

Identity Formation in India: A Response to Ohara

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This is a response to the paper presented by Yuki Ohara on the topic of identity formation of Dalits in India. It is definitely an intriguing and complex topic which triggers many questions about the concept of identity, the influence of 'others' in the formation of one's own identity, as well as larger concerns about the validity of ancient systems that drew seemingly artificial lines to separate people; although this sort of categorization exists in almost all cultures (if not all), it is perhaps most apparent in Indian society today. In this response I will not say much about the legitimacy of the caste system or its relation to ancient Hindu texts such as the *Vedas*. But I will say that 'caste' is a word that was never used in Sanskrit (the ancient Indian language of which the *Vedas* have been written); it was a word that was ascribed by colonialists. And so there is often a crude interpretation of the 'caste system' that narrowly construes it as clusters of people categorised by professions. However, it is often argued that the Sanskrit word 'varna' (which was later translated into caste) was a natural division of people that did not emphasise hierarchies or power structures, but rather placed people within the larger structure of the cosmos (see work related to Alain Danielou). Regardless of where this notion originated and what it may have originally been meant for, it has made an almost impenetrable impression on the mindset of millions of Indians and people around the world. In this brief response I will touch upon some general ideas around the notion of 'identity' and 'identity formation' and specifically in the case of Dalits.

It is apparent that an aspect of human life that is of fundamental importance to the person is the notion of identity evidenced in the constant attempt on the part of persons to understand 'who am I' as an individual and 'what is my relation to others?' Getting clearer about the nature of the 'self' and achieving an understanding of the place of the self in society is something that all people strive for. In daily activities and exchanges people seek to form connections between themselves and the world around them. Identity formation involves a persons effort to find a place and meaning in her life. In general, people find meaning in life by connecting with others and are most comfortable when they are able to affiliate themselves with something.¹ Thus, identity is not only made up of attributes that we are born with, but additionally attributes which we acquire in one way or another as a result from our environment, including those we self-consciously choose, many of which are related to allegiances and commitments.

This is a fairly brief outline of what identity might be, but it is by no means a comprehensive representation. It is important to note that identity formation is often referred to as a 'choice' a person makes, which is defined by the various allegiances she may have. What is interesting is that Ohara has placed emphasis on the way society can influence a person's identity, through the construction of language. In his book

entitled *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, Amartya Sen (2006) writes that

Even when we are clear about how we want to see ourselves, we may still have difficulty in being able to persuade *others* to see us in just that way... Our freedom to assert our personal identities can sometimes be extraordinarily limited in the eyes of others, no matter how we see ourselves (Sen, 2006, p. 6).

Consequently, the influence of others perceptions of ‘us’ may be quite powerful. Ohara has drawn attention to the way in which language (in this case certain labels) can impress upon a persons idea of him or herself. Language has an affect on one’s identity. Being referred to as an ‘untouchable’ has obvious negative connotations, and is an extremely demeaning way of referring to a human being. Thus, there have been numerous efforts to shift the label of this group of people to ‘Harijan’, ‘Scheduled Castes’, ‘Dalits’ and so forth. However, do these different titles actually affect the way we perceive ourselves or the way others perceive us? In her conclusion, Ohara writes that ‘each term explained here represents different identities of Dalits’, but does the modification of language necessarily change a person’s identity? If I am a servant in a household and am treated with a lack of respect, does it really matter if society decides to change the way they define my role (be it ‘maid’ or ‘hired help’)? It does matter if this change affects the way they perceive and treat me, but it does not matter if I am simply re-labelled and continue to be mistreated. If identity formation is the result of an individual’s attempt to find a place and meaning in her life, as it was mentioned above, then language may not necessarily be a significant factor in this formation—though it may result in ‘political correctness’. The point I’m trying to make is that perhaps it’s not necessarily the label we ascribe to a person that is of importance, but rather the way we think about those people and the way we treat them.

Language can make a certain impression, but it cannot automatically change the mindset of people. I am suggesting that if the mindset of people don’t change, it seems that there will be an inevitable negative association with ‘Dalit’—regardless of whether they are referred to as ‘untouchables’ or ‘*Maharajas*’ (kings).

NOTE

1. To ‘affiliate’ as understood by Strike (2003) is to affirm the practices of a group, thus strengthening the solidarity of the link between one’s identity and the group culture (Strike, 2003, p. 89).

REFERENCES

- Sen, A. (2006) *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (London, Penguin).
 Strike, K. (2003) Freedom of Conscience, Pluralism, Personal Identity, in: W. Feinberg and K. McDonough (eds) *Education and Citizenship in Liberal Democratic Societies* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).