

Breaking the Sacred Order: Dismantling Hierarchies

Challenging the Cult of Personality and Systemic Oppression

Radical Sunday School

Dec 1

Overview

Our Journey Today:

Exploring Power and Leadership

Challenging Heroic Narratives

Understanding Systemic Hierarchies

Paths to Collective Liberation

Unpacking the Cult of Personality

What is a Cult of Personality?

A phenomenon where an individual is elevated to near-mythical status, becoming the face of movements while overshadowing collective efforts.

Key Characteristics

Mythification

Moral Authority

Collective Erasure

Critique Suppression

Image Control

Critical Perspective

Case Study: Gandhi's Legacy

- Global icon of nonviolence
- Overshadowed militant resistance:

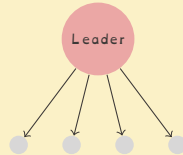
Indian Naval Mutiny
INA (Bose), Anusilan
Samiti

Understanding the dynamics of individual elevation in social movements

Consequences of Personality Cults

Systemic Impacts

- Concentration of moral authority, reducing grassroots autonomy
- Silencing marginalized voices
- Creating top-down narratives of change
- Undermining decentralized resistance



Top-down power structure

Discussion Points

Do movements often centralize power in individuals?

How do movements avoid replicating power dynamics they seek to dismantle?

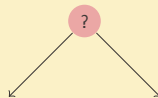
Reflections / Discussion

Critical Questions

- ◇ Do movements often centralize power in individuals?
- ◇ How do movements avoid replicating power dynamics they seek to dismantle?

For Collective Consideration

How can we build structures that resist the concentration of power while maintaining effective organization?



Traditional Power



Horizontal

Organization

"The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house"
- Audre Lorde

Caste – Institutionalized System of Oppression

Understanding Systemic Oppression

Core Nature

Beyond cultural practice
Comprehensive hierarchy
Entrenched control system

Operational Mechanisms

- Ideological frameworks
- Social norms
- Systemic violence

Impact Scope

Pervades every aspect of individual and collective existence

Origins and Terminology - The Colonial Lens

Historical Evolution

Etymology

'Casta'

- Portuguese root
- Means: lineage/breed

Pre-Colonial

Native Systems

- Varna
- Jati

Colonial Impact

Transformation

- Rigid categories
- Control tool

- ◇ How do mythological narratives perpetuate oppression?
- ◇ What mechanisms make hierarchical systems appear 'natural'?

From rigid social structures to stricter colonial classifications

Religious Foundations and Mythological Justifications

The Divine Hierarchy

Brahmins

Kshatriyas

Vaishyas

Shudras

Dalits (Excluded)

Textual Authority

Manusmriti

Religious texts

Divine ordinance

Critical Analysis

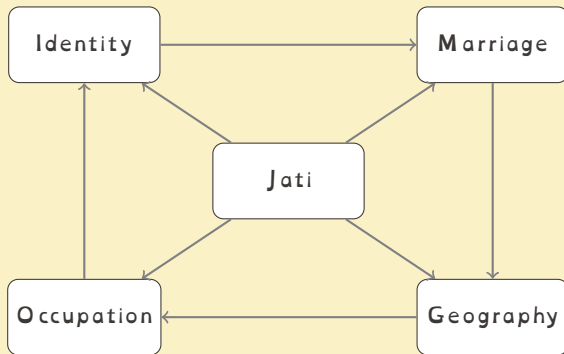
◇ Myth as control

◇ Natural vs. Constructed

Jati Structure - The Social Web

Jati System

Structural Framework



Jati Impact - Historical Control

Social Structure

■ Endogamous Communities

- Closed social groups
- Birth-based membership

■ Geographic Boundaries

- Regional variations
- Local hierarchies

Control Mechanisms

■ Hereditary Occupations

- Fixed work roles
- Economic restrictions

■ Marriage Restrictions

- Enforced endogamy
- Social boundaries

Jati Impact - Contemporary Manifestations

Modern Implications

Contemporary Social Reality

Social Sphere

- Housing segregation
- Systemic Violence, Lynchings.
- Marriage patterns

Economic Impact

- Workplace discrimination
- Professional networks
- Economic opportunities

Systemic Persistence

- ◇ Continuation in urban contexts
- ◇ Adaptation to modern institutions
- ◇ Intersection with other forms of inequality

Language of Oppression

Words as Weapons and Shields

Oppressive Terms

- × "Pollution"
- × "Untouchable"
- × "Low-born"

Resistance

- ✓ Dalit means broken and also resilient
- ✓ Bahujan means majority but marginalized

Transformation

From tools of oppression to instruments of liberation

Global Context and Comparative Perspectives

Beyond Indian Boundaries

Isabel Wilkerson explores caste as a hidden system shaping societies.

Examines three caste systems:

- United States (Jim Crow Laws)

- India

- Nazi Germany (Eugenics)

Highlights eight pillars that uphold caste hierarchies.

Provides comparative analysis with other systems of structural inequality.

Decolonial Perspectives

Challenges exoticized narratives.

Understands caste as a global phenomenon of power and exclusion.

Eight Pillars of Caste Hierarchy

Divine Will & Laws

Heritability

Endogamy &
Marriage

Purity & Pollution

Occupational
Hierarchy

Dehumanization &
Stigma

Terror & Cruelty

Superiority &
Inferiority

Based on Isabel Wilkerson's Analysis of Caste Systems in "Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents"

Global Inequality

How Power, Wealth, and Social Layers Connect

How Inequality Continues

Knowledge Leaders

Global Wealth and Knowledge Elite

- Top Universities ■ Tech Leaders (Gates, Musk, Bezos)
- Global Think Tanks ■ World Bank ■ High Investment Returns

Tech Domination

Power Holders

Political and Money Power

- World Leaders ■ Central Banks ■ Defense Industry
- Big Company Leaders ■ Top 1-10% of Earners

Knowledge Control

Business Class

Middle Class Workers

- Managers ■ Tech Workers ■ Teachers
- Small Business Owners ■ 10-20% Income Group

Money Barriers

Working People

Service and Labor Workers

- Essential Workers ■ Care Jobs ■ Service Industry
- Bottom 50% ■ Paycheck to Paycheck ■ High Debt

Border Restrictions

Marginalized Groups

Struggling Populations

- Informal Work ■ Displaced People ■ Urban Poor
- Bottom 20% ■ Little to No Savings ■ Trapped in Debt

Learning Access

How Wealth Grows Faster Than Wages

Money from investments grows faster than overall economic growth

After examining hierarchy ...
Have you heard of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar? Annihilation of Caste

Gandhi's Approach

- Satyagraha
- Village idealization
- Varna acceptance

Confrontation

Ambedkar's Vision

- Radical equality
- Caste annihilation
- Social transformation

The Paradox

- ◇ Freedom struggle leader
- ◇ Moral and ethical authority (self-sacrifice)
- ◇ in praise of caste hierarchy

The Challenge

- ◇ Voice of the oppressed
- ◇ Radical democracy
- ◇ Complete transformation

Perspectives and Resistance

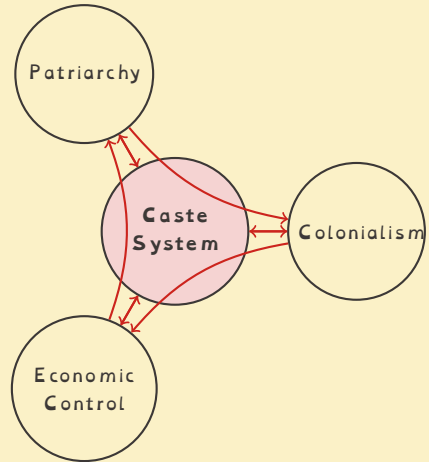
Radical vs. Reform

◦ Ambedkar's Vision

- Total dismantling of caste
- Electoral representation

◦ Gandhi's Approach

- Romanticized village life
- Maintaining social order,
- Symbolic gestures, removal of "untouchability"



"Caste is not just a division of labor, it is a division of laborers"
- B.R. Ambedkar

Examining Gandhi's Legacy: A Critical Analysis

On Caste and Social Order

- Defended varna as "harmonious"
- Preferred regulation over abolition
- Trusted privileged class goodwill

Gender and Authority

- Paternalistic control
- Women as moral subjects
- Limited agency

burden of moral discipline on women

Key Contradictions

- Moral reform vs. systemic change
- Village romanticism vs. reality
- Non-violence vs. structural violence

"I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved," Dr BR Ambedkar.

Gandhi in Western Imagination

Unpacking the Myth

Orientalist Construction

- **Spiritual Saint**

- **S**pinning wheel symbolism
- "Passive East" narrative
- **S**atyagraha as moral force
- Ahimsa as universal principle

- **Colonial Narrative**

- "**M**anageable" opposition
- **M**oral reform vs. revolution
- **N**on-threatening resistance

Erased Histories

- **Militant Resistance**

- **N**aval Mutiny (20,000+ sailors)
- **I**ndian National Army
- **S**ocialist revolutionaries

- **People's Movements**

- **P**easant uprisings (Tebhaga, Telangana)
- **W**omen militants (Pritilata Waddedar)
- **L**abor militancy

Beyond the Myth: Contemporary Implications

"The contest between Gandhi and Ambedkar is not just the contest between two men, but between two ways of seeing."

Systemic Issues

◇ Gandhi's Limitations

- Defense of varna system
- Opposition to Dalit electoral rights
- Village idealization

◇ Neoliberal Co-optation

- Corporate pacification
- NGO domestication
- Khadi as lifestyle brand

Radical Alternatives

◇ Ambedkar's Vision

- Caste annihilation
- Democratic reconstruction
- Social transformation

◇ Contemporary Struggles

- Anti-caste movements
- Feminist resistance
- Class struggles

How does this reshape our understanding of resistance?

Critical Reflections on Hierarchy

Core Questions

- ◊ Why do liberation movements often reproduce hierarchies?
- ◊ How does internalized oppression manifest in organizing?
- ◊ What makes some power structures visible and others hidden?

Systemic Patterns

- Persistence of caste-like logic
- Gender hierarchies
- Economic dependencies

Movement Challenges

- Recognizing contradictions
- Addressing internal hierarchies
- Building alternative structures

Radical Approaches to Dismantling Hierarchy

Anarchist Principles

- Abolition of hierarchical structures
- Mutual aid and solidarity
- Decentralization of power

Anti-Caste Movement Lessons

- ◇ Self-organization of oppressed
- ◇ Radical democracy in practice
- ◇ Intersectional resistance
- ◇ Cultural revolution needed

Ambedkar's Vision

- Complete annihilation of caste
- Democratic reconstruction
- Social and economic equality
- Education as liberation

"Educate, Agitate, Organize" - B.R. Ambedkar

Learning from Anti-Caste Radicals

"Educate, Agitate, Organize"

- B.R. Ambedkar

Core Principles

- Complete annihilation of caste
- Not reform, but reconstruction
- Liberation through education
- Democracy from below

Why It Matters Today

- Beyond symbolic change
- Power of radical democracy
- Role of self-organization

Connecting Radical Traditions

Anarchist Vision

- ◇ Abolition of hierarchy
- ◇ Mutual aid networks
- ◇ Decentralized power

Meeting Points

Anti-Caste Movement

- Social revolution
- Community power
- Direct action

Anarchist Practice

- Self-organization
- Horizontal structures
- Collective liberation

Building Liberation Movements

Practical Steps

- Collective decision-making
- Supporting marginalized voices
- Creating alternative institutions

Key Questions

- How do we practice what we preach?
- Where does power really lie?
- What makes change lasting?

"The roots of democracy are not in parliaments,
but in the people."

Discussion: From Theory to Practice

**What Can We Learn? Personal is Political:
Individual to Collective Liberation**

Collective Movement Building

- ◇ How do we build power without (re)creating new hierarchies?
- ◇ What does genuine solidarity look like in practice?
- ◇ How do we ensure marginalized voices lead?



Personal Accountability

- ◇ What hierarchies do I participate in, consciously or unconsciously?
- ◇ How can I challenge my role in upholding oppressive systems?
- ◇ How can I ensure my activism aligns with intersectional principles?

Reflection on Power and Leadership

Discussion

- How does personal transformation support collective liberation?
- What am I willing to risk or give up for collective liberation?
- How do we practice accountability while building solidarity?

Questions:

Does reverence for leaders obscure collective struggles?

Can we separate the contributions of a leader from their flaws?

What makes a leader truly effective?

Final Reflection:

What questions are we afraid to ask?

What answers are we afraid to face?

What actions are we afraid to take?