Südasien-Chronik - South Asia Chronicle 12/2022, pp. 307-327 © Südasien-Seminar der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin ISBN: 978-3-86004-349-3

Being Black in India: The Journeys of African-American Writers in Independent India[1]

SHALINI SHARMA

S.SHARMA@KEELE.AC.UK

KEYWORDS: RACE, CASTE, INDEPENDENT INDIA, INTELLECTUALS, RACISM

Introduction

In 2020 a book was published that provoked a lot of consternation. Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste: the origins of our discontents* argued that the inequities faced by black people in the United States was the same as the anti-Semitism faced by Jews in Nazi Germany and the daily oppression faced by Dalits in South Asia (Wilkerson 2020). "Caste" could be taken to mean any system which ranked people on the basis of ascribed identity and denied sexual miscegenation to maintain bloodlines and purity. In that sense there was a strong affinity between the Third Reich, the USA and India. Indeed, in Wilkerson's view, the Nazis learned their practices from their observations of slavery in the United States and from what they understood of the caste system in India. Appearing as the Black Lives Matter movement reached its peak, *Caste* provided an answer to new generations trying to understand the causes and the endurance of racism not just in the USA but elsewhere (Kopp & Hirschfelder 2021).

Wilkerson, the first woman of African-American heritage to have been awarded a Pulitzer prize had produced another bestseller (Wilkerson 2010). Inevitably, given its title, *Caste* caught the eye of Indian reviewers, at home and abroad. Reactions were mixed. On the one hand, some commentators and activists appreciated the links that Wilkerson had drawn between race

and caste (Solanki 2020; Vijaya 2020). The book enabled them to strengthen their own struggle against the Indian caste system, raising awareness that 'dalit or so-called untouchable lives matter' (Dutt 2020). Other Indians were not so generous. Negative reviews ranged from criticisms that Wilkerson's thesis was too simplistic, ahistorical and under-researched, to those that asserted that caste and race cannot be equated (Khilnani 2020; Appadurai 2020; Rao 2020). When it comes to the politics of skin-colour, India is different.

What interested me about this book and its reception was the cyclical nature of both its main thesis and the way it has been dismissed. We have been here before. From W. E. B. Du Bois' correspondence with Mohandas Gandhi in 1929 and later in 1946 with Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, and onto the Martin Luther King's visit to India in 1959, down to the trials and tribulations of the Dalit Panthers in the early 1970s (a group inspired by the Black Panthers in the United States), there have been arguments for and against this equation of caste and race over many decades (Cox 1948; Davis, Gardner & Gardner 1941; Berreman 1960; Beteille 1990). As recently as 2001 there was an attempt by some Dalit organisations to redefine caste oppression as racism at the UN-sponsored *World Conference against Racism* Durban, South Africa (Guru 2009; Yengde 2022). Historians have written about these moments of solidarity amongst the marginalised minorities of modern India and America, notably Nico Slate and Gyan Pandey, Gerald Horne and Vijay Prasad (Gould 2006; Biswas 2008; Bald 2007; Ramnath 2005; Slate 2012; Slate 2009; Prashad 2002). However, they have skated over those occasions when an assumed equivalence between the oppressed of India and America has been challenged by both sides.

This essay focuses on the experiences of a selection of African-American scholars and writers who visited India on trips funded by the US government in the decade after independence in 1947. These visits were high-profile moments of cultural diplomacy between the USA and the new republic, as the British empire was in retreat, and the new battle-lines of the cold war were being laid down across the Asian-Pacific rim. These visitors—two women and two men—came to India as harbingers of hope, looking to cultivate positive race relations between the two countries, but ultimately returned disappointed by the extent of what they deemed "colour consciousness" in India. Drawing on their memoirs, diaries, oral history interviews and published work, I engage with the assumptions and contradictions in their accounts, and give a sense of what Indians were talking

about when they talked about race at this time. My paper is derived from my current book project, *The new republic: a cultural history of India and the United States of America in the 20th century*, which shows how the United States in the twentieth century could represent in India a very strong version of modernity which was simultaneously appalling and appealing to Indians.

The book uses a series of case studies to analyse this revealed oscillation between antipathy and sympathy expressed by Indians for America and conversely Americans for Indians. It is a theme that has been largely absent from the historiography partly because of the understandable preoccupation with India's colonial and post-colonial relationship with Britain. But the American hold on the Indian imagination, and the ways in which India figured in the American imaginary are important. Both were ex-colonies, both were secular republics, both had histories seared by racial conflict. And for most of the twentieth century they were the two largest Anglophone cultures in the world. Understanding the Indian and American dialogue around issues such as race, gender, colonialism and religion offers new insights on late modernity and indeed on the contemporary world in which we now live.

The rest of my paper is in three parts. First, I set the scene, describing why India became so important to US cultural diplomacy after 1947. Then I turn to my four case-studies, giving a short account of who they were and what they did in India. Finally, I will critique what India represented to these visitors, and how they themselves were represented, as black Americans, to the Indians they met.

The fetish of "race equality"

The Second World War, which ended in Asia when the United States dropped atomic bombs over Japan in August 1945, ushered in a more overtly interventionist US foreign policy (Jones 2010). The United States State Department had a clear mission towards the new India, wishing to ostensibly support as much as possible the virgin republic that was so close to, in all senses, the USSR. However, there was a problem. Long before the end of the war American diplomats were warning the State Department back home about 'A new development in India' the fact that Americans were being identified with British imperialism (John Davies Jr letter to his brother 1943), the increasing "colour-consciousness" in Indians who saw Anglo-American cooperation in the war as evidence of a 'prolongation of whiteocracy in Asia' ("Attitude of Indian nationalist press" 1944). The colour

issue was getting in the way of American aid for India. In short, the political situation in India was too unsteady to warrant a huge level of investment on the part of the United States.

Much of the press in India was hostile to the United States. America was depicted as having let Indians down, despite being the champion of democracy, national self-determination and industrial progress. The Indian media mocked the US-led Atlantic Charter as soon as it was inaugurated, pointing to the fact that US immigration policy itself was designed to limit Asian settlement in the United States ("Candidus" 17 Sept. 1941; "2. Candidus" 21 Sept. 1941: 2). Indian newspapers also disliked the western occupation of Japan, echoing the Indian business magnate, G. D. Birla, who asked an English audience 'Does this imply that only western nations have the vital say in shaping the destinies of the Asiatic peoples?' ("Indian political situation" 1946). Similarly, the Indian press decried US "meddling" in Palestine, seen as denying the rights of Palestinians in favour of European Jews (ibid.).

Keen to turn the tide of anti-American opinion in India, State Department officials advised their superiors on how to engage with Indians. They urged them to support Asian nationalism and what they called a 'racial equality fetish' ("Responses" 1949). This "fetish", they suggested, was evident in much of the correspondence that the United States administration received from Indians. Mohandas Gandhi reminded President Roosevelt during the war that 'the declaration that the allies are fighting to the world safe for the individual and for democracy sounds hollow, so long as India, and for that matter Africa are exploited by Great Britain, and America has the negro problem in her own home' ("Gandhi to Roosevelt" 1942). The restrictions placed on Indian immigration in the United States had long caused consternation amongst Indians in the United States (Shaffer 2012: 74). In other words, Indians resented the hostility of the US authorities to their applications for US citizenship. The media was twitchy about racial slights experienced by Indians in America. For example, in July 1947, when the former mayor of Calcutta and Dean of Calcutta University, Dr B. C. Roy was refused service in a Decatur, Illinois restaurant his experience was widely reported in the Indian press. Roy, noting the poignancy of being discriminated against in the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln, categorised it as 'America’s Caste System' ("America’s Caste System" 1947: 6).

Therefore, the State Department needed to rebrand their country. Theirs was a diplomatic offensive fighting for new allies in the wake of Britain’s exit, as well as trying to hold together the Anglo-American alliance on a

world stage. The State Department might adopt a number of strategies. Advisors suggested changing their lenient attitude towards apartheid in South Africa—to which Indian opinion was adamantly opposed (Davis & Thakur 2016). They also advised to front up with the argument that that black people could achieve leadership positions in their own country (*Foreign Relations of the United States* 1950: 1597). With this in mind, as Michael Krenn has shown, the State Department established a band of black ambassadors to represent their nation, for example, Edith Spurlock Sampson, the first Black US delegate appointed to the United Nations in 1950. The State Department also sent out academics and writers to India on lecture tours (Krenn 1999; Laville & Lucas 1996). And through the philanthropy of senator James William Fulbright it worked with travelling university professors to engage with Indians as emissaries of their country (Lebovic 2013). In this cold war context when new forms of soft power were being invented and trialled, these exchanges sprang from a basic concern to show the world and especially the newly independent citizens of countries like India that the USA was a republic like the new India, where the lives of its citizens, black and white, were always improving and on the road to greater equality and progress as befitted the so-called American dream.

This was consolidated in 1951 when a conference bringing together representatives of United States diplomatic and consular officers throughout South Asia concluded that they needed to combat anti-Westernism (South Asian Regional Conference 1951: 1672). The history of this particular moment in US diplomacy, which Krenn has called the 'diplomacy of desegregation' stressed that Americans needed to be seen as people who were acting to improve race relations in their country as well as separate and distinct from the nexus of imperial powers, France and Britain (Krenn 1999: 17). The United States Information Service sent a number of prominent Black Americans to India at regular intervals. Their mission was to lecture on their area of expertise, from journalism in a "free press" to literature and international relations but also to be seen as successful exemplars of black America in the non-white world, the beacon of which was newly independent India.

Indians who were keen to promote a positive image of the United States also took to inviting these visiting black Americans to their political events. For example, the black Baptist journalist Max Yergan was a chief guest at the anti-Communist Indian Congress of Cultural Freedom held in Bombay in March 1951. Held in the wake of the Second World War he would have

noted that resolutions on racial segregation, concentration camps, and South African apartheid were as important to the Indian audiences and organisers as shining a light on communist demagoguery (Indian Congress 1951). Let me now look in more detail at how these visits to India by black Americans in the name of cultural rebranding played out.

Black intellectuals in India

Two of the earliest funded Fulbright scholars were Flemmie Kittrell (1904-80) and Merze Tate (1905-96), renowned scholars of home economics and international relations respectively. Their journeys had a lasting impact. Indeed, Merze Tate described her Fulbright year as the most important year of her life (Tate 1980).

Despite their modest backgrounds both Kittrell and Tate represent the elite of academia in their generation. They were educated, middle class professionals who had successful careers and wielding power in their discipline and institution in the United States. They were both churchgoers. Kittrell's diary in particular reveals the strength she derived from regular church attendance in Baroda during her stay there (Kittrell 1951). Significantly, both were also broadly non-Communist (Horrocks 2016). This was important in a time when people were being forced to deny association with the left. So, both of them had a stake in the USA. They were proud to be associated with the country and believed in changing it from the gradual approach of reform and democracy. They were not radical politicians or intellectuals looking to build international political networks or cosmopolitan alliances. Rather, their interests and motivations were more mundane, less ambitious and less demanding than say the agenda of Martin Luther King who visited a few years later.

Kittrell came to India in 1950, having been invited by Hansa Mehta, the Vice-Chancellor of Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda to help create a college for Home Science (Kittrell 1977). They had met previously in the United States and discussed the matter. Kittrell was a trailblazer in the United states—one of the first black women to get a PhD in a science subject working on nutrition. By the time she got to India, she was Dean of her faculty at Howard University. This wasn't her first international visit. She had already spent six months in Liberia on a State Department assignment, conducting a nutrition survey (Ottley 1980: 10). For her India was 'an opportunity and a challenge' (Kittrell 1953). She would revisit time and again over the course of her life.

Kittrell's personal records reveal how absorbed she was in her work whilst in India. She lists lecture outlines, attempts at research, bouts of fatigue as well as accounts of the church meetings and work with missionary groups. However, she was also aware of the sub-text of her mission back in the United States. Clifford H. Wilson, the Director of the Technical Cooperation Administration Mission in India reminded her that she had been 'contributing so much to the goals of the Indo-American Program' (Wilson 1953). Not for nothing did Eisenhower later describe her batch of Foreign Operations Administration Program as 'the US's most effective countermeasure to Soviet propaganda and the best method by which to create the political and social stability essential to lasting peace' (Ottley 1980: 12). As her biographer emphasised, 'Flemmie Kittrell was one of these ambassadors' (ibid.). Such an ambassadorial role continued outside of India itself. She took Indian students to Japan and Hawaii to learn homemaking skills. She advised the Indian government on the development of Home Science pedagogy across the subcontinent and supervised PhD students from India in the discipline for the rest of her career. Kittrell was a successful ambassador. She changed minds about child development, about nutrition, about nursery education and homemaking. Her version and vision of America, albeit inadvertently, entered Indian homes through her work on refrigeration, nutrition and child psychology (Times of India 1962: 11; Times of India 1964: 5). And whenever she was called upon to represent her country she did so as a proud American.

Merze Tate, her Howard colleague, was in India at the same time and on the same Fulbright scheme as Kittrell. She was a scholar of International Relations having worked her way up from a rural township in Michigan to becoming the first black woman to get a PhD from Oxford University. Her work on the US and armament and disarmament formed part of the standard reading for young Americans training to work in the State Department. She was also known as forthright in her views on the position of black Americans in the United States and the politics of race in international relations (Tate 1943). Encouraged by her Howard colleague, Professor of religion and expert on non-violence, William Stuart Nelson, who had worked and marched for peace with Gandhi in India in the years before independence, Tate was keen to join a lecture exchange program to India. The Fulbright Programme sent her to Visva Bharati University in Shantiniketan, the brainchild of the Nobel Prize winning poet and educationalist Rabindranath Tagore. The idea behind his Visva Bharati, which translates as world university, was to create a space where Indian students would be encouraged to learn about the philosophies of the east and west (Mukherjee

2021: 441). One way that the university tried to do this was to invite international scholars to come and lecture to students (Mukherjee 2020: 57). Tate was a good thing for Visva Bharati because not only was she an American but she could also present students with a different perspective because she was a black American, she was somebody who had the experience of being the first black woman from the United states to get a PhD from Oxford University and she bought even more of the world with her because she was a scholar of international relations (Tagore 1950: 2-3).

Tate endured an extremely hectic schedule of talks and visits as her diary and oral testimony attest. She was cautious of sticking only with her compatriots. Following the advice of her Vice-Principal at Visva Barathi, Anil Kumar Chanda, she spent more time with Indians (Tate 1980). However, she had no problems with her cultural baggage as an American. As she was quoted in a newspaper report on her return to Howard, 'My very presence in India was a symbol of what could happen to any person who works hard under the democratic way of life… I am a product of the American public school system plus a few scholarships and a lot of hard work' ("Mainly about Folks" 1953: 12). Tate travelled the length and breadth of India on her own. One of her adventures included holidaying on a Kashmir houseboat that happened to be adjacent to prime minister Nehru's. She was invited onto his boat for dinner. However, for her India was more than an adventure or an academic exercise. It was her opportunity to do some good, to give back, to live the liberal idealism that she taught and researched. As she said, 'If one has to suffer the slings and arrows of misfortune, of discrimination, of being a minority in a white man's country, if ever an occasion arises to direct that misfortune to an advantage one should not neglect the opportunity' (Tate 1980).

My two other case-studies are both men: J. Saunders Redding (1906-88) and Carl Rowan (1925-2000.) Both were men of letters. Redding was a renowned academic, the first African American to have a faculty position in an Ivy League university, Brown, as well as being a published poet, novelist and literary critic. He was a known ally of W. E. B. du Bois and had published a "hard hitting" autobiography *On being a Negro in America* a year before he ventured to India (Redding 1951). Carl Rowan was also a published author. His *South of Freedom* came out in 1952, an investigation into racial tension that established his reputation as an up and coming journalist (Rowan 1952). The State Department singled them both out, in 1952 and 1954 respectively, approaching them with a mission to meet and

influence Indians. 'I was told your job will be to help interpret American life to the people very well' (Redding 1954: 11). Rowan's mission in India was to lecture on the role of the free press in a democracy (Rowan 1956: 12; Rowan 1991: 121).

Put up in hotels for a few nights in cities across the subcontinent, they spoke to trade unionists, rotary clubs, government ministers and the public. Often facing four public engagements a day, these exhausted writers were performing as the face of America from morning to midnight. Generating public interest wherever they went, they were treated with more suspicion than either had expected. Did they think they were mere propaganda tools? Their memoirs suggest that this did plague both of them. Saunders wrestled with his self-doubt, constantly telling himself to stick to the truth, while Carl Rowan knew that he would go on answering questions on McCarthyism, segregation, divorce practices and even the phenomenon of spring break in the US because 'I, like my fellow Americans, wanted India to be on "our side" in the long run battle to preserve democracy and the dignity of the individual' (Rowan 1956: 22).

He, like Redding, wrote of the contradictory nature of their position. Here they were championing democracy and freedom in India while aware of the democratic deficit for black Americans back home. Reading a letter from his wife after a gruelling day on the Indian lecture circuit telling him how after she and her children had been refused motel accommodation with the words 'we don't take coloured here' made Rowan question his mission in India (Rowan 1956: 59). 'I had no hope now that I might go anywhere in India, or in the rest of Asia for that matter, without being expected to walk under the burden of all the sins, past and present, of my white countrymen' (Rowan 1956: 152).

Singled out in this way as tools of propaganda, these two men were less successful as ambassadors than Flemmie Kittrell and Merze Tate. Indeed Tate, who reviewed both men's accounts of their visits in the *Journal of Negro Education* averred that Redding's 'mission was not only a dismal and appalling failure but that American prestige in India actually suffered from his visit' (Tate 1955: 132). For her 'Mr Redding's extremely sensitive, impatient temper was unequal to an assignment that required the patience of job and the hide of an elephant' (ibid.: 131). Is it so easy to dismiss Redding's sensitivity? What Tate called an ethnocentric lack of engagement with the "real" India could also be a product of being chased off a stage with chants of 'American go home', or being constantly required to defend aspects of United States foreign and domestic policy to which he was

opposed. Tate reprimands Redding for choosing to write about these aspects of his tour. These choices make him, for her, a failed ambassador (ibid.: 130-2). But it is these very choices, that for us, added to the experiences of Kittrell, Tate and Rowan provide a more holistic picture. They also suggest that some forms of soft power were more effective than others during this period in India. Travelling lecturers guaranteed a riposte, whereas educational exchanges were a more subtle and enduring form of institutional engagement.

All four of our case studies were proud Americans. They had no qualms about that. Saunders Redding may have been the least invested in his nationality. His previous work had been scathing about the position of black people in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s and a few years after his sojourn in India the FBI conducted a full investigation on his loyalty because he had applied for a job on the Voice of America and his brother had once been a known Communist sympathiser (Redding 1953). However, it could be said that his own reflections on India suggest that his experience brought home to him more clearly how much he was wedded to the idea of the United States. However, their ethnic belonging inflected and affected the way their own nationality was received by their audiences in India and beyond. Flemmie Kittrell recounted in her biography the special measures taken by South African security personnel who followed her cars and continually stopped her because they could not deal with a black woman in her position.

It was Tate who reminded Kittrell that the only ostensible racism she had suffered in India was at the hands of her own countrymen, deciding that Tate and Kittrell would be paid less than their white fellow Fulbright recipients (Tate 1980). Tate wasn’t one to let this go, fighting it by telling the American cultural attaché in Delhi that 'The Indians are surprised to think that the United States have two types of Fulbrights, one for the white professors who come out, and another for the travelling expenses for the coloured'. That got results (Tate 1980). It also got Tate a label of being "difficult" by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the United States. While they didn’t refer to race in their diaries the politics of black civil rights was very much part of their intellectual make up, being scholars in the leading black university in the United States and part of the intellectual milieu from which it sprang. From India Kittrell wrote to Tate Brown public school scandal, a fight against the banning black children from white schools in the state of Kansas. This was important to her, as she said, 'please keep me informed' (Kittrell 1953).

Long before she was in India, Kittrell's own partner, whom she never married, was arrested in a school strike protesting against racial segregation in the 1930s (Ottley 1980: 3). Her policy was to 'tell the truth … tell whatever our difficulties are and say that at least we have a Constitution and a way of working things out. We do not need violent methods. A democracy has room for progress' (ibid: 11). She was however perturbed when Tate visited Kittrell in Baroda and joked with students that she avoided her (white) compatriots. As Kittrell wrote in her diary 'that wasn't a smart thing to repeat – especially since we are here to build up good will' (Kittrell 1951: 21 February 1951). Tate was very comfortable being asked to lecture on the position of black Americans in the United States although being asked, (like Kittrell) to sing spirituals wherever she went and being thought of and referred to as the spiritual singer Marion Anderson, another recent visitor to India, did give her pause for thought (Tate 1980).

The dissonance of caste and colour

It is understandable that each of my case-studies experienced India differently. They were placed in different situations and had different jobs to do. Rowan's hotel-hopping, Redding's sacrifice of American home comforts, Kittrell's apparent life of luxury as described by a jealous Tate, who herself had "gone native". However, they all confronted one thing in common: caste. And their self-identity as Americans and their time in India performing American-ness led to some idiosyncratic reactions to caste.

In 1959, in a by now famous incident, given central place in Isabel Wilkerson's book, Martin Luther King was introduced to a South Indian crowd as an untouchable, part of a community at the bottom of the social hierarchy, a fellow victim of inequality and an example from whom the audience and the world at large had much to learn. This, as well as the stories of transnational alliances against oppression written by Vijay Prashad, Niko Slate and Gerald Horne as moments of solidarity suggest it as a general experience across the board. However, this was not the case. Each was aware of caste, of the hierarchical nature of Indian society, of their having to get to the heart of what it meant to the audiences and interlocutors.

For Merze Tate caste was a quintessentially Indian phenomenon. She wrote about untouchability and tried to describe it in some of her oral interviews, in an attempt to account for how it was perpetuated within and by the community. (Tate 1980). She seemed oblivious to the ways in which caste had been reconstructed during the colonial period, or how it was being

contested after 1947. A few years after her first visit to India, while reviewing a book by Manmatha Nath Chatterjee, she repeated his description of the operation of caste and its apparently lack of reliance on state sanction, without delving into this issue in any depth. This may have been her attempt to see India through non-western eyes, a trait she had found failing in Saunders Redding (Tate 1955). For Tate, caste was something that explained India, not something that India needed to explain or defend. And independent India was an example the 'darker peoples of the world' could learn from rather than critique (Tate 1943: 169). By way of contrast, for her part Kittrell experienced caste on her doorstep as it were. She refrained from public commentary outside the purview of home science but she was very involved in the lives of her students. Her own confrontation with caste came when she was asked to intervene in the life of a student who wanted to marry outside her caste (Rajoo Bhatt to Kittrell c. 1950-51).

Redding and Rowan were both more direct in questioning the continuance of the caste system. In their respective books they both commented on the disconnect with an India that trumpeted social justice on the global stage. Redding was staggered when he heard an Indian liberal tell him that Indians needed to keep the caste distinctions effective for a long time or else the necessary work of nation building would not be done (Redding 1954: 43). While for Rowan, 'Time after time I had been irritated by seeing Indians who were themselves guilty of social injustice working themselves into emotional frenzies about social injustices elsewhere' (Rowan 1956: 154). He tells us that he would lecture on not screaming insults at each other quoting one of his speeches 'As far as I am concerned both are a denial of the basic dignity that belongs to every human being on the face of this earth' (ibid.: 155). However, he also noted that if he were to mention caste he would be faced with 'the highly nationalist intelligentsia crowd crowing about how India's constitution bars caste' despite the headlines in newspapers painting a starkly different picture (ibid.). Here he was being barred from critiquing caste by Indian nationalists.

In their different reactions to caste, Tate, Kittrell, Redding and Redding displayed "sympathy" for social inequalities in India, but not "empathy". That is to say, they did not perceive equivalence in their own situation as black Americans, despite the racial injustice going in back home, even affecting their own friends and family, while they toured India as feted guests.

Race and the politics of colour elicited a similar dissonance, particularly for Redding and Rowan. On one hand they were treated as fellow travellers.

Redding realised this that his colour allowed him to enter spaces Indian homes that was unusual for a foreigner. He realised that such spaces would not be allowed to white person (Redding 1954: 115). However, he realised that he was being treated with pity because of his blackness. Audiences did not want to know of his success and they certainly were not interested in hearing about black progress as something that was being developed jointly by blacks and whites in America (ibid.:174). At best Redding and Rowan invited pity. Both expressed annoyance at being reminded time and again that they were in safe company in India, safe to tell the truth, or give a realistic presentation of their country. People would tell them that they only decided to attend the lectures after they had seen that a photo of the presenter.

> I looked at it and I looked at my dark hand and I said here comes one of us. I thought I'd come to hear an American Negro journalist. When one of your white officials came up, many of us would not come out. Some who did refused to shake hands with him. We trust you, and speak to you frankly, because there is a common bond of colour. We hate the white man because he is the cause of all the trouble in Asia today. We respect you, but we hate white America (Rowan 1956: 55).

Ironically, such reactions led Redding and Rowan to see Indians, just as the State Department had done, as obsessed with colour. Carl Rowan saw it everywhere, 'I had seen in India perhaps the most rigid social pattern on earth and in that pattern color is a major factor' (ibid.: 154). 'I have been in India a month and hardly for a single day that I've been able to forget I was a Negro. Inherently you are one of us, an Indian would say. Now you tell us the real story about the treatment of your race in America' (ibid.: 54). Redding was equally baffled.

> I do not wish to over simplify emotional and psychological matters of great complexity, but many Indians were colour conscious to a degree completely unimaginable even to the American. It seemed impossible for these Indians to conceive of a dark skinned American as being other than the enemy of white, or having a loyalty that goes beyond colour (Saunders 1954: 11).

Rowan did attempt to analyse this phenomenon in his book *The pitiful and the proud*. Was the Indian preoccupation with colour an extension of the anti-imperialist nationalism that led his audiences to conflate the British and the Americans, forming as they did an Anglo-American nexus that was still trying to dominate the newly liberated Commonwealth. Was it a tool used by the left with which to attack western capitalism? Could it be a basis

on which to forge solidarity? Could colour transcend nationalism? Ultimately, Rowan saw the colour question as a ruse by which Indians could congratulate themselves, or develop their own sense of self-worth and dignity. By invoking colour, they could claim that they were not racist. He, like his paymasters in the US State Department, saw this as a communist tactic,

> The wily Reds realised that in the Indian's deepest emotional kit lies a long-satisfied desire not only for individual status but for the right to believe that his country is great…. And what better way to satisfy one's ego than by standing it next to an America in which the faults are magnified (Rowan 1956: 142)

But they could only do this by denying the American-ness of these black visitors. 'Always read white for western in our press', Redding was told with a wink by a professor at Aligarh University (Saunders 1954: 115).

In this framework black Americans were not real Americans. They could not represent their country. They were denied their nationality by their audience. They could only represent their people, black America or part of the black or non-white world of Asia and Africa. Rowan saw this attitude from Prime Minister Nehru through to almost everyone who introduced him to an audience. 'With many such people I was banging my head against a stone wall in trying to convince them that while injustices remained, Negroes were making startling strides towards first class citizenship' (Rowan 1956: 147).

In many ways, Rowan and Redding were caught between a rock and a hard place, as they insisted on talking positively about America. Their harshest critics in India branded them liars and stooges of the United States, so imbued with false consciousness that they didn't recognise their own subjugation, or race traitors peddling a lie for personal profit. Rowan devoted a whole chapter in his book to 'the problems of a Negro parrot' taking the title from a write up on him in *Blitz*, a popular Bombay socialist magazine. 'Of late America is sending out trained Negroe parrots to go around the world babbling about some imaginary freedoms enjoyed by Negroes in America', wrote the journal.

> One such propaganda peddler, Carl T Rowan, admitted to have been sent out by the American State Department, is currently touring India, and like a gramophone record, goes on repeating his one and the same speech comparing the state of harijans in India to that of the American Negroes. Naturally we do not agree with all these senseless babblings for we have abolished untouchability by law while our

Constitution has bestowed full freedoms on our Harijans. (Rowan 1956: 161).

Conclusion

In 1936 W. E. B. du Bois wrote an essay called "India" in which he asserted that 'The problems of the Indians can never be simply a problem of autonomy in the British Commonwealth of Nations. They must always stand as representatives of the coloured races—of the yellow and black people as well as the brown—of the majority of mankind' against white might and entitlement. Around twenty years later Martin Luther King was introduced at a meeting in South India as a fellow untouchable from the United States. He has famously described his feelings at that moment at as being floored, peeved, put off—and then realising, enlightened, that yes this was the correct description, this was his identity. 'Yes I am an untouchable and every Negro in the United States is' (Carson 1998: 131). Does this mean that our examples, the four travellers who had spent so much time in India in the early 1950s were simply on the wrong side of history? Did their insistence on representing the United States put them on the wrong side of the colour line?

While on one hand I am sympathetic to this view—the newly liberated India did have a lot to teach the world and was rightfully muscling in as a moral authority to question iniquitous regimes such as apartheid South Africa and racial segregation in the United States. But this glorious tradition also lets off the hook the demands made by Indian nationalists that did not allow the black intellectuals at whom I have looked to be what they claimed to be. For this nationalism an acceptable black individual could not simultaneously represent the United States. Also in this nationalism caste and gender were in an inner domain. Partha Chatterjee has written about this (Chatterjee 1999: 238-9). They were issues that only Indians and certain Indians could legitimately touch, broach, understand and comment on. Therefore, when Dalits raised caste at the Durban conference in 2001 they were lambasted as anti-national who had washed Indian’s dirty laundry in public (Malhotra & Neelakandan 2011: 127-9). It is also a nationalism that fails to account for the virulent racism faced by black students and refugees in contemporary India (Lawrence 2017).

While I did not encounter recollections of direct racism in the papers of my four "informants" I did encounter a nation-"washing" which treated them as only one aspect of their many identities. This was truer of the two men in my study, less so the women, whose identity as academics gave

them a different kind of cultural capital. For all these reasons, there is a need to rethink how we couple caste and race in a historical context. My case-studies suggest that any affinity between the struggles of black Americans and Indians enjoying their new-found independence were not taken as given, but had to be negotiated and wrestled over, and even then, ignorance and insularity still existed, on both sides.

Endnotes

[1] Thanks to the David Bruce Centre for American Studies, Keele University for funding to visit the Moorlan Springarn Research Center, Howard University, and also members of the De Montfort University History, UK Webinar Programme to whom I presented an earlier version of this paper in April 2022. All internet sources have been finally checked on 3 Nov. 2022.

Bibliography

Archive sources

Moorlan Spingarn Research Center, Howard University:

Bhatt, Rajoo to Kittrell (c. 1950-51), Flemmie P. Kittrell Papers.

Kittrell, Flemmie P. 1951. Asian Diary. Flemmie P Kittrell Papers.

Kittrell, Flemmie P. to Merze Tate. 1953. (and members of the Round Table), 31 December, Flemmie P. Kittrell Papers.

Kittrell, Flemmie P. to Merze Tate. 1958. 31 December, Flemmie P. Kittrell Papers.

Tate, Merze, FBI File. 9 Nov. 1950, Folder 4, Merze Vernie Tate Papers.

Ottley, Esther.1980. Flemmie P. Kittrell Profile. Flemmie P. Kittrell Papers.

Wilson, C. H. 1953. Wilson to Kittrell, 8 December, Flemmie P. Kittrell Papers.

National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland:

Attitude of Indian nationalist press towards criticism of the Japanese people as expressed by British and American leaders. 28 Aug. 1944, Memorandum, Adviser on Political Relations, Department of State, 845.000/8-644.

Responses to William Walton Butterworth and George C. McGhee on future policy and action in India. 18 Sept. 1949, Department of State, 845.000-949.

Indian political situation and Indian attitudes towards United States. 1946, Department of State, 845.00/1-1846.

John Paton Davies to Donald McNeil Davis (brother), 19 Feb. 1942, Letter, Department of State, 845.00/1914

Other:

Kittrell, Flemmie P. 1977. Black Women Oral History Project, Interviews, 1976-1981, OH-31, fols 20-1. 29 Aug. 1977, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

M. K. Gandhi to President Franklin D. Roosevelt. 1 July 1942, 7065056, India, 1933-1945, Diplomatic Correspondence, 1933–1945, Collection: President's Secretary's File (Franklin D. Roosevelt Administration), 1933–1945, NARA, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/7065056.

Redding, Jay Saunders. 1953. FBI File' March. *archive.com*, https://archive.org/details/J.SaundersReddingFBIFile.

Tate, Merze. 1980. Black Women Oral History Project Interviews, OH-31, T-32, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
https://id.lib.harvard.edu/ead/ sch01406/catalog.

Newspaper article without author

Candidus. Indian Political Notes: Reactions to Mr Churchill's Statement, *Times of India* 17 Sept. 1941, p. 6.

2. Candidus Indian political notes: reactions to Mr. Churchill's statement, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 21 Sept. 1941.

America's Caste System. Dr B. C. Roy's Experience. *Times of India*, 26 July, 1947, p. 6.

Qualified Teachers for Home Science Colleges: Importance stressed at Udaipur conference. *Times of India,* 7 Oct, 1962.

Home Science is not just study of cooking, sewing: Role in raising living standards stressed. *The Times of India,* 20 Oct. 1964, p. 5.

Literature

Appadurai, Arjun 2020. Comparing race to caste is an interesting idea but there are crucial differences between both. *the wire.in,* 12 Sept., https://thewire.in/books/book-review-isabel-wilkerson-caste-racism-america.

Bald, Vivek. 2007. Lost in the city. *South Asian Popular Culture,* 55 (1), pp. 59-76.

Berreman, Gerald. 1960. Caste in India and the United States. *American Journal of Sociology*, 66 (2), pp. 120-7.

Beteille, Andre. 1990. Race, caste, gender. *Man New Series*, 25 (3), pp. 489-504.

Biswas, Paromita. 2008. *Colonial displacements: nationalist longing and identity among early Indian intellectuals in the United States*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of California, Los Angeles.

Carson, Clayborne, ed. 1998. *The autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Warner Books.

Chatterjee, Partha. 1999. The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question. In: Kumkum Sangari & Sudesh Vaid, eds. *Recasting women*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, pp. 238-9.

Cox, Oliver. 1948. *Caste, class and race: a study in social dynamics*. New York: Doubleday.

Davis, Allison, Buleigh B. Gardner & Mary B. Gardner. 1941. *Deep south: a social anthropological study of caste and class*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Davis, Alexander E. & Vineet Thakur. 2016. Walking the thin line: India's anti-racist diplomatic practice in South Africa, Canada and Australia, 1946-1955. *International History Review*, 38 (5), pp. 880-99.

Du Bois, William Edward Burhardt. 1936. The Clash of Colour: Indians and American Negroes. In A. Getachew & J. Pitts (Eds.). 1922. *W. E. B. Du Bois: International Thought.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 144-149.

Dutt, Yashica. 2020. Feeling like an Outcast. *Foreign Policy*, 17. Sept., https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/17/caste-book-india-dalit-outcast-wilkerson-review/.

D., G.B. 1953. Mainly About Folks. *Enquirer and News*. Battle Creek, Michigan, 31 Oct., p. 12.

Gould, Harold A. 2006. *Sikhs, Swamis, students and spies: the India lobby in the United States, 1900-1946*. New Delhi & London: Sage Publications.

Guru, Gopal. 2009. What it means to be an Indian Dalit? Dalit responses to the Durban Conference. In: Balmuri Natrajan & Paul Greenough eds. *Against stigma: studies in caste, race and justice since Durban*. New Delhi: Orient Black Swan, pp. 168-82.

Horne, Gerald. 2008. *The End of Empires: African Americans and India.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Horrocks, Allison B. 2016. *Good will ambassador with a cookbook: Flemmie Kittrell and the international politics of home economics*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Connecticut. https://opencommons.uconn.edu/dissertations/1061.

Indian Congress for Cultural Freedom*, March 28-31, 1951 Proceedings*. Bombay: Indian Congress of Cultural Freedom.

Jones, Matt. 2010. *After Hiroshima: The United States, race and nuclear weapons in Asia, 1945-1965*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Khilnani, Sunil. 2020. Isabel Wilkerson's world historical theory of race and caste, *New Yorker*, 22 Aug. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/08/17/isabel-wilkersons-world-historical-theory-of-race-and-caste.

Fulbright Directory for Awards 1950-51. https://libraries.uark.edu/specialcollections/fulbrightdirectories/1950%20-%201951.pdf

Kopp, Luvona & Nicole Hirschfelder. 2021. Black lives matter: three key texts. *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, 66 (1), pp. 307-13.

Krenn, Michael. 1999. *Black diplomacy: African Americans and the state department*, *1945-69*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Laville, Helen & Scott Lucas. 1996. The American way: Edith Sampson, the NAACP, and African American identity in the Cold War. *Diplomatic History*, 20 (4), pp. 565-90.

Lawrence, Ezeugo Nnmadi. 2017. Let's talk about racism: I am tired of being a black man in India. *Hindustan Times*, 23 May.

Lebovic, Sam. 2013. From war junk to educational exchange: the World War II origins of the Fulbright program and the foundations of American cultural globalism, 1945-1950. *Diplomatic History*, 37 (2), pp. 280-312.

Malhotra, Rajeev & Aravindan Neelakandan. 2011. *Breaking India. Western interventions in Dravidian and Dalit faultlines*. New Delhi: Amaryllis.

Mukherjee, Mousumi. 2020. Tagore's 'Rooted-Cosmopolitanism' and international mindedness against institutional sustainability. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 40 (1), pp. 49–60.

Mukherjee, Soumen. 2021. The idea of Viśva Bhāratī: cosmopolitanism, transculturality and education in early twentieth century. *South Asia, South Asian History and Culture*, 12 (4), pp. 436-44.

Policy Statement Prepared in the Bureau of Near Eastern, South Asian and African Affairs, 29 Dec. 1950, *Foreign Relations of the United States, Volume 5, 1950, The Near East, South Asia and Africa*, p. 1597.

Prashad, Vijay. 2002. *Everybody was Kung Fu fighting. Afro-Asian connections and the myth of cultural purity*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Ramnath, Maia. 2005. Two revolutions: the Ghadar movement and India's radical diaspora, 1913-1918. *Radical History Review*, 92, pp. 7-30.

Rao, Anupama. 2020. The work of analogy: on Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste the origins of our discontents*. *L.A. Review of Books,* 1 Sept., https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-work-of-analogy-on-isabel-wilkersons-caste-the-origins-of-our-discontents/.

Redding, Jay Saunders. 1954. *An American in India: a personal report on the Indian dilemma and the nature of her conflicts*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.

_____. 1951. *On being Negro in America.* Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.

Rowan, Carl T. 1991. *Breaking barriers, a memoir*. New York: Harper Perennial.

_____. 1956. *The pitiful and the proud*. New York: Random House.

_____. 1952. *South of freedom.* New York: Alfred A Knopf.

Shaffer, Robert. 2012. J. J. Singh and the India League of America, 1945-1959: pressing at the margins of the Cold War consensus. *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 31 (2), pp. 68–103.

Slate, Nico. 2012. *Colored cosmopolitanism: the shared struggle for freedom in the United States and India*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

_____. 2009. I am a colored woman: Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya in the United States, 1939-1941. *Contemporary South Asia*, 17 (1), pp. 7-19.

Solanki, Durgesh. 2020. Isabel Wilkerson's caste: the origins of our discontents. *The White Review*, Oct., https://www.thewhitereview.org/reviews/isabel-wilkersons-caste-the-origin-of-our-discontents/.

South Asian Regional Conference, Ceylon, 1951. *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Volume 6, p. 1672.

Tagore, Rathindranath. 1950. *Annual* Report. n. p.:Santiniketan Press.

Tate, Merze. 1955. A personal report on an American Negro in India. *Journal of Negro Education*, 24 (2), pp. 130–2.

_____. 1943. The war aims of World War II and their relations to the darker peoples of the world. *Quarterly Review of Higher Education Among Negroes*, 12 (3), p. 169.

Vijaya, Ramya. 2020. Isabel Wilkerson's 'Caste' examines similarities between caste in India and race in America, *scroll.in*, 5 Sept., https://scroll.in/article/972167/isabel-wilkersons-book-caste-examines-similarities-between-caste-in-india-and-race-in-america.

Wilkerson, Isabel. 2020. *Caste: the lies that divide us.* New York: Random House.

_____. 2010. *The warmth of other suns*. New York: Random House.

Yengde, Suraj. 2022. Global castes. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 45 (2), pp. 340-60.