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### Anti-Caste Activism by the Dalit Diaspora in the United States: 1970-2000

B.R. Ambedkar once remarked that time abroad had enabled him to experience amnesia of caste identity. “My five years of stay in Europe and America,” he wrote, “had completely wiped out of my mind any consciousness that I was an untouchable and that an untouchable whenever he went in India was a problem to himself and others.”<sup>1</sup> For later generations of overseas Dalits, however, this was not always the case. The Indian diaspora in the U.S., U.K., and Canada was fractured by caste identities and practices, which at times reproduced the exclusion and discrimination experienced in India. For many Dalits, caste inequality and marginalization continued to be experienced abroad.<sup>2</sup> Memories of India, experiences in the diaspora, and a commitment to improving the status of Dalits in the subcontinent compelled these immigrants to establish Dalit associations and advocate locally and globally against caste discrimination. This activism was initiated by members of, in Dalit studies scholar Vivek Kumar’s terms, the “new” Dalit diaspora.<sup>3</sup> Kumar divides the Dalit diaspora into two categories: the “old,” which comprised of indentured laborers to Fiji, Trinidad, and Malaysia, and the “new,” the skilled and professional immigrants who migrated to the U.K., U.S., and Canada after independence. The latter, who resided in the most powerful countries in the world, were able to take advantage of innovations in communication and the expansion of NGOs at local, national, and international levels.<sup>4</sup> Through their activities, as Gail Omvedt writes, “gradually, a worldwide Dalit movement began to take shape.”<sup>5</sup>

This activism was crucial for increasing the global visibility of caste discrimination and for courting the attention of international human rights organizations. In this paper, I discuss how diasporic organizations raised awareness about caste-based violence and discrimination in India and created a transnational network of alliances for Dalits. Focusing primarily on protest, advocacy, and consciousness-raising as forms of activism, I show how this activism has been crucial for increasing the global visibility of caste discrimination and for courting the attention of international human rights organizations.

The first of these diasporic associations was established by Dalit immigrants to the United Kingdom. Punjabi immigrants to Wolverton in the English Midlands founded the Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Committee of Great Britain in 1969. Three years later in 1972, Dalit immigrants established the Bheem Association – later renamed the Dr. Ambedkar Mission Society – in Bedford, England. The 1970s saw the launching of several Ambedkarite associations, including ones in Birmingham, Southhall, and East London. Among the organizations established were, for example, the Ambedkar Buddhist Organisation, Ambedkar Memorial Trust, and Ambedkar and International Mission. In 1985, the Federation of Ambedkarite and Buddhist Organizations, U.K. (FABO UK) was founded to coordinate the activities of the associations within the U.K. and to advocate for Dalits in India. The FABO UK began raising awareness of the conditions facing Dalits in India at both the national and international levels, most notably during a series of events from 1989 to 1993 celebrating the birth centenary of Ambedkar. These organizations developed around the figure of Ambedkar, but while memorializing Ambedkar remained a focus of diasporic organizations, as FABO shows, these groups also began to advocate against caste discrimination in India and abroad.

Groups in North America were established with the explicit aim of protesting and advocating for Dalits in India, and here too, Ambedkar remained a key symbol for community development. The first association in the United States, Volunteers in the Service of India's Oppressed and Neglected (VISION), was founded in the early 1970s in New York City by Dr. Shobha Singh. Singh was an immigrant from New Delhi who had graduated from Johns Hopkins University in 1957 with a Ph.D. in Physics and went on to build an illustrious career at AT&T Bell Laboratories. VISION organized its first demonstration with Dalits from across the U.S. and Canada in June, 1978. The demonstration was outside of the United Nations and was planned to coincide with Prime Minister Morarji Desai's address to the General Assembly for the Special Session on Disarmament. The organization was protesting the Indian government's handling of upper caste violence against Dalit community in Agra. VISION mobilized Dalits from across the U.S. and Canada to protest the Indian state's management of the ordeal.

In Canada, the Ambedkar Memorial Mission was founded in Vancouver in 1978, but moved to Toronto the next year and was renamed the Ambedkar Mission. VISION and the Ambedkar Mission, together with the assistance of Chennai-based Dalit Liberation Education Trust, successfully persuaded the London-based human rights organization Minority Rights Group to create a working group on untouchability.<sup>6</sup> The organization assisted in a conference in 1983 titled "Minority Strategies: Comparative Perspectives on Racism and Untouchability" which was hosted by the City University of New York and Columbia University's Southern Asian Institute. Papers from the conference were later published as a book, *Untouchable! Voices from the Dalit Liberation Movement*.<sup>7</sup> A follow-up conference in India was planned, but blocked by the Indian state, which refused to grant visas to the American organizers of the conference.<sup>8</sup> In the years that followed, diasporic groups expanded their outreach and helped lay the foundation for a transnational advocacy movement for Dalit rights.

Diasporic groups also began to use the language of human rights to communicate the problems of Dalits and in this way, began to frame caste inequality as a human rights violation. VISION and the Ambedkar Mission represented Dalit issues at the Osaka International Conference Against Discrimination in 1982 and the Nairobi World Conference on Religion and Peace in 1984. Dr. Laxmi Berwa, an oncologist based in the Washington D.C. area who took over the leadership of VISION after Singh, became the first person to testify on the plight of Dalits before the U.N. Commission on Human Rights in 1982. Dr. Berwa's work illustrates three of the most important trends in the development of an international anticaste movement: the shift from an identity-based politics to one that courted non-Dalit groups, the increased use of the language of human rights to communicate the problems of Dalits, and finally, the use of arguments based on comparison and analogy.

Dr. Berwa arrived in the United States in 1971 after receiving an MBBS from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi. He completed his internship and residency in Brooklyn, N.Y. and a fellowship in Buffalo, N.Y. in 1977. From 1977 to 1980, he served as a commissioned officer in the U.S. Air Force and then began practicing internal medicine and oncology in the Washington D.C. area. In addition to providing testimony at the U.N. Commission on Human Rights in both 1982 and 1995, Berwa testified before Capitol Hill for the Congressional Human Rights Caucus in 1993 and spoke on the situation of Dalits in India at a diverse range of venues, including, for example, the Medicine Department of Cook County Hospital, Howard University, George Mason University, a conference of the International Studies Association, a meeting of the American Federation of Muslims, and a meeting of Communities United to Fight Under-Development in Trinidad.

He publicized his attempts to hold meetings with Indian dignitaries such as Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi when they visited the United States and organized demonstrations around these visits to draw attention to the situation of Dalits in India, specifically, the impunity with which violence and discrimination was enacted against them. To communicate the severity of conditions and suffering experienced by Dalits to audiences unfamiliar with caste discrimination, Berwa relied on analogies between Dalits and other groups. In his testimony at the Human Rights Commission in 1982, Berwa powerfully argued that the state of Dalits in India – which he described as a “constant state of terror and humiliation” – was akin to “the condition of Jewish people in Hitler’s time.”<sup>9</sup> At this and other forums, Berwa supplemented this analogy with two other ones: that of slavery and of the situation of African Americans under Jim Crow laws.<sup>10</sup> On several occasions, he used the term “crime against humanity” to describe untouchability. The term ‘crime against humanity’ translated untouchability as an affront to human dignity on par with the Holocaust and Apartheid. Berwa thus utilized a form of argumentation based on analogy as well as a vocabulary that rendered untouchability and caste discrimination gross violations of human rights.

Berwa found common cause with other minorities, both non-Indian and Indian, and rallied for their alliances in the face of majoritarian repression. He reached out to Indian Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians in the United States and argued for their solidarity with struggles faced by their counterparts in India. The problems facing minorities in India, he argued, were analogous: all minorities, he claimed, faced accusations of not belonging, of being “outsiders” to the nation. Not only do minorities experience similar problems, Berwa maintained, they also faced a “common aggressor,” namely Hindu extremists.<sup>11</sup> Berwa pointed out that minorities lacked the resources and capital available to the Hindu right and implored all Indian minorities to “stick together, help each other and work with the other secular minded Hindus to fight the communalists.”<sup>12</sup> In another presentation, Berwa called attention to the status of Indians in the U.S. as minorities and compared the relative tolerance and peace they enjoyed to the repression and violence experienced by minorities in India. He argued that Hindu aggression towards minorities in India would be analogous to “Christian-right hoodlum groups like K.K.K. and skin heads acting destroying Hindu temples and raping Hindu Women” in the U.S. “Let us not forget,” Berwa announced to a Seventh-day Adventist church in Maryland, “that Hindus outside of India are a minority and they are subject to the same reprisals as the minorities in India.”<sup>13</sup>

During a lecture celebrating Ambedkar’s one hundred and sixth birth anniversary at Howard University in 1998 Berwa argued for the relevance of Ambedkar’s thought to minority issues in the U.S., in particular that of African American struggles for equality.<sup>14</sup> The trustee elect of the Graduate Student Council, Randy Short, had invited Berwa to speak about Ambedkar to an audience that included students, professors, the ambassador to India, and a member of the executive board of the NAACP.<sup>15</sup> It was the first time an African American institution had commemorated Dr. Ambedkar’s birthday, and Berwa saw the event as “a new beginning in the human rights movement between Dalits and Afro-Americans.”<sup>16</sup> He spoke of the universality of Ambedkar’s theories of liberation and argued for their relevance to all minority issues “whether about Dalits in India, the Indian in U.K., Canada, or America for that matter, whether it was an issue of Afro-Americans in America or any persecuted minority.” He also noted that there were ideological similarities between the leaders of the civil rights and Dalit rights movements. Both Ambedkar and Martin Luther King, Jr., he argued, knew that “no one was going to give them their rights.”<sup>17</sup> They understood that securing rights would require struggle and that oppressed groups “must fight for their rights from their oppressors”<sup>18</sup> Berwa concluded his speech by

“urg[ing] the Afro-Americans in this country whether academicians, civil rights or political leaders...[to] join hands with the Dalits in India with the same message which our two leaders gave and that one message was equality.”

Berwa represented himself as a spokesperson for “the millions of speechless untouchables” and strove to, as he said, bring the plight of Dalits “to the attention of the whole civilized world.”<sup>19</sup> This required not only strategic analogies and broader networks of affiliation, but also the deployment of the logic and vocabulary of human rights. The language of human rights allowed Berwa to counter the Indian state’s adamant refusal to view caste as an issue appropriate for foreign or international forums. Globalizing Dalit issues meant countering the view of caste as a problem “internal” – both in terms of occurrence and jurisdiction – to India. During Rajiv Gandhi’s visit to the United States in 1987, Berwa protested violence against minorities in India and declared that even though the government of India had blocked the discussion of caste at the United Nations, the movement “must press on and meet the U.N. Secretary General to have a personal hearing and submit a memorandum on Human Rights Violation in India.”<sup>20</sup> In his presentation to the United Nations Human Rights Commission, Berwa cited “police inaction,” “police terrorizing,” and state neglect of Dalits in India and requested international surveillance and pressure for “corrective action.”<sup>21</sup>

In 1999, after over two decades of advocacy for Dalits from abroad, Laxmi Berwa was invited to speak at the Centre for Alternative Dalit Media in New Delhi. In this lecture, Berwa recounted the successes of Dalit activism in increasing the global visibility of Dalit issues. He cited an episode of the news program *60 Minutes* on untouchability in India as well as other stories in the U.S. media.<sup>22</sup> Dalits who had left India, he explained, had not forgotten about the situation of their counterparts in India. These privileged few had used their positions abroad to mobilize a broader base of support and would continue to “expose the high caste hypocrisy and the Indian government’s negligence and indifference” if the Indian state failed to support an environment where Dalits could “live as equals with dignity and pride.”

Berwa pointed out that Dalits abroad had helped direct the attention of the U.S. academy towards the situation of Dalits and had forged both academic and activist partnerships between African Americans and Dalits. “Thus,” he concluded, “it is a warning to Dalit oppressors that Indian Dalits are no longer alone in their struggle for equality but overseas Dalits and the rest of the civilized world is expressing their solidarity in no uncertain terms.”<sup>23</sup> Berwa – like Ambedkar – thus perceived the situation of Dalits in India as one of isolation. He characterized his work abroad – the courting of allies and the publicizing of Dalits’ predicaments in internationally recognizable terms – as a way to dismantle this isolation so that Dalits were “no longer alone in their struggle.” Through the work of Berwa and other activists both within India and the diaspora, transnational alliances became a significant avenue of Dalit activism.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Nanak Chand Rath, *Reminiscences and Remembrances of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar* (New Delhi: Falcon Books, 1995)12.

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Vivek Kumar, “Understanding Dalit Diaspora,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 39, no. 1 (Jan. 3-9, 2004):114-116; and Rachel Fell McDermott, “From Hinduism to Christianity, from India to New York: Bondage and Exodus Experiences in the Lives of Indian Dalit Christians in Diaspora,” in *South Asian Christian Diaspora: Invisible Diaspora in Europe and North America*, eds. Knut A. Jacobsen and Selva J. Raj (Surrey England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008). McDermott conducted interviews with Dalit Christians in the New York metropolitan area and concluded that they continued to face caste-based discrimination. She writes that “caste is a diaspora problem now, and will only become more so in the coming years” (246). See also Annapurna Waughray, “Caste Discrimination: A Twenty-first Century Challenge for UK Discrimination Law,” *The Modern Law Review* 72, no. 2 (2009): 182-219. Waughray discusses the UK government’s decision in 2008 not to legally protect against caste

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discrimination despite the fact that “caste exerts a divisive force” in the lives of many groups and individuals in the United Kingdom. Lastly, Castewatch UK, a watchdog organization targeting caste discrimination in the United Kingdom was founded in 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Vivek Kumar, “Understanding Dalit Diaspora,” 114.

<sup>4</sup> Vivek Kumar, “Dalit Movement and Dalit International Conferences,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38, no. 27 (July 5-11, 2003): 2799.

<sup>5</sup> Gail Omvedt, “The U.N., Racism and Caste,” in *Caste, Race and Discrimination: Discourses in International Context*, eds. Sukhadeo Thorat and Umakant (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2004) 188.

<sup>6</sup> Clifford Bob, “‘Dalit Rights are Human Rights’: Caste Discrimination, International Activism and the Construction of a New Human Rights Issue” *Human Rights Quarterly* 29 (2007): 167-193, 176.

<sup>7</sup> See Barbara R. Joshi, *Untouchable! Voices of the Dalit Liberation Movement*, London: Zed Books, 1986.

<sup>8</sup> See Gail Omvedt, “The UN, Racism, and Caste,” *The Hindu*, April 10, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> “Testimony by Dr. Laxmi Berwa to the UN Sub-Commission on Human Rights,” Geneva, Switzerland, August 31, 1982 in *Untouchable: Voices of the Dalit Liberation Movement* ed. Barbara R. Joshi (London: Zed Books, 1986).

<sup>10</sup> For example, Berwa uses these analogies at a speech to the Medicine Department of Cook County Hospital in Chicago, April 27, 1983. See Laxi Berwa, “Speech to the Medicine Department of Cook County Hospital” in *Asian Dalit Solidarity* ed. Laxmi Berwa (Delhi: Dalit Liberation Education Trust, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Berwa, “Address to Members of the American Federation of Muslims, October 21, 1994,” in *Asian Dalit Solidarity* ed. Laxmi Berwa (Delhi: Dalit Liberation Education Trust, 2000), 59.

<sup>12</sup> Berwa, “Speech Delivered at Protest held at the Indian Embassy, May 6, 1987,” in *Asian Dalit Solidarity* ed. Laxmi Berwa (Delhi: Dalit Liberation Education Trust, 2000) 22.

<sup>13</sup> Berwa, “Speech at Sligo Church, Maryland, January 17, 1999” in *Asian Dalit Solidarity* ed. Laxmi Berwa (Delhi: Dalit Liberation Education Trust, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Gail Omvedt notes that Laxmi Berwa’s “organizing...illustrated one of the first examples of unity between Dalits and Black Americans (African Americans).” She adds that Berwa discuss the situation of Dalits in India and recounted stories of caste atrocities on African American radio stations in the Washington D.C. area. See Gail Omvedt, “The U.N., Racism and Caste,” in *Caste, Race and Discrimination: Discourses in International Context*, eds. Sukhadeo Thorat and Umakant, Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2004, 188.

<sup>15</sup> A portrait of Ambedkar was raised at both the Howard University School of Law and the Indian Embassy as part of this event. Berwa had noticed that a portrait of Ambedkar was missing from among the portraits of the “founding fathers” of the nation and felt that this event “would be a great opportunity for the Indian government to pay homage to Dr. Ambedkar in America.” See Berwa, “Speech at Howard University for 106<sup>th</sup> Birth Anniversary of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, April 16, 1998” in *Asian Dalit Solidarity* ed. Laxmi Berwa (Delhi: Dalit Liberation Education Trust, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> Berwa, “Speech at Howard University for 106<sup>th</sup> Birth Anniversary of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.”

<sup>17</sup> Berwa, “Speech at Howard University for 106<sup>th</sup> Birth Anniversary of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.”

<sup>18</sup> Berwa, “Speech at Howard University for 106<sup>th</sup> Birth Anniversary of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.”

<sup>19</sup> Laxmi Berwa, “Speech at Consulate of India in NYC, May 1, 1983” in *Asian Dalit Solidarity* ed. Laxmi Berwa (Delhi: Dalit Liberation Education Trust, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> Laxmi Berwa, “Speech in front of the White House, protesting Rajiv Gandhi’s visit, October 20, 1987” in *Asian Dalit Solidarity* ed. Laxmi Berwa (Delhi: Dalit Liberation Education Trust, 2000). In this speech, Berwa also stated that if international advocacy did not bring about the necessary changes, Dalits should turn to more militant action: “if we don’t get justice from anywhere then we have the right to seek justice with own hand. If that means we have to raise arms against the injustice, we must do it. If it means a blood bath to save the honour of our women, we must do it. After all, what good is life which is without dignity, pride, and honor? What good is peace in the graveyard?”

<sup>21</sup> Laxmi Berwa, “Presentation at U.N. Commission on Human Rights, August 31, 1995” in *Asian Dalit Solidarity* ed. Laxmi Berwa (Delhi: Dalit Liberation Education Trust, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> The 60 minutes episode aired on March 21, 1999.

<sup>23</sup> Laxmi Berwa, “Lecture of Centre for Alternative Dalit Media, April 11, 1999,” in *Asian Dalit Solidarity* ed. Laxmi Berwa (Delhi: Dalit Liberation Education Trust, 2000)196.