

Why Is Identity Politics Failing to Curb Social Injustice?

Written by Akshat Sogani

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2022/04/08/why-is-identity-politics-failing-to-curb-social-injustice/>

AKSHAT SOGANI, APR 8 2022

In today's hostile world, where the interlocking systems of oppression have pushed many identities to the margins of society, social justice seems far-fetched. Despite a resurgence of identity politics since the 1960s, identity-based oppression along the lines of caste, class, race, gender, ethnicity and so on is far from ending[1]. So why is identity politics failing?

This paper will compare the two important case studies of caste-based politics in India and racial politics in the US to examine the failures of identity politics in ensuring social justice for Dalits and Blacks respectively. In each case, it will conclude by siding with Fraser's "bivalent" conception of social justice which, the paper believes, provides a useful strategy to address the day to day identity-based oppressions happening across the globe. It will also demonstrate why a compromise on any of the two orientations is likely to derail prospects for justice.

The paper is structured in the following manner. First, drawing from Fraser's article, it will lay out the theoretical framework and briefly compare the two types of politics i.e. the politics of redistribution and the politics of recognition. Second, it will demonstrate why a lack of caste-based redistribution politics in India has hampered Dalits' social and economic mobility. Third, it will argue why a lack of race-based recognition politics in the US has perpetuated Black oppression.

Theoretical framework

In today's world, social justice has mainly taken two routes. The first strand takes the form of 'redistributive politics', seeking for a "more just distribution of resources and goods"[2]. The second type is the 'politics of recognition' which seeks for a world which is difference-friendly, "where assimilation to majority or dominant cultural norms is no longer the price of equal respect"[3]. In her remarkable lecture delivered at the Stanford University in 1996 titled as "Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation", Nancy Fraser problematizes this either/or approach to justice i.e. the idea that the two are mutually exclusive alternatives implying as if a society can only make a choice between the two types of politics[4]. Fraser concludes by arguing for a **bivalent approach** i.e. "justice today requires both redistribution and recognition, as neither alone is sufficient"[5]. She sketches out four aspects on which the two orientations are often compared and contrasted[6].

The first distinction is made on the grounds that the two follow a different conception of injustice. On the one hand, the politics of redistribution "focuses on injustices it defines as socioeconomic and presumes it to be rooted in the economic structure of society." One intuitive example of this could be worker exploitation where the fruits of one's labour is essentially reaped by the employer or the capitalist for their own benefit. Other examples could include economic marginalisation and deprivation, where in the former, a person is subjected to "undesirable or poorly paid work" and in the latter, a person is denied a decent material living standard[7]. On the other hand, the politics of recognition "targets injustices it understands as cultural...rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication"[8]. These cultural injustices could be in the form of cultural domination where a group or an individual impose their culture onto another community or an individual through patterns of interpretation and communication. Other manifestations could be through non-recognition and facing disrespect in one's everyday life interactions.

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Second, since the orientations diverge on the conception of injustice, they “propose different sorts of remedies for injustice”[9]. Proponents of politics of redistribution argue for an economic restructuring of sorts in order to tackle socio-economic issues. Hence, remedies are more in line with ideas such as redistributing incomes, having a more equal division of labour for the economic upliftment of the workers etc. In contrast, advocates of politics of recognition seek solutions for injustice that are grounded in cultural or symbolic change. The aim is thus to challenge the deep-seated cultural mindsets of the society in order to revalue “disrespected identities and the cultural products of maligned groups”[10].

Third, the two orientations “assume different conceptions of the collectivities who suffer injustices”[11]. For the politics of redistribution, the collective identities which are subject to injustice are classes or class-like collectivities. Due to their economic character, we see discussions revolving around the market or the means of production. And it is also worth pointing out that this ambit of class is broad enough to include even other identities as long as it is about socio-economic issues. Hence, gender for instance could be an integral part of the politics of distribution if looked in terms of how women perform tasks that constitute as unwaged labour. Conversely, the politics of recognition is catered towards those collectivities which enjoy lesser “esteem, honor, and prestige” relative to other groups in society[12]. A case in point could be a low-status ethnic group such as the ill-treatment that is often meted out towards Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. Indeed, even gender would constitute a part of the politics of recognition. Thus, this shows that the two orientations can encompass the same identities such as gender and race. But what differentiates them is the frameworks under which the identities are being analysed. From the perspective of the politics of redistribution, race and gender are economically defined classes, whereas in this case, they are analysed through the lens of “culturally defined statuses”[13].

Lastly, drawing from the previous point, “the two political orientations assume different understandings of group differences.”[14] Rather than construing them as intrinsic properties of groups, the politics of redistribution believe differences are a result of unjust political economy. Thus, as the differences are socially constructed, they need to be abolished rather than being recognised. In contrast, the politics of recognition can have two variants. In first version, group differences are pre-existing and showcase cultural diversity which are to be savoured and celebrated. Whereas, the second variant seeks to “deconstruct the very terms in which such differences are currently elaborated.”[15]

Lack of redistributive measures for Dalits

Deep caste-based hierarchies have impinged India’s progress for many decades. From 1990s onwards, discourses around Dalit oppression have pervaded the sphere of electoral politics. In states where Dalit oppression is more widespread, especially in the Northern and Central parts of India, there has been an emergence of political parties fighting along caste lines. But, despite caste issues taking centre stage in India, majority of Dalits live in destitute conditions and are victims of day-to-day social injustice. As per the 2004-05 caste census data, around 40% of urban Dalit population live below the poverty line[16]. Why has India not made much progress in improving their status and socio-economic conditions?

Radha Sarkar and Amar Sarkar in their paper problematise the very nature of caste-based politics in India. They argue that “Dalit political parties in North and Central India have overwhelmingly pursued an agenda of recognition, calling for equal respect, rather than one of redistribution”[17]. While focusing on recognition for Dalits, political parties failed to pay attention to redistribution measures, which is a key prerequisite for “Dalits’ quest for equal treatment”[18]. This one-sided approach to resolving Dalit oppression has not translated into any significant material changes precisely because it has failed to consider the fact that caste is in fact a “two-sided category, composed of economic and cultural dimensions”[19]. Hence, even the aims of the politics of recognition such as equal respect and cultural inclusion for Dalits, cannot be fulfilled unless and until it is supplemented by a politics of redistribution.

A case in point could be the pro-Dalit BSP party in Uttar Pradesh. BSP’s remarkable performance and its ability to revive caste-based politics in UP can be attested by its surge in vote share from 9.4% in 1991 to 30.6% in 2007[20]. Sarkar et al highlight that in their attempt to advance the “social, economic, and political position of Dalits in UP”, BSP has so far employed a two-pronged strategy which is dictated by a politics of recognition[21]. BSP’s first

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strategy attempted for a “symbolic transformation of the landscape of UP” by building parks, statues and libraries dedicated to prominent Dalit leaders[22]. And in its second strategy, as opposed to introducing new legislations, it modified the “implementation of existing government policies” such as through moving more Dalits into key positions in the bureaucracy or via inducting more Dalits in the police force[23]. Such symbolic moves made the Dalit identity a more relevant and an integral part of the local-level politics of UP. However, the fact that socio-economic inequalities and poverty are still a persistent reality across the state for majority of Dalits, embracing only a politics of recognition has certainly done little to bring on-ground changes. Even to reap the advantages offered by the politics of recognition requires introducing some redistributive measures.

Indeed, to cultivate a culture where Dalits are treated with equal respect requires recalibrating the unequal nature of land and asset ownership in UP. Since most of the land and capital are owned by non-Dalits, it perpetuates exploitation of the low-caste and ensure Dalits remain a subordinated community[24]. In addition, as Bhatia notes, “the skewed labour relations engendered by this pattern of land ownership has been a source of enduring humiliation among Dalits and has exposed them to continued exploitation by their employers”[25]. In fact, even reservations as a medium to uplift Dalits have not been able to bring a major dent to social inequalities. Dalit individuals who are better positioned in the class hierarchy are the ones reaping benefits, which are not percolated down to the majority poor Dalits[26]. Therefore, the mode of caste politics in UP needs to align with a politics of redistribution through “direct intervention in the labour relations between them [Dalits] and other castes – either through land distribution, heightened minimum wage regulation, or other redistributive measures”[27].

Along with such symbolic achievements, redistributive measures are a must to meet the end goals of high social standing and an increased socio-economic status for Dalits. The discrimination and oppression that Dalits face by caste cannot be separated from economy since it is precisely these economic and market processes that systemically produce such inequalities in the first place[28]. Hence, rectifying caste-based injustice requires adopting a ‘bivalent’ strategy whereby issues faced by Dalits are also understood in terms of their ‘class’ realities, while simultaneously ensuring that there are changes to the cultural order to address problems of misrecognition. Although, as we saw earlier, the two orientations follow a different conception of injustice, the case of Dalit oppression in India demonstrates that non-recognition has a deep interconnection with socio-economic injustices[29].

However, it would be misleading to argue that Dalit misrecognition is wholly a by-product of casteist maldistribution. Indeed, the politics of recognition has its own relative independence from the other dimension[30]. And the way as it currently stands, a lot more focus also needs to be devoted towards a politics of recognition for Dalits. As Sikka argues in his paper, “Dalits are in a situation where they cannot easily identify themselves with the culture of a historical community that mistreated them so severely and continues to discard them”[31]. While a politics of distribution has its merits and is required, Dalits would not be able to restore a sense of self-respect unless and until they are also able to locate themselves within a culture that can be affirmed as their own[32]. Given the years of oppression they have faced from Hindus, Dalits’ search for dignity certainly does not lie in being assimilated in the society of Hindus. As Sikka notes, “they might be willing to form a nation with Hindus...but they do not wish to be part of a nation *of* Hindus”[33]. Therefore, only a combination of both the politics of redistribution and the politics of recognition can enable to achieve a just society where Dalits live a respectful and a dignified life.

Systemic non-recognition of Blacks

The case of Dalit politics in India demonstrates that a lack of politics of redistribution can be a major roadblock to a community’s progress. Using the case of racial politics, particularly the oppression of Black people in the US, we will now see how a lack of politics of recognition can equally perpetuate identity-based oppression and discrimination. Additionally, this would also show that the politics of redistribution and politics of recognition share a two-way relationship, each feeding into the other and hence only with an amalgamation of the two can a just society be affected.

Racism against the Black people has been a persistent problem in the US for several decades. Despite the abolition of Jim Crow laws in the 1960s which had institutionalised racial systems and laws, Black oppression is widespread[34]. Their mass incarceration, pathetic economic conditions and societal discrimination speak volume of

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the day-to-day racism that they face, and their systemic negation and non-recognition[35].

In his article, "The politics of Identity", Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that a treatment meted out to an identity 'X' has a direct correlation to that person's identity. As he states, "to treat someone as an X is to do something to her because she is an X"[36]. This implies that the way a person with a particular identity or a group is treated by others is contingent on a politics of recognition. The non-recognition of Black people and the fact that they are culturally looked down upon as a community in the US is the cause for their mistreatment and oppression. The fundamental problem to be highlighted here is the fact that racism is a deeply ingrained systemic issue in the US. This certainly calls for a politics of recognition in order to effect cultural changes and challenge the deep-seated mindsets of people (particularly the Whites) to "revalue disrespected" Black people [37]. System's non-recognition of Black people as a valuable and a respectful community is what facilitates racism and their oppression in the first place.

In her fascinating article on racial capitalism, Ida Danewid illuminates how global cities such as London and New York are "part of a historical and ongoing imperial terrain"[38]. She posits that global cities need to be understood as geographical components that are not at all neutral or innocent of power, but they are always representing particular hierarchies and privileges. Given the "raced modes of expropriation, dispossession and policing" taking place in these global cities, leads her to suggest that "capitalism has *de facto* always been racial capitalism"[39]. What results is the creation of a racialised 'surplus' people. On the one hand, the very processes of capital accumulation breathe on race-making practices because "racism supplies the precarious and exploitable lives that capitalism needs to extract land and labour"[40]. Thus, the logic of capitalism is exploitative in nature in the sense that these marginalised surplus communities (such as Black people) need to be exploited for the purposes of capital accumulation. And on the other hand, the logic of capitalism "produces some places and people as disposable and expendable"[41]. For instance, the urban regeneration projects in the pursuit of 'beautifying' or 'cleaning' spaces project the racialised and marginalised communities as excesses or surplus which are 'infecting' places with 'crime, drugs and disease' and thus need to be 'dispensed' with.

Hence, this dual production of the racialised 'surplus' people shows that racism is deeply seeped into the capitalist system, resulting in a systemic discrimination against Black people. For this reason, movements such as the 'Black Lives Matter (BLM)' are important because they are riding on a politics of recognition in order to build a cultural momentum against systemic racism and towards anti-Black oppression. Indeed, as Siddhant Issar notes, "social movements embody collective processes for people to identify 'injustice, oppression or stigma'" and "movements such as BLM are thus not simply objects of study but draw on and produce knowledges in their own right"[42].

Moreover, this suggests that the miserable socio-economic realities of Blacks need to be seen in the light of their cultural misrecognition. The politics of redistribution which focuses on socioeconomic injustices is influenced or affected by the cultural dimension of a politics of recognition. As Judith Butler argues in her account of queers, misrecognition can have 'maldistributive' effects[43]. Consider the recent case in the New York city. A group of rich, White elites in the Upper West side of the city were protesting "against the placement of 235 homeless men in a residential hotel in their neighbourhood"[44]. Most of these homeless men are Black[45]. Preceding a judge ruling that ultimately allowed them to stay at the hotel, the Mayor in fact had agreed to expunge the homeless men from the area to satisfy the demands of White protestors who felt that "their lives had been upended by ugliness and disorder"[46]. As Fraser would call it, this is a classic case of culturally defined status misrecognition. By equating Black people to 'disorder' and 'ugliness', it is apparent the way racial prejudice pervades state policy decision making, indicating that a politics of misrecognition does affect resource redistribution. Thus, the class issue of Black people must also be seen in the light of their cultural subjugation.

But to be fair, calling racial oppression in the US a mere cultural, misrecognition problem would be misleading and defeat the purpose. The politics of redistribution needs to be given equal weightage or else there is the danger of falling into the trap of neo-liberal hypocrisies. In his account of 'homocapitalism', Rahul Roy argues that the reason why neo-liberal capitalists are able to pretend themselves as inclusive is because homophobia is projected as a 'merely cultural' problem which effaces or marginalises "redistributive concerns"[47]. In a similar vein, it is imperative to ensure that racism in the US is not obscured of its redistributive dimension. While, as it was argued earlier, the politics of recognition does have a bearing on the politics of redistribution, the race issue also needs to be

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independently considered as a class-like differentiation. This means that a lot more also has to be done on the economy's front to uplift the socio-economic conditions of Black people which would potentially make them a more respectable and a recognised community. In a nutshell, just like in the case of Dalit politics, a 'bivalent' approach to the race issue is the only ideal way to ensure justice for Blacks.

Conclusion

This paper examined the reasons behind the failure of identity politics in curbing worldwide oppression along identity lines. Using Nancy Fraser's framework of social justice, it argued that in the absence of a politics of redistribution, Dalits in India have remained a subjugated caste identity. Then, using the same conception, the paper discussed the case of racial politics in the US where a lack of politics of recognition has pushed Blacks to the periphery. Additionally, in the process of analysing these case studies, it cautioned the reader to be wary of adhering to an isolated approach to justice. It highlighted the interlinkages between the politics of redistribution and the politics of recognition and thus asserted the importance of following a 'bivalent' approach where in only the culmination of the two can ensure justice for oppressed communities.

Although the magnitude and the nature of oppression varies from case to case, there are certainly some commonalities between the oppression faced by a Dalit in India and by a Black person in the US. Such transnational commonalities within the realm of identity politics calls for a shift in the discourse on social justice towards a more global approach. Locating identity-based oppressions within the nation-state framework not only blindfolds us to their transnational linkages, it also stops us from seeing it as a larger systemic issue. Ever since the onset of right-wing populism around the globe, we are seeing a more intense version of identity-based polarization. This has made it even more important to transit into a version of politics that is tailored to the demands of both recognition and redistribution, if we truly care about social justice.

End Notes

[1] Appiah 21

[2] Fraser 3

[3] Ibid

[4] Ibid 10

[5] Ibid 5

[6] Fraser 6

[7] Ibid 7

[8] Ibid

[9] Ibid

[10] Fraser 7

[11] Fraser 8

[12] Ibid 9

[13] Fraser 9

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[14] Ibid

[15] Ibid 10

[16] "State-Wise Percentage Of Population Below Poverty Line By Social Groups, 2004-05"

[17] Sarkar and Sarkar 14

[18] Ibid

[19] Ibid

[20] Jeffrey et al

[21] Sarkar and Sarkar 15

[22] Ibid

[23] Ibid

[24] Ibid 16

[25] Bhatia

[26] Sarkar and Sarkar 15

[27] Ibid 16

[28] Mosse 1225

[29] Mahanand 15

[30] Fraser 19

[31] Sikka 56

[32] Ibid

[33] Ibid

[34] "Jim Crow Laws"

[35] Issar 10

[36] Appiah 16

[37] Fraser 7

[38] Danewid 1

[39] Ibid 17

[40] Danewid 9-10

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[41] Ibid 10

[42] Issar 8

[43] Rao 44

[44] Bellafante

[45] Cuozzo

[46] Bellafante

[47] Rao 48

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