only in the U.S. is skin color a marker for caste.

Traditional arranged marriages in India have always followed caste distinctions, but “love” marriages, more frequent and more tolerated, usually do not. Honor killings (usually of the woman) still happen frequently, and they are not just restricted to the poor in rural villages. In June 2020, in Telangana, a professional couple from different castes married in secret, but when the wife’s family found out, two of her uncles kidnapped and murdered the husband.

Interracial marriages had been illegal in the U.S. since all states followed Virginia in 1691. In 1958, 94 percent of those polled approve of laws against miscegenation. In 1967, the Supreme Court finally ruled that a mixed-race couple Richard and Mildred Loving had a constitutional right to marry. Even so Alabama did not repeal its endogamy law until the year 2000, and 40 percent of its citizens still supported the ban.

### **Caste Determines Wealth**

On January 16, 1865, Gen. William T. Sherman ordered that 400,000 acres of coastal land in South Carolina and Northern Florida be given, in 40-acre parcels, to freed Black farmers. (The promise of a mule to each came later.) A racist and eventually impeached Andrew Johnson reversed this order five months later.

In 1862, Congress passed the Homestead Act which, for 126 years, gave up to 160 acres of land, at no cost, to millions of white settlers in the West. At the top of the caste pyramid railroad barons received free sections of land adjacent to their tracks. Land is wealth and without land low caste Black Americans, along with their Dalit brothers and sisters, began with a deficit that most of them cannot overcome. Today, whites have on average eight times more wealth than African Americans.

The Blacks worked this land in the South for nearly 300 years so they have sweat equity hundred times over the land’s value. When hard working Blacks tried to buy land and build homes, lenders would not approve mortgages or loans for remodeling existing structures. This was called “red lining” and it was banned in 1968 after the passage of Fair Housing Act.

A bill for a commission to study reparations for African Americans has just been voted out of a House committee, but small steps are being taken on the local level. Virginia Theological Seminary has put aside \$1.7 million for the descendants of enslaved Blacks who worked on its campus. The town council of Amherst, New Hampshire has created the African Heritage Reparation Coalition, and there are suggestions that marijuana tax revenue be used “to promote equity and justice and make restitution for past harms.” May this small stream become a roaring river of justice.

Nick Gier of Moscow taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. He was coordinator of religious studies from 1980 to 2003. Read his articles on civil rights at [webpages.uidaho.edu/ngier/CivilRights.htm](http://webpages.uidaho.edu/ngier/CivilRights.htm). Email him at [ngier006@gmail.com](mailto:ngier006@gmail.com).