

Opening Words

B. Ambedkar

"It is usual to hear all those who feel moved by the deplorable condition of the Untouchables unburden themselves by uttering the cry "We must do something for the Untouchables". One seldom hears any of the persons interested in the problem saying ' Let us do something to change the Touchable Hindu '. It is invariably assumed that the object to be reclaimed is the Untouchables. If there is to be a Mission, it must be to the Untouchables and if the Untouchables can be cured, untouchability will vanish. Nothing requires to be done to the Touchable. He is sound in mind, manners and morals. He is whole, there is nothing wrong with him. Is this assumption correct ? Whether correct or not, the Hindus like to cling to it. The assumption has the supreme merit of satisfying themselves that they are not responsible for the problem of the Untouchables."

Meditation

Ambedkar found fundamental flaws in Hinduism, especially the focus on fixed hierarchies, and spent his adult life seeking an alternative religion. Shortly before his death in 1956, he publically converted to Buddhism. He was a strong advocate of religious change when religion impeded one's personal growth and that of one's society. He wrote, " It befits only a fool to say that one should cling to one's own religion only because it is ancestral. ... Our progress is not possible without change. Conversion is a sort of change. And if no progress is possible without conversion, it becomes essential. The matter of ancestral religion can never be a hindrance in the path of a progressive man." We ask that you ponder those ancestral beliefs that may need to be 'let go of'.

Reading

B. Ambedkar. "The Hindu masses are of course incredibly heedless in the formation of their beliefs. But so are the Hindu leaders. And what is worse is that these Hindu

leaders become filled with an illicit passion for their beliefs when anyone roposes to rob them of their [beliefs'] companionship.

The Mahatma is not exception. The Mahatma appears not to believe in thinking. He refers to follow the saints. But is is equally true that dependence on saints cannot lead us to know the truth.

Insofar as he [the Mahatma] does think, to me he really appears to be prostituting his intelligence to find reasons for supporting this archaic social structure of the Hindus. He is the most influential apologist of it, and therefore the worst enemy of the Hindus.”

Sermon

I am honored to be asked to speak here today, though Paul was a bit bemused when I said I'd rather talk about Bhimarao Ambedkar than Gandhi. And while not diminishing Gandhi's amazing achievements and the focus on non-violent social movements that has been so important in our own society, as well as India. I am going to present a side of Gandhi usually ignored and not known, esp in the west. I hope you'll understand that Gandhi wasn't always a saint, in fact far from that, and that his views on those who were 'low', whether in India or Africa are actually quite appalling. So I hope to give you all a new hero, while I challenge the hero status of Gandhi. Ambedkar, to me, is much more closely attuned to Martin Luther King than Gandhi is.

I want to talk about Gandhi, Ambedkar and untouchables. But some of you may have seen the recent press on Gandhi's sexual 'experiments', his sleeping naked next to teenage girls, also naked, under a cover. Whatever they were called, these acts were highly abusive. The reports are true. I'd be glad to provide sources, but that is not my topic today.

So --, a brief lesson on untouchables. India has thousands of caste groups, somewhat loosely grouped into 4 categories called varna or the 4 varna, chaturvanra, as Gandhi referred to them, and a fifth group outside of varna, translated into English as untouchable. Amongst the untouchable there are also a multitude of caste groups, themselves ranked. (not sure tense to use here.. I will speak primarily in the past tense, but I assure you that for most Hindus, this is still definitely true today) You were born into your caste and you couldn't change it. Your caste defined your level of purity, an innate bodily substance that couldn't be changed. Untouchables were the least pure and Brahmins the most pure. If you were born an untouchable and touched a person from the 4-varna, your innate bodily substance would pollute them. Depending on where you lived,--because the rules varied across the region-- your shadow might pollute a high caste person, your spit on the ground might pollute them. You could not touch water in a pond or lake that high castes used, nor could you share their wells. You never touched their food, though you could eat the leftovers of those higher. Untouchables live in separate hamlets, and not surprisingly, were barred from schools and had no prospects. Even today, in the village where I have done research for 50 years, the untouchable children sit separately at school --but are now allowed to attend--and must eat on a hillock near the playground, not on the playground itself. They are still not allowed in the village temples or into high caste houses.

But untouchables are largely today referred to in India by the term Dalit, a term popularized by Ambedkar. It literally means being 'pressed down' or oppressed, coming from a Sanskrit term meaning to push down or submerge. Contrary to the cover of the UU magazine some years ago, it does not mean 'broken people'—a cover heading over a photo of a group of nicely smiling women. Dalits were and are not 'broken', though obviously there are individuals who 'break' under the pressures of the powerful, just as there are in any community but esp those at the bottom of the econ and pol scales. But the use of broken by UU angered me then and continues to do so. For today, in respect of Ambedkar, I am now using Dalit in (most of) the rest of this talk, though it is not used beyond very narrow circles until the

1970s and 80s. Gandhi would not have used it nor did Ambedkar till near the end of his life.

My thoughts re Gandhi are formed out of a series of events, starting with being a student at Delhi U. in the 1960s where I took a course on Gandhi. He was a hero then, for sure, though I had a quote in the paper for that course that now appalls me—more on that in a minute.

Then about 10 years ago, I saw an Indian film on Ambedkar at the SU Human Rights Film Festival. This film clearly highlighted Gandhi's unwillingness to seek social and political change for the Dalit community. While Gandhi did attempt to get some temples to open their doors to Dalits, he advocated the truth of the caste system, the four varna system, and was adamantly against intercaste marriage. To Gandhi, The caste system was the core of Hinduism and Hinduism with its clearly defined hierarchies and roles was the ideal social system.

So Gandhi called the Dalits harijan, the children **jan** of god –**hari**. But did little to change their actual roles in society and very strongly denied them access to political power.

A seldom recognized fact about Gandhi was that he really disliked those at the bottom of the social hierarchy—wherever. Here are two quotes, one about Africans and one about Indian villagers.

At a speech in Mumbai in 1896, he said that the Europeans in Natal wished “to degrade us (indian) to the level of the raw kaffir (African native) whose occupation is hunting, and whose sole ambition is to collect a certain number of cattle to buy a wife with, and then, pass his life in indolence and nakedness.”

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/09/03/what-did-mahatma-gandhi-think-of-black-people/>

That takes me to the quote in my undergrad paper,

Take the case of our village folk. From their childhood upward they toil and labour in their fields from morning till night like their cattle in the midst of whom they live. *Their existence is a weary endless round of mechanical drudgery unrelieved by a spark of intelligence or higher graces of life.* Deprived of all scope for developing their mind and soul, they have sunk to the level of the beast. Life to them is a sorry bungle which they muddle through anyhow (emphasis added).

-- Gandhi, *Village Swaraj*[i](#)

I can assure you that the village folk with whom I have lived for some years and whose poverty in the 1960s was pretty extreme had way more than a spark of intelligence.

It is worth noting too that Gandhi believed in the ideal village community, organized through Hindu categories of status (caste), self supporting in all ways and interacting little with other communities. This was actually a popular view in the 1920s and 30s, supported by European research that was heavily biased. It later becomes contentious as Gandhi's view of the ideal India—the self sufficient, hierarchial village community—the one where you spun your own cloth—would not lead India to modernity and industrialization.

I need to add one more political figure to my own understanding of Gandhi, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the 'father' of Pakistan. While teaching a course on Pakistan a few years ago, I showed a film on Jinnah, who was often criticized for not being 'muslim enough, esp not wearing Muslim clothing. But the film also contrasted Jinnah, who was kind of neutral looking religiously, with Gandhi, who is anything but neutral. When you meet someone, what do you first note, even before a word? Their appearance. And you judge on that. Gandhi epitomized Hindu, really marked it. (HOLD UP PIC). That, to me, makes it remarkable that he could advocate communal harmony when he was Hindu to the core—and his language was too—

satyagraha, ahimsa, and more. I can understand why Muslims distrusted him, as he didn't talk and look how he sometimes preached.

Now to Ambedkar, who as you all now know from story time, was an Dalit who caught the eye of one of India's many Rajas. In 1907, he became the first untouchable to attend the University of Bombay. His academic career was funded by the Raja of Baroda. This patronage was all important. From there, he went first to Columbia in 1913 when he was 22 years and then to LSE. where he earned another MA, a PhD and became a barrister. At Columbia he earned two MA degrees and a PhD.

Vowing as early as the 1930s not to die a Hindu, he converted to Buddhism shortly before his death in 1956. About his conversion, he said, "Because we have the misfortune of calling ourselves Hindus, we are treated thus. If we were members of another faith none would treat us so. Choose any religion which gives you equality of status and treatment. We shall repair our mistake now. I had the misfortune of being born with the stigma of a Dalit. However, it is not my fault; but I will not die a Hindu, for this is in my power" (from Roy n. 23)

Millions of Dalits eventually converted as well, though as we should know from our US experiences, what you claim to be doesn't mean that others acknowledge it. You could deny being a Hindu, just as you could deny being a slave in the south in 1865, but your high caste/one time slave owning neighbors didn't usually change their behavior toward you.

Ambedkar firmly believed in the Gandhian non-violent protest and launched several initiatives, including a major opening of a lake to Dalits in 1927, a movement not supported by Gandhi. After the Dalit drank from it, it was purified by the Brahmins and again denied to Dalits.

What Gandhi said was that he believed in caste. He believed in hereditary occupations. But he believed that everybody should be treated equally and loved by god—that they were harijans, children of god. Ambedkar recognized that a claim to be loved by god did not make one loved by other humans.

Ambedkar said caste is about entitlement: who has the land, who has access to water, who has access to education. Caste has everything to do with hierarchy and ancestral occupation. You are born high—or low—and you are limited in professions to what that birth is. No one but sweepers will clean toilets, and one but a Brahmin can be a priest in the holiest of temples.

Ambedkar fundamentally believed that the social/economic system of caste had to go, and that the new India needed to give clear political power to the Dalits. Before partition, the idea that British India would be cut into pieces, one Hindu and one Muslim, became the plan, separate electorates were planned for Muslims to guarantee their political power. Ambedkar wanted similar electorates for the Dalits, who would otherwise lose any political power under the pressures of the high castes.

And he had much justification. Through the 1970s Indian local level politics was controlled by the economically powerful, largely due to forms of bonded labor and the power of the landowner who decided who to hire or not hire for his fields.

Only in the late 1980s and 90s was this power broken as the Indian economy opened. Some of India's states have since had Dalit elected leaders. This is not to say that Indian politics is not caste driven—it truly is. When asked if caste is important in modern India, I say yes—for politics and for marriage. And because it is so political, in the US and in India, for education—traditionally education was limited to the high castes, and the untouchables were not even allowed in schools due to their 'untouchability'. Higher education was even more limited.

Arundhati Roy in her introduction to Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste*, notes that

the Indian National Crime Records Bureau says a that non-Dalit's commit a crime against Dalits every 16 minutes. Every day, 4 Dalit women are raped by touchables. Every week, 13 Dalits are murdered and 6 kidnapped. (p. 21)

The examples re caste and politics abound. Just last week, a young Dalit woman tragically committed suicide after her mother had won an election against a high caste male. That man's family, angry, gang raped the daughter, who then committed suicide. A pretty high price to pay for winning a local election.

In Karimpur where I do research, 5 years ago there was a highly contested election. The Brahmins won because they put all their votes behind one candidate, while the low castes split their votes amongst several. Despite the low castes being a majority of the pop, the low caste candidates lost by a narrow margin, leading to stone throwing by an angry Dalit group (that I got caught in one day).

Just over a week ago, a Dalit student at one of India's major universities committed suicide after being kicked out of his university.. Comment on role of pol in universities

This suicide followed a political dispute between the All India Student Council –a far right organization closely allied with the Modi government and high caste elites-- and the Ambedkar Student Union. Some also said that it was because the Dalit doctoral student was intellectually threatening to his peers. In any case, convinced the univ admins, itself high caste, to expel the 5 Dalit student leaders.

To sum up, Gandhi said, "I believe that if Hindu Society has been able to stand, it is because it is founded on the caste system....to destroy the caste system and adopt the western European social system means that Hindus must ... give up the caste system. To change it is to create disorder.")collected works 9, 226) Roy p 26
As Ambedkar noted, political emancipation of the Dalits means disrupting the structure of Hinduism.

Ambedkar, in contrast, shares much with King, whom our Syracuse community

celebrates tonight at the Dome.

IN a speech to Memphis sanitation workers shortly before his assassination in 1968, King said: “When there is vast unemployment and underemployment in the black community, they call it a social problem. When there is vast unemployment and underemployment in the white community, they call it a depression.”

King and Ambedkar shared this truth: they both knew that real equality could not be achieved simply through the elimination of bad prejudiced thoughts, of thousands of years of religious indoctrination. They knew that real equality would only come through radically changed economic and political structures. Laws and policies had to change so that the oppressed got fair treatment no matter what bigoted thoughts people might still harbor. (adapted from an article in Wash Post, Jan 21, 2016)

Closing Words:

Karthik Bittu, a faculty fellow, University of Hyderabad, wrote this in a letter in memory of his recently deceased Dalit friend,

I know only a little glimmer of how painful being alive in this world was for you. And how you still loved the world, the universe. You had just lost hope in people. Because they, we, could not create a world without the twisted thorns of caste that maliciously wrought the pain you were forced to feel, the pain you fought against tirelessly, impatiently. You were pricked by every injustice, and this is what I want people to know.

I want people to know that you were not only an aspiring scientist. You were a researcher already, and your rationality, your thirst for knowledge, informed your approach. At a time when so many science students and teachers see science as routine lab work divorced from rationality, who see no contradiction in wearing their caste threads while investigating the genetic basis of diabetes in the afternoon, who are paradoxically the bulk of students shepherded into the rank and file of the ABVP by a Brahmin-dominated scientific and academic establishment which

equates science with obedient and unquestioning study – you had liberated yourself from these chains and you knew that paradigm shifting science was always historically done by discarding authority and asking questions, and often paying for asking those questions with one's life

But the system is bloodthirsty. Our attention spans are bloodthirsty. Society needs dead bodies before it reacts in unpredictable ways. The unpredictability is what shakes society, has the potential to create temporary accountability. What is harder is systemic change.

In honor of those caught in prejudicial systems, I invite you to join us in We Shall Overcome as our postlude today.