

Black Lives Matter in the US: Do Muslim/Dalit/Migrant Worker/Dissident Lives Matter in India?

Monday 15 February 2021, by [MUBAYI Vinod](#) (Date first published: 1 July 2020).

The unprecedented outrage spurred by the murder of George Floyd by a racist policeman in Minneapolis has led to a situation where systemic change in the way state oppression of the minorities operates in the US is on the agenda. Battered by the pandemic, African-Americans finally revolted at yet another murder of a black man by a white cop and the familiar, despicably brutal manner in which it was carried out: strangulation. What happened to Floyd in Minneapolis had happened to Eric Garner in New York a few years ago and to other black and brown men earlier who had also struggled with the cops as they helplessly pleaded “I can’t breathe.” But while protests had also erupted after the earlier killings by the police they usually died down after a few weeks. The dynamic after Floyd is different. Perhaps, a line too far was crossed, one straw too many was placed on the camel’s back. Take your choice of metaphor but the outcome has been little short of stunning.

Protest marches continue to occur in many cities and towns in the country, including those where the minority population is less than 5%, with calls for fundamental changes in the way minorities are treated by the police. Even in metropolitan cities like New York, Chicago and Los Angeles that have significant numbers of African-Americans and Latinos, young whites are often in the majority in the protest marches, 60% compared to 25% Black and Latinx in a recent survey of many protest marches in major cities over the last several weeks. An article in Jacobin magazine of June 22 that references these statistics emphasizes “the most important, and potentially consequential, difference between the current protests and any we’ve seen in recent years: the racial and ethnic diversity of the current protest wave.”

As significant as their broad ethnic diversity is the content of what the protest marches are asking for. They include several variations on a set of basic demands for radical changes in policing, in what cops should do and how much funding they should get. The whole panoply of violence piled atop violence by men with guns as the answer to social problems of mental health, homelessness, drugs, and above all hopelessness is now being articulately called into question by the young marchers. Never mind that they themselves are often facing police brutality too at times, egged on by “leaders” like Trump and the widespread white supremacy ecosystem in the US, but one senses that if the demands of the marchers come close to being adopted, a seismic shift in issues of race, if not yet of class, is on the horizon. They have experienced some initial success; for example, schools in many areas have canceled their “arrangements” with police departments that would send armed cops to take care of disciplinary issues in schools. Of course, it’s far too early to say how far and how fast the George Floyd moment can lead to lasting change in US society.

The US was born as an explicitly racist country where slavery was legal. Even after Emancipation and the defeat of the slave holding Confederacy in the Civil War that followed it took only a decade

and a half for the institutions of slavery to re-establish themselves de facto in the Jim Crow era that lasted for almost another century before the great civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s were able to demolish its legal foundations.

But the roots of racism and racist thinking run deep, the institutions of what has been termed 'racial capitalism' remain powerful and the forces created and authorized by the state, i.e. the police, charged with protecting power and privilege, still largely controlled by whites, display these racist biases in full measure. The behavior of the (white) ruling class led by President Trump and Republican Party politicians exemplify racist thinking but some form of this permeates large sections of white society. So Black Lives Matter is bound to be a long and hard struggle even if its currently pervasive spread gives rise to some optimism.

The place occupied by African-Americans and Latinos in the US is matched by the status of Dalits (lowest in the caste hierarchy) in India. India's social oppression of its lower strata is a lot older than slavery in the US, bearing the hallmarks of the caste system that solidified perhaps 2000 years ago. In the last six years, however, ever since the right-wing Hindu fundamentalist regime led by Modi was elected first in 2014 and then re-elected last year, the religious minorities, particularly Muslims, have joined the Dalits as objects of social oppression subject to brutalities, including frequent lynching, by Hindu mobs with the local police either active participants or indifferent onlookers.

Given this background one may ask what is happening in India where the pandemic after a slow start is now in full swing? The travails of the millions of poor migrant workers in major cities, beset by the twin markers of caste and class and, in some cases, religious identity, abused and beaten by cops as they tried to make their way back to their villages hundreds of miles away, were covered in the news media but their suffering went largely in silence. Did anyone come out on the streets to protest their treatment at the hands of an uncaring government and a vicious police force? At the same time, the state's prosecution if not persecution of the Muslim minority, who had earlier dared to mount some of the largest and most creative non-violent protests seen in the country since the Gandhian era against unjust citizenship laws, has continued unabated even in the face of the pandemic as is its drive against those who dare to dissent with the policies of the regime in any manner. The legislature has conveniently shut down since the pandemic began and what is more distressing is that much of the judiciary has become a rubber stamp for the executive. This gives the police a free hand to put anyone who opposes the regime in jail under draconian laws. In many cases, those released on bail by a judge or magistrate are immediately rearrested under other charges.

Suhas Palshikar, writing in the Indian Express newspaper, describes the current Indian state as one where "criticism is almost seditious, claiming rights for marginalized sections can be termed as waging war against the state and empathizing with victims of social injustice is ridiculed or forbidden."

Some thoughtful commentators have asked if a George Floyd moment is possible in India? Compared to Black Lives Matter can one ask if the lives of Dalits or Muslims or the migrant workers or of those who oppose the regime's policies matter in India? The answer, based on current evidence, is surely no and it seems doubtful that these lives will matter in the near future either.

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