

## **The significance of the classification of people for the production of inequality and violence**

**Disha Bisht\***

### **Abstract**

The process of classification leads to simplification in almost all human societies. Classification is essential and enables simplification in various domains. Humans since past immemorial have been using the system of classification. Classification in itself is not problematic. Problem emerges when this classification becomes a means and basis of hierarchies, inequalities which further lead to disprivilege and violence. Through this paper I will attempt to highlight this aspect of society.

"Segregation not only harms one physically but injures one spiritually...It scars the soul...It is a system which forever stares the segregated in the face, saying, 'You are less than...' 'You are not equal to...'"

-Martin Luther King.

**Key words :** classification, inequalities, stratification, underprivileged and violence.

### **Introduction**

There exists classification in almost all human societies. The problem lies not in the fact that there exists classification in human societies but in the fact that it translates into inequalities which privileges some on one hand while dis-privileging some on the other. These privileges can be based on social, economic and political aspects. The dis-privileging sometimes goes to such a high extent that people are denied even the basic human rights, exploited and consequently become victims of violence. Looking at violence, we see that it has two aspects i.e., violence that these dis-privileged people become victims of and the harsh conditions due to which these people become violent and develop criminal tendencies. There is a whole range of politics associated with the question as to why is it that the crimes that are highlighted in the media are usually by these underprivileged people. Also, there are hardly any efforts made to look at the internal politics of these crimes and to debunk what appears on the surface to find out the reality.

In Sociology, Conflict theorists claim that stratification is based ultimately on control over productive resources such as land, technology, information and labor. Once elites gain control over these resources- by whatever means, they get other people to work for themselves that benefits them. How this is organized varies among different societies and systems. Consequently "inequality" has forever been a child of the system. It then becomes the primary task of sociology to investigate the origins of these inequalities existing even in a globalized world, characterized more by segregation than integration. Unlike the 'primitive societies' in 'The Elementary Forms of Religious Life', where religion is evidently social and religious representatives are collective representatives which express collective realities, a 'complex society' like ours cannot imagine a 'totemic classification' of clans into a bird or a tree, characteristics of which were found in the corresponding clans as well. Our society has 'individuation' to the extent of inequality among human beings translating into violence, owing all to the 'big word'- classification.

Classification plainly means categorizing the living or the non-living on some basic grounds or features they happen to share. These categories, however, may not be naturally imposed but should be seen in the light of history. To exemplify on this, in the Indian caste system, caste is innately acquired, inequality among them precipitates from the historical construction of these castes that aggregates them to the 'pure' and the 'impure' occupations. This led to the dominance of the 'untouchables' by the upper caste. Classification allows the creation of 'norm'. Drawing of the boundary is the classification we do to aggregate people to 'so-called' appropriate spaces which further conglomerates them to 'normal' or 'pathological'.

Categories expose people to different life-worlds. The basis of classification again is not naturally given but embedded in the social, cultural, biological and historical panorama. 'Untouchables' were historically and socially underprivileged, 'Blacks' were biologically prejudiced and a backward group or tribal in India is

---

\* Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Kumaun University, Nainital

considered 'culturally backward' owing to the underdeveloped infrastructures of the state and unavailability of job opportunities that have exposed them to a certain life-style 'pathological' to the rest of the population.

Biologists once classified races as subspecies. However, today anthropologists reject the concept of race and view humanity as an interrelated genetic continuum as taxonomy of the humans continues to evolve. Looking into the concrete relations between categories, individual, state, power and institution, one can learn about the abstract relations within them needed to highlight social realities, which is one of the many aims of anthropology.

Classification most of the time results in some amount of violence, recalling Mead<sup>2</sup> and Goffman's<sup>3</sup> terms, it comes to define the 'self' and the 'other'. Investigating the classification is to explore the extent and ways a society can choose or not choose to damage its members. A brutal manifestation of the violence can be seen in history in the forms of riots, genocides and holocausts that changes the way we look at the 'other'.

Mahmood Mamdani<sup>4</sup> in his book, *When Victims Become Killers*, recalls the Rwandan genocide of 1994 between two groups- the Hutus and the Tutsis. He argues that the identities get recreated by colonialism. Hutus were the sons of the soil and the Tutsis were the immigrants considered alien by the natives. Genocide, Mamdani argues, should be thought within the logic of colonialism which gave birth to the native impulse to eliminate the settler. The monopoly of the Tutsis over the institutions, employment and the politics marginalized the Hutus leaving them with the feeling of oppression during colonial rule and ever since this sowed the seeds for discord amongst the Hutus against the Tutsis.

In pre-colonial Rwanda it was possible to interchange the groups but the Belgian colonization transformed the status difference to a racial one. Viewing correspondingly, history offers the example of Indian colonization and the strategy of the British colonizers to intensify the segregation between caste and religious groups for the purpose of 'divide and rule' and to win the support of the ruled. In both cases this was done by introducing census, where in Indian context, 'caste' and 'religion' of individuals found a mention in the census. In Rwandan case too, classification was reified in the census, unlike Indian context people were classified on the basis of physical measurements, oral information by the church and the ownership of herds.

We see that classification was not arbitrary but took a form of existing socio-political distinction and racialize it. The two instances in history demonstrate how classification done at the hand of the state made people more conscious of their social position and contributed in reproduction of violence in the form of revolt of 1857- the sepoy mutiny, the partition of Bengal 1905. In Rwandan case the Hutu upsurge of 1959 and the genocide of 1994- Tutsis were killed, expelled and despoiled in the process whereas the benefits were shared among the victors.

Mamdani also talks about the violence played at the local level in Uganda where government denied citizenship to thousands of Tutsis. This led to formation of Rwandan Patriotic Front. Not as accepted as natives in both countries brought them to a liminal position of belonging to none country and hence devoid of citizenship rights. We now understand the reason why the RPF invasion of the northern tier of Rwanda became the sole recourse to claiming the citizenship.

In the *Purity and Exile*, Liisa Malkki<sup>5</sup> gives an account of the people who fled the massacres in Burundi in 1972 and settled in Tanzania in two patterns- the town and the camp. Briefly the camp had become a locus of 'purity' for the Hutu from where to begin a new national identity. People in camp heroized their identity while the town counterparts were reluctant to even identify themselves as refugees. Malkki gives a post-script of April 1994 based on experiences of the refugees living in Tanzania that included excerpts which end abruptly at the summer of 1993. During the summer of 1993 following the election of Burundi's first president, increasing number of Hutu refugees crossed the border from Tanzania into Burundi. Violence was evoked when a few months later the president was assassinated and there followed a recurrence of mass-killings.

Classification along biological lines can be seen in the American context of the 'black and the white' and how Blacks came to be dominated and oppressed by the Whites on the basis of colour. F. James Davis<sup>6</sup> in his book, "Who is Black", unfolds the historical origin of 'One-drop Rule', according to which any person with a black African ancestry was decreed as Black, dividing the Blacks and the Whites into two mutually antagonistic communities.

State's imposition of the unfair rule does not apply across the nations and in US it applies solely to African-Americans and no other ethnic group in the country, including those with visibly non-Caucasoid

features. This is done so to ensure that particularly those with African parentage do not assimilate into white society through intermarriage.

Davis demonstrates how being 'light' enables higher social placement. He also offers examples of how in some countries like Brazil, class and other factors may outweigh race, that a racial designation of an individual changes as he or she climbs the class ladder and their siblings are often classified differently.

Violence in U.S version of racial stratification was manifested in the form of rape and sexual exploitation done to women subjugated to the double standards of oppression, of being both a female and a black. They were bound to slavery and accept intimate relations with the master as a means of escaping harsh fieldwork and the greed of favoured treatment to the offspring.

These examples tell the long told tale of inequality and violence as the children of Classification done at the hand of the state and the people. Other examples of violence include the German Holocaust which demonstrates the uprising of the Nazis and the Jews against each other. The strong hold of the Jews among the Europeans posed a threat to the Germans which resulted in mass killing. With the help of the state involvement, the Jews were segregated from the rest of the population with the symbol they were asked to bear on their apparels and houses.

The example 'within the home' can be one of the Bodos and the Muslim antagonism in the state of Assam. The Bodos are the indigenous people of Assam while the Muslim are the immigrants from Bangladesh. The Rwandan case is repeated as Bodos begin to envy their increasing affluence and the resources that the 'other larger' population shares. The feeling of inequality and oppression on their very land gives the Indigenous ample reasons to drive the settlers out of the land.

The origin of violence thus is connected to how Hutus and Tutsis in the Rwandan context and Brahmins and shudras in Indian case were constructed as Political identities by the state. The idea of the Indigenous and the Settler has also been the major cause of violence in history.

### **The Indian Context**

Looking at the Indian context, we see how a certain form of classification was used by the British in order to rule. Nicholas Dirks<sup>7</sup> in his book, *The Hollow Crown*, shows how village communities have always been a solid form of oriental despotism that runs counter to the Western tradition. He shows how under British colonialism, the crown did become 'hollow'. In pre-colonial Indian society, power vested in the hands of the Kshatriyas and the Mughals. But, because the British wanted to rule without much obstacles, they weakened the political/secular power of these Rajput and Mughal communities and instead gave highest power to the Brahmins who had ritual power. Hence, the king was still the secular head but with a hollow crown in terms of power.

Dirks gives an example of the Kallar kings in Pudukkottai (Tamil Nadu) where the king was considered as the incarnation of God and every aspect was surrounded by the secular realm and kingship was considered divine. Scholars such as Dumont and many others, who were writing in the colonial period presented a Brahminical model of caste because of the British influx and their classification of society, in order to suit their interests and rule.

The ever-prevalent caste in Indian society was more classified leading to further inequalities. Census was used as an arbiter of caste ranking. Attempts were made in the census of 1871 to enumerate caste, the principal of organisation was to place caste (jatis) in the four varnas or in the categories of outcastes or aborigines. There was aggregation of caste data and ranking. Such ranked categorization became a site of contestation and created a context in which Indians were led to 'objectify' their society and culture. It thus creates caste ranking.

Violence however, has various entry points. One event may evoke antagonisms of different kind, in different directions. Veena Das<sup>8</sup> in her ethnographic account of Sultanpuri after the 1984 Sikh riots attempts to elaborate this idea. In Sultanpuri, the A4 block and the A2 block were antagonistic in relation since the A4 block residents were affluent as various economical doors had opened for them. The A4 residents believed the A2 pradhan as envious of them. A4 pradhan bought a space between the two antagonistic blocks for a Gurudwara. The A2 pradhan had the local control of things, backed by two Muslim, one Bania trader and one Jat he found it challenging his power.

Taunting and sarcasm episodes ended in the A4 pradhan's murder and immolation of his family. Later the same A2 crowd pulled out the Siglikar Sikhs in A4 and brutally murdered them screaming the lines, 'tumne humari maa ko maara hai' (you killed our mother), indirectly referring the word mother to Indira Gandhi. Veena Das emphasises how there are various causes for violence because of a single event in history, demonstrating how classification is not to be blamed for every act of violence.

### **Concluding Remark**

Two important findings that come out of this essay is that firstly, classification of people is deeply entrenched in the rubric of power in the particular space and time. Secondly, violence need not be perpetrated in a physical manner, as happened in the case of the Rwandan genocide and the Nazi Holocaust. Thus, classification entails friction between groups, it effaces racial and class diversity which by their very meaning entail differences. The above cases demonstrate how 'resistance' and the formation of oppositional cultural identity may, under given historical conditions, prompt the dominated to rise against the perpetuation of their exclusion. Even the most brutal forms of material domination finds its deepest roots in cultural categories. It is understood that some amount of inequality is needed to grow, but the extreme of it reduces mobility, can cause violence, and can lead to political rupture of our democratic institutions.

### **References**

1. Durkheim, E. 1915. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. London: Allen and Unwin.
2. Mead, George Herbert. 1964. *On Social Psychology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
3. Goffman, Erving. 1963. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Prentice-Hall.
4. Mamdani, Mahmood. 2001. *When victims become killers: colonialism, nativism, and the genocide in Rwanda*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
5. Malkki, Liisa H. 1995. *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National cosmology among Hut Refugees in Tanzania*. University of Chicago Process.
6. Davis, James F. 2001 [1991]. *Who is Black? One nation's definition*. Pennsylvania: University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
7. Dirks, Nicholas. 1987. *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* Cambridge University Press.
8. Das, Veena. 2007. *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.