Nation, class and caste: the culture of servitude and the case of the Indian diplomat

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A great drama unfolded in India in December 2013 over the arrest of Devyani Khobragade, India's deputy consul general in New York by the American authorities. She was charged with visa fraud with regard to the papers for her Indian housekeeper and maid, Sangeeta Richard, and also for paying the latter less than the legal minimum wage. The whole of India seemed fly into a rage over the supposed affront to the honor of the country. The Indian government responded with some unprecedented retaliatory measures against the United States, which included removing the security barriers protecting the American Embassy in New Delhi. And the sensationalist and boisterous media had a field day with a story supposedly fit for lore: a wronged and humiliated “Third World” nation (finally) and spectacularly standing up to the imperialist Satan.

What is ironical in the reaction by India is that it is a nation whose elites and middle classes are perfectly in sync with the American worldview. India is among the top America-loving nations in the world, and it thinks that America is the epitome of democracy. A survey from a few years ago showed that India had the most favorable opinion of America and the American people in the world (Srivastava 2005). Indian students and youth dream the American dream. Until quite recently, Indian students constituted the most among foreign students in the United States (Srivastava 2013). The Indian ruling elite seeks an eternal alliance with the American establishment. President Obama called the Indo-American strategic partnership as “one of the defining partnerships of the twenty-first century” (*The Economic Times* 2013). The Indian angry response to the American action seemed to disbelievingly ask how the United States could treat a trusted friend and ally in this manner.

At the same time, all the anger shows something more serious and deeply troubling about Indian culture itself. It shows in stark terms what dignity and

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humiliation mean to a nation. A country that was not roused into action for the 5,295 people who died in the Bhopal gas tragedy, the largest industrial disaster in the world, and its government which failed to show the political will to confront the United States to make the American MNC, and its top executives responsible for the tragedy to stand trial in India (*The Economic Times* 2011) were suddenly bristling with anger about the indignities of a cavity search suffered by an Indian diplomat at the hands of the American police.¹

To add to the list of ironies, a vast majority of the Indian citizens undergo far worse indignities on a daily basis. There was no elite anger when the cavities of Soni Sori were violated when the police inserted stones into them (Safvi 2013).² There were no bruised hearts and humiliated egos when on July 20, 2010, the manual scavengers of Savanur, Karnataka, in an unprecedented act of protest, smeared themselves with human feces (Teltumbde 2010). In a society with deep divisions of caste and class, the *Bhangi Dalits*, whose occupation is to carry feces (from dry toilets), do not have the same dignity that the upper classes and the upper castes do. Indian diplomats and embassies have been lackadaisical and hypocritical with regard to the rights of the millions of Indian workers, mainly from marginalized sections of the country, who work in slave-like conditions in the Gulf States. In the same week, when the diplomatic imbroglio was unfolding and the India government was busy revoking diplomatic privileges of American diplomats as a retaliatory measure, 50,000 riot victims were living in subhuman conditions in relief camps in Muzaffarnagar in the state of Uttar Pradesh (Asrar 2013), completely obscured from media limelight and government attention.

Stating these facts do not mean that the double standards of the United States, which prides itself as “the greatest country on earth,” are ignored. After all America is, as scholars like Noam Chomsky have argued, the most skilled practitioner of “democracy at home and imperialism abroad” policy, and which has one set of rules for itself and another for the others. Thus, to cite a couple of examples, the diplomatic row between India and USA cannot be adjudicated by a body like the International Court of Justice because America does not acknowledge its compulsory jurisdiction (Raju and Das 2013). Similarly, while American justice system has upped the ante against foreign diplomats like Khobragade and their alleged violation of American minimum wage laws, there are thousands of illegal immigrants in America who work for less than minimum wages and with no protection. There are obvious cases like sweatshops in Southern California, where

¹ This is in contrast to India’s muted response to the Edward Snowden revelations in which India appears as one of the major targets of American spying. The other targets like Brazil, France and Germany were outraged and expressed severe displeasure at American surveillance. As one commentator argues calling for a firmer response to the spying: “It has to do with India’s self-image and its credibility as an independent power when it fails to react to the systematic intrusion into its sovereign affairs, particularly when both countries view the other as a strategic partner” (Aaron 2013). This servility to the United States is seen in many other aspects. To cite one example, the US Embassy staff in New Delhi enjoyed unprecedented benefits and concessions given by the Indian government, and these are not reciprocated by America on its territory (Jagannathan 2014).

² Tribal activist and school teacher in the state of Chhattisgarh, Sori has been languishing in prison on allegedly false charges brought by the state of her being a leftwing terrorist.

1,500 investigations into the garment industry in the recent past have revealed a 93 percent violation (Miles 2012).³

Egregious as this is, what is more disturbing is how advanced capitalist societies and settled “democracies” like the United States export servitude and slavery to other nations in the global South. Just as the “developed” world exports or dumps its trash elsewhere, it exports its humiliations and indignities elsewhere so that it can keep its streets and conscience clean and continue to pay minimum wages. This helps the societies of the West to hide from the tragedies like that of the Rana Plaza garment factory building collapse in Bangladesh. The factory supplied clothes to all the major western MNCs including Walmart. The workers (numbering 1,129) buried under the rubble of the factory were paid \$38.5 a month, which is their minimum wage (Butler and Hammadi 2013)? These structures of exploitation spread beyond the home national borders are what fuel the age of mass consumption in the developed societies. Similar structures at home gloss over facts like the devaluing of the minimum wages with the rising levels of inequality since the neoliberal turn of economies like that of the United States from the 1970s (see Harvey 2007). Thus, what does minimum wage mean in America when an average CEO now makes 273 times the wages of an average worker [a shocking increase from 20 to 30 times a few decades ago] (Gongloff 2013).

While America and other developed nations function on the basis of these moderns, and seemingly invisible structures of exploitation, they also become a fig leaf for post-colonial nations like India to obscure their own cultures of servitude, much of which are inherited from the feudal past. The Indian response in the diplomatic imbroglio is an apt illustration of this.

Rather than a personal vilification of the diplomat in question, what is required a structural understanding of the issue. The alleged violation of law (of not paying minimum wages) by Khobragade is not something that is unique to her situation. Her case is a part of a systemic problem that has existed for sometime and not created by her, and about which the governments of India and USA have hardly taken any measures. Nevertheless, what is interesting is the way the vast majority of the media and commentators in India have reacted to the issue, exposing the class biases of the Indian society in no uncertain terms. But what has complicated this particular issue is the fact the diplomat in question belongs to the *Dalit* caste, historically, the untouchable caste, which bore the brunt of the oppressions of the caste system.

There were many accounts in the media about the benevolent disposition of Khobragade and what a kind employer she was. In the media trial of the case, the side of the diplomat was well represented, including by her own father, who is

³ While one can understand that the American government preaches one thing and practices another, it is almost shocking that media institutions which pride themselves as the free and critical voice participate in the camouflaging of these double standards. Thus the *New York Times* in an editorial called India's retaliatory measures in the diplomatic row as an “overwrought reaction”... which is unworthy of a democratic government (2013). While it correctly argues for the rights of the domestic worker in question, it completely glosses over the numerous occasions in which the American government has acted in a similar manner as India by protecting its own diplomats/officers at the expense of the rights of the local people in foreign countries when there have been criminal cases.

himself a retired member of the Indian Administrative System (IAS), the most powerful of the Indian civil services. The side if of the maid in question, Richard, hardly got a voice. Whenever her side of the story got highlighted, it was in the negative. Thus, there were characterizations of how upwardly mobile she was; how she owned the latest electronic gadgets and how “well-groomed and educated” she was. All these paint a picture which consciously and unconsciously expects the working and lower classes to be confined to their assigned places and behave in a servile fashion. Besides, there were also stories of her connections to influential people as her relatives apparently worked in the American Embassy in Delhi.

Prabhu Dayal, India’s former Consul General in New York, who faced similar charges as that of Khobragade from his domestic help, argued that Indian diplomats working in the US work in a culture of fear as they are afraid of being sued by “maids pursuing their American dreams.” The members of the Indian Foreign Service (IFS), which along with the IAS, constitute the most elite core of the Indian civil services, become in this account, the unfortunate victims of their upwardly mobile maids. He then goes onto recount, how over the years, a number of workers and guards accompanying Indian diplomats to the US have gone missing. They, according to him, “go to the US and try to stay on by hook or crook” (Dayal 2013).⁴ While this might be true, he does not pose the next question as to why do Indians from the lower classes try to escape their conditions in India. The inequities of his own society remain invisible in his version of the issue.

The virtual effacement of the other side of the story, that of the maid, reveals again in stark terms the kind of divisions that mark Indian society. It reveals the culture of servitude and the absolute subjugation and denigration of the laboring classes, both in material and symbolic terms. This includes the large number of nannies and “domestic servants.” Despite the incremental successes of the democratic struggles of the marginalized sections of the population, and the onward March of at least a formal democracy, India still has not legislated minimum wages for domestic workers. Only two states (Kerala and Tamil Nadu) have laws protecting these workers (Gupta 2013).

A vast majority of domestic workers belong to *Dalit* and other marginalized communities. In the case of the *Dalits* and other lower castes, there is double oppression; economic exploitation is aggravated by humiliations perpetrated on the basis of caste. In this general structure and culture of exploitation, with different economic and political capacities of classes, the chances of a maid against an IFS officer and her powerful father are bleak in the Indian judicial system. One example is the way in which the Khobragade were able to quickly move the Indian courts and were able to initiate proceedings against Richard. This is a measure of the imbalance in power.

Here, ironically, Richards’ chances are better in the American justice system even with its own inequities and fault lines. This is not because the US has an egalitarian judicial system, but because the working classes and the marginalized (at least those who are citizens and legal residents of the country) have comparatively

⁴ He also fails to mention the few cases when Indian officers themselves have not come back to their homeland.

better protection owing, among other things, to the substantial victories won by the laboring classes in the historical past. It is also because, as mentioned above, the country has managed to outsource the culture of servitude to other places while maintaining a rational-legal order and a semblance of democracy at home, unlike India where the culture of servitude is extant largely within its own shores. Thus, in another high profile example, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, French national and the then head of the IMF, one of the most powerful men in the world, was arrested on charges of sexually assaulting an immigrant housekeeper in a New York hotel. Even if the criminal case could not proceed, ultimately, he reportedly settled out of court for a sum believed to be in the order \$6 million (Rashbaum 2012),⁵ which is approximately half the sum that the tens of thousands of Bhopal gas tragedy victims got as compensation (*The Economic Times* 2011).

The US and India are alike in many respects, with largely the same views of the poor and the marginalized in society, and with similar economic inequalities (some of the most pronounced in the world). Yet, for many historical and contemporary reasons of economic and social development, their cultures of servitude are not mirror images. America is an advanced capitalist society with hundreds of years of capitalist growth and economic prosperity before the establishment of formal democratic rights. India, on the other hand, as a post-colonial society, has had to compress the processes of economic development and democratic empowerment into a few decades. Besides, it is still not rid of the remnants of feudal-based oppressions, which in the present, conjoin with market-based ones, while America is very largely structured by the latter.

In the Indian mainstream discourse, the case degenerated into one in which merely two individuals are involved and one which is only about two nations and a wounded nationalist pride. It did not go beyond to initiate a public debate about the larger structure of exploitation and violence and the culture of servitude prevalent in society. It is this culture that is prevalent in the wider society that is reflected in the India civil service and bureaucracies. And this culture consigns a large section of the working classes to an underclass performing tasks akin to that of the serfs and peasants in feudal landlordism.⁶ As a result, in the debate on the case, the freedom to employ any worker on a fair wage mutually agreed upon quickly transformed into a right to exploit workers and servants in an egregious manner. That is why, for example, in the solutions prescribed by Prabhu Dayal and other diplomats, only extending diplomatic immunity to all officers is mentioned. The most important question of the practice of Indian diplomats traveling with servants from India, and the potential abuses arising from their living with their employers in the context of the absence of laws protecting workers in India was not raised at all.

Such questions cannot be raised when the IFS, for example, is itself a product of these inequities. The Indian diplomatic corps numbers only 930 officers in 2012, which is almost, the same size as that of Singapore, one of the smallest countries in the world. The United States diplomatic corps has 20, 000 officers. Despite the

⁵ Strauss-Kahn's lawyers called the reported amount as false.

⁶ Feudal landlordism and its culture of servitude itself took further distinct shapes under the colonial system when the British instrumentally appropriated it.

severe shortage of diplomatic personnel faced by a growing power like India, the IFS has vehemently opposed the expansion of the corps by measures like allowing lateral entry (Mohan 2013). This is because of the anxiety to maintain the exclusive nature of the elite services.

The intransigence of the bureaucracy in giving up its privileges is an interesting question when it comes to democracies like India. And this opposition has had a significant role to play in slowing down or deradicalizing processes like that of the attempts at democratic decentralization by empowering elected bodies of the people at the lower levels of the village, city and the district. My own research on the state of Kerala reveals interesting facets about democratic deepening. Kerala is well known in social sciences literature as one of the very few regions in the global South which has gone the farthest in terms of establishing substantial democracies and securing rights of the workers and peasants (see Heller 1999; Mannathukkaren 2011). This reflects in the general culture and consciousness of the state, which is far less attuned to feudal exercises of power than other Indian states. As a result, civil service cadres like that of Kerala are a “nightmarish” experience for many non-Kerala officers because of the supposedly “recalcitrant” and “arrogant” staff and servants who show no respect to the officers. These translate into stories described by informants like an IAS officer not being offered a seat by railway station master, or a driver stopping work at 5 pm exactly leaving the boss to drive home by herself, or a senior official going into a shock after a tenure in Kerala and wondering whether the people of Kerala behave with their father and mother in the same impudent manner as they do with their bosses. These are nuggets of the wider culture of servitude that prevails in the larger society. But what is interesting is that even when workers and servants in states like Kerala manage to bend the culture of servitude and claim some rights and regain some dignity, the vast majority of those who are forced to serve still predominantly hails from the oppressed castes and communities. The culture of servitude is also not totally eliminated but acquires new insidious dimensions like in the United States.

Another intriguing aspect of the debate about the diplomatic row was the participation of some sections of the progressive *Dalit* movement in the mainstream effacement of the maid’s voice and rights and the demonization of her personality in the name of “Devyani who represents our pride to the outside world” or that she is an empowered *Dalit* woman who is “a symbol of our rightful entry into spaces that were so unreachable to all of us, for all these years” (Shraddha 2013). This is a reductionist understanding of the struggles against exploitation which remains shackled by caste boundaries. The caste of Sangeeta Richard is not unknown. But what if she turns out to be a *Dalit*? Would the same argument hold? Even if she is not of the *Dalit* caste, what kind of responsibilities that a progressive *Dalit* movement should have to a marginalized person like Richard? Should not her struggle (that is the struggle of the domestic workers and servants) be precisely their own (even if her own charges of being exploited in this case might be proved fraudulent) because she represents the most marginalized sections of the population? Should it not be equally a part of the struggle against all kinds of oppressions including caste?

Does a progressive Dalit politics mean that if Khobragade is ultimately found guilty (not by the narrow definition of the wages by the American system, but by the terms and conditions that she and Richard had entered into and also with regard to some serious allegations against her in India about a different case of corruption and disproportionate assets), no criticism can be made of her individual person as she is merely a participant and survivor in an exploitative system built and even now run by the upper castes? What does that mean for the agency of the hundreds of *Dalit* officers who are in the same system but bravely try to go against its massive tide?

These are interesting questions thrown up by the case. The lenses of national identity or caste alone do not suffice to understand the culture of servitude, for there are crosscutting oppressions which escape these boundaries. After all, Khobragade belongs to an elite service and a part of the establishment, and at the same time, as a *Dalit* and a woman, is subject to discrimination at another level. In America, she might have been subject to racism, but it cannot be said that she was subject to casteism in this case as the media and the people at large in India supported her and not her maid. The few that argued for the rights of the latter were mainly not Indians, like the American human right groups, and ironically, the American government.⁷

In India, ultimately, the question descended into one that pit one woman against the other which meant that the woman who represented the powerful and the elite triumphed despite her own lower caste origins. Since the latter became a symbol of India's national pride, the government did all that it could to rescue her. Ultimately, she was brought back to the country after the Indian government transferred her to a UN assignment which gave her diplomatic immunity (Dikshit and Lakshman 2014). But where the Indian political discourse failed was in using the occasion to question the entire edifice and structure of exploitation which produces masters and servants. This debate could have become a stepping stone to initiate wider debates about the protection of workers and servants of all kinds and about minimum wages for them. It also could have led to a rethink about the excessive privileges enjoyed by a small minority of diplomats, civil servants and the political class funded by public resources. Finally, it could have raised question marks about Indian foreign policy's servility to a declining imperialist superpower. Instead, the forces of nationalism and class privilege triumphed.

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⁷ It is very possible that there are certain other reasons, unknown to the public, that might have played a role in the American authorities pursuing this case alone when there could be violations of a similar kind by diplomats from other countries.

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