

# Towards a Žižekian Critique of the Indian Ideology

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## Abstract:

Much before Hamid Dabashi's polemic (2016) against Žižek, the Slovenian came under fire from Indian academics for his dogmatic Leninism, contempt for identity politics, and, of course, Eurocentrism (Menon 2010, Nigam 2010). Žižek, who has been critical of Indian nationalism and its key leader MK Gandhi, has nevertheless expressed much admiration for BR Ambedkar (Žižek 2010: 22-23), a popular leader of the Dalit castes. While Žižek's direct engagement with Ambedkar and other anti-caste thinkers is minimal, Žižek's critique of ideology offers new dimensions of looking at social and political realities in India. This paper seeks to bring Žižek into a dialogue with Periyar EV Ramasamy, a pro-Enlightenment anti-caste leader of the non-Brahmin movement in South India, who was a trenchant critic of Indian nationalism. Reading Žižek along with Periyar, this paper looks at the Indian ideology as a manifestation of Brahminism. Periyar, like Žižek much later, argued that prior to the British intervention, the lower castes had no rights, only duties – a permanent state of servility to the upper castes. Periyar saw European modernity as an equalizer and sought to promote egalitarianism, rationalism and atheism, and urged the non-Brahmin castes to emulate European values, much to the consternation of the Indian nationalists. Through a comparative theoretical engagement with Žižek and Periyar, this paper seeks to arrive at an understanding of Brahminism as an ideology, the Indian ideology at its purest. Further, this paper also seeks to address gaps in Perry Anderson's controversial book *The Indian Ideology* (2012), by deploying Žižekian ideology critique to complement Anderson and to respond to his critics. Finally, this paper concludes with a critical consideration of the importance of Žižek's political thought for radical anti-caste movements in India and challenges the key argument placed by postcolonial scholars against Žižek, that of his irrelevance to the so-called Third World.

Slavoj Žižek should by now be used to the accusations thrown at him. Few years before postcolonial academics from prestigious Western universities polemicized against Žižek for his alleged racism (Ahmed 2016; Dabashi 2016), the Slovenian came under fire from the Indian academic elite for his dogmatic Leninism, contempt for identity politics, and, of course, Eurocentrism (Menon 2010, Nigam 2010). One would have to write a separate essay to sum up the several accusations against Slavoj Žižek, but a recurring one is that Žižek's theories are useless as regards social and political issues in the so-called Third World. Contesting this, I argue that a Žižekian critique is important, especially for anti-caste movements in India to critically understand the nature of the ruling Indian ideology.

This essay begins with a discussion of Perry Anderson's controversial book *The Indian Ideology* (2012) and the reactions to it. I argue that while Anderson's work was empirically rich, it does not adequately provide insights into what its title claims to interrogate, namely, the Indian ideology. To this extent, I draw upon the works of BR Ambedkar, the iconic Dalit leader and intellectual, whom Žižek has also expressed much admiration for (Žižek 2010: 22-23), and 'Periyar' E.V. Ramasamy (Periyar hereafter), a radical atheist, pro-Enlightenment thinker and the key figure of the Dravidian Movement from the state of Tamil Nadu. Both thinkers were critical of Indian nationalism and the anti-colonial struggle as they saw it led primarily by the upper-castes. More importantly, they saw Brahminism as the guiding spirit of Indian nationalism, the ideology that structures, colors and validates social relations in India. To Ambedkar and Periyar, Brahminism was the Indian ideology. And it is in arriving at a contemporary critique of Brahminism as an ideology that a Žižekian approach is most useful.

I expand on Ambedkar to provide a working definition of Brahminism and then explore his and Periyar's identification of the same with Indian nationalism, their concomitant criticisms of anti-colonialism and a marked suspicion towards the nativist

trends during their time. Both Ambedkar and Periyar were militantly against the caste system, but despite the best of their efforts and that of their followers, caste in society and politics has reproduced itself, adapting itself to the changing times. This paper does not propose any right way to anti-caste politics, but instead seeks to arrive at a critique of Brahminism as an ideology that exists today. I take from Žižek that the ideological “is a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence” (2010a: 21). The key word here is *essence*. Ideology can never be simply false consciousness or non-awareness of subjects of its existence. The fact that caste as a system of discrimination exists is acknowledged even by the Hindu Right today, though it can be explained as a result of a utilitarian need to include the lower castes to expand their cadre (Kanungo 2007). Likewise, it is not uncommon now to find left-liberal upper caste scholars in the Indian academia empathizing with and eulogizing a Dalit identity politics in a selective, often particularist, fashion. A Žižekian reading of Brahminism and its essence would see these maneuvers as the simultaneous operation of Brahminical ideology.

Before proceeding further, a clarification of some terms is necessary. The traditional classification of Hindu society is the hierarchical *varna* model, wherein the Brahmins – the priests-cum-learned, the Kshatriyas – the warriors, the Vaishyas – businessmen, and the Shudras – the laborers and artisans, are supposed to have evolved respectively from the head, the arms, the thighs and the feet of the Primordial being. Those who fall out of this system, the *avarnas*, were the untouchables. This is a utopian model (for the lower castes it was obviously dystopian) of a division of labor in Indian society that only vaguely corresponds to modern reality, but is nevertheless important as it prescribes an ideal that society and its individuals should aspire to. No less a person than MK Gandhi was an advocate of this ideal. He wanted the model without its excesses, that is, the practice of untouchability.

As far as the Indian social reality is concerned, *jati* – whose closest English equivalent is caste, a derivate from the Portuguese *casta*, constitutes the demographic. There are thousands of *jati* groups and it is at this level that “caste injunctions on marriage, occupation and social relations are conducted” and these castes “draw their ideological rationale of purity-pollution, endogamy, commensality,

and so forth, from the varna model” (Gupta 2000: 199). Each of these castes claims affiliation to a particular *varna*. But there are hierarchies within as well. For instances, it is not uncommon for one caste of Brahmins claiming ritual superiority over other Brahmin castes. Likewise, one can also find frictions within the untouchable castes, where some are seen to be more polluting than the others.

History has seen the mobility of castes up and down the *varna* system. The upward mobility of lower castes has been greatly resented and resisted by the top. Yet compromises have been arrived at for a restoration of social order. There are different sociological and anthropological accounts of the dynamics of this process and it is not in the scope of this paper to go into that. It can be shortly argued here that it has been near impossible for non-Brahmin castes to become Brahmins and significantly difficult for untouchable castes to become touchable. As I have mentioned elsewhere, Brahminhood generally was a ‘No Entry’ zone and untouchability generally was a ‘No Exit’ zone (Manoharan 2017: 87).

I have used the term ‘upper castes’ and ‘lower castes’ largely based on a general reference to the *varna* model and how it corresponds to castes today, where ‘upper’ denotes the members of castes belonging – or widely recognized as belonging – to the first three layers and ‘lower’ generically denotes the castes belonging to lowest rung and the untouchable castes as well. In appropriate places, I refer to the untouchable castes by the specific term ‘Dalit’, which initially was an umbrella term to refer to all oppressed castes and groups (Omvedt 2010: 72), but now largely refers to members of the untouchable castes. But the figure I shall largely be focusing on will be the Brahmin – not as an individual member of the apex group of castes, but as a trope for the ideology of Brahminism.

## **The Indian Ideology and Its Critics**

It needs to be stated at the outset that Perry Anderson’s *The Indian Ideology* is not a work of theory, but of history. Anderson cites an array of empirical material to make a fundamentally ideological statement, that India is a Hindu state that favors the upper caste elites at the expense of the rest. However, he does not adequately interrogate the subject that forms his book’s title, namely, the Indian

ideology. One could say that critics of the book were justified in asking what is novel about this book given that several Indian thinkers, most notably from lower castes, have made similar arguments and arrived at similar conclusions. In a volume that collated responses to Anderson from three well-known Indian academics (Chatterjee et al 2016), Nivedita Menon asks how it could be argued that the Hindu world-view is hegemonic in India when Hindu nationalism is seen pejoratively by opponents of the Hindu Right while the Right passes itself off as the truly secular force in India (47). Sudipta Kaviraj accuses Anderson of engaging in the unmasking of facts rather than conducting a serious analysis of his subject (155). Partha Chatterjee asserts strongly that “There is an Indian Ideology, but it’s not this” (61). While one can dismiss Menon’s accusations of Anderson’s Eurocentrism as rather trite, Chatterjee’s criticisms carry much merit. Indeed, Anderson’s fault is not that he interrogated the Indian ideology, but that he did not do it adequately.

It is obvious that the key targets of the book are MK Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and the Indian National Congress, all of whom Anderson dubs as apologists for varying forms of Hindu nationalism with varying intensities. Anderson is merciless in his attacks on Gandhi who saw Hindu icons as fundamental symbols of national piety (23) and Nehru who considered Hinduism as the national religion of India (54). The relatively modern Nehru, who had little time for Gandhi’s “extraterrestrial dreams or earthly archaisms” (51) nevertheless suffered from “a capacity for self-deception with far-reaching political consequences” (53). There is little that critics of Indian nationalism, most notably those swearing by Ambedkar and Periyar, would disagree on this, but Anderson’s almost obsessive focus on the historical personalities of Indian nationalism blinds him to other theoretical questions which he could have expanded upon, but failed to. In fact, in comparison to the robust criticism of the fragile basis of Indian nationalism in *Nationalism Without a Nation in India* (Aloysius 1997) – which strangely is not referred to at all by Anderson – *The Indian Ideology* looks theoretically flaccid. While Anderson makes the convincing argument that “An ideology, to be effective, must always in some measure answer to reality”, his concentration as such is on the Indian Reality rather than the Indian Ideology; indeed, the former would have served as a

better title to his book and could have thus served a better defense against Chatterjee's criticisms.

There are other pertinent observations that Anderson makes that deserve greater analysis than what was accorded to them. For instance, he notes four tropes in the official and intellectual imaginary of India – “antiquity-continuity; diversity-unity; massivity-democracy; multi-confessionality-secularity” (9). Consecutive sections will explore how Ambedkar and Periyar looked at these. Anderson acknowledges that both Periyar and Ambedkar had “less respect for the pieties of their age” than several thinkers of contemporary India. It is inevitable that any attempt at the study of the Indian Ideology will necessarily involve some discussion of caste. As mentioned earlier, Anderson is critical of the Hindu upper-caste composition of the Congress, and he holds Ambedkar and Periyar, arguably two of the sharpest critics of mainstream Indian nationalism both during the anti-colonialist struggle phases and in the post-independence period, in much high regard. He compliments Ambedkar for being “intellectually head and shoulders above most of the Congress leaders” (52). Likewise, lavishing praise on the radical politics of Periyar that few in Indian academia are willing to acknowledge, Anderson writes

He is still admired in his homeland. But an enemy of caste and of sexual inequality as fearless as this had no place in the construction of the Indian Union, which he reviled, and once it was consolidated, a stance like his became unthinkable for any politician with national ambitions (172).

Of course, the nature of the politics of caste and of caste in politics has significantly altered since the times of Periyar and Ambedkar. Lower castes movements emerged in several parts of the country, and in states like Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, they actually captured power. There are many political groups representing the subaltern castes, and both of the big national parties, the Congress and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are more amenable to including such castes in their ranks. The BJP, for instance, has Narendra Modi from a lower caste as its Prime Minister while it nominated Ram Nath Kovind, a Dalit, as the President. That these

representations are instrumental for parties to gain votes and secure power rather than owing to any genuine efforts at securing social and economic justice is a different story.

While the role of caste in politics has changed, Anderson argues that “What would not change was its structural significance as the ultimate secret of Indian democracy” adding further that “Caste is what preserved Hindu democracy from disintegration” as it prevents any possibility of collective action, and “It was not the contradiction of democracy to come. It was the condition of it. India would be a caste-iron democracy” (112). Caste-identity based mobilization is seen as both offering possibilities as well as placing limitations. Anderson, however, does not place much faith in the parliamentary representation of the lower castes. In as much as the subaltern groups could enter the parliament and articulate their interests, the validity of the parliament and the structures of the Indian state were left intact. While individuals, and occasionally groups, might have been empowered, social disabilities and hierarchies persisted. Anderson argues

A rigid social hierarchy was the basis of original democratic stability, and its mutation into a compartmentalized identity politics has simultaneously deepened parliamentary democracy and debauched it. Throughout, caste is the cage that has held Indian democracy together, and it has yet to escape (171).

Caste, then, is quite central to the political reality of India. What is crucial, however, to understanding the Indian Ideology is a critique of Brahminism which, I argue, is the Indian Ideology at its purest. The next sections will look at how Ambedkar and Periyar approached Brahminism, and through a dialogue with these thinkers and Slavoj Žižek, we will arrive at a Žižekian critique of Brahminism.

### **Ambedkar: Naming the Brahmin, Defining Brahminism**

Colonial modernity and the introduction of Western education in India opened up several vocal political criticisms of Brahmin domination and casteism. Of course, pre-modern/pre-colonial India also had individuals and religious movements

challenging caste hierarchies, like Sikhism and Buddhism much before that, but these were largely in the realm of the spiritual. It was only under colonialism that secular avenues for the criticism of caste were opened<sup>1</sup>. Colonialism created the space for anti-caste and anti-Brahminism *as politics*.

Of the anti-caste thinkers who emerged in this period, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956) was undoubtedly the most important. Born in a Mahar Dalit family in the state of Maharashtra in Western India, enduring casteist discriminations and humiliations of many sorts, he would earn a PhD from Columbia University and a D.Sc. from the London School of Economics. Though both were in the subject of economics and despite his strong concerns over the question of labor, he is most popularly known for his writings on society, politics and religion. Providing an exhaustive critique of Hinduism, he converted to Buddhism in 1956. One of the most qualified Indian leaders of his period, he is the central figure of Dalit politics today and his writings continue to inform and inspire lower caste movements across India. Contemporary innovative readings look at Ambedkar as a political philosopher (Rodrigues 2017: 101-107) and recognize his profound contributions to political theory (Rathore 2017: 168-206).

In a time when the Indian nationalist movement led by the Congress was gaining momentum, Ambedkar did give qualified support to the end of British colonialism, which he identified as being economically exploitative. Yet, unlike the Congressmen, he did not subscribe to the view of India as a homogenous, ancient and sacred entity. Gail Omvedt correctly notes his abhorrence to the invocation of tradition and his preference of building a nation on fundamental democratic principles:

His unique contribution was to give this concept a fully modernist thrust – the society he wanted was democratic and rational, embodying Enlightenment values, expressed in the French Revolution trinity of liberty, equality and fraternity. British colonial rule was an obstacle to this. Still, it was less inimical to untouchables than to elites, who suffered immediate loss of power. The low castes, however, had gained concrete benefits from the opening up of education and employment. (Omvedt 2008: 39)



While opposing British colonialism, he had no qualms about identifying the elitist nature of the Indian anti-colonialists and locating the Brahmin as the cornerstone of the matrix of caste oppression. To Ambedkar, the Brahmin would never interrogate the nature of caste oppression because “the Brahmin scholar is only a learned man. He is not an intellectual [...] The former is class-conscious and is alive to the interests of his class. The latter is an emancipated being who is free to act without being swayed by class considerations” (Ambedkar 2008: 8).

Ambedkar identified inequality as the official doctrine of the Hindu religion and asserted that “The Hindu has no will to equality” (2006: 28). Ambedkar was critically opposed to Gandhi’s attempts to reform Hinduism from within and he saw the Mahatma’s outreach to the untouchables as a mere utilitarian tokenism, a strategy to secure their support for the Congress and to ensure that they did not convert to other religions or take a more radical course of political action. Unlike Gandhi, Ambedkar did not view untouchability *alone* as an excess of Hinduism; he saw inequality as the fundamental essence of Brahminism which was coded into all rituals and practices of Hinduism. In Hinduism, he saw a “gospel of darkness” (Ambedkar 2010: 37) where “inequality is a religious doctrine adopted and conscientiously preached as a sacred dogma” (ibid: 57). Casteism and untouchability was not something the *bad* Hindus practiced, rather, Brahminism made it mandatory for all Hindus, in fact, for all Indians, to be casteist.

To Ambedkar, the Brahmins, the high priests and prime beneficiaries of Hinduism, were historically “the most inveterate enemy of the servile classes” and the cardinal principles of Brahminism were the following

- (1) graded inequality between the different classes;
- (2) complete disarmament of the Shudras and the Untouchables;
- (3) complete prohibition of the education of the Shudras and the Untouchables;
- (4) ban on the Shudras and the Untouchables occupying places of power and authority;
- (5) ban on the Shudras and the Untouchables acquiring

property; (6) complete subjugation and suppression of women (Ambedkar 2002: 146).

Points 2-6 refer to the empirical effects of Brahminism, which have changed as the Indian empirical reality changed. With the establishment of electoral democracy and with decades of affirmative action for the lower castes in government services and education, towards which Ambedkar played no small role, these castes have found representation, if not justly proportional to their overwhelmingly huge population, in colleges, universities, the police and the army. A politics of populism has ensured that lower castes have also gained considerable political power in states in India that have a legacy of movements emphasizing social justice. And though violence against women and several forms of discrimination against them capture the news on an almost daily basis, there are quite a few iconic women leaders in the public, like Mamata Banerjee, the Chief Minister of Bengal, the late J. Jayalalithaa, former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, and Kumari Mayawati, former Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, who is also a Dalit. But still, the core aspect of the ideology of Brahminism, that of graded inequality, persists.

Elsewhere, Ambedkar writes that “The caste system is not mere a division of labourers which is quite different from a division of labour – it is an (sic) hierarchy in which the division of labourers are graded one above the other” (2002: 262). Not only are the laborers divided by caste, they are placed in graded, particularistic identities which denies them the possibility of long-term political solidarities to wage common socio-economic struggles. Chatterjee writes that caste politics has not found adequate grounds on which it can be superseded by a “new universal form of community” (Chatterjee 1994: 208). It should be added that the ideology of Brahminism prevents the emergence of any radical politics that would supersede the particularism of caste by a universalism.

*Brahminism as an ideology thus can be defined as a system of graded inequality that seals castes in particularist identities and prevents the emergence of any radical universalist politics that could challenge its existence.* It cannot be reduced to the obvious acts of direct violence and explicit discrimination against lower castes alone

“but also the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation” (Žižek 2009, 8). As Aloysius argues, the Brahminical also reproduces itself through multiple socio-political discourses both at social levels and at academic levels (2010: 28). Aloysius further notes that the discourses in Indian scholarship “do not help recognize the cultural-social face, thereby the local identity of dominance” (ibid: 34). This can be read as a criticism of trends in Indian writing by left-liberals who focus almost exclusively on the atrocities that the lower castes endure (Viswanathan 2009; Sivaraman 2013), with pseudo-Gandhian sympathies for the identities and experiences of those at the bottom and righteous anger against those who appear to be immediate perpetrators of violence, but who ultimately obfuscate any critical interrogation of the ideology that structures *all* caste identities in the Indian society.

### **Periyar: A Transitive Critique of Brahminism**

The Tamil region in South India during the colonial period saw the emergence and consolidation of a progressive non-Brahmin movement. In fact, the first novel in Tamil history, Samuel Vedanayagam Pillai’s *Prathapa Mudaliar Charithiram*, published in 1879, had mild undertones of anti-Brahminism in it. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, there were quite a few non-Brahmin leaders and intellectuals who publicly articulated grievances against Brahmin preponderance in education, politics and public services. These notables got a political platform with the formation of the Justice Party and a political programme with the publication of the Non-Brahmin Manifesto in 1916 which, among other things, urged the colonial authorities to ensure that any transfer of power did not empower the native elite castes.

The non-Brahmin movement, which till then was mostly dominated by affluent members of the non-Brahmin castes, was radicalized by the arrival of ‘Periyar’ Erode Venkata Ramasamy (1879-1973). Born in a reasonably well to do non-Brahmin family, Periyar, as he is popularly addressed, is known across South India as a militant atheist and a defender of rationalism. The spearhead of a militant social reform movement that would significantly transform the political discourse of Tamil Nadu’s politics, Periyar is a household name among Tamils, associated with anti-Brahminism and social justice. If there was a central theme that ran coherently in Periyar’s thoughts

it is this – anti-Brahminism. Periyar’s political affiliations and activities have varied over time – he started off as a Congress activist, later called it an evil to be eradicated, supported Gandhi’s campaigns for liquor prohibition and later called for a prohibition of Gandhism, engaged with Communism and while criticizing the Indian Communist Party for being dominated by Brahmins, took the chairmanship of the Justice Party eventually criticizing the non-Brahmin elites within it and converting it to the more radical people-oriented ‘Dravidar Kazhagam’ (Dravidian Federation) in 1944, burnt Hindu religious texts and broke idols of deities, advocated atheism while campaigning for rights of all castes to access temples, opposed the imposition of Hindi as the national language of India while simultaneously satirizing the political rhetoric of his Tamil nationalist contemporaries. Through all this, Periyar’s discourse remained consistently anti-Brahminical.

Pandian writes that Periyar deployed a “transitive critique” of Brahminism. This critique “produced the Brahmin as a trope for different forms of power anchored in a range of identities such as caste, gender, region, and language” which led to “an alliance of non-Brahmins based on a range of real and perceived injuries” (Pandian 2007: 188). In Periyar’s perspective, Brahminism, Hinduism, and Indian nationalism overlapped, privileging the Brahmin identity and securing its position at the top, and his political career was marked by an uncompromising criticism of the lot. Claiming that Brahminism as religion, culture and the state denied respect to the lower castes, he named the movement he championed as *suyamariyadhai iyakkam* or the Self-Respect Movement.

Though some critics claim that Periyar, in his prioritization of social reform, “drifted into shameful collaboration with British imperialism” (Ram 1977: 68), Periyar clearly understood the pernicious effects of British rule. However, he identified the anti-colonialist maneuver to suture a unity among Indians as a ruse for perpetuating Brahmin leadership. Further, he also identifies the Brahminical ideology as preventing a unity of lower castes from emerging. In an editorial for his party paper he writes:

Just as the Whites who divided us and prevented us from achieving unity and by this strategy, they ruled a country of 330 million, ruling with the aid

of guns and cannons, looting our wealth, the Brahmins have divided us into several castes, instructing us that one was high and the other was low, facilitated a conflict between the high and low and with the aid of the weapons of Vedas, the scriptures, puranas and mores, have inferiorized us and live off our blood. (Ramasamy 1926)

He was convinced that the Brahmins prevented a progressive unity of the lower castes and that Indian nationalism and the newly formed Indian state were instrumental to this end. This was a conviction he held throughout his political life. In his last public speech in 1973, he would say that the Indian government “is a party to the Brahmins to stand in the way of the unity of the people” (1998: 8). It might be tempting here to draw parallels with racist or chauvinist reasoning, where the Other serves the function of a disruptive force that violates the unity of a harmonious whole – the Jew for the anti-Semite, the Black for the White supremacist, the Western for the Islamist and so on – whose removal would guarantee a return to harmony. But such a reading is thoroughly wrong.

Firstly, Periyar did not romanticize the archaic nor did he have interest retrieving any real or imagined historical greatness. He was as critical of Indian nationalists whom he accused of Hindu revivalism as he was of Tamil nationalists who sang paeans to ancient Tamil kingdoms. His idea of the nation “freed from the past, located in the anticipatory and framed by notions of ‘modernity from below’ was a metaphor, a metaphor which stood for ever-fluid, free and equal citizenship” (Pandian 1993: 2286). Next, where Indian nationalists saw colonial modernity as a wound inflicted on an organic society, Periyar, to take from Žižek, saw in the disintegration of traditional forms an opening of spaces for liberation (Žižek 2014: 136). Most importantly, the Brahmin was not seen as a disruptive force in a harmonious whole; On the contrary, he was the cement that bound castes in varying positions in a fake sublation that retained the particularity of caste identities.

It is instructive to here to look at Periyar’s approach towards communism. Impressed by the Russian Revolution, he toured the Soviet Union for about three months, between February and May 1932. Venkatachalapathy provides an elaborate

account of Periyar's travel in the USSR and his fascination with the Soviet socialist model, especially its promotion of atheism. In his article, Venkatachalapathy documents a rather revealing incident: during Periyar's stay in Russia, a British leftist met him and apologized profusely to him for the crimes of imperialism, asking for forgiveness. Periyar replied that "There is no need for forgiveness" and that communism would come to India once Indians attained Self-Respect and shook themselves free from Gandhism (which he saw as Brahminical), further adding that "nobody's generosity is required for this" (2017: 114). One could read Periyar's response as a gentle rebuke to this leftist that what was needed was not a dramatic performance of white guilt or generosity, but solidarity based on common political principles.

On his return, he began aggressively promoting socialist ideas, arranging for the translation of Marxist texts to Tamil, denouncing nationalism and hailing the virtues of proletarian internationalism. After consultation with local communists, the Self-Respecters passed a set of resolutions demanding radical land reforms, minimal wages and improving of living conditions for workers, public ownership of essential services, state control of religious bodies and prohibition of caste. Apprehensive of the radicalization of the Self-Respect movement, the colonial government began a crackdown on its leaders and cadres and many, including Periyar, had to serve terms in prison. Fearing that the progress made by the Self-Respect movement would achieve severe setbacks under continued repression, Periyar made a break with his erstwhile communist allies, even though he would be attracted to socialist ideals for the rest of his life. But there was another crucial reason for his distancing from the Indian communists.

In an article written in 1944, noting that the Indian Communist Party was dominated by Brahmins<sup>2</sup>, he argued that as long as caste exists, any form of communism would only benefit the Brahmins since a mere change in economic status would not necessarily bring a change in ritual hierarchy (2009: 1646). Contrasting with the Soviet Union, he said "Since the Western countries did not have caste, they had to wage a class war before communism could be reached. Here, owing to the presence of caste, it is necessary to wage a caste war before achieving communism" (2009: 1647). He differentiates between caste and class in that class is determined by relation to labour whereas caste is a marker determined by birth in relation to a religiously

sanctioned hierarchy. He asserts that “In a country where there are no common rights, communism would only strengthen those who have been enjoying greater rights,” adding that abolishing the privilege of Brahmins and the upper castes would result in going half the way towards the communist ideal (ibid). Periyar suspected that the universality that was guaranteed by communism, in the Indian scenario, would be appropriated by the Brahmin to secure his own particular interests. In this, he was not rejecting the universality of communism – he was rather criticizing the Brahmin for being unable to transcend his particularity.

### **Žižek: Further Forays into the Forbidden**

We saw in the sections on Ambedkar and Periyar how they contested the tropes of the Indian imaginary as outlined by Anderson. The “unity-diversity” trope is a key area of tension between the Hindu Right and the Indian liberal secularists. Where the Hindu Right stress on the unity of Hindus, while nevertheless retaining the diversity and hierarchies of castes, the seculars seek to maintain multireligious, multicultural nature of India *without* challenging the hierarchies of castes. With Indian liberal multiculturalism, castes seen as cultural communities are used to showcase Indian diversity (Natrajan 2012: 164) and Ambedkar’s exhortation to annihilate caste are ignored by those who celebrate caste as a non-confrontational identity (Dhanda 2015: 39).

One can observe the reproduction of these tensions in cinema. Mani Ratnam's *Bombay* (1995) is about a liberal Hindu male marrying a conservative Muslim girl. In the wake of the Mumbai riots of 1992-93, their love story comes to the foreground and unites Hindus and Muslims as one family, one nation, one India. Karan Johar's *Kurbaan* (2009) shows a Hindu woman married to a Muslim terrorist and his *My Name is Khan* (2010) shows a Hindu woman married to a Muslim who is wrongly accused of terrorism – both movies promoting the idea of tolerance and the vitality of the modern Indian. The more recent Rajkumar Hirani's *PK* (2014) shows a Hindu Indian girl in love with a Pakistani Muslim. The Hindu protagonists of these films are all upper castes. Anything can go: as long as the Hindu upper caste remains at the top, and the Indian physical and ideological structure that preserves this remains intact<sup>3</sup>.

Indian multiculturalism's slogan of "unity in diversity" ultimately masks the obscenity of Hindu caste society and the permanently privileged status that the Brahmin enjoys. To take from Žižek

The weak point of the universal multiculturalist gaze does not reside in its inability to 'throw out the dirty water without losing the baby': it is deeply wrong to assert that, when one throws out nationalist dirty water—'excessive' fanaticism—one should be careful not to lose the baby of 'healthy' national identity, so that one should trace the line of separation between the proper degree of 'healthy' nationalism which guarantees the necessary minimum of national identity, and 'excessive' nationalism. Such a common sense distinction *reproduces the very nationalist reasoning which aims to get rid of 'impure' excess.* (Žižek 1997: 38)

The Indian multicultural appeal for "unity in diversity" has a twin argument coded within it; one, that the unity of the Indian state and the Indian national identity is sacrosanct because it can guarantee diversity (automatically delegitimizing Tamil, Manipuri or Kashmiri nationalisms as monoethnic chauvinisms); secondly, diversity means not only respect for the particular identities of religious minorities, but also the particular identities of caste. After all, cannot the appeal for a tolerance for the Muslim minority on a purely identitarian basis also translate into a diktat for the tolerance for the excessively influential Brahmin minority? It appears that Indian nationalist reasoning aims to get rid of the impure excess of the external Other be it the colonialist, the Pakistani, the Chinese etc.; in fact, it is fine with co-existence *provided* the purity of the internal order is maintained. The dirty water of India is caste; the baby to be thrown out "to render visible the phantasmatic support which structures the *jouissance* in the national Thing" (ibid) is the idea of unity in diversity.

This, of course, is troubling when we bring the idea of communist solidarity in to the picture. The past experiences of communism have demonstrated that while proletarian internationalism is an ideal to be pursued national specificities have also to be taken into consideration – failure to do so will cost politically, while too much of



importance given to the specific will but be a reproduction of nationalist rule with a restoration of capitalism, as the histories of the Russian, Chinese and Vietnamese revolutions show us. Caste complicates it a bit further. It was not uncommon for communists in India to claim to be both Brahmin and communist at the same time. But a communist-Brahmin is an oxymoron. While the communist is a man or woman representing the commons, the Brahmin, by definition, is above the commons! This is a key reason why both Ambedkar and Periyar, while remaining supportive of the basic tenets of Marxism, were deeply suspicious of the Indian communists who did not give due importance to the annihilation of caste.

This brings us to the question of sublation. Brahminism prevents the process of a genuine sublation as it always seeks to retain the identity of caste, more specifically, of the Brahmin. At its left-liberal worst, it fetishizes the Dalit/tribal identity as the only authentic vehicle of resistance. This is a purely ideological operation that focuses on acts of physical violence on the Dalits by castes that are usually much lower to the Brahmins in hierarchy, and presents Dalit identitarianism as legitimate response, subtly dismissing larger questions on ideology. While unconditionally condemning anti-Dalit violence, one must also dare to pose critical questions on the promotion of a politics that confines Dalits to their immediate identities and encourages them to confront only those who appear as immediate oppressors.

According to Žižek, “sublation includes all particulars into a dialectical totality” (Žižek 2012: 427). One should reject liberal readings of Hegel that regard sublation as a process where the new retains the identities of the old. On the contrary, a radical reading would suggest that the new mutilates the identities of the old that is, “Hegelian *Aufhebung* (sublation) as a movement through which every contingent particularity is *aufgehoben* (sublated) in its universal notion” (ibid: 471). The fake sublation that Brahminism offers is an order that tolerates caste differences. A genuine sublation can only be one where caste particularities – all of them – are radically negated. As Žižek says

[...] actual universality appears (actualises itself) as the experience of negativity, of the inadequacy-to-itself, of a particular identity. The formula

of revolutionary solidarity is not 'let us tolerate our differences', it is not a pact of civilisations, but a pact of struggles which cut across civilisations, a pact between what, in each civilisation, undermines its identity from within, fights against the oppressive kernel (2009: 133).

Such a common struggle in India can be possible not only when it negates the Brahmin identity, but also when it consciously reminds castes, all of them, of the inadequacy of particularist identities. Only such a radical universality can prevent the reproduction of the Brahminical system. Elsewhere, Žižek notes that "It is high-class and high caste (mostly Brahmin) post-colonial theorists, not those who really belong to indigenous tribal groups, who celebrate the perseverance of local traditions and communal ethics as constituting resistance to global capitalism" (Žižek 2014a: 169). But even if it was actually the tribals or the Dalits or any other lower caste celebrating communal ethics or localisms, it is still to be opposed, even at the risk of offending politically correct sensibilities. Brahminism can function without the physical presence of the Brahmin. It cannot function without the particularisms of caste identity.

## **Conclusion**

The past decades have witnessed remarkable political mobility of the lower castes and Dalits, especially in the terrain of electoral politics. M. Karunanidhi, from a marginal lower caste, was elected five times as Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, while Kumari Mayawati became the first Dalit Chief Minister in history in 1995, ruling Uttar Pradesh, the largest state in India. Dalits wage militant protests in several states combating discrimination and caste violence. The Hindu Right is compelled to offer key positions to lower castes and Dalits as it seeks to mobilize them against an external Other, the Muslim. The liberals, with their conviction that the Hindu Right alone is responsible for the evils in the country, offer the easy-fix solution of tolerance. What is interesting in recent times is the extreme interest in Dalit assertion by a section of the Indian liberal-left, more so when this assertion is in conflict with other non-Brahmin castes. This has to be looked at critically without a cheap patronizing sympathy. Because what this entails is locking the Dalits in a perpetual cycle of victimhood, where

only those with the Dalit experience can claim to be authentic victims. The problem is not just that non-Dalits cannot know what Dalit experience is – the Dalits themselves cannot lay claim to a uniform and universal Dalit experience.

“An ideology is really ‘holding us’ only when we do not feel any opposition between it and reality – that is, when the ideology succeeds in determining the mode of our everyday experience of reality itself” (Žižek 2010a: 49). Ideology to be successful not only prevents resistance to it – it also shapes and legitimizes those ‘resistances’ which appear as bringing a change but only reinforce ideology. Here in India, the promotion of an isolationist Dalit politics has to be read the same way as the uncritical celebration of *Avatar* (2009) or *Black Panther* (2018) by white Western liberals. Indeed “it is not enough to find new terms with which to define oneself outside of the dominant white tradition - one should go a step further and deprive the whites of the monopoly on defining their own tradition” (Žižek 2009a, 120). Asserting oneself outside the Brahminical tradition is not enough – one should also deprive the Brahmin of defining what tradition, nation, culture and resistance are. Praxis based on the thoughts of Ambedkar, Periyar and Žižek could assist to this end.

## NOTES

1. M.S.S. Pandian elaborates on this in *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin* (2007: 6-13).
2. Ambedkar too dismissed the Indian communists as a “bunch of Brahmin boys”. For a more detailed criticism of the Indian communists’ terribly erroneous approach to the question of caste see *The Blindness of Insight* (Menon 2005).
3. The author pursues these arguments in greater detail in an earlier essay (2015).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at seminars at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai in September 2018 and Calcutta University in February 2019. I am grateful to the participants for their questions and feedback.

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