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# Social Movements among the Backward Classes and the Blacks: Homology in the Sources of Identity

DEPRIVED SECTIONS OF society in different parts of the world have organized themselves into protest movements to fight against discriminations of various kinds based on colour, religion, caste and tribe. Their problem, however, has been one of establishing a new identity —the kind of image that they want to protect in order to gain self-respect, honour and status. While the question of identity has been common to all the deprived sections, the answers that they have sought to provide have been different but homologous. This paper* is an attempt to provide a classificatory scheme, at an abstract level, for the analysis of the homology in the sources of identity among the Backward Classes and Black movements, which have arisen under diverse social and cultural conditions such as India and the United States of America. The paper does not deal with the question why and under what circumstances certain movements choose one source of identity rather than any other,[1] because such a question can be answered only by a detailed empirical examination of the event structure and cognitive response of the concerned group in the wider economic and political contexts. I believe such

an enquiry should follow the analysis of logic of forms and homo-
logy between them.

The social movements that have occurred among the Backward
Classes in India and the Blacks in the United States have undoub-
tedly arisen under diverse social and cultural circumstances. The
differences are too apparent. For instance, while Indian society is
characterized by the caste system, American society is characterized
by class, race, and ethnicity. The Indian and American systems
of hierarchy and control are different. The latter is a developed
nation, whereas the former is a developing one. Nevertheless, as we
shall point out later, the ways in which the Backward Classes and
Blacks have sought to establish new identities are homologous, at
an abstract level, and not similar.

The problem of identity is crucial in the formation of protest
groups and for collective mobilization. The existing groups project
a different image of themselves *vis-a-vis* other groups and define
their internal and external relations in the light of this self-image.
Identity is, however, a dynamic phenomenon—old identities are
discarded and new ones are assumed. The self-perception of the
group changes in the context of the current objectives to be gained
and interests to be pursued. In the context of social movements
among the deprived sections, the element of conflict becomes promi-
nent, sharpening the criteria of incorporation and exclusion.

The problem of identity is intimately related to ideology which
is a symbolic system. An ideology provides a set of beliefs and
symbols in relation to the aspirations of the concerned group and
its response to reality. It helps the codification of beliefs, inter-
prets the surroundings and legitimizes action. It also develops
symbols and codes. It is necessary to stress that the ideology of
social movements among the deprived classes tends to be double-
edged. It not only provides self-defence against powerlessness but
also acts as a guide to aggressive action.

In order to understand the formation of ideologies it is necessary
to analyze the structural situation of the Backward Classes and the
Blacks in terms of relative deprivation. However, the position of
relative deprivation provides only the necessary conditions for the
formation of a protest ideology. The sufficient conditions are
supplied by the self-perception and the ideology of the concerned
group, on the basis of which a new identity is established.

## Position of Relative Deprivation

The position of the Blacks and the Backward Classes[2] in their respective social and cultural systems is characterized by relative deprivation. To take the position of the Blacks, the American Negroes, who first landed in Virginia in 1619, had the status of indentured labour but were later made slaves. Chattel slavery was soon institutionalized. The slaves were denied both civil and political rights. Husbands, wives and children could be separated, and children often derived their status from their mothers. The slaves were awarded as prizes in lotteries and raffles. They were wagered at gambling tables and horse races (Stampp 1956:201). They were whipped for minor crimes, mutilated for harsher crimes and killed for striking a white.

The slaves worked from dawn to dusk under the supervision of a whiteman. While the old men tended gardens and looked after the animals, old women did domestic work. They lived in small huts, or slave cabins, which had no amenities. They were not allowed to retain their culture, language and religion. They were converted to Christianity and were told by the white ministers how to adjust to their conditions of servitude which was ordained by God. Bishops and other religious leaders frequently owned slaves themselves (Franklin, 1948:200). This situation lasted for about two-and-a-half centuries till the end of the Civil War in 1865.

Among the Backward Classes in India, the category that has now come to be identified as the scheduled castes, which includes the ex-untouchables or Harijans, had a status in the traditional social system before British rule which was more or less homologous to that of the Blacks. Verba, Ahmed and Bhatt (1971: Chp. III) have systematically compared the contemporary social and economic positions of the Blacks and the Harijans. We shall consider the parallels only in the traditional social systems, to enable us to understand the structural conditions in the emergence of social movements.

Serfdom and slavery existed in parts of India, where agricultural labourers were recruited from among the untouchable castes and, in some cases, from among the tribes. For instance, in Kerala (Rao, 1957:37), the Pulayas, Cherumas and Panas (a tribe) belonged to the category of agrestic slaves. They were governed by three types of tenures, the degree of severity being highest in the first type. In this they were the property of their masters, being bought, sold and

transferred like any other commodity. But unlike the Blacks, the husband and wife were never separated. They lived in huts on the farmstead, had their own family life, followed their own religion but always worked for their masters.

The untouchables suffered from many kinds of religious and secular disabilities. On the religious side they were not allowed to study the sacred scriptures nor to worship at the temples of the caste Hindus. Their touch was considered defiling by the caste Hindus. Hence, they were not allowed to use the tanks and wells of the latter. Extreme forms of discriminations existed in Kerala. There was not only touch pollution, but also distance pollution. The unapproachables were forbidden to build houses of bricks, to use an umbrella or footwear. Their women were obliged not to cover their breasts. Any violation of the customary norms of behaviour was rewarded with very severe forms of punishment—from decapitation to multilation.

Thus, both the Blacks and the scheduled castes suffered from intense forms of relative deprivation in the fields of religion, education, economics and politics. They were discriminated against in the dress they wore, their speech, the houses they built, the way they carried themselves and the manner in which they interacted with the privileged. The latter zealously guarded their privileges and brutally punished those who violated the customary laws.

Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the scheduled castes and the Blacks largely accepted their lot. Some of them rebelled against their helplessness, but the vast majority believed that their real chances lay in obedience and hard work as there was some reward for these 'virtues'.

## First Awakening

While the presence of structural conditions of relative deprivation provided only the necessary context for the genesis of protest move ments among both the Blacks and the Backward Classes, certain external influences provided the sufficient conditions to create an awakening among them. The first signs of an awareness of the extremely deprived status that they occupied occurred under diverse circumstances in the two cases. The Christian missionaries were about the first group to organize a programme for the scheduled castes, who

were then referred to as the depressed classes. The missionaries not only converted them to their respective denominations but initiated a broad-based programme involving English education, and the setting up of orphanages and other special welfare measures. Those of the depressed classes who were converted to Christianity soon developed a different life style from their contemporaries. They received English education and were recruited to various government jobs.

Those of the depressed classes who had not embraced Christianity were quick to perceive the difference between their status and that of their converted brethren. The perception was one of the factors which led to an awareness among the non-converts. A further impetus was provided by the national movement which provided an ideology of egalitarianism and supported social movements which revolted against discrimination of any kind. Then there were the reform movements organized by the upper castes which initiated programmes of education and welfare for the Backward Classes, especially the depressed classes. These movements, being liberal, were against many orthodox brahmanical practices, including their attitudes towards the untouchables. Finally, the British abolished slavery and introduced an egalitarian system of law, liberal education and notions of representative government. All these developments provided a favourable climate for the genesis of social movements, with distinct ideologies and leadership, among the Backward Classes.

Among the Blacks, social awakening was initially brought about by the efforts of the Quakers in 1775 when they founded the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. This was the first organization in the United States which adopted an anti-slavery stance and advocated schooling for the Blacks (Bennett, 1970:362). Thus the first awakening occurred in colonial America before it became independent in 1876. Soon after, some states—such as Vermont, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania—abolished slavery. Blacks became more and more awakened to their slave status and there were many slave insurrections in the early nineteenth century. Some of the major ones occurred in Richmond (1800), Charleston (1822) and Southampton (1831).

Not all Blacks were slaves. There were also free Blacks who had migrated from Africa in the middle of the seventeenth century and who numbered about 60,000 by the end of the eighteenth century. They were mostly concentrated in the Northern part of the United States and enjoyed certain benefits which their brethern in the South did not. For instance, they were admitted to universities and several