



Opinion

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Mind-Filled Caste Prejudice: Labeling Caste-Discriminating Pride Names in Biological and Social Contexts

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Abstract

During the Hindu Vedic period, value systems and social connections were primarily influenced by caste divisions. Members of different castes are expected to act in a manner that is deemed appropriate, adhering to the varna system, which upholds disparities in values and types of work. Although the Indian constitution prohibits the practice of “untouchability” in relation to the caste system, it continues to manifest in various forms within contemporary society itself. A significant number of individuals remain unaware that caste-based discrimination persists in India, where certain animals still bear caste-related and derogatory names. For example, terms that disrespect specific caste have been widely used in both biological and social contexts. This article will explore uncommon names for animals that are either caste-discriminatory or caste-privileged, alongside more neutral terms currently used in India.

Keywords: Prejudice; Caste-pride; Caste-discrimination; Animal names; Biological-Social contexts

Opinion

The term “Pariah” is used to describe two beloved animals: The Indian Pariah Dog (Figure 1) and the common Pariah kite, which is now more commonly referred to as the Black kite (Figure 2) (Both species can be found throughout India.) Any indigenous dog that is either stray or lives freely in the wild may be labelled as the “Pariah dog.” In India, the most prevalent raptor species is the common Pariah kite [1]. These large brown birds of prey congregate around garbage dumps, scavenging on insects, lizards, rats, and frogs. The term pariah, originating from lower caste terminology, conveys associations with free-ranging behaviour, unattractiveness, blackness, filth, impurity, disregard, and subordinate status.

Conversely, the Brahminy kite (Figure 3) is associated with a higher caste designation. This striking raptor features a white head, neck, and breast, complemented by a vivid rusty red colouration on its upper body [1] In Hindu culture, this bird is considered sacred and is honored as “Krishna Parundhu”. Its name is derived from the revered Hindu higher caste, symbolized by Lord Krishna, which traditionally consisted of temple priests adhering

to their designated varna. However, presently, a broad spectrum of higher caste individuals engages in various advanced white-collar professions such as banking, entertainment, media editing (both visual and print), information technology, and the judiciary. The Brahminy starling, or Brahminy Myna (refer to (Figure 4), is a small avian species characterized by a distinct black crown atop its head, a yellow bill, and a brownish body colouration [1] Additionally, the blue and lustrous Brahminy blind snake (Figure 5) remains concealed underground in wooded regions. The ruddy shelduck, recognized in India as the Brahminy duck (Figure 6), showcases orange-brown plumage with a lighter head, while its tail and wing flight feathers are black, contrasting with the white covering on its wings. The Brahminy river turtle, also called the crowned river turtle (Figure 7), symbolizes the ‘Kurma avatar.’ These turtles lay eggs underwater and possess a shell characterized by a large, moderately flat, dark brown or black carapace (the upper surface) along with a yellow or black plastron (the lower surface). The preferred upper caste descriptors connected to these creatures encompass terms such as superior, pure, beautiful, radiant, and reverently esteemed.



Figure 1: Indian Pariah dog.



Figure 2: Black kite, previously called Pariah Kite.



Figure 3: Brahminy kite.



Figure 4: Brahminy starling, or Brahminy Myna.



Figure 5: Brahminy blind snake.



Figure 6: Ruddy shelduck or Brahminy duck.

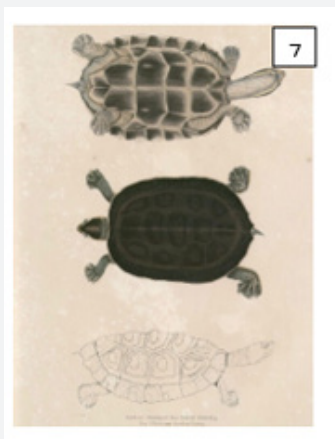


Figure 7: Brahminy river turtle or crowned river turtle.

The Social Context of the Term “Pariah”. The Rig Veda, a highly contemporary Hindu scripture, articulates that the four essential social classes-Brahmana or priests, Kshatriya or warriors, Vaishya or traders, and Shudra or servants-arose from the entity of Brahma, the Creator. Warriors are said to be born from the arm, businesspersons from the stomach, servants from the foot, and the Dvija priests from the mouth of the Creator. As indicated in the Rig Veda, “Pariah” individuals belonging to the untouchable category are identified as outcastes due to their births from their respective mothers’ ‘yoni’ instead of from Brahma’s mouth, arm, stomach, or foot. The term “Pariah” is described by the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language as “a member of a marginalized group, a social outcast, no matter their social status,” reflecting a more rigid social hierarchy that specifically marginalized certain individuals as Pariahs. The caste system in Tamil Nadu relegated Pariahs, or untouchables, to a lower societal status. The expression “Paraiyar,” the plural version of the caste designation “Paraiyan,” translating to “(hereditary) drummer” in Tamil, is the source of the English term “Pariah.” In reality, however, these individuals constituted one of the four ethnic groups referred to in the Sangam literature “Purananuru,” recognized for their expertise in literature and art, their prophetic abilities, governance, their adherence to Buddhism, and their strong resistance to the Vedic/Hindu tradition and the Varna system. While they comprise 30% of India’s demographics, members of this group prefer the contemporary label “Dalit”- which denotes “crushed/broken and downtrodden”- people in modern times [2].

In English, the term “Pariah” made its first appearance in 1613. The enduring period of British colonialism in India significantly influenced its adoption into the English language and its evolving meanings. M. C. Rajah, one of the notable figures from the Pariah caste, served as a powerful advocate for the Pariah community. He led the All-India Depressed Classes Association in 1928 while he was a member of the Madras Legislative Council during British rule. He played a crucial role in the initiative to eliminate the term “Pariah” from official governmental publications [3] Diwan

Bahadur Rettamalai Srinivasan is a Paraiyar icon and was a close ally of Mahatma Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar. He is commemorated today as a key figure in the Scheduled Caste movement in India. In 1893, he established the Adi Dravida Mahajana Sabha. Rettamalai Srinivasan served as a representative for the Paraiyars during the initial two Round Table Conferences held in London in 1930 and 1931 [4]. C. Iyothee Thass Pandithar was an activist in India who challenged the caste system and engaged in Siddha medicine. He is recognized for his embrace of Buddhism and for co-founding the Panchamar Mahajana Sabha in 1891 with Rettamalai Srinivasan. His grandfather, Kandappan, unearthed manuscripts of the Thirukkural, the Tiruvalluva Maalai-which highlights the contributions of Valluvar-and the Naaladi Naannurru, also known as Naalatiyaar, a collection of poetry from the Sangam period. According to various records, Kandappan protected these texts from being lost after he found the manuscripts on palm leaves buried among cooking waste. He ensured that these precious works were sent to Ellis, where they were later published. Consequently, this term’s application in historical societal records has faced considerable examination since the early 20th century.

Mahatma Gandhi rebranded it as “Harijans” (children of the God Hari/Visnu, or simply, children of God) because he found the designation “Pariah” intolerable. In a national television debate, Indian politician Subramanya Swamy labelled former LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran as a “Pariah”, whereas former UK Prime Minister John Major remarked that Saddam Hussein, the former president of Iraq, deserved to be restrained and beaten like an international “Pariah”. While zoologists use the term “caste” to describe the organization within eusocial insect communities, the concept of caste within Indian society differs significantly from its role in insect populations. Biologist Stephen Jay Gould [5] rightly stated that “drawing parallels between biological evolution and human cultural or technological changes has caused far more harm than benefit.” Moreover, the practice of naming animals based on their caste has eluded the scrutiny of sociologists and biologists for centuries. The English designation “Pariah” undoubtedly

disparages an indigenous Indian caste. When it appears in news media, it conveys the notion of an outsider [6]. Esteemed journals such as *Science* from the United States and *Nature* from the United Kingdom continue to apply this term in social discussions.

For instance, an article in *Science* characterized Libya's scientific progress as transitioning from a "Pariah to Science Powerhouse," while a *Nature* article referred to a drug user as a "Social Pariah" [7]. Recently, the term "Pariah" has been featured in scientific articles titled "Facing the Pariah of Science" [8,9]. However, this term has been used twice in a biological context in India's *Current Science* journal [10]; therefore, other journals should refrain from adopting this biological framework. The mass media should practice caution in utilizing terminology that perpetuates caste discrimination, especially since the United Nations conference on racism, racial discrimination, and xenophobia held in South Africa in September 2001 associated racism with Casteism. Common phrases that continue to express pride while perpetuating discriminatory meanings in various social situations include Brahmanal café, Agrakaram (Brahmin village), Kaalani ("Pariah" hamlet), and Cheri Bhasai ("Pariah" dialect). In English, the term "Pariah" seemingly suggests a derogatory meaning that diminishes an indigenous caste group. Conversely, the "Pariah" caste group has produced numerous intellectuals, inventors, social reformers, scientists, politicians, bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, writers, celebrities in cinema (including directors, musicians, actors, and technicians), and athletes. Therefore, the negative implications associated with the term "Pariah" in both social and biological contexts ought to be avoided or removed. Regarding historical connections, the Paraiyar community is now openly claiming their Pariah identity.

For instance, the term does not originate from drummers; instead, it is derived from the word "Parai," a measurement tool for grain used in the state of Kerala undoubtedly stated that Parahs were historically landholders or zamindars. In temples, residences, weddings, or any setting, one can be certain to observe the Nelpara. The Para was the traditional unit used for measuring

paddy in households across Tamil Nadu and Kerala until modern alternatives became available. In summary, we suggest that the terms associated with pride (Brahminy) and those that discriminate based on caste ("Pariah") should be refrained from or removed altogether in biological and social contexts due to their links to historical societal biases that weaken the unity of India. Nevertheless, the pride linked to caste within society motivates the marginalized group to agitate, organize and express their frustration against, and the application of these labels in biological and social context reflects the very prejudices and discrimination associated with caste.

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