

Classism: End to All Means

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Abstract – The paper discusses classism as an end to justify the actions of indentured workers in the plantations in three geographical regions of the world – Peru, Mauritius and America. In Mauritius, it is seen through the caste system, in America through the prevalence of religious classes and their concomitant support for education, in Peru through the direct and indirect exploitation of Chinese workers. This is in line with the materialist interpretation of history as developed by Marx.

Keywords: Indenture System, Plantations, Guano Mining, Caste System, Classism

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INTRODUCTION

In the case of Mauritius, casteism is just a manifestation of the underlying classism as those belonging to the higher castes are also the ones with the most social and economic standing.

In America, the Puritans wanted to “purify” the Church of England, patronized by the King while the Cavaliers, supporters of the King, supported it. Thus, supporters of the Church held economic power too. They had all the land and power even after migrating to America and thus wanted to control it through their rigid education policies.

OBJECTIVES

This interplay between religion and class brings us to our second theme of classism, which was a crucial strand in social relations in human history. The economic class identity of an individual supersedes his ethnic and religious identity. His economic class determines his clout, power and authority and thus his social class and first and foremost he is concerned with safeguarding it. The paper attempts to throw light on some of the dimensions of classism, as espoused by Marx in his famous materialist interpretation of history.

METHODOLOGY

The fact that casteism was only a means to acquire social gain is seen in some high - caste laborers hiding their caste for fears they would be thought unsuitable for the arduous plantation status. Added to this were fears they would be seen as trouble makers by rallying the plantation workers due to their “intellectual-elite status” (Claveyrolas, 2015). This shows that high-caste people were not concerned with caste per se, but the power it afforded them. When it was convenient for them they hid it, as in

Mauritius; while where it benefited them they embraced it, as in India.

Thus, religion was used as a means of control and power. Religious affiliation was an attempt to get a higher social standing. The American context also bears testimony to this. New England colonies were dominated by Puritans, Middle colonies had a mix, mainly Protestants and Southern colonies were Cavaliers, leaning towards the Church of England. In both America and Mauritius, we see spatial segregation according to religion – Puritans in New England and Anglicans in Southern colonies. In Mauritius villages, there were specific villages for specific castes; land purchase pattern also followed caste lines with people preferring land near that of members of the same caste. This is just one manifestation of the classism veiled behind the plantation system. Using other instances, the paper seeks to delve into other forms of classism.

RESULTS

Puritans were mainly middle and lower classes, while the Cavaliers were upper classes and nobility. They were aristocratic, hence wanted to limit education to the masses.” Education was carefully reserved for those favored by birth.” Rigid Southern social class distinctions allowed few opportunities for the indentured servants, the slaves, and the poverty-stricken freedmen to engage in cultural pursuits or to improve their minds” (Snyder, 2007). They favored a feudalistic system. On the contrary, Puritans strongly favored education since firstly, it was the foundation of their religious doctrine i.e. people would be able to read the bible and interpret it for themselves. Secondly, they were merchants, craftsmen and traders so

education was the way to economic growth. Thus they promoted education.

This bears resonance with the caste system in Mauritius. The Brahmins were at the top of the hierarchy, and wanted to keep their monopoly on power. The feudalistic system wanted by Cavaliers in America was like the caste system in Mauritius. The difference was that in America, lower castes successfully used education but in Mauritius, caste system endured. Primarily the lower castes, Bhojpuri peasants, fought against it, and techniques like sanskritisation were used to ascend the social hierarchy.

Both in America and Mauritius we see that instead of dismantling social classes altogether, lower classes tried to get higher in the hierarchy- in America, through education and in Mauritius by taking on new caste names and ascending to the Vaish caste etc. In Mauritius, “We encountered no arguments in favour of suggesting there may be positive aspects to the caste system, such as solidarity within each caste, or the inter-caste agreement that the most vulnerable must be protected. However, the pride of belonging to a higher caste rapidly came up.” (Claveyrolas, 2015).

The head right system in America whereby 50 acres of land were granted to a planter for every individual that was brought to the colonies in that person's name was similar to Peruvian planters getting a subsidy of 30 pesos per immigrant in Peru in 1839. Further, they were compensated for freeing slaves, 300 pesos per slave.

The British colonizers of America, as employers of indentured labor, ill-treated their own people – Europeans in general and the British in particular.

In Peru, plantations were financed from the profits from the guano boom, a nationalized industry of Peru. Instead of using it for everyone's welfare the elites monopolized it. They did not employ Peruvian labor due to higher wages, though they were their own countrymen and would have benefited from this. Their capitalization of the labor of the workers enabled them to survive the crisis of the 1870s and 1880s and emerge as wealthy businessman and political leaders in the 1890s. They had themselves been colonized and oppressed, yet they oppressed the Chinese and blacks – their class preceded their shared history of oppression. Racism played a crucial role in this maltreatment. Unaware of Asian culture, they considered the Chinese to be racially inferior and stereotyped them as being perverse and lazy. Another factor was corruption. Planters were politically well connected so the recommendations of the Chinese Commission which depended on local officials were not implemented. Even when planters gave workers to public officials to be tried it was only to not create scandal in their upcoming political careers.

Chinese contractors exploited their own countrymen – got part of workers' wages and ran stores on plantations, and thus embezzlement and peonage were endemic.

Classism is also reflected in the indirect clout of colonial powers due to their high economic status and their sanctimonious nature to retain this power. When the British powers opposed Chinese indenture to Peru in 1874, and pressurized their ally Portugal, colonial ruler of Macao, indenture was abolished in Peru. But they only did it because of the Panic of 1873 in London markets which lessened the scope for lending to Peru, which was one of their major borrowers. Also, the British merchants had monopolized guano trade as consignment contractors but the boom was punctured by resource exhaustion and falling prices. The guano revenues went into the plantations too, where the British supplied opium to the workers as allies of local merchants. But with the revenues drying up, plantations were also affected. Also, by supporting the abolition of indenture, they hoped to obtain the support of the Chinese government. Hence, they had nothing to lose supporting abolition at this time.

Even the Chileans were opportunists. They sent the Chinese to work in the guano fields.

Another dimension to classism is the enmity between Blacks and Asian workers. In Peru, Blacks as foremen oppressed the Chinese brutally. Fights between Chinese moneylenders and Black creditors sprung up sporadically. There was a massacre by the Blacks of the Chinese in 1881. “Anywhere from 700 to 1,500 Chinese were killed” (Claveyrolas, 2015). On the face of it, it seems a superficial enmity borne out of economic competition. But the indentured workers were a cushioning class for the planters against the rage of the blacks and vice-versa. Their enmity prevented them from focusing on the real enemy, the elite planters. This theme also recurs in the Mauritian context, albeit differently. Creole means someone born in a plantation society. But in Mauritius Creole refers to the descendants of Black slaves only. “The Mauritian ‘Creole’ category is built on its opposition to the Hindu category... Creoleness is an identity born out of the encounter of various cultures that have been brutally displaced in the plantation context.” (Claveyrolas, 2015). This suggests the reason Creoles are against Hindus in Mauritius, as opposed to elsewhere. Hindus lack economic, political and cultural power despite being one- third of the population. On the other hand, Indo - Mauritius have monopolized these areas due to their Indian links and economic power. The historical reason for this power is their access to land, because of the economic power of Indian Sirdars with better wages and their role as moneylenders. In 1880s, laborers were sedentarised and Indian villages were set up. By 1939-45, half of cultivated land

was owned by descendants of indentured laborers, who were mostly Indians. (Claveyrolas, 2015).

Both Creoles and Indo - Mauritians as descendants of plantation workers had similar beginnings – they were lower in social hierarchy and exploited but the Indian descendants rose rapidly, while creoles have not been able to. Thus, the Creoles have not got their rightful share, for which they resent the Indian dominant class.

All this underlies the dominance of economic class as the principal foundation of social structures and human relations. This is in line with the classical idea of materialist interpretation of history.

CONCLUSION

Classism and racism engendered by the plantation society still persists. We still see the manipulation of religious allegiances for the retention of power. This is in line with the materialist interpretation of history as espoused by Marx and Engels.

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