

CONTESTING MARGINALISATIONS

Conversations on Ambedkarism & Social Justice

Volume 1

Interviews by

Vidya Bhushan Rawat



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DEDICATION

I am ever indebted all those who gave their precious time to converse with me
and enlightened me with the depth of their knowledge.

Mr Bhagwan Das

Mr N G Uke

Mr V T Rajshekar

Mr L R Balley


Dr R M Pal

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

It gives me immense satisfaction to present before you this volume of conversations with eminent Ambedkarites and human rights defenders who have spoken fearlessly and with great conviction on the issue of caste discrimination and untouchability in our society. I am hopeful that these conversations will be able to provide further clarity to those who are in the movement as well as those who are interested in the history of vast anti-caste discrimination movement in independent India after Baba Saheb Ambedkar.

I would like to thank all the individuals who gave their precious time to me during these conversations and gave an as detailed answer as possible.

In conducting these conversations, many friends helped me in recording these conversations. I would acknowledge my dear friend Vivek Sakpal - Mumbai Abhishek Indrekar - Ahmedabad, Bhaskar Sur - Kolkata, Sanjay Mishra - Delhi, Pankaj Gautam - Varanasi and Ms Swechha in Mangalore. I also acknowledge the support and connectivity provided by Mr Anil Gaikwad and Sangh Priya Gautam in Mumbai and Nagpur, who took extra pains in arranging many of the interviews. I am also thankful to Mr Manish Jain, a very dear friend for editing many of these conversations.

I would like to inform here that not all the interviews are based on the transcription of the videos that we have done. Most of the interviews are based on my questionnaire that I send through email to these friends. I would like to particularly put on record the help provided to me through transcription of some of the conversations by my friend Mr Bhupinder Singh, Canada, Ms Sowmya Siva Kumar, nik Mutha and Ms Vidita Priyadarshini.

I am thankful to People's Literature Publication for agreeing to publish this volume which I hope will be of great importance for all the students of Ambedkarism as well as human rights movement in India.

Vidya Bhushan Rawat

Delhi, July 2017

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INTRODUCTION

Conversations are an important part of our lives through which we can also preserve the oral history of our time. While those who are authors, historians, social scientists by profession, do get opportunities to express their expertise at various platforms not only speaking at forums or seminars but also writing scholarly papers too, there are hundreds of others, who might not have a 'valid' 'professional' qualification yet have wide experience of social movements that we study.

The year 1990 was tumultuous for several reasons. The first one was the Mandal phenomena and the second was the counter-strategy of the Sangh Parivar. I came to Delhi during this phase only and my understanding to the whole movement started after I saw the calumny and sinister propaganda by the media against Mandal Commission Report. In the 1980s when Punjab was burning, we had one man who wrote passionately against the state terrorism was Arun Shourie, who also advocated against the capital punishment. Some of us who were growing as young adults in those years saw Shourie as one of the few persons defending our right to freedom of expression and choices. But by the 1990s Shourie's frustration with Mandal became a turning point of his embracing hardcore Sangh Parivar agenda. It was revealing to me but by that time I had also come to realise the media's Brahmanical propaganda and how it became highly an upper caste media to protect their interests. The one man who sharpened my understanding of Indian media's brahmanical character was V T Rajshekar, Editor of Dalit Voice which during that period really became the voice of alternative Dalit-Bahujan media. He was blunt and did not lack the vocabulary to counter the lies of information by the so called mainstream media.

The first generation Mandal Commission Report in 1990 had more support from the Dalits and Ambedkarites than the OBCs themselves but it had shown the way. Ambedkarites and OBC political leaders, social activists were joining hand for a common cause. There was more interest in Ambedkarite literature. Actually, 1990 was the year of centenary celebrations of Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar and the government of India has formed a big committee. Baba Saheb's literature became hugely popular as for the first time in Hindi heartland the original volumes were being translated in Hindi and spreading like wildfire. A large number of Ambedkarite were already bringing journals and magazines. The quest for digging history of injustice became part of all those who were looking for a new world beyond the confines of caste hierarchies and discrimination based on the identity of your birth. Ambedkar, Phule and Periyar became the most powerful combination of articulating the narratives of the Bahujan movement.

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This was the period when I was struggling for a modest living in Delhi and came in touch with great Ambedkarites like Mr. Bhagawan Das and N G Uke apart from many others. Mr V T Rajshekhar was already speaking to people through Dalit Voice and has a huge following in states like Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. There were many others who were strengthening Ambedkarism through their own simple efforts. I would visit Bhagwan Das ji at his Munirka residence and also of Mr Uke. We would speak on the phone regularly. During 1990s, I used Sony Handycam to record many conversations and interviews whenever I went on a 'mission' as I found that useful to record than taking note which would not give me a correct picture. I felt this video Handycam very useful tool for my work purpose and writing an assignment.

Bhagwan Das ji was also well known through his enormous work of bringing out the Ambedkar volume. Whenever I went to him, I would just want to listen to him numerous anecdotes and stories about Dr Ambedkar. Some of them were so interesting and important that I felt that they should have come in the book form but I was not a publisher so one day I felt that it is time we need to record conversations with all those people who are working for the cause of human rights, secularism and Ambedkarism.

By 2004, I had been able to convert many of my field visits and clippings into small 30-40 minutes documentaries. Those were the years when digital cameras were not available and once you do a video, it was difficult to digitalise it unless you go to a studio for the same. Due to lack of resources, I kept all these video tapes with me as I did not have the idea of what to do about them. It was difficult to even see your own tapes unless you have the mechanism at home but when youtube provided the option to upload them after editing, I decided that I will have it. Friends suggested that I must go for a professional Sony Cam which most of the channels use these days, as that would make my film quality better and probably I would be able to screen them at various places. I went by this advice and felt that time has come to record conversations with people also and use it at a certain point of time whenever necessary.

My first interview in this regard was with Mr Bhagwan Das. I used to visit him whenever I found time and told him that I wish to interview him. He smiled. It was difficult to interview a person who you idolise. Nevertheless, I had so many issues coming in my mind that I thought I must seek an explanation as I felt that being one of the pioneers, his voice is important to be recorded for future generations. I went to his home at Munirka. I had none as an attendant or a camera person because for a conversation you need free hand otherwise it will never be of that quality. I had a friend Sanjay Mishra who was a novice but I had taken him, asking him to be behind the camera for some time whenever I would sit with Bhagwan Das ji asking him questions. He was there but I had to

handle the camera most of the time. The interview went for three hours and I know Mr Bhagwan Das ji became quite exhausted that day but we felt happy that we were able to digitalise him and may be generations will know about him and his enormous contribution not only through his work but also watching him on videos and youtube.

The second interview that I recorded with was late N G Uke who was one among those sent abroad for higher or expertise education by Baba Saheb Ambedkar. Uke Saheb too had lots of memories related to Baba Saheb but my trouble was that I was all alone. I did neither have money to hire someone or some associate so I went alone to his home at Vasant Kunj and took an interview of him. I came in touch with Uke Saheb at a programme in Ambedkar Foundation where he introduced ‘Ambedkar Samaj’, an organisation founded by him, which in his opinion would be an enlightened society of the dreams of Baba Saheb Ambedkar. He was one such person who was always rational in expression which I found among very few people.

During the same period, I recorded a conversation with my mentor and guide Dr R M Pal, who was editor PUCL Bulletin and taught me values of human rights and humanism. That was the time when Dr Pal was confined to his wheelchair with a paralytic stroke about a year ago but he fought well and was in control though confined to wheelchair. He spoke very well on the current crisis in South Asia and about religious fundamentalism. He was an important person of human rights defenders who went to Durban Summit against Racism, Xenophobia and caste discrimination. The importance of this conversation with Dr R M Pal, who was a very close associate of legendary M N Roy is that Pal Saheb actually guided me to write a paper on Ambedkar Roy relationship which makes a fascinating reading and bring out some hitherto unknown facts about them. Dr Pal was one of the leading lights of the civil liberties movement in India who guided me a lot in the context of libertarian values of Ambedkarism and its close association with humanist values espoused by M N Roy. Dr Pal was one of the most vocal speakers that I have seen who would always speak of violation of human rights anywhere. He was the first person to have spoken about caste based discrimination within the mainstream human rights movement particularly at PUCL through his writings.

After the current dispensation took over in Delhi, we know how history is being targeted and distorted. I felt our time has started. We know how dirty the mainstream media which many are now terming as manuwadi media, has decided to play role of the whipping boy of the government and dictate its agenda. During Emergency, despite pressure, a large portion of media still had people’s concern in mind. The government media blocked the news of the opposition but today the situation is much more dangerous. With fake news, the

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biggest threat to civil liberties and human rights is emerging from crony media which is distorting facts and constructing news in their studios and editing desks. It was at that time, I felt that time has come to record conversations of activists, writers and others to put them online in the greater public interest. We did not have a fund to pursue this but felt that if opportunity comes to visit any place, I will not allow it to go unused and hence a camera became my best friend to use my time positively. So, in a real sense, our conversation series started in April 2016 when our friend Vivek Sakpal and Anil Gaikwad encouraged me to continue with it and promised technical support in relations to their editing and uploading on YouTube. So while I was able to do numerous conversations in Nepal, in UK and with numerous others in India, the Maharastra's historical connections came through Anil Gaikwad and Vivek as both of them worked hard in introducing me to people and getting them ready for interview. And this was absolutely historical with diverse range of people. We had Dalit Panthers founder J V Pawar and Raja Dhale agreeing to it at one end while eminent Ambedkarites like Sadanand Fulzale, Bhadant Nagarjun Surai Sasai, Suhas Sonawane, Vijay Surwade and many others. The conversations with them were extremely important and revealing. While Sadanand Fulzale was witness to huge mass conversion in 1956 led by Baba Saheb Ambedkar, Bhadant Nagarjun Surai Sasai, a Buddhist monk from Japan who settled in Nagpur much earlier need no introduction as his contribution to strengthening Ambedkarite Buddhist movement is acknowledged by all. Among all the Ambedkarites world over, two individuals and their work will ultimately make you feel understand what were the weaknesses of it. Mr Vijay Surwade and Mr Suhas Sonawane not only documented things about Baba Saheb Ambedkar but have been associates of Mrs Savita Ambedkar, a woman who faced a lot of flak and criticism in the movement being made responsible for the 'killing' of Baba Saheb. The two interviews exposed various interest groups inside the close circles who wanted to use the opportunity to up their political career. The conversations provide a lot of thoughts for future thinking and honest appraisal of the movement for better mobility and organisations in future.

In the meanwhile, I was also able to record conversations with Mr V T Rajshekar, Editor, Dalit Voice, at his home in Mangalore. Rajshekar does not open up to anyone and it took a lot to pursue him speak though I personally feel him responsible for my curiosity and joining the Ambedkarite movement. The other important conversation that I was able to record was with doyen of Ambedkarite movement and Editor of Bhim Patrika, Jalandhar, Mr L R Balley. It was so informative and impressive, to say the least that was not known about how he came into movement and how the RPI and Samata Sainik Dal in the past had raised the issue of land reforms at various political forums. Balley had been a bitter critique of the BSP and late Kanshi Ram's politics, maybe he

himself was a veteran who contested against the then Defence Minister Sardar Swaran Singh and made him sweat despite all his money and power. In movements and democracy differences are bound to happen and we must take it to learn lessons from them. There is no need to be hyper about it as persons like Balley with his commitment and conviction to Ambedkarism only bring strength and lots of learning for it to grow further. In Chennai, I was able to converse with Mr K Veermani but sadly his office associates kept the recording and have not been able to send me despite repeated reminder. That interview was brilliant and spoke about the Dravidian movements and the challenges it had but sometimes the politics and insidious mechanism that exists at various 'institutions' that the big people remained either ignorant or unaware of them. We had no way to contact them but that is a sad part.

During these conversations, I had a lot of issues. Most of those who knew me had no issue speaking and barring out but there were a few who were very difficult to pursue. One of the person was very upset with mine just informing him that I met a certain person who was speaking very positive of him. This made the person so disturbed that he asked me if I speak about the certain person again then he is not going to give us the interview. That showed the high level of insecurity among people. There was another who claimed to have been a close associate of late Kanshi Ram and felt betrayed after BSP was formed. Now, he was ready to speak everything but only those things which he wanted to speak. I told him in a conversation we do speak and respond to questions. If the intellectuals felt so insecure of 'being' misquoted then there is no way you can speak in public life. And this happens when we go through common friends and all are present.

Three conversations that we recorded brought out the details of the Dalit Panthers movement. In Mumbai, our conversations were enriched by great thoughts of Mr J V Pawar and Mr Raja Dhale, both are actively writing in Marathi. Now, Pawar has written about the Ambedkarite movement in English too. It is essential to understand Ambedkarite movement in action to study rise and demise of Dalit Panthers movement. In Gujarat, the one man who took the challenge and led from the front is Valji Bhai Patel, whose conversation gave us detailed ideas of Baba Saheb Ambedkar and his linkages with Gujarat.

The most fascinating thing that I found in these conversations was the passion of Ambedkarism among them particularly who have migrated to UK. The first generation Ambedkarites from Punjab had kept the memories of Baba Saheb with them. His name is so sacred for them that have few parallels in the history, a man who has inspired a whole generation of people and now to the entire oppressed communities. The story of Ambedkarites in UK is the story of how hard work and passion makes you successful if you are given equal

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opportunities. The conversation with Ms Santosh Das, President, Federation of Ambedkarite and Buddhist Organisations UK, Arun Kumar, General Secretary, FABO, Mr Bishan Das Bains, former Mayor of Wolverhampton are simply the history of their struggle and successes in UK. Ms Santosh Das is not just an eminent Ambedkarite but also a celebrated civil servant in UK who was awarded Medal of British Empire (MBE) while Bishan Das Bains is the first South Asian to have become Mayor of Wolver Hampton in 1983. Mr Arun Kumar has given details of the struggles of Ambedkarite in UK including his own experiences of dealing with caste discrimination which is very important for all those who wish to document rich history of the movement. Last year, I was invited by Federation of Ambedkarite and Buddhist Organisations (FABO) for their International Conference on the commemoration of Dr Ambedkar's one hundred years at London School of Economics where Prof Amartya Sen was the chief speaker. During the visit to UK, I was able to record a conversation with about ten veteran Ambedkarites at various places in London, Southall, Birmingham, Bedford and Wolverhampton but shockingly in the month of August 2016 while travelling to Uttar Pradesh, my baggage was stolen during the journey and I lost essentially my huge database. This disheartened me a lot but fortunately, that did not deter me pursuing things positively.

During the recording of these conversations, I realised that they need to be responded in textual forms too because when we are conversing, many things misses and many answered are not framed that way so I send a written questionnaire through mail to a number of people. Many of them responded many felt that they have already spoken to me so did not. The written textual replies are remarkable and become reference material for future generations. We have tried to transcribe a number of the conversations here.

In this volume we are also putting several important conversations outside the traditional Ambedkarite circles but who are keen observers of it. These three will be important for people to understand the dynamics of other movement elsewhere which come close to Ambedkarite movement. To understand the self-respect movement of Periyar in Tamilnadu we have a fairly detailed conversation with S Rajadurrai and V Geetha, two eminent scholar on Periyar's movement there, the importance of African American movement in United States in relations to Dalit movement in India with Prof Kevin Brown, Indiana University and Mr M Chakma from the Chakma Hill Track of Bangladesh on the whole question of indigenous people in that region. The interview also reveals a much ignored issue of the Adivasis during the transfer of power in the region. We feel it will give people a broader understanding of the movements for autonomy and identities elsewhere.

Mr Anand Teltumbde is a well-known scholar of Ambedkarite and left movement in India. The interview with him gives a critical analysis of the situation around us and how can we move ahead. Dr A K Biswas is former Vice Chancellor of Dr Ambedkar University, Muzaffarpur, Bihar, a former civil servant who is a respectable historian now, give in detailed how the upper caste left have ditched Dalits in West Bengal. Conversation with him throws open the issue of Ambedkarite with left. The importance of this volume lies in bringing different shades of conversations so people draw their conclusion from these and strengthen the values and ideas that Dr Ambedkar espoused for.

Another important conversation that we must look at with positivity is that with Mr M C Raj, a prolific writer and founder of Bhushakti Kendra, in Tumkur Karnataka. Raj is brilliant with his words and critical of many things that he sees among the Ambedkarites. He has been candid in his observations of Dr Ambedkar. His vision of Dalit empowerment is contrast to many of the Ambedkarite as Raj's always found links off to the old cultural value system of what he termed as Adijans, and what he felt Dr Ambedkar ignored the greater issue of the Dalit identity. We had put some very critical questions to him and to his remarkable calibre and forthrightness he responded them with great openness without being hypocritical.

The two conversations from Nepal give diversity of thoughts. Comrade Tilak Parihar, is the first Dalit to have risen to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Nepal and his differences with Prachanda, he brings out a detailed analysis of class-caste combination to fight injustice while Mr Om Prakash Gahath Raj is an Ambedkarite who speak about Ambedkarism from a different perspective.

The conversation with Prof Kevin Brown from Indiana University is on the whole issue of discrimination against African American in the United States and how powerful is the African American movement and its similarities with the Dalit movement in India. Prof Brown is a regular visitor to India and has been interacting with the Ambedkarite scholars and activists in India, brings a refreshingly new approach on the entire issue. His interview provides a new approach to deal with the situation and how America was definitely well placed to address the issue than India as we are still a communitarian society while in the US, now individual matters the most and marriages are not a taboo. When we ask people to break the barriers of castes and identities, it will not be possible where community identities dominate the discourse and structure and hence the crisis in India pervades.

Many of the conversations mentioned here are available online on our Youtube channel Lokayat and might not have been transcribed at the moment but we will definitely try to put them in the next book. I had sent a list of a

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questionnaire to many of the friends so that the answers are framed in a better way and no chance of a confusion but then it takes a lot of patience to follow them up. I hope we have that so that people are not denied the huge knowledge base which exists on the ground.

I have included one important interview with Mr Anand Patwardhan who has been documenting things on human rights violation in India and does not need my introduction. His documentary 'Jaibhim Comrade' was both liked and critiqued by Ambedkarites. It is important to listen to the voices of those who have been the friends of Ambedkarite movement even when may not claim to be. The perspective might differ with others but ultimately it helps the growth of a movement. Diverse opinion gives us room to understand the movement and strengthen it.

I did try a lot to get some information from Pakistan. I got in touch with Dalit Sujag Tahreek in Sind which is spearheading the Dalit identity movement but unfortunately, most of the people that I send my questionnaire were unable to respond despite repeated reminders. I am still pursuing them in hope that when we bring out the next document of this series, we will definitely have some of them speaking from Pakistan.

I do not wish to write a lengthy introduction as you will find them in these conversations. My aim was to bring these diverse voices to one platform through conversations and put them online too. The hope is that in these times of crisis these refreshingly honest conversations will give people in the movement as well as political parties new ideas to fight against injustice and discrimination. At the time when there is so much happening in India and forces interested in weakening the movement for social justice and human rights are on the rampage, it is time we learn a lot from historical Ambedkarite movement and listen to those voices who worked with Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar, dedicated their lives for the cause, tried to understand him in letter and spirit so that we get a better understanding to develop our ideological grounds without which we cannot fight the rabid caste minds which are polluting the socio-political environment of the country at the moment.

This is my first effort and I hope despite various technical difficulties and glitches I am happy that we succeeded in bringing out this volume but it is my promise to bring more volumes of thoughtful discussions with intellectual activists in South Asia so that the voices of reasoning and humanity are united in their common struggle against religious right wings dictating our political discourse and controlling our mindsets. I do regret my inability to interview some of the people, I had tremendous respect. I lost some of the tapes too. One of them was my very dear friend Prof D Prempati along with who, I travelled a large part of the country trying to build up a political movement as

well as intervene through intellectual discourse. The other important person I regret not able to record the conversation with late K. Jamnadas who was a great scholar of Ambedkarism and Buddhism. I went to meet him in Chandrapur, spoke to him, took some photographs and recorded some of the conversation but my camera ditched me as we came out, I was in a rush. I had to travel to Bhopal by bus from Chandrapur. Next morning, I found that all my data was lost. It was a loss I never recover but since I am not that professional who is doing it for business interest, we know laxity or lack of know-how of the technical things cost us heavily.

There is a huge information and knowledge waiting to be recorded at various levels. Unfortunately, we remain unconcerned many times but I am happy that with the many people are doing so passionately. Mere technology will not bring the desired results unless we have passion. My video recordings are definitely not of great quality as I did not have the luxury of hiring professional camerapersons or editors yet for me the issue of recording was more important and that made me reach so many of them who are not with us today. I am satisfied that these conversations with some of the most outstanding Ambedkarites, known for the dedication to the cause and many others who might or might not be categorized yet whose contribution for the cause of the marginalized is well known, will provide us enormous food for thought to take the caravan of Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar into the right direction. This is the beginning and we hope in the coming years we hope to continue to tradition of recording movement for social change and social justice as well as those of human rights in the greater interest of democracy so that people enjoy their freedom without any fear or favour. We hope these conversations will give us ideas to strengthen anti caste-anti patriarchy movement to make India truly a secular socialist republic as envisaged by Baba Saheb Ambedkar and many other leaders of our freedom movement.

ADVOCATE BHAGWAN DAS*

First human rights defender after Baba Saheb Ambedkar to raise untouchability at various international platforms including United Nations.



How was your childhood? Where were you born?

BD: My childhood is slightly different from the general impressions people have about the untouchables. My father came from a well-off family because his father had business in three cities -- in Shimla, Ambala and Lucknow. After his death, there were some differences between the brothers and my father came to Jatog near Shimla where we had a house and settled down there and he started life afresh at 3 rupees per month watching wireless towers.

But he was educated and he couldn't go to school but his father engaged a tutor and two brothers took to studies. The other two were more interested in drinking. My father and his younger brother were interested in studying and studied Urdu and Hindi.

My father came to Shimla. He tried to find a job, but he couldn't get a job so he found a chowkidar's job and started working at a post office as a sweeper. Later on, he joined the wireless office also in the same capacity. But he had a house of his own, saved money and used to spend time reading and his hobby was Ayurveda.

We had a custom in the family that somebody had to be adopted as a guru and the man he adopted as his guru was a medical practitioner, Ayurvedic and Unani. His interest got stimulated but he took special care to educate me and my sister. We used to go to school but he engaged a Maulvi as a tutor who used to teach for an hour in the evening. You can imagine I was a very different person in a sense because not many people belonging to the untouchable community will have parents like him. He saved money, he bought a house, today we own four houses in that place, so he was financially well off and spent most of his time with books and Ayurveda, besides his job.

* Late Bhagwan Das was one of the most reputed scholars on Ambedkarism and the issue of Human Rights of Dalits. Widely travelled, he was the person who brought Babasaheb Ambedkar's volume in public life when the governments were not interested in them. He was the first human rights defender after Baba Saheb Ambedkar who spoke of untouchability at various international platforms including the United Nations. Bhagwan Das has spoken at various national and international platforms on the conditions of Dalits in India and what is the best way of their emancipation. In a freewheeling conversation he speaks of the state of Dalit movement as well as political parties in India. This interview was recorded in September 2007 at the residence of Bhagwan Das Ji in New Delhi. He passed away on November 18, 2010.

He put me in a school and I studied in a primary school. I spent two years in Balganj near Shimla and that was a lower middle school and one experience I remember about my childhood is that my father took me for admission to a school and the headmaster was very pleased. He said "I have checked him, he is a good boy and will make progress" and my father like most people happened to say "agar bhagwan ki marzi hogi to zaroor aap logon ke usse padhega." The moment he uttered the word Bhagwan, the headmaster got wild. What is Bhagwan? What does he do? What has he done for you people? So that was a new approach altogether about Bhagwan that I got from my headmaster. I became curious. At home, because the atmosphere was fairly religious and we had close contact with the Christian missionaries of foreign origin, British, Australian, and American and for me it was something very different and something very new.

The moment he came to know that I belong to an untouchable community he said why didn't you tell me earlier. Now I have touched you and have to take a bath, and Shimla was very expensive to take a bath so then I came and told my father that this was how the headmaster behaved and my father came again to the headmaster and the headmaster said "Alright you don't go to the drill, you sit in the library and read books." So I sat in the library and read books. I don't know if he admonished this headmaster but I didn't go to the drill classes. These are some of the memories I have.

VB: Did the headmaster belong to an upper caste family?

He belonged to the upper caste but I think in those days in Punjab there were three movements which were affecting the intellectuals. One was the Arya Samajist movement, Dev Samaji movement and there was some inclined towards Marxism, atheism and that kind of thing and a small group was becoming interested in Gandhism. I am talking about the late 20s and early 30s, I think he was influenced by some atheistic organisation and he didn't have much faith in Hinduism. That's why he said that.

After that 6th class, I had to go to some high school, so the teachers from the SD School and the DAV school used to come to these lower middle schools. There were two boys from our class, me and Jatindernath. Jatindernath was a very intelligent boy. Either he stood first or I stood first. But this time he was first and I was second in the class. His father was inclined towards Arya Samaj so he went to the DAV school and the headmaster from the SD School took me to his school. I didn't know much about the Sanatan Dharam and others but I think I didn't come across as an untouchable in the SD School but then came a Brahmin teacher, religious saint or something and delivered a lecture. He said that every boy must put on a tilak in the morning when he finished his prayer and the second thing you must recite is the Gayatri mantra 108 times: "om bhūr

bhuvah svah, tát savitúr váreṇ(ī)yaṃ, bhárgo devásya dhīmahi, dhíyo yó naḥ
prachodayāt”

I mean that kind of thing and in the class, we had to repeat it 108 times, but when we tried to attend the class the peon who sat there with a bowlful of the paste, we were kept out - a Muhammadan, me and there was one more scheduled caste boy. We were told in case we dipped our finger it would get polluted. That was the only experience of that Brahmin religious leader. Otherwise, I did not come across any untouchability there.

But in my native place, untouchability was practised by the Hindus in turning on the taps and the barbers didn't cut our hair and (we) could not enter the temple. And we had to ask for some Hindu boys to get water in case we wanted to drink water, that kind of thing. But since my family was financially well off, we didn't experience any other difficulties. So that was my childhood.

VB: How was your education afterwards particularly Higher education?

BD: It was a tragedy. My father was barely 44 or 45 years old when he died in 1943. I was 16, and a month after that my house was burned down. It caught fire from the neighbouring house, it was owned by a Mirzai and in his absence, the fire broke out and spread to our house and everything was destroyed. These two tragedies took place within a short period of one month, and because of my age, I couldn't find a government employment early. I had been doing some tuition work and earned some money and gave to my father but a month before his death I found employment as an accounts clerk in CPWD in Shimla. An Account Clerk used to draw forty rupees plus his DA allowance of rupees 51.

My boss was an officer from Burma. He had come as a refugee from Burma and found employment. He was an engineer and I came to know later that from his younger brother, his name was Rangasami and he also belonged to Scheduled Caste but he was educated in Burma.

I worked there for a few months and then Dr. Ambedkar was elevated to the position of Labour Member during war time. His office was in Shimla, my father used to talk about Ambedkar as a child. He used to read, he was very fond of reading newspapers and the word in Urdu was written not as Ambedkar but Ummidkar and he used to say that he is not Ambedkar, but “Ummidkar”, a harbinger of hope. So, whenever there was any news published in these newspapers, he used to talk very proudly about this. But we didn't come across any biography or any other thing, excepting what was written against him in the Congress papers and in some Hindu papers.

The only thing favourable I had read was in the Kranti of the Jat Pat Todo Mandal published from Lahore and it was some Sant Ambey. It was only in that

magazine that I found anything in praise of Ambedkar, otherwise, most of the papers were critical of his approach. They said he is pro-British, he is anti-India, he is anti-Gandhi and all that kind of things.

I met him for the first time when I waited outside his place for seven hours because I was just a boy and all the people holding important positions, came, talked to him and went away. But his personal assistant said you keep sitting and I will introduce you to him.

About 7 o'clock when he was going to Mushtaq Ahmad Gurmani's house, I was taken in. He looked at my face and said, "Yes?" I was about 16 then. I did not go there or ask for anything specific. He said, "What do you want?" I didn't want anything. I was already employed so I told him that this is the situation and I would like to serve under you. He asked, "Have you put in an application?" I said I had sent one but nobody bothered.

Within 15 days I got a letter of appointment and I joined his department, Ministry of Labour, and I found that most of the Mohammedans were terribly against me and the Scheduled Caste people, not so much the Hindus because the Hindus there were rather progressive and well-educated people and some of them might be Arya Samajists- I do not know. Some were South Indian Brahmins and I found them more progressive because this Matlub Hussain was my immediate boss. He had some complaint against me because I was overburdened with work. I used to start my work at about 9:30 in the morning and keep sitting till 7 o'clock, working throughout, but even then everybody tried to exploit me and dumped his work. So, something was delayed and so Alam ur Rizvi was the in-charge. He was an IAS officer and Brig Rey was Director, Technical Training. He took me to Brig. Rey and Brig Rey looked at my face and said,

"How old are you?"

I said, "I am 16, Sir."

"You take more interest in your work."

He didn't say anything at all.

I resigned. Rather I left the job and joined the Air Force. In fact, when I went to the recruiting officer, I said wanted to go to Navy, because I had read a lot of literature in my labour department published by the Director, Publicity about Air Force and the Navy.

I didn't want to go to Army because many of my relations had served in the Army for two generations had been associated with it. But Navy appealed to me because I could go to the seashore and travel. But when I went to Jalandhar, for

final confirmation, the recruiting officer was an officer from the Air Force and he said, "Why are you joining the Navy, why don't you join the Air Force?" He gave me a test. I passed, and I was sent to Bangalore for an initial training.

I did my training there, then I did my technical training, which was very special training because radar was the highly secret department of the Air Force and Navy and I was selected for that and I underwent training there and was sent for advanced training to Belgaum and then I was posted to Calcutta and from there we went to the Burma front. But I was working with the Australians, British, and Americans and there were one or two Indians in our unit.

It was a very different atmosphere and I learnt many things in the company of these people because they had a very different approach and the Air Force was very different from the soldiers of the Army. They were well educated and I know that my immediate neighbour was a graduate of Oxford University and he was British and similarly some of the other persons were also well educated and their language approach was very different. So, it was for me an educational experience also. Then I was recommended for commission in technical training. I joined technical training and came back to Bangalore.

I was selected for commission and I was to go to the UK for training but unfortunately, they wanted me to pay Rs. 5,000 and I couldn't do that. In 1946 it was a big amount. I couldn't pay, I couldn't go to England. I was absolutely disappointed but then I thought I would leave Air Force and go back home and look after the family because mother was there and four or five members were there. The war was over, I had the option to continue or to seek release. So I signed for release and came back to Shimla.

There I had been working with Scheduled Caste Federation and I came across very progressive-thinking person's belonging to the Communist Party, and one prominent person that I remember very well is Prof. Kameshwar Pandit. There we read the Marxist literature and the Chinese experiences especially I came across the books written by Mao Tse-tung but who appealed most to me was Liu Shaoqi. I mean besides the Marxian angle, the other person who appealed to me was Liu Shao qi. He was with Mao and remained in power for a long time. Within that communist group, we used to hold classes and we used to read the latest literature published by the Communist Party of India, and Communist Party of Britain. Because British also had a Communist Party and the British leader I knew very well. His approach was slightly different from the other Marxists.

There, while I was associated with the Ambedkarean organisation Scheduled Caste Federation, being a government employee I couldn't take part in that but I was associating with the most prominent and upright characters leading the

movement then in Shimla. I used to do his writing work, correspondence, reading articles, and provide him with literature. He was not highly educated but a very well-read person. This movement was fairly strong but the Communist Party movement also appealed to me very much, and I think I was too young to make any distinction as to which was more correct. But then Ambedkar movement appealed to me more because the Marxist movement believed in the Marxian economic interpretation of history and didn't touch caste and untouchability.

But the Ambedkar movement had the economic approach as well as the social problem, the untouchables and the caste system. And that appealed to me and I continued but then for some reason, I had to come to Delhi. In fact, the office shifted to Delhi. So the house again got divided and I established contact with the Communist movement and the communist bookshop workers here. Dwarkanath Bali was one, Y.D. Sharma was one. Yagya Dutt Sharma had just come up and then we used to hold study circle meetings at night. When I say that I liked the Ambedkar movement more, but this was also there.

VB: Where were you staying?

BD: I was staying in Seva Nagar. It was a peon's house that we had hired. I couldn't afford to hire any other place. My pay was Rs. 40 or 50 a month and it was in that room I stayed for about 2 years. Then I shifted to Lodhi Colony with a friend who was an ex-communist; he was thrown out of the party by S Bhatnagar. He had been a whole-timer but was thrown out of the party, I don't know why. But he was very fond of reading, not Marxist literature anymore but generally. So I stayed with him and then I tried to hire a house and ultimately I was allotted a government quarter in Sarojini Nagar. My number was GIN 999, that was a memorable number.

I stayed there and here I came in touch with backward classes commission and Shivdayal Singh Chaurasiya from Lucknow. I used to spend most of my time in the morning and in the evening in Gandhi Peace Library, which was situated on Man Singh Road in those days. It shifted to a new place much later and Chaurasiya used to pass through the veranda and he wondered what I was reading.

He once called me inside and said, "What are you?" and I told him and he then put questions about caste. He said "It is very strange that you are very fond of reading," and after a few days he said, "I have a request to make." He was a member of the Commission in a ministerial rank. He said, "I am making a request." I was surprised and then said, "What is it that I can do for you?" He said, "Can you keep my son with you? I will pay the expenses." I was just wondering why was he thinking like that. Anyway, I said well but my

accommodation problem was there but I am prepared to keep him. He said it doesn't matter.

He kept his son with me. He was admitted in a school here and I used to help him in the evening. He did well at school. I had a brother in the school, and besides my brother and sister who were attending school, he also was one of the members of the family. And then Chaurasiya thought I should marry. I was not interested in marriage. I wanted to be a Bhikku and work among the scheduled caste people, according to the teaching of Dr. Ambedkar. Chaurasiya wrote a note of dissent of Backward Classes Commission. In fact, I did most of the writing because he was not great at writing. He was a lawyer alright and he took me to Dr. Ambedkar. He wanted to show the note of dissent to Dr. Ambedkar and Dr. Ambedkar didn't have a very high opinion about that kind of note. He said, "Leave it here and I will go through that," and then he put questions about me. He had forgotten that we had met earlier and then he said that so and so and so. I spoke most of the time in English and I offered to work for him and I said I can devote three days a week. He agreed.

I used to go there and work for three days in a week -- whatever work he gave me. Sometimes he wanted to get some information about certain books so I used to go to the library and get extracts from the books and give it to him. He himself had a very good library and I could just search for those things there. But after my work was over, I used to sit for about 10 minutes and talk to Ambedkar. I used to put my own questions and one question which shocked me was when he said we will embrace Buddhism. He said publicly and wrote a number of articles also and I said, "Babasaheb, I have a question about Buddhism."

He said, "What is it?"

And I said, "I come from Himachal Pradesh. We have Buddhist community there and we know. I, as a member of the untouchable community, know, that I cannot enter a Buddhist Vihara, how do you say that Buddhism is better than any other religion? And I said I have been in Burma, I have been to areas which were under the influence of Tibetan Buddhism and I have not come across anything worthwhile.

Buddhism I haven't studied much but in social terms, I haven't found anything much different there."

He said, "What have you done? MA in History or Philosophy?"

I said, "No sir, I am a poorly educated man, barely a matriculate."

After of about 10 minutes' time, he again put me a question, "Have you done MA in Philosophy or religion or anything like that?" I said, "It's not that, I am a very poorly educated person."

"Where did you get education then?"

I said, "Self-education."

"Well," he said about Buddhism, "it won't happen now, that's all." So I didn't put any more questions about Buddhism but still I studied, I saw his books, I saw his magazines, I went through the article that was published in the Maha Buddhist Society very seriously and since I had been very seriously studying religions like Hinduism, Arya Samaj, Christianity and Islam and Qadianis. And Sikhism also. Marxism and Buddhism appealed to me more than any other.

About Sikhism I had a very poor opinion because I became interested in Sikhism because I was teaching two children belonging to the Sikh religion. Their father was a doctor and he very often asked me to come to the gurdwara so I went to the gurdwara and then there was one religious festival on which they had their langar within the Gurdwara premises and one man asked this doctor, "Aap to choorey chamaron ko hamare saath bithake khila rahin hain." And that was shocking experience for me. In the gurdwara, I saw they are talking about caste.

Then I studied Sikhism and I found they had 10 gurus, all belonging to the Khatri caste. None married outside his own parental caste and the fourth guru included the teachings of saints like Ravidas, Kabir and others in the Guru Granth Sahab but in practice the Sikhs are no better than the Hindus because if there is a convert from the carpenter caste, he is a Ramgarhia, if he's a convert from sweeper caste, he is a Mazhabi Sikh, if there is a convert from a merchant class who sells drinks like wine, and liquor, they become Ahluwalias. So, where is the caste system gone? You have it thrown from the front door and it has come back through the windows and you have never started a movement to condemn caste-ism. So when I heard that man saying "Aap to choorey chamaron ko hamare saath bithake khila rahin hain" (he said it in Punjabi- "tusi te jee ssanu choorey chamaran naal bithake khila rahe ho") Shocking. Thereafter I never went to gurdwara. Anyway, I am just recounting my experience.

But after studying these religions very seriously and also Marxism, which was critical of Buddhism. But I still have that what Ambedkar was saying, it could make sense. Because the untouchables continue to follow the religion they are following, there is absolutely no hope of them ever uniting because if Hindus had been practising untouchability against these castes, but these castes themselves practised untouchability among themselves. Now for instance, if you go to a chamar house, he looks down upon a sweeper. And when you go to the

sweeper house, especially in northern Indian, the people who call themselves Balmiki. Balmiki will have nothing to do with Ahela, Dhanuk, Domar. They are all also sweepers because Balmiki movement started in 1930-31 and mainly it was started by the Arya Samajists because they were converting to Christianity.

There was one man by the name Ditta, born in Sialkot. He was a petty merchant. He used to take things for sale on a camel's back. He approached a missionary and asked to be baptised, but the Christian missionary didn't want to baptise, men belonging to the sweeper community. Because they were afraid that if these sweepers are converted and they start coming to church, everybody else will leave, and that is true. I don't know if you know that there is a custom in the church. In the church after the prayer, you share sacred water and when they share it with the same cup the people naturally feel very awkward, they simply touch the lips and pass on to the next person. But then they stopped coming to the church.

Well, it has happened in Delhi also. Holy communion in Delhi created a problem. In Kashmiri Gate church, you know that perhaps because the upper caste people became converted to Christianity after 1857. There were Muslim and Hindus, they became Christians. Later on when the Christian missionaries started converting the untouchables then they also started coming to the church and the Holy Communion created a problem. So the upper caste converts to Christianity decided to hold a meeting in the church, a prayer meeting, in the morning, and asked them to hold their meeting in the afternoon. So, the Kashmiri Gate church had two services, one in the morning for the upper castes and one for lower caste. But anyway this is what happened there. So, that thing became, I became interested in these things. Sikhism, I discarded, Buddhism appealed to me, but Buddhism was not practised in the sense it should have been.

So I studied Buddhism, I studied Ambedkar's literature, I studied Buddhist literature, I had discussions with him on several occasions, I had discussions with other people also, and I found that those who were interested in conversion was by name only, not inside because I have seen that in India, when people embraced other religion(s), they stick to the caste and here even among the untouchables you just can't get rid of the caste because the Christians in South India you might have seen, if a pariah became a Christian, then the upper caste people do not go to the church. Then the other caste belonging to the Scheduled Castes, they also don't have anything to do with these communities. So they have separate churches and services. They embrace Christianity but caste-ism remains intact.

I was interested in the Buddhist movement. Of course, he started it and Ambedkar, he converted a lot of people in Maharashtra -- they were mostly

from the Mahar community and only about a dozen people belonging to other communities. I was interested and I became one of the pioneers in this field but unfortunately, I was disillusioned because even in Maharashtra, the Mahars were the only people who came forward and the Maang were looked down upon by the Mahars and they didn't bother about the Chamars. Only one member of the Chamar community became a Buddhist, P.M. Rajbhoj. Otherwise, not many people responded. And even Mahars could not get rid of their twelve and a half castes. So I was disillusioned. Then I said that the practical way to adopt Buddhism and to follow Buddhism is to do what Ambedkar wanted us to do practically -- break the caste. One. And lay more emphasis on the moral teachings of Lord Buddha because Buddha's religion is nothing but moral teaching. This is one thing. Second, it is more scientific. It is not dogmatic. And there is very little room for blind faith in that. So this is what appealed to me and I started working among the people.

VB: Did you pursue higher education?

BD: That was through an accident. I applied for a job in one ministry which wanted people with experience in translation. I had written about 10 or 15 books by that time and translated some books in Urdu. Then Ann Johnson's book I translated in Urdu and there was one more book by an American writer that I translated in Urdu and Annihilation of Caste I translated in Urdu. So I applied for it but they wanted a person with Honours in Urdu and then after about three months...I thought it will take about three months' time. Meanwhile, with late fee I submitted an application to Punjab University for the Adeeb Fazil examination but they didn't call me for an interview because I was not a graduate. So after the Fazil I said I will sit for the English examination, so I did English, Political Science and Sociology. So that was my graduation. After the graduation I thought, I would sit for the MA. So I did MA in Political Science as a private candidate from Punjab University. And I joined the evening classes for LLB from Delhi University. So this is how I got educated.

VB: When did you finish your PhD?

BD: PhD I worked for it but I didn't write my thesis and submit to the University. It is very wrong as some people write my name as Dr. I am not. I have not done any doctorate but I have written 2 theses which were accepted by some university but not for the PhD degree. I am not a PhD.

VB: When did you finish your law?

BD: I finished my law in 1970.

VB: So you have been a student for a long period.

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BD: I joined the evening classes and it took three years. I joined in 1967-68 and passed in 1970. Then I was practising in the districts court with somebody, and ultimately I joined Sh. P.P. Rao, a senior advocate in the Supreme Court who was my teacher at the University. I became a junior in Supreme Court and had been working with the High Court and Supreme Court since 1978.

VB: What was the most important thing about Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar?

BD: The thing which impressed me very much when I met him for the first time. One, his love for learning, second his character. It was immaculately clean, his worst enemies could not criticise him, and his commitment to the cause of the untouchables but then when I was working in Labour, I found his interest in developing this country industrially and otherwise was equally good because under him there were two officers Brig. Rey and Brig. C.P. Clark and they started a special technical training for Indian students and under the Balance Scheme he sent a number of people to UK for undergoing training and he sent about six people belonging to the scheduled caste also for undergoing special training in the UK They came back and held very important positions. So, besides the scheduled castes and the other things, he was also interested in industrialising this country and creating rank and cadre to take up after the British leave.

VB: But did he believe in the same kind of vision that Gandhian vision of Khadi.

BD: Oh, no. Terrible. Gandhi, he didn't appeal to him.

VB: Like the way the village economy...

BD: No, nothing. Nothing of that sort. He wanted industrialisation. He wanted a kind of socialism different from communism. But he certainly was against Gandhian philosophy and Gandhi's method of working because Gandhi was marching backwards with face to the front.

VB: But like many people say, like he was not exactly what the communists think, but his vision also supporting private participation in our economy?

BD: So far as I know if you come across people who have read his book on Indian economics. One was his thesis which he submitted and the other was The Problem of the Rupee. There is an inclination towards more progressive thinking and rebuilding the nation on modern lines very close to Marxism. Not proletarian dictatorship but it is very close to Marxism. Because he was influenced by the Labour socialist leaders of the UK and some other countries, especially France and Germany.

VB: Because many people are now projecting Ambedkar as an anti-Marxist philosopher.

BD: Oh, no. That's wrong. He was not an anti-Marxist philosopher. But he was against the dogmatic people because a person like Dange for instance, and persons who wrote about communism were mostly from upper stratum of society and they were Brahmins by caste. So that kind of Marxism didn't appeal to him, but he studied Marxism very seriously and he studied the Labour Movement of Britain also and was much interested in modernising India and that is why when he was Labour Minister, he tried to introduce these things when he wrote the Indian Constitution.

You should go through his speeches which were delivered in Parliament. The inclination is towards progressive thinking and that is one thing in common between Nehru and Ambedkar and that has not been highlighted by the writers because they haven't done any independent research.

VB: A large number of them highlight and see that Ambedkar looked down upon Nehru.

BD: No. They had much respect for each other and Ambedkar was shocked because he was not a great admirer of Nehru before joining the government but when he was invited and he had the opportunity to talk to him, his opinion was very different.

VB: Ambedkar analysed the racial prejudices, the varnasharam dharma but do you agree that he could not materialise the anger of the Dalits into a vast movement?

BD: The trouble with the Dalits is that they are incapable of thinking and taking a decision. If he had a large following in Maharashtra it was mainly from the Mahar community, not because of his ideology but because of his caste association and other untouchable communities kept away. When he became an all-India leader after the Poona Pact after the Roundtable Conferences, then many people who thought that they were closer to that community they came and followed him but majority kept away. But when he got into power, he tried to do whatever could be done as a minister and he studied a lot and he worked a lot for that but the community did not support him.

VB: Do you think that anger is still missing? The anger against the varnasharam and today what do you think about the state of the Dalit movement in India after so many BSPs, RPIs and BAMCEFs?

BD: The trouble with the Dalit movement is when Dr. Ambedkar entered the field he started the Independent Labour Party and in the Independent Labour party had not only the untouchables but he also had the upper caste people who

joined as leaders in that movement. But in parties, he thought it is not enough so he started Scheduled Caste Federation (SCF) and that SCF was a party exclusively of the untouchables of India.

Then after the transfer of power in 1947, he was assigned the job of drafting the Constitution and pursuing it as a Law Minister. After that, he thought that in future India we don't need a caste organisation so the Scheduled Caste Federation became meaningless. He started the Republican Party of India which was not a party exclusively of the scheduled castes people. He had many people from other castes. He wanted to broaden the base and take up the economic cause and the social cause for the advancement of India. But unfortunately, the people who took over the leadership of the RPI they couldn't understand or did not try to follow him. So they converted the RPI into another Scheduled Caste organisation and then it got split on caste and state lines. Today we have three divisions of the RPI- they reached nowhere.

VB: And where are the BAMSCEF's and the BSPs?

BD: BAMSCEF is not a political party. BAMSCEF is a confusion because when they started this BAMSCEF they said backward and minority community employees' federation. If it is an employee federation, it is not a political organisation, one thing is clear. Second is BAMSCEF was actually started by some people in Poona, and Kanshiram was one person who didn't understand much politics in those days because he was working as a junior scientist in some Defense organisation. He joined that organisation only there and since he was a bachelor, they took advantage of that and they deputed him to come to northern India and try to establish BAMSCEF. So this BAMSCEF was actually Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation. There were no minority communities and most of the employees who joined the BAMSCEF belonged to the Scheduled castes.

VB: But they came from some particular community or ...?

BD: No, when they joined they were members of the scheduled castes and unfortunately Kanshi Ram doesn't have much understanding of sociology and politics of India. And he had taken advantage of the vacuum created because of the failure of the SCF and RPI. So the people who had been following Babasaheb Ambedkar's organisations they thought here was a new leader and BAMSCEF because they used the name of Ambedkar, they followed him they joined him. But then BAMSCEF, what is the message of the BAMSCEF?

BAMSCEF is trying to reach the consciousness of the people. It is not a party which can contest elections; it is not a party which has a political programme. This is not a party that has an economic programme, it doesn't even have a written constitution, it didn't have it for a long time. And then BAMSCEF said

when we come to power we shall have it and then afterwards the constitution was written and Mayawati also joined them.

But even today, strictly speaking, it is not a political party. It is still utter confusion and then BAMSCEF got split into three branches and each is speaking its own language and frankly I feel that it is dominated by the Chamar community in certain areas and in some areas of Vidharba, not in Bombay, it is dominated by the Mahars but it doesn't have an all-India appeal because it doesn't have an all-India understanding or an all-India programme, because to organize scheduled castes is not an easy job, because they are divided into more than 800 castes and there are castes and sub-castes and caste rivalry. You can't even unite the Chamars who are divided into more than 60 castes. You can't unite sweepers -- they are divided into about 12 castes and the so called Balmikis that are trying to dominate and Hinduize the whole thing but they can't carry Dhanuks, Helas and Domars and people in Banaras region who live and work as scavengers.

VB: So what we call a Dalit movement, an Ambedkarite movement, actually is just movement of certain castes, not all marginalised castes.

BD: Well, no. It was started by Ambedkar and some progressive thinking honest people came forward but then they had to go to the caste to find the following and caste dominated in their own particular manner. So the result is that it could not become an organisation and movement of all scheduled castes. It became a movement of only a few enlightened castes. But even those enlightened castes could not join together.

When I started the Ambedkar Mission, I made it a principle that anybody joining this organisation will have to give an undertaking that at least one member of the family will be married outside his parental caste. And that is the only proof to show that you don't believe in caste. It worked for some time and people did in my case. I have got about relations with six or seven different caste groups. Malas in Andhra Pradesh, Chamars of UP, Dhanuks of Ratlam and so on, but not many people could do it because unless you break the caste and what is the right manner to break the caste is to have closer social association second marital relations because if you do have marital relations, the caste breaks. But they don't want to have the marital relations. If you ask a Punjabi Chamar to marry outside his caste, he will say no. I am sorry I can't do that. But I don't believe in caste, I am sorry I can't do that. But I don't believe in caste. He would say that I don't believe in caste.

VB: But some people feel that to break caste the best option is to convert. Is conversion the best way to break caste or as a person, I spoke just a few months

back and he was saying that conversion is very dangerous for Dalits because it takes away the revolutionary spirit from them.

BD: No, it's a lack of understanding on their part. Look at it this way. If you continue to remain divided on caste lines you can never become a strong body, a force. You can never become. Even upper caste Hindus have not been able to become. It is the three castes which are dominating, and rest of these untouchable communities belonging to the Shudra, the ati-Shudra and the other castes are not united but in India we have Brahmins, then Kshatriyas is no longer alive, it is the Rajputs who took over because Kshatriyas joined in the name of Buddhism and Jainism they rebelled against them so new Kshatriyas were created such as Rajputs. Brahmins, Kshatriyas Rajputs and then a community that became powerful after Buddhism, even during Buddhism, because they had the opportunity to study and then they studied this Arabic and Persian during Mughal rule and then during British, English, the Kayastha community. That becomes the third most powerful community. So, today you have the most virtuous people among the Kayastha hoarding power. They are not so much in business so much but holding power and monopolizing education too, whether you are in Bengal where you have the three communities, the Brahmins, Vaidya and Kayastha or you come to other regions Bihar and UP and you go to Andhra you find Kayastha, so this is one community which has come up with the help of education and also because they took advantage of the opportunities offered by the bureaucracy and the political powers.

Today we have Brahmins, then we have Rajputs then we have trading communities, which is very dominating and then we have the Kayasthas. Outside these, all other Shudra castes are divided and the ati-Shudras are very hopelessly divided in spite of reservation because reservation gave them opportunity and it's only those communities who are more enlightened and took advantage of reservation. Not others. Now, for instance, if you go to Western Uttar Pradesh, you find that the Jatavs who are in business, who have the largest number of educated people, they monopolise most of the jobs. But what about the others? So, in case they continue to be members of these castes and they don't try to change and broaden the base, there is no hope. One. Second is, here you are strengthening Hinduism, the religion which exploits you, which weakened you which oppressed you are strengthening Hinduism because you are imitating the upper castes in all respects - marriage ceremonies, festivals, cremating ceremonies and other things. You are strengthening it and if you go on strengthening it you are not strengthening yourself. One. Second is in case they embrace other religion(s), what will happen?

Let's go to the history. They embraced Christianity, maintained caste. They embraced Islam but maintained caste because Islamic society is divided into three major religions -- Ashraf, Ajlafs, Afzal. Ashrafs are Sheikh Hussain Mughal Pathans who came as invaders and they looked down upon the people who converted here. They are included in the second category Ajlafs, and at the bottom are the working class people and the lower caste people and the untouchable people who are included in the Afzal. Of course, today they adopt the name, now for instance if there is a butcher, Khatik who converts to Islam, now what does he do? He says I am Qureshi because Qureshis came from outside and if there is a weaver, Julaha, and Julahas are an untouchable caste, he has become a Muslim, what does he say now? I am an Ansari, came from Ansar. I mean they are trying to hide it but the fact remains that the Muslim society is divided into three major communities, Ashraf, Ajlaf, Afzal and there are no intermarriages.

Religions like Christianity, Islam and Sikhism have failed because they were sticking to the original teachings of religion which acknowledge the presence of a god and the book says god created all men and all men are equal. In fact, they are not equal. So once he thought that if this thing continues and if they continue to remain divided on caste lines what is the future?

So he thought there must be a religion but what kind of religion? Now when he said what kind of religion, the question arises how is the institution of religion existing today? Religion is a nominal title for most of the people they don't care for the original teachings of the religion, they stick to it mainly because for political reasons and also because it gives them an identity and a history but majority of the people professing different religions have little knowledge about their own religion. They don't follow it, they only use it for marriage and burial. Nothing more than that.

So Dr. Ambedkar thought that we need to bring about a change, a revolutionary change and that revolutionary change is that religion has to be replaced and that religion has to be placed on reason, compassion and brotherhood. That's why he adopted Buddhism and Buddhism because of the teachings of Buddhism as Lord Buddha said at the end of his life, there is no place for God and he said you have to change but you have to keep in mind the general problems of people which can alleviate them and also unite them. So that's why he chose Buddhism but unfortunately, the leaders of Buddhism have not been able to carry that message to the people. They want to maintain the caste and at the same time call themselves Buddhists.

VB: One question which they say that most of these movements only catered to the need of the working classes, particularly the government employees, where there it is Ambedkarite movement or so-called SC/ST BAMSCEF movements.

They never reached the agrarian labourers and people say, we don't have the exact figures, but they say that 90% of the Dalits are the landless communities and when we talk about all these- reservations and other such things, most of these movements are basically among the scheduled castes people who are working and that is one reason why they feel that the movement has not reached to the most marginalized communities.

BD: The trouble is that he started the movement was quite alright and in chalking a programme how to reach 700,000 villages of India where 70% people live and people in the villages are worst treated by the dominating communities. If it is Maratha and Kunbis in Maharashtra, it is Jats in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab and Rajputs or non-agricultural communities in Rajasthan. He thought that Bengal is different because in Bengal because the community did not work in the land, the land went to the untouchables because of the reforms initially started by some progressive people and later on by the Marxists. So the land is with the untouchables today but not in most of India and 700,000 villages of India 70% people live. This movement which Dr. Ambedkar wanted to go to the villages, unfortunately, the leadership came from the urban areas, educated, semi-educated took over the leadership of the party and the movement didn't go beyond that. But there were some people who really tried to educate the villages but then working in villages is very difficult because the society is horizontally and vertically divided and the land-holding community is the worst enemy.

What Ambedkar did was to give a call to the people to migrate to the cities. So people who could not face the situation in the rural areas, they migrated to the cities in some areas but then the situation is different in different states. In Punjab it is different from UP, in UP it is different Bihar and so on. And in southern states, it was very different but in the southern states, the situation is slightly better in the sense because the land was owned by the Brahmins and the Brahmins have been thrown out in South India. But not in Northern India, where the land is not owned by the Brahmins, land is owned by other people and they are middle class people and these people could not organise themselves because they became Hinduized, and when you become Hinduized, naturally you try to look at them for guidance and protection. So, the village movement of landless people has not been initiated by RPI. They have it in their programme, they have it in the programme but it has not been promoted because most of the leadership came from the cities and they were more interested in winning reserved seats. And they exploited the poor people living in the villages for the purpose of elections only but didn't take up their cause.

VB: One of the most marginalised communities have been the scavenger communities among the Dalits. Do you think there is an invisible resistance to empower this community in vis-à-vis Ambedkarite movement?

BD: No, the scavenger community is not a community in a real sense because they are divided into about 12 to 14 castes in different parts of India, but in South India, the division is not that bad. In South India, for instance you go to Andhra, you find the Mala and Madigas are two major communities, of course, they have a number of others but the Madigas, 70% of the Madigas work as sweepers and Madigas are basically Chamar. So in south, the division is not that strict and hard as it is in northern India. In northern India we have about 12 or 14 castes and most of them are employed under the municipal corporations, municipal committees, cantonment boards, station staff officers, railways and these kinds of organizations and they have a long tradition of being exploited by the people promoted as jamadars in these departments and in spite of the fact that it is a very lowly occupation, people pay bribes to get jobs. So even in Delhi, you have to pay a bribe to get employed under the Municipal Corporation.

Unfortunately, in this community, efforts have not been made to unite the sweepers. Why, because you took up the cause in one particular area and the community which is living in a separate quarter, separate area is one community and then you try to pick up leaders from among them, mostly the jamadar would become a leader or a person having an ambition to enter politics, join a political party and then become the leader, A semi-educated person and so on. So, a majority of them are employed under the municipal corporations, municipal body and second majority is employed as private labourers working in the mohallas on the Brit system. So in Brit system you have hundreds of masters. If you are working in a mohalla, you have 40 or 50 families so naturally under their domination because they give you some money, some thrown out garments and in marriages and other days you get leftover food and you go begging for food every day also. So it is not one master but several masters, and efforts have not been made to unite them and if they unite because of the economic weaknesses, they don't remain united for long. So that is why these sweeper and scavenger community even today continues to be one of the poorest and most backward communities in India.

One reason is leadership, the second is economic status and you have to find a job and the third is you live in a mohalla where you have all the vices and this job doesn't need hard work. It is only dirty work, you don't have to exert very much, no physical or muscular activity but it's a dirty work and is looked down upon by everybody. So, these factors have created many problems which are secondary problems, for example, they are addicted to drinking, wasteful

expenditure in marriages, imitation of the masters and wishful expenditure on imitation. You see, until 1930s, 1940s, dead used to be buried, now they have become Hinduized so, they have to be cremated and if a person is to be cremated, naturally you need a lot of money and if you don't have money, you borrow. So this Hinduization has also weakened them.

So the reason is that efforts have not been made by the leaders to unite these people, to unite different castes and to make them acquainted with the programmes of the government. Even the commissions have not been able to do that and their cause has not been taken up properly and educationally they are backward because the dropout rate is very high and efforts have not been made to promote education in these classes. In one or two places schools were started exclusively for the sweepers but ultimately what has happened is that although the sweeper number went down and upper caste people went up in those schools. Allahabad and Jalandhar and Delhi. So there are many factors.

VB: Do you think there is a resistance among the other Dalit communities vis-à-vis these communities. Are there prejudices?

BD: There has been but then even among the Chamars and Mahars there have been prejudices against some of their own people. I think this is part of Hinduism. But among the sweepers, the Balmikis looked down upon everybody else. The so-called Balmikis who became Balmikis, who were adopted in 1931 -- they looked down upon the Dhanuks and Domars, Helas. So how can you blame it? This is part of Hinduism.

VB: How do you feel when you see the various Dalit movements empowerment in UP, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh? How do you think, what do you think about them? Are they empowering their community or they are identity-based movements?

BD: No. I have been associated with this movement from age 16. And I have also been associated with the labour movement. I personally feel and I have come across many people who are still thinking very correctly and they want to organise them on broad alliance. But unfortunately, the ambitious political people want to take advantage of the backwardness and ignorance of these people. They are creating problems and the result is the right kind of leadership is making efforts to come up, to educate them and to lead them but these pseudo politicians illiterate people with more ambition and less knowledge they are coming in the way and I think there is hardly a political organization which is free from this accusation -- Congress, BJP and many others. They have not been able to bring up the right kind of people and they want to encourage this tendency but I think the way the people belonging to the Scheduled Castes, including these sweepers, are thinking and the kind of articles being written in

their journals and in the smaller meetings and conferences what they are saying, I think there is some hope. It will take some time, some hope in the sense that the population of the right thinking is showing an upward trend. Now, for instance, could you ever imagine that the sweepers of Punjab will host the conference to have a mass conversion to Buddhism? They had it last year in Ludhiana.

VB: How many people converted?

BD: There were about 5,000 people present but converted I think was 2,000 people. So new kinds of trends are coming up, they don't get much publicity in the media and new kind of leadership is also coming up and then several meetings I have attended I have found they were talking sense, but unfortunately, they are helpless because they don't have the means.

VB: Do you feel that still people misquote Ambedkar sometimes? I don't say misquote but that political power is master key and this term is being manipulated in such a way that all they say that once you have the political power it can change everything from social and culture, sam, daam, dand, bhed?

BD: There was a time when he said that but you know when you are speaking of a political leader and you are addressing different kinds of audiences. You say so many things, but his real programme is, if you have to understand his philosophy, then there is a book *Emancipation of Untouchables* and Mr. Gandhi, Ranade and Jinnah. I think this is one of the best works that gives you his whole idea and political power is alright; you have to win political power but then you also have to get rid of the weaknesses within the society. He also laid emphasis on education. What is being done for promotion of education? So it is really wrong to say that he laid emphasis only on political power. So only people holding political power will be able to do anything. Because political power without ideology and right kind of workers means nothing, and I think it is misquoting Ambedkar, or they have not been able to understand that particular sentence where he said that political power is important because when he was speaking as a political leader and addressing a meeting of the SCF, he might have said that but then what is important is what about the other work? In a country like India where caste-ism is very strong, at every election gives it a further lease of life. So, it's not enough.

VB: How important, do you think, is the role of the State in Dalit empowerment? Now after globalisation, the state sector is continuously being disempowered; there are no jobs in the government. What do you think?

BD: This problem is very complex. Had reservation been properly implemented, then you could have about 10% or 15% people, but it has not been properly implemented. You have more people in the categories 3 and 4

not in 1 and 2, and now with the judgment of the Supreme Court, they are going to suffer more in the years to come and this globalisation and other things they don't attract that much attention by the oppressed and the weaker sections of the society at the moment. But then in globalisation, if the international movement of the Dalits is properly handled, even in globalisation they can have a share. If it is properly conducted because globalisation has a political motive, it has an economic motive and it leads to empowerment but what is behind those people who are trying to promote this idea. They are trying to solve their own problems, find the markets, create new markets, create new classes and then get hold of the power also. But I think in Western countries I found that there are more people today who are becoming conversant with the problems of these weaker sections of society and they want to take advantage of it. And that is not unlikely that within some years' time, they may even try to create a new kind of consciousness among these people.

VB: What would have been Babasaheb's thoughts on this issue of international cooperation and globalisation?

BD: It is very difficult to say because he was one man who was very rational in thinking but he always had the interests of the weaker section of society in his country. I don't know what he would have said about globalisation...

VB: What about his decision to join the Viceroy's Council.

BD: Viceroy's Council he joined because he wanted to be empowered and be able to do something for the weaker section of society and at the same time promote industrialisation and promote modern thinking. So he joined the Viceroy's Council, and really the kind of work he did during those years from 1942-46, I think it was remarkable because it was laying down the foundation of the industrialisation of India.

VB: Many people quote it like this, during Viceroy's Council just to say that "dushman ka dushman, dost" ("The enemy of my enemy is my friend")

BD: Oh, no. He never considered the British to be the friends but he got an opportunity because the British wanted to expand the executive council and they included so many other progressive Hindus also. So he was one person representing the Scheduled Castes but then he was the most capable and learned person among this whole lot he was taken in. But he had an economic programme which he tried to implement through this Ministry of Labour, which is considered an awful ministry. And through that Ministry of Labour, he tried to promote the industrialisation of India and also tried to create classes of technically trained people. Nobody had done it earlier.

Transcription by Bhupinder Singh

L R BALLEY*

Political battles can only be fought on Programme based Agenda

VB: Balley Saheb, when did you start Bhim Patrika and what inspired you to do the same.

LRB: I along with K C Surekh started it initially. Actually, Surekh who was General Secretary, Scheduled Caste Federation in 1946 used to bring out Ujala, an Urdu weekly which due to certain reason was closed as Sulekh went to the government job in 1952 so there was no newspaper as such for us. In September 1958, I started initially in Urdu, then in Punjabi and English and finally in Hindi since 1965. We decided to use word Bhim from Baba Saheb's name Bhim Rao Ambedkar to start the Patrika, a magazine devoted to Dr Ambedkar's mission.

VB: What was its circulation when you started it. What were your struggles in establishing it particularly financially as well as trying to get volunteers for it?

LRB: In 1957 general elections were called out. I belonged to Navashahar which is now a district in Punjab. I along with Bhaiya Saheb Yashwant Ambedkar jointly toured Punjab during this period and fielded candidates for Scheduled Caste Federation. RPI had not yet started though the resolution had already been passed on September 30th, 1956 at 26 Alipur Road, New Delhi, Baba Saheb's residence till his Mahaparinirwan. Hence when we went in campaigning during the elections, we addressed public meetings. Krishna Kumar who later became Krishna Kumar Bodhi and belonged to my native place had come to hear the speech of Baba Saheb's son, liked my speech very much. He was a businessman and tried to find out about me antecedents and he finally came to meet me and asked me whether you want to live or run away. I had left my government job because the last time when I met Baba Saheb Ambedkar on September 30th, 1956, he was very ill that time. I made a promise to him that Baba Saheb, I will spread that mission and ideology till the end of life which you

* Lahauri Ram Balley is one of the doyens of Ambedkarites missionary journalism in India. Based in Jalandhar, L R Balley started Bhim Patrika, in Urdu first, immediately after the passing away of Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar, leaving his government job in Delhi. Bhim Patrika became voice of Ambedkarites all over the country once it started publishing in Punjabi, Hindi and English and to do this tedious work, Balley Saheb did not have a very big dedicated staff. Even today at the ripe age of 86 years, he constantly works and suggests that working for the mission of Baba Saheb Ambedkar is his life, his soul, his breath. This interview was recorded at his office cum home in Jalandhar in August 2015



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have worked all your life. So it was basically inspiration by Krishna Kumar that I started the paper.

VB: Did you have any thought in mind that Baba Saheb won't live for long?

LRB: Yes, I felt so. After the meeting of Scheduled Caste Federation, he was seated in the verandah for fresh air. He fainted. So he was brought in and was put on oxygen for some time along with medication. I had been sitting there on a chair for many hours. When he got well, then I promised him. I was in the government service that time. I was not the member of Scheduled Caste Federation working committee but Dr Bhagya Singh was the new chairman of Scheduled Caste Federation in Punjab and I went along with him to introduce him to Baba Saheb. I was sitting outside as I was not in the meeting but this is the thing after the meeting. I was sitting on the chair and later went in and was there for long. On 6th December 1956 when Baba Saheb got Mahaparinirvana, I was in the government job, a permanent employee in the P & T department and got deposited one month's salary as desired according to service conditions, left the job and started working. I told Krishna Kumar that I am going to stay. Where will I go? He asked me to start a paper. Krishna Kumar inspired me to start the paper. He was not a Dalit. He belonged to Khatri, an upper caste, president of Arya Samaj, a big businessman of shoes and cloths. His family had many shops. He started supporting us. We started Bhim Patrika in Urdu.

VB: How much was circulation

Initially one thousand in Urdu, in Punjabi it was two thousand. People in Punjab don't read much but we made it live. I did not know Hindi. I knew Urdu and Persian. In 1965 there was a Morcha and I was vice chairman of the action committee of. I was the first one to be arrested on December 6th, 1964 along with my wife, daughter and son in Delhi. Magistrate asked my children but my wife said we will also go along with. I was in Jail for 70 days.

VB: What were the charges and what were your demands.

LRB: There were no charges as we were arrested during the agitation. In February 1965, we got released. Our demand were nationalised bank, redistribute land, a statue of Baba Saheb in Parliament, fulfil the reservation of SC ST in government jobs and many others like this.

VB: These were important demands which are not on the agenda of many of the Ambedkarites!

LRB: I have not only produced literature but also cadre. I placed people on work. There is a basti near the railway station, there are 250 homes from Maharashtra who had bad habits. I got them a loan from the bank on our

personal guarantee. I never believed in speeches alone. I wanted people to make stronger on economic as well as in thoughts too. Land Reform is important.

On June 15th, 1964, about 101 cadres of RPI came out on cycle to move towards Delhi for putting our demand to the Prime Minister. We used to eat Rotis on provided by people in the villages. In Seven days we reached Delhi to meet Lal Bahadur Shastri who had just become prime minister. He has just arrived. Our demand was that evacuee land be given to landless Dalits. We were given space in news. We met Shastri ji. He said you have come but go back to your town after 'touring' the city. We told him that we have not come here for that. Then, I went to meet Ram Manohar Lohia. He said I don't go to the PM but would send someone. After some time Shastri invited Chief Minister Comrade Ram Kishan and then the government allotted evacuee land to millions of landless scheduled castes. About 300 acres of land was allotted with my assistance to scheduled castes in Punjab in our city. Elsewhere many people actually got huge land against which a commission of inquiry was set up. So for us, it was work for the people that was more important.

VB: How did you come to Baba Saheb's ideology?

LRB: My uncle was a qualified Doctor, a Hakim. He was educated. He was the president of Nagar Palika i.e. Municipality of Nawashahar. He used to get a lot of literary magazines and journals. I was fond of reading particularly Magazines and journals published in Urdu by Jat Pat Todak Mandal's Sant Ram's BA, in which lot of writings of Baba Saheb used to get published. I came to know about Baba Saheb through them. My uncle was a member of the reception committee to receive Baba Saheb Ambedkar. Political leaders used to visit our family. My family was kind of reformed one and I can give them credit for what I am but later I studied a lot. I read each word of Baba Saheb.

VB: You met Sant Ram BA, President of Jat Pat Todak Mandal who became famous or infamous with his differences of Dr Ambedkar. What do you think about him?

LRB: He was basically a writer. He was an open mind person. He was a BA that time. He was engaged in farming and put animal bones as fertiliser. I used to meet him. His village was Purani Basi, Hoshiarpur. Basically, he was a writer. He wrote over 200 books to his credit. He was a great translator. One of his finest translation was "How to win friends" was translated in Hindi.

VB: The speech that Ambedkar wrote for Jaat Pad Todak Mandal as chair was never delivered because Sant Ram BA wanted to change some of its text. Did you ever discuss those issues related to Baba Saheb Ambedkar? Did he ever regret that Dr Ambedkar was unable to speak there?

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LRB: Actually, things are not that simple. It is in the same book these things are there. Jat Pat Todak Mandal has most of the Arya Samajis. Sant Ram BA was an Arya Samaji who consider Vedas as the sole authority. In his speech, Dr Ambedkar speech, he writes, free youth from the thralldom of scriptures. Now, for all the Arya Samajis, Vedas are sacrosanct and hence they felt offended. Har Bhagwan, who was a student in Christian college, wrote to Baba Saheb for amending his presidential address. It was not Sant Ram BA but Har Bhagwan who wanted Baba Saheb to amend his speech.

It was Sant Ram who introduced Baba Saheb through his paper particularly to Urdu speaking people. When Baba Saheb married again in 1948, Sant Ram went to meet Baba Saheb. Their relations were never strained.

VB: Arya Samaj has a lot of influence in Punjab, Western UP, and Haryana. We feel wherever Arya Samaj has a bigger influence, the attack on Dalits are very high.

LRB: It is not Arya Samaj. We can't say so. It is basically landed communities which are aggressive against Dalits. Arya Samaj was formed by Dayanand Saraswati. Arya Samaj was revived by Swami Shraddhanand ji. He was from Punjab only. His actual name was Munshi Ram. Bhagat Singh's uncle Kishan Singh was an Arya Samaji. We are creation of Arya Samaj. They used to put us in Schools. They used to give children wash in handpump. They never believed in untouchability.

I don't believe that Arya Samajis are attacking Dalits. Now as education is commercialised so has Arya Samajis. Read letters of Sant Ram BA and Swami Shraddhanand to Gandhi. They are very critical of Gandhi.

VB: You created a movement. You build RPI and Scheduled Castes Federation. Why Dalits could not influence Punjab politics?

LRB: After 1990s politics is changed. Politics after emergency was different. In 1967, we had two ministers in the coalition government of Gurunam Singh in Punjab. We had one minister with Charan Singh's government in Uttar Pradesh. We resolved many economic issues. What we are witnessing in Doaba is the results of our work.

VB: The economic status of Dalits in Punjab is better than any other state. Gujarat too is a powerful state but condition in Punjab are better. Is it because Sikhism ?

LRB: Dalits in Punjab are powerful. If we are beaten up, we will also give them back but Sikhism is the biggest problem. In Malwa, the condition of Dalits is very bad. They don't even have Pagadi. Malwa had old Riasats, like Patiala. So the caste system in the old Raja Razwadas is worst.

VB: How do you look at Ambedkarite movement in India today? Its Strength and weaknesses.

LRB: When I started working in 1956. It was too risky to take Dr Ambedkar's name. I have over 50 cases on me to rush me here and there. Even today, I have a case on me through my book "Rangeela Gandhi". I had to give 20 lakh as bond, Ten lakh in cash as FD and 10 lakh property. Only then, I was given a passport and that too for one year.

VB: What was there in Rangeela Gandhi that our government was afraid of it?

LRB: They banned it in Rajasthan. Here another book of mine 'Hinduism 'dharma or Kalank' was banned. I spoke in Jammu that Vedas contained nothing but forgery'. It offended some and they filed case against me under J & K. It was a historical speech of Baba Saheb on September 24th, 1944 that he spoke in Madras. I was taken from Jalandhar to Jammu to appear in the court. I know how difficult it was and how I survived.

VB: So you are facing from that day. Now everybody is afraid of Ambedkar.

LRB: Those were the years we were not allowed to organise meeting. That is our success that we have pushed Ambedkar so much that even the opponents are shouting slogan of Ambedkar. It is a success. But we never compromised on our principles.

VB: This is an important point.

LRB: I am a simple person. I always felt like an ordinary citizen.

India's intellectuals are dishonest. If you want to clarify please read Baba Saheb's book, 'The Untouchable'. There is a difference between an educated man, who is loyal to his caste, his community and sectarian cause, an intellectual die for his ideology. Our educated people, we can't call them intellectual, continue to compromise.

VB: You were committed people, who kept the name of Baba Saheb alive. You have done a lot of work. Brought out so many volumes like you and Bhagwan Das. Today, many parties have been formed of Dalits..leaders. You are saying that our leaders are purchased. Our parties are compromising.

LRB: I was in Delhi. I saw a car, written on a car plate was Republican of India, formed by Baba Saheb. It belonged to Ramdas Athawale, now a member of Rajya Sabha with the help of BJP and demonstrating in Delhi. What is it for? In 1966 RPI decided to ally with Congress. I resigned from the party opposing it. I contested 1967 under RPI Ambedkarite. We formed in Lucknow and fought elections all over the country. I contested against Swarn Singh, defence minister of India. WE never compromised. Most of the members who went to Congress

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actually compromised. See Barrister B D Khobargade got power and position. When communist went with the Congress faced the same. Feudal parties actually purchase the leadership of the poor and have-nots.

VB: All the Dalit parties compromised with BJP. We won't be able to work without it. Too much idealistic, we will not be able to stand.

LRB: I am not suggesting idealism. Please stand for the basic issues of people. What is ideal? Baba Saheb said, academics are nothing in politics. But do practical politics. Practical politics made five-year plans, the constitution was made. In the constitution is written that the Scheduled Caste commission will send its report to President and then President will forward it to Parliament but see how many reports are not sending by the President for discussion and our leaders don't even raise the issue. President doesn't send the report. Baba Saheb spoke on Scheduled Caste Commission. What is untouchability? This is mental twist and how can we resolve it. You go to Parliament with reserve seat. Talk about country, about community, about development. Baba Saheb wrote to his friend, ' Santosh parmodham' which is basically from Dhammapada. People don't understand it.

VB: People's politics has disappeared.

LRB: WE have done people's politics. I don't have an issue. My younger brother is in England since 1959. I can shift to England and Canada and yet at this age of 86 years of age I am still fighting here. Leadership must emerge from people. We introduced Baba Saheb through literature. We know there were not many books that time. Today, there are so many writers. Those who cant write letters have become writers. Those who can't sing have become singers. The entire society is demoralised. Our own have become worst many time.

VB: There are good people coming from the community.

LRB: Look, we have fight with RSS. But we should understand that many of their people working on the ground. We differ with their ideology and programme but they are devoted to their cause. We need such devoted people here too.

VB: Political power is a master key. Don't you think there is a brain drain? All want to get into government job but does not want to work for the community.

LRB: I agree to some extent. There may be some uncertainty for youths but what about the retired people. Why can't they devote their time for society. Our Baldev ji give his time to the community after retirement. How many percent people are there English educated 2%. How many of the so-called people. 98% people are languishing in the villages.

VB: There is an inertia.. bad conditions, kind of helplessness or disappointment.

LRB: Land can never be Banjh or barren. People will come out of movement when frustration will increase. India is moving towards civil war. There is nothing like Parliament or assembly as they don't discuss. Unemployment will increase. It will result in frustration and that will go for civil war. Frustration has not reached to a final level. Then people will start questioning their own leaders.

VB: I want to ask why can't we agitate for our own power. I am not a fan of Anna Hazare. Why are unable to revolt.

LRB: This is a huge country, a very diverse country. Our General Secretary was from Karnataka C M Aramugam. One man cannot cover the entire country. Even if I wish, I can't cover the entire country though I tour Punjab regularly.

VB: So alliance has to be made. We will have to make alliance in politics.

LRB : I am clear about it. Whether good or bad, it is the communists who can be our partner.

VB: But many Ambedkarites question any move for an alliance with communists. The complaint is that communism is the biggest defence of Brahmanism, particularly in India.

LRB: This may be correct but what can do with repetition of these. Ambedkarite need to change their tactics and point of view. Dr Ambedkar was impressed with Soviet model of pro people work of the government. Ambedkarite and communists should form a charter of demand, a common minimum programme and prepare people for movement.

VB: Do you think that the politics of Narsimha Rao in post 1990s was anti people, anti Dalits.

LRB: He purchased all the MPs. It is an open secret.

VB: Don't you think that we should revive the demand of Proportionate Electorate System (PES) ?

LRB: There is no benefit of saying for a separate electorate but for Proportionate Electorate Baba Saheb agreed. Minu Masani said it in the Constituent Assembly.I can agree to PES. Baba Sahib has not agreed to reservation and separate electorate. He said cumulative system of voting. The present electoral system is wrong.

VB: This system is there to keep brahmanical elite alive. Using the contradiction of the poor, Dalits and using their hatred against Muslims to get votes of other communities.

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LRB: A question came that revolution has to come from the people. It can't come from outside. China has taken half Pakistan. There will be a time when China will try do something here. What Maoists are doing is international support. It is not possible without international support.

VB: Do you agree with their movement.

LRB: It will be suppressed. To some extent, I am for them. You have not allowed anything. Conditions of desperations are there. Baba Saheb said in annihilation of caste. You have kept them ignorant. If they come to anybody's hand, it will be dangerous for you. Today, the same thing happening. Others are controlling them.

VB: Issues of land, forest and water.

LRB: Gadhchiroli was our bigger centre apart from Adilabad. I have seen those areas. there is a Lumbini Nagar near Adilabad where we got settled about 500 acre land for scheduled castes.

VB: You were talking about Alliance. Now BAMSEF talking about Unity of the Moolniwasis.

LRB: It is all Bakwas. Unless there is a minimum economic programme. Alliance built on programme. It can't happen on caste basis. What do you want to do?

VB : Do you think that the politics of identity will not work.

LRB: They are clerks. BAMSECF. They are sarkari naukers. They can't do anything. I have been nauker for 9 years, I know what it is. What is Mool Niwasi. This thought is wrong. Baba Saheb said none has come out from outside. Annihilation gives one hundred answers. Moolniwasi is nothing. It is for their developing own leadership. Brahmanism means, being irrational. Brahmanism means domination. Those who claim themselves leader. Do you eat meat? You eat everything but now beef. Why not? They can't say clearly. If it is meat. It is meat. Those who claim to be Ambedkarite don't understand Ambedkarism. They don't want to walk Ambedkarism. They won't want to understand. I have taken numerous journeys for parties. We have brought various volumes of Baba Saheb. Such 21 volumes are brought by me. See this, page 48. Mr D R Bhandarkar, foreign elements in the Hindu population has stated that, 'there is hardly a class or caste in India, which has not a foreign strain in it. There is an admixture of alien blood not among the Rajputs, Marathas but even among the lower classes.

VB: It means Baba Saheb has rejected Mulniwasi..

LRB: Alliance cannot be identity based. Identity is personal. These calculations do not work. Punjab's SCs have more than 40. Two dominant communities are Churas and Chamars who do not want to come together. This exists everywhere. How identity will bring them together. Only programme, that too time bound, will take us further.

VB: Shouldn't we bring leadership from those groups.

LRB: We have to bring leadership from the communities. We will have to declass and decaste but this leadership will only emerge from the movement, if you are fighting. Dalits are not fighting today. He loves life. Muslims learn to sacrifice. Dalits fear of dying. They will have to leave this. You see, how many people were killed by Mao, Stalin.

VB: Do you think we will have to retaliate?

LRB: That is the only solution. Baba Saheb in his speech named a Reddy who had over 4,200 acre of a village. Volume three, volume five...there is nothing wrong in eliminating those who owned property and exploit people.

Baba Saheb says so.

VB: People will question it. They will say we have faith in parliamentary democracy.

LRB: We must move towards to revolution. What is the option?

VB: Has the Parliamentary democracy failed

LRB: Where is democracy? There is no democracy?

I give you Baba Saheb's quotation from Volume III

Volume III: If a murderer can be killed because he killed a citizen, a soldier can be killed in a war because he belong to a hostile nation, why can't a property owner be killed if his ownership leads miseries for rest of the humanity, there is no reason to make an exception in favor of the property owner why should one considered private property as sacrosanct.

VB: This is a very important statement by Baba Saheb.

LRB: Yes, you have seen it. I did not write it. It is Baba Saheb's statement. In Buddha and Karl Marx.

VB: In the Buddha and Dhamma, he called equality with Fraternity.

LRB: He has a speech in Pune. In India parliamentary democracy bound to fail..

VB: Why.

LRB: Baba Saheb gives five reasons for failure of democracy in India.

L R Balley

No loyalty to the constitution,

Not acting according to constitution

Lack of strong opposition,

Election system not fair

People are now aware

Thereafter there will be anarchy and some sort of communism he said.

VB: You are prophesizing in terms of future that there will be anarchy.

LRB: It is anarchy.

VB: How do frustrated people get out of it.

LRB: I am not an astrologer. My thinking is that some leadership will come up. I have seen 1947 riots. Any person who was very coward he also took sword and killed people. It is mob violence.

VB: You are the most senior among Ambedkarite world over.. You brought that literature. I am seeing photograph of Bhagat Singh. They feel that Simon Commission came for Dalits and Bhagat Singh was opposed it. What do we get of violence?

LRB: Baba Saheb did not comment on it. Gandhi called him sirfira. My village is 3 miles of Bhagat Singh's village. I have known to entire family. I have read him thoroughly. The first Shaheed was an editor of Urdu paper. He was shot. About 98 people were hanged. Why is Bhagat Singh got so prominent? Bhagat Singh had a principle. The bomb that he threw, he said, that we did not want to take life of people. He never opposed Baba Saheb. Then he said I am atheist and socialists. Those who condemn Bhagat Singh are idiots. They don't have the capacity to analyse.

VB: I want to hear from you. They said Bhagat Singh famed because of being Jat and not Udham Singh. They divided Kabir and Ravidas too on caste lines.

LRB: See this is wrong. Some of the Bhangis said that Baba Saheb belonged to their community but we remain. We don't worship individuals but ideologies. We don't worship Bhagat Singh. He ideology was of Insaniyat. Baba Saheb's ideology is also of insaniyat. That is common point.

VB: What is your message for people world over?

LRB: First read Baba Saheb correctly and then understand him. Be progressive radical. It means that our alliance can only be with those who are progressive. Hence take along with them. Bring common issues related to oppressed communities and develop a plan for movement. For movement, idealism is

important, pragmatism is important. Movement cannot be on the basis of castes. The first time SC word came into government of India. When constitution was passed he said that we should not form organisations based on castes. Caste cannot be a reliable point. You can't fight a political battle on the basis of caste. There are more than 40 sub castes which we call communities. Every state has such communities. How will you unite them? None can do that not even SCF. It is time rise above caste. Take progressive views, with progressive programmes. It will be meaningful.

VB: Is annihilation of caste is still valid or not.

LRB: An experiment happened in Maharashtra. Prakash Ambedkar made a front along with communist parties, peasant groups. I support it. We must take it to India.

Baba Saheb said, inter-caste marriage, interdining are important but the third thing people ignore. Make youngsters free from the enslavement of the religious scriptures. Our constitution permits us to be secular. Manusmriti is being published and promoted. Constitution is not working. Our biggest problem is contradiction.

VB : We are using constitution only when it is suitable for us. The brahmanical forces are responsible.. but why those who should leave it, not leaving it.

LRB: All the progressive forces must demand fourth part to be implemented. We should not allow monopoly. The sources of Income must be spent for the benefit of the people. The fair implementation of directive principles of the state is the heart of constitution. Baba Saheb called it socialism. He defined it.

VB: At last, I want to ask you the mission of Bhim Patrika. You worked, saw Dr Ambedkar. What after you.

LRB: There can't be a second Bali. There can be better than me but not like Balley. I have prepared a paper for building a Bhim Patrika Trust probably by December 2016. As long as my health permits, I will work. I can settle in Canada, in England and I can stay with my family but I will continue to fight for people's right. I will go on doing that till my last. Baba Saheb's mission is my life. There is no meaning to my life other than the mission of Baba Saheb Ambedkar.

V T RAJSHEKAR*



VB: The Dalit Voice has done tremendous work for the unification of Dalit Bahujan communities, including the minorities, the persecuted minorities in India. I personally acknowledge in all forums that even as an Ambedkarite, I have actually been introduced to Ambedkarism through Dalit Voice, and that influenced my personal writings also. After so many years of yeoman service, I find the magazine is not coming out right now. What is the reason and what are you planning now?

VT: See, Bangalore climate did not suit me. People are there in plenty in this country who say yes, you're doing good work, this that, but when it comes to the question of supporting financially, they are not ready. Then my doctor friend said, Mangalore climate- this is Mangalore- this climate is very good, hot climate. Mangalore is cheap, good climate. Then I got Dalit Voice deliberately printed in printing press owned by Christian, and Dalit Voice started coming out. 4-5-6 issues came out. Meanwhile, the RSS – this is big RSS stronghold. Southern headquarters of the RSS is here. Are you aware?

VB: Yes, yes I am aware

VT: So the RSS boys, 2-3 boys, with a stick they used to come around this building, 3 rounds they'd take, and go to their...some 5-6 months before I came here, there was a big attack on Christian churches. Now I thought Christian printing press is safe. The RSS people went to the press and told him "There are 4-5-6 cases pending against you, we withdraw it on the condition that you stop printing Dalit Voice." Then I went around in my car, there were 20-30 printing presses/press capable of printing Dalit Voice but by then, RSS people had covered everybody. So no press was ready to print Dalit Voice. Nothing was possible hence I simply issued a circular, posted it to all the subscribers, and told them this is the situation.

VB: But we were under the impression that your health was not good and second, there is a financial crisis.

* Vontibettu Thimmappa Rajshekar, Founder and Editor of the Dalit Voice, which has been described in a release by Human Rights Watch as "India's most widely circulated Dalit journal". He was formerly a journalist on the Indian Express and also the author of a great number of pamphlets and books. In 1986 Rajshekar's passport was confiscated because of "anti-Hinduism writings outside of India, and has been arrested under the Sedition Act Terrorism and Anti-Disruptive Activities Act. In 2005 he received the London Institute of South Asia (LISA) Book of the Year Award.



VT: No there was no financial crisis, there was no health issue, financial crisis are always there. Ours is not a profit making paper like others. There was no problem; the problem was this (emphatically)

VB: This was not known to anyone?

VT: It was not known because it could not come out in Dalit Voice because Dalit Voice stopped.

VB: You've been publishing for so many years, so powerfully but you stopped the online thing also. I mean the web publication...

VT: Then, I was a little frustrated, I accept. And then after I sent the circular, everybody empathised...all our readers are poor people. Rich people are not interested.

VB: But Dalit Voice has a very loyal leadership also, very powerful people also who can support.

VT: For example, many people who I know, all the Dalit people who come up in life, they are purchased by the Brahmins.

VB: But there are powerful people, they can give you a space easily...

VT: They are not giving. The only people who are – Sikhs.

VB: Sikhs are your good friends

VT: I was arrested, kept in jail for the sake of Sikhs. Muslims, Christians to some extent also came. See, there was no offer on their part. When the country's persecuted nationalities are not ready to fight back brahmanism...myself, how many times I've suggested. They put in jail, my passport has been revoked.

My son has been repeatedly telling me. I have only one child – see, my wife died in (Bangalore?) long back. I'm now here. I'm alone. My son says I'm worried about you, why don't you come to London...but London is not my country! What is the use of going there? I'll become like a pig, you feed the pig, it'll become fat. I'm not interested.

VB: You spoke about law of Contradictions by Mao. The crisis is in India Mao and Marx are not easily acceptable, that easily as they are considered not to have understood caste system.

VT: If the fresh air comes from that window, keep the door open. If bad air comes from here, we keep it closed. Prejudice should not be there. Intellectuals should have no prejudice.

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VB: Why I am saying about the contradictions is that this time contradictions among Dalits and OBCs are growing, in many places...

VT: That is created by the Brahmins.

VB: But they have to understand also

VT: Who? Who has to understand?

VB: Why should Mulayam Singh Or Karunanidhi Or PMK, Vanniyars not able to understand it?

VT: We had a CM called Bangarappa. He became a member of the Lok Sabha. When I was in Delhi, the first time, when VP Singh was Prime Minister I think, I was in Vasant Vihar, and my house was attacked, at that time, I met Bangarappa – he said, the best person to talk to about all this is Mulayam Singh Yadav, I'll take you, and we went there, he was in a room, 30-40 people and all, subject could not be taken up. Political leaders are not good for stability. The only one who understands this is Laloo Prasad Yadav but he was in jail, I went and met him. He was very understanding and promised that once out of jail, he'll offer everything for you but political leader...

VB: Laloo can understand tricks very well, he's very good communicator also.

VT: Political leadership comes once we become a political force

VB: But don't you think the RSS, Sangh Parivar, will pressurise everywhere

VT: They will, they will do their best. There is nothing like pressurising the Brahmins. Congress is the original Brahman party, Congress is more dangerous

VB: But some people are saying that those Ambedkarites who are saying Congress is more dangerous are indirectly supporting the Sangh Parivar.

VT: Yes

VB: We know you've been writing a lot about this issue about media issue and it is very important. But don't you think the Dalit-Bahujan leaders, whoever they are, unlike RSS who keep all intellectuals in their pocket, the Dalit-Bahujan leadership that come to power – never need them? Or never respect them? Is this a fact that you...or they think you don't have the mass base, we have the mass base, these kind of things...

VT: See, intellectuals will never have a mass base. Only one person who combined intellectualism and mass was Baba Saheb Ambedkar. Now, intellectuals can never be a mass leader and should not be. I myself was not familiar with the Dalit movement, I came into the Dalit movement much later, I was Marxist!

VB: Why did you leave Marxism? What happened?

VT: Marxism became bogus. Marxism was a Jewish manufactured idea. Karl Marx was a Jew.

VB: So what? What matters is his ideology?

VT: First the shock that came to me was, I was leading a delegation to China, there they gave me law of contradictions of Mao Tse-Tung, and they explained the whole thing to me – China wants to break away from Lenin! That shocked me. Lenin's Politburo had only Jews! Lenin called M.N Roy, a Brahmin from Kolkata, and asked him to nominate a top level committee of Marxists from India, and M N Roy appointed only Brahmans!

VB: But I was told once upon a time, you had a lot of liking for M.N.Roy.

VT: I had. It was slow. At that time, I was still a Marxist!

VB: But among all the Marxists in India, I still consider M N Roy as very tall, intellectually...

VT: No, you are not properly informed. MN Roy used only Brahmans for his Politburo. All these things made me realise that the most mischievous fellow was Namboodiripad. Dange. That gave me a big shock. I was in Bombay at that time. Shripad Amrit Dange, a Brahman, he wrote a book, I forget the name of the book, it is there...he says in the book, all the wisdom of Karl Marx came from Vedanta!

VB: Oh!

VT: You have to put it. That is what Shripad Amrit Dange said. Politburo met and (bloody fellow?) MS was expelled...not MS, Dange. Shripad Amrit Dange. What about VR Krishna Iyer? He pretended. He's first a Brahmin, then only everything

VB: But Roy was supported by Ambedkar thoroughly. Ambedkar used to pay him rupees thirty eight thousand from the Viceroy Council you know, the whole book that Arun Shourie wrote "Worshipping the False God," the origin of that book is the money Dr Ambedkar as the Labour Minister in the Viceroy Council sanctioned for M N Roy's anti-war efforts.

VT: Maybe.

VB: so what I was saying, this contradiction between the Bahujan and Dalits. How to resolve it?

VT: That will remain as long as we have no media for all, you know. Now the only media is the Brahman papers. They are now talking about contradictions

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between Dalits, there is no difference at all between the untouchables and OBCs.

VB: People are always asking – what will happen after you?

VT: What happened, what happened...what happened after Babasaheb?

VB: Babasaheb, at least you people are there to carry forward the message.

VT: No, some people will come up. For thousands of years we've been like this only.

VB: We don't have a culture of respecting the intellectuals, or dissent or..

VT: No, no...that is a philosophical way of seeing it. The problem is caste, sub-caste, sub-sub caste, one upon one, one upon one...not possible, to understand. Caste, sub-caste, tribal there is a district called Kodagu, Coorg. Actually, the anglicised name is Coorg. There, we've got a tribe – they extract honey from some tree there – they stay on the treetop! Jenu Kurubas – they stay on the treetop!

VB: Permanently live there?

VT: That is their abode. There are people who live in caves. There are all types of people in this country. Nothing is changed. Nothing is changed. But once the political power comes in, how to retain the political power itself is the main job.

VB: This means that there was this thing, Dr Ambedkar said, political power is the master key. And Periyar was a different man. He said no, we don't want political power but we'll put them to our knees.

VT: Yes, he was a different man. I was invited to the Rajya Sabha 2-3 times as well as Member of Legislative Council. I rejected because the moment you go into the political arena, you become intellectually corrupted.

VB: And you get co-opted in all side structure

VT: Yes, I was right hand man of Devaraja Urs was very popular leader. Devaraja Aras was very popular CM. Two times he was CM. He wanted to make me member of Rajya Sabha – I fought with him and declined – no. I'll become corrupted. See, when you live in a dirty surrounding, you go on inhaling the dirty air, and you get accustomed to it!

VB: That's where I like this Periyar's whole world view that your know

VT: Periyar was very great

VB: And that is where OBCs, Dalits, Bahujan should take his advice.

VT: He went to Russia. He couldn't talk English, but he understood English. And there was a meeting of three great people – Periyar, Dr. Ambedkar, and Jinnah. What happened to that, nobody knows. There was another person who can be called great. He's called Shyam Sunder.

VB: Shyam Sunder?

VT: Yes, from Hyderabad. He was the Nizam's representative in London. He was an untouchable from Mahar community from Aurangabad. He was an erudite person, a Powerful speaker. He was a minister under the Nizam. He was Nizam's representative in London. We have published his book. The name of the book is "They Burn". It is a very wonderful book. Vast country, hundreds of languages, caste complication, tribes...

VB: Many times, the Ambedkarites feel like you wrote this book, 'Caste a nation within a nation'. Caste within caste, nation, and strengthen caste to eliminate caste, but many people say it is very antithesis of Dr. Ambedkar's Annihilation of caste.

VT: Caste is an identity. It will not go. Caste is an identity. What is wrong in identity? But only thing is, to say – my caste is above your caste. That's casteism.

VB: Casteism is wrong, caste is not wrong

VT: (nodding) Caste is identity. Among Brahmins, there are so many castes. Sub castes. But one sub-caste of Brahmins won't say, I'm above you, they won't say that.

VB: So caste is basically diversity, and different ethnicities. But it is also true that after your book on castes many people suggested that you are spreading casteism and it is against, very antithesis basically of the...

VT: There are too many Brahmin agents within Dalits, you know...I'm not bothered if somebody talks or writes.

VB: How would you say about – once upon a time you were very close to Vanniyars, PMK group in Tamil Nadu. And they've been now openly instigating against Dalits, against inter-caste marriages.

VT: PMK. Pattali Makkal Katchi. My right hand Ezhilmalai, who became the health minister – he was an Ambedkarite – very fine person, very thorough Ambedkarite. He became a big Dalit leader in Tamil Nadu and Dalits told Ezhilmalai he will support the PMK, Dr Ramdoss. That party got lots of votes, lots of seats in Parliament. S Ramadoss came to my room and said, I want to make Dalit Ezhilmalai as a minister. I said, wonderful, it's a great gesture. Normally, he would nominate his own caste man. But that person, on the very

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first day as health minister, he started taking money. He has made too much money.

VB: Why is it so easy to corrupt our people? You have not been corrupted for so many years. So how come the political leaders from these movements are so easy to corrupt?

VT: Ideologically, a person...no doubt he comes from a slum, poor. If a hungry dog, you give it something to eat, it will eat everything...maybe like that also, that's also quite possible...but now he's almost on his death bed. That's a very classic case. He was a great Ambedkarite.

VB: Yes, but now his own party is now becoming highly anti-Ambedkarite.

VT: Now yes, he's left that party. After his exit, that party was no party, now nobody trusts him. He's got plenty of money, he's purchased a good house in central Madras, maybe drinking, eating, and sleeping, that's all. Nobody bothers about him. These are the problems with the Dalits.

VB: So do you think as Dr Ambedkar said once – “the elite class, the educated elite, has betrayed us” or maybe...do you think the educated elite is still not keen on going to the people?

VT: See, it is not possible. A huge rock is sitting on the heads. It is not even possible to move this huge boulder sitting on the heads of the caste system, the hierarchy of castes. So...adjust, manoeuvre, compromise...through reservation. Because they get the pleasure of power, their children get separated from other Dalits. But that doesn't mean I'm opposing reservation.

VB: No, no, I'm not saying...that we know, you support reservation.

VT: Reservation is a human right. But I've seen the reserved sector people behave in a different way in that they get separated from the Dalits. India is a big problem country. They normally don't understand – the caste.

VB: As you are saying, we're a problematic country; Dalit-Bahujan leadership is also completely in a mess.

VT: I am actually immediately blaming the Muslim intellectual religious leadership

VB: Why?

VT: Because, for 800-odd years, Muslims ruled India

VB: But in different places. They're not consolidated, the Muslims.

VT: Yes, but the Mughals were big rulers...that rule was different, Islam as a religion, it lasted for hundreds of years and Islam, I say is a very powerful

ideology. And I am very very close to the Muslims, very close. And Islam liberated the Dalits.

VB: Muslims are today the biggest target of the Hindu right. And the target is a to...another consolidation of Dalit-Bahujan into Hindutva.

VT: Yes, that's also one. That means they are pushing the Dalit-Bahujan deeper and deeper...

VB: But people say things about you. That you instigate religiosity; support all Muslim fundamentalists, Christian fundamentalists. How can Maoism and Marxism and Ambedkarism combine with that?

VT: What do they mean by Muslim fundamentalism, Christian fundamentalism? See the religion of Islam is not separated from fundamentalism, fundamentals of the religion. Not even a comma has been changed.

VB: But many of the Dalits feel that you don't come out in support of Buddhism so openly...

VT: I'm Buddhist myself! I converted to Buddhism in Lucknow.

VB: But they say it is not that much open as for Muslim.

VT: Aaah- there are all sorts of allegations against me. All sorts. "He's made lot of money..." the usual character assassination. "He's got huge money, his son is in a big job, he sends money from there"...all kinds of allegations, Muslim...I was darling of the Sikhs...

VB: Yes, that's the tragic part, the tragic part But these are things I wanted to be very clear...it is good. So, in the 80s, why did you start Dalit Voice when you started, and I heard that Mulk Raj Anand...

VT: Yes, he's the person...

VB: Well, I lived with him for 3 years

VT: Really?

VB: Yes, yes!

VT: I was dismissed from the Indian Express and became a big news all over India, he read it somewhere. He said, I read about you, I am coming to meet, he came, I showed him all my books. "yes, yes, yes, very good..." He authored the book, Coolie.

VB: Yes, Coolie and Untouchable

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VT: He suggested to me, “You must start a paper. I’ll give the name” ‘Dalit Voice’ was suggested by him. He also proposed to give some initial money. He was also ready to contribute some articles. So Dalit Voice started.

VB: Ok. That’s a very important point you are making because that’s not a very well-known fact about Dr Anand actually. So that time, when you started with initial support, after that what happened, Mulk Raj Anand disassociated with you or something?

VT: No, no, no...disassociated in the sense, see, he was a great supporter of Indira Gandhi

VB: A friend of the Gandhi family, yes I know that

VT: Indira Gandhi was killed...

VB: Operation Blue Star...

VT: (continuing) Blue Star. And the two people who killed are Dalit Sikhs. I wrote an article on that, on which he differed. He differed, not intellectually, but on blind admiration for Indira Gandhi

VB: Ok..

VT: Well, he was very close to Indira Gandhi. After getting old...he said, I am no longer interested in associating with you because you condemned Indira Gandhi. I welcomed, welcomed the assassination. It was the Dalits! Both Satwant Singh and Beant Singh were Dalit Sikhs.

VB: But why did you support the assassination of Indira Gandhi?

VT: Shall anybody launch a war to the Golden Temple? I went and saw Bhinderwale at the Golden Temple.

VB: Was Bhinderwale a revolutionary kind of person? or just – illiterate?

VT: He was illiterate. But there’s no need to be educated...but he died, that’s important, he died in the Army Operation entering Golden Temple.

VB: That’s why your passport got impounded?

VT: My passport got impounded not for that reason. I was invited for a conference by blacks in Libya by Gaddafi.

VB: Oh, Libya had a Black conference?

VT: Black conference. And in the world conference, I was given 3 minutes to speak.

VT: Everyone was given 3 minutes

VT: Ok. I prepared my thoughts and spoke. It was televised, which I did not see. There was standing ovation. Then I came back to my room, had my lunch and was taking rest, when somebody knocked on the door. I opened it and a man at the door who looked like an Indian said he was the Press Trust of India chief Tripoli. He said, "I saw your speech on TV, live TV speech". So I said, thank you very much. Then he said, "You have criticised India!" "Can you criticise India abroad?" I asked, "who said that, stated that we should not criticise India outside the country?"

VB: Ok. There is nothing written in the Constitution (ironically)

VT: Nothing, it is an intellectual discussion! We can criticise even God! We criticise God also! Any criticism is very important to go forward. I told him I'm chief reporter from Indian Express...

VB: You were in the Indian Express that time?

VT: Yes, at that time. Then he got little agitated. I am also a newspaper man, how can you teach these things to me- get out! By the time I came back, my passport was seized in the airport itself.

VB: In the airport? Delhi Airport?

VT: Doesn't matter...

VB: But they didn't arrest you

VT: No.

VB: Just seized the passport and let you go?

VT: That's all. Only thing, I can't go out of India!

VB: So after that, once you came and your passport was impounded, then Indian Express took action against you?

VT: No, no not for that. I became strong, my name was all over India. They thought that "he has become a big monster, if he becomes more and more strong, using the Indian Express platform...".

VB: Do you think that the absence of truly strong intellectualism among our communities, in our country has hurt the democratic movements? A people who cannot surrender in front of the power?

VTR: See, intellectualism is not a readymade packet which is purchased from a shop. It has to be nourished like a plant, it has to grow. Now, this intellectualism is to be nourished in sociology department, literature department etc. I have given all my books to St. Xavier College here in Mangalore. After one year of donating all the books I went there to see how they are being used?

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Librarian came in and said sir, “You have given the books. From that day we have arranged the books in a proper way, put them in a lock. Till today we have not opened.”

VB: So that means, we don't want our students to read the dissenting notes or you know books...

VT: No no, not that we don't want. The students are not interested. Students are interested in passing exams. They want to pass the examinations. It is not the case in other parts of the world. I have gone to Sweden, I have gone to...All over the world I have gone. Libraries are packed, bookstores are packed. You see the students. Nobody is interested in books. Gone intellectuals you see. Money, money, money. Christian churches, you see, in terms of scholars, have the biggest colleges in the country. They are not interested. Only thing is, they have thrown open the college doors to Muslims and particularly, Muslim girls. Have you heard of it?

VB: Yeah, they can do whatever is possible but they should, I feel.

VT: I was surprised. First of all, it is the Muslim institution. The girls and that too Muslim girls-Burkha clad, 90 Muslim girls, so much (fear) and no college is ready to give admission to the Burkha clad girls.

VB: We feel, as you have been writing that against the Hindutva fanaticism or fundamentalism or communalism, that only Dalit intellectual tradition can take them on but still we are unable to do that.

VT: Unable because you see, to hit a King-Kong, you must have the strength. You have not grown at all. Have we got any stature, person in intellectuals? Babasaheb Ambedkar was number one an intellectual then a political leader. Shyam Sundar was an intellectual, an honest intellectual. You see Lalu Prasad Yadav is interesting. He is a fighter. He knows he is into some drama, he knows it.

VB: My question is about your background from this place, what was your father, how did you come into Ambedkarite movement?

VTR: My father was collector of this district.

VB: What period?

VTR: Immediately after the British.

VB: He was an ICS or an IAS?

VT: He was neither an ICS nor an IAS. Incorruptible but he did not have this background. He was Pro British because at that time there was a Justice party and a Congress party.

Justice Party was all over Tamil Nadu. Justice Party was a party of the Non-Brahmins. I was born in Mangalore. Up to BA I studied here then went to Law College. A biography has come in now.

VB: So you studied law also?

VTR: Yes, I got dismissed.

VB: There also? So you have a record of dismissal. Why?

VT: See it was an evening college, part time evening college. Mysore, a useless place. Mysore city is a useless city. You can imagine at that time it was just a big village. 5 or 6 girls were there. By the time the classes were over, it would become a bit dark. So the girls were telling, “see it becomes very difficult for us to go home after the classes and all. The college was dominated by the Brahmins. I was the president of the college.

VB: Oh!

VT: They said why don't you speak to (someone). I said we will need a resolution of the students union. I can't go and speak to them, all Brahmins I tell you they are horrible fellows. A resolution was passed and then put to them. “NO”, they said. They simply rejected. I placed the thing before the student's union, student union is young blood. The principle said, “Bloody fellow, you are the cause of the whole problem”, you are Dismissed.

VB: So the ‘president’ was dismissed?

VTR: I was dismissed. At that time there was one CM called Hanumant Iyer. Have you read about him?

VB: I haven't read but heard about him, yes.

VTR: He was a powerful CM. I had gone to meet him. What happened, what made you to come? I said, like this “they dismissed me”. “Very good thing they did” I was very inside, my father wanted to set my head on fire. With great difficulty with his income I was the only one to have studied up to law at that time. If he came to know that I was dismissed and not studying, he would say, “Get out bloody fellow. Come back. He said, “They did a very good thing.” I asked, “Why did you say”. He said “I also wanted to be a lawyer like you. I had no practice.

VT: I asked then what do you want me to do?” He said “Become a journalist”. I said, alright, if I want to write, who will recommend me? “Get me a job”, I said. He said, “you forgot that I am the CM?”. He Telephoned the general manager. That chap was not in the office at that time. He said, “this is the CM speaking, Hanumant Iyer. Tell him to call me up immediately wherever he is.” At that

time, there was no mobile. A time was given to me and I was waiting. He's a horrible fellow but, wait. "If you want a job in Deccan Herald, why do you go to the CM? You're such a great man?"

VT: The job was given. I became a reporter in Deccan Herald. That's why I became a journalist. Once a journalist, always a journalist. If I would have become a lawyer, I would be a misfit, quarrelling with everybody. What is the use of law, you see? Law is not a good course. In a property society.

VB: One of the things that I always admired, I don't know about the others, that you've never written in a mainstream paper after Dalit voice. Why?

VT: I have written, once or twice I did write. I used to write in the weekly, the statesman. And other papers and that itself became a charge against me for dismissal from the Indian Express. Kuldeep Nair came from Delhi to investigate. He was the bureau chief. "sir, the entire Brahmins have revolted against you. They want to dismiss you." He was sent by Goenka team. He said, "they will finish you". I said, let them finish, they want to dismiss, let them dismiss. He said, Don't talk like that. I will make you a special correspondent, a big post. I'll get you a house in Sundarnagar. And I'll get you a central post, a big post. And you write as the special correspondent, it is a big post. I said, I want them to dismiss me and ahhh.. you are a useless fellow I see. nice fellow, you see..

VB: Yeah Kuldip Nayar is nice. Pro-people..

VT: They'll say, but now there is a built Dalit movement in Karnataka. "Oh he got a good job in Delhi and ran away. He has joined the Brahmins." and it is a fact also, that I moved to Delhi. He ran away you see. So I wanted to die fighting. I became a martyr. Dalit movement started there. At that time, I joined Dalit Voice.

VB: But the Karnataka Dalit movement has also diluted now..

VTR: All, everywhere dead

VTR: India became independent. We are not yet able to keep one foot forward till today. We are taken as worms everywhere. China has become independent two years after India. Not only defeated us in one war but today, it is a world force and is replacing America. Already made a reserve currency by the world bank. We are sadly fighting fighting, fighting only amongst ourselves. Now, the leadership of this country continues to be Brahmanical. This is our mistake in keeping the brahmanical forces as our leader. They are our political leaders, our intellectual leaders, our religious leaders, our intellectual guides. They have to be thrown out, not killed but thrown out and the Dalit Bahujans must take over.

For that, we need hundreds of honest intellectuals which Dalit voices produced. There are dishonest leaders but they don't know, until there is some direction.

VB: The biggest Hinduisation process is amongst the backward classes

VT: Backward classes. Ramdev and all sort of frauds have taken over the backward castes and the scheduled castes

VB: How do they come out of that?

VT: That is the Brahminism. Brahminism is the cause of all the things. Brahmins themselves are the victims of it today. If you see Mangalore, it is a very good place for the study of Brahmanism, it is a stronghold of Brahmins. There are two types of Brahmins living in there. One is the Brahmins, another is the Konkani speaking Brahmins. They are called the GSB. Gauda Saraswat Brahmins. They are even more dangerous. They are the ones who founded the Syndicate Bank, Corporation Bank. 4-5 banks are with them, even today. They are the richest people

VB: The Bants are also the richest people, the Shettys.

VT: They were once upon a time. See, China has now started a bank called International bank. The head of it is a GSB from here. I forget his name. Bants are the landlord community

VB: So you feel that, you know, it is important for Dalit Bahujan leadership or there are industries or intellectuals who can contribute for Dalit voice, they should support? They are not supporting the cause?

VT: what to do? They are from the bank or something where they are Dalits. Some bank or something...

VB: no but bank is fine. They can give somebody some loan for their auto, scooter, factory but not for intellectual tradition?

VT: nothing, nothing, nothing, so far they did not approach me, I also did not approach them.

VB: Is there any regret that you are having so far about, you know, the thing that you wanted to do, you could not have done...because of your ideology, because of your perception, because of your convictions?

VT: Yes. See if I had continued in Bangalore, suffering health wise, things would have continued, but health is more important than anything else, you know? See, there were moments when I could not even breathe in Bangalore. Health is more important that is why I shifted here.

VB: I mean in terms of your writing, what you've done, everything...

V T Rajshekar

VT: I want to be but a person even like Babasaheb Ambedkar is forgotten?

VB: Where is he forgotten? Everybody is talking about Ambedkar, Modi is also talking

VT: Periyar, and. Shahuji Maharaj.. the great man..

VB: Jyotiba Phule..

VT: Yes


VB: I mean, definitely, it is a pleasure to speak to Mr. Rajshekhar. He has dedicated his life for the Dalit Movement and unity of Dalit Bahujan. And Dalit Voice must continue as many of the people say. And it is here that he wished that he is ready to work at this age also, post 80s

VT: 85

VB: He is 85 now and still roaring to go and I sincerely hope that people will come out for support for a bigger cause because what we need today is a strong intellectual tradition of the Dalit Bahujan Movement.

Transcription by Sowmya Sivakumar & Shrenik Mutha

N. G. UKE*

VB: Use Saheb, how did you come in touch with Dr Ambedkar. 

NGU: My first meeting with Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was in July 1942 at Nagpur during the Depressed Classes Conferences held on 18,19,20 July 1942. During these conferences were attended by about 75,000 Scheduled Castes persons, including 25,000 women. The three Conferences were:

1. All India Depressed Classes Conference,
2. All India Depressed Classes Women's Conference,
3. Samata Sainik Dal Conference.

During these Conferences, we the Scheduled Castes student established All India Scheduled Castes Students Federation (SCSF). I was one of the Joint Secretaries of the SCSF. At that time I was studying in Inter Science at the College of Science Nagpur. We met Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and sought his advice and guidance for working of our SCSF. He was very happy and we had a very useful discussion.

Since Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was being appointed as the Labour Member of the Executive Council of H.E. the Viceroy and the Governor General, he could not function as the full-time President of the All India Depressed Classes Conferences. In his place, Rao Bahadur N. Shivraj, MLA (Central) was appointed as the president of the Conference.

My second meeting with Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was at his residence 22 Prithviraj Road at Delhi. I had gone to Delhi for an interview before the selection board for the selection of scholars to be sent abroad for higher studies. I was selected by the board for higher studies in Engineering in London. Rai Saheb GT Meshram who was the Estate Officer Govt. of India took me to 22, Prithviraj Road to meet Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. As soon as I was introduced to Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, he immediately said " Mr. Uke Congratulations since we have selected you for higher studies in UK, under the Scheduled Castes Students Scholarship. We had a selection in Simla". I thanked Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar for my selection in the SC Scholarship. But I told Babasaheb that I have also been selected today by the Govt. of India under

* Mr N.G.Uke, was among the rare breed of Ambedkarite who saw Baba Saheb and was selected by him as a scholar. He was the first person to use term ' Ambedkar Samaj' and rather than saying ' I am a Buddhist' which he was and openly supported for Atheism. He was a person of strong secular commitment and hated words like 'fortunate, unfortunate, Mahatma, noble soul, gods' etc as he said using these words we are ultimately trapped into the religious moulding justifying the oppression and exploitation. He died on November 4th, 2006 at his Vasant Kunj, Delhi residence at the age of 82

N. G. Uke

general scholarship for study in UK for Engineering. Babasaheb was very happy that I was selected in General Scholarship, thus saving one scholarship of Scheduled Caste.

My next meetings with Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar were in London 4 times, on 26 th Oct. 29th Oct. 2nd Nov. and 9th Nov.1946. During this period he had met important personalities from London including Clement Attlee Prime Minister of UK, and Mr. Winston Churchill. On 2 nd Nov. 1946 we invited him to visit our place at 4, Downside Crescent. He blessed us by visiting our place and sitting for a group photo which included a number of SC Scholars including Mr. Khobragade studying for Bar.

The next time when I met Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was when I was called from London to return to India, for selection for a post in Defence. The Public Service Commission selected me for this post. I met Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar along with Raisaheb GT Meshram after my selection. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar had a liking for me and suggested to Mr. Meshram that he should propose my marriage with his daughter Kamal. Meshram family and Babasaheb Ambedkar were very close to each other. Whenever Babasaheb used to go to Nagpur he used to stay with Meshram family. Kamal used to know Babasaheb from her childhood of about 6 years since 1935. Our marriage took place on May 8th, 1949 at 4 Lodhi Estate, the residence of Mr. Meshram. Our marriage certificate was signed by 3 Cabinet Ministers of Govt. of India, 1 Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, 2. Dr. John Matthai, and 3. Dr. Kakasaheb Gadgil.

VB: What was your personality about ? Did you face discrimination during your childhood? How supportive were your parents.

NGU: You desired to know whether I was docile or strong person and whether I suffered from discrimination. In my childhood, I was very strong. I normally used to score very high position in my class. The Brahmins did not like my status in the class and they closed the school after I passed class 3 of the primary school. For the 4th class, I had to go to nearby village about 2 miles from our village. I cleared class 4 th from that school with top record. I had told my father that he should help me financially up to 8th class including the middle school in English at Bramhpuri about 10 miles from my village. I passed the 8th class with high % and was allotted Govt. Scholarship from 9th class onwards. I secured the high school admission in Patwardhan high school at Nagpur. My further studies were at the College of Science at Nagpur. Later I won the Govt. of India Scholarship for higher studies in London.

VB: What impression did you get from Baba Saheb. What do his followers need to do to take forward his mission?

NGU: When we met Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar in London during 1946 he advised us that our people should be better than their best. Some of us definitely tried to come to the expectation of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar embraced Buddhism on 14th of October 1956 along with 5 lacks of people at Nagpur. His mission was to make whole of India as a Buddhist Country. However he expired within 53 days of his embracing Buddhism.

His followers were not of the required capacity for the mission of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar with same vigour and achievements. They have been working in different groups and are not united.

Ambedkarites must join together under one platform. I had met Dalai Lama in Ashoka Hotel a few years ago and I had suggested to him that he should take up the mission of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar of converting India into a Prabuddha Bharat. For my suggestion, he became very happy and embraced me very warmly. In order to convert India into Prabuddha Bharat on the advice of Buddha and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, it is necessary to work out a rational program.

There are various factions in Buddhism. We must consolidate all the Buddhists of the world. For that matter, we will have to spell out the Buddhism as has been prescribed by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar.

VB: A number of people are redefining Ambedkar's conversion. Some say that he wanted to embrace Islam while others suggest that he was in fact for Christianity. There is a Sikh angle also. To strengthen their point, they say that Ambedkar buckled under the pressure of the upper caste Hindu leadership? For me, it is difficult to digest as Ambedkar remained a man of conviction and character all his life and it would have been difficult for him to accept anything as final word or Gods word. As a staunch Ambedkarite, how do you respond to such questions?

NGU: It is wrong. He never wanted to become Muslim or Sikh or Christian. Neither did he want to remain as a Hindu. He wanted to become Buddhist and he had declared in 1935 that though he was a born a Hindu, which was not in his hand, but he would not die as a Hindu. When he was in his matriculation, he was given a book on Buddhism. Baba Saheb had been reading about Buddhism for a very long time. Nizam offered him a lot of money. Others also offered him but he was not worried about money. He was worried about India. To make India a Prabuddha Bharat, an enlightned India and no religion can do that. He believed in Buddha but never in those rituals. He redefined Buddhism. Scriptures and Gods cannot help India at all.

N. G. Uke

VB: Reservation issue has again rocked the country. While the current row has been actually against the OBC reservation in government services but it seems that in this entire scheme of things, it is the Dalits who have become target of the upper caste contempt. The Dalits are fighting the battle for OBCs while the latter are not visible anywhere, only to be found hitting at them in the villages. Now questions are being raised about creamy layer as well as different Dalit identities. As an Ambedkarite how to you resolve this crisis?

NGU: As per as the reservation for Scheduled Castes is concerned people refused to understand the Constitutional provisions regarding SCST reservation. The Constitution is very clear. Constitution provides for reservations for the Scheduled Castes. These reservations are Universal. However the Govt. have excluded a large number of Jobs from the reservations, which goes against the spirit of the Constitution.

There is also a view that a creamy layer from Scheduled Castes must be taken away from Scheduled Castes. This view is totally wrong The Creamy layer is the cream of the society. The Cream, which consists of the intellect of the Scheduled Castes are the people who guide and lead the Scheduled Castes. Nobody can deprive the Scheduled Castes of their intellectual leaders. All the rulers namely The President, The Prime Minister and the other leaders come from Creamy layer and govern. The Scheduled Castes cannot be divided as very rightly ruled by the Supreme Court.

As far as the reservations for Scheduled Castes are concerned no Non-SC is affected and they have nothing to do with reservations.

VB: You are a rare breed of Ambedkarite who are proclaimed atheists. Why?

NGU: Scheduled Castes cannot gain anything from Gods and their work. The only way out is to prove that our society, our system is better than theirs. We believe that superstitions, rituals ultimately exploit human being.

VB: What do you think of economic globalisation. I mean many new Dalit scholars have complimented capitalism and often condemn Marx and his vision. What is an Ambedkarite vision of India.

NGU: Privatisation is a threat to our sovereignty. Land should be nationalized and redistributed among our people. Why should we allow the national resources to the private companies to suck our blood. Privatisation is nothing but taking away people's resources and we must oppose it.

Once you privatize things, our people lose jobs in the government sector. Private companies are not going to follow that. The government must bring out a law to protect the interest of the Scheduled Castes.

Baba Saheb was a revolutionary and so was Marx though Baba Saheb differed with his violence theory yet in no way was Baba Saheb anti Marx. We may have differences with Marxist theoreticians in India yet Marx and his philosophy are for the benefits of the common man.

VB: What are the activities of Ambedkar Samaj. What does it aims at?

NGU: We have started Ambedkar Samaj to bring all Ambedkarites on one platform to fulfill the mission of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar not only to convert India as a Prabuddha Bharat but we have to transform the whole world as a Scientific Humanity without any differences. The Ambedkarites must lead to take the world forward as one humanity.

VIJAY SURWADE*

On the role of Savita Ambedkar in the life of Baba Saheb Ambedkar

VB: How did you come in touch with Ambedkarism? What inspired you the most?

VS: I was born in Jalgaon district. Right from childhood, we had heard about Baba Saheb. My mother's father was a Gardner in railways. He was illiterate but a staunch Ambedkarite. He used to go to attend the meeting of Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar. He used to tell me about the movement, about Baba Saheb and his vast knowledge. Hearing from him the curiosity increased day by day. So out of curiosity, I started collecting his photographs. I was three years old during the Mahaparinirwana of Baba Saheb in 1956 so no opportunity to meet him but now I feel if I were born a few years earlier, I would have definitely met him. The curiosity increased day by day, it was increasing as I was growing and learning. I passed matriculation and joined Siddharth College and I was staying in the hostel in 1970. I completed my graduation in 1974 and during this period I got to know many things, it was changing period for me. Dalit Panthers had started during the same period. Raja Dhale, Arun Kamble, J V Pawar and myself would sit together and discuss things. I was more attached to Raja Dhale. He had a different take on everything so he also liked me and the vice versa. We used to read and share. Fortunately, Siddhartha College library was so rich as all the original copies Baba Saheb's work were there. I started reading them even when I did not know much English as upto 11th, I was studying in Marathi medium. Though English was there in 5th standard yet because it was not my first language hence could not do much in this but after college, the situation changed as Bombay University, right from the beginning is English medium. So, I started reading books of Baba Saheb. I bought an Oxford dictionary English Marathi and started writing meanings of tough words in Marathi and that made me understand the meaning of the word that Baba Saheb had used in his books.

In Childhood, I had kept one notebook and whatever photograph that I got, I would paste it in the notebook. There were photographs in wedding invites etc, I would put all the photographs in my notebook. So to that extent, my curiosity

* Vijay Surwade, has largest personal collection of Photographs, letters, books, references on life & movement of Dr. Ambedkar. He has written/published many books containing photographs, correspondence, memoirs, writings of Dr. Ambedkar. Mai Ambedkar's revised autobiography & separate biographical vol.2 (1947 to 2003) is under-publication. He plans to publish 30 references/original documents/rare photographs on life & movement of Dr. Ambedkar in due course. He retired as Dy. General Manager from IDBI Bank.



was there about Baba Saheb. When I came to Mumbai and saw original photographs of Baba Saheb, then I realise the difference between the original photographs and the artificial ones. Then I started searching original photographs. In the beginning, I would go to photo studios. I was living in Hostel, near Dadar that time. Then I started locating colleagues of Baba Saheb in the movement. Asking about how he looked like. If they had any papers or photographs. They would not give me photographs because of their bad experiences. Once Bhaiya Saheb Ambedkar organised a photo exhibition and he put a lot of photographs but people took it and lot of important photographs were lost. I used to pursue the case if they had photographs but people would insult me too. People would lie to that I have photographs even when they did not have. I did not have money as I was poor but I had to pursue that I would buy them. Even if I had photographs, I had to have negative. My father was an clerk in municipality and my mother died when was in 8th standard. My father used to send me some money.

Then my collection was becoming bigger. There was Dil studio in Dadar near Baba Saheb's House. There was a number of photographs. Negatives were of bigger size. They were 10X12 inch It was difficult to find. I used to go there then he used to do. It was not easy to find. I went everywhere to meet individuals, organisations, institutions. I learnt so many things from these experiences but I learnt how to allure people to get the photographs that I would give you bigger size. Come along with me. But I learnt from my experiences.

VB: How many photographs?

VS: I have not counted but those are in thousands. Those are from all over India. I did not go to foreign countries but I have two photographs from round table India which Jabbar Patel gave me. But from India, I travelled everywhere. I joined Bank after graduation. I got married.

VB: Tell us about the conspiracy theories that Mai Saheb faced about Baba Saheb. All these need to be cleared as it is too much and people are using it for their own purposes. What is your impression?

VS: I have been hearing this since childhood. Some people said that she poisoned him in buttermilk. Other said she was giving him slow poison. Lokhande said that she killed him throttling him in the pillow. There were so many conspiracy theories. Was Baba Saheb such a small child to be done like that.

Baba Saheb wrote a preface on December 5th about her role. Most of the people like Sohan Lal Shastri and others used to feel bad when Mai Saheb would deny. So most of the friends of Baba Saheb would come him unusual

time and without any preplanned visit. She was a doctor as well as a wife. So she had to play dual role. Today, doctors don't allow people to meet even wife. Wives' will have their own concern. She was a doctor and always concerned about his diet. She had written about his diet and was very particular about Baba Saheb. She was strictly going according to the timetable required for Baba Saheb from the point of view of medicine, health, food and rest. If anyone comes in between why should she allow. He was doing such an important task for community, his time was important. How would a wife concerned so much allow people to disturb him. We were ultimately deceiving Baba Saheb. We are trying to tell as if Dr Ambedkar was fool. They had a love affair for over a year. She was Baba Saheb's lover. My daughter has written a book on that.

VB: Tell us about Mai Saheb's relations with Baba Saheb

VS: I came to her contact when I was a student in Siddharth College. She used to come to Baviskar's house. It must have been around 1972. She knew I have been working on Baba Saheb and it was a passion for me. One day she called me and showed me all the letters between them. They were big letters. Each one letter of Baba Sahib to her are 18,20, 25 pages. They were in relationship for a year. She had written to Baba Saheb, huge bunch of letter she showed to me and said these are the "motio ki mala". His handwriting was so beautiful. She said, just have a look, don't read them. They were very personal letter. It was between 1947 and 1948. They wrote around 40-50 letters to each other during this period. All letters were lengthy. All the letters of Baba Saheb was in midnight as he was very busy. Her name was Sharda and Baba Saheb used to call her Saru and later named her Savita. Her letter-head mast was S and Baba Saheb was B. In one letter Savita wrote to him that she would like to come and take care of him as he needed a doctor to take care of his health particularly. Baba Saheb wrote to her that he would only love to bring her legally after duly getting married. He was advised to keep a nurse. He wrote to Mai too. Fortunately or unfortunately, my people consider me as their god. My opponents are afraid of my character, which he wrote to Mai.

VB: Did Baba Saheb ever speak to his son Yashwant about corruption?

VS: Mai wrote it. It was a story of two builders who wanted to influence Baba Saheb when he was Labour Minister in Viceroy's Council and CPWD was under him. It was related to some contract and Yashwant had come to Delhi. As soon as Baba Saheb came to know about this he got enraged. He asked Yashwant to leave immediately for Mumbai and need not to come to Delhi.

VB: Do you think that Mai never deserve how people behaved with her after the demise of Baba Saheb ?

VS: I was helping Dhananjay. He knew that I was close to Mai. Keer wrote what Nanak Chand Rattu gave to him. I can prove all this by document. Nanak Chand gave to Khairmudhe and Keer. He wrote that Baba Saheb was very sad during his last days. Baba Saheb was singing was a sign of happiness. It was a doha. He finished his thesis before going to bed. Kautslyayan said that the preface was on the table. The biggest credit he gave to Mai Saheb.. I was a dying flame by a doctor. Successful rekindling of this dying flame is due to my doctor wife and Dr Mavalankar. I am immensely grateful to them. She was an Ambedkarite, She was a Buddhist lifelong. Many people did not accept her. But this is changing. J V Pawar, Arjun Dangle says that we did not do justice to Mai. Shanti Swroop Baudh too was of the opinion formed by Rattu but later all of them changed due to my work. People did not inform us about Mai's contribution. Baba Saheb married to Brahmin but she was a Buddhist. She became Buddhist. I have seen her very closely. For Riddles, she spoke passionately.

VB: What is her role in the Riddles movement?

VS: She was a leader. She went all over, spoke everywhere. She spoke against Bal Thackery. Mai Saheb was very particular about the unpublished work of Baba Saheb. And this is 1959, when none knew about her except Rattu. For unpublished work, she got Mr Jadhav. She did not get any Royalty though Prakash get it even today. I have the agreement. I was close to both Dhananjay Keer and Mai. I have the original copy of the letter. When he received that he admitted the contribution of Mai Saheb. He realised that a lot of injustice was done to Mai Saheb. In fact Keer wanted to write a book on her but Mai never wanted him to do so.

I asked her you killed Baba Saheb when I met her. I heard it from childhood. I felt she would be angry but she laughed. 'What is the new thing that you are asking', she said. 'I have been hearing this for years'. Later Dhale discussed with me and we felt that Baba Saheb did all of the work because of her. It would have been impossible if she was not cooperative to him. She was with him at the most critical moment. She would have stopped him against Deeksha. Mai and Baba Saheb took Deeksha May 2, 1950, at Birla Mahabodhi Vihar in Delhi by Aryawansh Bhante. Bhadant Anand Kautslyayan also wrote about this deeksha.

I felt she should allow Keer to write about her life. I have the audio-recorded Mai's original voice about herself. Mai was very active. She would go to meeting and conferences. Later Keer too got ill and died so the project remained unfulfilled. She would tell me so many stories. And I felt all those stories must come out. I used to think with that positive angle. When she would tell us her memoir, I felt Mai's contribution must come out. Letters must come out at any

Vijay Surwade

cost. There are a lot of personal things, I removed them and decided to write. She used to speak Marathi but she had command over English. I would help you to write memoirs and then she accepted it.

I decided a frame about the book. Baba Saheb's up and down must come out. What was his physical position when Mai came in his life? What work Baba Saheb did during the time when Mai came in his life.

So, I decided since 1930. All the health issues, I had. At one point of it became too critical. Nobody was there to help him. The stage when he had blood pressure. "You are doing great work. I needed to help him. He need my help, it was saying my doctor inside me. I took up the decision", Mai said. It was Mai's revolutionary step despite being Brahmin and that too a medical doctor from Grand Medical College during British from 1937 she decided to marry Baba Saheb. Sohanlal wrote about her that she was a nurse but fortunately I got the original certificate. I have the original certificate of Mai.

VB: About Role of Nanak Chand Rattu

VS: It has been dubious. I knew him from closely. Mai was too stubborn sometimes. Bhiaya Saheb was fighting with her on property issue so Shankaranand Shastri and Nanak Chand Rattu had sympathy for him. Many people would ask me how I could stay with her. She was blunt. She used to say, I am Ambedkar, hence it is my right. When I don't take anything from any one then why should I be afraid?

The bungalow at 26 Alipur Road was on rent. It was owned by Sivai's Maharaja. Baba Saheb had helped him through adjudication. They had two bungalows 26 and 27 and wanted to sale them to Baba Saheb for one lakh rupees each. Dr Ambedkar said he did not have the money. So they had the problem of staying in Delhi after he resigned from the government. So, the Maharaja gave it on rent. Maharaja died and the new legatees asked Mai to leave the place. She did not vacate it. She went to the court. She came to Mumbai to live with her relatives. People blamed her that she sold the property. Rattu used to assist Mai Saheb. He was continuously in touch with her. I have a letter in 2001 written to me seeking my cooperation to get help from Mai. One case, Mai could not go and court gave ex-parte order. The bungalow was sealed and the household items, precious books and belonging of Baba Saheb were thrown away. It was in 1967. It was raining so many things was left out. So it was distributed into three places to keep them safe among Rattu, Shastri and others. You will be surprised that Mai stayed a Rattu's place. So Rattu was speaking against her outside but kept her inside her.

Shankaranand used to meet me whenever he used to come to Mumbai. We were travelling in Bus to Mazgaon. He told me Rattu was stooge of Mai. After

Shankarnand told me, I felt it. He helped in selling the plot. I asked Mai and then she told me that he kept me at our house. He was just a typist. He used to do initial in whatever he typed. I told her the copy of his letters which she did not know. She was shocked. He has so many letters written on inlands to Mai.

Mai would call me around three to four times. She told me Rattu came and added, "I asked him what has you written about me. He said, I have been helping you". Then she threw file at him and just asked him to leave the place. I think this is about 1990s. In 2001 he wrote to me. He gave much "belonging" of Baba Saheb in Chichuli and Wolver Hampton. but many things are absolutely duplicate but most of the stuff was given provided by Mai. Many things I have heard that he (Rattu) purchased from old market and gave them in the name of Baba Saheb. He died in 2002. Mai passed away in 2003. He knew that Mai has known it. He wrote to me in 2001. He said, you are so close to Mai. It is easy to get the things done. Actually the things donated to Chicholi was given to Mr Godbole. There was some misunderstanding. Godbole knew things. Rattu wanted a letter from Mai that the stuff that he has and given to Godbole belonged to Rattu. I typed it. By 2001 Mai's conditions had deteriorated. Her memory was lost. My wife cleaned her many time. I had typed the letter. I felt it was not right to get signed. Rattu send me a letter send me a sample of letterhead of Mai Saheb on her behalf. In 2002 he died and in 2003 Mai passed away.

This is an important part of Ambedkarite movement. Why should a woman who was dutifully and legally married to Baba Saheb Ambedkar is seen as conspirator and outsider. She was boycotted. It shows that caste system has so much in our blood that we could not give her justice. Baba Saheb gave us the path of Buddhism. How much have we succeeded? There are success stories. The dream of Prabuddha Bharat is yet to be fulfilled. There are very few examples. I would say sadly. Everyone is working according to his own agenda. We failed politically completely.

What is the use of joining hand with BJP. It is painful.

We do not want Dalit word but as a movement we needed Dalit Panther today. Mai Saheb used to say, don't dissolve it. Let it like be an aggressive wing, fighting against injustice. She said in speech. Make it three wings: Political, religious and educational. Those who are interested should lead it so there would not be fight against it. So if Dhale was interested in religion so he should lead that. Ramdas was interested in politics so he should lead that. It was actually a very wise advice.

Today there are over 100 groups of RPIs. Everything has become opportunist. It is not going accordingly. They must unite. During the riddles movement, all

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people have got united. They were together fighting against ban on Riddles. I have heard Kanshiram saying that you worship anyone but just vote us. I heard it in Jabalpur and did not like it.

VB: What are you planning to protect this 'national asset' that you have which is of great importance as a history of Ambedkarite movement? Many stories people have not heard. They have remained unknown.

VS: I have not begged from anyone. None want to become like Baba Saheb. People do not care. They are unable to bring real Baba Saheb. We are not bringing him to people. It is backstabbing with the movement. Baba Saheb became very sensitive when he saw and said if do not take this movement any further don't take it back.

VB: Where is the movement?

VS: I don't know anything of politics. I am not interested. Practically everyone knows me personally. We lived together in hostel including Gavai, Kavade. I am not interested in their politics.

VB: An Ambedkarite you have lived your life. What are those things you won't compromise?

VS: We can't survive on our own politically but We will have to alliance with those who ideology with Baba Saheb. We can't compromise with Hindutva at any cost. We can't compromise with Psychology, philosophy which made us enslaved till date. It is not essential that they agree to everyone but you have to agree on complimentary ideas. He had good relations with M N Roy. Baba Saheb helped him and it was debated in Parliament. People have become selfish. How could an Ambedkarite be part of Shiv Sena?

VB: What is your vision and what would you appeal to Ambedkarites world over?

VS: I won't ask anyone to help me. I have two options. First, we have a Foundation. Athawale has promised. Mai has done so much and we must do it for her. You make a trust and I will get the land. Mai used to give her (my wife) saris, shawls, chashma, letters, photographs to my wife and we have kept them as safe. We have to preserve them but for that one need money. Athawale is saying that he would take me to chief minister. Athawale used to give me a lot of respect because of Mai. He gives respect to all. Second, fortunately, I retired as deputy general manager, IDBI. I have a flat in the society. If I get my possession then I will live there and leave this house as a memorial. Somebody will be here. We will donate the material. WE need to preserve the material. Third option, Symbiosis is ready to do this. They have money, place and machinery including technology. If I give them then, they can preserve it. So

these are three options. My son is in USA. I don't know whether he comes or not. He reads but may not have the same interest. The way I have done, he might not have the same. This is property of Ambedkarite society. It is of Ambedkar Samaj. I don't consider it for anyone. I will donate it.

RAJA DHALE*



VB: Shri Raja Dhale is a pioneer of Maharashtra's Dalit Panther movement and an important member of its literary community, who has written on a wide array of issues, particularly on the discrimination faced by the Dalits. Taking inspiration from Ambedkar, he has worked a lot to advance the cause of Buddhism as well. Today, we want to hear his life story in his own voice, of how the movement was built, and his vision of how it should be carried forward. I thank you for being with us. My first question to you is, how did you first come into contact with the Ambedkarite movement?

RD: The land I have been born into, Bharat, sees that Ambedkar's name is chanted by all Dalits and backward classes. Right from birth, they all hear this mantra; they are told about all his great achievements. I was born in a slum in such a land. Even in 1938, my father wrote in a letter addressed to Babasaheb Ambedkar, comparing him to the great Buddha. I don't know if he ever sent it, but I received a copy of it when I visited my village. After living for 4 years in the village, I came back here with my aunt, to this big town called Worli, which is a stronghold of the Ambedkarites. The Ambedkar Jayanti celebrated there is unmatched in its pomp and glory to similar celebrations across the world. I grew up in this environment, and from there flourished the painter, poet, and writer inside me.

VB: You gave up your government job for this movement...

RD: What's the big deal in that? It's a job, you throw it like you pick it. It was never the case that I never found something to eat. The ones who work only for food [material gains] are fools. There is more to life than that, and we should work for it. Of course, everyone does not possess this quality. In my family, I was the youngest amongst all my siblings and cousins, and that's why everyone always helped me, and I learnt from them. One of my brothers became a doctor, being the first few students to enrol in the new Siddharth College; he even has a photo with Baba Saheb. Such were the sources of inspiration during my youth, and from there began my creative journey, through which I joined this movement. There were two writers from Worli, who were not highly literate, but they established the Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangh under the guidance of Babasaheb. At the age of 15, I was a member of the Sangh.

* Raja Dhale is an Indian Buddhist writer and activist and was one the founding members of the Dalit Panther, started in April 1972, alongside Namdeo Dhasal and Arun Krushnaji Kamble. He is known for his feirce writing and was charged under Sedition Act for one of his writings on Indian National Flag.



VB: In which year was this?

RD: This was around 1954-55. I was born in 1940.

VB: So, were you there during Babasaheb's Mahaparinirvana .

RD: The first meeting conducted by students in Worli, 6 months after his passing, in May 1957. I was the Secretary of this group, which was all school-going boys and girls. We planned a tribute to Babasaheb.

VBS. So, on December 6, 1956...

RD: I was there. It was a huge crowd, and who would notice me, but I was there.

VB: So, you witnessed it...

RD: Yes, after the pyre was burnt, there was a meeting, and I listened to everyone. I was there with my elder brother, who was the Vice-President of this student group.

VB: So, was this student group affiliated with any political organisation?

RD: No, no, no..

VB: So, it was an independent body to address Dalit issues?

RD: Yes. We were 15-16 years old, what did we know about politics? We just thought that if everyone is paying their respects to him, there should be something from the students' side as well.

VB: So, how did you enter the Dalit Panther movement?

RD: At the time I was reading these American weekly magazines Life, Time, Newsweek etc – and they had a lot of coverage of the Black Panthers movement around 1968 – the shootouts, the support they received from the whites, who also served as their lawyers.. I used to read their statements, and they inspired me. I had delved into Black literature before as well, and I translated some works as well. For example, Egyptian love poetry really fascinated me, and around that time itself, I was acquainted with the broader literature as well. I used to read and tell my friends about these issues. These things inspired me that we must oppose injustice and exploitation vehemently, till our last breaths. It was their fight that evoked such emotion in me.

VB: There was an article you wrote which led to a case of sedition against you.

RD: In 1972, yes. This was after the [Dalit] Panthers had been established. There was a Brahmin village in Marathwada, where there were two women – Kalavati, and I forget the other's name, but she is in my article – who were paraded naked because they had crossed the Brahmin fields. This was covered

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in the newspapers, so I decided to visit the village personally, and made some inquiries. That night, we arranged a meeting there, where the magistrate was also present. After I spoke, they filed a case against me. A month later, a man came to give me the court documents. I was sleeping, but I let the man in. He told me that I should go with him since I have a warrant against me, and if I don't comply, there will be problems. I told him I am not coming, and he can inform the magistrate. The man then started begging saying his job is on the line. He then just wrote that I will come, and disappeared.

VB: This was in '72?

RD: Yes

VB: So, what did you write that caused such furore?

RD: I just wrote that the national flag is a cloth, much like what a house-maid wears. I asked what is the difference between the two? Just that the tricolour is called the national flag, and you consider it an offence if someone doesn't stand up for it. The rate for cloth of saree is Rs 300/yard, so why is the punishment for this crime only Rs 50?

VB: Only Rs 50? Were there any other charges against them?

RD: I wrote everything, and published it in a weekly socialist newspaper called Sadhna. They requested me to write such a piece, as I had begun my post-graduate studies at that point, and was a famous writer. This was what caused a furore. Durga Bhagwat, a prominent Marathi intellectual, wrote against me, as I had disrespected her during the ceremony of Namdeo [name]'s book release, at which she was a speaker, and I had clashed with her on all her points. There was an unresolved conflict as she was a well-known person and I was a 'nobody'. She was a patron of the magazine.

VB: Was this case filed against you by an individual or the government took action on its own?

RD: Someone must have filed it. Actually, I am not sure.

VB: Yes, because today as well we are seeing the same things, sedition, anti-national activity etc..

RD: Yes. But I also wrote a befitting reply to her in the newspaper. Things went quiet for a while, and a few months later, they let go of it.

VB: Did you get arrested?

RD: No, they just rescinded the court case against me. The pressure had been rising, and my organisation became much stronger after the incident as well.

VB: The Dalit Panthers must have become very famous.

RD: Yes, the Durga Bhagwat incident catapulted us into fame. I wasn't afraid, and I had some savarna friends who would encourage me to debate such people. I used to say that even if I reply, sometimes they won't publish. So once they came with me, and talked to the editor and asked him the reason for delaying my publication. The editor tried to deflect by saying it'll be done in the next few days. My friends were adamant, and said "How long will you wait? Until he has been hanged?" I was out to get tea. But they kept questioning him, and tried to convince him. There were several such incidents.

VB: So, this was the first instance where you felt the strength and fame of the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra?

RD: Yes, after this, in Pune, the Congress and others were demonstrating against this guy. So, we also took some 60-70 night-school students from Bombay, to demonstrate. Word spread quickly, and the situation changed quickly.

VB: And so one could say that this was the foundation of the Dalit Panthers' movement character...

RD: Yes, basically, it was the small things that brought us together...

VB: And the Marathwada movement must have certainly pushed things...

RD: We were not doing this for fame...

VB: ... but to strengthen the movement?

RD: The movement was standing on its own. If a person's intentions are good, things sort themselves out.

VB: So what would you say about the role of the Marathwada movement?

RD: Here, the students received very small monthly scholarships from the government. So in 1974, we went to Marathwada, because the Socialist Party members there were instigating our young boys. And this was a betrayal to our organisation, because the work would be disparate so one of the Panther leaders called me to deal with the situation. The boys wanted to delay the meeting, and first wanted to campaign. However, when I spoke, the situation turned, and the main leader ran away.

VB: So why was there so much opposition to protesting in Babasaheb's name?

RD: The Savarna people don't have Babasaheb in their hearts, it's only us. He's our idol. The importance they received is due to their caste, and that's why they always tried to find ways to create complications in our organisations. If we

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needed more scholarships, what stake did these people have in it? They were just trying to create some sympathy for their own organisations, but we intervened at the right moment. One boy even took out a knife in the crowd, to make sure we reach back safely. They were very daring people.

VB: there was a lot of violence and torture...

RD: The Dalits faced a lot of exploitation..

VB: But a lot of people said that even the people from the backward castes had a major role in it, especially the Shiv Sena.

RD: They are all the same, Hindus, all together. Once I found out that there was a supply of around 40 swords from different cities that young boys had purchased from a man called Namdeo. The police had all the reports.

VB: So were you ever accused of being a Naxalite?

RD: No, they knew he's a real Ambedkarite.

VB: A lot of people called the Dalit Panthers as communists..

RD: The reason was that this guy Namdeo had relations with everyone. I was mostly on my own. I didn't fall into their trap. I had some communist and Naxalite friends, but they all also switched sides later.

VB: Like Namdeo joined the Shiv Sena. How is this possible?

RD: He had no other way for earning livelihood. He was no revolutionary; he created his image just like that. He was friends with the right people, such as Vidya Charan Shukla, who even received a Padma Shri.

VB: However, sometimes people say that our people didn't accord him any protection so he left to join the Shiv Sena, just to make ends meet.

RD: Nobody went to Shiv Sena, this is a rumour.

VB: No, but he used to write in Samana.

RD: Yes, his wife also used to work there.

VB: But why would he go to a newspaper which spread so much hatred and divisiveness?

RD: See, Namdeo was not a moralistic person, except for selfishness. So this talk seems to me is just Savarnas writing on his behalf to weaken our movement, because he was their follower.

VB: So, your third biggest movement was Riddles of 'Rama and Krishna' which was Babasaheb's book...

RD: Yes

VB: Why did Maharashtra government ban it?

RD: The Shiv Sena people were unhappy about this section of Riddles of Rama Krishna I was involved, and I drafted and handed in the letter for negotiations myself to give it Shankar Rao Chavan. Bhujbal was there but he did not know how to give it to CM.

VB: Bhujbal saheb was a Bahujan...

RD: No, he's a Mali. He was born in Jotiba Phule's caste but is a follower of them [savarnas]. I was not afraid of them.

VB: So with the 'Riddles' case, the first feel of the strength of the Maharashtra Dalit movement was had...

RD: Right. After the first demonstration regarding 'Riddles', I was asked by a friend from the Congress Party about why we made the announcement for a second demonstration already. I was convinced that the turnout will be double the next time, and I turned out to be right. I think this was the first major show of strength to the savarnas. Attempts were made to purchase us.

VB: So is it fair to say that with your rising strength there were many attempts to break the movement?

RD: No, there were not too many attempts, and nevertheless we were very strong. Apart from Namdeo, everyone was standing together. He used to hang around with journalists and get random things published. It was like one rotten fish destroying the whole pond.

VB: So you believe that Namdeo Dhasal caused a lot of damage to the Dalit Panthers?

RD: Correct. I have even mentioned this in my book on Dalit Panthers. I questioned people, but nobody dared to reply. He was a 'ghar bhedia'. That fellow was only a ninth-grade pass. A dropout like him used to write some nonsense and it made people laugh. He was just a big follower of the communists and was a chamcha of them and they promoted him.

VB: But what is your opposition to the communists?

RD: My opposition is purely on the grounds that I do not condone violence. I do not want to become a Naxalite. Our numbers are small and this will cut me and my fellow beings.

VB: However you are very strong now.

RD: I am not afraid to die.

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VB: So, are the others afraid to die?

RD: No, all the people from my time, except this fellow Namdeo, are like me.

VB: But this has always been the case in politics that...

RD: The savarnas bought off Ramdas Athawale and gave him a high position in the ministry. He was such an idiot that now everyone laughs at him. There were a few such weak elements, and we had to stop it. Everybody laugh at him. There are such kind of people. We will have to stop such people.

VB: So how do people get sold off so easily from our movements?

RD: How would I know? You should ask them (laughs)

VB: But for example, the BJP and Hindutva have the Sangh Parivar..

RD: They get to eat money, that's why they switch.

VB: They have a cultural organisation, but it seems we are lacking that.

RD: They are willing to buy people off, I don't do that. We know that some people want to use organisations as a source of living. All these organisations are getting factionalised. The fight over who gets what... You only get something once you become a leader, not as a mere activist.

VB: What do you think of the statesmen kind of leaders who say that their personal interests are on the side and they only want to serve the society?

RD: I think everyone knows how to differentiate the good and bad guys. How am I alive until now if all the Shiv Seniks are hovering around me, but no one raises a finger, because they know I'm a simple man, and should not be riled up. They befriend us because they think we have a 'dalit mind', and are not revolvers.

VB: But you used to call Dalit as a symbol of revolt...

RD: The debate about why this name.... Are we animals to call ourselves Panthers?

VB: (laughs)

RD: We were young and foolish, but we have come a long way under the guidance of Babasaheb. We used a name but that does not mean we became animals. We are here to make human being.

VB: So, you never associated with either the Republicans or the Bahujans..

RD: The Republicans and Bahujans are both state parties. My party is a social party. There is no money involved that is why I can still command some respect.

VB: When you were establishing the Panthers, you were saying that our leaders go in the state Assemblies and the Parliament... they didn't manage to work

RD: Because it didn't work we are in such a condition. If they had worked, this would not be the case. We had so many court cases on us, but this man [don't know who] never did anything. I was brought in front of the Magistrate after the Worli scandal, and he had a reputation of being strict. He asked me who my lawyer was, and a colleague from the Samajwadi Party came running, whispering me to get out of there as fast as possible after the bail. Somehow found my way back to the village, but I realised that we do not have competent lawyers amongst us. I was telling this to a friend's son, that there is no one else apart from you, and I just said that don't think about becoming a leader, just focus on being a good lawyer. He went away for a while, but recently his own village people faced some troubles, so he met me...

VB: Brahminism thrives on the contradictions in the lives of the Dalits and backward classes...

RD: .. They didn't have anyone to fight against. It has only started in the last 200 years. Such as Iyothee Dass or Babasaheb.

VB: Some Bahujans say that they wished Babasaheb was a leader of the backward classes. But we ask, what is stopping them from accepting him? What is the logic of such fractionalization...

RD: I recently wrote a paper saying that whatever Babasaheb had written with regards to the analysis of caste, the exact opposite has been adopted by Kanshiram. Instead of questioning caste, he wanted to find a token person from each caste, and invested in advertising campaigns. They didn't read him much, were just using his name.

VB: So we have seen that people from backward classes are converting to Buddhism in large numbers..

RD: Where?

VB: Nagpur

RD: They say that but it is not the reality. There are too many cases on paper just to get the government's attention.

VB: But the paper thing is long established. As far as I remember, in 1990 there was some declaration regarding Buddhism..

RD: It doesn't matter. I will just say that our people are cowardly. There used to be turnout in huge numbers but half of them disappeared later, under pressure from their parents, to find jobs... That's why we were unable to create good

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activists. It only created thieves. I still meet a lot of good people, but since 3-4 years, I have not set up any task force. Once they get a 'position', the organisation gets fractionalized. There should be work and not this fight for status, such as chairperson etc, and everyone should do all kinds of work.

VB: Do you feel that a lot of new organisations have this problem that there are less people but more positions?

RD: Yeah you understand my pain...

VB: Yes, because, for example when we make banners, there are so many names that the photos are not visible anymore.. But they argue that everyone has to be represented in this way.

RD: It is wrong. The views and ideologies must be represented, not the people. What are these people standing for? What is the point of publishing photos of faceless people? There is no purpose of people without any real thought in our organisations

VB: So this means that caste can be dismantled only after you come outside the domain of caste..

RD: Correct

VB: ... Such as by coming into Buddhism...

RD: What Babasaheb said was the same. Is it the wrong way? Why don't people follow it? That is my main point of contention. People want to say that they are religious, and that's why they don't invite me to talk anymore. They know I'm a straight-talking man.

VB: It is true that many people come, for example 10 Lakh people in Nagpur, or elsewhere, but despite that the growth of Buddhism in India has been minimal.

RD: I would disagree. Compared to the level it was it before – almost zero – this number is revolutionary. That is what they are scared of.

VB: But if 20 Lakh people declare officially every year about their conversion...

RD: But that is the thing, these paper Buddhists are everywhere but on papers they are 'Harijans'

VB: But what about the 1990 decision?

RD: The government took a decision, but nobody understands it that is the problem.

VB: So after Namantar, the Mandal Commission report that came out in 1990, was a big decision by the government of that time. Your movements were also

active during the time. Under the umbrella of the Mandal movement, there was an attempt to mobilise the Dalits and backward classes, but, what were the issues...

RD: See, even today, very lightheartedly, for the December 25 program, the representatives, the big names of those who call themselves OBC, are involved. They are going to become Buddhists. Giving them support is our job, to be present there in big numbers is our job, otherwise they will go their way. This is what I told the people from Nagpur, that this is what we should do, and I will go there. But despite this there are some differences. The people who were given the ideas, such as Hanumanta Upare, they are now coming into Buddhism, and they are all literate.

VB: So if the OBC come into Buddhism..

RD: There are even police offers in this. So there will be a queue after the ones who have already decided convert. After them, whoever has been oppressed in the Hindu religion will come.

VB: In 1990, the Dalit/backward classes movement was solidified a little more...

RD: This is always said, and is printed on paper, but where is it? I met an adivasi today and I found two books, one of them was called 'Towards the Religion of Nature'. What kind of religion is this? For those whose houses are in the mountains or caves, so who are the heirs of Buddha? It's the adivasis, they said it first. Instead of explaining this, there are some people who want to mislead others. This is a recent story from Chandrapur, and from there a new religion sprang up.

VB: There are too many of these religions and saints and seers coming up every year in India. So whatever ideological revolution could come, they have...

RD: They are afraid of the ideological revolution, and that is why they sow the seeds of such things.

VB: But it's not just the Brahmins, even among the Dalit/backward classes there are a lot of babas...

RD: They are getting money so what...

VB: No but these babas are popular, coming on TV...

RD: Who are these? Tell me.

VB: (laughs) I am not going to name people. But there is one who has gained popularity in recent years and calls himself Bahujan Baba – Acharya Ramdev.

RD: Is he Bahujan? He's a Yadav, no?

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VB: (laughs) Yes.

RD: So then what?

VB: So now I want to ask you how long has it been since you have been a Buddhist.

RD: I became a Buddhist in '74, after I got married, at the hands of Bhadant Anand Kautsylyan. So then I became double Buddhist because I had already taken an oath when I was 16 years old after Babasaheb's death. But this time both of us did it together.

VB: So your wedding was done by Bhadant Anand Kaushalyayan

RD: Yes.

VB: So you also had a love marriage?

RD: It is love marriage only. Whether caste is same or different, there should be love, right? So then I asked her and we got married.

VB: So Bhadant Anand Kautsylyan also struggled a lot for the society.

RD: He used to first live in Singur. He once came to Mumbai in 1957, and stopped at Worli. There, some Marwari had built a Japanese Buddha Vihara, where he stayed. A friend of mine informed me of this, so I gave him some of my poetry – quartets. I used to go to the Vihara to read in quietude, and that's how we got acquainted. So then he recommended me some things to read. I was an idiot to give him Marathi writing, he didn't know the language. After that we met in Nagpur in 1972, when this stuff had begun already, and he was the first one to stand in the demonstration. When I arrived and saw him standing there, he stayed until the very end. He had a very strong commitment to Buddhism and Ambedkarism, he was a great man.

VB: Sometimes it happens that Brahmins convert to Buddhism, and people don't want to accept...

RD: No, he wasn't a Brahmin, he was a Kshatriya. He told us also, and he wrote about it. When his family used to visit, and one of his niece was a Principal of a girls' school in Lucknow. They all met me, his brothers as well.

VB: So did they all become Buddhist or not?

RD: I think it is immaterial if they converted or not. They were his family members, and had some shifts in their thinking. Otherwise, they would have boycotted him.

VB: You are reading and writing regularly about the political history. In Independent India, what do you think have been the most influential political

decisions for the Dalit/Bahujans? Which leader has personally influenced you the most as well?

RD: The movement here is called Phule-Ambedkar movement, not simply Ambedkar movement. There would have been no Ambedkar without Phule. Phule was the one of the first to study anthropology. This has not been written yet, but I will write about it. I have also given university lectures on this. He even wrote about the social hierarchies in America. Jotiba Phule had a broad vision, and he wrote about a lot of things. However, he got neglected, so Babasaheb took the reins and brought it forward. Therefore, there should be a renewed discussion about these people. What they have written about the caste system is not taught properly in schools and colleges. This should be our demand. He went to one of the most prominent American universities – Columbia University – achieved a lot of recognition, however, his name is usually absent from our own books. The sociology and anthropology textbooks should be revised to include his work. If people understand the society from this perspective, the caste-system will get reduced. If this had already been written, this problem would have been dealt with already.

VB: It is because if Babasaheb's books are introduced in the classroom,

RD: They are not considered worthy of it by the caste Hindu educationists and political elite.

VB: ... it will shake the system.

RD: Babasaheb is there only to shake the system. What do you say? They don't want this. In the Purusha Sukta, the man has a mouth, hands, chest, and legs. Where is the brain? I will write this, why there was no talk of intellect? Is there only a mouth to eat? The Brahmins kept themselves outside the Purusha Sukta. There should have been more uproar over these things.

VB: But there is not much uproar because as you said, within our political system, there are people who easily compromise.

RD: There are such people. But there have been so many Babasahebs, Buddhas, Kabirs, Phules, have our people read about them? So that is why I say that change will come with education.

VB: So the unity will not come until everyone believes that Babasaheb is for everyone...

RD: There is no restriction. We have not said that he is ours and not yours. It is just that caste is more influential. If caste dies, their religion will also die. The death of their religion will not mean their caste is dead. Whichever religion they go to, they will take their caste along with them, for example in Christianity.

Raja Dhale

There has to be an ideological battle, but it doesn't happen. The existing law about the atrocities against Dalits is anyway soft on the perpetrators, now they want to dilute it even further, whereas we want to make it stricter. They are trying to address two sides using one law. They will ask for capital punishment in the case of rape for 'them'. But if savarnas commit atrocities, they want to dilute it. So one person says two things about the same issue. This struggle is for power. In Maharashtra, the Marathi speaking Hindus are in majority. They were afraid they will lose their seat in Maharashtra, that is why they carried out the Maratha Morcha. So if there is fragmentation in Hindus, we will get the benefits. It is simple – we are not Marathas, nor are we Hindus, so we are a different faction. The end product of these OBC religion conversions will be this only. We don't have much to lose. We are minorities, what will be our politics?

VB: We might be minorities, but we will need to build alliances, so who should we approach?

RD: there is no one worthy of an alliance. Their party names are different, but because their religion is the same, they are all the same inside. If you speak against casteism, why would the upper-caste people support you? Because they are united. They don't need us. It is for us to be united. But we chase them to gain power, but that will be short-lived only.

VB: Several parties have been formed.

RD: Of course there will be many parties. If I don't win, I will contest from another party. But this business needs to stop.

VB: is it because people worship politicians more than questioning them?

RD: All of this is a sham – the difference between leaders and followers. Everyone is in it for their own benefits.

VB: So you believe that nobody worships anyone and people only work according to need?

RD: My belief is that humans should be of humans, and people should not try to claim seniority, or godness. What is the point of this? These values have no place in a democracy.

VB: But the feudal element still swings some weight in our democracy.

RD: I am saying that casteism is an old value in Hindustan, but constitutionalism is the value of Bharat.

VB: So there is a difference between Hindustan and Bharat.

RD: Yes.

VB: So Manuwad is a feature of Hindustan, and Babasaheb's Constitution is a feature of Bharat.

RD: Correct.

VB: But it seems it is steadily becoming Hindustan these days.

RD: This is nothing new, this has been happening since before. I am not blaming it, but I want to break it.

VB: Some people said that Hindustan was established in May 2014.

RD: This is not correct. These people have been here since before Modi arrived on the scene. When I first went to Gujarat through the Dalit Panthers, Modi was sitting idle on the stage – he was not a big name then. Twice or thrice I saw him and wondered why he comes to our meeting.

VB: Modi used to attend Dalit Panthers meetings?

RD: Yes! He used to sit on the stage in a corner.

VB: This is a very revealing thing.

RD: He used to come to report on the content of our meetings to the RSS. And the Chamars were on good terms with these people. But we didn't know that he used to do this. I even asked a couple times why he was there, but there was no answer. This is before '74. Even the Dalit Sahitya met the same fate, we don't know who are the few people who write. So this suspicion of Dalit groups' activities has been alive since then.

VB: In Maharashtra, there are rising atrocities against Dalits nowadays, there are many allegations..

RD: ... atrocities are more than before, yes. But that is because it comes to light more often now. Atrocities always existed, but now they access the law enforcement more, that is it.

VB: So in your writing – you said that you don't like the name Panthers either...

RD: It is not about like or dislike. Just that we have to adapt our ideas according to the times. If you are against caste-system, just tell me how many of our people have researched on this? Have you read anything after Babasaheb?

VB: I have... You have written also. (laughs) What I wanted to ask about was that everyone is writing now...

RD: We need to list reasons... The origins and what sustains it..

VB: And how to break it..

Raja Dhale

RD: How to break it... If we know how it originated, we will automatically have the answer about how to kill it. So about this, what research have our people done?

VB: So I will briefly mention the researches. After 1990, the Mandal revolution, and the counter-revolution that came alongside – the revolution was about the Dalit/Bahujan identities, but the counter-revolution was when the so-called intellectuals worked overtime to destroy it and brought up the question of sub-identity.

RD: Are there books about this?

VB: I am telling you...

RD: I am asking because...

VB: I will tell you and then you can respond. So after Mandal, when the first Samajwadi Party and Bahujan Samaj Party governments were formed in U.P. in 1992, after that, there were calls for leaders for each community, the fishermen or whoever. The RSS found something for each community. The attempt was to create a hero for each community. So my question is...

RD: .. Kanshiram is one of them. What you said about RSS creating trouble, this was what Kanshiram was also doing bringing all these saints from different castes.

VB: That...

RD: You are trapped in your own words now.

VB: I am not talking only about him. I am talking about the BAMSCEF members, whether they believed in Kanshiram or someone else, they all did this...

RD: No, it is Kanshiram who brought this, why do you want to hide the truth? Even in Maharashtra was through Kanshiram.

VB: But originally for Kanshiram, it was Phule, Ambedkar, Periyar, Srinarayan Guru...

RD: I understand about Phule, Ambedkar, Periyar. But how did Shahu pop up in this?

VB: Chhatrapati Shahuji Maharaj?

RD: Yes. What he did was, he had a fight with Tilak. Tilak was a Brahmin, and he was a Maratha. He just wanted Vedic rules instead of Puranic rules. So what is he?

VB: Yeah, but they say that he worked a lot for backward classes, particularly providing them reservation too. He introduced scholarship for Dalits and OBC students which was a visionary thing.

RD: You have to answer my question too, don't try to escape. What I say is, he was a good man, a king, concerned about our plight, but he was not a man of ideological change. And these people included such a person in our movement. This was Kanshiram and Mayawati's doing.

VB: They said he was a kurmi, because kurmis are a big subcaste in U.P., like the Yadavs. To appease them, on one hand they brought Sardar Patel...

RD: That is not what I meant to say. I am asking if someone has researched on this casteism, after Babasaheb.

VB: No, because caste was used as a marketing tool...

RD: Yes, that is what I am saying. I contest the claim that caste system is very old – it did not exist before 5th and 6th centuries. Recently also I have written, where I quote Buddha from a Pali text, which says that the Kshatriyas were the ones engaged in farming. At that point, caste was linked to occupation, and not inferiority. The impurity thing has developed later. Therefore, it was a counter-revolution against Buddhist ideals. I have given the example of Nagarjunaconda, Baba Saheb has written so much, explored things. So they were all occupations. I ask, what are our doctoral scholars doing? They do not write anything useful. So I have fought with them, and that is why they are afraid of me. And we should go into this in detail.

VB: I agree with you, and I have a reaction about that. So for example, the woman who cleared the IAS recently and she planned an inter-caste marriage with the man who is Muslim.

RD: Yeah, Tina Dabhi...

VB: I would refrain from using names... Anyway, so a lot of people had responses such as when Dalits clear these things they go to other castes, and that we should retain our caste.

RD: She is the daughter of one of our colleagues from Nagpur. What she did was, she took the name of this man Dabi, and we don't know what caste.

VB: From Rajasthan.

RD: He must be savarna. And now her daughter is forward caste. So she thinks that she can marry anyone, as she is of the right age.

VB: So we should promote this?

Raja Dhale

RD: If now they do this, then who are we to say no?

VB: No, but I am asking about responses such as our children get derailed...

RD: All of these are the ones who stay silent when their own child does the same. There is a problem here, this attraction towards the upper-caste. Our own boys do it, and if the father is an activist, I will scold. This attraction is the reason for your oppression.

VB: But isn't it that when boys and girls are on their own, they can choose anyone?

RD: So then what is the need of Babasaheb?

VB: People read Babasaheb, and he said that we should open our minds.

RD: A person can only survive if they have a stable identity, otherwise you will get flown away. If you intermingle, then no one will know who you are. Then what is our pride for? Why did Babasaheb give it to us? Everyone is equal, so we should fight for equality, but not like this, by mixing with them.

VB: So we should not destroy our identity.

RD: What this guy did right now is wrong. This girl became first with the 51%, but what was the need to speak about her marriage on television?

VB: Marriage is a personal matter.

RD: Yes. They should do it, that's not what I'm saying...

VB: But they can still work for the society even after marriage. It is not that they are not committed to this work.

RD: That is fair, but if there was commitment towards society, they wouldn't have done this, if she was a responsible girl. The society pressurises you. Tomorrow, ten other girls will do the same, and so on. If this is the effect of education, then religiosity will not be broken.

VB: What is interesting though is that upper-caste and Dalit marriages happen, but it is more difficult for internal marriages, within the Bahujans.

RD: It will happen, I will introduce you to these people. There are different paths to becoming forward-caste. She used education, and we don't know her father's caste, and even before that her mother did the same. Now her house has Allah. Do we believe in Allah? But there still is a god inside now. And so they have thrown away Babasaheb.

VB: There is a possibility that they have a secular marriage.

RD: There is no secularism here. Where there is no religion, there is no secularism. Secularism is only when there is religion, because they are the ones denying religion.

VB: Yes, so the ones who don't believe in religion.

RD: If there is no religion, what do you mean secular? I mean to say that this should be expressed, that I don't believe in any god.

VB: The person who believes in Babasaheb will be secular only.

RD: But this girl does not believe – she doesn't know about Babasaheb?

VB: She says that she believes.

RD: I don't...

VB: Many time people asked, so she said this. Anyway, we should not expect too much from people either. Society is built from ideals, not power.

RD: We will only survive if we struggle. What we have fought for is to come from bottom to top, but the ones on the top don't want us there. If you want to come, then you mix with us. And that is what she did.

VB: So destroy your own identity...

RD: Now she is with the Muslims. So what do we do this?

VB: So they say these are individual choices, and we say this is the society?

RD: There is no choice, if you live in a society, there is no individual. If you live in a society, then you will have to fulfil some of its requirements. It is about taking the society forward, not one individual forward.

VB: The people who are involved in the Ambedkarite movement, what will be your message to them?

RD: Babasaheb's lifelong struggle was for human rights, human dignity, to increase human potential, he has given us a lot of good ideals, and we should never forget those, and then no one will be able to suppress or oppress you, be it caste or religion. if you leave this, you will disappear.

VB: Thank you very much. I hope that the conversation with Raja Dhale was insightful, and our listeners will develop the framework of their movements using this knowledge. It is important that we stay together in these struggles, as without the struggle, our essence and pride can be destroyed. Jai Bhim to everyone.

Transcription by Vidita Priyadarshini

M C RAJ*

Annihilation of the castes is a wild goose chase

VB: Raj, when are we expecting your next novel? What is it all about? Despite all your busy schedule, you have been consistently writing. What is the source of your energy?

MC: There are two novels out for publication. One is Lapsang Cha and the other is The Daughters of Janasthan. The former is with a Hollywood producer and publisher and the latter is with my Literary Agent.

Lapsang Cha

It's a science fiction based on a development from 2005. It's based on the science of Optogenetics. Not many would have heard of it as it's a recent scientific development. Optogenetics aims at intruding into the nerves, genes and brain cells of animals through optical waves and control the behaviour of animals. I have stretched my imagination to the human realm. What will happen to the world if scientists succeed and if the same is transferred to human beings? To make it a real fiction, I have created a plot of a conflict among the American and the Chinese scientists and CIA.

The Daughters of Janasthan

This is a story of Sita, Soorpanaka, and Mandodri. On the sidelines are Ravan and Ram. This novel takes a radically critical look at the epic of Ramayan.

I enjoy thinking and writing. My body is replenished with fresh energy when I write. Moreover, the success rate of our work among the poor and the Adijans keep our energy level going. The central source of our energy is our visits to the villages. In village after village the women make Jyothi and me sit and all the women sing songs and bless us. Each one showers flowers and rice on us and touch us from head to feet as a blessing. I feel physical energy passing through all the cells in my body. When I come back I brim with more life and energy.

* Manickam Casmir Raj is acclaimed as a social reformer in Karnataka. With many national initiatives to his credit he had been spearheading impactful work for the development of Dalits whom he called Adijans through the Adijan Panchayat Movement, for global warming mitigation through a CDM Gold Standard project, and a major national campaign for Proportional Representation system in India. M C Raj was an intellectual who inspired many people not only with his new social vision but also with his innovative approaches of social engagement. A prolific writer, Raj has written many books, fictions, theoretical and ideological positioning of the aadijans. Raj was well read and had his own perceptions about many things and in this candid conversation he has spoken without keeping them in his heart.

My day is generally for the people and visitors and my night is for writing and reading.

VB: What do you consider yourself: an ideologue, an activist or a fiction writer?

MC: I consider myself as a healthy combination of all the three and many more. I try not to compartmentalise my being into different sections. I try to harmonise my existence with the rhythm of the cosmos in as much as it's possible for a human being. I am basically a philosopher. It runs through my action and fiction.

VB: You build up a big Dalit Panchayat Movement in Tumkur ? What was the idea? Were these Dalit Panchayats duly elected or were they parallel to elected Panchayats?

MC: The terrible oppression and violence that the Adijans face from the dominant caste people led us to a serious and collective analysis of why it was happening unabated. We saw clearly that the epicentre of power was concentrated on the traditional caste Panchayats. Internal conflict resolution, political participation, economic development, and social life of the Adijans (Dalits) were controlled by the caste Panchayats. It happens even today. The constitution of India is a virtual paper tiger. What bares its teeth on the daily lives of the Adijans is the caste Panchayat. It virtually subverts the constitution. Fighting for the benefits of reservation becomes meaningless though it still remains a significant need in India.

We decided to initiate the Adijan Panchayat Movement as an alternative to the oppressive caste Panchayats. All Adijan families in every village would form the Adijan Panchayat, resolve their internal problems without taking them to the caste Panchayat, would select their candidates for local body elections and would select the beneficiaries of government development programmes. Our organisation would support them with capacitation and external lobbying. The backbone of this movement would be the Adijan culture and history.

Adijan Panchayat is not a parallel to the elected panchayats but has effectively enhanced more meaningful participation of Adijans in elections, especially in Gram Panchayat elections.

VB: You do not belong to Karnataka and yet the people of Tumkur have given you their love and support. When and how did you develop this strong relationship with the community here?

MC: I did my studies in Bangalore. We came to Tumkur in 1984. All that we knew was to love the poor. Jyothi got involved in social issues as a high school student. I hailed from the premises of a leprosy hospital in Tuticorin, where my father worked as a daily wage earner. My role models were the European and

Indian sisters who dedicated their lives to the lepers. Later I combined my love for the poor with a strong addiction to Marxian ideology. People tested us of our commitment to them. They made sure that our actions were congruent with our words. Once they made sure of our truthfulness they were ready to give their life for us. With every successful struggle, their confidence in us soared high.

It's not simply love that's in question. The oppressed psyche is constantly on the look out for a symbol of their liberation. It does not accept anyone who claims to be such a symbol. It knows innately and intuitively who can effectively represent their aspirations and negotiate with the oppressors on their behalf. We are happy that we fit the bill of the people on this score. We are happy that we were able to combine it with a bit of charisma that is an essential ingredient of the liberation symbol. Our engagement with the society on behalf of the poor was not born out of an academically designed strategy. We developed our strategies of development organically as we learned at the feet of our people. This helped the people to own their development efforts.

VB: You along with Jyoti have been engaged in the land rights movement of Dalits in Tumkur. Could you please throw some light on it. I mean, how do you promote land rights of the Dalits and where does woman stand in the entire legal and ideological framework ? As a community person do you support the idea of community ownership over the individual titles which many in the indigenous people's movement have been speaking for years.

MC: Initially we got involved in regaining the lost land of individual members of the Adijan Panchayats. Such success led to entire villages taking up huge land struggles. But the government would approve land only for individuals. We employed street fights, lobbying with the bureaucracy, direct negotiations with the landlords and court cases. We have till now recovered 11,902.20 acres of land.

Simultaneously, we demanded policy decisions from the government to distribute 5 acres of land to all Adijan families. Later we broadened it to all landless families in India. When it came to lobbying and Advocacy we joined hands with other major networks like the Ekta Parishad.

We are happy that we were able to bring about quite a few policy decisions in Karnataka. Strong support from the bureaucracy of Karnataka helped us too on the road to success.

There was a time when we initiated the idea of community ownership. But it remained only an idea as most people were either landless or had lost their land. Our priority was to retain the recovered land in the hands of the Adijans and

other poor. We have a long way to go to even take the first step toward community ownership of land.

VB: Apart from working with the people, you have been defining ideological positions of what you describe Aadijan people. Are the Aadijans same as Dalits ? If not then what is the difference in addressing them as Dalits or aadijans ?

MC: We arrived at the Adijan identify after extensive reflections and discussions for many years. This was a consequence of building a resurgent culture of assertion and celebration. Very positively and creatively we unearthed the latent strength of the Adijan poor and built the Movement on their strength. We dismissed the Freudian path of focusing on the removal of weaknesses. Instead, we took recourse to the Jungian approach of scientifically identifying the strengths of the Adijans one by one. It led to greater and bigger success of the Adijan struggles for entitlements and land rights. An inevitable sidekick was the permeation of a greater sense of dignity. A receiving people gradually became a giving people contributing generously to their development out of the meagre resources they had. A new self-image of a celebrating people emerged.

Such resurgence made the identity of a broken people (Dalit) redundant. Coupled with this was the cry from a few communities in India to give up the Dalit identity. Being oppressed is historical. But, to say that we are a broken people amounts to giving an undue credit to the forces of caste hegemony. Dalit represents what has happened to us from others. Adijan represents what we are from the beginning. It is internal. We delayed announcing it for many years not to create any confusion. When we found the time ripe we made an announcement.

VB: As an ideologue you have defined the history of Dalit movement in a different way where culture play an important part. You have always proudly mentioned the Dalit culture and its glorified history but in the modern Ambedkarite discourse the focus is on delinking from the past which was always considered as subjugated and brahmanical hierarchical. Does your position contradict Ambedkarite position on this issue?

MC: If Ambedkar saw Adijan history as a subjugated history, then I must say that his view was jinxed. Being subjugated is only one side of history. Ambedkar refused to see the strength of his people. Like many NGOs of today he could not wage a battle in society if he saw the brighter side of the Adijans. That's why he could not sustain his negotiation on separate electorate. Instead he surrendered to the idea of reserved seats. Pathos and ghetto are strong tools at the hands of Adijan leaders to promote themselves.

Dominant communities don't want to focus on culture and history because these are smeared with violence and blood. They don't want the rest of the

world and their children to know their history. What will they show as their culture? But Adijan history and culture are filled with inclusion, resilience, primacy of women and nonviolence. We should have the courage to take these to the negotiating tables as our innate strength. Being educated in Western universities, it is possible that Ambedkar subscribed to the dominant ideas of history and culture.

If we look at Adijan leaders like Mangooram, Ayyankali, Muthukuttyswamy, Sri Kumara Gurudevan, Sri Narayana Guru etc. who have laid tangible paths of liberation have based their efforts on history and culture. Ignoring culture and history by oppressed indigenous communities will lead to subjugation. Thus in an effort to liberate the Adijans from subjugation, intellectuals like Ambedkar may have subconsciously paved the path for their postmodern subjugation. It's unfortunate. Looking at Ambedkar as the only icon of Adijan liberation undermines other Adijan leaders of greater worth. Forgetting history will obliterate precious lessons and ideology that they cherished. Perhaps it's what the dominant caste forces want to happen.

VB: What is your ideological difference with Baba Saheb Ambedkar's embracing Buddhism? Do you subscribe to the views which many have articulated that Dalits had their own religion and need not to go to Buddhism or do you feel religion is not that important at all in people's life? How different is your position from that of say Ravidasis, Valmikis and aadidharmis as each one of them want to keep their identity as separate?

MC: Much before Buddha arrived on the scene Adijan people practised nonviolence. Buddha and Gandhi appropriated it from the Adijans. The Adijans didn't have a formal religion. But they had their belief system and worship. It was a cosmic religion based on the essential belief of the cosmos being the ultimate. There was no belief in a divine being as a person. They believed in cosmic powers. Later it developed into a fertility cult based on the belief of the earth being the mother of all beings. There was also a strong reverence and worship of the ancestors. It clearly shows that the Adijans were proud of the legacy left by their ancestors. If people are proud of their history and culture, who are the 'Dalit' leaders to say that we do not need them? One may identify this belief and practice of Adijans as Shamanism.

Just as Charvaka, Buddha too borrowed his atheism and nonviolence from the ancient Shamanism of the Adijans. Buddhism is only an extension of Hinduism, either glorious or rebellious. Hinduism's philosophical trajectory is Karma, Samsara, and Swarga. Buddhism's philosophical trajectory is Karma, Samsara and Nirvana. Buddhism is different from Hinduism only on the question of Swarga. Buddha's nirvana is once again borrowed from the Adijan's cosmism. In his later avatar, Buddha was only a primitive Shankaracharya.

In my perception Ambedkar made a serious mistake of converting to Buddhism, taking the Adijans to a path that belongs to the caste forces. RSS accepts the conversion of Adijans into Buddhism with a glee. We have historical evidence that conversion to any religion is a regressive path. Conversion has led only to a double subjugation. Ambedkar has definitely misread the implications of conversion.

The viable alternative is a strong assertion by the Adijans that we Adijans are Adijans. It will naturally lead to the collective discovery of common culture and history. I have expatiated the nuances of recovering history and culture in my books, Dalitology, Cosmosity, Dalithink and Dyche.

VB: Today, Dalits are under various threats. Poona pact sealed their fate as the political leadership of the day is not responding the way it should have. Campaign for Electoral Reform in India (CERI) revived the old debate of Proportionate representation. Where is the campaign at the moment and how have been the responses of political parties particularly those claiming to represent Baba Saheb Ambedkar's ideology?

MC : The CERI campaign is on low ebb because of my illness. That's a statement of the state of affairs. There's a lethargy set in with the thumping victory of the BJP in the last elections. Most political parties, both national and regional, subscribe to the idea of proportional representation in the way we have proposed in our policy document. The biggest hitch at the moment is taking up the issue in the Parliament. The parties have to be brought together to agree on the one national party that will move the issue at the Indian parliament. Even as I planned for two national conferences to achieve this, came my illness and for some more time it will not be possible for me to travel. The core group members of CERI are carrying on the campaign at their state level. We have a long way to go.

VB: World over religious rights are intimidatingly dominating the political discourse as Minorities and marginalised are out of their agenda. From Modi to Trump is the victory of a failed system which allow extremist viewpoint to get people's approval. How are we going to face such a crisis today? If India's vote was against the Dalits and minorities last time, Americans seems to have reacted against the blacks?

MC: As you rightly point out, the world is passing through a particular phase in history where fascism is gaining an upper hand in governance. My hope is that such a trend will be carried on to an intolerable level and the 'other' world will begin to strike back at the ruling forces. The foundation for the present state of affairs was systematically laid at the beginning of the 16th century. Capitalism has consolidated the spread of its tentacles. It's not anymore the battle of any

one people. It's going to be a global revolution. Philosophers have to keep on churning out alternative vision of the world. Politicians from below need to strategize and choose the best option. Campaigners and activists should be ready to sacrifice their ego and their life to translate a collective global vision into revolutionary action. All these are possible if the indigenous women take up the leadership. At the moment all those who are concerned should begin to speak and write about alternative discourses. When there are more and more of such discourses the threads of a common action will emerge. All of us will have to be in a hurry but be hopeful and patient.

VB: You have been talking about the Dalit Panchayats a lot. What in your opinion should be the ideological position of Dalits towards the new market economy or what our prime minister called 'e-wallet' or cashless economy?

MC: Narendra Modi is the antithesis of development. He is the best agent of the agent state under the garb of nation state. Adijans and Adivasis are already paying a heavy price to sustain this perverted economic mindset. We must appreciate those Adijans who have made inroads into the world of capital. But they will fail if their economic capitalism is not coupled with a social capital. The Black people can be a good lesson for Adijans and Adivasis on this. The leverage to create and expand 'own' spaces within the capitalist world should be strengthened. It will require strong vision and deep rooting in the community so that the benefits that accrue will go to the people.

The largely recognised capital that Adijans have is their labour. Therefore, there needs to be a heavy focus on labour economy. It has to come from Adijan intellectuals. Recognising the value of Adijan and Adivasi labour as well as rewarding labour both by the government and the private sector is of paramount importance. Adijans have to make their labour the biggest bargaining leverage. For example, in the agricultural field and in the sanitation industry, if Adijans strike work demanding their due the country will have to bow down and accede to their demand. In the railways, if Adijans refuse to do scavenging, the country is going to stink up to the doors of the White House.

The less said about e-wallet the better. I am thinking of the poor in the rural India. The entire design seems to be to exclude the rural masses from the developing economy. Is this what Modi promised? Perhaps it is what he had in mind, that he should design economy to the greatest benefits of his friends in high places. I am sure that Modi must go if the poor in this country have to survive.

VB: Past 20 years, we have seen growing trend of acquiring lands of the Dalits and adivasis in the name of development. The first generational land reform did not happen. There was land redistribution but it remained highly unequal and

unfair. The state apparatus did not implement it in letter and spirit of the constitution. Now, we need more highways, more corporations and so land is being acquired without asking people of what they want. Shouldn't we challenge the current 'developmental' module which is based on destruction of people, environment and ecology?

MC: From the time of India's independence we have been going through the contradictions of development. We had no dearth of promises to gain the votes of the poor. Once the elections were over, people in governance only became busy at distributing land among themselves. India is a very strange country where even people have no understanding of the value of constitutional governance. The caste forces don't want constitutional governance. We conveniently blame Modi for fascism. But it is important to recognise that Indian citizens in general are fascists. Those who fight against fascism are branded as anti-nationals. This explains why even before Modi came on the scene Indian society remained largely fascist. Caste fascism keeps corroding the Indian society from inside. As it happens in all dominant societies, the poor, Adijans, Adivasis and minorities are the ones who have to pay a heavy price for this anomaly.

VB: The economic policies that we followed are taking India towards private corporations where the responsibility of the state would be minimum. State has withdrawn from health. It is getting out of education as the more and more private companies are investing in hospitals and education with high fee. Reservation has virtually become redundant now. How do we fight against such onslaught of the private corporations on public resources?

MC: This is not an India-specific problem. It is a global design. As you are aware, democracy, governance and the state developed along with capitalism from the time of enlightenment or as a result of enlightenment. They were designed to serve a specific purpose of the ruling class of the capitalist societies. After four centuries, the state began to outlive itself and now we are at a phase of a slow de-stating of the state. There is a redesigning of the state. The present character of the state will go through a metamorphosis to the greater advantage of the ruling classes. The state is expected to shun its development responsibility. Only those who are capable of paying for their development will be respected as citizens in this redesigned state. One should make a clear distinction between protectionism and the responsibility of the state to protect the interests of the citizens. Therefore, it is a stark contradiction and blatant double speaking that Modi has come to power on the plank of development. He knows that he is hoodwinking the people. He knows the real model of the state in the postmodern democracy. Withdrawal of the welfare state is gradually becoming an accomplished fact, accompanied by strong protectionism of vested

interests of caste groups. An ignorant citizenry is the best bet for the rulers. American and Indian citizens are the best political playgrounds for rulers like Trump and Modi.

We need to discuss reservation as a separate thesis as there are multiple internal and external factors that deserve to be analysed threadbare. Reservation has become the anti-thesis of Adijan development in the sense that the governments and the caste society wash off their responsibility by making 17.5% available to SC/ST. Once it is done Adijans are never allowed to go beyond this 17.5%. Most Adijans also are happy with this provision and become lethargic. Thus reservation has become not a 'reserved' benefit but a reserved slavery.

VB: The Hindutva is posing the biggest threat to Dalits. They are dictating today as what is our culture. Our food habits are being challenged. Hundreds of incident of public flogging, lynching and socio-economic boycotts have come in public domain particularly that of Dalits and Muslims due to their menial work of skinning dead cows or picking them up. One idea was like what happened in Gujarat after Una incident where Dalits have decided not to engage in the traditional occupation but then what is the alternative. We all will shout one day but go away. There seems to be no positive socio economic agenda. Your experience from Tumkur is an example of bringing the positive energy and creating a much better alternative for future. How do you perceive the future could be ?

MC: Just think of this, Rawat. If there are about five thousand small communities in India that are internally strengthened with a strong constitution of not impinging on the rights of other communities, Hindutva will be on the run. This is what we are proposing and doing in the Adijan Panchayat Movement. We know that India is not one country.

All communities must have a system of internally governing themselves through democratically derived norms. Based on this strength they should elect a national government through proportional representation system. It will lead to hard negotiations and peaceful co-existence with deep respect for differences in each community. When this happens, no religion will be able to hold a sway over people. Nationalism will assume stronger connotation of peaceful co-existence in this context.

It will require a lot of homework and deeper reflection on the part of the communities. Sanity of approach can be achieved through community education. We shall become a country of million gardens with millions of flowers in millions of colours. This is not at all utopian. It is possible if one has a serious look at the Tumkur model.

VB: What is the best way to bring various Dalits, adivasis, Muslims and other communities together to fight against the menace of Hindutva ? We all know who are the victims of brahmanical system in India but is not it important for us to also describe what could be our idea of India ? I felt Dr Ambedkar has given that through the preamble of the constitution and in many of his writings but our political class is still unable to take it further?

MC: The First Past the Post electoral system that is a British legacy is for the politicians. The Proportional Representation system that is now implemented in 89 democracies is for the citizens. It is one thing to have a beautiful constitution. It is another thing to implement the same on behalf of the citizens. Having failed in his demand for separate electorate the next best thing Ambedkar could have and should have done was to agree for PR system in the Constituent Assembly. By opting for FPTP he has sealed the fate of the Adijans, Adivasis, MBCs and Minorities for a long time to come. Now, these communities should come together first to fight for PR system and then make the best use of the PR system to gain their political leverage. On this question they have to watch out against the shenanigans of political parties as well as their own political leaders for whom FPTP offers short-term benefits.

VB: Dr Ambedkar has always emphasised that without encouraging women in our structure our movement can not grow. Jyotiba Phule encouraged Savitri Bai Phule who took the torch and revolutionised the movement but when we see the Dalit Bahujan movement women face lots of problems, resistance from the male counterparts. Most of the decision making places where people address the communities, are, 'all men's club', which is seriously disturbing. You have seen many movements and can better analyse for us so that the movement is benefitted.

MC: Women are being spoken about for the survival of men and for the legitimacy of male dominance. History has shown sufficiently enough that men have spoken in flowing terms of women's equality only to camouflage their male dominance. I see Jyothiba Phule and Kanshiram as noble exceptions to this male trend. Men are not the right people to bring about women's equality. It should be women. Men should simply sit back and watch women take the reins of governance without sitting on judgment seats in any way. I have no faith in any men leaders who speak of women's equality.

The need is to focus on the primacy of women. It is a strong value foundation of the indigenous communities including Adijan community. It is unfortunate that most of these communities have blindly aped patriarchal societies. Male celebrities of these communities have done precious little for the primacy of their women.

It is one of the reasons why I give much focus on history and culture. Adijan communities in general and most of the Adivasi communities have a culture of family governance by women. Modern men have appropriated much of these capacities from women and have led the community to indignity and penury. It is Adijan men who have allowed untouchability, slavery of their communities, have supported the deprivation of education for their children, have let themselves into bonded labor etc. If Adijan communities still survive it is because of the capacity of their women to sustain the family. Adijan communities have survived a bit not because of their men but despite their men.

Through the revival of own history and culture it is possible for Adijan women to take back the reins of family and community governance. Men from these communities should tender an apology to their women and sit back in silence believing in the wisdom of their women. Women are the biggest harbinger of hope to an intolerant and violence torn world.

VB: Many activist feel that your work 'Dalitology' try to glorify superstition and irrationality in the name of 'culture'. How do you respond to those fears of Ambedkarites who feel that culture gave nothing, a position that Baba Saheb has taken and that is why gave a call to come out of the brahmanical Hindu practices?

MC: Let's get this right. I've come across some such people. When I question them further I come to know that they have only heard of Dalitology from others but have not read it themselves. It becomes difficult for me to carry on any meaningful dialogue with those who have not read a book. Dalitology and Dyche are major documents for the future of Adijan development. On the need for history and culture I have already said a few things in this interview and don't want to repeat them. It is Christianity, Hinduism and now Buddhism that are promoting superstition. Culture provides the value system for governance. This is accepted by many rational philosophers.

If you go back a little to the mechanism of colonisation you realise that the first thing the colonisers did among the indigenous people was to destroy their culture and their cultural symbols. They knew for sure that the indigenous people were bound together by their cultural values and governed themselves strongly. Destroying their culture would break their backbone and pave the way for the governance of the colonisers. In order to do this they also infused their highly superstitious religions. Which indigenous community has accepted the possibility of virgin birth?

Gramsci speaks of organic intellectualism. How many 'Dalit' intellectuals have some importance to this dimension in liberation politics? In an effort to gain

some space in the dominant intellectual world many 'Dalit' scholars only develop a bookish intellectualism. These books have been written by dominant forces. How many intellectuals sit at the feet of Adijan women and men and draw their intellectualism from them. Dalitology was written drawing its ideas and inspiration from the illiterate masses of Adijan people. I have given only a philosophical framework to the content. It is my strength. Organic intellectuals within the Adijan community largely remain unnoticed and unrecognised. That is the tragedy of India.

Dalitology is a document against all forms of superstition and that's why all fellows belonging to dominant religions and some egotistic 'Dalit' leaders have hounded me out. It is a rational document par excellence. I am a proud rationalist. They have stopped talking to Jyothi and me and have prevented others from talking to both of us. If they are rational they should argue with my position and tear me into pieces. I am ready for that. There is a bloated ego at play and not any search for truth. But there are also some people who have invited me for discussions on Adijan spirituality and mysticism.

By converting to Buddhism, Babasaheb and his followers have only taken the Adijans back to Hinduism through the backdoor. It is a mark of their inability to recognise the internal strength of the oppressed Adijans. At the back of their head may be a sense of worthlessness both of themselves and of the poor Adijans. It is a dishonest effort to indulge in mass conversion of Adijans by making use of one's leadership position. Ordinary Adijans are illiterate but they are very wise. They are able to see through the game plans of conversion. They can also clearly see that it's a Mahar effort at establishing their superiority over other sections of Adijans.

Yes, Adijans should come out of Brahminism and Hinduism. There will be no development as long as they are within the Hindu fold. However, converting to other religions is not an alternative. Reclaiming their own history and culture will be the surest way of getting out of superstitions and other religions. This is what some of the liberated indigenous communities have achieved in many parts of the world.

VB: How relevant is Annihilation of castes? Do you believe in it or you believe that Dalits were never part of the brahmanical culture. If not then the reality is they are part of brahmanical cultural practices. What should they do to come out of this fold? Do you think the necessity of them to delink themselves from the caste structure?

MC: Let us simply acknowledge the truth that annihilation of caste is a wild goose chase. Caste can never be annihilated and there is no need of doing it. Even if it has to be annihilated why should Adijans waste their time and energy

on this useless exercise? It's one of the worst intellectual deviations that Babasaheb has provided to many half-baked 'Dalit' intellectuals. They can hold on to this log of wood all their life while the rest of the community can drown in the flood of caste cauldron. There is no problem with people clinging on to their caste. Let Brahmins be Brahmins, let Kshatriyas be Kshatriyas, let Vaishyas be Vaishyas and let Shudras be Shudras. Let them not come on the way of Adijans being Adijans. Let there be a constitution to govern all these communities.

Constitution should be agreed upon and be supreme in the instruments and mechanisms of national governance. Let each caste community govern itself with its culture and norms. Let there be no interference in the way other communities govern themselves. Let there be a constitution to protect people from dominant intervention in their internal affairs. Let all people abide by common laws as envisioned in the constitution. I am speaking of a new constitution when this truth of differences is accepted in national life. Only then shall we be able to show the door to people like Modi and to forces like RSS. No single culture should be allowed to have a sway over the formation and implementation of the constitution. This is possible if we have the PR system. Do not threaten the Brahmins and do not play one caste against another. Let there be negotiations on peaceful co-existence. Let there be constitutional provisions to bring to books those who deviate from negotiated positions. This is a big thesis I have proposed in my 1100 page volume Dyche.

VB: Many ideological movements happened. You have been an ideologue and a philosopher on the ground. You also provided us the new dimensions of the proportionate electorate system through CERI which were hitherto not known but we have not seen you any of the meetings which claims to set political agenda for Dalits and Bahujans particularly BAMSECF or RPIs ? Any particular reason ?

MC: Educating Indian citizens on PR system is going to be a long drawn out process. We are such mental slaves of the British that many of us don't want to get out of the cosy comforts of colonisation. Our role model of national governance is the coloniser. PR system requires Adijan parties to come together as a coalition in order to meaningfully share power both within and outside. Many 'ego' based 'Dalit' Political leaders are not prepared for this. They are happy with the crumbs that fall beneath the dining table of the Dives. Who can demand a leader to give up his ego? He will not live if he gives up his ego. PR system provides the space even to ego-based leaders to come together to the negotiating table as an Adijan coalition. Such a coalition can get into the business of negotiating with other political parties for their legitimate space to grab power to govern at the national level. Instead, many of them are happy

with the one or two seats that they gain by joining the coalition under the FPTP. I remember once when Thirumavalavan negotiated with the DMK for seats to contest, Karunanidhi did not give his party even one seat to contest. Then Karunanidhi said that Thiruma had a place in his heart. They design their political game under the presumption that 'Dalits' are sentimental fools. Let it be any 'Dalit' political party. They are the biggest betrayers of the Adijan people. They allow their ego to be the primary platform of political negotiation and not the future of the community.

Each Adijan community must set its political agenda. All such agenda must be brought to the negotiation table internally. A collective Adijan and national agenda must be evolved and negotiations with other parties must take place on the strength of this agenda. A national collation with other political parties can evolve through such negotiations. This is a long-term process. It needs a strong commitment not only to the process but also to the ultimate liberation and development of the Adijan people.

If other caste communities, Adivasis and religious minorities also follow this path, then India will have not only the largest democracy in the world but also the best democracy. India has only a sham democracy at the moment.

VB: How is a Dalit Bahujan Aadijan unity possible? What could be the programme agenda? Do you think that the left parties could be part of such a structure if not the mainstream left then those who claim to work for the Dalits? Left had made lots of mistakes in past. Their leadership rarely gave representation to Dalits but then those claiming the Dalit Bahujan leadership too form the part of the powerful castes only. How do we come to a common minimum agenda to defeat the divisive communal brahmanical forces in India?

MC: I think I have already answered this question except the one on the comrades. I have emerged from a Marxian school of thought though I did not join any communist party. Am happy that the comrades both in the CPI and the CPM see the value of this now. Such acceptance comes after many years of isolation only because I work for the Adijans. The ground for their rejection was that I was taking support from donor NGOs for my work. When I think of the comrades in India I remember the Maoists in Nepal who struggled hard to usher in true democracy to their land. Adijans have no issues with Indian communists and it is unfathomable why they think that any liberation work among the Adijans is an impediment to the class 'revolution' that they want to bring about. It shows their insecure position.

Now we should be happy that most communists have come out of this insecurity and are ready to join hands with Adijans to usher in a new society. Unfortunately, though, they are quite lethargic after the rise of Modi. Often it

M C Raj

makes me think whether they have found at last their bed-fellow and want him to continue in the saddle.

At my level, I have convinced many 'Dalit' leaders that they should sit at the negotiation table with the comrades and hope that better light will come soon. I believe that ideologically they are the only force on Indian soil that can play a constructive and creative role in changing the face of Indian democracy. But I remain with the confused question: 'who will bell the cat?'

ANAND TELTUMBDE*

Castes, gender and other such issues are social reality and they need to be dealt with as part of the class struggle.

VB: Anand ji, how to you assess the status of Ambedkarite movement in India since the demise of Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar.

AT: To say that the Ambedkarite movement today is in lamentable state may be a grossly understatement. What we see going in its name is the exhibition of identities, Ambedkar himself having become an inert icon supplying that identity; rampant opportunism, everybody floating a shop for political brokerage in the name of devotion to Ambedkar; ideological bankruptcy, openly joining enemy camps for pelf and power but claiming to serve Ambedkarite cause; explosion of scholars rewriting what Ambedkar wrote or showering empty superlatives over him; toeing the lines of power that be for self-aggrandizement; and indulgence in never ending mutilation of what Ambedkar stood for. There are other strands of these to be seen in social media—outpourings on Facebook, WhatsApp groups, and such others, with a new tribe of activists thriving in virtual space.

The question as to what really constitutes the Ambedkarite movement may have to be answered. Is it just anything swearing by the self-proclaimed followership of Ambedkar that makes an Ambedkarite movement or is there any criteria to determine it? While it may not be easy to answer this question, there being many facets of Ambedkar's own struggle, one may broadly take a clue from his vision and say that any movement that is oriented to make society move towards liberty, equality and fraternity may be termed as Ambedkarite. Naturally, the movements that privilege caste identities could not be Ambedkarite. The movements that do not raise voice against the violation of democratic rights of people cannot be Ambedkarite. The movement that is not socialistic is not Ambedkarite. Babasaheb Ambedkar stressed this value triad in terms of political, economic and social democracy. These criteria may be supplemented by additional features associated with the persona and character

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of Babasaheb Ambedkar such as his iconoclasm, rationality and scientific attitude, integrity, dedication, etc.

If we test out what passes as the movements of Dalits on these criteria, we may not get any that comes even within the consideration zone. It is with this understanding that I say that there are no Ambedkarite movements existing today. Being Ambedkarite does not mean worshiping Ambedkar or making him a cult figure, least capitalising on it for selfish ends. But that is precisely every movement of Dalits is engaged in. What is seen as Ambedkar movement is the growing congregations at the newer and newer places being discovered as associated with him, the ever growing number of statues and monuments subtly aided by the state, growing panegyric literature much of it is pointless, building of Buddha Viharas in competition with the Hindu temples just as the marker of identity; growing number of seminars, conferences and meetings that appears to engage/accommodate the growing tribe of educated Dalits with sophisticated version of Ambedkar bhakti. There is a pseudo-concern of the employed Dalits in the name of the 'payback to society' in distributing food packets and providing medical aid, etc. to the poor masses of Dalits who congregate at the places like Chaitya Bhumi and Deeksha Bhumi, indirectly promoting them. Of course there are better versions of it, although in small numbers, that seek to provide coaching, scholarship and extend financial aid to needy Dalit student. The entire Ambedkarite movement is seen in the form of these activities, which do not even remotely connect with what Ambedkar stood for. Many of them may rather be seen as antithetical to his persona and vision.

It needs to be understood that what Babasaheb Ambedkar practised was pragmatism imbibed from his Professor John Dewey while in Columbia. He did not believe that there could be a science of history and therefore some abiding laws of societal development. Therefore, what he did was to figure out the best possible way in the given situation to advance the interests of Dalits. Therefore, apart from the abiding and unflinching commitment to the cause of Dalits (later expanded to entire humanity) one may not find a theoretical string that could be extended to any length of in future. The Ambedkarite movement was supposed to carry on what Ambedkar did, towards certain goals like annihilation of castes, achieving his dream society based on liberty, equality and fraternity as discussed before. The only methodological prerequisite was the sterling commitment to the cause and as he said to the extent avoiding violence and dictatorship.

After his death in 1956, the movement experienced sudden vacuum of leadership as there was no leader who could take his place. But the leaders had huge personal ambitions. According to J V Pawar, who chronicled the significant events around the time, right after his cremation at the Chaitya Bhumi, the politicking among the Maharashtra Scheduled Caste Federation

(SCF) leaders had begun. Babasaheb in his last days had toyed with an idea to form a non-Congress, non-Communist opposition party by bringing all prominent leaders under its banner. He had sent the proposal to socialist leaders like Dr Ram Manohar Lohia and S M Joshi. Nothing is known about their responses but at Nagpur, while addressing a mammoth gathering collected for Dharmantar (conversion to Buddhism) he spoke out this idea of forming a new party, Republican Party of India (RPI). Since the 1957 elections were round the corner, the post-Ambedkar SCF leadership decided to defer the decision and fight elections on reserved constituencies although they were supposed to have forsaken Hinduism and were no more the Scheduled Castes. The leadership issue was sorted out by having a collective leadership in the form of seven member presidium. But it did not last long.

Just about a year after the formation of the RPI, in deference to the wishes of Ambedkar on 3 October 1957, the vertical division in the party precipitated. Each faction began claiming to be a true heir of Ambedkar. The division sharpened when Dadasaheb Gaikwad, who had better bond with masses and who had enjoyed relatively greater confidence of Ambedkar than any other leader began talking about the livelihood issues of the Dalits. B C Kamble, by virtue of being an advocate, presumptuously claimed to know the Constitution more than anyone else. He accused Gaikwad of speaking the language of communists. The anti-communist sentiment was ripe in minds of people, as communists were seen as responsible for the defeat of Ambedkar in the 1952 election. These sentiments were duly capitalised by the anti-Gaikwad faction for denigrating him. Gaikwad, not entirely devoid of personal ambition, however, knew the pulse of masses as well as what Babasaheb Ambedkar desired. In his later years, Ambedkar was getting increasingly frustrated as the things he did his entire life, did not seem to produce desired result. In one of such bouts of frustration, he lamented to the Marathwada unit of the SCF that visited him at his residence in Delhi in 1953 that whatever he did had benefitted only a small section of the urban educated Dalits and that he could not do anything for the vast majority of Dalits in rural area. He wondered to the leader of the unit, B S Waghmare, whether he would be able to organise a struggle for demanding land for the rural Dalits. Immediately after his return Waghmare organised a land satyagraha in Marathwada with the help of Gaikwad. Some 1700 people had gone to jail in this first ever struggle for land (or any material issue) in the history of of Ambedkarite movement. After the death of Ambedkar, Gaikwad reenacted the land satyagraha in 1959, this time in much bigger scale in the Khandesh-Marathwada region of the then Bombay Province in which many socialist and communist leaders participated and went to jail along with Dalits. The RPI under Gaikwad organised a countrywide land satyagraha in 1964-5 on an unprecedented scale, which lasted for nearly a month, each day hundreds of

people including women and children courting arrests. The resolve of Dalit masses to fight for their livelihood issues reflected by this land satyagraha alarmed the government at the centre. It responded with a strategy to coopt the Dalit leaders. None other than Dadasaheb Gaikwad would fall prey to this strategy inaugurated by the then chief minister of Maharashtra, Yashwantrao Chauhan. Gaikwad fully conscious of the consequences could not however save the party from the damage. The strategy opened the floodgates for Dalit leaders to join the Congress or indirectly work for it. The RPI, deformed at the birth itself, would not survive thereafter but for in the name claimed by innumerable factions.

The independent Ambedkarite movement had virtually collapsed by mid-1960s. By the late 1960s, the political emasculation of the Dalits began showing up in rising atrocities. In the wake of the global unrest and particularly taking inspiration from the Black Panthers Party in the US, the Ambedkarite youth, pouring out of universities just to have dark future staring at them despite the chimera of reservations, began giving expression to their feelings of frustration emulating the genre of Black literature. From this movement of Dalit literature was born the Dalit Panthers movement. The very name emulating the Maoist Black Panthers Party in the US and in the background of the birth of another militant movement in Naxalbari in North Bengal, the Dalit Panthers sent a shockwave across the ruling establishment. But before it could set its tone through some militant action, it split on the point of deviating from Ambedkarism. A faction led by Raja Dhale accused the other led by Namdeo Dhasal of being under the communist influence. It was a rehash of the split in the RPI on the basis of an idiotic syllogism, that speaking about material interests of the masses was communism, Ambedkar was opposed to communism and hence anything that raised the livelihood issues was against Ambedkar. This time it was constitutionalism but Buddhism. Dalit Panthers thus just proved to be a flash in pan.

Dalit Panthers went the RPI way, with much rapid degeneration than the latter. The electoral politics by then had become intensely competitive with the emergence of regional parties threatening the political hegemony of the Congress. The very processes of creating a class of rich farmers using seemingly the people-oriented policies like land reforms and Green Revolution but intended to create a political ally in rural India had led to this aftermath. The small bunch of votes which were available in the forms of castes and communities assumed disproportionate importance in the first-past-the-post (FPTP) elections and with that the value of brokering. It gave rise to a tribe of brokers in the guise of Ambedkarite leaders. In the crowd of these fraudsters the nostalgic Dalit masses were increasingly drawn towards Ambedkar icon which in turn was exploited by the ruling classes in subtly deforming Ambedkar.

Babasaheb Ambedkar who remained an ignored figure for almost a decade, so much so that his son had to take out a march from Mahu to Mumbai collecting small donations from people to build a small structure at the place of his cremation in mid 1960s, began to be monumentalized by the establishment all over the country. The gullible Dalit masses would not understand the stratagem of the ruling classes and would increasingly fall for it, setting in a vicious cycle. What remains now of the Ambedkarite movement is these statues of Ambedkar, Buddha Vihars, congregations in his memories, hymns and identity hysteria.

VB: Why, in your opinion, RPI which could have become a strong secular progressive force as visualised by Dr Ambedkar, could not achieve much.

AT: RPI was conceived by Babasaheb Ambedkar as a non-communist opposition party to the then ruling Congress. What was to be progressive in it is really not known. What I imagine is that Ambedkar was not very comfortable with a seemingly caste based party like SCF. It was occasioned by the political development triggered by the Cripp's report in 1942. Now that its utility was over and also that its historical performance has been listless, he was naturally inclined to revive the idea of his very first party, the Independent Labour Party (ILP) under the new name, more fitting to the constitutionalism that he propagated. The Congress being a party of the capitalists, the natural opposition party was a party of labour. But labour was associated with the communists. Ambedkar was historically cut up with the communists, and particularly bitter with them for having defeated him in the 1952 elections. They, however, were the major opposition party, although distant second to the Congress. Weighing the relative strength of the parties and taking cognizance of the huge dominance of the Congress, strategically it would have been a good idea to forge a broad coalition of all socialist and communist parties. After all, the communists had adopted the parliamentary path. The RPI, relying upon ideologically amorphous socialists outside the communists was not destined to be a major opposition party to the Congress. The very fact that it failed to take off, perhaps speaks volumes about its poor strategic basis.

I am not sure Babasaheb used secular for the RPI. The 'secular' is the most abused term in this country popularised by so called progressives. What I know is that the RPI was to be the non-communist opposition party to the dominant Congress. It may rather be likened to the Janata Party that emerged in 1970s, as the major opposition party to the Congress, that did not hesitate to include the Bharatiya Jan Sangh (BJS). The 'secular' that signifies the firewall between religion and politics was disposed of during the Constitution making itself. When the subcommittee of the CA decided to have it, none other than Nehru, who is supposed to be the biggest secularist around had rejected it and as a

result the Constitution did not contain this term. There is no evidence that even Babasaheb Ambedkar also contradicted the ruling version of dharmnirapekshta. It is well known that in November 1948, Prof K T Shah, representing Bihar in the CA, had moved an amendment to the effect that “India shall be a Secular, Federal, Socialist Union of States.” It was Babasaheb himself who opposed it saying that the Constitution was “merely a mechanism for the purpose of regulating the work of the various organs of the State” and what the policy of the State or how the “Society should be organised in its social and economic side are matters which must be decided by the people themselves according to time and circumstances.” It is a different matter that he was a strong votary until his first speech in the CA of hardcoding the socialist structure of the society into the constitution!

India is not a secular country; it is a dharmnirpeksh country, and de facto a Hindu country, as the likes of Mohan Bhagwat rightly claim. The Constitution does not have this word; it was inserted by Indira Gandhi paradoxically during the Emergency, perhaps to complete the joke on the Indian people. Well, coming back to the question of the RPI, how would such a party emerge as a strong party? What binding force the motley combination of leaders with all ideological hues would have held it together? What would be its constituency? What would be its goal?

Indian elections are fought on the strength of money, muscle and communal power, all of which are evil. Without resorting to these evil, no party would really survive in India. Communist party was the biggest opposition party in the parliament in early years. Its electoral success was due to its struggles in certain pockets of the country. But leave apart building upon it, the party could not even sustain itself. With what imagination one could say that the RPI would have been different? Yes, there are examples of the Dravidian parties (DMK and AIDMK in its present avatar) surviving as the electoral parties and whether one sees the portents with open eyes, until yesteryears, the BSP also achieved electoral success. The pertinent question to be asked here is whether they could really do justice to their professed goals. What remains of these parties is a different hue of the ruling class parties. They have enriched their leaders but have kept their constituency vulnerable.

As a matter of fact, neither Ambedkar nor his party could succeed in post-colonial elections.

Whether RPI could have been successful is a purely hypothetical question. The more pertinent question is whether it could have been successful in promoting what Ambedkar willed. My answer to this question is in flat negative. The proof of my saying is the fact that no party, small or big, or even the parliamentary communist parties, swearing by the working classes, could really serve the

interests of poor in this country. The structure of politics sucks you in and dissolves into its colours. Electoral successes could be manipulated and success could be claimed as the BSP did. But as the BSP experiment amply proved, you cannot defy the grammar of this politics. Money, muscle, communal arithmetic drives you away from the masses into the so called mainstream rendering you indistinguishable from any other ruling class party.

VB: You have been with the left movement and always talked about bringing caste and class issues together. Left has rarely accepted the caste as the primary source of exploitation in India but many of your writings confirms the fact that you too look from the class angle. Could you please explain why you insist class matter and secondly why there is a remote possibility of left and Ambedkarite coming together?

AT: Yes, I have been with the political left (not with any party) for the most part of my life and also willed that the communist and the Dalit movements should converge to make a strong unified revolutionary force. It is not bringing class and caste together but enclosing castes within a class. I have serious objection to the constricted conception of class the communists and even others have. My definition of class subsumes castes. This is the mistake of the early communists that has cost Indian poor their revolution. Marx said that the history of all hitherto existing society was the history of class struggles. How could then castes that were the life world of the subcontinent for most part of the known history be left aside from the class analysis? Neither class analysis of the Indian society nor class struggle in India could be conceived without taking cognizance of castes. This is the greatest blunder of the Indian communists that may be traced to their Brahmanic proclivities to adhere to the given word. In pre-capitalist world classes manifested in various forms; castes also were the forms of classes.

It does not mean ignoring castes. In fact nothing is ignored. Revolutions are not a theory that you assume away something and proceed; you have to confront social reality. Castes, genders and every other such issue are a social reality and they need to be dealt with as part of the class struggle. It is a process to enhance revolutionary consciousness. Castes, given their peculiar characteristics (quite unlike any other social category) cannot be the basis of struggle in any other way. We have experience with various caste struggles for over a century. They reveal that they could not make any dent to the existence of castes. Whatever changes that have crept in them are due to the advent of capitalism and modernity piggybacking it. I have explained it in my book *Anti-Imperialism and Annihilation of Caste* and many other writings. Castes only drive you deeper into the ditch.

Today despite these caste struggles, arguably, India is more casteized than it was ever in history. Class struggle is the prime mover of the history and cannot be contrasted to any other struggle. It does not mean only economic struggle as the ignoramuses made it to be. They subsume all other struggles. In India class struggle necessarily incorporates anti-caste struggle. There cannot be a separate front where castes can be fought against. This has been historical folly in India. Of course, for this I hold the communists responsible because they claiming the ownership of analytical arsenal of Marxism could not use it. Babasaheb Ambedkar, a pragmatist by confession, was devising his praxis as the situation unfolded and hence his blame becomes certainly lesser.

No, I am not pessimistic. Both the movements marching separately have reached their points of extinction. It is natural that at least a section of their adherents has begun realising the mistake and thinking of correcting themselves. Unlike others I do not speak/write in vacuum; I am intimately in touch with the struggles afield and do have a sense that such realisation is fast dawning on the youngsters on both sides. The times are, however, uncongenial for such manifestations. But the things cannot rot for long. There will be a way out.

Yes, there is big hurdle in the path. The mushrooming middle class of Dalits represent that hurdle. They do not want it. They have whipped up the identity obsession among the Dalits and made Ambedkar a marker of that identity. They will naturally prevent it happening. The class characteristics of these Dalits tend to prefer the status quo because it has brought them some stature and material prosperity. They would not want it change. Revolution moreover demands sacrifices, which has not been in their grammar. But that is not the case with the multitude of the Dalit masses. Their condition craves for change. They do not have anything left to lose but their pitiable condition. And therefore they would like to have a revolution. The only problem they do not know what it would be like, what it would entail. It is not only in India but also the world over, people ceased to believe in revolutions and their promises. The communists are solely responsible for this state of mind. They have only given them failures. They need to squarely accept it. Those who want change from the status quo, may have to be low on rhetoric and high on creative strategies. The odds are serious but not insurmountable. The same old stereotype of revolutionary rhetoric and slogan mongering would not work. It will demand new creative ways. The entire revolutionary theory in the context of the contemporary techno-managerial context of the world will have to be rethought. The pace of change in the contemporary world is so rapid and accelerating that no ism howsoever scientific it may be can be relied to offer us solution. Revolutions, as such, have always been a serious enterprise and they cannot be spoken superfluously. They always demand hard work and sacrifices.

VB: Is not it true that the left has historically not considered Ambedkar as icon of the Dalit identity and culture. In fact many of them went on to criticise him to the extent of not even considering him as an intellectual. Is it not the brahmanical arrogance which many of the left ideologue suffer from?

AT: Who says they haven't? Have all Dalits in contrast really considered Ambedkar as their icon? It is only the Mahars in Maharashtra and their equivalents in other states have accepted him as their icon of identity and culture. It was as such a caste affair, pure and simple.

Over time there has been promotion of this icon by the state and he is made what he is today. When India became independent, the ruling classes had adopted Gandhi as their icon. He remained for initial decades the state icon but with the change in times began losing its lustre. It outlived its utility by 1980s. The aura of independence struggle and the ethos of Indianness that the Gandhian icon represented became out of tune by the time India became neoliberal. The ruling classes needed to replace it. Ambedkar, who historically contrasted Gandhi and presented his antithesis, came handy as an icon for the neoliberal India, which was considered as the antithesis of the welfare state during the Gandhian phase. It is therefore that they began projecting him as the free market economist, pro-globalization figure, a monetarist and what not particularly through some of the Dalit brokers masquerading as intellectuals. Ambedkar's modern look combined with liberal and pragmatic views came to perfectly fit in the requirements of the new icon for neoliberal era.

The role of the state in making up the Ambedkar icon cannot be missed. Apart from monumentalizing efforts, it opened up Ambedkar centres everywhere. There was a sudden spurt in so called research on him in universities. Ambedkar, almost an abhorrent figure for the elite, suddenly became venerable. The bout of bhakti Modi expresses for him just illustrates it starkly.

As a matter of fact, as explained above, Ambedkar's iconization had begun from the late 1960s itself. The turning point came with the 1964-65 all India land satyagraha. Dalits for the most part until then had engaged in cultural struggles; against Brahmanism which was in a way abstract, challenging really no one. If they turned towards their economic deprivations, as this struggle reflected, it would pose real threat to the entire structure. Therefore, the Congress had launched its cooptation strategy. There were other factors too that contributed to this trend. As explained earlier, intensification of electoral competition and consequent importance of the vote banks made it imperative to iconize Ambedkar to woo the Dalit voters. Gradually thereafter, one finds roads being named after Ambedkar, his statutes dotting them, institutions being named after him and his pictures adorning them. The nostalgia of the Dalit masses in the

face of dilapidation of the Dalit movement by then also aided this trend in a significant way.

As for your question that the Left has historically not considered him as an icon of the Dalit identity and culture, I do not see it as such. Initially, it is true they did ignore him rather if you go to his times; the communists ridiculed him as some hardliners among them still do. But later with their own degeneration, they also could not keep themselves away from the electoral logic. Some of them tacitly realised their mistake in ignoring castes but the peculiar cultural attitude not to admit mistakes prevented them from speaking that out loudly. Today all the communist parties do acknowledge Ambedkar. Even the Marxist-Leninist parties, popularly called Naxalites, who do not have electoral compulsion as the parliamentary parties have, do acknowledge his work and contributions.

But why and how does the Left considering or acknowledging Ambedkar as an icon of Dalit identity and culture become important? How consequential it is either for the Dalit emancipation or the Indian revolution? I would rather ask why should Ambedkar be only a Dalit icon? Ambedkar acquired a universal vision as he evolved. Why should he be demeaned to the mean status of just being a Dalit icon? I am also against this iconization business. Icons, on the positive side, can inspire certain ideals but on the negative side they can also distort the reality. The very concept of icon distances it from the reality and makes it objectionable.

Ambedkar need not be an icon for anyone but should be seriously considered for what he has to offer for the creation of the new world based on 'liberty, equality and fraternity' as he proclaimed. His own attitude towards the great people was similar. He dismissed the heroes and great men in no uncertain terms and proclaimed himself as an iconoclast. Why make him an icon and insult him? All great people—who looked beyond their self and strove for betterment of humanity—have something to say as to how to reach there. And they all should be considered important for their thoughts and actions. One needs to mind, however, that they are simultaneously limited by their won space and time. In the past with slow pace of change their thoughts and actions could guide us in dealing with our problems but not now. We may be inspired by their vision but may not be able to use their thoughts, actions or methods because the entire reference points may have undergone change. Our world demands novel strategies to deal with and limits utility to that extent of the past. Perhaps this dictum would invalidate privileging any ism as the solution. What is important with them (and those which are not been fortunate to be taken as such) is the insights they had.

As regards your comment about Left criticism, both communists as well Ambedkar criticised each other. Because, their constituencies had a huge overlap, the criticism was quite natural. Communists viewed that Ambedkar was dividing the working class and he criticised them that they did not pay attention to caste discrimination that the Dalit workers suffered under their nose. Apart from that the communists' superficial understanding of the Marxian metaphor of 'base and superstructure' led them to believe that mere struggle against caste was pointless. But I do not think that they denied him his intellectual status. Despite the intrinsic intellectual arrogance that the communists reflect, they swallowed his claim in 1938 public meeting that he had read more books on communism than all communists taken together. These issues rooted in the dynamics of times a century before should not trouble us but because of our identitarian obsession they keep deflecting our present focus too.

VB: You have been participating in various programmes of the left Dalit alliances. How is it happening? Do you think possibility of them coming together or will it break due to wider perspective gap among them?

AT: I have already explained that unless Dalits adopt class orientation, they are not going to be successful even in their anti-caste struggle. To have class-approach does not make one automatically communist or Marxist, least the adherent of some political outfit. That is the only approach that could bind all oppressed people together and bring in a hope of annihilation of castes. I am not enamoured with the communist parties that exist in India. My concern is with the movements, there are movements beyond parties. Given the state of politics on both sides, there is little that one hopes for. I see a need to make a new beginning. Yes, I see hope of that happening too. Despite numerous odds in our path, there are enough people who listen to us. It is better to have right orientation than having wrong results. The world today has gone very complex. People will have to be on their toes to comprehend it and devise viable strategies towards making it better for the vast majority. What I do is to prepare them doing that.

VB: Rohith Vemula's institutional murder gave different left and Ambedkarite groups an opportunity but then they split again. The Hyderabad Central University Elections and later the JNU Student elections both places the left parties refused to accept or support the Ambedkarite or Dalit Bahujan groups like BAPSA resulting in much bitter altercation among them. How do you react to this?

AT: It is unfortunate that in both these campuses Left and Ambedkarite students could not use the opportunity to converge. In HCU, in the thick of the protests over Rohith's death, I had a meeting with both sides and advised them to forge a united a front against the Hindutva, isolating the ABVP. I had

explained my rationale that the HCU was an appropriate place to seed it and promised to replicate in other campuses. But for inexplicable reasons, and I am sure it had all to do with identities that it was not pursued. In HCU, the onus was on the Ambedkar Students' Association (ASA) to make it happen but I don't think they even tried it. As a result, the wider base for the protest movement petered out and it recoiled back to be just a Dalit matter. It is our Telangana based organisation, Kula Nirmulan Porata Samiti that has kept the movement alive.

In JNU, reportedly the left students did take an initiative and striking a joint front with BAPSA but the latter would not speak with them. I do not really know who to blame. But I sense, the identity obsession and hatred for the Left among the Dalits make things difficult. As I said these things are more with the educated middle class of the Dalits than the masses. There is a weird logic underneath this conduct. Hating Left opens up avenues for going anywhere. All said and done, whether they are right or wrong, the Left have the ethos of sacrifice, confines of ideology. Being against them opens the floodgate of opportunities. This is what happened to the Dalit politics. You could easily walkover to the hindutva camp but would not consider touching the Left with a bargepole. This attitude has informed the degeneration of the Dalit politics that we see. The intellectual behaviour is not very different. Ambedkarites have made their hatred for the Left it into an art form to justify their opportunism. I have been giving the post-dinner lectures to the JNU students and whatever the topic is bombarded with the same questions by the Ambedkarite students as I was asked say 10-15 years ago. I had to jocularly wonder whether the students haven't passed out of the campus over such a long period. I had answered these stereotypical questions numerous times seemingly to their satisfaction (because every time they kept quiet) but they would keep repeating them over the years with the airs of profundity. My declaration that I do not care for any ism, or my criticism of the Left strewn all over my writings, do not cut any ice with them. They would just assume things and behave. While I may not absolve the Left side of the blame, but my own experience with the so called Ambedkarite students provide me huge data about the dynamics. It is terribly painful to see these young students in relatively elite institution instead of learning shut their faculties willfully.

VB: You have been working a lot on the issue of land acquisition and Adivasi question on both there is a huge misunderstanding of perspective as well as work both by the Ambedkarite as well as those who claims to be Marxists.

AT: Yes, I have associated myself with many land struggles wherever I could and tried to help them as per my capacity. Land is a scarce resource and constituted terrain for class struggle between rich and poor. For the poor they

represent livelihood resource and for the rich they are required for 'development'. I have participated in and associated with anti-SEZ struggles, Adivasi struggles to preserve their habitat in many states, and Dalits' struggle for their land rights, also in many states. By Ambedkarite definition, they all become Left struggles but are not necessarily waged by the ideological Left. I haven't seen any Ambedkarite spearheading these struggles. The honourable exceptions were Valjibhai Patel and Jignesh Mewani in Gujarat, who have been struggling to get physical possession of the lands allotted to the Dalits by the Gujarat government in 1980s. Elsewhere, they came in caste conflict with others, not necessarily with the high castes but the likes of Adivasis and BCs. There was a struggle in Chitradurga district of Karnataka led by Shivalingam and another at Pathapally in Telangana, spearheaded by the KNPS activists, to which I actively contributed. Wherever the Dalits were involved, it invariably assumed caste dimension and still the activists were isolated by the middle class Dalits as the Leftists. They would keep themselves away but the masses would actively uphold them. There is this clear divide between the masses of Dalits and their middle classes that surfaces in every struggle and particularly the land struggles.

The Dalit activists leading the land struggle invariably did it under the banner of Babasaheb Ambedkar but could not impress the so called Ambedkarites and deserve their support. They rather criticised them. When it came to resisting the states' or state-sponsored land grab, Ambedkarites are conspicuous by their absence. There are hundreds of such resistance movements going on all over the country and they are mainly waged by the Dalits and Adivasis but one may not meet any Ambedkarite there. They are only supported by the Left activists. Take for instance the anti-Posco struggle that endured all kinds of state repression but eventually compelled the giant company to wind up their plans. All of them were Adivasis and Dalits. Where was the Ambedkarites there? Has any Ambedkarite scholar considered it important to write on and at least express his moral support? The Ambedkarites rather have tendentiously sided by the state. The Maoist movement, may be criticised ad infinitum for its methods, but can never be opposed by anyone claiming to be on the side of the oppressed masses. It is only the Ambedkarites who do it. In my recent experience, as a General Secretary of the Committee for Protection of Democratic Rights (CPDR) hosting an executive committee meeting of our umbrella organization – Coordination of Democratic Rights Organizations (CDRO) at the MLA Hostel in Nagpur, there were violent slogan shouting by the people holding Ambedkar's picture and blue flags, demanding death to Saibaba and his supporters, meaning us. What would one call these Ambedkarites? Babasaheb Ambedkar would cry at such a misuse of his name!

Where is the difference between perspectives on this issue? When you have almost declared the struggle as taboo and conveniently kept away from it; and at

another extreme have chosen to actively oppose those who struggle against it, you cannot claim respectability using phrases like difference in perspectives.

VB: Is the question of identity not important for developing the leadership of the marginalised communities or is it just who work for them. Even technically both models have failed given the nature of corrupted leadership that has emerged.

AT: Identity per se is not an issue; what kind of identity for what kind of objective is the issue. People naturally wear multiple identities, from individual to collective. They all have their utility. So, identities per se are not a problem. The combination of identity and objective needs to be examined. When the objective is emancipation of larger humanity, the identity also should reflect it. When the movements are built on sectarian identities, then it becomes problematic. Take for example, the Dalit struggle against castes. It appears that Dalit as an identity is viable. But on a careful consideration it is not. Because the caste oppression of the Dalits stems from caste ideology, which is pervasive, without annihilation of which the former cannot be ended. It is therefore; Babasaheb Ambedkar had thought of annihilation of caste and necessarily graduated to a universal goal of achieving ideal society. If this is the goal, then Dalit identity also will be inadequate. Ambedkar toyed with Dalit identity because he wanted to mobilise all the untouchables for anti-caste struggle as its vanguard. Dalit was still beyond castes; a quasi-class term assimilating all the untouchables. In course, he himself graduated to expand this integrating others as the working class in the ILP phase and later as all people, a la Prabuddha Bharat. Therefore, your usage of identity has to be commensurate with the goal.

Caste as an identity has another serious problem. The core characteristic of caste is hierarchy; caste always seeks hierarchy and hence tends to split. We see, Ambedkar's Dalit also split into its sub-castes. These sub-castes may have their own subsubcastes. With such an identity, you cannot imagine to build a viable struggle for emancipatory goal. Jotiba Phule had conceived shudra-atishudra identity; Kanshiram tried Bahujan as the identity. The problem with them was that they were based on castes and hence they collapsed. When identity is made to serve as the basis of politics, it always becomes sectarian as we observe. With this you can build your empire, you cannot emancipate.

Do you require identity for developing leadership of the marginalised communities? And how necessary it is to develop such a leadership? I would suppose that if a Dalit comes forward to lead the issues of Dalits, no non-Dalits will be able to outcompete him for the sheer reason that he cannot know as much as his Dalit counterpart. Notwithstanding, the primary consideration should remain that whether such an identity would really accomplish the goal. Sans such a marginalised identity, the leadership at least could universalize the

issue and broad-base the struggle. That option would disappear if the struggle is built on the sectarian identity. Moreover, as I explained the peculiar proclivity of the caste identity to split makes it seriously problematic in using it.

I don't know what you mean by both models failing. One could see anything in social realm as failure and success. It is difficult to be objective about it as we ourselves are part of it. But just consider, notwithstanding the eventual reversals of the class based struggles that brought about revolutions in the last century, which indirectly induced many progressive changes in the world, the identity movements could not even make a dent to their oppression. Even Babasaheb Ambedkar who had stressed that the movement of Dalits could and should only be led by the Dalits and permanently dislodged Vittha Ramji Shinde, who had considerable following among Dalits from leadership, also willed that larger society should own up the task of reforms. His ILP strategy and the last RPI strategy also could be construed to do away with the constricted identity of caste. Whence this identity obsession is developed among the Ambedkarites is really difficult to understand.

VB: You have written extensively on Mahad Movement. Recently your book on the same has come out. Why do you felt the need to document this and what are the lessons for all of us from it.

AT: Yes, I would not have written Mahad if it had just been mere documentation. It all started with some friends asking me to write a introduction to the English translation of Comrade R B More's account of Mahad struggle, which was published in a college magazine many years before. The book just evolved. As I am wont, I wanted to put the narrative of this foundational struggle within an analytical frame. Thus, I created a bracketing chapters; the first as the historical background of the Mahad. It was meant to dispel the folklore that Ambedkar is an avatar who descended from heavens to emancipate the Dalits. It provided the history of caste and caste struggle until the eve of the Mahad struggle. One would find that there were many an important struggles that preceded Mahad. They had distinctive characteristics and lot much to teach us even now. The last chapter 'Looking backward, Moving Forward' served to draw certain lessons with the advantage of hindsight. I have drawn many lessons and tried to link them to the state of the contemporary Dalit movement. The decision not to retaliate the attack of the caste Hindu goons, not to confront the state, not having clarity as to who the target for the struggle was, the pyrrhic aftermath of Mahad, the strategic fluidity, etc. that starkly come out of the Mahad episode appears to have shaped up the future of the Dalit movement. There are numerous other lessons such as Ambedkar's reference to Mahar caste, advice to women, dealing with the collector, democratic content of the movement, presence of women, etc.

VB: As a scholar, how do you define Baba Saheb Ambedkar's economic policies? I mean what would have been his response to demonetisation which has rendered millions of people cashless as well as workless. How would Ambedkar respond to those who are quoting him or should I say misquoting him from 'The Problem of rupee' that the currency should be demontetised in every 10 years.

AT: Babasaheb Ambedkar's economics was predominantly normative. He was more concerned with the economic policy being used for the benefit of the majority of people than the technical aspects of the discipline. The most inspiring thing about his study of economics is that he boldly engaged with the contemporary debate and crossed swords at times with the greats of those times. All of his academic theses in economics dealt with the problem of administrative economics, public finance and currency system to be followed by the state. I personally would not see much relevance of these today except for they should inspire young researchers how to take pains in doing research. The most important of his economic writings is his paper 'Small Holdings in India and Their Remedies' which was published in the Journal of the Indian Economic Society, Vol I, 1918. It is an essay with profound economic insights and great relevance to India even after a century. It contains important directions to the economic development of India and particularly the growing agrarian crisis we suffer today.

At that time, British administrators and academics in India were bothered about the low productivity of the Indian agriculture and they attributed it to the small sizes of the farm holdings cultivated by Indian peasants. Many stalwarts of those times such as H S Jevons of Allahabad University, Harold Mann and G F Keatinge of Bombay, and the committee appointed to make proposals on the consolidation of small and scattered holdings in the Baroda State (1917) engaged with the subject and offered their suggestions in terms of consolidating and/or enlarging the holdings in the hands of individual farmers through interesting administrative measures. Ambedkar made a critical examination of these suggestions and came out with very profound observations some of which are of extremely important theoretical value. He dismissed these suggestions saying that there could not be anything like a correct size of agricultural holding. He argued that land was only one of the many factors of production and the productivity of one factor of production is dependent upon the proportion in which the other factors of production were combined. He pointed out the problem of insufficiency of capital needed for acquiring "agricultural stock and implements", which in turn could be traced to lack of savings. He still digs deeper and highlights the non-availability of sufficient land and large population superfluously engaged in agriculture. It was precursor to the systematised notions of disguised unemployment or underemployment that would come later

into economics. Ambedkar provides solution in terms of industrialisation that would release the pressure of population on land and generate surplus that could help optimise the inputs to agriculture enhancing its productivity. The solution is still relevant to India as it was then.

Much is made out of Ambedkar's *The Problem of Rupee and Its Solution*, his D Sc thesis submitted to London University and published by P S King and Son Ltd, London 1923. The vested interests projected him as the monetarist and hence pro-globalization to toe the official line of the government. The basic issue Ambedkar dealt with in this work was the currency standards, viz., Gold Standard and Gold Exchange Standard. He favoured Gold Standard in order to maintain the stability of the currency system and thereby the internal pricing structure of the economy. It could not be extended to the free market argument or monetarist management as outlined by Milton Friedman in 1960s. When the Modi government came out with Tughlaquesque idea of demonetization of 86 percent of the currency, it was projected to be in accordance to the advice of Babasaheb Ambedkar in his *The Problem of the Rupee*. The slavish leaders of the Dalits put up the posters to that effect. Surprisingly, Prakash Ambedkar who has been consistently opposing the RSS in recent times also came out making similar statement. I do not know what prompted him to do this faux pas but the fact remained that it was a pure lie. There is nothing in the *Problem of the Rupee* to indicate that the currency should be demonetized, least for the foolish purpose for which the government did it.

Demonetization was the foolhardy decision the motive of which is difficult to discern. I had written as many as three articles in EPW on its various aspects and had speculated the reasons for it. It appeared that Modi wanted to weaken the opposition parties, particularly the BSP for the ensuing elections in UP. It also wanted to project its macho image to the public and resolve to fight black money. And perhaps test out endurance of people. Demonetization put poor people to indescribable hardship but hats off to the Goebblesque propaganda of Modi that he fooled them to repeat his lines that demonetization was a small price for cleansing the economy. All the reasons that Modi gave for demonetization on 8 November proved invalid and made him to shift the goal post every time he opened his mouth. And still the public failed to note the lie and willingly fell prey to his vicious design.

What surprised and saddened me most is the invocation of Ambedkar. Supposing Ambedkar had really said it, can it make demonetization less evil? What is more important: the actual sufferings of people or a casual utterance of Ambedkar? This misuse of Ambedkar by the vested interests has already cost the Dalits dearly but they do not wish to see it and behave in an inebriated manner taking pride in their identity. Any issue and Ambedkar is invoked as

though the issue is automatically justified if he spoke in favour and invalidated if he did it against. And what of his contradictions and inconsistencies which he would just dismiss invoking Emerson's dictum. Was Ambedkar against Muslims, communists, Brahmins? Did he speak on Bhagat Singh, Adivasis, Telangana movement? How is that important? He may have said what he did in his times. How is that applicable to me in my world?

VB: Today even the Sangh Parivar is using Baba Saheb Ambedkar in its discourse. Is it because the Sangh want to use his writings on political Islam, particularly on Pakistan to create an impression as if he supported the idea of Sangh Parivar's India?

AT: Sangh Parivar has not begun using Babasaheb Ambedkar today. It started way back in 1980s. Initially, Ambedkar was an anathema to it because of his utterances against its Hindu religion. During the Hedgewar-Munje-Golwalkar phase, it kept distance from Ambedkar. They openly spoke against all that Ambedkar stood for without however naming him. The Dalit movement was vibrant enough to allow any inroads. Moreover, it seemed to believe that it could do with the Hindu population and did not need Ambedkarite Dalits to accomplish their project. But when Deoras, the lowest profile Sarsanghchalak, took over the RSS, he gave a clear strategic direction. He clearly knew that in order to accomplish their objective they could not remain away from the constitutional structure. It was important to appeal to as many communities as possible. It was during his period that Babasaheb Ambedkar was included in the list of pratahsmaraniyas (the ones to be remembered at the dawn). They slowly supplemented it with their saffronizing drive. They launched Samajik Samrasata Manch. Huge literature was produced and disseminated among the Dalits to show Ambedkar as friends with Hedgewar, praise of the RSS, the greatest benefactor of hindutva, and against the Muslims, etc. They had already started their work among the Adivasis to hinduize them. The non-Ambedkarite Dalits were already with them. Now it was the turn of the Ambedkarite Dalits!

No, it is not confined to only Muslims. Wherever they found exploitable clues, they used it. It was Vinay Katiyar, the then the state president of the BJP, had gone around spreading the canard on the eve of the 2004 election in UP that Ambedkar was against Muslims. He was showing a copy of the book Pakistan or Partition of India in support of his statements. It had provoked me to write a counter through a book Ambedkar on Muslims. Muslim, as the other, always came handy for the BJP but their canard is not confined only to Muslims. If they could saffronise Ambedkar much of the battle is won, the strategy with which Gandhi for instance coopted Ambedkar to be the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, the same strategy informs the BJP to saffronize Ambedkar.

Ambedkar represents the aspiration of the Dalits; saffronizing Ambedkar implies saffronizing those aspirations.

VB: Dr Ambedkar wanted nationalisation of land but it could not happen in our constitution. What would have been the reason for the same?

AT: I do not consider the Constitution has anything to do with Ambedkar's views. His contributions have been like that of a professional. He actually spoke out his mind in the Rajya Sabha when on 2 September 1953 he retorted to the charge that he was the architect of the Constitution, by saying, "My answer is, I was a hack. What I was asked to do, I did much against my will. Sir, my friends tell me that I have made the Constitution. But I am quite prepared to say that I shall be the first person to burn it out. I do not want it. It does not suit anybody...." Unfortunately, later he patched up the statement by analogizing the Constitution as a temple that needed to be destroyed as the demons took its possession before the gods could be installed.

As you know, when the constituent assembly was being constituted, Ambedkar did not have any way to reach there as his party, SCF had just two seats in the 1946 elections. In that situation, he had prepared a memorandum to the constituent assembly proposing a scheme of state socialism. It proposed nationalisation of land, key and basic industries being owned and run by the state, etc. But later he managed to get elected to the CA from Jessore-Khulna constituency with the help of Jogendranath Mandal. Shortly thereafter according to Mountbatten's 3rd June plan, partition of India was announced and his membership was annulled as Jessore-Khulna went over to Pakistan. There was a patch up between the Congress and him and he got elected by the former from the Bombay Assembly. He was also made the chairman of the most important committee of the CA, the drafting committee. During the proceedings of the CA in 1948, one member Prof K T Shah (an alumnus of the London School of Economics and later (1 May 1949) the founder president of the United Trade Union Congress (UTUC), a trade union of the Revolutionary Socialist Party), had proposed an amendment seeking to declare India as a "Secular, Federal, Socialist" nation, it was Ambedkar who opposed it. He argued that "how the Society should be organised in its social and economic side are matters which must be decided by the people themselves according to time and circumstances and it could not be laid down in the Constitution.

What could have been the reasons? Aren't the reasons obvious? The Constitution was the collective opinion of the CA finally worded by the drafting committee of which Ambedkar was the chairman. What was the composition of this CA? Of the total 389 members, 292 were representatives of the states, 93 represented the princely states and four were from commissioner provinces. Of the 292 elected members, Congress had won 208, and the Muslim League 73,

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who however, had refused to participate. There was overwhelming domination of Congress in the CA. How was the election done? It was done by the elected members of the assemblies formed in the February 1946 elections. The members who elected the members of the CA themselves did not represent the Indian people; only 28% people having the voting right. Where was the possibility of any radical provision being included in the Constitution? A perceptive commentator like Granville Austin is absolutely right in commenting that CA was the Congress and the Congress was India.

The CA predominantly representing rich urbanite and landlord classes could not be expected to sign its own death warrant!

VB: How would you describe Nehru-Ambedkar relationship? Was that better than Gandhi Ambedkar relationship as both were modern secularists?

AT: My impression is that Nehru never liked Babasaheb Ambedkar. Not only both were secularists but even Fabians and that similarity perhaps repelled them as the same poles do. However, Gandhi was a strategist par excellence. He knew the strategic importance of Dalits and Ambedkar as their representative. Although they clashed in RTCs, and Gandhi blackmailed him to give up separate electorates, he fully acceded to the counter demands of Ambedkar in terms of the enhanced numbers of reserved seats and volunteered to commit the Congress working for the upliftment of the Dalits. It is a different matter that after some time it did not produce much result and disillusioned Ambedkar completely.

Moreover, their persona was cast very differently. Gandhi's religio-moral bearing was accommodative. I believe it was he who influenced Nehru to accept Ambedkar in his cabinet as well as the Congress to get him elected to the CA when he lost his membership. The identity obsessed Dalits refuse to see this strategic masterstroke that chained them emotionally to the Constitution which proved to produce a society antithetical to Ambedkar's vision: sans liberty, equality and fraternity. The ignoramuses among them innocently seek proof for such an sterling intrigue, when the secrecy has been its crux. Their very arguments rather prove the value of the stratagem.

VB: How do you describe the antipathy of Ambedkarites towards Savita Ambedkar ?

AT: I would not like to speak about it. To me it only smacks of the casteist attitude of the Ambedkarites towards that lady. She was an ordinary person, who for whatever motivation decided to marry him but the fact remains that she took care of him in his old days. To smell criminality in such a person was an ungrateful act.

VB: How would have Dr Ambedkar responded to the whole issue of honoured killings in India as well as unattended issues of the marginalised particularly those who remain at the margins of the Dalit mainstream ?

AT: He would certainly be disturbed to see castes kicking after 70 years of the working of the Constitution and despite his lifelong struggle. But is that not purely speculative? He would also be disturbed to see the aftermath of many policies that were the products of his own efforts. As a matter of fact, he was disturbed to see them in his own lifetime. Didn't he say publicly in Aga on 18 March 1956 that the educated people had ditched him? He was disturbed to see his representational logic not working. He did observe that those who occupied bureaucratic positions remained engrossed with their own families and own progression and paid no attention to the Dalits. As a matter of fact he was realising at the fag-end of his life that most things he did actually did not work. As referred to before, he had lamented that whatever he did only benefited a small section of the urban educated Dalits and he could not do anything for the rural Dalits, who constituted a vast majority. Babasaheb in his frustration had written a small note to Gaikwad, which is included in the published volumes, saying that he thought his methods did not seem to work and if communism could get Dalits immediate relief, they could become communists.

VB: There are feelings of some of the Adivasi activists that there issue was never addressed by the constituent assembly with sympathy. In fact they blame the Constituent Assembly for denying the Adivasis their identity by putting it under the Scheduled Tribe category. What is your view? Why Ambedkar be targeted for that after all making of constitution was the job of the constituent assembly and there were debates and discussions on each issue.

AT: Yes, I would agree with you that such criticism should be disposed of by the fact that the Constitution was made by the CA, Babasaheb Ambedkar just put it in proper language. What is the point in saying that Ambedkar has not addressed the issue of Adivasis in the CA with sympathy?

Some people object to his condescending tone and 'racial' remarks while writing about Adivasis in the Annihilation of Caste. The passage runs as follows: "... the fact still remains that these aborigines have remained in their primitive uncivilised state in a land which boasts of a civilisation thousands of years old. Not only are they not civilised but some of them follow pursuits which have led to their being classified as criminals. Thirteen millions of people living in the midst of civilisation are still in a savage state and are leading the life of hereditary criminals! But the Hindus have never felt ashamed of it." [BAWS, Vol 1, p. 52]

Yes, the reference reflects some extent his prejudice and lack of appreciation of the tribal genius of coexisting with nature, but in all, the argument he is making is innocuous. There is another passage often quoted to project his lack of appreciation of tribal identity. While discussing the issue of proportional representation, Ambedkar says that “[T]he Aboriginal Tribes have not as yet developed any political sense to make the best use of their political opportunities and they may easily become mere instruments in the hands either of a majority or a minority and thereby disturb the balance without doing any good to themselves...” There could be disagreements with his vision of incorporating tribal into the mainstream and not arguing for tribal autonomy whereby the tribal would be at liberty to develop themselves according to their genius and culture. But to accuse him of prejudice perhaps is going little too far.

VB: How could you bring the Dalit, Adivasi and farmers movements together? There may be contradictions among them based on their identities but the need of the hour is definitely to bring them together.

AT: As I explicated my viewpoints the prerequisite for striking unity of various struggling people is to discard castes and identify on class line. Howsoever, it may sound formidable, that is the only way out in this country. Ambedkar himself had given a prototype of such a unity in bringing the Dalits and non-Dalits to march together on Bombay road for the anti-Khoti bill. Unfortunately, the circumstances dragged him in different directions. The identity aspects, particularly the aspects of caste identities, are many times amplified by vested interests. They need to be seen realistically.

VB: What ideological difference you have with the Bahujan/Republican polity. Is it that they never approached you or do you feel that they rarely raised people's issues?

AT: I do not have any ideological difference with anyone as long as they reflect anti-caste orientation. The Bahujan is welcome but if they mean collection of people on the basis of caste certificates, I am not for that. Same thing can be said of Republican. Ambedkar imagined Republican as the then anti-Congress, anti-communist opposition party and did not speak of castes. But his followers reduced it to be the renamed Scheduled Caste Federation. These groupings only lead to strengthening caste identities and strengthening of caste. According to me they are not only anti-Ambedkar but also reactionary.

VB: In today's environment when corporate unambiguously shown their preference towards a brahmanical India, how would according to your understanding, respond to current socio-political crisis in India and South Asia.

AT: Corporate are enamoured with neoliberal India and anything that helps creating it is welcome to it. There is a kind of ideological affinity between

brahmanical ideology and the neoliberalism. Although, the Congress brought these policies in but over the time the BJP demonstrated that they reflect ideological congeniality to these policies than the Congress's pragmatism. I had shown in my book *Hindutva and Dalits* how these two ideologies, Brahmanism and Neoliberalism, resonate in India. Now that the BJP has nearly decimated electoral opposition, and as the results of the recent state assembly elections portend, the BJP will have a cake walk through the next elections. That would mean official transformation of India as the Hindu Rashtra. There is nothing to imagine how this Hindu Rashtra would be. The ideologues of the RSS like Golwalkar had given enough clues as to what it means. The Hindu Rashtra is the revivalist project aimed to create the unitary rule of the elite class. It may not be the Brahmins as the Ambedkarites are prone to imagine. It may approximate to something like fascist Italy as the Hindutva ideologues have idealised. But it may not mean dismantling the façade of constitutional democracy. What they will do is to change the Constitution to the presidential system that gets them closer to the one leader paradigm. They may bring in suitable changes in electoral system so as to ensure that they may not be easily dislodged from power. I do not think it would mean any threatening changes to political configuration to the South Asia as much as it would to the internal political situation in the country. It would certainly mean decimating dissent and even physically exterminating the resistance.

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VB: There was an article by MN Roy where he opposed state intervention in education and he supported the privatisation of education. He says the state has no business to impose its ideology or impose its views on the children.

RMP: When MN Roy wrote that, he had in mind what Hitler did in Germany because MN Roy could not forget his own past spent in Germany. Hitler there wanted to change the education system because he wanted a healthy woman to marry a healthy man so that the healthy children could be born and they will become better soldiers. That is what Hitler had wanted to do. Roy was against state intervention in that country because if the state intervenes then it will bring only its philosophy as for instance as you have seen what the NCERT tried to do in the recent past.

VB: It is not only in our recent past because it has been always done by the state in the past also. Much before the BJP came to power the Congress has been doing that the same thing. So, isn't it time that education be kept away from the state?

RMP: Oh, yes education should be kept for instance these organisations like the UGC or the and NCERT they should be dominated by intellectuals and members who know and understand. I could give you an example also, for instance, if you want to have a historian in the NCERT or in the university grants commission then you must have a historian like Romila Thapar but you mention Romila Thapar to any Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) man his temperature will rise to 105 degrees at once because they can't stand the name of Romila Thapar because she's against the inglorious past of India- what we term as a "glorious past."

I once criticised Soli Sorabjee who wrote an article. He had concluded his article by saying that if you do that then India's past golden past will be written in gold. One day, I met him in a party and said you could have managed to do without that journalistic thing- he said it is only in India where 10,000 people from Iran came and a Hindu king gave us shelter. I pointed out that it was also in India, for instance, that Jains and the Buddhists had been brutally treated by the

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Hindus. This is also India's glorious past. Yes, the real, genuine glorious past will be written in gold but not the kind of past that you are referring to, about what you don't know anything at all.

That is the kind of understanding of, for example Human Rights education which was you very much and what the NCERT or the UGC wants to do - the formal education with regards to human rights. (Catering to) every religion- that is not secularism.

VB: So, there is no need for a God in our education system, or is there a need?

RMP: We do not need a God in our education system but unfortunately it is state organisations like UGC and NCERT. Do you know when our pundits started saying that astrology be taught. A university like Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) could not go against the government because their grants might be cut so what they did very clever thing. God has not created more clever people than Hindus, let me tell you. They said no we are going to introduce astrology as part of Sanskrit studies. So, astrology was introduced in the Department of Sanskrit. That's how they brought astrology to the JNU. Otherwise, many universities rejected that government circular to introduce it as a subject. The JNU rejected in this manner the Sanskrit Department will teach astrology.

VB: How did you come into the human rights movement? Was it a coincidence or something happened?

RMP: It is not a coincidence. I came to the human rights movement through M N Roy. M N Roy is known as a humanist and not a human rights intellectual activist. But that's not true When I came to Dehradun, it was a chance that I came to MN Roy. He asked me where I lived. I said I don't have a room. He offered that I could stay in one of the vacant rooms on his premises. So, I started staying there.

I was just talking about the caste system, about the Brahmins. He said that you don't mean the Brahmin as an individual but as a Brahmanical system. I said yes, but then he saw my interest in the caste system so he told me that there is a book in the library "Caste in India" by an Englishman W.W. Hunt, an Indian Civil Services officer, you can read that. Since he knew that I was totally opposed to the caste system he warned me that the book is a bit pro- caste but if you can give up your prejudices then that book will help you tremendously and he was so right.

I read that book. That is the only book about caste that I read. I think that is wonderful and what a pity a book like that was written by an Englishman or not by an English scholar, not by an Indian. In his writings in number of places he

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refers to social justice. Even in his (MN Roy's) prison volumes, there is more reference to social justice than in any other book about the caste system. For instance, he calls it the ugly relic of the past and how to get it up. There he has differences with other intellectuals. MN Roy had many admirers among intellectuals. K.N. Panikkar was one of them so once he asked K.N. Panikkar to write an article for the magazine which he had just started and Panikkar agreed and wrote an article on the caste system and suggested that the state should abolish caste in this country otherwise there is no remedy.

Roy did not agree with him. He said no if you allow the state to do these things then ultimately the state will become a fascist state so this is the thing in the caste system which have been very harmful for India to be tackled by intellectuals. Once they conclude that this is a wrong system then it is they who should take the initiative to see that this thing is removed from our social system, from social norms. Caste should not be allowed to interfere in such matters.

VB: Isn't it an irony that neither the human rights movement nor the movement for the self- respect or moment for the rights of Dalits, never recognised M N Roy for his contribution?

RMP: It's a very sad thing for a country like India. Well it is one thing that MN Roy has not been recognised as such. He is dead, so it doesn't matter to him whether he's recognised or not but it does matter to our society as such, that some of the wise things that he had recommended are not being followed by either the Dalits or those who consider that the caste system is an evil.

Even Mahatma Gandhi, per whom untouchability and communalism- these are the two most important obnoxious evils in this country. If these are not removed, then India does not deserve to be an independent country. Even he did not recognise the evil thing involved in the varna system. He said the varna system must remain. I refer you to one thing that is in the Tagore- Gandhi debate.

Tagore asked Gandhiji that you are wrong because if you are against untouchability then you must see that the varnasharm is not the correct system. Gandhi did not agree with him but if you read the correspondence you will see that Tagore was intellectually far superior to Gandhi. Of course, the debate did not provide any conclusion but it is quite clear that even Tagore did not agree with Gandhi on the issue of varnashram but Gandhi was adamant that the varnashram must remain and untouchability can be tackled without disturbing the orders. It is not possible, so where a man like Gandhi has failed we are much too small people, smaller people who will not succeed but even then, we must keep on fighting.

I am only suggesting that among us philosophy of radical humanism is one such philosophy through which the caste system and the Dalit question can be addressed because Dalits have nowhere to go to except to humanism. Dr. Ambedkar recognised it, realised it and that's why I suggest that he adopted, accepted and converted himself to Buddhism because Buddhism is one religion which is without God. It is a godless religion, so Ambedkar saw that God has done incalculable harm more to Dalits than to the other people in the Hindu society so he brought Buddhism in the picture and he advised his people to convert themselves to Buddhism.

VB: But you were associated with the PUCL. An organisation like the PUCL, which came in the aftermath of emergency 1975. Don't you think that PUCL and the other organisations have rarely raised the issue of caste and perhaps you had to struggle a lot to bring the issue of the Dalits in these organisations. What are the reasons? Why is there a resistance among the human right groups to raise the issue of caste and Dalits?

RMP: Most unfortunately and regrettably the human rights activists in this country associate human rights violations only with state violation of Human Rights. They did not recognise that societal violation is more dangerous than state violation, or to put it in in a different way if you do not tackle the societal violation, like, for instance communalism, as you have seen in Gujarat. The Dalits know atrocities as human rights as NHRC has recognised recently if you don't tackle these then state violation of human rights cannot be tackled. After all, the policeman- where does he come from? He comes from the same strata of society as you and I do. They are the people who are perpetrating atrocities on the Dalits or on Muslims.

This is one thing. Then the other aspect how I came in contact that is from my experience of my village. I am a Bengali and I was born in that part of India which at that time was known as East Bengal, now known as Bangladesh and that was a Hindu majority area and I saw how the Muslims were treated by the Hindus in East Bengal. I maintain that it is because of these Hindu treatments of Muslims that Bengal was partitioned, first in 1905 and then second time in 1947.

One Mrs. Joya Chatterji from the Cambridge University has written a thesis on this subject called "Bengal Divided". I recommend this book to anybody. Even Gandhi, if he were alive today, I would have gone to Gandhi and said don't give lecture to anybody- read this book first. Do you know that Gandhi did not take any cooked meal in a Muslim house? So, how can you solve the societal violation of human rights when you have that attitude?

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In East Bengal, in my part of Bengal, a Hindu would not drink water even if he is dying even then he will not drink water from a Muslim hand or even in a glass which was first used by a Muslim- no, the question doesn't arise.

In marriage ceremonies and all that, Muslims- even if they were very important people would not be invited. Even if they are invited, separate arrangements should be made for them separate glasses to drink water and separate plates to eat.

VB: It still existing in Bangladesh today where the Muslims are doing a role reversal. Organisations like Jamaat-e-Islami have launched a war against the minorities, the Hindus. So how do you tackle a situation like this?

RMP: Exactly. Because this, I have maintained all during all these years, that it is majority communalism which is the most dangerous thing. It is not the minority communities, for instance, in our country the RSS talks of Muslim communalism but Muslim communalism is not as dangerous in our country as Hindu majority communalism. To tackle this, again the caste system comes into the picture because we must reform ourselves even though it is true that the reformists have not been able to achieve anything in this country during the last two centuries. They have not but that there is no other way also because if you want to tackle, for instance, recurrence of another Gujarat then how does one go about it? We have seen that the State cannot help, the State does not succeed.

Therefore, intellectuals should come together and have brainstorming sessions one after the other. I can give one example. When the NHRC came into existence I was the first person to write an article against it saying that that the NHRC should be instituted only to tackle the people in our society who are downtrodden and were deprived and therefore the members also should come from those categories. Nobody else mentioned that and when Justice (Ranganath) Mishra became the chairman, people like VM Tarkunde and Rajni Kothari were opposed to his appointment. They were opposed to his appointment only for one reason- because of the anti- Sikh 1984 riots. He was appointed to the Commission and he completely ignored the society which was formed for that purpose and he did not take into account the politicians who were responsible but only dealt with the police and others. I not only told him but told everybody, including Tarkunde that this is wrong, this is nonsense. The killing was not done by the police- the killing was done by the non- policeman, by the willing executioners of the politicians. Therefore, if a commission cannot do that, such a man has no right to become the chairman of the NHRC.

VB: All these Commissions whether it is the National Human Rights Commission or SC, ST Commissions or the National Commission for

Minorities- are these institutions being created to give jobs to a few retired people or to those who haven't made it to the ministry? Like a person heading Minorities Commission is trying to reconcile between the RSS and other organisations. So, is it the job of the Minority Commission to go to tell people that you talk to the VHP, you talk to the RSS? That is what these days the Minority Commission is doing today.

RMP: You are partially right in that it is meant for people who must be provided jobs. Again, why? Because the state wants to use these institutions to come to the rescue and to help the same for all the wrongdoings that in it indulges in. The NHRC was created primarily with a view to rescue the Indian state at that time because Indian state at that time was under attack from all governments abroad and all funding agencies. They announced that no funding agency will any more give money to India unless they rectify the situation. They thought once NHRC is created it will give a good chit to the government of India and then they will make use of that good status before the UN, Japan, the US and the funding agencies who had announced that they would not give more money to India for any funding purposes.

So far as the Minorities Commission is concerned yes, in fact, the man who was first appointed the chairperson was a judge from Andhra Pradesh High Court and he was Narasimha Rao's man. TADA had just come into existence and I tried my best to bring the Minority Commission in the picture. I said look TADA is being used against the Muslims in Gujarat and all that, therefore you should stand up. You may not be able to do anything but at least you should stand up. They did not stand up, but at least the NHRC did and I still remember when the NHRC first held a meeting and invited all, including many NGOs and activists. Then in that meeting the NHRC said, what a shame that a country like India has TADA which is an uncivilised law. The members said it openly in that meeting but again you know that is...

VB: I read your editorial in the PUCL Bulletin when you talked about NHRC and sometimes futility of the organisation but after NHRC's intervention in two areas particularly on Gujarat and the other on the Durban Conference against racism they came out strongly in support of the Dalit groups as well as in Gujarat. They came out against the communal Gujarat government. Do you think that NHRC has now lived up to its expectation?

RMP: No, I don't think so. I will tell you how it came about. It is very simple. I was in very close contact with the NHRC when it came into existence where I came to know the secretary-general- one Mr. Pillai whom I found to be a quick learner. I told Mr. Pillai, if you want to survive then you must take up the societal violation. To begin with, you need to have a brainstorming session not in North India but in South India. He asked if I could put this in writing. I said

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I will give it put in my individual capacity but not on behalf of PUCL. So I wrote it then and there in his office then he offered me a cup of tea, saying, "I will just be with you in another couple of minutes". He went out of the office and then returned and he says ok, done. We have accepted your proposal in principle that we should have a brainstorming session on the question of human rights of Dalits. I said it should be done not by NHRC alone but in cooperation with some Dalit organisations. They asked me and I suggested one organisation in Madras, Dalit Human Rights Trust. They agreed and the first brainstorming session was held in Madras in cooperation with NHRC and I took a leading part in that and subsequently I edited that book and it the proceedings came out as Human Rights of Dalits.

After that I suggested to the NHRC it is very good you have started that and I wrote an editorial in the PUCL Bulletin that now the NHRC should divert its attention to the communal riots and they should have a brainstorming session. Unfortunately, they did not pay any heed to that but after that as you know there have been many human rights violations because of communal riots, particularly during the Ratha- yatra and after the demolition of the Babri Masjid- in Surat, in Bombay and in many other parts of Maharashtra and India. So, one day when I was speaking to the members of the Human Rights Commission, they said, Dr. Pal you are right, we should have had that brainstorming session earlier because a lot of damage has been done as you pointed out in your report on Aligarh. A lot of damage has been done.

I said look I am not suggesting NHRC as a panacea for everything but at least you can start a movement so that other people would also be drawn to that. Look, we must start somewhere and see that human rights violations of the Dalits is stopped. Dalits are respected, women are respected, children's education- all these things are addressed. Unfortunately, there has been no follow up. Their eyes opened only when it started in Gujarat, so they sent a team to Gujarat. But that was too late. The idea is once it started and then you react, it does not work. But at least the NHRC has now recognised this thing (human rights for Dalits). You will be surprised to know when initially I drew their attention to Dalit human rights, they dismissed it in their annual report by using only two words and sent wrong a signal. That's all.

I wrote on several occasions. I said this is all humbug what do you mean by atrocities. Then I try to draw them- If it is caste system then you must say that the caste system should be tackled. So the NHRC accepted and they did go to Durban and recommended, but without accepting the fact that the caste system is the real evil and unless that evil number one is tackle the evil number two named untouchability or discrimination against Dalits cannot be tackled. That the NHRC has not yet accepted- nor have the other human rights groups in this

country. You might have heard of one man who has done good work in this area- Henri Tiphagne in Madurai. One day I asked why can't you accept that? You should come out openly against the caste system. Then some of them would always say that you don't know if we say this then we will be completely wiped out. I said who can wipe out? The state would not come against you.

I was wrong and Henri was correct because very recently you might have heard that Henri's organization was attacked and the police came and they arrested him and all his colleagues and took them to jail because they were so... but the question is that you once you are in this field, once you have a shop, you run your it properly. If not, then close your shop because it is understood once you come out like this, the state or some agencies of the state might like to persecute you. You should be prepared to face that. If you are not prepared to face that, you close your shop. I once told the NHRC when the Chairman was there. I said look so far as human rights violations are concerned you cannot be apologetic in your language. If you are apologetic then close your shop, recommend to the Government of India the NHRC should be closed.

I said look it's not only you, I have told the PUCL that if you are apologetic, I could bring the Dalit question in the PUCL through the columns of the PUCL Bulletin and thanks to one man Justice Sachar who does not have any special corner for the Dalits but he was a genuine liberal and he was the President of the PUCL at that time. He gave me absolute freedom and liberty to write anything. I mention one small incident. I once wrote in an editorial that unless the caste system is abolished lock, stock and barrel, it is of no use. The Human Rights movement in this country cannot flourish.

Once at their annual conference in Bombay, Nissim Ezekiel, one of the best-known Indo- English poet was there to inaugurate the session and he stood up and he says, "I have been reading the few PUCL Bulletin from first word to the last and I have read your editorial in which it says it unless the caste system is abolished lock, stock and barrel human rights movement cannot start." He said I don't agree with you because then there are other systems in other religions so that means we must first tackle with those. I said well I'm sorry Mr. Ezekiel, I hold this view and your political guru and my political guru, we are guru- bhai because we have learnt from the same guru because Nissim Ezekiel was also at one time a Royist. Just as I started arguing with him, Justice Sachar stood up and said look I am the chairperson of the PUCL and I want to intervene at this stage because our editor Dr. Pal has the complete freedom to give expression to his views and I know. Once I rang him up because when he quoted the Gita I thought he was wrong so immediately he cut me short by saying on the telephone he says Judge sahib, if you think if you don't agree with me just give me a hint and I will stop writing but I said no, you must continue writing but I

only wanted to tell you that your quotation from the Gita is not the correct it is not the most appropriate one. Then he asked me is it the correct one? I told him yes have quoted correctly from the Gita but I only say that it is not the appropriate one in relation to the varna system. That's all. And after that he went on writing about the caste system in the same language and manner as he has been writing. He has complete freedom, Mr. Ezekiel, and he is not compelling you or me to accept his point of view but he has the right to bring it to our notice and I am grateful to him that he has brought this subject on the PUCL agenda and not only on the PUCL agenda. I am sure he will bring it on many other agendas because this is an important issue. Our political guru Dr. Lohia also thought about this like this and he wrote also extensively on this subject like this.

VB: I want to talk about the paradox of Indian human rights movement or intellectual circles. They are very comfortable talking in terms of communalism, the question of Gujarat, question of Meerut riots or Maliana riots, in Moradabad or Bombay in 1992 we saw a number of groups sitting on a dharna the Raj Ghat this number of people expressing their deep anguish over what had happened to the Babri Masjid but when the question of Dalits comes, the people who are secular intellectuals or secular human right activists keep a conspicuous silence. Why is this paradox? Why the same people don't come and say that what has happened against Dalits is wrong. We have so many mass protests against war in Iraq but when it comes to where Dalits are massacred, people do not hear that much of a media protest, that kind of protest from intellectuals, that kind of reporting even from organisations like the PUCL. We have very good reports from PUCL on Kashmir but why not the same kind of reports on Dalits?

RMP: I was a member of the Dalit caucus and I went to Durban. There were many groups to represent many aspects of this thing. There was a group from Pakistan and the Pakistan High Commission officials came to the tent of the (Pakistani participants) and found then out how they were doing. Nobody from the Indian High Commission came. Not even a junior secretary turned up to find out how the Indian groups were doing. I rang up a secretary in the High Commission. He said sorry, we don't have time because so many VIPs are coming here. I asked who is coming. He said today a Justice so and so from the NHRC. I said he is a friend of mine you can tell him that he can manage without a secretary from the High Commission but at least once you should go to the tent. He said, no, sorry. So, nobody turned up. That is the concern of our people.

The NHRC was there but they also did not turn up to find out, but one thing the NHRC did do before the Durban Conference. They held a session and

invited a good number of intellectuals and activists to discuss this issue because the Dalit caucus felt that this should come on the agenda of the UN that this is a straightforward human rights violations and Government of India was resisting. We and the Dalit caucus and intellectuals said that this is by birth and the government of India's representative said no even the NHRC said no this is not by birth. We do not recognise our Constitution does not recognise any discrimination because of birth. I argued that the Constitution may not, but does it exist? If it exists then our only request is that you should adopt it, that's all. We failed, I as a member of the Dalit group I must say to my great shame that we failed and where we failed miserably. The UN did not put it on the agenda.

VB: Was just the government opposed to it or were there groups also so-called human rights groups also? That's why it's a paradox I referred to.

RMP: Not human rights groups but several intellectuals accepted this fact that the Dalit question is a very serious question but they would not accept the fact that it is it is because of birth that is discrimination, due to birth that nobody would see. Asghar Ali Engineer has brought out a book edited by him, he has collected all the articles written during that period and he has given the title "The Mandal Commission Controversy" and I suggest you just go through the articles to the kind of people who wrote- all middle-class intellectuals from universities but nobody would accept this thing. That is where we failed. We failed because our intellectuals failed us.

VB: But are these things, like you talked about, as Asghar Ali Engineer's book. Do you think we have continuously been trying to be apologetic about our caste? Like Asghar Ali Engineer there are many others who say that this thing is not written in our textbook. This doesn't happen, it is some Hindutva sort of people, they are involved on casteism or communalism otherwise our holy textbooks are very fine, very nice and we are had a very golden past. I know that you have been writing that our past has never been golden so don't you think that we have come to a stage where we can say that our past is not glorious and that intellectuals are doing a great damage when they're trying to hide this kind of a thing?

RM: Oh yes, I couldn't agree more because we want to bask in the sun of our past glory. But what is the past glory? For instance, today Bangladesh had one heritage of which they should be proud of and they are now restoring - that is the Baul singers. Baul singers, as you know, they are both Muslims and Hindus and now the mullahs, the fundamentalists in Bangladesh have come down very heavily on the Bauls in some villages in Murshidabad district. If I can think of any practicing humanists in this country or in this part of the world, in South Asia, then Bauls are the only practicing humanists because if you ask Fakir Shah

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Lallan, the most important Muslim Baul singer, his most important song is "People ask me my religion, I tell them I have no religion and whatever I had I have thrown it away in the marketplace". Then he says in one song that if there is a Brahmin male you know he is a Brahmin because he has put on the pita that is the sacred thread but how do you know if you see a woman how do you know that she is a Brahmin because she does not use the pita.

These are the kind of songs the Bauls sing and a fatwa has been issued by the fundamentalist mullahs that they must be socially boycotted. People should not sell them anything and they must not be allowed to irrigate their land, they must not be allowed to buy anything from any Muslim shop meaning total boycott in Murshidabad. Similarly, in our country we can be proud of our past, for example, our Buddhist past or our materialist past. No, I don't think in recent times we have come across any article written by any intellectual in our country about this past. They will always talk of the past of Rama and Krishna and all.

I don't know how one can be proud of Rama...

VB: It is a blasphemy to say anything about him. When Dr. Ambedkar wrote the "Riddles of Rama and Krishna", there were protests. It was banned which shows we are not a mature society, not a civilised society.

RMP: Not at all. If we want to be a civilised society we must do away with the ugly relic of the past. This phrase is by Roy, we must do with this ugly thing of the past and that is why he talks of Renaissance. Renaissance means revival of the past and when you revive the past you retain the good things and bury the bad things. That is what the European Renaissance did, that they retained the good things of Greek and Roman civilisation and buried the ugly past- for instance the Pope would prescribe which book to read and which book not to read. The Europeans retained ideas like democracy from the Greeks and during the Renaissance they came to recognise the fact that man is created in his own image not in God's image. Otherwise, the Catholic Church would prescribe that man is created in God's image.

That is the kind of revolution, a philosophical revolution we must bring about. One may not agree with many things that MN Roy has said but this one thing- that is unless you bring about a philosophical revolution to be followed by a social revolution I don't see any future, the kind of future that for instance Europe achieved.

VB: We are still uncomfortable with criticism and dissent, particularly this is an instinct in South Asia. If I say Taslima Nasreen writes something, some Muslims will come up, if Ambedkar writes something the Hindus will come up and we try to defend ourselves saying, look the government banned Taslima

Nasreen's books so it must ban this and every community is using the other for its own purposes

RMP: I recommend an essay by Prof. Sibnarayan Ray in the book 'The Human Rights of Dalits' which I edited. He has drawn our attention to this fact, that a Muslim cannot criticise the Allah or some of the deeds of the prophets. So, you bring a law like the obnoxious blasphemy law in Pakistan. Do you know that Bangladesh is now thinking of introducing that law? Introducing that law in Bangladesh means the minorities will be completely wiped out the few remaining Buddhists, Hindus and Christians who have been left behind in Bangladesh.

The main purpose of the blasphemy law is that the minority property must be taken away by the majority, the Muslims and they have already thrown away the Buddhists from Bangladesh. Almost the entire Buddhist population from Bangladesh has come to Tripura state, which is known as Chittagong Hill Tracts. I remember I was at the University of Leeds during the Bangladesh war. There were many students from East Pakistan at that time. They organised a function to celebrate the birth of Bangladesh. I was also invited to speak. I spoke and I said I am happy and I am hoping Bangladesh will be different from other South Asian countries because Bangladesh has a different kind of past, namely, a Buddhist past, a Baul past, a Nazrul past- not merely a Tagore past. But the kind of thing we see now in Bangladesh, I think I should confess that I was wrong, because Bangladesh is also adopting the same. In fact, I read about it from a journalist who wrote an article for us at the Radical Humanist, that the mullahs are pressing the government to introduce the blasphemy law.

The blasphemy law exists everywhere in the world- section 125 is the blasphemy law in our country also, but in Pakistan they introduced many other sections where they made the death penalty mandatory, that is if a non-Muslim speaks a word critical of the Prophet, the mandatory punishment is death. Similarly, the Ahmadiyyas. Do you know that the Ahmadiyyas were declared non- Muslim not by Zia-ul-Haq but by a great liberal like Bhutto It is Bhutto, when he was the President of Pakistan, who declared the Ahmadiyyas as non- Muslim? As a matter of fact, Islamisation in Pakistan started with Bhutto, Zia-ul-Haq only perfected it. Zia-ul-Haq brought all these sections to it. Death penalty became mandatory. So now in Bangladesh also they have started; they have declared the Ahmadiyyas non- Muslim. Ahmadiyyas are the best of soldiers; the best of scholars. The same thing is existing in our country, in a much bigger way. In India, it is in a much bigger way than it is in Pakistan or it is going to be in Bangladesh.

VB: Are you satisfied the secular response in the Asian Subcontinent like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, whether they are strong voices, small voices or marginal

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voices against the religious fundamentalism or is it the same kind of liberal fad? As you have pointed out liberalism is sometimes dangerous.

RMP: The secular voice in India is very weak, it is not articulate at all and there is no secular movement in India. If you want a secular state, then the first thing you must talk about is that you should have secular morality and not religious morality. In India, we are practising religious morality but we declare that we are a secular state, this is a contradiction in terms. Even secular intellectuals, they are also...

VB: That means secularism and multiculturalism are two different issues and what we opted for was a multicultural society not a secular society?

RM: No. We are using this pluralism in a very wrong context. When we say, ours is a pluralist society, we want to mean but don't, that ours is a tolerant society. So, pluralism and tolerance are being used interchangeably and I suggest, very wrongly because a pluralist society need not be automatically a tolerant society. Yes, it is true, we have inherited a pluralism, but have not inherited tolerance.

VB: But do you support a French kind of law, as the French government banned religious signs in the government aided schools, do you support that kind of secularism in India, that we don't want to have any religious symbol in Government agencies, government schools, and government buildings. Do you think we should have that kind of a secular approach?

RMP: That will be again empowering the state with arbitrary powers which may lead to fascism and the birth of a fascist state. Soviet Russia tried after the revolution but failed and the church has come back in post- Soviet Russia with a vengeance. It is the Orthodox Church which is dominating in Russia today. They tried to abolish religion in communist Russia, but they failed.

VB: But don't you think the State in India is buckling under every religious "politics?" You can change laws for appeasing the Muslim mullahs, you can allow the Sikh women not to wear a helmet when it was made mandatory. So isn't it a fact that we always do that kind of a knee jerk approach as far as dealing with religious fundamentalism?

RMP: The only difference between you and me could be that you may suggest, obliquely, that it is the state, that should jump in these affairs. I am only suggesting, no, it is the intellectuals even if they are weak today, they must come together and have brainstorming sessions one after the other to tackle these issues. For instance, the kind of approach in Pakistan, that the mullahs are being tackled in Pakistan more by the human rights activists than by the state today. I was there a few years ago, in Lahore. I met many women activists. One of them

was a chain smoker, so I said, how come in a Muslim society are you can do that in a Muslim society?

She said it became a habit during Zia-ul-Haq's time. Some of the women started doing so to show our protest against his regime. Women were being forbidden to drink or smoke in public and the burqa was re-introduced, so we took to the cigarette in protest. It then became a habit. My parents came from Azamgarh to Karachi, for a girl from Azamgarh to be a chain smoker, that is the example I can give you.

For instance, the movement against death sentence in our country is not as strong as it is in Pakistan. Pakistan Human Rights Commission, which is a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), has been agitating against the death sentence for the last several years even though the government there is persecuting. So even if today we are weak, the intellectuals, we have no other option but to go on raising our voice and find out the answer to these questions outside the state intervention.

VB: But we still talk of the rule of law.

RMP: Yes, rule of law is very important. As you have given the example, using the helmet is a law in our country, now if the Sikhs came out claiming that this law cannot be applied to them. I did not agree. I wrote for the PUCL Bulletin also, I said I do not agree because it is against the rule of law.

VB: A player like Navjot Singh Sidhu or Maninder Singh is playing cricket. They will never refuse to wear the helmet if they are facing Imran Khan or somebody else. Then God will never save them? Or isn't it a fact that we keep silent when see minority fundamentalism and that is why it is giving rise to the majority fundamentalism of the majority community in India. Like we have the recent case of the Bollywood film 'Sin'. The Catholic community in India is protesting it because they say that it is against their culture, against their religion. In it a priest is shown having an illicit relationship with a girl and they say it is an attack on the Christian community. It is like what happened in London this year, a play by Gurpreet Kaur based on the life of a Sikh woman, and the Sikhs objected to it. But I have heard very few voices in India protesting it. Why is it that when this minority fundamentalism comes up, we keep quiet and if there is a certain thing that comes up from the Hindu system we all jump up and cry and that gives a kind of strength to the RSS.

RMP: Another recent example, the Calcutta Muslims. Do you know in Calcutta, the population ratio of Muslims to Hindus is one Muslim for seven Hindus? Some sections of the Muslims raised a voice against Sania Mirza. They objected to her putting on that dress while playing but fortunately amongst the Muslims, because the Hindus are also there, immediately a leadership came up, they said,

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no, Sania Mirza has brought India on top of the world in the field of tennis and therefore we should applaud that and not decry her dress. She must put on that dress, it is obligatory. The Calcutta Muslim community started applauding Sania Mirza after that. It's true, the Hindu Intellectuals were also there and joined the Muslims. That should be the kind of approach. I don't suggest that if we raise our voice against the Sikhs, the entire Sikh community will be against the Hindus. No, it will not be.

VB: But we keep quiet on that.

RM: Yes, but we must not fight shy of that. That if the Muslims, for instance, I still remember a few years ago, I have a friend in Karachi, Mr M B Naqvi He is a very well-known name as he was The Times of India's Pakistan correspondent for many years. For some time before partition, he was for a short while, associated with the Radical Democratic Party of M.N Roy. I know him that well. One day, we were coming from Calcutta together in the same train, same compartment and I said, "The Quran gives security to women". He said, it's all humbug, nowhere is it written in the Quran that Muslim women are equal to Muslim men.

He came to Delhi. I was in the Indian Social Institute so I organised a lecture for him. I introduced him saying he was one of the most progressive and highly educated Muslims I had come across; he lives in Karachi. The audience there in the Indian Social Institute, majority were Muslim. I raised the topic that I request Mr. Naqvi to speak about the human Rights of women in Pakistan and he came down so heavily on the Quran. He said Hindu intellectuals have caused a lot of damage to us because they said Quran gives equal rights to women. This is all humbug, and I request them not to spread such misinformation.

He went on to say that since you are from Bangladesh so you should know that in Chittagong and in Comilla, the burqa is the most common thing but you go to North Bengal, Rampur and all that you don't find any burqa. So again, it is the cultural improvement that has been taking place among the Muslims by the Muslims.

Whatever we have achieved in Pakistan, it has been achieved by the Muslims and by our effort, not by the effort of the progressive intellectuals outside the Muslim community either in Pakistan or outside Pakistan. " I am Muslim", he said it openly. I have read the Quran so many times and I don't know many things about the Quran and a non-Muslim who might have read the Quran, pointing out to me, he said, you might have read the Quran only once you know and based on your reading the Quran only once, you pass judgement which are at best, I can say, judgment.

VB: That is what I want to ask, like in our education system, because you are involved with the Human Rights Education also and University Grant Commission and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), in a joint effort for human right education. What kind of education system do we have that we can't even tell our children that there is a caste system or we can't tell our children that there something wrong in our values? Can we?

RMP: No! It is not in our book, and if it is, we remove it. It happened in my own family. One day my younger daughter came home from her school. She read in a secular school. She asked her mother “What caste do we belong to?”. My wife asked what made you ask the question. My daughter says, you know what happened today, we had a civics class and the caste system was being discussed. After the class was over, all the girls were asking one another “What is your caste?” They also asked me and I said I don't know. So, my wife told her, that is the best answer in the future also, say 'I don't know'.

That is how we become caste conscious and the NCERT books have mentioned this and those books have been withdrawn. Unfortunately, in our textbooks, these facts are not mentioned, these are not taught to our children. So how can you know about our evils, unless it is being taught? You are right- it is our education system.

VB: What is the main challenge for the human rights movement in India?

RMP: In India, the main challenge is the societal violation of human rights. Unless the societal violation of human rights is tackled, no other human rights violation can be done away with.

VB: So how do we do with this international covenants or the Atrocities Act?

RM: International covenants, the Atrocities Act..... but intellectual brainstorming session's one after the other, that must continue.

VB: And we should be ready to challenge our past

RMP: Oh, Yes! Absolutely

VB: What has been your most successful achievement in the human rights field?

RMP: My most successful achievement has been to introduce the human rights of Dalits to the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) movement. Two years after that, PUCL, in their national conference, kept this as subject the main subject for discussion, after I started that.

The second is that I succeeded in organising the brainstorming session in Madras on the Human Rights of the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). I am only suggesting that, if you go on discussing, intellectual

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discussion, then some results are bound to accrue. Otherwise only depending on the UN or a conference like Durban, which I saw, we failed there miserably.

I should give you a very simple instance, did you get to negotiate to, talk to other delegates to support us in our cause? I spoke to one British delegate, so I was talking about the caste system and he says, what is the caste system? I said, come on, you haven't heard of that. He said, no. I said, you people ruled our India for two hundred years, more than two hundred years and you don't know what is caste system. I said, when you go back and talk to people, they will laugh at your ignorance. I was not even able to bring the Bangladesh representative to support us.

VB: I wanted to draw your attention to the fact that though we had a very strong materialist past, what had Lokayat darshan, we had Buddhism, we had Kabir, we had Charvak, all these kinds of legends but today the humanist tribe in India is looking like an endangered species. What is the reason?

RMP: In our country, humanism is juxtaposed only against religion. I suggest this is the western approach. This is the western approach because in the West, Catholicism has played havoc. Any humanist movement in Europe or in the USA will naturally rise against and their number one enemy will be the Catholic Church. But in India if I start from the assumption that my number one enemy is Hinduism, then I cannot succeed as a humanist.

VB: Why?

RMP: For instance, the number one enemy in our country is the absence of social democracy. That is the number one enemy. Everybody is celebrating today Lalu Prasad's defeat, but I have been feeling very sad because one single contribution by Lalu Prasad Yadav is to bring about reasonable success in the field of social democracy in Bihar. That nobody recognises. The number one enemy in this country is the absence of social democracy and this absence of social democracy arises out of the caste system. Any humanist movement in our country must tackle the question of social justice which intimately is connected with social democracy. Nobody talks about this one simple thing that political democracy can never succeed anywhere in the world without a very strong articulate social democracy. That is how the humanist movement in our country should start....

VB: What are the meeting points of humanism and human rights?

RMP: For instance, societal violation of human rights is the most important.

Materialism is the right approach for any human rights activist, like say among Dalits or for instance the kind of philosophy that Dr. Ambedkar had shown, or Phule had indicated. That is the meeting point. They were very great human

rights activists. I cannot think of anyone, a more active human rights activist than Ambedkar or Phule in this country.

As a matter of fact, I have always been wondering, the human rights movement in our country, their most important members should be Dalits because they have nowhere else to go except to a Humanist Philosophy, to a materialist philosophy. If you bring God to them or you take them to God, they are finished again.

VB: But that hasn't happened.

RMP: Yes, that hasn't happened. I tried in a small way in this area, when the Babri Masjid was demolished. In this area, I talked to these people, Mochi i.e shoemaker and all- they are my good friends. When I fell ill, they are the people who first came to see me and then I asked them what have you done (by voting for the BJP)?

They said, sir, we voted for Vijay Kumar Malhotra (the BJP's candidate) to govern, not to demolish the mosque and build a Ram temple. It's not their job, that is the job of the priests and pundits. It is not the government's job to build temples, this cannot continue.

And I spoke like that to many individuals and every Tuesday, Hindus particularly, they go to temple- Hanuman Mandir. So, one day I went there. I found that Sitaram, my tailor, was not there. I enquired from his neighbour about his whereabouts.

He said it is Tuesday today, he has gone to the temple in Greater Kailash today.

I said Sitaram doesn't have enough to eat, what business does he have going to the temple? Only the rich go to the temples. The next time they said, you are right, sir. We should not be voting for those who talk of Mandir- masjid disputes.

So, it's not that people don't or will not but even among the Dalits, when you talk to them about Periyar, you are not going to be a popular man, because Periyar is no longer a Dalit. The Dalits do not accept him as their leader or as their benefactor, although nobody else did as much for the cause as Periyar did.

VB: What has been your regret? Is there any regret that you feel so far you have not been able to do or you want to do?

RMP: My one regret has been that the failure in the Durban Conference. That we were not able to put it on the agenda -- the discrimination against Dalits in this country, comes from caste and birth. That is a real great regret. Because I think it is very correct and we should have been able to make the UN leaders understand this issue.

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VB: What message would you like to give to the new youth who are entering the human rights field and humanist movement?

RMP: Well, I am not so important to give any message but I can only say that I try to practice what I say or what I have been writing all these years. Some of you may be familiar it. There is no shortcut to having a new philosophy for India, for Hindus, Muslims and for all, a progressive philosophy which then would be followed by social revolution because no social revolution without a proper philosophy can ever succeed. We have the French revolution. The French Revolution succeeded because of the Encyclopaedic movement. Unfortunately, we don't have one.

Young people may not be able to bring about a philosophical revolution in this country tomorrow. But Ambedkar -you may say anything about him - but he did succeed in bringing a kind of philosophical revolution. For instance, his interpretation of Dhamma. Many Buddhist scholars attacked him saying that Ambedkar is wrong and he's treading on dangerous ground but he did it. So, either you follow his interpretation of Nirvana, for instance, even the most orthodox of the educated Buddhists understand today Nirvana in the way that the Hindus interpret Nirvana but Ambedkar stuck to his ground and says no, Nirvana means that is the Karma you know you get the result of Karma only in this world not after that and death is not Mukti or is not there's no transmigration of souls and he stuck to his ground. He did not believe in the transmigration of soul and he did not believe in the kind of Nirvana that our Hindu philosophy has been teaching. That is the kind, in a small way, Ambedkar.

Another example, Mahatma Phule had started but unfortunately he was not able to bring about this kind of anti-Brahmin movement in Maharashtra, at least in the political field- something like the Bahujan Samaj, but he failed or maybe he did not have enough time to pursue that. Therefore, young people in our country must get involved with the younger people from the minorities and from the Dalits and try to have brainstorming among them. You must because if society does not become a better society then whether one is a Dalit or one is an upper caste both are going to suffer ultimately.

That is the only thing and to say the state would come to our rescue, I don't agree, and don't believe in that

Transcription by Bhupinder Singh

A K BISWAS*



VB: In Lokayat today, we are having a conversation with Dr. A.K. Biswas, one of the very well-known writers and historian, because of his extraordinary work about Mushahars in Bihar, and a number of other things which are hitherto unknown, [particularly] about Dr. Ambedkar, how he came to the Constituent Assembly, how he was elected from Bengal. There are many issues which are not known in the public discourse and we would like to discuss these issues here. So welcome, Dr. Biswas.

VB: I would like to ask [about your] recent article that appeared in the Mainstream, about how Babasaheb Ambedkar came to the Constituent Assembly, with a lot of obstacles, but how Bengal sent him to the Constituent Assembly. Can you share about that incident?

AKB: Thank you. Dr. Ambedkar, at that point of time, was a member of the Executive Council of the Governor General of India. When the Independence was approaching, they needed to frame the Constitution, or write the Constitution for Independent India. Elections were held all over the country, so that members could draft Constitution for the new nation. The Congress Party was against Ambedkar, and they decided that his entry into the Constituent Assembly has to be stopped, or prevented. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, in one of his statements, said that we have closed the doors and windows of the Constituent Assembly, and we'll see how does he enter in this house. He could not get elected from Bombay Presidency, his home province, so he was thinking to get elected from Bengal, with the help of Anglo-Indian members of the State Assembly of Bengal. Few months before the election, when he came to Calcutta and tried to get their support, he was told that the Anglo-Indian members have decided first to not participate in the election, and second that they will not vote [for] anybody in the election. So Ambedkar was pretty disappointed and went back to Delhi. At this point of time, Jogendranath Mandal invited Ambedkar to come to Bengal and contest election. He was the MLC of Scheduled Castes Federation of India founded by Dr. Ambedkar. And he was the solitary member of the Bengal Assembly. Just 21 days before the election, Ambedkar came to Calcutta and he had a meeting with the supporters and volunteers of the Scheduled Castes' Society here, and then he agreed to contest elections. Mandal proposed his name and Biswas supported or seconded his candidature for the election. Elections are held on the appointed day and as many as 7 MLCs voted for Ambedkar. In fact 5 MLCs are required for any person to be elected as the

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member of the Constituent Assembly. The results of the first round are declared it was found that Ambedkar has secured the best number of votes from Bengal. Incidentally Sarat Chandra Bose, elder brother of Subhas Chandra Bose, got 6 votes, 1 less than Dr. Ambedkar. Thus, a new chapter of the history of the Dalit movement and the struggle that Ambedkar undertook all his life was brought closer to the logical conclusion, and that gave him the opportunity to reach Constituent Assembly and fight for the cause of the 'untouchable' people of this country.

VB: How despite Sardar Patel's statement, opposition, how could Ambedkar become the Chairman of the Drafting Committee?

AKB: See, in fact, Dr. Rajinder Prasad wrote a very important letter at a later stage, a few months after, because, by that time, India Independence Act was passed, in 1946, and on the basis of that it was decided that Ambedkar has to seek a re-election. There are others also, those who got elected from parts that were in Pakistan.. They had to seek re-election. Ambedkar was elected first from Bengal – his constituency was Jasur and Kulna, which is now in Bangladesh...

VB: Both constituencies are in Bangladesh?

AKB: No, it is a single constituency. Jasur and Kulna are two districts comprising one constituency. So, this constituency went out of India. So he was required to be re-elected. So, Dr. Rajinder Prasad, who was the speaker of the Constituent Assembly, wrote a letter to B.J. Kher in Bombay to ensure that he is re-elected and sent as a member of the Constituent Assembly. This is because we have seen his performance as a member – it is brilliant, and in public interest and interest of the country and the nation, and we need his services. So ensure that he is re-elected and resent to the Assembly very soon. So thus he came to the Assembly. That almost decided the fate of Ambedkar as being elected or selected as the Chairman of the Drafting Committee.

VB: One of the biggest backbones of Dr. Ambedkar coming to the Constituent Assembly from Bengal was Jogendranath Mandal. And coincidentally, he was also the member of the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, as a law minister there. When he resigned from Pakistan... His resignation letter is in itself a masterpiece. But isn't it a tragedy that not much is known in public discourse in India about him, and his contribution to the Dalit movement, and the emancipation of the marginalised?

AKB: This is a sad part that little is known about him. He went to Pakistan and that has definitely made him unpopular, you are right. First of all, his resignation from the Government of Pakistan was because of the serious violation of safety, security, peace, dignity of the minorities in East Pakistan. He found that the promises that were made to him that minorities would live in peace and

harmony, and that religion will not be allowed to play a major role in the life of the state, that did not happen. It is. Recently I read an article in Dawn, written by a very well-known analyst and social thinker – he says that the rift between the government, the bureaucracy and the politicians was made by the bureaucracy, and they carried a story against Mandal. Ultimately he fell from the grace, and unfortunately it so happened that Mohd. Ali Jinnah died, and his death actually made him helpless, because he didn't have a person in the Pakistani government he could look up to. He was almost alone. He was not the law minister; he inaugurated the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, but ultimately he could not stay there seeing that his people, his countrymen, were suffering such difficulties. So he had to resign and he came back to East Pakistan, and then he came to India.

VB: But if we see the conditions of Dalits in East Pakistan, or now in Bengal, here, is there anything satisfactory, because Bengal for long has been under the Left domain? People call it the intellectual hub, etc but one thing is for sure that the representation at all levels, right from the government to bureaucracy to teaching, the percentage is very low. In fact, the communist parties have rarely accepted the presence of Dalits in this state. And the other side of the story is East Bengal, now in Bangladesh, where there was discrimination of the kind that forced Mandal to come back to India. Why is it that Bengal does not accept that there is a discrimination against Dalits and they were marginalised? Why do you think there have been no efforts to highlight these issues?

AKB: Perhaps it would be sufficient to say Debojit Bhattacharjee was Chief Minister. 69% of the ministers of his Cabinet are from three high castes. And these three castes in pre-Partition India in Bengal were just 6.5%. The ratio perhaps has not changed. More or less it has remained the same. So it is a very minuscule minority that has been dominating this scenario. And they have covered every inch of the space. Wherever, whether it is in the society, or it is in politics, or agitation, they have taken it.

VB: The interesting thing was that Bengal was under 400 years of Buddhist rule..

AKB: That is true, but then – this has happened. But we don't see any prominent person here. This has been known by many people that we see in Bihar, there have been changes in political leadership as they had Jagjivan Ram, Ram Vilas Paswan, Lalu Prasad Yadav, Nitish Kumar etc. We don't see anyone coming from Bengal. This is because the environment is not there. The environment has not been allowed to grow like this. One thing I must tell you very clearly – in Bengal, the proportion of people, Hindus, who are denied entry into the temple is more than those who are denied entry into temple in Bihar.

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So percentage 'untouchable' in Bengal are more than in Bihar. This fact in Bihar they don't know, and in Bengal, the elite know but don't say.

VB: So there is a kind of attempt by popular media and so-called intellectuals to deny Bengal, or Bengalis because when I am saying Bengali that means the Namoshudras Bengalis – to deny their space and annihilating the cultural history of the Dalits.

AKB: See, what you have spoken about the liberal attitude, unity and social solidarity, I largely disagree with that. You see the Partition took place in the refugees came. The vast numbers that have been sent out of West Bengal are largely from lower social strata. In fact, in Bihar I have seen, 33.5 Lakh refugees in my jurisdiction, I don't think I have seen any person who doesn't belong to the lower social strata of the Bengalis.

VB: So they were uprooted from their land and language, but also thrown away to other areas.

AKB: Of course. I was talking about this...

VB: How people were sent to different parts..

AKB: of the country.

VB: Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand. I have seen many in Uttarakhand.

AKB: They are mostly from the namashudras community. They are entirely from the lower social strata. And they have gone into a place where they don't find the environment they have lived in, they have grown in...

VB: Yes, absolutely

AKB: The entire atmosphere has been changed for them.

VB: Absolutely. They have lost their language actually.

AKB: There is, you know, a major havoc that has happened to them in their life. They don't know their language – they have forgotten their language, in only 30 years of their time they have lost their language.

VB: One of the biggest massacres in the history of Bengal happened in Marichjhapi.

AKB: Yes. Because the Left Front leaders, before they came to power promised them everything suggesting that there is enough space to settle people and ultimately when they got elected, and secured power, they not only forgot about them, they betrayed them. But right after they got elected to power, their ministers in the government told that now you are in power, so you can come. And they invited 5 crore Bengalis to embrace you with ten crore hands. And

when they turned, they found a hostile atmosphere against them. So they dared move to Marichjhapi. Incidentally this Marichjhapi initially this Bidhanchandra Ray wanted to settle them. But that was opposed.

VB: And the killings were never reported?

AKB: That is such a massacre in the darkness of night, carried by official machinery and by goons and goondas. Something shameful chapter... and people believe that it was worse than Jallianwallah Bagh.

VB: Yes, and the party machinery was used in it?

AKB: Party machinery was used. In fact, one of the researchers – a Canadian researcher – he has said that Muslim goondas are brought with debris, because the Muslim and Namashudras had animosity back then. So the Muslim took revenge and advantage of the animosity and they pounced on them. No action was taken against them.

VB: And the state apparatus was supporting it?

AKB: No action had been taken..

VB: Is there any government report on that?

AKB: No

VB: Nothing?

AKB: (nods) In fact, it was one of the.. It was a police operation.

VB: Yes..

AKB: I can tell – I was District Magistrate of Nalanda at that point of time, and the Divisional Commissioner of Presidency was visiting Rajgir – Rajgir was under my jurisdiction. So, A.K. Majumdar, Presidency Divisional Commissioner, one day I asked him “Sir, Tell me something about it.” And he told me very frankly, “Sorry, I don’t know anything about this, and civil administration is not involved in this, but the police is involved.”

VB: How many people would have been killed in that?

AKB: Nobody knows how many people have been killed, how many people have been missing, who are missing, what has happened to them, how many people have returned to ***, nobody knows

VB: So no track record of people...

AKB: . No track record and act as if they are refugees – the Pillar of the left front movement. They are the architect of the left front movement. They have built up the power base.

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VB: So the unfortunate part is this that not even the opposition parties resist.

AKB: The opposition leaders and the leaders of the government – if you look at the composition and the social background of them, they come from the same background...

VB: ... the same caste background..

AKB: .. same khet ka mooli jo kehta hai na

VB: ji, ji (laughs)

AKB: So they have little interest to address it, except making a political front out of it. Some have spoken, but then, they couldn't force the government to do something about it.

VB: Because if we look at the history of Independent India, I call the Marichjhapi incident as the biggest blot on the communist movement in India. This claim to work for the proletariat, but who are the proletariat?

AKB: Marichjhapi has been the darkest episode, definitely, in the modern Indian history, and in Bengal. Recently they reopened various other cases but but not the Marichjhapi has been brought on.

VB: Yes, because that exposes not just the parties but also the classes and the castes.

AKB: Yeah, as I said it is the same ground, the same social...

VB: ... ek hi khet ki mooli

VB: Subsequently after this, various governments now in Bengal, the second term of the other government, and it seemed that the caste hegemony is increasing here, not reducing. What did you see?

AKB: I read a book, written by a communist leader Kanti Biswas, who was education minister of West Bengal. When he was made the Education Minister in '82, 2-3 months after his swearing-in, the party boss gave him a bunch of letters, saying that "Biswas these are the letters for you though it is written to me. So take out one of the letters and read what is there." That letter came from a place called Baghpat – not to make Kanti Biswas Education Minister if he is a chandal. Bengal cannot take education from him.

VB: And he didn't react to it?

AKB: This is what I've been seeing in West Bengal. Let us take this in a scene elsewhere. 2004, '99-2004, when Atal Behari Vajpayee was Prime Minister, Murli Manohar Joshi was HRD Minister and was holding a meeting in Delhi, where ministers of all states were there, including Kanti Biswas. They were

debating over an issue. Murli Manohar Joshi asks Kanti Biswas for his opinion. Kanti Biswas gives a candid opinion, that in this country with so many religions, so many languages, so many cultural traits, so our policy should be such that it suits everybody. Murli Manohar Joshi told “I respect Kanti Biswas highly, because nobody knows the subject of education better than Kanti Biswas. But I hate him because he is a Brahmin, but he has taken a certificate of Scheduled Caste for the benefit of political interests.”

VB: The percentage of Scheduled Castes in Bengal is...

AKB: 24%... Actually 25%

VB: And equal number of Muslims?

AKB: It should be more now..

VB: And, the past few years, the Bengali government, they never accepted that caste exists in Bengal, or discrimination is there, or untouchability is there, because most people say Bengal mein toh chhoot-achhoot hota nahi hai.

AKB: Credit for this does not go to anybody, except Partition. Because the Partition came in such broad flats, people in flats. So they could not keep this puritanism undamaged or undented. They had to live on the same platforms, under the same camps, so segregation that is required for maintaining caste differences could not be maintained. That is the basic reason. I don't know others will agree or not, but this is what I feel.

VB: But despite that, they ensured that the marginalised Dalits stayed outside the posh areas, like the Salt Lake City...

AKB: I'll tell you, in Calcutta and around Calcutta, there are around 225 colonies, forcible occupation – zamindar lands, government lands, fallow lands... Those lands were forcibly occupied. That occupation has been formalised also. That has been recognised elsewhere, and people have been settled. And then settlement part also, in official agreements – urban settlements for those who are executive class, business class, and rural settlements for those who didn't have education, or a vocation dependent on tertiary sector.

VB: Who are the owners of these occupied colonies?

AKB: Mostly, the upper social strata.

VB: Now, Bengal is like... Most of the time when people give data for outside Bengal, particularly about land reform – because one of the things that the Left Front government talks a lot about is the land reform, even though they were tenancy reforms mostly – has Bengal seen any land reform? And if that is the case, then why do Dalits still face stigma? If we see Singur and Nandigram, what

have the Dalits got in these, because they are just agricultural workers? They didn't get the compensation.

AKB: The executive class hate anybody who does anything with hands. Handling things, manipulating tools, physical labour – they hate it. One thing at the level of settlement and rehabilitation, the segregation was very easy and simple. Those who are settled in the primary sector were agricultural or non-agricultural. Agricultural settlement were people with agricultural vocation, they were taken to the hill areas. Their urban life was shut. And almost it is the truth that social division took place. And we have seen that there are very few schools and colleges – colleges particularly – from Vangao to Sialdah. Till the 90s, Bangla College, Dolnar College, Howrah College, Barashat College – there were no other colleges. Now, after '82 or '86, colleges have started coming up, but not many. Education has been denied so that the surge of people from rural areas doesn't take place. And then the language, that is also affecting this.

VB: A lot of your work on the contribution of Dalits in the freedom movement, particularly 1857, not much has been written about that. Many of the writers are now.. Because the Gandhian and the Ambedkarite movements for India's independence were two separate things. But even within the Gandhi's movement, there were executed, and who went and fought... You wrote about Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. Can you share more about this?

AKB: Bengal didn't involve itself much in the Sepoy Mutiny. That is more or less... In fact, the zamindar of Uttarpara writing a letter to the District Magistrate of Hooghly, they brought this Bakdi, Hadi, Golas and Chandals as sepoys in the thanas so that peace is maintained and disorder is prevented. He writes a very interesting letter, the district magistrate writes to the government that this is the proposal of an Uttarpara zamindar, which is a very respectable zamindar, and the government approved the proposal. And they went to the streets. The zamindars would pay for the sepoys', other karmcharis and chandals, for the purposes of peacekeeping. So that is there. But then, not much... Another sad aspect is, when First World War broke out, a letter to Naveen Chandra Sen. Naveen Chandra Sen is a nineteenth century Magistrate, in the Bengal civil services. He was a poet also. And he was a contemporary of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. He was younger than Vidyasagar. Vidyasagar writes a letter to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee saying that "I am so unhappy that I had started a primary school in my village, and when I went to the village I am surrounded by the parents of children who studied or are studying there, saying that their sons have become useless. Neither have they succeeded in education nor are they good for doing agricultural work. They have all become babus. So never in future in my life I will open schools in villages."



VB: That is a statement of Vidyasagar?

AKB: (Nods)

VB: That is very serious, actually.

AKB: Vidyasagar in 1859 – He writes a letter to the Governor of Bengal. That time it was called the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, J.P. Grant, and says ‘the government now wants to focus education on the masses, because enough has been done for the upper social strata, and so that more people can become literate. So I would say and suggest that more needs to be done for the upper social strata, and therefore it would be advisable for the government to pay more attention for the education of the higher classes.’ These are the internal writings...

VB: Okay... So the entire so-called campaign for education of women was also meant for the higher classes and castes.

AKB: Yes, so this is what he writes. These are the letters that are preserved. So whenever there has been a mention of the question of education, it will receive opposition... In 1911, when Bengal Partition was knifed, then Governor-General Lord Hades proposed that we will create a university in Dhaka  This was immediately opposed by Ashutosh Mukherjee who was Vice-Chancellor of  University, Surendranath Banerjee who was the political leader at that point of time in a college called Ripon College, education minister was Prabhash Chandra Mitra. When the entire proposal for the budget came, it was not allowed to be passed. The delegation to the Governor said that internal Partition will remain in existence if university is allowed to come up in Dhaka.

VB: Why were they opposing?

AKB: And then from 1911 to 1921, a university was not allowed to come up in Dhaka. That would have been the fifth university in India created by the British. Then there was Patna which had a university. Benares Hindu University was a private initiative. So, ultimately, the Muslims raised a serious problem – they created a breaking point in the face of their anger and strong resentment – because they didn’t want Muslims to learn this.

VB: So basically anti-Muslim, and anti-Dalit also, because the population is large..

AKB: They used to collect salami, which is a word for illegal gratification, from the tenants. Because the zamindar who had a son and was doing his law in England, so his rivals used to be exploited. Money used to be collected for the gratification of his son in England. And when the son comes, they don’t know. They didn’t allow the common man to get educated. This is the landmark of education in India.

VR: Basically, this was as we were discussing in the morning, Bengal had two Renaissances. One was the upper caste Renaissance. And the other was this Harinath Thakur and others. The savarna Renaissance actually never bothered about the Dalits and untouchables.

AKB: No, this so-called nineteenth century Bengal Renaissance, they could take a lot of other people, you read the literature...

VB: One of your major works is about Mushahars in Bihar. Mushahars have been one of the most disenfranchised communities, as far as I know. I have worked with them, and they are one of the most marginalised. But, in the caste hierarchy, Mushahars consider themselves to be much superior to many other communities, such as Chamars, Balmikis, Doms. They will not eat with them. They will say that we are of upper echelons. I found that Mushahars are mostly with tribal tendencies. Do you think that they were tribes?

AKB: They could be tribes. Physically, they were very sound. I have seen stances that they used to go to the river Ganges for fishing crocodile. They used to kill them and eat them. There is a misgiving about them that they are rat eaters. One theory is that they did it to keep away from crime – to eat rats instead of committing crimes. In Mushahars you will not find many criminals.

VB: But they were declared as criminal tribe by the British.

AKB: In 1932, the Governments of Bihar and Odisha declared a band of 45 persons as criminal tribe, that included the Brahmins, Rajputs, Kayasthas and Bhumihars – largely, if not entirely. An editorial was written by a man called Dr. Sachidanand Sinha, one of the prominent barristers of Bihar, and he attacked the government decision to declare them as criminal tribes saying that I was in the Governor General's Council in 1911 when the Act was amended. The Objective of the Act was not to declare as criminal tribes as children of the educated upper castes.

VB: But it was not aimed at the upper-caste elites.

AKB: It was not aimed to include the upper caste crime. This resonated throughout the country, from Lahore to Chennai. Every newspaper raised voice against this decision. I have a whole list of the groups that were declared criminal tribes by that Order. And the same Sachidanand Sinha was the first Speaker of the Constituent Assembly. Then he was succeeded by Dr Rajendra Prasad. So, the attitude was that criminal tribes are only of lower social order.

VB: So you are saying that there was a list from which the upper castes were deleted and the Dalits were put?

AKB: No, you see, the question is, the police is upper caste, the judge is upper caste, the lawyer and prosecutor is upper caste, so every opportunity to get benefit of doubt of being criminal is to that social strata. It was open orders. I have the quotes – I have the order of the S.S. Gangopadhyay Commission. I have the order with me.

VB: What was the case about?

AKB: There was a girl from the Munda tribe in Bengal. She passed her graduation. She was the first to graduate from her tribe. She was also the first girl of her tribe to get into university. She admitted herself into M.Sc. in Anthropology. One of her teachers was harassing her – calling her names and telling her that she belonged to a criminal tribe. Outside the class, she used to be chased and hunted. For two years, she was not allowed to take her examination. She complained against the teacher's harassment. No action was taken so that the harassment stops. The situation became so unbearable that she ultimately committed suicide. So after a public outcry, a commission was set up. In the end, the enquiry commission told that Chakraborty has no reason to particularly target and humiliate and harass the girl. This happens in the daily course of college life. So there is not much evidence here that she was harassed that has led to her suicide.

VB: And there was nothing else...

AKB: No, no.. This was the enquiry, that's it. This was 1992-93.

VB: So that also means that what happened to Rohith Vemula last year, Dalit students have been facing for long. And we only make an outcry where the situation is suitable and convenient, but when it doesn't suit us we keep quiet. Because when Left Front raises these issues a lot in public, their own record is not very great.

AKB: Yeah, it is a very dirty record. This same Kanti Biswas, the education minister, he raised an objection in the first Left Front government. He spoke to Jyoti Basu and said that we don't have a Scheduled Caste minister, thought the Scheduled Castes have summarily supported you and stood behind you, and this has created a serious resentment among them. So Jyoti Basu tells him that how is it necessary that a Scheduled Caste can serve them? Can't we take care of their own problems? But ultimately a minister was taken and Kanti Biswas was made a minister with welfare and sports activities.

VB: How do you think the Mushahars or other communities on the margins among the Dalits also – there many in Bengal, and also other states – how do we bring them in league with other communities?

AKB: There is a serious and practical problem because of level of education, or level of material attainment and advancement. They were dominant, particularly numerically dominant. They are coming out and are marching ahead. Others are not coming and that is the problem and only education can give them.

VB: Because the level of resentment is easily exploited by the dominant others. This is happening in U.P., Bihar. I don't know what is happening in Bengal. But elsewhere in Telangana, we have Madigas. And this has been used by political parties to exploit their sentiments.

AKB: And create a rift in between these communities

VB: And that actually destroyed the reservation also.

VB: You have studied migrant workers also. Many people say that when they migrate they are uprooted from their culture, languages and value-systems. But when it comes to Dalits, many people say that they get new values, like Dr. Ambedkar said many times that people should migrate to cities to educate themselves and to get rid of what he called the 'village system' which has ...

AKB: ... chest full of castes.

VB: Yes. So what do you suggest? What are your findings?

AKB: While I was doing this dissertation for PhD, on overseas immigration of working classes. And, those who went out of the country, in the end, they have come up in life fairly well. They work hard, endure hardship, and survive the worldview. They have grown very well. I had met this ambassador of Suriname and Trinidad when they were celebrating 100 years of the migration of the first batch of refugees in Suriname and Trinidad. The ambassador came to Patna, and he said that the Indian immigrants, many of whom were from Bihar, they participated in the freedom struggle of Suriname and Trinidad against the British, and they are honoured there. But in our own country, they are not. In fact in Bihar, a Dusadh woman was killed by police in 1942, during Quit India Movement, and nobody knows her name. Her name is Akdi Devi, and she died of police action.

VB: There are so many who were killed and executed. In fact, I went to Champaran and a few other places, only to find out that the whole movement is only in the name of a few Brahmins, and there is no other Mushahar, or Mandals, or various other communities. We don't find any.

AKB: True, true. And Champaran movement, you know, Rajkumar Shukla has been....

VB: Yes, yes..

AKB: Rajkumar Shukla was a contractor, moneylender, he was a small zamindar...

VB: Yes, that's why he gave so much land to the Harijan Sevak Sangh.

AKB: Yes, so, I have done some study on the Champaran movement of Gandhi.

VB: Yes, that is true.

AKB: Even Gandhi doesn't say what about that?


VB: They said Nilha gaye milha aaye,.. The indigo agents went, and the local mill owners came... Champaran is still a huge mill trend.

AKB: That is sugar mills etc. but then apart from that the zamindars were the exploiters.

VB: Yes, it still has the least number of land given to the poor. Last year, a friend was arrested for fighting for the land rights of Mushahars. They were tilling the land, and he was a member of the Bihar Land Reform Council. He was only released after 4 months. Even when you say that people had gone abroad and they succeeded, but the caste never left them there also. In fact when they go abroad, the caste system is much bigger and much harder, among Indians.

AKB: Because there are no. If someone has to be married, their daughter, then they say to find a boy of the same community.

VB: So we are not able to elevate ourselves when we go in those liberal democracies.

AKB: (Laughs) Next best is to get oriented with America. Caste supremacy is there.[48:44 to 49:05 unclear] 

VB: England is already there.

AKB: AKB  gland is already under the shadow of caste.

VB: So do you visualise that India will some day become an egalitarian society as it says in our constitution?

AKB: It is a difficult question, very difficult to answer. After 7 decades of independence, not much change has taken place.

VB: Why is there a gap between our constitutional values and our individual values in India? We still prefer the individual values, or what we call the Brahminical values.

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AKB: We are too religious. The temples and ashrams and pilgrimages, all those places keep on limiting our thoughts.

VB: The more we are progressing, these students of modernity, like terrorism videos, channels, are being used to take people backward also?

AKB: You saw the other day – I think within last 2 years, when this spacecraft had to be sent to the sky

VB: - Mangalyan

AKB: - Yes, a small replica was taken to Tirupati for the purpose of blessings, before it could fly

VB: So why despite so many changes – we say we are a modern constitution with republicanism – we find that even the people in the services such as government or media, we still find the same parochial and medieval values dominating our discourse.

AKB: I totally agree.

VB: How to get rid of that? Should there be a code of conduct for anybody who takes oath?

AKB: It already is there. The judge has to take an oath, the police officer wherever he goes or civil servants when they go to Lal Bahadur Shastri academy for training have to take an oath to protect the constitution. There is a code already there. [51:15 to 51:30 IF YOU EAT HALF THE WORDS IN YOUR MOUTH HOW WILL THE WHOLE SENTENCE MAKE SENSE?]



VB: ... to protect the constitution.

AKB: Right, they will protect the constitution, they will be above religious fanaticism.. But every forgets about this and they follow their own code.

VB: When we see the Court, and people go to seek justice, and we see big mullah, big daadi wali, big topi wala, can we expect that people can really do justice with these kinds of appearances?

AKB: A few years back, the Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment told that less than 4% of SC/ST Atrocities Act cases – conviction rate is 4%. So 96% simply go scot-free. Nothing happens to them.

VB: But that's the reality. Otherwise in the Rohith Vemula case, police has not moved ahead. In fact there was a commission, and the commission of enquiry blamed the victim only.

AKB: It is a pointless thing. You don't expect anything from them.

VB: So how do we get out of this what we call depressing situation?

AKB: I believe that it is only education, real education, not this education which has been drafted by some people with preconceived notions. We are afraid to tell the truths, that is something very serious. I think we know, the Battle of Plassey, which laid the foundation of the British in India. The man who was the chief conspirator, Maharaja Krishna Chandra Ray, he is not shown as conspirator, his name has been deleted from history books. After the battle, 12 guns are presented to the Maharaja and those guns were used in the Battle of Plassey against Indian. So today everybody in Bengal knows that Mir Zafar means traitor. A betrayal of the country is called independence. Mir Zafar paid at least 3-4 crore of rupees at that point of time, to East India Company as compensation for attacking Calcutta, to bribe more than 1 crore 20 lakh rupees, to Watts who was in the Nawab's court. He paid money to become the Nawab. But the man who made him Nawab, Lord Clive, presented 12 guns which were used in the Battle of Plassey and this does not come up in books.

VB: Yeah, that is what they are doing, selective usage of history for their own purposes..

AKB: No, distorting...

VB: Like Prithviraj Chauhan and Jaichand history. And cooked up which I say Cooking up the Dinanath Batra brand of history, where every mythology converts to history.

AKB: and this is the word getting swept under the carpet.

VB: Yes, and they don't question the mythologies.

AKB: And this Maharaja Krishna Chandra is a Brahmin of the highest order. In Bengal we have 4 kulins. We have another, 5th kulin. This is Panditratna. Bangal Sen had a Brahmin concubine, and he had a son out of that. He was made the 5th kulin, and that is known as Panditratna. And Panditratna in Bengal also bears the titles of Bandyopadhyay. Womesh Chandra was one of the Panditratnas, the first President of the Indian National Congress in 1885.

VB: So the Brahmin can do no wrong.

AKB: They don't obey their own scripture. If the man, who fathers a child with a woman higher than him, the child will get the caste of the man. Here, the child becomes Brahmin. But this, Bangal Sen was a beggar.

VB: A child beggar.

AKB: This caste does not give the status higher than the lower order.

VB: Outside Bengal, a lot of people suggest that the Dalits and the Left forces are natural allies in fighting against communalisation, casteism and all. What do you think – are they? Or should they? They are two different questions.

AKB: In the political system that we have adopted, not by compulsion but by choice, we adopted constitutional democracy, and we backed the forces of political parties. Now in Bengal, no political party is headed by non-Brahmin, or non-Brahminical person. And the lower social strata do not get importance in distribution of portfolios and power, and the opportunity to handle power. They are not trusted.

VB: They are not given rights basically. The reservation has never been implemented, OBC or SC/ST reservation.

AKB: I have spoken to officers here, and they say that in elected gazetted posts, reservation is, attempts have yet to be made but when Mass scale recruitment takes place. Because you provide for more people by denying. I heard that, I looked into the statistical information of 1984-85 to 1987, the clerks in West Bengal recruited by Public Services Commission, 30% or ~450 of the vacancies had not been filled up on the pretext that suitable candidates were not found. And, 8% of the ST vacancies of about ~200 posts, that means only 6 or 7 seats could be filled up by tribal candidates, on the same pretext. Also in the case of the civil service examinations for the state. In the 5-6 years of the Left Front government, the reserved seats have been filled up by the general candidates. And they use the same plea about unsuitable candidates.

VB: This I was told even in the sweepers' vacancy. They recruited upper-caste people and claim that upper caste people too coming from sweeper's job and then these upper-caste people would then recruit someone as an absentee.

AKB: I saw in Bihar, the Mehtars...

VB: Yeah, Bhumihars,

AKB: Yes, they would work for them. The Bhumihars would come and collect the pay-packets.

VB: In U.P. it's the same. Where I was coming here, most of the time people from Haryana, U.P., and Bihar were complaining that when salary and confirmed jobs are given, they are given to the upper-caste people, and then they employ, a Balmikis to do this work as proxy.

AKB: They will employ a proxy.

VB: Absentee employee. And then he will come only on the salary day and sign and other work will be done by this person.

VB: So that was the question that you were responding, that the Dalits and the marginalised in the political scenario, how will they respond to the crisis unleashed by the Hindutva forces, because this is now an existential crisis.

AKB: I don't think there is any perceptible or visible reaction or responses from them. Problem is that whenever some festival takes place, people go to Tarkeswar or the Durga Puja, all sorts of people are coming. It does not look that they are trying to avoid it. They don't want to confront.

VB: So it's not happening.

AKB: No

VB: So there are moments of reactions to small things in some places...

AKB: There are... But even then they don't make much impact.

VB: So they are only reactions to some things and then...

AKB: For instance, this year also, this Asur Puja was taking place in Purulia. Mahishasur worship is taking place. I know a person, he is Buddhist, speaking about him being persecuted by neighbours. Also there are known stances that somebody following Matua tradition started by Harichand Thakur too have been persecuted by the people. They didn't want to observe these Brahminical practices. They said that we will go by this Matua tradition. So they have been persecuted, and that has happened during the Left rule.

VB: So the Left rule has continuously survived on the Brahminical rituals and that's why Durga Puja is an important element of it.

AKB: They have allowed leaders to participate in Durga Puja and other festivals.

VB: Is it not shocking – like what happened in Tamil Nadu where Periyar and his party opposed people participating in these kind of rituals and practices and gave a new alternative – and here, the communist parties are themselves making Durga Pandal and giving holidays for months on end..

AK: Here, I don't remember any conscious effort in public to discourage people from participating in religious festivities.

VB: And religious festivities are very cleverly termed as cultural events.

AK: Mass cultural participation is called Utsav, not just Puja.

VB: And it is not reducing, it is magnifying every year.

AKB: And this is now also being exported. The idols are sent abroad and the rituals are carried out.

A K Biswas

VB: But, that is fine for those who believe in it. But those who are not supposed to believe in it are also following it. This relates to the point you have made that there is no conscious effort to counter the dominant Brahminical value-system or the political discourse.

AKB: Conscious, demonstrative or exhibited efforts have to be made.

VB: Before I end, I will ask, how do you suggest people should do it? Many people who are in the Ambedkarite movement will be watching, so I want your response on how we can make a conscious, demonstrative public effort to counter all these forces?

AKB: People should discourage these irrational practices and rituals. You don't do at your own level. Don't organise something like this which you don't approve or believe please don't do it. You know these are all false and hack. There is no spiritual value. It costs you so avoid it. It harms your financial.

VB: Bengal was ruled by Buddhist for 400 years. Do you think there should be a movement to go back to Buddhist movement?

AKB: There may be some particular events or incidents of people embracing Buddhism. There is no movement at the moment as there is no perceptible, visible movement here for Buddhism like Maharashtra but I believe it is important to be part of it. Principles of Buddhism stand on scientific values and values egalitarianism, humanism and rationality and it must be encouraged.

Transcription by Vidita Priyadarshini

S V RAJADURAI* & V GEETHA**

On Periyar's ideology, self respect movement and opportunism of political parties

VB: Periyar was one of the tallest revolutionaries of India. His thoughts on secularism, on Brahmanism surpass any other political leaders of his time. He was enormously popular with the masses. Why does today's Tamil Nadu seem absolutely reverse to Periyar's thoughts when we see the growing religiosity in the state and a huge number of Shudras following it?

SV & VG: Periyar's radicalism comprised several parts – his critique of Brahminism was many-sided. At one level, it was a rejection of the Brahminical abhorrence of labour and touch. Describing the differences he harboured with Rajaji, who was also a personal friend, he remarked that C. Rajagopalachariyar (Rajaji) stayed true to his mission, which was that 'he did not want his caste men to have to pick up a spade and labour'. In another instance, speaking of the winning flexibility of Brahmin intellectualism, he observed that some Brahmins might abhor a 'Panchama' entering their homes, whereas others might not be averse to the same 'Panchama' entering their kitchens; why, some might even 'allow' a Panchama to enter the sanctum sanctorum of their altar-room, and there were Brahmins who did marry Panchamas. In all this, though Brahmins made choices that worked to their advantage – he used the Tamil word 'balithavarai', that is whatever 'worked' for them. At another level Periyar argued that Brahminism had to do with the hierarchical logic of varnadharma,

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which, like a ladder implicates everyone – in this sense, each of us carries a ladder in our consciousness, and we measure ourselves and others on the basis of where we are placed on this ladder. However, what drew the attention of the people at large was his critique of the Brahmin community's proneness to separate and 'upgrade' themselves whenever they were challenged; and the hegemonic role they exercised in matters of everyday religiosity, culture, and in the modern period in arbitrating social values. Brahmin religious authority was also scorned – and Hindu religious lore was subject to merciless criticism.

Periyar also argued that 'Dravidian' faith and rituals were as 'soiled' by Brahminical exegesis and arguments, and dismissed, on this basis the Tamil Saivites' claim to a faith (Saiva Siddhantha) which, they argued, was different from Brahminical Hinduism; he was equally dismissive of local practices of ritual, of village cults and so on. Yet, given that the political force of his critique of Brahminism addressed Brahminical Hinduism, the 'Dravidian' practitioners of Saivism, as well as those who were bound by local lore and faith, could detach Periyar's animosity towards religion in general from his anti-Brahmin critique, and uphold the latter, while ignoring the former. This was not, of course, true of his more consistent followers, including women. This is important to note, because atheism as household practice was common amongst those in the organisations he founded – and there were several intrepid women, who were proud to declare themselves atheists and insisted on secular burial rituals, when they passed away.

All this made for a public culture, where Periyar's radical rejection and critique of faith – breaking of the Ganesha idol, slipping portraits of the god Rama in public – enjoyed visibility and support; yet his more fundamental critique of faith, and the angry denunciation of caste that was implicit in his denunciation of Brahminical Hinduism were not always taken in and internalized.

Also, historically, religious ritual, including temple festivals, and the granting of 'honours' to local heads of communities during such events have served the purpose of affirming social status and rank in the Tamil context. This is as true of local temples as it is of the gigantic royal and Brahminical edifices that mark the Tamil landscape. So, in a sense, social personhood is bound with temple ritual – with religious and secular authority being nested in each other. This is why Dalits see it fit to challenge the prerogative that dominant castes arrogate to themselves during such festivals, and demand places and roles for themselves in the conduct of the latter.

Further, even those temple spaces which had been outside the sacred spaces dominated by Brahminical Hinduism have, over the last few decades, been 'upgraded' and they began practising Brahminical temple rituals – which of course require a Brahmin priest. Worshippers at such temples which have been

so ‘upgraded’ are mostly from the so-called Shudra groups, those we would designate as backward and most backward castes, if we are to resort to state terminology. On the other hand, as we saw when the courts banned animal sacrifices in temples outside the purview of Brahminical control, there were widespread protests – and the local was upheld in the face of the ‘supralocal’ Brahminical view of faith. What was forgotten in this debate was that the local did not always mean that it was inclusive of Dalits – and that while Dalits too may be invested in the local, it was always ‘their’ local. That is, they were not part of a putative and trans-caste local culture.

Here it must be noted that in the 1940s and after, particularly in northern Tamil Nadu, when Dalits were drawn to the Scheduled Caste Federation, and to Buddhism, they (some of them) gave up such practices of the local – they refused to be part of temple rituals in some cases, gave up animal sacrifices in others, and took to Buddhism. But Tamil Nadu is yet to witness large scale conversion to Buddhism as occurred in Maharashtra.

So, if we are to view Periyar’s life and work in the context of the *longue durée* of history, and of the complex relationship between Brahminical Hinduism and local and regional practices of faith, we are likely to end up with a more sober view of his influence – he interrupted, powerfully and with intellectual and social verve a longer history of religiosity, but that does not mean that this history was stood on its head. Its logic persists to this day. Also, we know, from the histories of other nations that disavowed faith, that it was State power that dislodged the institutional authority, material power and resources of religions – and not rational persuasion or consistent civil opposition. This is as true of Napoleonic France, as it was of the Soviet Union.

VB: Most of the parties who claim to follow Periyar have become the parties of personal fiefdom of certain individuals and their families. It has resulted in huge corruption in the state. These parties have time and again compromised with the Hindutva forces. How would have Periyar reacted to such a situation if he were alive today?

SV & VG: Periyar would have raged against these practices – for one, he was suspicious of political power, as such, and many a time noted that power can and does corrupt, not merely in the material sense, but that it also compromises one’s social vision. He also noted that staying out of the precincts of power granted him a certain latitudinarian freedom, to criticise social and faith-based practices. Secondly, while he was a pragmatist and did envisage a role for the State in bringing about laws that would enable social change, such pragmatism did not ever stop him from continuing to criticise social and religious practices. That is, the demands he made of the State and of governance did not mean that these automatically fell in with those in power – and this is evident in his

support for the Congress government in Tamil Nadu under the headship of the late K. Kamaraj.

As we all know, political pragmatism can be principled or not – Babasaheb Ambedkar’s position in this context is the most complex, and ethically mindful. At the same time, we have seen left and Dalit political groups, who are ideologically fierce, adopting a pragmatism that was not always as mindful – the CPI’s stance during the Emergency, the CPI’s and CPM’s support in the past of corrupt and anti-people governments and parties in Tamil Nadu, and Mayawati’s support for Modi during the Gujarat post-carnage-2002 elections. Clearly, pragmatism is viewed as ‘alright’ in the long run, while embarrassing and problematic in the short run – but this was not a position Periyar or Babasaheb Ambedkar would have accepted. Further, even when he supported governments that appeared to him to be receptive to social justice ideals, Periyar did not ever allow such support to interfere with his critical work in the civil and public realms.

Probity in public life was an important value for Periyar – and he always wrote scornfully of how much those in power earn, or benefit in a material sense. Yet he was not unmindful of what money could do, and kept a tight rein on his own organisation’s financial resources, and did not plot a role for kin in managing the latter.

VB: Many writers from Tamil Nadu portrayed Periyar as loud and foul who might have been anti-Brahmin but not really pro-Dalit. Many Dalit scholars used this analogy in their critique of Periyar. What do you think is the reality?

VB: It is ironical that Tamil Nadu is the hotbed of anti-Dalit violence. Most of these come from powerful communities like Vanniyars and Thevars. Tamil Nadu’s Dravidian movement was also dominated by them, but today the legacy is divided among various castes. Most of these parties have been converted into caste parties. Parties like PMK or Vanniyar Samajik Sangam have openly called against SC-ST Act. They support violence against inter caste or love marriages between Dalits and Vanniyars. Where is Periyar in all this? Why is it that mere anti-Brahmanism philosophy won’t work unless we have a very clear programme to take with us the vast sections of those who may not be numerically powerful communities?

VB. Periyar was a man ‘extraordinaire’, a genius whose connection with masses was supreme. He was a man of masses which we have seen from the huge sea of people on his death, in Chennai. Though he talked about anti-Brahmanism, take us to what were his specific views about untouchability as well as rights of the Dalits and Adivasis?

SV & VG : As we feel these questions are inter-related, we would like to give a combined answer:

These are important and complex questions. We will try and answer it as succinctly as possible. Let us start with brief historical descriptions of the four so-called dominant Tamil Shudra castes.

a. The first backward caste, numerically dominant in northern Tamil Nadu and well mobilized into caste organizations, comprises Vanniyars – associated for long with agriculture, but chiefly as tenants, and labourers, rather than as owners of land, at least until urbanization which saw an exit of landlords to cities which gave tenants and sharecroppers access to land, though on a modest scale; there are some segments amongst this caste that took to weaving as well. More recently, they have moved into the professions, including government employment on account of the larger logic of economic transformation, and of course reservation provisions, though their presence in these occupations, is not commensurate with their presence in the population. With large numbers still present and active in agriculture, they have also faced the brunt of the agricultural crisis, and in any case over the years, particularly in and around the Neyveli Lignite Power Plant, have steadily lost land to the project. The Vanniyars are well organized and politically have been active in the Dravidian parties, as well as Congress, and to limited extent in the left Kisan Sabhas – their political leadership has concentrated on agitating for a fixed share of reservation for Vanniyars – declared most backward – and on their representation in whatever political party is in power, at the state as well as central governments.

b. The next caste that we need to take note of comprises a bloc of communities, since known as the Mukkulathors, many of which are found in the southern districts of the state: a section of which is a de-notified community. Historically these castes – Agamudaiyars, Kallars and Maravars – have lived on the fringes of agricultural society, and were given to policing work and active militias in the pre-modern period. They do not appear to have been identified with particular occupations, though in the eastern districts, there are agriculturalists amongst them, including powerful landlords. Many of them migrated to work on tea and rubber plantations in Sri Lanka and Malaya in the late colonial period. Elsewhere, they have settled into agriculture, as in the central districts, bordering Kerala – as a result of being ‘pacified’ by colonial authority and missionary activity. These communities came into their own in the 1950s – with the emergence of a powerful and charismatic local leader, who has since acquired the status of a revered ancestor, and is worshipped as such. They received a fillip through overt political support from the ruling AIADMK in the 1980s. On account of local circumstance, political patronage, and reservation

they came to populate local administration, particularly revenue and police at the lower levels in the southern districts.

On the other hand, segments of the Mukkulathors were active in the left movement, particularly where they are agriculturalists, and in some left-led trade unions. They have been also present in large numbers in the Dravidian parties, Forward Bloc and Congress.

c. The third community that has proved influential comprises the Gounders, also known as Kongu Vellalas. Noted for their unrelenting labour, and often on rain-less lands in western Tamil Nadu, the Gounders are essentially peasants, whose skill earned the admiration of colonial administrators. Due to the economic changes that took place in this region, sections of the community have moved from being peasants to successful entrepreneurs in the textile and related industries, including in the export sector, associated with the hosiery industry in the boom town of Thiruppur. Kinship and caste ties have been central to capital mobilisation by the Gounders, and while class differences persist, the caste as a whole is viewed as successful and upwardly mobile. Politically the elites amongst them were associated with the nationalist Congress, though large numbers were part of the Dravidian and communist movements as well. Caste associations have become increasingly prominent in the region, and their shrill politics of identity, coupled with demands for higher reservation have rendered them attractive to small town and rural ideologues, often silently supported by economically powerful caste interests.

d. The fourth caste I wish to describe are the Nadars – who were consigned to near-untouchable status in the 19th century and have since been one of the most mobile of communities in the Tamil context, with sections of them having become dynamic entrepreneurs, educationists and not only in the Tamil context, but in the all-India context as well. Nadars are not locked into status battles with Dalits, but have been with other backward castes in the past – though they are as watchful of endogamous limits as others. Some segments of the community have been drawn to Hindutva ideologies, and while to an extent this has to do with trade rivalries with Muslims, that is not of course the only reason as to why they have chosen to be with the Hindu Right. This is ironical, given that in the heyday of the self-respect movement, they were amongst the staunchest of Periyar's followers. Their anomalous position in the caste order has not 'required' them to practise untouchability, so to speak, but if one wishes to upgrade oneself within the social order, it implicates the self and community into observing varnadharma – and in the case of the Nadars, perhaps, that some have chosen to abide by Hindutva is indicative of the intermeshed secular-religious framework of the caste order.

Of these castes, Vanniyars, Mukkulathors and Gounders have been in the forefront of attacks against Dalits – though smaller sat-Shudra and the so-called most backward castes which are locally dominant have also been resolute in refusing to concede equal rights to temple honours for Dalits, and have been as inimical to marriages where one of the spouses happens to be Dalits.

Attacks against Dalits emerge from a position of social anxiety and of feeling threatened by educated Dalits, upwardly mobile Dalits, by their resolute refusal to heed caste hierarchies. Such anxiety is expressed in and through acts of crude violence, and often endorsed by caste outfits and political parties – for reasons that are contingent on the one hand, and have to do with the logic of the caste order on the other.

The question of course arises, and has been most sharply posed by Dalit leaders and parties, how may one reconcile these emergent caste interests, often expressed in charged language, and defined by their clearly spelt out antagonism to Dalits, with the fact that this is a state that witnessed a powerful anti-caste movement and one that came to political office. Young Dalit intellectuals are wont to argue that the hypervisibility of these castes in political and economic life, and the social authority they continue to deploy against Dalits, points to the limited success of the Dravidian movement – that it was more successful in articulating an anti-Brahmin politics, rather than an anti-caste politics, and perhaps neither the movement, nor its chief arbiter, Periyar were as invested in the latter.

This is not a question that can be easily settled in the Tamil context, but the fact that in spite of over 50 years of non-Brahmin governance, violence against Dalits and resentment at their mobility and success, such as has been possible, persist – this is something that has to be taken seriously – and to do this, we ought to reflect on the past, as well as on how that past is invoked to explain, justify or argue present day concerns.

Incidentally, in Tamil Nadu there are as many Dalit intellectuals who find ideological and inspirational arsenal in Periyar for their anti-caste struggles (these are the ones not enjoying the benefits of bilingualism that enables one to reach out to an All India audience) as those who, for their own reasons and logic, tend to dismiss him as irrelevant to Dalit cause.

We would like to start by noting that we don't think there is either historical accuracy or conceptual weight to the argument that Periyar was not committed to the annihilation of caste. Nor is it fair to claim that he was concerned only about non-Brahmin claims to equality with Brahmins. If one were to examine his long political life and the manner in which he – and the organisations he founded, and the ideologues, publicists and people who were part of these –

expressed their anti-caste politics, one could see that there were differences in emphases and arguments over time.

During 1925-1931, Periyar and his self-respect movement espoused a radical atheism, and strong commitment to ending untouchability; to the cause of civil rights, of Dalits, to access public spaces, including temples. They offered a principled, charged and satiric critique of what they termed political Brahminism – this was their definition of Congress nationalism. They were equally critical of Brahminical Hinduism, of Hindu scripture, lore, and ritual and so on. They held strong views on the women's question, and argued through a politics of female freedom and autonomy – which insisted on women being arbiters of their own sexual and conjugal choices, and as free, as men, to commit themselves to public life and the public good, through the pursuit of reason, equality and justice.

From 1932 to 1937, especially until 1935, Periyar's critique of caste was bound with a critique of its material and economic basis – following his visit to the Soviet Union in 1931-32. During this first decade of the Self-respect movement, we find Periyar addressing non-Brahmin Shudra and sat-Shudra castes, Dalits, women, men of property, learning as well as the very poor. Dalit groups, caste associations, non-Brahmin civil groups were in touch with the Self-respect movement, and Periyar and others spoke in all these forums – and one of the most important indices of Periyar's recognition of the centrality of Dalit claims on equality and justice is the unconditional endorsement that he and others in the self-respect movement extended to Babasaheb Ambedkar's position on the communal award, and they were as fiercely critical of Gandhi as Ambedkar would be, in the future.

What we ought not to forget though is that Periyar was neither singular nor the first to address the Dalit question in Tamil Nadu, or in Old Madras. Dalit organisations, linked to newspapers, church groups, and to a politics of assertion and rights had been active in the province from as far back as the last quarter, if not earlier, of the 19th century, as is evident from the phenomenal life and work of Pandit Iyothee Thass. Further research undertaken by young Dalit scholars such as Mathivannan, Stalin Rajangam, Ko. Raghupathy, and Balasubramaniam has brought to our attention the existence of complex histories of Dalit organising across the state, which does not fit in all that easily into familiar political locations, whether to do with Congress, the Dravidian movement or the left movements. So, in a sense Periyar spoke to a political constituency that was already politicized – and to be sure, he brought in startling new themes to do with radical republicanism and women's equality, but his critique of Brahmins, and Hinduism were not unfamiliar themes in Dalit political circles – and in fact had existed from the late 1890s.

To summarise, this first decade of anti-caste politics witnessed a call to annihilate caste – in and through a denunciation of what Periyar called Brahminical Hinduism, temple worship, and through the practice of a politics of self-respect comradeship, which was founded on rationalism, and a radical politics of social and gender equality. A radical sense of self, founded on self-respect was also seen as essential to lead a life, free of caste.

During 1938-1947, from the time when the Self-respect movement spearheaded a struggle against the imposition of Hindi as a language of instruction in the Tamil context, the critique of political Brahminism acquired salience – as Periyar and his followers read this move to impose Hindi as representing the political and cultural will of the nationalist Brahmin-Bania combine, a will that they argued rendered Indian nationalism narrow in its focus, and committed to the hegemony of the upper castes. This decade thus saw a critique of caste aligned to a critique of nationalism – and as India stood on the brink of independence, this double-edged critique expressed itself in and through a language of Dravidian nationalism. This is the most complex part of our story, because it proved consequential: for one, it advanced a critique of the Indian nation-state which proved complex and subtle, which expressed the right of self-determination of the Dravidian nation; and it argued that the latter was, in essence, a caste-free utopia. However, the critique of caste that was implicit in this politics did not possess the acute social edge that it did in the former decades.

During the next important historical period – 1948-1952, we see Periyar fulminating against Hindu-Hindi-Hindustan in very radical ways and draw closer to the left. However, post 1952, following the first general elections, and almost until 1967, he essayed a pragmatic turn, and gradually looked to the non-Brahmin Congress leader K. Kamaraj (who was Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu from 1954-1963) and his government in Tamil Nadu to fulfil his dreams of social justice – which had to do with reservation, the presence of Non-Brahmins in political office, and with pursuing modern, institutional and industrial growth. Critiques of caste were now expressed in and through an Periyar's endorsement of K. Kamaraj's policies to do with affirmative action, and his commitment to a modern social and economic order.

Further, during this period, especially in the early 1950s, we see Periyar conceding that Dalits are better served by Dr Ambedkar, his ideas, and organisations and in this context, it would appear to those who wish to misread him, that he presented himself as a leader of the Shudras, and not of a putative anti-caste constituency.

Given this complex political history, how do we assess the legacy that he handed on? On the one hand, the Dravidian movement has achieved limited

success, drawing on his radical legacy, with respect to reservation, and a populist welfarism. Dynamic and built into policy-making during Kamaraj's time, this welfarism has since turned fierce (especially under the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)). This has also resulted in a situation where the Dravidian movement's ideologues and leaders, of whatever political dispensation, have come to be identified with the 'oppressed'. On the other hand, this has meant that the graded logic of the caste order, the material basis of caste power and the cultural weight of caste when it comes to marriage have been matters relegated to the background by Dravidian political parties; even as particular caste constituencies were cultivated in the context of electoral politics.

Now if we are to put together the story of Periyar's political journey and the historical changes that have beset the lives and fortunes of major castes in the Tamil context, we see a pattern emerging – Periyar's anti-Indian State politics, his anti-Brahminism and opposition to an imperfect federal polity did not translate into a locally effective ideology or plan to annihilate caste, though it possessed all the necessary ideological instruments to do so. To be sure, his Dravidar Kazhagam (DK) that he founded (in 1944) was very effective in particular contexts, addressing specific instances of casteist violence, and in taking the part of Dalits during such conflicts, and in encouraging and supporting trans-caste marriages; but the DK did not develop a specific programme that dovetailed various activities into a concerted plan. Meanwhile, the logic of development and of electoral politics (as we have briefly described in our account of the four dominant backward and most backward castes in Tamil Nadu) infused fresh life into older – and local - hierarchies of caste; even as Dalits sought to challenge the same. And the end result has been violence against and hatred and anger against Dalits.

To return to the question of the so-called backward and most backward castes, in this context: those members of these castes, who went with the ideologues and activists of the Dravidar Kazhagam in the post-Independence period, in a public, political sense, agitated against Brahmin power and sometimes against the caste order; at the same time, in their own locations, they remained particular castes, defined by their region, occupation, and relationship to Hinduism. And their relationship to Dalits was acutely shaped by both factors: in some cases, positively by experiences of comradeship at least in the public realm; and in other cases, by local caste considerations, especially of status, precedence, and competition for public goods. For example, if we are to take the Vanniyars they would view Dalits as fellow comrades in public campaigns against the Indian state, or for the cause of the Tamil language, and in the context of limited class struggles. However, and more often than not, they would be equally given to viewing them in a spirit of competitive envy. Further on their own too, they had specific demands, for instance to do with

reservation, and in these and other contexts, where they upstaged their 'backward'ness, such assertion, even when 'just' in the context of graded inequality, was always shadowed by acts of violence against Dalits.

With the Mukkulathors, we find a different logic at work: challenged by Dalits from fairly early on, from the 1950s, if not earlier, they have sought to 'punish' Dalit assertion and independence, especially Dalit insistence on marking their own political space, through setting up statues of Dr Ambedkar, or other local Dalit leaders (such as the revered and much loved Immanuel Sekaran, who was cold-bloodedly murdered by a group of Mukkulathors).

With Gounders, we see yet another practice of dominance: and here the late Dr Balagopal's analysis of what he calls the provincial propertied classes comes in useful – Dr Balagopal argues that in Andhra Pradesh, these classes, comprising economically powerful and socially dominant upper Non-brahmin peasant communities, such as the Reddys and Naidus, sought to assert political clout and power in a regional context, and against the national Congress, For them the practice of punitive violence against Dalits becomes a requirement, an assertive act of violence to mark their own recently acquired political authority. While the Gounders are not necessarily opposed to the Congress, they are a powerful peasant caste that has come into industrial wealth and growth, and they underscore their social dominance through acts of humiliation and violence directed at Dalits.

Let us summarise: in the Tamil Nadu situation, some things are clear – from the early 20th century, Non-Brahmins and Dalits resented Brahmin authority and came together for various purposes. Theirs was not a class unity or a comradeship based on ideological consensus about the caste system. Rather, it was defined by anger at Brahmin power and venality, and opportune politics; to be sure, critiques of varnadharma urged forth by Periyar and his self-respecters and later by the Dravidar Kazhagam were heard out, perhaps even internalized and accepted by some; as was the critique of faith, particularly Hinduism (certainly by Dalits, more than others). There have been dramatic and particular campaigns against casteist authority, and centred on particular demands especially in the early period, from the 1920s to the late 1940s – and yet it must be said that while ideologically, the annihilation of caste was centred on a critique of Brahminical Hinduism, and the caste order it sanctioned, such critique did not always express itself through a singular programme for the annihilation of caste. At times, the emphasis was on the abolition of untouchability, at other times on economic equality; at times on angry denunciation of unregenerate non-Brahmin caste pride and arrogance; and sometimes the emphasis was on female freedom and self-respect. From the 1940s onwards, the destruction of caste was linked to exiting from an unjust

federal polity, and challenging the 'Brahmin-Bania' Aryan state, and in imagining a caste-free 'Dravida Nadu' or Dravidian nation. However, when the anti-caste agenda came to be thus nested within a larger politics of resistant nationalism, and when Periyar's anger was trained against the unitary Indian state, the internal tensions, contradictions and cleavages that marked the larger 'Dravidian' community, particularly between Dalits and other castes failed to receive as much critical attention. Meanwhile, the socio-economic changes that transformed Dalit as well as other caste lives came to be mediated through an unregenerate politics of caste pride and violence.

Periyar was not sanguine about his life's work. When interviewed for All India Radio a few months before he passed away, he said that his life's work had not amounted to more than attempting to haul and overturn the mountain of caste, using a single lock of hair. He had attempted what appeared just and right, but that did not mean that justice had been secured – the struggle was difficult, long, wearisome and arduous.

Before we conclude, we would like to add a few words on the left: the communists had an agenda for the material expropriation of the dominant class-caste nexus, but they did not have a programme that would take into account and work against the logic of graded inequality, against the fact, so astutely noted by Dr Ambedkar, that caste was not just a division of labour, but of labourers. To be sure, in particular contexts and struggles, there was great and affectionate comradeship, but the question remains, whether that translated into sustained new social and fraternal values, into that associational life that Dr Ambedkar valued, or that self-respecting samadharmic existence, which Periyar upheld in the face of Manudharma. The left worked with constituents of the Dravidar Kazhagam, especially in the 1940s and early 1950s, and did endorse struggles against caste-based inequality and violence, and enrolled Dalits in large numbers in its agricultural workers' organisations, its trade unions in the plantations and in those that emerged in the leather trade and with respect to sanitary labour. But even here there were autonomous Dalit organisations, including trade unions, and the record of the left and these latter working together has not been very good though not absent. But clearly the onus was on the better organised and resourceful left groups to have learned from Dalit groups the salience of the caste question and responded to it with the sustained attention it deserves. Sadly, instead of doing this, the parliamentary left has sought to retain its meagre presence in the legislature through opportunist alliances with one or the other of the Dravidian parties.

Things have changed to an extent over the past decade, and the recent assembly elections saw the left and Dalit groups coming together in what was clearly more than a strategic alliance – and in many contexts the CPM's Anti-

Untouchability front and the Dalit party Viduthalai Siruthaigal Kachi (VCK) work together.

VB : How would have Periyar reacted to growing capitalism in India which is 'developing' structure at the lives of innocent tribes by displacing them from forest, killing their culture. Capitalism has joined hand with Brahmanism in India which is the biggest threat to socialist nature of our state as Brahmanism never believes in a welfare state.

SV & VG : Periyar did not develop consistently argued views on the economy, but he was clear-eyed about capitalism and its relentless march towards amassing wealth, irrespective of how that affects the larger common good. His insistent characterization of the modern Indian nation-state as 'Brahmin-Bania' was not only on account of its cultural-social core but also because he saw the state as subserving capitalist interests. He viewed the State as being a truly republican institution, with the people being sovereign in every sense – and the State in this capacity had a role to play, arbitrating the greater common good, and devising laws and plans that would ensure the realisation of such a good. This is why he insisted that the State be responsive to the claims to power and representation of different sections of the population and upheld the importance of reservation – for otherwise, how may a State be considered a people's State, or one that was sovereign?

In another sense too, Periyar was critical of capitalism – private property he argued was central to the making of social and conjugal relations, for it was only because one wished to pass on property (or resources, as the case may be) in a generational sense that marriage was deemed a necessity, and in the Indian context, this also meant that one passed on one's caste legacy as well. Marriage, he argued was central to the reproduction of an unjust social order and an exploitative economic system – an argument he adapted from Engels, and reworked to suit the caste context.

VB: How strong were Periyar's views on Women? I know he believed in women's equality and defended her right over her body. Personally, I feel, no other political leader of his age came near to him in his ideas about women's freedom. What is your opinion?

We can write reams on this – but here we would simply refer you to various things written in the past on this subject (readers can start with the chapter Women: Coeval with Men, in our book, Towards a Non Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar, 2nd edn, Samya, Kolkata, 2008). His radicalism in this context grew with age, and we find him stoutly criticising marriage, motherhood, and the imperative of women to marry and start a family even when he was well into his 70s and 80s. He was critical of romantic love, of

conjugal violence and cultures that led to the objectification of women's bodies, and caste practices which relegated them choicelessly to lives of sexual service. He approved of what was known as 'free love', arguing that it was possible to hold one's passion responsibly – this meant one had to understand that love, marriage, property, lineage and progeny were linked and make choices that did not lead to a reproduction of economic and social hierarchy.

We give below excerpts from 'Periyar: Countering Caste and Gender Differences and Inequalities', a talk that V. Geetha gave on the occasion of Savitribai Phule's birthday at the University of Mumbai in 2013:

Periyar and his self-respect movement understood the caste system to be essentially unjust and hierarchical – Periyar likened it to a ladder with castes positioned on each of its steps, but more interestingly he remarked that it was a ladder that we also carried within us, and so we were prone to placing ourselves below some and above others – not very different from Babasaheb's observation that the logic of caste may be understood in terms of an ascending logic of reverence and a descending logic of contempt.

If this was the case, argued Periyar, caste does not make for a healthy sense of the self, and to develop such a sense, one would have to practise self-respect, learn to value one's self. In fact this had to precede all other values and objectives, including freedom and self-rule, in short even swaraj. Periyar defined self-respect in diverse ways, and depending on the context of his utterance and the historical moment in which that utterance was required, self-respect was aligned to socialism, Islam, to the Buddhist notion of samadharma...in fact Periyar's use of the word samadharma, as a counter to Manudharma, and as an adjunct of socialism (which he argued had to do with the logic of just distribution, whereas samadharma required a just and equal ethics which implicates all of us) was not very different from Dr Ambedkar's sadhamma: the form of that ethical consensus that we forge with each other, that we shall hold and exercise rights and compassion in common.

Another adjunct of self-respect was comradeship – for in place of that self-serving ethics which made a person view only his caste as worthy of respect, or progress, and against the insistence of no birth-based privilege, one needed an ethics that bound human beings to one another. What was maithri or fellowship for Ambedkar was comradeship for Periyar. In fact it was his movement that gave to the left the Tamil word for comrade, 'thozhar' which is gender-neutral, and can be used to address both men and women and others.

These concepts, of caste as unequal hierarchy and its opposites, self-respect, samadharma and comradeship were also deployed as analytical terms to understand caste society, and it is here that caste and gender emerged as

categories that constituted each other. Thus S. Ramanathan, an early self-respect ideologue argued that historically, the enslavement of women and of Dalits happened at roughly the same time. Dalits were required as captive labour, and women had to be limited and imprisoned within the family and kin group, so that men could exercise control over them, which in effect meant, to control and regulate their reproductive power and labour. Periyar would extend this argument in the 1940s to argue that women not only reproduced their own subordination, but also reproduced family and caste status. The principle of hierarchy, in other words, hinged as much on the organisation of reproduction, as it did on Brahminical texts, the social division of labour, and the logic of high and low which divided not just occupations into high and low, but labourers into higher and lower castes.

Elsewhere, while commenting on how the dharma shastras explain varna differences, Periyar too issues with the fact that miscegenation was made the basis for graded differences: whether a Brahmin married or kept a woman made a difference to their offspring, and to which caste he or she would belong to; whether a Shudra man married a upper or lower caste woman had, likewise its own consequences for the status of children, and the future of communities. In other words, hybrid offspring were packed off into castes, and the proliferation of castes meant the continued existence of crossing varna lines to love, mate, produce children. Periyar made it clear that it did not matter to him who married and slept with whom, but since communities appeared to be ranked on that basis, it was important to discard the whole edifice altogether, and think of marriage and children entirely differently: as based not on identities given or taken, or defied or imposed, but on choice, desire, love...

Dalits, Shudras and women could not therefore hope to gain anything at all from the caste system and their liberation lay in refusing hierarchy and opting out of it. The way out for Shudras and Dalits was to emerge into communities for self-respect, to adopt a different ethics of the self, and a rethinking of everyday practices, of labour, rituals, faith, marriage... For women, in addition to all of these, the challenge lay in opting out of the traditional family order, which limited their minds, controlled their bodies and consigned them to domesticity and the family. Comradeship was marked as important for women as well and through the 1940s, after the self-respect movement transformed into the Dravidar Kazhagam and mobilized peacefully to secede from the impending Indian union, we find Periyar addressing women as comrades and citizens (in striking contrast to other fellow thinkers and ideologues, whose views I briefly alluded to, earlier): he rebukes them for settling into conjugality, asks them to eschew marriage, and work towards realizing the utopia that was to be, in the wake of secession from a unitary, and 'Brahmin-Bania' dominated India.

To resist hierarchy required in Periyar's universe, a radical practice of equality. For, when aligned to self-respect/comradeship, equality meant absolute, substantive equality between all beings: both Dalits and women were therefore comrades and citizens, This meant not only equal access to education, political representation and fair and just labour, but as far as women were concerned, a radical understanding of sexual difference. In the self-respect universe, biological differences were not germane, and as Periyar famously remarked, apart from bearing and nursing an infant for the first few months of its existence, male and female roles are interchangeable. In other words 'difference' could not be made the basis for either complementarity or an un-equal society.

Periyar was likewise opposed to a sexual ethics that was premised on biology, and refused to concede that promiscuity became a man, and chastity a woman. In his later years, he grew increasingly impatient with the notion of difference as such, and spoke and wrote with fervour on technological changes that might render motherhood a matter between a woman and her womb. He welcomed science that would help us move towards non-sexual reproduction, and this along with his growing disdain for marriage as an institution made for a provocative politics of sexual freedom. I will return to this theme in a short while.

Another valuable index of equality was the destruction of 'masculinity', which in an unequal society referred to attributes that men were supposed to have as well as to 'being men' in an unambiguous, unjust way. Sexual justice for women, as well as their freedom, Periyar argued was contingent on the destruction of masculinity. More generally, in Periyar's thought, justice was what equality would bring about: and here both social and cultural transformation as well as political fiat (and state power), which produced policies that would legislate equality and deliver justice, were deemed important.

The challenges that the self-respect movement posed the caste order, both in an everyday political sense, as well as in terms of the knowledge – the concepts it made available – however constitute only one part of Periyar's critique of existing gender arrangements. The other part owes a great deal to emergent arguments – in the late 1920s and 1930s – on the question of female sexuality, marriage and motherhood. In addressing these concerns, Periyar went on to produce a fascinating set of concepts and arguments – which in retrospect appear to express his sense of what I have earlier referred to as the relative autonomy of the gender and sexuality question.

Periyar and the self-respect movement's understanding of the women's question acquired its distinctive edge in the late 1920s, when three sets of legal debates were in progress: to do with raising the age of consent to sexual congress, restraining child marriage and finally the devadasi abolition bill. From 1925

onwards, marriage reform was widely discussed. In 1924, H.C. Gour had drafted a bill to amend Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code, which sought to raise the age of consent in marital and extra-marital relationships. Colonial government was reluctant to act on the bill, but a year later, it proposed its own bill, fixing 14 as the age of consent in extra marital cases and 13 in marital cases. It became clear though that very few instances of the infringement of the law in the context of marriage came to the courts. Gour then turned his attention to the existing marriage law and suggested, through his Children's Protection Bill, that parents ought not to marry their children off before they attained a certain age. Even as this bill was on the anvil, Har Bilas Sarada, an Arya Samaj reformer who had consistently addressed infirmities faced by women, advanced his own bill, which eventually came to be referred to as the Child Marriage Restraint Bill.

The devadasi abolition debates, occasioned by Dr Muthulakshmi's bill that sought to end the practice of dedicating young girls to temples, got under way in 1928. The Tamil cultural world was soon beset with a host of questions to do with social and sexual practices in caste society and the sexual subjugation of women.

These legal debates apart, there were two other themes that occupied the attention of reformers and their detractors. For one, Tamil radical thought to do with gender also benefited from nationalist horror over the publication of Katherine Mayo's infamous *Mother India* in 1927 and the subsequent defences of Hindu culture which followed in the following years. Self-respecters utilised Mayo's arguments to put forward their distinctive critique of caste and of women's status in Hindu society. This was also a time when birth control arguments were in vogue, and they proved wide-ranging. Some invoked typically Malthusian spectres of an overpopulated world, teeming with the wretched and ignorant poor; while others, following Gandhi, spoke of the importance of sexual restraint.

Periyar's – and the self-respect movement's – response to this important historical conjuncture was exceptional. They, of course, endorsed the Sarada Act, and actively propagandised in its favour. But they did more: Periyar offered startling re-definitions of marriage, rights of spouses in marriage, and more fundamentally, produced a critique of conjugality itself. Periyar's views on marriage may be gleaned from the many speeches he made at self-respect marriage gatherings. In a sense, one might say that practice preceded argument in that self-respect marriages had begun to take place in the late 1920s, while the bulk of his most effective writing on the subject belonged to the succeeding years. Starting out as marriages which eschewed the services of Brahmin priests and gradually all ritual and scripture, they evolved into full-fledged 'contracts' entered into by two confident, self-conscious adults who had decided to choose

their own life partners. Periyar and his comrades deliberately sought to 'desacralize' marriages by insisting on their contractual – and therefore provisional – nature, and arguing that if there was no god to please or scripture to look up to, a marriage remained what it ought to be, a human arrangement that like all human arrangements work to the extent that the people involved in its making are committed to its continued existence.

In this context, Periyar made the valuable observation that shorn of its sacral quality, and marked as provisional and therefore changeable, marriage could only mean one thing: a context for the expression of love and the resolution of desire, love and desire being 'natural' emotions in Periyar's lexicon. To imagine marriage in this manner required two human beings to come together in freedom, and not in conditions of coercion, servitude or inequality.

For the same reasons that he advocated that marriage be viewed as a contract, Periyar supported the right to divorce, and the right to re-marriage, not only for widows, but for those who desire to opt out of unhappy marriages, and who may be childless or not. In other words, re-marriage was not merely a panacea for the widow's supposedly stifled and ultimately destructive sexuality, but a logical option for those who understood marriage to be a contingent practice that either of spouses could choose to end. Divorce was likewise to be seen as an option, but here Periyar urged the case of female unhappiness as reason enough for creating a divorce law. Dwelling poignantly and sympathetically on the lot of women trapped in loveless and slavish marriages, and burdened to remain monogamous, he spoke of how divorce would free them and offer them hope – currently, he noted, men were allowed to be licentious, and women were prevented from separating, a state of affairs that did not bode well for sexual equality. He refused to be dissuaded by arguments that lamented the loss of morality should the right to divorce come about – and pointed out that provisions for freedom need not automatically imply a total absence of restraint or morality, rather they could become the basis for a new, common morality. One need not fear therefore that women would become immoral, but see how a common morality may be put in place.

For all his interest in marriage reform, Periyar did not think much of the institution itself. He counted it as one amongst the many social arrangements that human beings had devised to regulate sexual love, beginning with the incest taboo. The importance granted to marriage, he was wont to say, was because of the need to secure property and lineage and thereby keep unequal social arrangements in place. Women saw in marriage a guarantor of food and clothing, and if they had access to education, a trade and property rights, they would not want to get married at all, he argued. Periyar was aware too that the centrality granted to marriage, especially the prohibitions against remarriage and

so on, were prevalent mostly amongst the higher castes, and that matters were far more flexible with other castes – but even in those instances, he did not think marriage worked to women’s advantage, and this is why he made it clear that women must have the right to not marry as well and in this instance too pooh-pooed male anxiety over unmarried single women.

Periyar was fond of quoting what he imagined were exceptional socialist examples from the Soviet Union – free love, he said, was possible there because there was no property; as for children, they ceased to tie women down, since the state was responsible for them, and so women – and men – loved chiefly because they desired or chose people they wished to be with. In the 1940s and after, Periyar spoke out against marriage forcefully, and argued that women may as well not waste their time getting married, and instead devote their time to the improvement of society and state. In fact this is a theme that occupied his mind in other contexts as well – for instance in arguing against sanctions of beauty imposed on women, he noted that it was only because beauty was the chief measure by which women were judged, they were obsessed with it, and if they saw themselves as valuable in other ways, they might not devote as much time as they currently did to make themselves look agreeable, fashionable and so on. He was not against wanting to appear pleasing, but against the need to dress up, to fall in line with arbitrary social norms, he clarified.

Buttressing Periyar’s views on marriage were his arguments on the theme of *karpu* or chastity – Periyar was clear that this was a partisan norm, meant to keep women in sexual servitude while allowing men to be promiscuous. He did not think that chastity resided in any particular thing or emotion or ideal. If at all it resided only in those mutual limits that two human beings in love or those who had agreed to marry set themselves, and in any case, in such circumstances, chastity ceased to be a bind, and so would not impede freedom. As for the persistence of chastity as an ideal, Periyar put it down to two things: women’s own acceptance of this imposed ideal on account of ignorance, fear, superstition and scripture; and secondly, men’s desire to legitimise their promiscuity by allowing themselves the sexual freedom they denied their wives. This is why, observed Periyar, chastity was linked dialectically to prostitution. In fact the one cannot exist without the other, he said. For, in order for women to be unfree sexually and men to be free, there needed to be a sexually available population and these were women in prostitution, from the traditional devadasi to those who offered paid sex.

In this sense, in his universe, prostitution and chastity cancelled out each other – and only acquired the force of meaning that is associated with either term in the context of conscious arrangements that had been made and imposed in our historical evolution. To blame prostitutes, and not men who go to them – even

as these self-same men took umbrage when their wives were considered ‘uncontrollable’, ‘lewd’, etc. – smacked of rank sexual hypocrisy as far as Periyar was concerned.

The larger problem though he conceded was not even this, but that we do not see sexual arrangements as contingent, endlessly relative and constantly changeable – sexual habits vary, sexual taboos are diverse, as are conjugal arrangements; different societies and climates produce different types of behaviour... and so, “Sexual arrangements, howsoever they be, if entered into by two individuals, are their business, and the do’s and don’ts that apply such cases may not apply as such when it comes to public morality”. Here, in any case, one cannot impose an arbitrary set of rules, but only those that which do not interfere with individual freedom, choice, and which do not discriminate amongst human beings on the basis of birth, wealth or other unjust criterion. Ultimately, and here Periyar rested his case, public sexual morality could only be guided by what appeared just in a given instance, and justice in turn, depended on whether we, as individuals or as group, are willing to grant to others what one wanted to grant oneself. Mutuality and understanding alone could sustain public morality, in this argument.

In this context, it is important to underline Periyar’s views on love and pleasure. Time and again, Periyar invoked the order of nature against the order of an unjust society, with respect to love and sexual desire. Yet he was not willing to endorse a romantic vision of love, as effusive, spontaneous, non-rational, overpowering, and so on. While he granted the reality and inevitability of emotional rapture, sexual drives and the desire to seek sexual fulfilment, he did not think that these necessarily had to be driven only by passion and/or power. Love required understanding, comradeship and the freedom to remain true to one’s sense of right and wrong – in other words, being in love or being a conjugal unit did not mean that individual rights are secondary or are automatically dissolved in a vague commonly held right.

Like love, pleasure was for Periyar a ‘natural’ emotion, and marriage or any other arrangement between a man and woman made sense only for the fulfilment of this objective – not that pleasure could not be ‘bought’ or ‘bartered’ or ‘sold’ but free love, in Periyar’s understanding, sought fulfilment on its own terms. Pleasure and the desire for pleasure were of the natural order of things, and it was because human beings sought to curb, restrict, and manage these in cruel, slavish ways, argued Periyar that there was no dignity or happiness in conjugality or in promiscuity.

Periyar’s views on love, marriage, comradeship were shadowed by his views on female promiscuity, which came into focus with the devadasi abolition bills. Like many others during his time, who saw themselves as reformists, endorsed

abolition, argued that devadasis had become a 'caste' and that to insist on their continuing to be what they had come to be, was tantamount to supporting sexual slavery. Periyar also protested arguments that held the devadasi system as necessary to protect the chastity of the home, and that if this manner of satisfying men's lust was not available, morality would cease to be. He pointed out that such chastity that required policing 'our' women while demanding 'other' women remain promiscuous cannot be 'chastity' in an ethical sense. Besides, it did seem specious to him that the chastity of wives is to be guaranteed by the promiscuity of their husbands (Kudi Arasu, Sub-editorial, 30.10.1927).

The devadasi remained an ambiguous figure in Periyar's universe: while he did, at times, subscribe to the reformist notion that she represented danger and degeneracy and therefore the system which allowed her to exist, must be abolished; at other times, he was compelled to admit to a) they were independent, mobile and educated, when other women were not and b) that the devadasi existed largely because men had given themselves to be promiscuous and besides were not held to account for their hypocritical attitude to sex: they required their wives to be chaste, when they were not, and besides, they mandated that some women remain committedly unchaste! Periyar also argued that the existence of the devadasi and prostitution in general cannot be seen in isolation and has to be seen in the context of a culture of conjugality, where women could not hope to exercise emotional, sexual or other choices, and remained trapped by what was expected of them.

Domesticity and prostitution, in Periyar's view were thus dialectically linked and he himself sought to resolve the dialectic, so to speak, by suggesting that women become free, rational, learn to exercise control over their lives, especially their wombs – the Tamil word he deploys, *karbaatchi*, literally translates as exercising rule over one's womb – and step outside the confines of family, marriage and into public life.

As a counter to a slavish and bound sexuality, Periyar counselled a free and responsible sexuality and it is in this context that his views on contraception and motherhood assume importance. He made it clear that he supported contraception or what he termed 'women's rule over their wombs' not because he feared that the poor would overrun the planet, or because he was concerned about social hygiene and economic progress. He was of the opinion that child-bearing at best was a nuisance and if women are freed from having to be mothers, their lives would be considerably lightened, and they stood to gain – they would not be bound by the need to marry, they would not have to plan for the future in a restricted sort of way, because 'there were the children'.

Importantly, they would not have to put up with loveless and cruel marriages that held no happiness or pleasure for them.

Periyar's views may be summed up somewhat schematically in terms of the five rights for women that he upheld: the right to property, the right to marriage and divorce, the right to 'see' (that is the right to be out of purdah, and to be mobile) and finally the right to make their own moral choices (without being told that their choices are likely to compromise social morality). Ultimately though these rights made sense only if women could be free – a right in this sense was not the same as freedom; it explained and legitimised a claim, or claims that women were likely to make, but it did not guarantee freedom. Freedom in this sense was something that women had to grant themselves: freedom from the bind of beauty and chastity, in short from self-objectification; freedom from child-bearing; freedom to marry or not marry and finally moral freedom, the right to enter in whatever social and sexual relationships they desired, as long as they granted that right to others.

VB: Many people accuse Periyar of being amoral even when he had said clearly that this morality is of nothing but Brahmanical virtues to keep women subjugated. A question arose when Periyar married his long time secretary; then, he was blamed to have misused his position and done an immoral act. He was 75 then and she was perhaps 26. How did Periyar respond to these questions raised by his close associates like Annadurai?

SV & VG : Criticism of Periyar on this score is both primitive and puritanical. He married a woman who, he reasoned, was fond of him, and would stay loyal to his vision. She was not averse to such a match, from what we know, and was a capable intelligent woman. He married her less for romantic than for pragmatic and political reasons – he wanted a comrade that he could trust and one who would shore up his legacy. He did not want either his kin or his long-time political associates to do so – he was not partial to his kin, and he had grown wary of his political comrades, for various justified and unjustifiable reasons. Annadurai's ostensible reason for leaving Periyar was this marriage, but as S.V. Rajadurai has argued brilliantly and persuasively in his book in Tamil (Periyar: Augsut 15, Vitiyal Publications, Coimbatore), it was Annadurai and his cohorts' desire to be part of Hindu-Hindi-India, and benefit from its electoral politics that made him leave the Dravidar Kazhagam and start the DMK.

VB: Periyar had a lot of respect for Babasaheb Ambedkar. They met at certain time but it is the biggest tragedy of Indian politics that they could not join hands in a common struggle. What would have been the reason?

SV & VG: Well, Dr Ambedkar and Periyar did join hands, on the eve of India's independence – when either supported the Pakistan demand, and argued for the

rights of the Shudra and Dalit communities within the future polity, such as it was beginning to emerge. They also were in conversation about Buddhism, and Periyar accompanied Ambedkar to a major world Buddhist conference in Burma in early 1950s. Periyar followed Babasaheb's work on the Hindu Code Bill and wrote warmly about it. He had, earlier, supported him in the matter of the communal award – and it was Periyar's magazine that first translated and published *Annihilation of Caste* into Tamil (as early as in 1936; translations in other Indian languages followed much later) and his journalists kept a close watch on Babasaheb's movements, and reported on them, constantly praising him, and endorsing his points of view from the late 1920s.

Periyar was unhappy about Dr Ambedkar joining the Constituent Assembly – he felt that in order to secure the abolition of untouchability as a fundamental right, Babasaheb had to forego his larger objective, the annihilation of caste as a constitutional goal and as a fundamental right. Periyar also understood his refusal to stay with Hinduism as a brilliant political move that forced the hand of the Congress to concede some of his demands (sic) whereby the cause of the Shudras was left behind.

VB: Why was Periyar not part of India's Constituent Assembly or any deliberations on India's freedom? The Constituent Assembly invited Ambedkar to be the chairman of the drafting committee. We know Periyar was not a legal expert but he could definitely have given a great strength to our constitution. Was he kept out or did he opt out of it? What were his reservations?

SV & VG: See above; also, Periyar had interesting and complex views on matters such as rights. He upheld State power and authority in redefining custom, lore and in laying down the law even when it interfered with freedom to practise one's faith – as he argued such freedom could also be invoked to justify untouchability and violence against women. His presence in the Assembly would certainly have provoked admiration as well as denunciation – but we must not forget that like Socrates, Periyar was a man of the streets, of the Agora, rather than Parliament.

VB: Where do you think Periyar and Ambedkar differ in their approach? I feel one of the most powerful statement of Periyar was that he never considered state mightier than people and never opted for any state recognition or never wanted to be part of it. Even when Anna Durrai and his colleagues wanted to fulfil their 'dream' to 'help' people, Periyar was against their forming DMK? Why was Periyar against formation of political party?

SV & VG: As we have noted above, Periyar was insistent critical of the political sphere, which to him, was inexorably given to instrumental reasoning and limited goals. He felt that being active in this sphere could prove corrupting

– and so decided to keep away from it, and instead function as a permanent dissident and critical movement in society.

VB: Periyar had proposed that Tamil become the official language of the ‘archakas’ in the Tamil Temples which was contested by the Supreme Court under the pretext that it is the internal affair of Hindus. The Brahmins got right to worship in Sanskrit. Did he change his view or he remained so?

SV & VG : This again is a complicated story, and here we quote from our book:

It is entirely logical that his [Periyar’s] last struggle should have been provoked by what he characterised as the Brahminic logic of the modern Indian nation. In 1970, the Government of Tamil Nadu, then under the rule of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) with M. Karunanidhi as Chief Minister, passed amendments to the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Act—Tamil Nadu Act 2 of 1971—to do away with the practice of appointing archakas (temple priests) on a hereditary basis in over 10,000 temples, permitting persons from all castes to be eligible for the posts of priests. For Periyar, this seemed a matter of urgent import, for he had all his life held that it was the Brahmin’s time-honoured relationship to sacrality that granted him his exclusive identity and prowess. This act that was passed by the Tamil Nadu Legislature was, however, challenged in the Supreme Court.

The five-judge bench of the Supreme Court upheld the DMK government’s reasoning in respect of the appointment of non-hereditary priests: it accepted that the matter of appointing priests had evolved out of secular imperatives and there was nothing sacred about this practice. But the Bench refused to accept the consequent argument that priests could henceforth be appointed from all castes. It was argued that such a practice, if instituted, would be a clear violation of agamic injunctions which were very severe with respect to the conduct demanded of a prospective priest. Further, if such injunctions were to be wilfully ignored, this would mean a direct interference with the Hindu worshipper’s practice of his faith. The Bench observed that for the Hindu, the idol was a sacred object of immense significance. The devout Hindu would not countenance anyone but a traditional priest to touch the idol, for his faith was clear on this matter. Further, ‘any State action which permits the defilement or pollution of the image by the touch of an Archaka not authorised by Agamas would violently interfere with the religious faith and practices of the Hindu worshipper in a vital respect and would therefore be prima facie invalid under Act 25(1) of the Constitution’ (AIR 1972: 1592-93).

Needless to say, such sentiments angered Periyar and confirmed him in his opinion that the Indian nation was not interested in all those who were condemned by the Hindu religion to be less than human simply because they

were not Brahmins. The circularity of this kind of reasoning proved particularly bothersome to Periyar, who sensed there was really no way out of it. The learned judges of the Supreme Court had, after all, quoted without demur P.V. Kane's reference to Brahma Purana: 'when an image... is touched by beasts like donkeys... or is rendered impure by the touch of outcastes and the like... God ceases to dwell therein.' Further, the Bench had unequivocally stated they were duty-bound to protect the freedoms guaranteed under Articles 25 and 26 of the Constitution:

The protection of these articles is not limited to matters of doctrine or belief, they extend also to acts done in pursuance of religion and therefore contained a guarantee of rituals and observances, ceremonies and modes of worship which are integral parts of religion... what constitutes an essential part of a religion or religious practices has to be decided by the Court with reference to the doctrines of a particular religion and include practices which are regarded by the community as part of its religion (AIR 1972: 1593).

Under these circumstances, damned to eternal Shudrahood, by law, custom, precedent and practice, Periyar could not but dream of Utopia again. Thus, in 1972, he revived with vigour the demand for a separate Tamil Nadu, for a state of being and a community where touch may not defile and where angst and despair would not torment those unlucky millions who had been born as Shudras and Panchamas. Perhaps he cursed and laughed bitterly all the way to his grave, fuming at an injustice that seems to have been mandated by the 'Gods' themselves. But, then this is the laughter of prophecy, which dares to dream again, and yet again, and which points to the necessity of struggle, even as it anticipates utopia (*Awaiting the Millennium*, Chapter 13, in *Towards a Non Brahmin Millennium: From IyotheeThass to Periyar*, Samya, Kolkata, 2008).

VB: Could you please narrate Periyar's heroic work at Vaikom to fight for the Dalits rights? How did Gandhi convert it into 'temple' entry movement when it was not? Periyar felt betrayed by Gandhi and perhaps that was the reason why he left Congress. What were the main points of difference between Gandhi and Periyar?

SV & VG : Periyar's critique of Gandhi was multi-faceted and cannot be understood in and through the Vaikom prism alone. Let us quote from our book to make clear what this critique was all about.

(Periyar wrote): "His [Gandhi's] religious guise, god-related talk, his constant references to Truth, Non-Violence, Satyagraha, cleansing of the heart, the power of the spirit, sacrifice and penance on the one hand and the propaganda his disciples and others—nationalists and journalists—who in the name of politics and the nation consider him a rishi, a sage, Christ, the Prophet, a

Mahatma... and a veritable avatar of Vishnu on the other, along with the opportune use of Gandhi's name by the rich and the educated... have together made Gandhi a political dictator" (Kudi Arasu 23.7.33; Anaimuthu 1974: 389-90).

Periyar compared Gandhi to Annie Besant and pointed out that like Gandhi she had dominated nationalist politics by talking of the Bhagavad Gita, by claiming she communed with gods and mahatmas and by professing to know peoples' previous and future births. The popularity of people such as Besant and Gandhi, noted Periyar, derived from their habit of putting their religious sensibilities to political use and endowing their political acumen with a mystical aura (Kudi Arasu 23.7.33; Anaimuthu 1974: 389-90). Writing a couple of months later, on the death of Annie Besant, a Kudi Arasu obituary noted that the waning of Besant's influence in the Congress coincided with the entry of Gandhi and the growth of his influence in that party. The obituary suggested that in many significant ways, Gandhi was a fit substitute to Mrs. Besant (even as he was presented as an antidote to her powers and influence in the Congress), combining as he did matters of the spirit and issues of political import (Kudi Arasu, 24.9.33).

The Gandhian conundrum for Periyar was best represented in the Gandhian ideal of Satyagraha. In an article titled 'Satyagraha', he dwelt at great length on the meaning and relevance attached to this ideal in the Gandhian lexicon. He noted that the Self-Respecters could not possibly wage this 'war of truth'. For those against whom this war would be waged, would consider opposing the Self-Respecters in name of a 'truth' of which they were convinced. Periyar went on to detail the nature of the Self-Respecters' struggle and their achievements in respect of their anti-caste and anti-untouchability campaigns. He argued that as opposed to claiming to speak and act in the name of an ineffable truth, Self-Respecters had sought to persuade rather than force a change of opinion. They had travelled from town to town, from village to village, holding meetings, prevailing upon the public to listen and if convinced, heed their words. But they had not sought to explain and interpret their ideas to suit the occasion or the context. This mode of public debate, implied Periyar, was in stark contrast to the habitual Congress mode of conducting its public and political campaigns. Congress was interested in displays of power and sentiment; it was given to shows of defiance against India's imperial rulers and was clearly interested in rousing rather than educating people's sentiments and feelings on matters of import to them.

Periyar also pointed out that the appeal of Satyagraha of the Congress variety derived from its semantic associations. Congressmen were wont to attribute to the ideal of Satyagraha notions of dharma, sacrifice and divine will. Satyagraha,

it was claimed, being morally and spiritually right, could not but succeed, could not but win its victories. By rendering Satyagraha as an ideal and a mode of protest naturally and inevitably successful, Congressmen had come to interest the people in its causes. Whether these causes actually succeeded or not, the aura associated with these, on account of their inherent 'truth', sustained and redeemed them in the eyes of thousands of ordinary Congressmen. Yet, pointed out Periyar, 'there need be no truth in a particular cause (for which one conducts Satyagraha) nor need a winning cause need to be a particularly truthful one'. This was because Truth was never singular in character and could be interpreted differently and understood in a number of ways. Besides, what appeared true to one need not necessarily be true to another. 'What is Truth? Untruth? For which may one conduct Satyagraha? Is there indeed a way of testing these things? What appeared as truth to, say, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya need not be true as far as the Self-Respecters were concerned.'

Periyar's problem with the Gandhian notion of Satyagraha was simply this: It rested on faulty premises in that its relevance and worth could not be measured, except in and through its own forms of expression. Secondly, were one to interrogate its truth claims, one would have to admit that these were arbitrary and relative. Thirdly, and this proved particularly bothersome to Periyar, one could never be sure if the efficacy of Satyagraha was due to its inherent worth, or due to the fact that its proponents, by claiming they were 'acting in Truth', had coerced their opponents or those whom they addressed, into heeding their claims. Thus, he wondered if it was because the Satyagrahis' arguments and ideas were persuasive and convincing that they were heeded, or because those who were forced to confront their obduracy had to give in to their claims, not being able to find a way out of a situation forced on them by the Satyagrahis. It was because the ethical effects of Satyagraha seemed to escape definition that Periyar held, the practice of Satyagraha demanded and required the simultaneous practice of manipulation, deception and falsehood.

Periyar also argued that, desirous as the Self-Respecters were of building a samadharmonic society where property will be held in common, they could not possibly expect or hope that the conduct of Satyagrahas will enable Adi-Dravidas to acquire land or a share of the wealth that was held by religious institutions and temples. Neither would Satyagraha prove successful against zamindars and merchants and kings who were determined to keep their working population captive to their interest and who gave them enough only so that they may live to labour. What Satyagraha could do and had indeed achieved for all its pains (and for all the impetus given it by Gandhi and the Congress) was that it had forced the common people to trust to the divine powers of truth and instilled in them a false faith as to what could possibly be achieved to ameliorate their conditions of existence (Kudi Arasu, 6.9.31). For Periyar, then, Satyagraha

served as an expressive modality in and through which the discourses of Gandhian nationalism had habitually been made available to the world at large. The moral ambiguity which lay at the heart of discourses and practices of Satyagraha were interpreted by him to represent the problematic nature of a politics that attempted to subsume its partisan concerns in a universal rhetoric of truth, patriotism and sacrifice. Satyagraha in this sense represented the favoured mode of expression of nationalism and one that rendered the latter an appealing idea (The Ideal Society: Imagining Dravida Nadu, Chapter 12, in Towards a Non Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar, Samya, Kolkata, 2008).

VB: Why do you think Indian state avoids Periyar even today? It has accepted Ambedkar, it has accepted Jyotiba Phule, it talks about Buddha; why is Periyar a 'persona-non-grata' for the Indian state and mainstream political parties except for those in Tamil Nadu?

SV & VG: Well, let's say that the Indian State for thoroughly opportunist reasons appears to have 'accepted' Babasaheb and Phule, but what does that mean, in a substantive sense, besides celebrating birthdays, putting up statues, and making ponderous dishonest speeches? We suppose the question is why has Periyar been not accepted even in this sense? Well, Periyar rejected the Indian State and nation – which cannot endear him to its ideologues and rulers. He also consistently identified nationalism with political Brahminism; further he was fiercely critical of nationalism, and even his campaign for a separate Dravidian nation was on account of his opposition to caste, to what he called the Brahmin-Bania Indian nation-state and not because he was committed to a romantic ideology of a resistant Dravidian nationalism. He also had no use for or investment in the instruments of State power, unless they subserved his ideological and political vision – and this pragmatism was easily foregone, in the interests of the vision that he valued above all.

Further, unlike Dr Ambedkar, he did not represent a potential political constituency that had to be wooed. To the end, he remained his own man, adored, loved, contested, reviled, but his followers were not definable by their specific political identities – they could be nationalist, liberal, Dalit, non-Brahmin, communist, anarchist, feminist, and from literally all social groups, so the State had no reason to 'cultivate' him or to 'tame' him.

His atheism, his feminism, his communitarian sense of his own autonomy – these have also made him a permanent dissident, a presence that is both exhilarating as well as one that provokes unease and discomfort.

VB: Irony is that Periyar's thoughts are not part of curriculum in schools and universities in Tamil Nadu. There may be a few exceptions, but his role as

emancipator and fighter for the rights of Dravidian people is not much highlighted anywhere in the state?

SV & VG : No, the State has not even thought it fit to compile his writings or to support their publication and dissemination.

VB: As political leader what was Periyar's political philosophy? I mean, how Periyar would have responded to current socio-economic and political climate of the country and the globe? I know he visited Soviet Union and was impressed. Was he impressed with communism? What kind of politics he espoused for? What were his views on democracy? How would have he responded to his own political parties today which swear by his name, seeing their conditions and corruption?

SV & VG: We think we have addressed these questions above. But we would like to say a few words about his understanding of democracy. He was a Democrat in a fundamental intellectual sense – he was open to differences, to worldviews different from his own, and believed in unfettered expression of ideas, opinions and in conversation and dialogue, and in political decorum that did not allow ideological and political positions to come in the way of everyday civility. He was also a democrat in his understanding of the caste and gender questions – in his commitment to absolute equality and comradeship, as well as justice. Politically, he was uneasy with democracy in practice, fearing as he did, the power of uninformed opinion-mongering and political opportunism, and felt that electoral democracy was the last resort of unprincipled scoundrels. His organisation was not democratically managed or arranged, and at various times in its history, his own trusted comrades felt impelled to leave – some for instrumental or limited reasons, others for more principled ones. Yet he was a radical Republican and imagined the state as embodying, or as serving as, an instrument of rule that ought to represent the greater common good and that was sovereign only because it was a people's state.



ANAND PATWARDHAN*

Gandhi and Ambedkar were both liberation theologians



VB: As a freedom lover secularist what is the difference between today's media and that which existed during the official Emergency in 1975.

AP: The Emergency of 1975 was visible to all. The world condemned it and in India, some brave newspapers like the Indian Express protested with blank editorials. Within a fairly short time a strong resistance movement grew. Today's Emergency is largely invisible to the masses because Indian media houses have been corporatized and these corporates, both Indian and foreign, are direct beneficiaries of an economic system that has been surreptitiously imposed on the country not just by the present regime but by forces that were already moving in the same direction but at a slower pace. We have sold our sovereignty to USA and the global corporates and people have been told that this is for our own good. The invisible Emergency of today depends on what Chomsky called "manufactured consent".

VB: Today we face the biggest challenge to Indian democracy since independence when our civil liberties are under the attack, when freedom of expression is under threat and when media is constructing the 'news'. Is 'free media' now the biggest threat to democracy?

AP: The media is free in the sense that it now has the freedom to tell lies about both, the domestic economy and about national security - lies that parrot an American-Israeli-Saudi axis which created, nurtured and unleashed Al Qaeda and ISIS on the one hand and pretended to "fight terror" on the other.

VB: You have documented major events not only of communal violence but also of violence against Dalits in Maharashtra. After the death of Rohit Vemula, in HCU, JNU and other campuses, students of all ideological frames – from the Left, to Ambedkarites and other Bahujan groups, joined in a common struggle against the ABVP and its attempt to vitiate the climate in the universities. Today that unity appears to be crumbling and we are again at the crossroads. Why ?

* Anand Patwardhan's documentary films have stood for freedom of expression. He faced censorship on numerous occasions, took the government to court, and won each time. Anand is not just a filmmaker but an activist in the cause of Indian democracy, clearly under threat today. Anand discusses his views on the challenges before us, and most importantly, how he perceives both Gandhi and Ambedkar as liberation theologians whose ideas are in danger of being revised by their enemies.

AP: The fault lies as much with the Left (of all shades) which is still unclear about how to destroy the caste system within, as with Dalit groups that fall prey to red-baiting and exclusivist identity politics. On one side are traditional Marxists who were brought up to think that caste is part of a superstructure that will automatically wither away when the economic base becomes socialist. On the other side are those who think that the caste of your birth alone forever determines how you think and how you act. Not only is such thinking contrary to the teachings of Dr. Ambedkar, it mirrors the mindset of the worst Manuvadis who believe that caste determines everything.

Luckily reality is proving both positions wrong. I believe that the Left and Dalits are natural allies so it is a matter of time before a genuine, long-lasting unity is forged. People like Comrade Govind Pansare, Kanhaiya Kumar and Jignesh Mevani have shown us that this unity is possible. At HCU and JNU and across Indian campuses we saw the amazing potential of unity. Into this mix I would add progressive Gandhians - people like Narendra Dabholkar and Medha Patkar. Together these forces represent the politics of Reason that this country so desperately needs.

VB: Your film *Jai Bhim* Comrade was an extraordinary work which brought us back the memories of the struggle for justice of the people of Ramabai Nagar in Mumbai. You screened the film in various places. What were the reactions?

AP: The film as you know took 14 years to make. In the winter of 2011 we screened it in the open air in Dalit bastis across urban Maharashtra. We bought a powerful video projector, made a huge foldable cloth screen, and in each basti erected bamboo scaffolding to mount it on. As the screen was being erected, we played progressive film songs and Dalit movement songs to alert and attract the audience. Often the crowd would swell to well over a 1000 people. As we could not afford so many chairs, people sat on the ground or stood at the back and on the sides for the three-hour duration of the film. At the end of the screening we tried to organise a discussion but often instead of a back and forth question and answer session, people just grabbed the mike and poured their hearts out about what the film had meant to them. It was an overwhelming experience for me. Later I began to understand the reasons for this amazing response. Although in the bastis, little of the hardship shown in the film was unknown to people, the fact that the film presented its protagonists not as victims but as resisters, was a morale booster. The genre of music heard in the film was in danger of either dying out or getting commercialised, so the film, so full of these songs captured over decades, served as a valuable archive. Lastly, the politics of the film was appreciated, as it did not pull punches. It called to task not only sections of the Left for not recognising the primacy of caste, but also Dalit leaders who were being lured by Manuvadi Hindutva to betray the legacy of Dr. Ambedkar.

Much later I began to show the film in colleges and schools and other middle class and elite circles. Here the response was enthusiastic but very different from that in the bastis. Even though people generally appreciated the film, almost invariably someone would ask about the evils of “reservations”. It was as if the audience had been blind and deaf to what they had just seen. After 3000 years where manual scavenging has been reserved for one caste alone and education has been forbidden, was it not time to reserve education seats for the dispossessed? In the end after long discussions, we agreed that reservations could be done away with only when the children of the rich and the children of the poor start going to the same schools - from the primary to the college level. Such prolonged inter-caste, inter-class contact could also open the door for inter-caste marriages. Many generations of such mixed marriages could finally end the caste system. This sounds idealistic but in my view this is the only way to finally end caste - when bloodlines become so mixed that no one can clearly say what caste they come from.

VB: Do you think that as secular activists we have not been able to communicate to common people in the language they understand or have failed to use the great secular legacy of India which was radical and rational as well?

AP: In general this is true but in particular some people are genuinely trying to address this. Of course the task is huge and we are up against a fascist force in the Brahminist RSS that has created a hydra-headed, cadre-based organisation that indoctrinates people in the name of cultural and religious pride, as well as today, of fake nationalism. In the early days they attracted mainly Brahmins. Today they are drawing in all castes and tribes that can be mobilised against their stated three enemies - Muslims, Christians and Communists. Religious culture and right wing politics is a potent combination and we rationalists have so far failed to match the organisational genius that runs this fascist machine.

VB: This government has been in hyper-active mode to keep people busy but if we analyse their actions we find clear attempts to divide people and polarise the debate. It started with their favourite topics like 'Gaay', Ganga, Rastrawaad, beef, Jana Gana Mana and then to Kashmir. Things went horribly wrong in Kashmir and the last part was a surgical strike but that too was questioned. Then came demonetization which hurt the poorest of the poor but was dressed up to look like an attack on “black money” and the rich. Each act is commonly linked, in my opinion, to privatising our national resources and creating business for crony capital.

AP: Yes there is a clear strategy. Nothing in the Hindutva Parivar happens ad hoc or without central planning. At the same time perhaps Modi and Amit Shah have surprised even their own cadre by their willingness to be brutal and dishonest. Demonetization is an example. Even the direct beneficiaries, like the

crony capitalists who emptied the banks and refused to pay back their loans must have been surprised at how the poor were squeezed to fill the bank coffers up again and then sold the idea that this was a strike on the unscrupulous rich. Even when all the “black money” came back into the banks and became white money, no question was raised while thousands of jobs were lost across the nation. It may be the undoing of Modi in the long run but in the short term he is still fooling most of the people most of the time.

VB: Communalism or I would call it Brahminism has joined hands with capitalism here but the resistance too is stronger. Unfortunately, political parties are unable to join hands with their egos and brinkmanship for votes. Will people's pressure bring them together?

AP: At the moment there is no visible peoples' pressure. There is visible suffering but the anger is not yet visible. Let us see if it manifests later.

VB: Do you feel that the Indian way of secularism i.e. equal respect to all religions, or what we call Sarva Dharma Samabhava is damaging the cause of social change as it allows religious dogmatics to hijack the leadership of different communities? There is a virtual competition between the religious right taking place in the polity thereby denying common persons of all communities the means to counter them. How do we respond to it?

AP: All over the world rationalists have found that religion that has existed for centuries is hard to stamp out and some form of co-existence is the norm in most secular countries. After the Soviet Revolution, St. Petersburg became Leningrad but in 1991 it became St. Petersburg again.

In India, both Gandhi and Ambedkar recognised that this country was so steeped in the idiom of religion that atheism or pure rationality would not be easily accepted by the masses. I consider Gandhi and Ambedkar, each in their own right, to be liberation theologians. Of course, Gandhi unlike Ambedkar, did not choose his own religion, he inherited it. But to whatever he inherited, he applied post-Enlightenment ethical values that were essentially modern. When he began to do manual scavenging and began to advocate this (even force it) on to his followers, he actually destroyed the very basis of the Pollution/Purity dichotomy that is at the heart of the caste system. Theoretically he for a long time infamously clung to the concept of Varnashram Dharma, but in actual deed he destroyed it the day he took up manual scavenging, a job that had been hitherto reserved for the so-called ‘untouchables’. As time went on Gandhi became ever more radical. He clearly learned from Dr. Ambedkar as well as from his own intuitive understanding of the world he was witnessing. For instance, towards the latter stages of his life, Gandhi refused to attend any marriage that was not an inter-caste marriage. By the end of his life he had

fashioned out of his inherited Hinduism, something entirely new. Only the idiom remained, and not the original hierarchical Sanatan Dharma. Whether his reluctance to discard the idiom was a practical decision that stemmed from a desire to remain in touch with the vast Indian masses in a language they could easily follow, or from his own inner belief system, is something that can be debated, but is of no great interest to me. What is unmistakable is that Gandhi's ethical code bears little resemblance to the hierarchical and vengeful structure of traditional Hinduism.

Dr. Ambedkar in some ways was more fortunate than Gandhi in that he clearly saw how oppressive the religion of his birth was, being as he was, a direct victim of it. So he discarded it and searched for the best alternative to it. After examining many religions he finally chose the religion that was closest to Reason. Buddhism is the one world religion that does not posit an external, all-knowing God. However it has a very strong ethical core that Dr. Ambedkar highlighted. At the same time he discarded irrational and unprovable Buddhist tenets like Reincarnation that many traditional Buddhists ardently follow. This is why I see both Ambedkar and Gandhi as liberation theologians. In the same way that Left wing priests like Ernesto Cardenal in Latin America, a minister in Nicaragua's revolutionary Sandinista government, re-interpreted Jesus Christ as a revolutionary who fought and died for justice to the poor and powerless, Gandhi and Ambedkar gave new ethical meaning to the religions they adopted and adapted.

Make no mistake that I am equating the two. Their differences are obvious. One came from a privileged caste, the other from the most oppressed. One was educated in a limited sense and steeped in traditional religion in his formative years while the other came from a caste denied the right to education and rose to become the best-read and easily the greatest intellectual of modern India.

I am not at all blind to the things about Gandhi that are paradoxical and irrational like his life-long demonization of sexuality. Gandhi's insistence on chastity puts him in the same irrational, patriarchal boat as the priests and monks and nuns of many world religions. To examine this aspect in depth would take a whole chapter. And yet this same sex-denying man, by introducing the Charkha as a weapon of non-violent resistance, brought thousands of women into the mainstream of the Indian freedom movement.

I realise that I have let my stream of consciousness diverge from your original question. To get back to the issue about whether Sarva Dharma Samabhava can take the place of constitutionally guaranteed secular democratic rights, I think it cannot. We need Dr. Ambedkar's Constitution much more than we need holy books. And yet as many in our country are still hooked to holy books and unholy pretenders, we need liberation theologians who can help people to

culturally discard the worst features of their inherited religious culture and replace these with ethical, just and non-exclusivist interpretations.

Waiting for everyone to become atheist or rationalist may take centuries. Ethics is the answer. Small wonder that Ambedkar and Gandhi, each in their own way, arrived at individual definitions of Ahimsa.

VB: In post-Mandal India communities are seeking their space in the polity. In the earlier phase of secularism, the Indian elite always kept the marginalised communities like Dalits, OBCs, Muslims outside the gates of their decision making bodies and public platforms but things are changing now. Very, unfortunately, more than the seculars it is the communalists who are jumping into identity politics and social engineering. Meanwhile, communist parties still retain their upper caste leadership. Will we be able to face the challenge in such a way?

AP: Actually identity politics is a double-edged weapon. As long as oppression of identifiable groups exists, it is perfectly legitimate for oppressed groups to unite according to their identity. “Black is beautiful” was a necessary movement for Afro-Americans in the USA, just as pride in Dalit or Buddhist identity is necessary in India. The trouble begins when this turns into an exclusivist or separatist movement. Malcolm X went through a Black Muslim phase when he described all white people as “devils”. But in the latter stages of his life he completely rejected this theory for a much more inclusive critique of injustice and inequality. That is when the American deep State killed him. Similarly while a broad section of Dalits are inclusive and fully understand the distinction Dr. Ambedkar made between the ideology of Brahminism and individuals who happen to be born into one or the other “upper” castes, there is a tiny section of separatist Dalits today who see birth as the sole determining factor. The fact that Western post-modern academia encourages such identity politics in preference to class analysis has given this form of separatist politics international acceptance. Meanwhile in India Manuvadi forces feel obvious glee when Dalits attack the Left or Gandhi, as both have long been the enemies of Hindutva.

VB: Hindutva people are expert in appropriating icons who are secular. They used Ambedkar, Bhagat Singh, Vivekananda, Subhash Chandra Bose, Sri Narayan Guru etc for their purposes. Is this because an overdose of Gandhi and Nehru's role in our freedom struggle minimised all other icons that a kind of resentment began against Nehru and Gandhi?

AP: Frankly I am not a fan of Subhash Chandra Bose. I cannot swallow his alliance with Hitler and Hirohito. Freedom could not be wrested at such a cost. Vivekanand is also very troubling because he advocated a kind of machismo

Anand Patwardhan

that I think is deeply problematic. Also what is little known about him is that he was deeply casteist. In fact, he seems perfectly suited as a BJP icon. The resentment against Gandhi lies at the heart of the project of Hindutva which is why they killed him first and then attempted to appropriate his glasses and broomstick later. Nehru is hated because his development paradigm goes against the grain of privatisation. Ambedkar they do not dare criticise openly these days so the only option is to use his image, minus any content.

VB: Your uncle Achyut Patwardhan was an icon of the socialist movement in India. We heard a lot about his relationship with Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar. Was there any influence of him on your socio-political thoughts?

AP: Achyutkaka and Aruna Asaf Ali, according to British records, were amongst the most wanted underground leaders of 1942. He ran the underground radio and was a master of disguise amongst other things but in later years he ensured that history erased him. You hardly hear or read about him anywhere because soon after Independence he became disillusioned with mainstream politics. He did educational and social work but he would never discuss the past, even with me. He felt it had all been mostly an illusion. His elder brother, Purshottam (Raokaka to me) was also a freedom fighter and spent over 10 years in British jails. In the 1930's while he was making an anti-communal speech, Madanlal Pahwa tried to assassinate him but was caught. Raokaka who was a Gandhian socialist, refused to file charges and Pahwa was let off. Later this same Pahwa threw a bomb at Gandhi and was part of the conspiracy that finally killed him.

To answer your next question, it is true that in the decade of the 1930's Dr. Ambedkar spent several months living, writing and studying at our family farm home in Ahmednagar, but this again is a chapter of history that has been irretrievably lost. Raokaka like Achyut left active politics after Independence and both, by their own choice, were written out of history. I have heard that Dr. Ambedkar and Achyutkaka were friends and met when Achyutkaka was underground, but I have no documents about this. What I do know is that my family opposed the caste system and many married outside their own caste, including my parents.

VB: You have always tried to bring together not only left and Ambedkarites but also what you call 'Progressive Gandhians'. Why are you using this term ? You have been critical of people who as you say 'blow out of proportion' the differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar. Many of the Ambedkarites feel it quite disturbing?

AP: I must speak the truth as I see it. I have always felt that the affinities between Gandhi and Ambedkar are greater than their differences. They were

both egalitarian humanists at heart. It may not win me any popularity contest today but I think those who are ready to set prejudice aside and undertake a proper historical study will come around to this point of view. Take the act of “Satyagraha”, a term coined by Gandhi. Ambedkar used this very term and form of struggle to launch his Mahad Satyagraha to claim drinking water rights. There are many other examples of common ideas and action. I was pleasantly shocked to read what Dr. Ambedkar had to say in 1932 immediately after concluding the now infamous Poona Pact (where the idea of separate electorates for Dalits was abandoned in favour of reserved seats for Dalits). Popular theory is that Ambedkar was blackmailed by Gandhi’s fast-unto-death into accepting a bitter compromise. But Ambedkar’s statement in 1932 after signing the pact was totally different in tone. He had high praise for Gandhi and stated that the “Mahatma” (yes, contrary to popular belief, Ambedkar referred to Gandhi as “Mahatma” at this point in time) offered a much better deal for Dalits in terms of reserved seats than Ambedkar himself had asked or hoped for. There is no denying however that Ambedkar did get disgusted with the Congress in later years. How much of the blame for the failures of Congress are attributable to Gandhi is a matter of discussion and debate. We know that Gandhi’s writ did not work in preventing Partition or the bloodshed that preceded and followed it and that Gandhi did not attend the Independence Day flag-hoisting at the Red Fort in Delhi. He was busy fighting the communal inferno in the countryside.

Gandhi had a lot of obscurantist ideas to start with but as time went on he was honest enough to keep evolving. In the end I see him as a great humanist who died for his belief in non-violence and religious universality. He was also an inventive anti-Imperialist (though in his earlier days he had supported the British Empire) and an organic naturalist that today’s madly consumerist, globally warmed world desperately needs. Are most of today’s Gandhians like that? Of course not. That is why I used the term ‘progressive Gandhians’. It describes dedicated non-violent fighters like Medha Patkar, Narendra Dabholkar, the whole Baba Amte family, Asghar Ali Engineer, Sandeep Pande, S.P Udaykumar, Teesta Setalvad, Aruna Roy, Admiral Ramdas, and so many others. It certainly does not include government-fed Gandhians and those Gandhians who jump onto the Hindutva bandwagon as soon as it gathers steam.

Throughout his life Dr. Ambedkar fought for reason and justice without resorting to violence. Today his followers, like the Ambedkar Students Association and Dr. Prakash Ambedkar are leading the resistance against religious and caste hatred. Against all odds Radhika and Raja Vemula (Rohith Vemula’s mother and brother) are continuing the fight for justice. With the rising spectre of intolerant authoritarianism, the time has come for all

Anand Patwardhan

humanists, rationalists and fighters for social and economic justice to unite against the usurpers of our democracy and our history.

SADANAND FULZELE*

An eyewitness to the historic Dhammadeeskha, 1956

It is astonishing that not much is known about the man who was one of the prominent figures of Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar's historical return to the roots of Buddhism along with nearly half a million people at the Deekshabhumi ground in Nagpur on October 14th, 1956. Interestingly, Sadanand Fulzele was not an ordinary man in any senses during that period as he was the Deputy Mayor of Nagpur Municipal Corporation and that too with consensus. He was elected on Scheduled Caste Federation ticket for the Corporation in 1952 and won by just one vote to his nearest rival. A man dedicated to Baba Saheb Ambedkar's mission for life long, I asked him as how did he get in touch with Dr Ambedkar and what was his involvement with Deekshabhumi function.

“When I was Deputy Mayor that time the states got reorganised. Nagpur got merged in Bombay i.e. Maharashtra. We people, a deputation of corporation leaders, went to Delhi to meet Govind Ballabh Pant to demand Nagpur as the capital of Maharashtra. In Delhi I stayed with our Member of Parliament Tahir Ali Saheb. That time Baba Saheb had written about Deeksha on 14th October to Mewa Ram Kawade and Godbole to come and meet him. Baba Saheb asked them whether arrangements could be made for the Deeksha. They said, yes it will be done as our own person was Deputy Mayor in the corporation. They told him that I was in Delhi. Then he asked me to come over. Then I went to meet Baba Saheb along with senior person in All India Radio at his residence 26 Alipur Road in the evening. We sat there near the gate. After some time Baba Saheb came with the help of Nanakchand Rattu and sat in front of us on the reclining chair. He said, Mewa Ram Kawade and Godbole came and we have now fixed on October 14th. Will you arrange the programme. I said yes. And that was the time Baba Saheb put the responsibility of the programme on me.

After returning from there, I, Waman Ram Godbole, Kawade and others started looking for a suitable place where Deeksha ceremony could be organised and we found this place suitable as there was a big slope and even if the rains come the water would easily flow out. So, finally the selection of Deekshabhumi was done. Baba Saheb's programme was also fixed. Now, the correspondence and other details were to be done and hence the entire responsibility of the programme fell on my soldiers.”

*Sadanand Fulzele was an eyewitness to the historic celebrations of Dhammadeeskha in 1956. He was the deputy Mayor of Nagpur Corporation and was instrumental in making the arrangements.

It was a huge celebration he says. Photographs of the functions are well placed decorating his drawing room in Nagpur and each event reverberate his mind in passion. "First Baba Saheb took Deeksha through Chandramani ji. He was so overwhelmed that he did not raise his head. Then Chandramani ji gave him panchsheel. Then he got up and said now I have become Buddhist. All those who want to have Deeksha should stand up. Then Baba Sahib gave them trisharan and panchasheel.. and later gave them 22 bows. The people were there for two days. Baba Saheb spoke for nearly two hours. Later in the night Baba Saheb departed for Chandrapur."

"Was there any opposition to Dhammadeeksha", I ask

"What would have they done ? Many people felt that Baba Saheb should not take Dhamma Deeksha and newspapers reported such stories, but Baba Saheb responded to all the quarries" as the programme went for two full days till October 15th evening and the number of people remained the same.

Sadanand Fulzele is not only witness to historical legacy of Baba Saheb but also part of the political party i.e. Republican Party of India and felt that If Baba Saheb had survived a few more years, perhaps the situation would have been different. Unfortunately, within two months he passed away and things that would have happened never happened.

He felt that the fight for power was the real reason for disintegration of Republican Party of India. "It was for power. In 1957, RPI was established. Avade Babu wanted to become the Secretary. Dada Saheb wanted Barrister Khobaragade. But Avade Babu did not know it and hence next year Avade Babu, B C Kamble and other formed a different party.

I ask him that there was an allegation that Dada Saheb never wanted to Dhammadeeksha ceremony as he felt politically it would have been detrimental for the party. The charge was levelled none other than Bhau Lokhande, in a conversation with me.

'No it is not true', says Sadanand Fulzele and added that some people who wanted to be in the elections that we should not go for conversion.

But according to Fulzele, Baba Saheb's decision was 'absolutely correct'.

After the Mahaparinirwan of Baba Saheb, Mr Sadanand Fulzele devoted his time and energy to strengthen the Republican Party of India. He was the Nagpur city president of it and later became Secretary of the state followed by All India secretary.

I ask him that Baba Saheb has become so powerful that even the opponents are chanting Jai Bhim. Many Ámbedkarites' have joined the Sangh camp. He says, '

There is nothing in the party today. It is almost finished. Athawale is there but he has also gone with BJP. Now people do not fear BJP and people have started going to BJP’.

‘Is it not wrong’, I ask.

He thinks and perhaps the state of mind is of exasperation and absolute helplessness in the political front when he says, ‘What can be done. There is nothing now. Baba Saheb wanted that RPI should have people from different communities not exclusive to SCs. Unfortunately, it did not succeed. After baba saheb’s passing away.’ In his last days, Baba Saheb was in touch with Samajwadis like Ram Manohar Lohia, S M Joshi, Atreji, I ask. Yes, he says, ‘Baba Saheb had written a letter to S M Joshi and Atre about Republican Party of India. Since he was not there, things could not move.

He is happy that the movement is spreading everywhere especially in UP. He witnessed the huge gathering of nearly ten thousand persons predominantly the OBCs taking Deeksha in Dhamma on December 25th last year under the spiritual guidance of Bhadant Nagarjun Surai Sasai.

‘There were different communities and not one particular community’, he says.

There were rumours about Baba Saheb was not from their community among the OBCs. How the annihilation of caste has become caste calculation, I ask. ‘Jaati never goes. It is in our mind. Merely laws can’t eradicate it. Unless there is a change in heart in our mind, jaati cant go. We will have to work doubly hard.

Can the Dhamma Deeksha remove it, I ask.

Yes, with Dhamma, jaati would be able to eradicate it.

When I ask, ‘What are the challenges before us’, he respond saying that ‘People are fighting. Some are joining others. There are changes. Situations are different. UP has powerful Bahujan Samaj Party today.

How come a place where Republican Party of India was a strong political force once upon a time is completely without any cadre or leaders?

‘UP has a strong RPI organisation. Maruya Sahib was MP. When Bahuguna was chief minister of UP. He gave allurements, power to all the others and they joined the Congress. The entire Republican Party got decimated. This was the best way of co-option and purchasing leadership through power. Hence, when Kanshiram went with Baba Saheb’s elephant then people supported him. Nobody would have gone to Kanshiram but because of our failure’, he responds.

Sadanand Fulzele

He acknowledges the hard work done by late Kanshiram though suggest that BAMSCEF initially was not formed to be a political party and hence they separated when Bahujan Samaj Party was formed.

‘Kanshiram was first government servant. He worked very hard then he made BAMSCEF with the help of government servants, mostly Nagpur friends supported him. BAMSCEF leaders were not happy when they formed political party. But he got support in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab’ says Fulzele.

But what about other places particularly Maharastra where Maharastra’s Dalit Bahujan don’t have their own parties. Is it good to go with communal parties?, I ask.

‘What to do? Athawale’s group is powerful but he is with BJP. Prakash Ambedkar has a group but he has no follower. Right now Athawale, has found people support’. He feel that Dalits are not accepting all those parties as their own parties have failed them. Baba Saheb wanted an inclusive party and not an exclusively scheduled castes outfit but his dream was shattered after his sudden death. The Buddhist movement is helping socially and culturally but not politically. The cultural movement will bring more changes than the political party’ he says.

And finally, one of the things which I always pondered over and asked many Ambedkarites as why do they think Savita Ambedkar, the wife of Baba Saheb, was responsible for the death of Baba Saheb Ambedkar though many said it is wrong to blame the person who devoted her life for Baba Saheb Ambedkar and later for the mission, Fulzele has no straight answer though he does not blame her outrightly but says that, ‘About her Maharastra people had misgivings. They felt that she had given Baba Saheb slow poison. Once Athawale brought her on the dais of his party but people did not accept her’. Unfortunately, he did not feel it that the politicians should have taken it upon themselves to speak about this but at certain point of time the extreme voices look more legitimate while those talk of ‘reasoning’ are considered as betrayer of the cause.

Sadanand Fulzele is approaching 90s of his life. He is still active and aim to develop Deekshabhumi a much loved historical place of destinations for people interested in the Ambedkarite Buddhist movement. Born in 1928 he plunged into politics after completing graduation. He has three sons and a daughter.

Sadanand Fulzele continues to dedicate his time and energy to strengthen the Buddhist movement started by Baba Saheb Ambedkar. His life has been that of dedication and silently working towards his mission without much being in limelight. He says that he is not much into writing but we hope he would do so in the greater interest of the movement.

BHADANT NAGARJUN SURAI*

Nearly ten thousand people had assembled at historic Deekshabhumi in Nagpur on December 25th, 2016 to embrace Buddhism as envisaged by Baba Saheb Ambedkar nearly 60 years ago at the same place along with nearly half a million people on Ashoka Vijayadashmi day in 1956, but this time the Deeksha was being led by Bhadant Nagarjun Surai Sasai, who originally hails from Japan and made India his home long back in 1960s and this time the people who embraced Buddhism were mostly from various OBC communities. The chanting of ‘Buddham Sharanam Gachchami’ reverberated in the air. In an impressive Marathi, the octogenarian monk ask people to follow him word by word as he start narrating the 22 oaths that Baba Saheb Ambedkar had used to get the people ‘dhamma deeksha’ on October 14th, 1956. Such is his influence that people listen to him, follow him and look upon for guidance. Bhadant Nagarjun Surai Sasai has made India his home and a place to fulfill his mission to make India a Prabuddha Bharat, as dreamt by Baba Saheb Ambedkar.

As I go to meet him at his Indora Buddha Vihar in Nagpur that he built as he made the city his workplace to fulfil the dreams of Baba Saheb Ambedkar. I ask him, “When did you come to India and how did you get involved in the Ambedkarite movement?”. “I came in 1967 exactly 11 years after the Mahaparinirwan of Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar. Baba Saheb got Mahaparinirwan in 1956. And he proudly says this to me. Though he became Buddhist in Japan only, India always inspired him. He says, ‘It was my wish to come here. In Japan there was not much known about Baba Saheb. I felt even the governments were not interested to tell the world about Baba Saheb. The Japanese Sangh sent me to Thailand first. I stayed in Thailand for three years. Then I had to return to Japan but I informed the Japanese Sangh that I would not return to Japan but would visit India and have *darshan* of Lumbini, Bodhgaya, Sarnath and other sacred places’.

And he landed up in Rajgiri which he always referred as Rajgrih in 1966. He says, ‘I went to Rajgir first. This is the place where Buddha came here as promised to king Bimbisara. There I went to a, Nichidatsu Fujji, a Japanese monk. He was planning a ‘peace pagoda’ or Shanti Stupa at the pragbodhi Hill of Rajgir. First I came to Kolkata and then came to Rajgir. There are 13 sects in Japan which follow Buddhism. I was different from Fujji. But despite that, I felt that he too was Japanese hence I decided to engage in the *Shramdan*. This kept

*Bhadant Nagarjun Arya Surai SASAI, a Japanese born Indian monk who aspire for Bahujan Buddhist revolution. He has been at the forefront of a campaign to free the Mahabodhi Temple, Bodh Gaya from its Hindu control.

me in Rajgir to build the *Shanti Stupa*. There were not many Japanese people hence we had to take help from the local people in digging. I used to not only look after but also do the digging work. Many times, I saw tigers there. After some time they handed the work to a construction company hence my work was done and naturally the devotees were coming who belonged to different sects and there were chances of disputes and differences hence I thought to return to Japan.’

Despite those difficult circumstances Bhadant Surai Sasai lived there for over one and a half year and told me that, ‘ I was thinking of returning to Japan. It was the Purnima in the month of August. It was total rainy season. To be precise, it was August 8th and midnight. I was in my *dhayana* when someone pats me on the back. I opened my eyes to see a figure with white hair and long whitish moustache. It was *Purnima* and hello around him was shining. I was frightened for a while as I never had such an experience. I asked in my heart as I did not have the courage to speak up openly, who you are. Who are you? My voice was not coming out. I started chanting the Buddhist Mantra. Then the voice came in my ear. ‘I am Nagarjuna. You go to Nagpur immediately. Nagpur is my karmbhumi and Janmbhumi as well as Nirwanbhumi too. You go to Nagpur and it will become your Karmbhumi too’, He said. I was just listening and chanting. After some time He disappeared. Then I asked *Fuji Guruji* as where is Nagpur. He said, I don’t know. He had been staying in India for over 30 years yet did not know Nagpur. He asked me what happened. I informed him about the incident. He said you must have it in your dream. I said no. He appeared before me. He said it is in Central India. I said, I will not go to Japan but go to Nagpur instead. I was ordered by Venerable Nagarjuna to go to Nagpur and yes it was not a dream as he gave me *live darshan* so I had to follow his orders. I had my return ticket for Japan via Thailand but I cancelled them. I decided to go to Nagpur. I did not have any knowledge of Hindi that time. I had only just working knowledge of Hindi, not much. I did not know things about India. Finally, I arrived in Nagpur. Did not know how to go so came via Patna. Boarded a train and got down at Allahabad and started looking for general coach in the train towards Andhra-Chennai. It was slightly raining. I did not know how long and how far it was but by asking people finally I got down in Nagpur. I did not have any knowledge, any acquaint about Nagpur that time so I came out of the station and sat in front of it, started my chanting of Buddhist mantras. Slowly, people started coming in. I asked people if there was any Buddha Vihara. People asked him where have, I come from as I did not tell anything. There was tension on the Indo-China border so many people felt I might be from China and do something wrong as I did not tell I am from Japan. Some of them started asking me to be sending away from there. I said, I am a Buddhist monk who came here 10 years later Baba Saheb took Dhammdeeksha,

even Anand Kauslayan came after me. I asked, don't you know any Bhante here. So, one *rikshawallah* took me to a Buddha Vihar built by Waman Godbole who took an important role during the Dharmantaran ceremony of Baba Saheb Ambedkar. As I entered his house, there were huge portraits of Buddha as well as Baba Saheb Ambedkar in his tie suit. I asked who is this man? Godbole said, Bhante ji, don't you know him. Haven't you heard name of Dr Ambedkar. I said, no. He said, Ambedkar is a great man who made many people Buddhists in India. I was just thinking that Buddhism did not exist in India. Then, I asked Godbole, are you a Buddhists, he said yes. All the friends there said they were Buddhists. I was gladdened to hear so many voices claiming Buddhists. Then, I told them that I have come from Japan. I then stayed at the House of Godbole for nearly a month. Then he took me to another place and I got a place to live.'

Waman Rao Godbole has been a highly respected Ambedkarite in Nagpur who supported Bhadant Nagarjun Surai Sasai who was willing to learn local languages everywhere he travelled and that too not by formal education but by way of conversation. "I did not learn Hindi. I learnt it by speaking with people. There was no formal education of Hindi for me. I was send to Thailand and from Thailand where did I go? India. I got a letter that fine you are in India but I was told not to learn Hindi. I was surprised. Why? I thought people go to Japan and learn Japanese, go to Thailand and speak Thai then why shouldn't I learn Hindi to understand India. He said since there are Buddhists in India so that I should not learn Hindi. I was shocked as why should not I learn Hindi as there were Buddhists in India and Hindi is essentially linked to Hinduism according to them hence I should not learn Hindi. I discarded their advice and continue to interact with people and learnt Hindi. I still can't write Hindi that well but can speak easily. I have been here over 50 years interacting people hence now I can make a speech in the public in Hindi as well as in Marathi. Two days back, I got people swear 22 vows of Baba Saheb Ambedkar for OBC Dhammadeeksha. I got them in Marathi and people were very happy. They complimented me.

He was visibly pleased that over ten thousand OBCs took Deeksha under him on December 25th, 2016 at Deekshabhumi Nagpur. He says, 'Baba Saheb used to say, I would make India, Buddhist. The Constitution of India is based on Buddhist principles. Baba Saheb himself said our constitutional revolution is not influenced by French revolution but by the principles of Buddha. The chakra and three colours in our national flag are based on Buddhist ideals. Every religious person whether Muslim, Christians, Hindu, Sikhs or others have to bow to the national flag and constitution. So on the basis of constitution and law, India is a Buddhist country. Our 'sanskaras' according to Dhamma have not happened till yet. The Dhamma Deeksha has slowed down. Bhantes have not done it. Dharma and Dhamma are not the same. Dhamma Deeksha is

essential so many alcoholic people get into Deeksha but many wise persons like Kanshiram too did not take dhama Deeksha and became Buddhist. So, if you do not take dhammadeeksha you don't become Buddhist.'

I ask him, 'You have seen Dalits embracing Buddhism. Now OBCs too are embracing Buddhism. Would you appeal to Hindus, swarnas too who might be progressive to embrace Buddhism?' Bhadant respond by saying that, 'In Buddhism we have 'Knowledge, Samadhi, karma, 'sheela', love and affection, fraternity which is absent elsewhere. You can see Christians, Hinduism which has so many castes and superstitions but where do have pragya and brotherhoods in other religions. Everybody is moving forward including the backward communities but still there is casteism. Hindus too want to finish it. There are people who now want to get into Deeksha even when they were elsewhere. I am sure people will come to Buddhism based on its principles. That's what Baba Saheb said. Unite first, then struggle and educate yourself. These three mantras are essential. The Hindus too will come to Buddhism. Yes, I feel the entire country would become Buddhist.'

I raised the issue of Burakomin community in Japan which suffers from untouchability. I ask, whether it is still prevalent? 'No, he says, 'Japanese government helped them a lot. Now, they have become bigger than the ordinary people there in Japan. Government helped them and provided them electricity connection, housing and many other things. It is completely abolished. It was there in past but now Burakumin have moved ahead. Now government helps them and they have moved ahead, though many ordinary people now resent it.'

'So you mean to say untouchability is abolished there', I repeat.

'Yes, it is. It was there in past. It is not there now', he suggest confidently.

The issue of Mahabodhi Vihar in Gaya, where Buddha attained enlightenment, is important and dear to Buddhist all over the world. Bhadant Nagarjun Surai Sasai launched a movement to liberate it. I ask him about the efforts in the direction of handing it over to Buddhists. He says, 'Mahabodhi Vihar is the place where Lord Buddha attained wisdom. And among the Buddhist pilgrimages, it is the most sacred and important shrine. The Birthplace of Buddha is not Lumbini. Actually, Lumbini is the birth place of Siddhartha. Maha Bodhi Vihar is the real place of birth of Buddha as he attained wisdom here. I have been agitating for the same for years'.

When will Buddhists get it, I ask.

“Don’t worry we will get it, he says, assuring me. ‘I have been agitating for it for the past twenty years and I am sure we will get it. There will be a time when even Brahmins will embrace Buddhism. They will come themselves’.

In 1988 he became citizen of India and left Japanese citizenship. I ask him whether the governments ever troubled him. ‘Yes but now I am citizen of India like you. I can do politics. I can speak on any issue,’ he says. He was made member of National Commission for Minorities for the period 2003-2006. ‘I did a lot of work then. There was no holiday on Baba Saheb’s birthday. Three four states used to do so but I have got it done in entire country’, he says.

I ask him, ‘You have seen Ambedkarite Buddhist movement for so long. What is its biggest strength?

In the last Lok Sabha elections, BJP used money to lure voters not just in Nagpur but in the entire country. Such things never happened in our history of elections. So, I started speaking much before elections that if you people vote by getting money then you are a ‘nakali’ Buddhist, duplicate Buddhist. You will damage Ambedkar mission by doing so, it will be sinful.

When I ask him about BJP’s love for Dr Ambedkar as they too started saying ‘jai bhim’, he says bluntly, ‘

‘This is all drama. It is ‘natakaji’. In reality they can’t ever say Jai of Baba Saheb. They will pretend something to finish Baba Saheb’s name. That’s how they came to power everywhere including Maharashtra. I said you are Nakali Buddhist. You worked against Baba Saheb. I did not celebrate my birthday in August because of this. After making the government prime minister Modi and all others are taking name of Baba Saheb.’

There are many ‘Buddhist monks’s campaigning for BJP in Uttar Pradesh, I say.

‘They all are duplicate Buddhists’, says Bhadant and add that it is the money factor but he emphasise that people have realised these and are getting united and will soon leave BJP.’

They say Buddha is the fifth incarnation of Lord Vishnu and Buddhism is an extension of Hinduism. What would you say.

Have you heard 22 vows. What are they? I will never consider Brahma Vishnu Mahesh as my gods. I will not consider any of the gods and goddesses of Hindu dharma.

You mean these 22 bows are real Buddhism.

Yes. The problem is our culture and tradition of the varna system remains.

Bhadant Nagarjun Surai

Now people all over India are watching you particularly Buddhists and Ambedkarites. How to strengthen the mission of Baba Saheb Ambedkar?


Develop your eyes of Dhamma. You will get many opportunities, honours, money and everything but the only way is 'buddham sharanam gachchami. dhammam sharanam gachchami'. Remember your 22 vows as everything is there. Be knowledgeable. Speak to Bhantes but not to the duplicate ones but the Ambedkarite one, truly devoted to the mission.

What is there in your life which you want to fulfil? What would you like to see before you leave?

My aim is to see Mahabodhi temple liberated and comes to Buddhists and second the strengthening the Buddhist movement and organisations. And not just Buddhism, I want to strengthen the Bahujan Buddhist movement. I want to see Bahujan revolution in Buddhism but we must practice our ancient traditional culture and values too. Strengthen Buddhism. No need to abuse others. Develop your own organisations and strengthen Bahujan Samaj.

Strengthening Bahujan Samaj and building a new samaj is the aim of Bhadant Nagarjun Surai Sasai. He says he does not have many years. He already died once and now he is alive so he wants to complete his task in next two to five years. It is an honour to meet him and see him energised despite his ailing health. We hope his dreams would be fulfilled during his lifetime.

OM PRAKASH GAHATRAJ*

Ambedkar's ideology is the only way for Dalit liberation in Nepal: 

VB: You mentioned yesterday about the visit of Dr Ambedkar in 1956. It is interesting to see how the Nepali Dalit community welcomed Baba Saheb on his visit. I would like to listen from you a little more about this visit and who were the people who hosted him and which places did he visit. What did he advise to the people.

OM: The Govt. of Nepal and Buddhist Group hosted Dr. Ambedkar. He visited Dalits areas (dwellings) specially Deopatan (Pashupati Temple Area), Sahagal (Lalitpur), Dhalku-Chettrapati(Kathmandu) and Bhaktapur. After looking the worst conditions of Dalits, he advised Dalits to go in struggle in large scale for emancipation from this condition.

VB: Where did he stay ? Who were the people who invited him ?

OM: The Govt. of Nepal and Buddhist Group invited Dr. Ambedkar to play vital role to make success of Buddhist Conference in Kathmandu on 1956. He stayed in Sital Nivas (Govt. Guest House- Presently President House).

VB: Baba Saheb redefined Buddhism in India. He felt it was the only way out for the emancipation of the untouchables. Did Buddhism play same emancipatory role in Nepal for untouchables or they have been culturally religiously remained Hindus. Is there any movement to carry this message of Baba Saheb in Nepal?

OM: As far I know no Buddhist did campaign in Nepal to emancipate Dalits from this caste based discrimination. They are remained religiously limited and very rarely they speak for equality in their religious speech. We social workers do movement to carry messages of Baba Saheb in Nepal.

VB: According to your narratives of life of Mohan Lal Kapaliji, Baba Saheb also visited Pashupatinath temple. Are you sure of it? Is there any photograph

* Om Prakash Gahatraj is an encyclopedia of Ambedkarite movement in Nepal. He was associated with a veteran leader Mohan Lal Kapali who took Baba Saheb Ambedkar to various Dalit basties in Kathmandu when he visited there to attend the World Buddhist Conference in 1956. He worked in different capacities with the government of Nepal to help them on various issues related to Dalits and their uplift.

He is now engaged in Dalit movement of Nepal. He is also the Chief Editor of "Pratinidhi" tri-monthly literary Dalit Magazine published in 80s. Writer of the Biography of Mr. Mohan Lal Kapali (Senior Leader of Dalit Movement) published by DNF/ESP. Published many articles in leading newspapers, journals etc.

available? What was his reaction to visit there? Did he express his desire or it was the local community leaders who wanted him to go there.

OM: The major area of Dalits was in Deopatan which is the area of Pashupati Temple. Formerly it was called Deopatan Area and now it is called Pashupati Area. Dr. Ambedkar visited that area to see the condition of Dalits not to worship Pashupati Temple. On the way he saw Pashupati Temple being in the same locality of Dalits but did not worship. Even today there are thousands of Dalits living there. Neither the Dalit leaders wanted him to go there nor was his desire, it was on the way so he saw it.

VB: I can understand the pain Baba Saheb Ambedkar felt deeply disturbed on seeing the conditions of Dalits in Nepal. What was his initial reactions and what advice did he give to the people here.

OM: Dr. Ambedkar was angered with the behaviour of Nepal Government towards Dalits of Nepal and said he was betrayed by the leaders of Nepal while talking in Delhi about Dalits of Nepal. After returning from the visit the leader of the team of Dalit leaders Mr. Saharsanath Kapali (Eldest brother of Mr. Mohan Lal Kapali) gave tea reception in honour of Baba Sahib at the Sital Nivas. At the reception Baba Sahib called on Dalits of Nepal to go on struggle for rights.

VB: You mentioned that Baba Saheb wanted to meet the prime minister but when the PM came to know about Dr Ambedkar's wish to meet him. He himself came to Sheetla Bhavan. Could you elaborate of that meeting? Did the PM give any particular assurance to Dr Ambedkar.

OM: I never mentioned that Baba Saheb wanted to meet the prime minister. When Baba Saheb visited Dalit Basti (Area) and saw the worst condition of Dalits, he became angered against the attitude of Nepal Govt. towards Dalits of Nepal. Seeing the angry mood of Baba Sahib, the liaison officer who was associated on behalf of Govt. in the visit reported the anger of Baba Saheb to the Prime Minister of Nepal (Mr. Tanka Prasad Acharya). After the return of Baba Saheb to the Guest House (Sital Nivas), Then Prime Minister Hon. Acharya invited Baba Saheb to his residence to talk about this matter. When Baba Saheb showed his reluctance to go in his residence, Hon Acharya himself came to the Sital Nivas and assured to Baba Saheb to give due attention to the development of Dalits.

VB: Where is Ambedkarite movement in Nepal? What have been their achievements? Could you share with us the role of Mohan Lal Kapali ji in promoting Ambedkarism and strengthening the Dalit movement in Nepal?

OM: Ambedkarite movement is run by most of Dalit leaders not by non Dalits till now

in Nepal. Late Mr. Mohan Lal Kapali run Ambedkarite movement throughout his life in Nepal. We were also educated and informed about Baba Saheb from him. Now most of Dalit leaders in Nepal are convinced that Dr. Baba Saheb's philosophy is only the way to get rid of caste based discrimination.

VB: What has the the civil society role in Nepal to eliminate discrimination against Dalit. Is there solidarity among various movements in Nepal with the cause of Dalit rights?

OM: There is a little role of the civil society in Nepal to eliminate discrimination against Dalit. There is solidarity among various movements in Nepal with the cause of Dalit rights. But most of the civil society organisations are led by Bramins so there is some problems to be done the work by heart.

VB: What is the status of Dalits in Nepal? Is there affirmative action on part of government for the Dalits in Nepal ?

OM: No one Dalit is in the Council of Ministers even today whereas Dalit's population according to Govt. statistics is more than 13.2 %. Only one Dalit is Chief District Officer out of 75. Out of 601 Constituent Assembly members, only 41 Members are from Dalit community. There is less than one % Dalit recruitment in the Govt. civil service. There is very little affirmative action in the laws that too very poor implementation because all the top leaders of major political parties are Brahmins. They do not like to lose the existing opportunities of their families.

VB: Nepal has outlawed untouchability but discrimination against Dalits and practice of untouchability is prevalent. How does the government handle them? What is the role of NHRC and National Dalit Commission in all this. Do they have power to summon and dismiss the officials who are found violating the law of the land?

OM: NHRC only can recommend to Govt to implement the laws. National Dalit Commission is not constitutional body so it has no power. It can only request to the concerned agency to provide justice. But the stakeholders so far are showing a deaf ear. The Govt. has assigned the job of over-thrugging this problem to Dalits itself through National Dalit Commission and Dalit Development Committee. Non Dalits are not interested in this job.

VB: How strong is the role of left organisations or parties in strengthening the Dalit movement in Nepal? Are they considered to be friend or allies? How do Ambedkarite organisation, if there are any, consider them. What do you think

Om Prakash Gahatraj

has been the role of the Maoists in fighting for the rights of the Dalits in your country?

OM: All they are using Dalits for their own and throw them into the garbage after use. This is reality. Most of the leaders of left parties also are Brahmins so it is easy to understand the reality.

VB: Are political parties ready to give fair representations in their structure or they still want to continue with patronising attitude?

OM: They are giving very less representation to Dalits but not in decision-making level in their parties to show inclusion to donors.

VB: What is the way out to eliminate caste discrimination and untouchability?

OM: The only way out to eliminate caste based discrimination and untouchability is to follow Dr. Ambedkar's philosophy "Be educated, Be organised and Do struggle".

TILAK PARIYAR*

“The revolutionary people’s movement can only be strengthened with scientific temperament and spiritual experiences of Buddha and Ambedkar.”

VB: Tilakji, you are the Central Committee member of your party CPN. It is a great achievement for anyone as there are not many leaders from Dalit communities at the highest echelons of the left movements in India. Could you elaborate how and when you were included in the Central Committee?

TP: I have been in Central Advisory Committee of Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist since 2003, during the People's War and now I am acting as the Secretary of that Committee since 2013. There is dialectical relation between ideology and leadership. On the condition of the majority of the communists with the mixed culture of Marxism and Brahmanism in our society, based on the caste system, the development of the leadership for women and oppressed (Dalit) community is challenging. The leaders developed from the Dalit community should be prepared to work hard and satisfy others in the field of ideology and politics.

VB: Nepal has been a traditional society. Caste system and Untouchability is being practised. Did you face anything like that in your childhood? Have things changed? If yes then how and who changed them?

TP: We initiated the Great People's War with the aim of resolving the contradictions of Nepalese society including political, economical and social ones. By the initiation, Nepalese rulers declared to destroy the movement and finish the Maoists, but failed. That was the result of the dedication of Maoist party struggling to adopt the pro-people policy, solubility with the people, defence of Nationalism and high morale to establish a democracy. During that operation, the Dalits were backward in all sectors of life including economic, political, and social due to upper caste insistence on a caste system with untouchability, which had been going on since thousands of years against the Dalit community. The Dalits were involved in the PW and fought against the

* Mr Tilak Pariyar is a member of the Central Advisory Committee of the Communist Party of Nepal. He is a very senior political leader from a revolutionary party with massive social experience. Hailing from a Pariyar community, which is one of the largest untouchable communities in Nepal, Tilakji rose to the highest body of the party. He is very articulate and a thought-provoking political leader who experienced the caste discrimination in his life. He was attached to the revolutionary movement from his student life when he came to study in Delhi in 1960s. He was impressed with the Marxist ideology and started working for the masses. In a wide ranging discussion with activist-writer

enemy. During the practice of proportional inclusiveness and special rights in People's Government, People's Court and People's Liberation Army, the changes over caste system and untouchability culture were among the base. It is essential to run the campaign of economic, social, cultural transformation and to extend it continuously.

VB: Could you share with us the struggle that you had to do in your childhood? What kind of caste discrimination did you face in your childhood?

TP: In the social structure of caste system and untouchability culture, to take birth in the Dalit family means to face the discrimination within the mother's womb. I was born in a very poor family. My parents were ignorant and uneducated. They did have the courage to send me to the school, but the teachers used to discriminate against me even in the school. I couldn't drink the water fetched by the peon. I had to run to the water tap to drink water. We were addressed with offensive words and physical hurt. I have been struggling against it. My sharp understanding is that the Hindu religious rituals are the origin of the Dalit problem which actually resulted in the Hindu hegemonic oppression of Dalits. We boycotted temples and worshipping, burned the Manusmriti and the books abusing the Dalits. Teachers beat me for this but I kept on my dissent. My rebellious nature and progressive thinking inspired me to be Marxist-Leninist-Maoist.

VB: You studied at the Delhi University and then became part of revolutionary politics. How did you get engaged to the left political ideology?

TP: I was impressed by the instructions of Com. B.D.Randiwe, an Indian communist leader, when I was studying B.A. in Delhi University and was doing part time job in 1964/65. Then I came in contact with Com. Pusplal, the founder of Nepalese Communist Movement, through him and he introduced me to the party. I am proud of my birth in the Dalit community. I have observed that most of the leaders and cadres from non-Dalit background have shown an opportunist character.

VB: In Nepal, despite ideological differences, people accept the role played by the Maoists in bringing the Dalit issues to the core particularly the land relations in the village. Unfortunately, the language and idioms that have been used by the movement still avoid targeting the Brahmanical value system which subjugated the Dalits. Is it deliberate so that you do not lose the upper castes along with you? It is important to use the Marxist terminology of class but caste is a harsh reality too in our society. Have you ever given it a thought that without eliminating the caste system, we can not bring equality in society?

TP: You have asked an important question, it is found true that Economics counts not only the relations of goods but the relations of mankind too and

especially between the classes. Caste system is also a product of class divided society. Thus, the fact is proved that the problem of caste system and untouchability is a form of class exploitation and oppression. It is notable that the whole and parts have dialectical relation; the whole gets completeness only after integrating several parts. To talk about pure class liberation or pure Dalit liberation in isolation means to serve the status-quo. Marxism has no relation with it. The dialectical materialist outlook which understands and transforms the Dalit problem and the spiritualist religious ideology which argues the development of the human society as the wish of a god can't be the same. We can't identify the problem until we are not clear on it. If we show recklessness to treat without the diagnosis, it has risk for side effect or there won't be any efficacy. The cause of the acceptance of Dalit agenda and the question of the land to the Maoists is based on a clear outlook and has a correct political line. Humans need food, dwelling and clothing before politics, cultural tradition, rituals, art, and entertainment. We can operate all types of activities of social cultural transformations on the foundation of them. Economic equality, assurances of political access and social combination are integral parts of each other. It is essential to understand it in totality.

VB: How important is Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar for you and your cadres? As you know Ambedkar now symbolises struggle for dignity and human rights. His acceptance in social movements have transcended beyond India and among huge number of people outside India. Nepal's Dalit movement is also claiming his legacy now. What are the meeting points and where do you differ in perceptions?

TP: Baba Saheb Ambedkar is a respectable and honourable Dalit leader for me. His important contributions to the Dalit movement are rememberable. He struggled for the right to vote. He took a stand for separate electorate system for the Dalits. But he felt obligated to leave it after Gandhi's fast. For the first time in history, a person from the Dalit community was established as the builder of a nation's Constitution, the Indian Constitution. Despite these contributions, he was not clear on the outlook to identify the problem. As the result, he converted to Buddhism on the last moments of his life. I have a strong view that proselytism can't be the right guidance for the liberation of Dalits.

VB: But Dalit representation in CA is merely 8%. In fact, last CA was much better in terms of representation. Will it not be inadequate that without fair representation of Dalits in CA, it would somewhere lose its legitimacy?

TP: The Article 21 of the Interim Constitution of Nepal accepts the principle of proportional inclusiveness on the question of social justice. The population of Dalits is 13.2% as the Governmental statistics and 20% as per the Non-

Governmental one. The number of total members of the Constituent Assembly is 600. So, 78 Dalits as the Government or 120 Dalits as the NGOs have the instinctive right to represent in the CA. But the electoral system of First Past the Post and Mixed system of Proportional List is adopted. Multi-candidate direct election system has made women and Dalits to lose the election as per the system of competition among unequals. The same thing was adopted during the CA election of 2007. At that time, with the influence of 10 years People's War and 19 days People's Movement, 7 Dalits had been elected from the direct election. That was 8.2%. Only 6.8% Dalits are representatives to the so called CA recently. Parliamentarians are active not only in reducing the representation of Dalits but also in dismissing the representation by so called democratic process by vulgarising the proportional electoral system. The two-third majority of the CA of 2007 was pro-people and now the so called CA has two-third majority who are anti-people. If they move to the process, the past pro-people achievements will be thrown away and the agenda of reconstruction of the state will surely be dismissed. That's why we believe the CA election, occurred on 19th November 2013, is without legitimacy. If they are ready to make the Constitution to authorise the people and to protect the national independence, it is essential to make the national political consensus on the essence of the constitution by organising All Political Conference.

VB: Where is Nepal's Dalit movement at the moment? We do not see much stronger struggle against land rights and untouchability. Your party raised the issue but never really challenged the brahmanical hegemony in Nepal. How can Nepal be a representative and egalitarian society?

TP: The problems of right to land and freedom from untouchability are complementary to each other. The New Democratic revolution is inevitable to solve this problem in Nepal which contains the situation of semi-feudalist and neo-colonial society. To defend the nation's independence and enrich the people with rights is the basic minimum goal of the New Democratic revolution. In the past, we had entered into the process of building equalised society by establishing people's government, challenging the Brahmanical norms and hegemony. But the revolution suffered a setback due to the reactionary forces, both foreign and domestic, and the class and national capitulationist elements inside the party. It will take time to prepare for the revolution but it is essential to organise the revolutionaries, empower the internal side and balance the external powers. It is possible to build an equalised society by forwarding the process of unity-struggle-transformation.

VB: You have differed with your original party led by Comrade Prachanda. What were the points of difference? He is trying to play an important role in democracy and bring change through democracy. It is difficult to go back to the

pre-democratic positions after a peace accord. If you do not participate in democratic exercise, wouldn't it be easier for your opponents to blame you for not having people's support?

TP: Prachanda has abandoned the political line of "People's insurrection on the foundation of the People's War", which was passed by the plenum of 7000 cadres, and adopted the so-called socialist revolution saying that the New Democratic revolution is over. This is the result of his ideological deviation. How can one be the leader of the original party who had abandoned the official line of the party? We have nothing to say if it is original by the recognition of American and Indian ruling class.

VB: You claimed that you will go for Janvidroh? How can you reassure the Dalits and minorities that this Janvidroh has a place for them? How many of the Dalits are represented in the highest body of parties in Nepal? I have no issue people claiming to work for the Dalits but you can not sidetrack the issue of the leadership emerging from the community.

TP: The question of the construction of a revolutionary party cannot be answered by the method of proportional representation. Dalits and backward classes are basic classes for the revolution but all of them haven't developed a revolutionary leadership. Party should prioritise the development of leaders from the basic classes and communities. The leaders and cadres of the concerned communities should be clear ideologically and theoretically. There are 14 Dalits at the central level in our party. All of them are the comrades who had fought the 10 years People's War and had achieved an ideological and political clarity. But the leadership is not developing as expected. The People's War or an insurrection can't be done by subjective method. These can be initiated by the plan-of-action line and action-plan on the basis of concrete analysis of concrete circumstances and other objective situations.

VB: What is the socio-economic agenda that you want to set for Nepal? How do you propose to bring equality in the society? Untouchability and other traditions like Kumari and Baadi are still being practised. There is manual scavenging (cleaning human excreta) from Mehtar community but so far these issues have not come up for discussions at the highest level. They have not become part of the public discourse and Dalit movement.

TP: First of all, these agenda can't be implemented for the interest of workers, peasants, Dalits, women and the oppressed people without the establishment of a New Democratic Republic. So, political revolution is the essential precondition. After this, the socio-economic agenda, which are related to solutions of the problems of nationality, democracy and people's concerns, will achieve the desired importance and effectiveness. Our party says that the

interests and rights of workers, peasants, women, Dalits, indigenous nationalities, Madheshis, Muslims, backward mass and national capitalist class. It says the special rights to women; Dalits and Muslims community should be arranged with compensation until the relative development on social, economic and political equality is achieved. It also says the arrangement of right to preference and assurance of representation to all organs of state power on the basis of proportional inclusive theory should be managed. Our party wants to develop federalism with the identity of oppressed ethnicity, construction and development of independent national economy, termination of feudal land ownership and revolutionary land reform, independent foreign policy, democratic educational policy, democratic judicial system, resolution of basic problems of people's concern including education, health, employment, food sovereignty and residence as well as democratic and scientific culture.

On the question of solving the problem of Baadi, Mehtar and Kumari customs, as you have mentioned are one of the problems of the entire Dalit community. And it should be resolved by the process of 'Unity, Struggle, Transformation.' Our party will give these communities special priority within the provisions meant for Dalits.

VB: Do you support political reservation for the Dalits which of course, is there in your Constitution but there is no reservation for the Dalits in the government services? Without giving them enough representation in the government services, you can not really do away with discrimination. What is your party's view on it?

TP: The genuine MLM communists don't believe in the policy of reservation because it diverts the issue of proportional participation of all sectors based on the population. This policy depends on the mercy of rulers instead of our own rights. The policy of proportional representation is correct in the form of rights. On the basis of theory of compensation for the historical oppression since thousands of years, additional rights (Special rights) should be given till the relative equality isn't established. These rights can be increased or decreased on the basis of Human Development Index. Because these rights are given to Dalits by deducting from the share of non-Dalits, termination of untouchability and environment of social combination would take place rapidly. The thematic committees of the now dissolved CA had recommended the special rights for the new Constitution.

VB: Number of people from different movements in India, are going to read your views. What is your message to them? Do you believe Buddha, Marx and Ambedkar converge at certain points and if we bring them together, a revolution will not be a dream but a reality?

TP: I would like to pass my message to all Indian oppressed and justice loving people that the liberation movement will obtain the necessary speed by moving ahead including the leadership of the MLM scientific ideology and spiritual experiences of Buddha and Ambedkar. The main focus should be given to the scientific ideology and rational outlook.

ARUN KUMAR*

The history of Ambedkarite movement in United Kingdom

VB: When did you arrive in UK? What were the reasons of coming to UK?

AK: I came to UK in 1977. In India, after Matriculation, I joined government service in the Punjab Civil Secretariat at Chandigarh as a clerk in 1969. During my eight years in this service, most of the time I was a student in the Punjab University Evening College, Chandigarh and completed my MA in Political Science. During my 2nd year in MA, I was elected as the class representative to represent students. At that time, the Scheduled Caste students studying in the evening colleges used to get stipends under the Govt. of India scheme. But the GOI stopped those stipends and students were hit financially. With the help and support of ST/BC Employees Union, campaigned and lobbied Punjab government headed by CM, Giani Zail Singh to continue the scheme. Consequently we were successful and scholarships were restored by the Punjab Government.

To bring some flavour in the dull lives of the government employees, Punjab Secretariat Naveen Rang Manch, a social, drama and cultural organisation of govt employees was set up in 1972 and I was one of the founder members of this organisation. As a Publicity Secretary, I was instrumental in staging a number of plays in the Chandigarh's prestigious Tagore Theatre in the presence of several Ministers, Chief Minister of Punjab and other government high officials. I remained in that position since its inception till I left the government job.

I was also active in Punjab Civil Secretariat Employees Union. I went on fast for 48 hours in 1972 during a strike in 1972. The 20 point programme by Mrs. Indira Gandhi during emergency was very much in favour of the poor people especially for SC/STs. Non Scheduled Caste people were forming a front to oppose reservation. After the emergency, the government employee Union openly started campaigning against reservation. I along with other SC employees came out from the main union and started taking interest in the Scheduled Caste and Backward Employees Union. Non Scheduled Caste Union was formed first in the Punjab Civil Secretariat which later on spread to all India especially in Gujarat where a number of SC/Sts were killed when doctors went on strike. SC employees were being harassed and humiliated. They were feeling

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very insecure and needed protection. That was the time when BAMCEF was formed.

As a government employee, I also faced harassment and discrimination. As a result of one of the prominent members of the organising committee of the social club, I was quite popular amongst the government employees and had direct access to the officers. Nobody knew that I was belonging to SC. But the officials in the establishment branch which dealt with confidential reports, leave etc knew the record of every individual employee. They were quite jealous with me moving around with officers of high ranks than them. They wanted to find an excuse to frame me. As mentioned earlier I was studying in the evening college. I asked for a leave for the preparation of my MA exams and they refused. I was depressed and went to doctor and he gave me sick note for four weeks and I appeared in the exams. When I went back, I was given a show cause notice saying that my illness was an excuse for appearing in the exams. I told them that one could appear in the exams while he was ill. But they didn't agree with me and I was censured. After a year, my junior was promoted and I was ignored. That hit me hard and I questioned the decision. In spite of my immaculate service record throughout my service, I became the victim of caste discrimination. When everybody else was doing the same thing, no action was taken against them. I decided to challenge the decision. Coincidentally I was working in the Social Welfare branch. As I had a good rapport with my seniors, I went straight to my Deputy Secretary who was also one of the patterns of our social club, was quite helpful to me in my studies and wanted me to appear in IAS. I explained the entire situation to him and he immediately phoned the Secretary concerned. Within a week, I had the promotion orders in my hands. The Establishment branch did another cheek and transferred me to a branch in which the in charge was another SC. But the work load was so heavy nobody attended that particular work from months. Whosoever was put on that work took medical leave and got transferred. My Superintendent called me and explained me that I was deliberately transferred on this seat so that he would be forced to make a complaint against me. That would give bad name to him and me. Being a SC incharge, he didn't want to harm me. I assured him not to worry. It was a hard work and I had to spend my own time by overstaying in the office for clearing the work load. As an SC, I had to show more than others. I didn't want to give to so called upper castes to say that SCs are inefficient. I cleared all pending work with a month and I became a favourite to my seniors. After three or four months, I resigned from the job and came to UK.

I came to UK for marriage purposes. To be frank, the main reason was for coming here was economic. I come from a small village in Punjab from a very poor family. My father served in the army for a little while. After having a mental health issue, he left the army and started as a tailoring profession.

Occasionally he would work as a weaver. His mental health was so severe that he stopped working altogether and he needed a constant care. My mother worked in the fields to feed and educate us-my two sisters and one brother. But my mother was determined not to let us work in the fields. Even my elder sister went to school when it was a taboo to send girls to school. Occasionally I was going to fields to work on daily wages. In spite of hardship, she sent all of us to school and gave education. That is why after Matriculation, I preferred to have a job and help my family. I became the breadwinner in the family. Working at Chandigarh, it was too expensive. My more than half of the pay was going in the rent and food. I was studying as well. So I was not able to save anything for my family. I was frustrated and living hand to mouth. I was getting depressed. During that period, one of my relations from UK was visiting India and offered the proposal for marriage. Without much thinking, I immediately accepted the offer and came to UK in August 1977.

VB: What kind of obstacles you faced after coming to UK. How did you handle them?

Where did you start your work initially? How and when did you settle in Bedford?

AK: My maternal uncle and his family were living in Bradford, West Yorkshire. I went to him and they organised my wedding and my wife joined me there. I immediately started finding work but no avail. Ultimately I found work in the steel foundry. I didn't have any choice. I never worked in such an environment. A Pakistani man became my friend and he helped me a lot. I wanted to earn a lot of money and return to India. My uncle was upset as I didn't have decent job. My brother in law suggested me to move to Bedford as there were more chances to get better job. After juggling with a couple of jobs in factories, I was able to get a job in the Royal Mail. There was a lot of overtime available in that job and I was working 15-16 hours a day. I was not thinking about my career or anything else apart from money. Within a year I bought my own house and settled. As my children were growing up, the idea of going back to India disappeared.

VB: Bedford is famous for the work done by Ambedkar Mission from the 1960s. You celebrate Ambedkar Jayanti every year. When Ambedkar Mission did started working here, what was its major work and who were the forces behind it.

AK: In the UK, people from India started migrating in 50s. In Bedford, there were a number of brick kilns and steel industry making car parts for Vauxhall vehicles. This car factory was based in Luton not very far from Bedford and partly in Bedford. As Dalits were uneducated unskilled labour, most of them

were attracted to Bedford in the brick kilns. Majority of Dalits came from Doaba region of Punjab which was a base for the Ad-Dharam movement of Babu Mangu Ram and Ambedkarite movement. They had an influence of those two movements. There were certain people in Bedford who were directly involved in the activities of Republican Party of India. Mr Chanan Chahal was one of the pioneers of early Ambedkarite movement in the UK especially in Bedford. The Republican Group of Great Britain was set up in early 60s which included a number of Ambedkarites from all over UK. Chanan Chahal even contested a local election from this group. They invited a number of Ambedkarite leaders from India to make the people aware of the plight of our people in India and campaigned against the atrocities. In 1968, there was a first demonstration against the Shankaracharya of Puri when he advocated and justified caste on the basis of scriptures. Over 7000 people participated in the protest. Mr. Lahori Ram Balley, Late Bhagwan Dass, Late Sohan Lal Shastri, late Yashwant Rao Ambedkar (son of Babasaheb Ambedkar), Khobragade and many other Ambedkarites visited Bedford. With the split of RPI, the Republican Group also disintegrated. There were certain people from Delhi settled in Bedford who had a football team run by Bheem Association in Delhi. Similarly they formed Bheem Association, sports club, in Bedford in 1972. They arranged a couple of tournaments. Chanan Chahal was not interested in sports. He used Bheem Association as a vehicle for social change. He was a forceful orator and writer in English and Punjabi and very vocal against caste discrimination. In 1976, a local newspaper Bedfordshire Times ran a feature on various communities in Bedfordshire in which Chanan Chahal introduced Dr Ambedkar to the people in Bedfordshire. In this very article, one of the Hindus mentioned that Untouchables were sub humans created by gods for the service of upper castes. They were dirty that is why they were not allowed to touch others and kept outside the temple. Dalits in Bedford took it as an offensive and had a meeting to protest against that person. The reporter involved in story held a meeting with both parties where the culprit had to apologise. But Dalits at the time were not satisfied with half hearted apology and were so angry that they boycotted his shop. Ultimately he had to close his shop. Chanan Chahal led this campaign.

In 1982, Bhagwan Dassji again visited Bedford. As he was quite active in the activities of Ambedkar Mission Society Punjab, he suggested us to change the name to Ambedkar Mission Society to become a part of an international mission of Babasaheb Dr Ambedkar.

Chanan Chahal was instrumental in starting a Punjabi journal 'Kirti Weekly' in Punjab. He authored a book in Punjabi 'Main Hindu Kyon Nahin' (Why I am not Hindu?). He also wrote to many papers here in the UK and appeared in a number of documentaries on caste discrimination. In 2008, Hindu Council UK

published a report 'Caste System' to oppose the government legislation against caste discrimination. The report denied the existence of caste system in the UK and accused the foreigners and British in India for importing caste into India. Accusations were also made that the campaigners for legislation are trying to spread misinformation about Hinduism and attempts were being made to vilify the Hindu people. In reply to this report, Chanan Chahal prepared a paper 'The Evil of Caste: - The Caste System as the Largest Systemic Violation of Human Rights in Today.' To counter the misinformation and fallacy of the argument put forward by the Hindu Council UK, Chanan Chahal's response 'Evil of Caste' was a detailed examination of Hindu Scriptures and every point raised was rebutted and discussed.

VB: You have documented many incidents of caste discrimination in the United Kingdom by the Indian immigrants. Is caste discrimination bigger than the discrimination the migrants from India faced from whites due to their colour or race?

AK: Colour or race discrimination is visible. It is very easy to prove. But in the case of caste, the culprit and victim of caste discrimination is of the same colour and race. To understand caste based discrimination, either you need to be Asian or understand the Asian culture. When the coloured people including Asians and blacks from African countries migrated to the UK, naturally their colour, culture and way of living were different from the host community i.e. the white people. They were looked upon differently. At the time of high unemployment, whites were considering that immigrants were taking over their jobs and houses. There was an element of hatred towards immigrants and they faced discrimination in employment and goods and services provided by the state. This discrimination was faced by all Indians irrespective of their caste or religion. All immigrants from various countries got together, fought against this discrimination and Race Relations Act came into form and discrimination on the basis of colour and race was prohibited by law. Initially when the Indians migrated to UK in 1950s, they were single men and were in small numbers. During that period, there was a wide spread racial discrimination. They forgot their caste identity out of fear from the host community and for security reasons, they used to live together sometimes sharing the same houses and even same rooms. They were eating together and the caste didn't matter. Soon the families started coming and caste began to raise its head. The upper castes feared that the children might get mix up with each other and get married to a person different from their caste. To avoid inter-caste marriages, parents telling their children that persons belonging to Dalit communities were used to work in their fields and homes as servants and are inferior to them. They were taking a pride in their caste. There were certain cases where there were fights in schools on the basis of caste. This high and low phenomenon travelled to

workplaces and hospitals. The caste based temples also started cropping up. The music industry has played a major role in glorifying the castes especially 'Jats' in Punjab.

VB: One of the stories that you have said about the pub owned by an Indian who used to taunt in abusing language. What was the entire case and what happened ultimately.

AK: No that pub was owned by an English lady. That pub was located in the locality where majority of Dalits were living. After finishing their day's hard work, they were going to the pub for socialising where they played cards, darts and dominoes etc. At that time there were no Asian programmes on TV and there was no other way of entertainment. As majority of the clients in the pub were from low caste 'Chamars' The 'Jats' (so called high caste in Punjab) started calling it a 'Chamar Pub'. Surprisingly if you asked anybody about the real name of the pub, nobody knew it. If you ask somebody about 'Chamar Pub', people would give exact location of the pub. That pub was stigmatised as if it was belonging to a low caste person. Sometimes abusive language was also used against each other on the basis of caste. In the surrounding areas, there was graffiti on walls and some derogatory remarks were written about Chamars.

In 1985, Late Mr Chanan Chahal publically announced that as result of ill-treatment in Hinduism, he would be leaving his parental religion and embrace Buddhism. At that time there was a television programme called BBC Network East exclusively for Asians. They made a documentary film about 10-15 minutes on his conversion and caste discrimination in which I and some of my colleagues including Ram Pal in Ambedkar Mission gave interviews on caste discrimination. The story about the pub was also covered. As this programme was watched by only Asians, nobody else noticed much about it.

During the Dr Ambedkar birth Centenary in 1991, we were raising the profile of Dr Ambedkar by writing to print media, TV and Radio. Somehow one of the national newspapers 'The Daily Telegraph' came to know about the pub story and was interested in covering it. He interviewed me in front of the pub and flashed full page story with my picture. That was the first story published in the national newspaper on caste discrimination in the UK. It turned out to be a bombshell on caste discrimination. I was contacted by various newspapers. The local newspaper 'Bedfordshire on Sunday' also ran a story with my picture. Sooner this story was published, it became a talking point in Asian community and I started getting threats from Indians especially from Dalits for exposing caste and giving a bad name to the community. The landlady of the pub claimed that the Asian clientele of the pub dropped. She threatened the newspaper and me to sue for defamation. Naturally, I was scared and reported the matter to police in case somebody attacked me physically. The local paper 'Bedfordshire

on Sunday' ran the story for three four weeks continuously. I had a relief when a few letters were published in my support. Even one of the women from so called upper caste gave a statement that 'untouchables are the scum of earth. If you paid me, I wouldn't touch them'. My point was proved. Mr V.T. Rajshekhar started sending Dalit Voice to the pub. The landlady understood that the matter was too deep. She kept quiet and withdrew her threat and the matter died down. Later on another leading national daily 'The Guardian' also covered the story of caste discrimination in Bedford.

VB: The stories that I have heard here in UK are disturbing. I never felt that there would be caste discrimination among the Punjabis as it is our general feeling that Sikhism is an egalitarian religion and there is no caste system among them. But the stories of caste discrimination in UK expose dirty caste practices among the Sikhs too. What is the reason and what kind of discrimination the Dalits face here.

AK: Caste is basically a Hindu phenomenon. Unfortunately, whosoever came into contact with it got infected. Today no religion in India has escaped from this disease and Sikhism is no exception. Though the Sikh scripture, Guru Granth Saheb condemns caste and preach equality but this equality remained in their holy book. Social structure of a Punjab village is no different from any village in any part of the country. Punjab villages are divided between the localities of Jat Sikhs and Dalits whether they are Ravidassis (Chamars) or Valmikis (Bhangis). Jat Sikhs are land owning community and Dalits work in their fields. So their relationship is of haves and have-nots. Jats consider that are superior and high in status. They dominate in all fields-economic, social and religious and regulate the social life of villages. They give Dalits the same treatment as caste Hindus give in other states. In music, Jats are glorified. They have their separate places of worship. Even cremation grounds are separate from each other. In Punjab, you will find Jat Sikh, Ravidassia Sikh (Chamar), Mazhabi Sikh (Valmiki), Ramgarhia Sikh (carpenter) and so on.

On the name of culture, Indians have brought their traditions and customs to UK and caste is one of them. Jats still consider Dalits lower and inferior to them. They seldom leave an opportunity when Dalits are not reminded that they belong to lower castes. Dalits in the UK built their own religious places as they were badly treated in the mainstream Gurudwaras. Dalit men and women were not allowed to work in the kitchen and serve food to the congregation. I have heard the stories from our elders when Jat Sikhs refused to accept 'Prasad' from a Dalit.

Former Mayor of Wolverhampton, Mr. Bishan Dass, in his biography 'Pride and Prejudice' recorded his own experience of discrimination when he contested a local council election in Wolverhampton. One of the Jat Sikhs

mobilised his community against Mr Dass to defeat him in the election. Mr Dass is an Ambedkarite who was the General Secretary of the Republican Group of Great Britain. Similarly, the former Mayor of Coventry, Ram Lakha, a Labour Councillor who is a Dalit, faced intense discrimination from 'upper castes' when he stood for election in a largely Indian ward. 'During campaigning he was often told that he would not get people's vote as he was a 'chamar', a low caste Dalit. So he filed his nomination in a non-Asian constituency and was able to win.

Matrimonial adverts can be seen in the papers where a particular caste men/women prefer their own caste for marriages. Inter-caste marriages are fiercely opposed. There were quite a few fights and physical assaults here in the UK as a result of inter caste relationships.

VB: Why do you think that the British Government not interested in implementing the Equality Law even when it is passed by the Parliament?

AK: After so many years of hard work, the both houses of parliament accepted our point of view and the discrimination on the basis of caste has been outlawed. But it has not been implemented. Some of the Hindus and Sikhs consider that this law is an attack on their religion and giving them bad name. But it is not a truth. There is a strong lobby of Hindus and Sikhs who are opposing this legislation. The opponents, especially Hindus, occupy the offices of influence in the government and they are advising the government that there is no caste discrimination in the UK and the law will cause more problems. There is an All Party Parliament Group for British Hindus and Hindu Council UK have regular meetings with them. There are some Hindu intellectuals who are writing against this legislation. Even they claim that caste is invented by foreigners. All the big businesses in the UK are owned by Hindus and Sikhs. They pay funds to the various political parties. Naturally, the government listen to them more than us as we have nothing to offer. There is also a pressure from the Indian government as trade is more important than human right issues. British government doesn't want to upset the Indian government in case they lose contracts.

Now the voices against caste discrimination are heard in America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and other countries of Europe but no country has come up with legislation. Apart from India, only Nepal has made laws against Caste based discrimination (CBD). UK is the first Western country which has enacted legislation against CBD. Hindus and Sikhs are opposing this legislation as they know once this legislation is implemented in this country, it will set up a precedent and other countries would follow suit. They are doing all possible efforts to block this legislation so the voices against caste in other countries are also stopped.

VB: What are Ambedkarite organisations doing in this regard? Do you think that there are powerful Hindu groups working against it? Are there other communities of upper caste engaged in it, say Sikhs, Muslims, Christians etc? How do you plan to counter it?

AK: As I mentioned earlier there is strong Hindu and Sikh lobby opposing this legislation. Christians and Muslims also deny that there is caste discrimination. Indian Christians hardly take interest in this issue. As I explained earlier, initially this battle was started by Ambedkarites only. With more and more awareness about caste, like minded people also joined in. With the increasing atrocities on Christian Dalits in India, Indian Christians became active as well and they formed Dalit Solidarity Group. Late Bhagwan Dass, a Buddhist was the President of Dalit Solidarity Programme in India. This organisation was made up of various religious groups but dominated by the Christians. Dass Saheb visited many times in the UK and other countries and raised Dalit issues in universities and other forums. So there was some education in intellectual circles. During that period, Rev. David Haslam who was very active in the apartheid movement, visited India and saw very closely the plight of Dalits. On his return, he set up an organisation Dalit Solidarity Network UK. As they had organisational skill as well money behind it, work on Dalit issues started being raised in organised way in the international human rights organisations as well as in the governmental departments. Other organisation called of 'Voice of Dalits' headed by a Christian from Kerala came into existence as well. Ambedkarites assisted and played an important part in both of the organisations. When the British government issued a white paper on Single Equality Act, another organisation Caste-Watch UK was formed in which Ambedkarites, Ravidasshis, Valmikis and Christians were represented. This organisation was set up purely to concentrate on caste legislation. Some people were not happy with the working of this organisation and they called a meeting for a larger alliance and anti Caste discrimination alliance UK came into existence of which our President Ms Santosh Dass is a Vice Chair. Even the President of CasteWatchUK is also a staunch Ambedkarite and Buddhist. Ambedkarite organisations under the umbrella of the Federation of Ambedkarite and Buddhist Organisations UK are raising this issue and fully supporting and assisting all organisations engaged in highlighting the caste discrimination. We regularly lobby the lawmakers. During the discussion in the Parliament, we sent a petition to all the members of both houses of the British Parliament. Ambedkarite organisations along with other organisations produced the cases of discrimination before the National Institute of Educational and Cultural Research (NIECER) who published its report confirming the CBD in the UK. This report also widely quoted Chanan Chahal's 'Evil of Caste'

VB: Why are Asian communities unable to shed their caste prejudices? How long will they remain confined to their narrow caste minds? What is the way out?

AK: It is unfortunate that Asian communities are still holding on to their caste. It is not their fault. They have been brainwashed and conditioned to accept this system for thousands of years. We are told every day that our birth is because of our deeds in the previous life. If we follow the dictates of Varnashram, we may be able to be born into a high caste. One is born into a particular caste and dies into it. The membership of caste is not transferable. A person follows this system as a religious duty and has become a norm in dealing with other members of society. It has ingrained in their blood. Until the caste remains, the feelings of high and low will remain.

Some people say that it would die down with the passage of time. But I don't see that way. Caste is considered as an essential part of their culture and religion. Some of the Hindu intellectuals are trying to justify it. They say that caste is different from Jati which is based on good or bad deeds. As Gandhiji also justified caste on the basis on 'Karamic theory'. Now, most of the religious worshipping places are built on the basis of caste and the Indian Diaspora is fully divided into caste groups. The coming generation will follow their elders by not only going but also managing to the temples built by their forefathers. They have developed a sense of belongings to a particular caste. Only inter caste marriages can break the barriers and caste can be eradicated. Though the youngsters have started this trend, but the parents need to take initiative to arrange inter caste marriages.

VB: UK has the vast Dalit community, perhaps the largest one in the world outside India, which is very influential and powerful. They own radio stations, organise TV programmes and have Gurudwaras and Buddha Viharas too yet over the years we are witnessing some unfortunate trends of differences among them. The differences in the name of particular identities. Will these differences be overcome or you think they are going to increase further.

AK: It is true that UK has the largest Dalit community outside India. Unfortunately, they are all fragmented into various religious groups. These groups are founded after the names of their patron saints such as Valmiki, adopted by the sweepers and scavengers of North India and Ravidasi after the name of Guru Ravidass. The followers of Dr Ambedkar embraced Buddhism. The real triumph of the caste system lies in conditioning the consciousness of every caste that they are superior to others. This feeling has created divisions between various castes. It is true that they are owning radio stations and arrange TV programmes but they are all caste based promoting a particular caste. They consider their caste as a religion and take pride in it. In the name of identity, in

actual fact they are promoting and glorifying caste though they claim that they are against caste system. Media has played a significant role to establish caste identities. Ambedkarites have ideological differences with these religious groups. An Ambedkarite is not a caste. It is a symbol of change and revolution. He believes in humanism. He rejects the existence of God, rebirth, and soul, sacred scriptures that teach discrimination, fate and heaven because all this philosophy has made him a subservient to others. He represents a exploited man on the earth. On the positive side, they have all come together on the issue of discrimination whether it is in India or UK. All these groups demonstrated in front of the British Parliament and Indian High Commission in support of legislation to outlaw caste discrimination and against the atrocities on Dalits. At least they have realised that their problems are common.

VB: You are the General Secretary of FABO which is truly an Ambedkarite

Organisation. What kind of initiatives are you taking in this regard to bring all kinds of Dalit groups together in UK?

AK: As a grass root worker, one needs to be very careful in dealing with other religious groups in case somebody gets offended. If we can leave religious matters aside, there is a possibility of a common ground where all Dalits can meet. We had various conferences where we invited various community leaders from different backgrounds to talk on the issues concerning Dalit empowerment. We had a large conference in Bedford in 1999 where over 200 people attended from all over the country. We helped to set up 'Dalit Forum for Social Justice UK' comprising of representation from different Dalit groups. Our objective was to promote leadership from Valmiki and Ravidassia community and Ambedkarites remained in the background so these communities should feel a sense of belonging to the organisation. After a couple of years, this organisation died down because of lack of interest from these groups and ego problem between the leaders. Later on 'Anti Caste Discrimination Alliance UK' was also formed on the same principle in 2008. I was one of the members who were present at the formation of this organisation and FABO UK fully supports its activities. I am associated with the Federation of Ambedkarite and Buddhist Organisations UK since its inception in 1985. We as a team did many monumental works. We always sought cooperation from different communities and gave them due honour and representation in our functions. On the issue of caste, we have helped and cooperated with all organisations campaigning to include caste into British law. Whenever we issued a press release that was on behalf of various groups so that they feel valued. We have developed a good working relationship with other organisations. We will continue this partnership in the future. We in Bedford have a good working relationship with other organisations and set up an example for others.

VB: What do you think are the biggest challenge before us as Ambedkarite? How do you think the mission of Dr Ambedkar for an enlightened world could be achieved?

AK: Ambedkarites, whether they are in India or anywhere in the World, are the most outspoken on Dalit issues. They are considered as the biggest challenge to the orthodoxy and the establishment. We have seen what happened to Rohit Vemula and it is happening to many Vemulas in our country. In this situation, the followers of Babasaheb must forget their petty differences and get together to fight for the common cause. We need to learn and appreciate the work done by other organisations whether they are small or large and try to work with them rather than against them. Another biggest challenge we face is today everybody says that he/she is a follower of Ambedkar. We need to be watchful of their actions. Dr Ambedkar stood for secularism and it is reflected in his constitution. He always stood for minorities and their empowerments. Today so-called followers of Dr Ambedkar are joining and supporting those forces who are against the core values of secularism enshrined in our constitution. Minorities in India suffer as they are victims of silence. Dr Ambedkar never stopped raising his voice against injustice. If we really follow Dr Ambedkar, we need to speak all the time. Freedom of speech is our fundamental right' If it is suppressed; we must come forward in unity to condemn such actions. Ambedkarites have more responsibility to protect those values Babasaheb fought for all his life.

When I joined Ambedkar movement in 70s, it was restricted only to the Indian community and not many people were familiar with Dr Ambedkar's contribution and achievement. Whenever we talked to media, we had to give introduction about Dr Ambedkar. It was essential to raise the profile of Dr Ambedkar to make the Western society familiar with Dr Ambedkar's contribution to the human rights movement. In 1989, under the auspices of FABO UK, Ambedkar Centenary Celebration Committee was formed not just to celebrate Dr Ambedkar birth anniversary but also to raise his profile and work to eradicate discrimination whether it is based on race, colour, religion, gender or caste. Functions at the London School of Economics, Grays Inn, Royal Common Wealth Hall, India House, both Houses of the British Parliament and many other prominent places were arranged and secured a wide coverage in the media. One of the functions was attended by the daughter of Lord Mountbatten of Burma. Four volumes of souvenirs were produced covering Dr Ambedkar's various aspects of work. Exhibitions and talks were arranged at a number of libraries in the UK. Late V.P. Singh, former Prime Minister of India was also invited. The stage was set for future programmes. Later on, FABO UK took up the task of installing Dr Ambedkar's statues at the places associated with Dr Ambedkar. As a result, his statues were installed at the

London School of Economics, London, Columbia University, USA and at India House, Indian high Commission. Later on Ambedkar Mission Society Bedford donated Dr Ambedkar's bust to Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada. Now we are happy that statues are also installed in York University, Toronto, Canada, Hungary and Japan. The house where Dr Ambedkar stayed during his studies in London has also been purchased and converted into a museum. This proposal was sent to the Government of Maharashtra by our President, Ms Santosh Dass MBE. During that period many British people started taking keen interest in Ambedkar. One of them was Kenneth Griffith, a prominent film actor, presenter and documentary maker. Ambedkar International Institute was set up of which he remained President till his death in 2006. He made a documentary film 'Untouchable' for BBC on the life of Dr Ambedkar.

It took us about fifty years to bring Dr Ambedkar to World stage. Now he doesn't need any introduction. Even his birthday was celebrated at the United Nations headquarters. His contribution is being recognised by intellectuals and human rights movements all over the World. Caravan to fulfil his mission is unstoppable and is going forward. We need to be careful that his ideology is not appropriated and diluted.

VB: In Bedford, you had the great legacy of legendary Ambedkarite coming and working. We have heard how much you had supported Advocate Bhagwan Das ji when he came to UK, stayed there for several months and prepared his presentation for UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. That superb presentation. You still have so much of documentation and memories of him.

AK: Yes, Bedford has played a fair share of its part in the Ambedkar movement. Many legendary Ambedkarites and politicians such as L.R. Balley, Sohan Lal Shastri, Yashwant Rao Ambedkar, Parkash Ambedkar, R.R. Bole, Advocate Bhagwan Dass, Nanak Chand Rattu, V.P. Singh, Ram Vilas Paswan and many others visited Bedford. Ambedkarites in the UK, especially in Bedford, have great respect for Bhagwan Dassji. He visited Bedford a number of times. Mr. Bhagwan Das was one of the few Ambedkarite scholars involved in highlighting the plight of Dalits at international level. He was one of the founder members of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP). He attended many sessions of the (WCRP) held in Kenya, Japan, Malaysia, USA and many other countries. He gave testimony in the 36th Session of the United Nations Commission on Prevention of Discrimination of Minorities held at Geneva in August 1983 on behalf of Dr Ambedkar Mission Society, Bedford and many other organisations from India and abroad. Before going to Geneva, he stayed with us for a couple of weeks. While preparing his testimony, Mr. Das suggested that it would be nice if a few copies of his testimony were made for distribution to the delegates. It would leave a long lasting impact. At that time

there was no facility of modern computers and photocopying. We bought an old type cyclostyle copier. Mr. Dass typed his speech on stencils and we made copies. We all finished this work about 2 O'clock in the morning. Over hundred copies were made which he took with him to Geneva

After this testimony, the Indian Muslim, Sikh and Hindu delegates turned against him and conspired to omit his name from the next session of WCRP to be held in Nairobi, Kenya. Mr. Das asked us to write to the Secretary General of WCRP and explained the situation. A letter was written to the Secretary General, Dr. Homer A. Jack with the request to include him in the delegation as he was the only voice of the voiceless people in India. Dr. Jack was a genuine person. He thanked the Ambedkar Mission Society, Bedford for letting him know the conspiracy and assured us that Mr. Das would attend the future conferences. Das Sahib was invited as an 'expert on the Asian Affairs'. All Indian delegates kept a distance from him. Indian High Commissioner in Nairobi invited all Indian delegates for dinner but boycotted Mr. Das. Bhagwan Dass ji told me later on that boycott incident went in his favour as delegates from other countries came to know the truth and Mr. Das became a regular invitee to the future conferences. Since then we were in regular contact with each other.

In 1988, Federation of Ambedkarite & Buddhist Organisations UK had a preliminary meeting to celebrate Ambedkar Birth Centenary in the UK. The meeting was held under the chairmanship of Bhagwan Dassji. On his initiative, an organisation 'International Ambedkar Institute, UK' was set up to take Ambedkar thought in the premier institutes in the UK and do some research work. Renowned actor and filmmaker, late Kenneth Griffith was elected as a Chairman who later on made a documentary film on Baba Sahib Ambedkar. During this visit, Das Sahib visited Bedford where he was interviewed by the BBC Radio, Bedfordshire and Chiltern Radio. I requested the BBC presenter for a copy of his interview. He was kind enough to send me the original recording of his interview which I still treasure.

VB: Bedford had another legend called Dr Chanan Chahal. His anti-caste work was extraordinary. Could you share your thoughts about him and other Ambedkarite friends?

AK: Chanan Chahal was one of the founding members of the local Guru Ravidass Sabha, Bedford and later on Guru Ravidass Sabha, UK, Ambedkar Mission Society Bedford and Federation of Ambedkarite and Buddhist Organisations. UK. He was also a prominent member of the Republican Group of Great Britain set up in early sixties. Chanan was well read, a forceful orator in both English and Punjabi. He galvanised not only Ambedkarite but also Dalit movement in the Europe. He travelled USA, Canada, Europe and India to take

Babasaheb's message. His articles on caste discrimination appeared in a number of papers in UK and India. He was instrumental in organising a number of demonstrations and giving memorandums to the Government of India and the British Government against the atrocities on Dalits in India. He authored a book in Punjabi 'Mein Hindu Kiun nahin' (Why I am not a Hindu) and the preface was written by Bhagwan Dassji. This book became one of the best sellers in Punjabi circles. He started a periodical 'Kirti Weekly' in Punjab for three years. During the Ambedkar birth centenary, as a President, Chanan played a prominent part in installing the statues of Dr. Ambedkar at Indian High Commission, London, LSE, Columbia and Vancouver. Chanan Chahal's 'The Evil of Caste: - The Caste System as the Largest Systemic Violation of Human Rights in Today.' Is a detailed examination of Hindu scriptures and dismantles the Hindu argument that caste was imported by the Westerners.

VB: This year on the 125th birth anniversary of Baba Saheb Ambedkar you had a wonderful programme. You had Baba Saheb Ambedkar's work along with other great international personalities like Dr Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King. What was the idea and how was the response?

AK: The 125th birth anniversary of Babasaheb Ambedkar was a very important event. I had been a part of the Ambedkar Centenary Celebrations and find myself very fortunate to have an opportunity to be part of 125th. When we celebrated Babasaheb's hundredth birth anniversary, we had to give an introduction of Dr Ambedkar to the media, academics and human rights organisations. During the last 25 years, Dr Ambedkar's popularity and significance are gone high sky. So far Babasaheb was tagged as a leader of Dalits. In actual fact, he was a humanist. His contribution was for everybody irrespective of religion, caste, race or gender. He was one of the greatest human rights defenders. We wanted to portray Dr Ambedkar as a universal leader as par with Dr Nelson Mandela and Dr Martin Luther King not a leader of a particular section of the Indian society. Keeping in view this in mind, we arranged the programmes. We talked to our Member of Parliament and Mayor of Bedford. They were quite interested to be part of the birth celebrations. We organised an exhibition on the life and works of Dr Ambedkar, caste discrimination in the UK and atrocities against Dalits in India in the Bedford Central Library and at the Council premises. Bedford Borough Council provided these venues. Mayor of Bedford opened the exhibition and our Member of Parliament fully participated. The concluding function took place in a mega hall where a documentary film on the life of Dr Ambedkar was screened. In addition to a number of speakers, there was also a cultural programme. There was a huge response from the public. The local churches and school children attended the functions. People were surprised to know the

contribution of Dr Ambedkar. I am satisfied with the positive response from the followers of Guru Ravidass and Bhagwan Valmik who not only supported these events but also provided food and refreshments.

It is a matter of pride that FABO UK was able to secure the house where Dr Ambedkar stayed during his studies at the London School of Economics during 1921-22. The proposal to purchase and convert into Ambedkar memorial was prepared and sent to the GOM by our President, Ms Santosh Dass MBE. After a year's hard work of lobbying the house was purchased by the GOM and opened by the Prime Minister, Mr Narendra Modi. This memorial will be a tourist place for visitors and give inspiration to the academics and students involved and interested in the human rights issues. This is the biggest single achievement of Ambedkarites in the UK which would be remembered for generations to come. The year 2016 is also a year of the centenary of Dr Ambedkar's arrival in the UK to join London School of Economics for his higher studies. To commemorate his 125th birthday and his centenary of his joining LSE, we decided to have seminar in the LSE and the British Parliament. In LSE Noble Prize laureate Dr Amritya Sen who considers Dr Ambedkar as his Guru in economics gave a wonderful talk on Dr Ambedkar and his relevance in the modern times. A number of scholars from the top universities in UK and human rights activists participated. For us, the year was fairly busy for us.

VB: What are your future plans?

AK: The law against caste discrimination has been already agreed by Parliament in April 2013. The British Government is blatantly ignoring the will of the Parliament and refusing to implement this legislation on the one pretext or the other. Now they have decided to issue a public consultation on this important matter. The consultation will run for 12 weeks from its commencement date. One of the key aims of the consultation will be to obtain the views of stakeholders on the appropriate provision that should be made for caste in the Act. It is another tactic to delay and some or how to derail the implementation. Our first priority is to engage with other organisations and individuals and prepare them for this public consultation. We might have to produce more cases of caste discrimination during the consultation.


We have already written to various agencies in India for starting Ambedkar scholarships to the Dalit students interested to study in the Western Universities. To set up an Ambedkar Chair in one of the premier institutes in the UK is another objective we have in our mind. Government of India under the leadership of Prime Minister, Mr Narendra Modi is making big announcements to build Ambedkar memorials, but we want something where our young generation is benefitted. I expect from the Ambedkarites in India to

Arun Kumar

press on this issue as well. We are also asking the government to spend the allocated money for the welfare of Dalits and not divert to others projects. Also, invest more money in education in the rural areas of India so that the neglected people of our society are empowered.

We have also written to the Prime Minister to recommend to the United Nations to declare 14 April, the birthday of Dr Ambedkar as an Equality Day. Some other organisations in India have also written to the PM. We need more push from political and social organisations to lobby GOI to achieve this objective.

SANTOSH DASS*

A Human Right based solution is the way forward to end caste discrimination: 

VB: When are we going to see the anti caste discrimination legislation passed by British Parliament becoming a reality?

SD: It's already been passed as part of the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act 2013. The law has yet however, to be implemented and brought into force.


This Government has indicated that the legislation will be introduced in Summer 2015 and brought into force in October 2015. So we are nearly there!

VB: How did it happen?

SD: Intense lobbying, and domestic (NGOs including Anti Caste Discrimination Alliance, Liberty, Parliamentarians, lawyers, and Government's own Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and international (UN and European Commission) calls for legal protection for victims.

The lobbying was underpinned by numerous reports since 2008 – including those by the Dalit Solidarity Network UK, the Federation of Ambedkarite and Buddhist Organisations, UK, the Anti Caste Discrimination Alliance and academic studies. All provided evidence of Caste-based Discrimination (CBD) in the UK. These reports and studies also established that the CBD extended to beyond personal relationships only - contrary to views expressed by people opposing legal protection for CBD.

VB: I have read literature of Ambedkarites in Bedford and how they fought against discrimination and many of them have become hugely successful in business and other venture. It is sad that they had to face discrimination at different level and that too not through the hands of British but migrant

* Ms Santosh Dass, MBE ntosh was born in Punjab, India in 1959 and emigrated with her mother and brother to join her father in London in February 1968. She is a former civil servant who took early voluntary retirement in 2012 after 30 years working in a number of Central Government Departments. In 1997, Santosh was awarded an MBE for her contribution to better regulation at the Department of Health. She received this from Prince Charles at Buckingham Palace in the presence of her mother.

Santosh spends her time working with a number of NGOs on human rights and equality issues in the UK and holds a Community Governor post at a school in London. She is the President of the Federation of Ambedkarite and Buddhist Organisations, UK and the Vice Chair of the Anti-Caste Discrimination Alliance. She has travelled extensively in Europe and the USA and makes regular visits to India.

Indians, the caste Hindus and Sikhs. Why have we not been able to leave our castes to our homes in India ?

SD: Caste continues to be part of the social fabric of many of the Asian Diaspora in the UK in varying degrees. There is a level of interest in ones descent and caste.

VB: The number of migrants from former British colonies to Britain is growing daily. I think the government here also promote the diversity in their services as well as private sector institutions. How much of this is implemented as far as Dalits are concern ? Is there any demand by the Ambedkarite or anti caste organisations in UK to provide representation to this huge segment at every sphere of life in UK including government and private services.

SD: There are affirmative targets for Ethnic Minorities (EMs) in the public sector already. This is consistent with other areas of Equality Law that helps address imbalances in the areas of for example, Gender, Disability etc. The EMs includes Dalits too. No specific demands have been made for the need to identify ones caste as part of the legislation. Groups from both sides of the argument in respect of the law on caste discrimination were clear that they do not wish to see caste institutionalised in the UK. All must be done to eradicate the discrimination that has been sadly imported to the UK.

VB: What kind of discrimination do Dalits face in United Kingdom ? Is there any agency documenting these incidents and acting on them?

SD: It's the same as other forms of discrimination and harassment. In the workplace (cases of holding up career progression, pay progression, harassment, exclusion etc), in provision of services (case of an elderly lady not getting her full care because of her caste, or a medical practitioner (e.g. doctor or a nurse) not treating a Dalit fully or resisting examining them), and cases of bullying and harassment in schools and universities.

There are numerous examples included in the Anti Caste Discrimination Alliance's (ACDA) report "A Hidden Apartheid –Voice of the Community" 2009. Of the 300 responders in the ACDA report:

- 9% missed promotion at work
- 9% experienced verbal abuse
- 7% of under 12-year -olds faced threatening behaviour and 16% verbal abuse; 10% of perpetrators were teachers and 42% fellow pupils
- 58% had faced discrimination because of their Caste

- 80% said that police would not understand if CBD was reported to them

I don't think there are any central government records. There will ofcourse be cases that go through the legal system and these will be well documented in due course.

VB: One of the biggest causes of violence against Dalits in India in the 'love marriages'. I would not call them 'inter-caste' marriages as there is no possibility of inter-caste marriages in India. Love marriages or self-arranged marriages transcends beyond boundaries. They challenge the power of 'parents' or society over two individuals who have decided to marry but that is the root cause of violence against them. I suppose the number of honour killing in UK too is growing and they are not just in the Islamic societies but also in these kinds of marriages where the partners hail from different castes? Is there any particular law to deal with it apart from your 'Forced Marriage Law'.

SD: No UK laws other than those for honour killings or forced marriages

The law when implemented will not extend to personal relationships. Criminal law would deal with violence related to inter-caste marriage for example.

VB: Your own journey to United Kingdom was very hard. You have been bold in accepting the fact that there is a gender imbalance within the movement too. I hope it is not too much a personal question to share with us your struggle as girl child from your parental family to your journey in UK.

In my view, there has been a gender imbalance in the movement at the top. Things are improving though. I am a prime example of this – I am the Vice Chairman of the Anti Caste Discrimination Alliance, and the President of the Federation and Ambedkarite and Buddhist Organisations in the UK. I have been working in this field for over twenty years.

In the past year, in demonstrations on caste discrimination law, we have had many Indian women (young and old) fully participating.

VB: Did you face discrimination based on caste and colour in UK?.

SD: Yes. In employment when I worked with a predominately Asian workforce.

VB: How did you join the Civil Services in UK. What was the inspiration? Did you get support and encouragements from your near dear ones? Did you face discrimination based on caste?.

SD: Civil Service was seen as the next best thing to being a doctor/lawyer etc. I wanted to be an artist!.

Santosh Dass

I was inspired by the work of the Department now known as the Department of International Development (DFID). When I joined it was part of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. I really believed at the time that aid to developing countries was very important and I wanted to be a part of a department that had responsibility for it. It was my first ever interview for a job and I was very pleased to get selected.

Yes, my family were fully behind me. When I joined DFID I worked in a central Government Department. There were hardly any EMs there. I remember seeing only one Indian lady in the Department when I joined in 1979. She was very junior in the hierarchy. I did not face Caste discrimination in DFID.

I remained in the civil service until I took early voluntary retirement in 2012.

VB: You got a British honour which was definitely a proud moment. Why were you chosen for such a coveted award?

SD: I was awarded a Medal of the British Empire (MBE). Prince Charles presented it to me in 1997. It was for services to Better Regulation and reducing red-tape at the Department of Health.

I did, however, think long and hard about whether I should accept the award. This was because of the Honour system's links to the days of the Empire. But my daughter persuaded me that I should accept it because she said it would help the movement.

It was a proud moment for my family and community. I took my mum and dear ones to Buckingham Palace to watch me receive the award. Mum always remembers that day as being one of the best days of her life. I think I was the first person from our community at to receive such an award. I may be wrong!

VB: You have been working with FABO and Anti Caste Discrimination Alliance and CasteWatchUK for several years. Could you elaborate about their activities and achievements.

SD: Too many to mention. It's all teamwork. Getting Caste discrimination legislation on the Statute book is one. Helping strengthen the position of the community in the eyes of the establishment (international (UN) and domestic) and those organisations that have hitherto marginalised a community, is another achievement.


VB: International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) is organising second world conference against Untouchability in Nepal a few days later. First time, we will be celebrating Ambedkar Jayanti in Kathmandu with other humanist Dalit rights activists in other parts of the world. IHEU perceive a non religious

political and human rights based solution for the whole untouchability question. What message would you like to give to the participants in this conference.

SD: In my view, a human rights-based solution is the way forward.

Together with this, always striving to improve the capability of the organisation; agreeing achievable strategic goals at the outset with clear timelines for action and outputs; presenting evidenced- based submissions to those who can influence or are in positions of power; excellent and consistent communication messages; and securing grass roots support. Integrity of the organisation and individuals that form it are key.

BISHAN DASS BAINS*

Upper caste Hindus and Jat Sikhs did every effort to defeat me in election 

VB: When did you arrive in UK ? What was the reason of your coming here. I mean what were your parents and where were they living in Punjab. Please also tell us about your education? Did you face any kind of discrimination at your home due to your caste ? What were your first impressions about England?

BDB: I was born and brought up in a small remote village Shaffipur, in northern state of Punjab India. The village had no shop, school, no health provisions and no community facility or religious place for people to get to gather. The education was not an important part of their life. Consequently, 99% habitants were backward, illiterate, orthodox and superstitious. The village was epitomised thousands of villages in India where people were and still destined to born in poverty, live in poverty and died in poverty. I was second of my parent's ten children. After going through a great deal of hardship in my early life, walking five miles to primary and high schools and travelling twenty miles to my college, I completed my graduation in 1963. The caste prejudice was wide open at every level of life as such upper caste Jat Sikhs will not socially mix or dine to gather with SC, OBC and at school some of the teachers will not eat anything touched by children from lower castes. I remember, in 1959 organising two months strike against caste prejudice at school. I was the first person from my village to educate to a degree level and it was a matter of pride for the whole family. They were not very happy about my idea of going abroad but reluctantly agreed to support me. While I was getting ready and making

* Bishan Dass Bains is the first South Asian Mayor of Wolverhampton in United Kingdom elected at Labour Party ticket in November 1985. A staunch Ambedkarite Bains Saheb migrated to England in 1963 in search of a livelihood as well as to pursue further education. His life journey is that of struggle and determination. He participated in various movement under the Republican Party of Great Britain too in the beginning but slowly he realised that he would serve his people better under the mainstream political parties in UK and Labour came as a natural choice for him as it was the party with socialist principles, supporting migrants as well as people who faced different kinds of discrimination. Bains succeeded in giving a new dynamics to his Mayoral position. He refused to follow the traditional way of the inauguration which was the domain of local church. Instead, he organised a local civil reception. His book 'Pride vs Prejudice' reflect the discrimination that he faced on the caste basis and explain in details as how the Jat Sikhs and caste Hindus did their best to defeat him in elections. Bains Saheb is not in active politics but Wolverhampton does not leave him and has been provided with the title 'Alderman' which is confirmed by the city council. He is active in strengthening Ambedkarite Buddhist movement in UK and India.

preparation to migrate to UK, my parents organised my marriage with Ram Piari, a girl from a neighbouring village. I came to UK in 1963 for further education. After arriving here in England I have to make very difficult choice between pursuing my ambition for further education or to earn money to support my family back in India, and I choose the second option.

VB: Your arrival in UK too has an interesting journey. Could you narrate that how did you reach the place you were supposed to stay?

BDB: My journey from home to England was very interesting. It was not easy to leave behind all, the family, friends and relatives, knowing that you are not going to see them for an unspecified time. It was for the first time that I travelled that far and by air. The whole journey from home to New Delhi, Mumbai and Heathrow was the most frightening experience of my life. I reached Heathrow airport at about 5 p.m. and after going through all the immigration and custom check-up, I came out of airport building and started looking eagerly for someone I know or had come to receive me. I was very disappointed and frightened to think about where to go now. I started searching my pockets and eventually found an address of a distance relative to whom I had never met. He was living in Wolverhampton, and I had no idea how far this place was? There were a number of unauthorised taxi drivers always plying for innocent newcomer people like me. One of them was very quick to pick me up and asked me if I want a taxi, and asked him, how much it will be for Wolverhampton. He replied, don't worry about the fare and quickly asked me to sit in the taxi. He picked up five and bundled us all six in his car and started driving. God knows where he was going to take us to. It was now dark, cold and raining, hardly could I see anything outside. He took us to different towns and cities and dropped one by one at various places. I was the last one to reach about 9.30 in Wolverhampton. The taxi driver knocked at door of a dimly lit terraced house in Lesley Road Wolverhampton. A short chubby woman reluctantly half opened the door and peeped outside in dismay. The taxi driver said madam, you have visitor from India. She was taken aback, looked at a man standing in front of her, and said "what"? "A visitor – your relative from India, he replied. The lady of the house was looking confused and shaky. I opened the door and came out of the car with my shoulder bag hanging on one side. I said Namaste Bhabhi ji, she looked at me still confused and speechless. I took some courage to slide into the house and the taxi driver carried my suitcase inside the house. From the outset it looks nothing less than a forced entry into a house of a stranger.

VB: What influenced you to be part of Baba Saheb's ideology? Was it from student times or at the later stage of your career? It would be good if you share in details. You mentioned that you were part of the Republican Party in UK.

You had several protests against discrimination against Dalits. Could you please explain it to us was when did you become member and what were the kind of activities that you took during this phase

BDB: I was always active with student union. During the early sixties, there was a very limited Asian media in England. There was one Indian grocery shop used to sell "Blitz" weekly and a friend of mine was having "Bheem Patrika" by post from India. I was passionately keen in reading both the papers. The All India Republican Party launched an agitation in 1964, against atrocities against downtrodden masses of India and presented a charter of demands for the uplift of their living status. During the agitation, more than 250000 people nationwide were arrested to jails and thirteen people became martyrs due to police brutality.

This agitation in India was a turning point in my life. I talk to some friends, organised meetings, made some collection and sent some financial support to the Republic Party Punjab branch. Then following on from there we decided to form a Republic Group of Great Britain and increased our membership all over England. I acted as convenor, secretary and chair for the group for several years. In those days, there were no computers, IT, telephone lines and typewriters. I used to send dozens hand written notices for the meeting and used to get leaflets cyclostyled at the Labour Part offices. The main purpose of the Group was to provide some financial and moral support to the Republican Party and people working for Baba Sahib's mission in India. The Group done a great of ground work during sixties, organised meetings in different towns and cities, recruit membership, organise public meetings, and protest marches in London against inequality and caste prejudice in India.

VB: What were your reasons of leaving the Republican or India-centric groups or parties? Were there ideological differences or you something else?

BDB: The civil war in All India Republic Party during second part of sixties had dire consequences weakening the roots of Baba Sahib's mission. The party badly disintegrated and the leadership abandoned the sinking ship. Consequently, the infighting in RPI badly polluted the supporting organisations like Republican Group of GB, later the activities of the group gradually weakened and had to be abandoned.

VB: Interesting to learn that you joined politics later and that too labour party. Was there anything specific in your joining labour? When was it?

BDB: Within a short period of coming to UK.I became active with Ravidass Dharmak Sabha, Anti-Nazi League and Community Relations Council and of course Republican Group of Great Britain. I come across many people including local leaders of the Labour party, who encouraged me to join the party. Historically the Labour Party is the bi-product of the trade union moment

started after the second war and secondly it was the Labour Party government who granted independence to India. There were not a great deal of ideological differences between the socialist policies of the Labour party and the mission of Baba Sahib based upon equality, liberty and social justice. The leaders of the local Labour Party persuaded me to join the party in 1968 and eventually asked me to contest local elections in 1973. In 1975, the party selected me to contest a by-election from a so call safe Labour seat which I won with a comfortable majority.

VB: What kind of discrimination that you found in Britain in terms of RACIAL & CASTE DISCRIMINATION.

BDB: The British society was torn apart between black and whites as the racial prejudice and colour bar had reached its peak during the years of sixties and seventies. There were many pubs and clubs which had discretions to exclude black customers and it was not unusual to see a notice on their windows saying, "Blacks and Asians are not allowed". I came across this kind of situation in early days. Not only that, the new-comers were destined to live in squalors in run down inner city areas. They were made to work on dirty, dusty and hot jobs nobody wants to do. I was no exception to these prevailing conditions and was subjected to racial prejudice at work.

VB: How did the labour decide to nominate you for the Mayor of Wolverhampton? Who were the other contenders? Did you face any racial prejudices?

BDB: The 1979 election was the most memorable episode in the history of my political career in England. The Indian Workers Association, mainly lead and dominated by Punjabi Jat Sikhs, was a very strong national organisation during the period of sixties and seventies. They found it extremely difficult to digest and compromise with the facts that a person from a lower caste can be an elected member of the council. Subsequently, the dirty Indian politics of caste prejudice and religious hatred reared its head to undermine my position as an elected member of the council. They left no stone unturned to get me deselected by the Labour Party and replaced me with one from their own caste. After their failed attempts, they fielded a most reputable person the president of the Indian Workers Association, against me. During the election they started a smear campaign to tarnish my name and discredit my public reputation. They had army of workers roaming streets of my constituency all day, harassing and intimidating residents, printing and distributing literature. It was one of the most difficult elections as campaign as I have to overcome a multiple of discrimination and prejudice. In addition to Indian caste & religious prejudice, there was a British National Party (far right wing organisation) and other two parties slightly less racial. In the end with solid support from the Pakistani

community, some indigenous and others, I managed to win the seat with an increased majority.

VB: We heard that during the election campaign the upper caste Hindus and Sikhs campaigned against you. Is it true? Did you try to reach them? Why did they oppose any Indian for such a prestigious position?

BDB: The local Labour Party had an established custom and practice for the past many years to elect a Mayoral candidate for the ensuing year. At a special meeting two names were proposed and secret voting taken, according to custom and practice the winner of the contest become the candidate for the following year, and the runner-up is usually had the nomination and elected the following year.

I like to mention here that I was the only non-white out of sixty elected members of the council for many years, and the rest of fifty nine were all indigenous whites. In the beginning I was not interested at all to become the Mayor of the city. But there were some left wing councillors who wanted me to bid for my right. My name was duly proposed and seconded continuously for two constructive years and I lost the contest for both times. It means the established custom and practices which were being followed up over the past many years were violated for no reason other than underlying racial prejudice. Not only that, it was contrary to the policy of equality of opportunity of the national Labour Party. This situation left me with no option but to seriously consider my position in both terms as an elected member of the council and as a member of the party. I decided not to walk away quietly but to fight back and publically expose their behaviour of racial prejudice. I decided to bring the whole truth of underlying racial prejudice in the Labour Party into public domain.

Now it was not a question of getting the nomination for mayoralty but to fight back for equality of opportunity and justice. I decided to issue a press statement, highlighting the underlying racial discrimination within the Labour Party. It was a very controversial, of course a courageous move which attracted a great deal of public support for me and contrarily huge discontentment amongst my fellow Labour councillors. I was served with a show cause notice and meeting with the high command leadership. I justify my actions at the meeting and it was decided to harmonise mutual relations amongst elected members of the Labour Party.

VB: And you won the historical battle? The first Asian for becoming Mayor of this town? Please narrate the entire event for us. When was it exactly and how did things happen?

BDB: It was for the third time lucky in 1985 I won the contest to become a candidate for Mayoralty for the year 1986/87. After the nomination the first and the foremost thing I did was to declare that I shall not organise a traditional Civic – Sunday and secondly I will not appoint my Christian Chaplain for any prayer at the beginning of every council meeting. This move generated a great deal of controversy. All the opposition parties and leaders of Christian Churches ganged up against me and threatened boycott and no co-operation during my year of mayoralty.

VB: One of the most remarkable things was that you change the entire political discourse here as well as the tradition of going to Church with all fanfare. So you broke the traditional protocol if I may say so when you took oath of Mayor. What was the event and how did you decide not to follow the official protocol. Were there opposition to it?

BDB;I took over the office of Mayor in May 1986, and within few months I manage to harmonise my relations with all the different communities living here in Wolverhampton. I became a focus of attention all over the country as I was the first Indian-born Mayor in England. I had many invitations to speak at different functions and on different subjects from all over the country. I attended 2300 functions and meetings in one year and delivered Baba Sahib's message of EQUALITY LIBERT AND SOCIAL JUSTICE everywhere I go. I and my wife Ram Piari who took over the gracious role of the Mayoress, were well received by people from all denominations except Sikh temples.

VB: Wolverhampton is mini Asia like Birmingham. I call it undivided India. How are your relations with friends from other nationalities like Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka ? I mean does national identities ever affected your warmth?

BDB: Now living and working here with the, and for the community, over the past many years, I have very good relations with people from many differing denominations. There many Gurudwaras, Hindu Temples, Churches and other religious places regularly inviting me to their special functions and I enjoy the highest regards from all of them.

VB: What were the main achievements that you attribute to your Mayoral period?

BDB: There are a number of memorable achievements, of which I am proud to have the credits for as such:-

A.....What can be a most memorable thing for an untouchable person to attain the highest post of number one citizen of the town in a country which virtually ruled the whole world.

B.....Many people consider me and my year of Mayoralty as an inspiration role model for younger generations to encourage them to participate into mainstream organisations.

C.....The most important thing, is to remember was that where ever I go or spoken about, I always carry the message and preaching of equality, liberty, fraternity, and social justice the main pivot of Baba Sahib's mission.

VB: What are you doing now after your retirement from politics?

BDB: As you are aware that now I have decided to retire from the council but they still need me off and on, and appointed me an honorary Alderman which means I still have some optional civic responsibilities. Now I am heavily engaged in harmonising relations and creating an atmosphere of mutual understandings and unity amongst Ambedkarites living here in UK.

When we started the Ambedkarite movement in early sixties, there were only few of us but we were well organised and united. Now we have a large number of Ambedkarites and organisations in different towns and cities but they are working in total isolation from each other. The Ambedkarites over the years have achieved great many things but they could have done lot more by working together under a well organised central body.

VB: How do you describe people claiming Baba Saheb's to work for Baba Saheb's vision too and glorifying to their traditional identities too.

BDB: My view in regard to maintaining the traditional identities and still claiming to be Ambedkarites. Baba Sahib was fully aware about the back grounds and history of untouchables divided into thousands of castes and sub castes they had faith and worship their local deities. Baba Sahib's advocacy for conversion to Buddhism was for two reasons i, e, firstly to get rid of the slavery of Hinduism, secondly to bring unification amongst downtrodden masses of India.

Those who stick to their traditional faith and still claim to be the followers of Baba Sahib, in my opinion, their loyalty to the mission is a marriage of convenience and they are no better than fanatic Hindus.

VB: How do we make basic human rights issues as part of Ambedkarite movement? Is it not time to come out of the religious structure and focus on civil and political rights of the people ?

BDB: In western world people less care about religion and devote their energy more for commodities of daily life such as ROTI, CAPRA and MAKAN. A large number of churches have closed and the rest of them are struggling for survival. In the case of India the situation is totally opposite, as more and more

religious establishments are mushrooming day by day and they are not short of money. As there are many Muslim countries are indirectly run by fanatic Mullahs similarly India have been and now being run by Shankaracharyas and Hindu priests.

That is why Baba Sahib said that India is a country where politics and religion go side by side supporting each other. He urged downtrodden people to grab as much as possible political power to utilise for the benefit of those in need. The Ambedkarites and downtrodden people of India must come out of their Hindu enclaves and strengthen their bonds into national unification. They can become a strong national force capable to not only protect their human rights but also the strong contender to rule the country.

VB: The British government is not honouring the commitment made in Parliament when they passed equality law. What is the biggest hurdle in its implementation? Do you think that after BJP's coming to power in India; the Hindu Right wing has got strengthened in UK and is thwarting every effort to implement the law?

BDB: The campaign to include caste discrimination into Human Rights & Equality Act 2010 has been going on over the past several years. But the year of 2015 marked the turning point in this regards when the British government introduced the bill in the parliament. The bill had gone through both houses of the parliament after all odds but the implementation was upheld due to pressure from right wing Hindu as well as Sikh organisations in UK. There is a great deal of scepticism that it cannot possibly happen without a very high profile interference and collaboration by the BJP government of India. It is worth mentioning here that out of 1.5m. Indian population in UK, Hindus & Sikhs combined are the second biggest vote bank which play a significance role to influence the election results. During 2015 UK general elections, a Sikh member of the parliament not only repeatedly voted against the bill but also organised very high profile visits for David Cameron the Tory leader and the prime minister, to Golden Temple in Amritsar & Bala Ji Hindu Temple, London the biggest in UK.

Those opposing the legislation stated that caste system does not exist in UK. But the fear lurks in their mind that the implications will be far beyond the boundaries of UK. The campaign to reintroduce the Bill is still going on and I am sure that in the end the common sense will prevail and the victory will be ours. As I have mentioned in my book *Pride VS Prejudice* that the bill to introduce changes had gone through the both houses of British Parliament but the implementation was upheld due to pressure from both the Hindu and Sikh fanatic organisations. The majority of pro- legislation people think that there is pressure from BJP government in addition to local lobbying in UK.

VB: What should be an ideal Ambedkarite in your opinion? What kind of political thoughts and socio-cultural behaviour is expected of an Ambedkarite?

BDB: Dr. Ambedkar was a great patriot and he wanted to see independent India a secular democratic republic state. For him, a transfer of political power in an independent India was not sufficient unless it is supported by economic and social democracy. We are reminded of Baba Sahib's speech to constitutional assembly on 25th.Nov.1949 that on 26th.Jan.1950 we are going to enter into a life of contradiction where in politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. We must remove this contradiction as earliest as possible.

He was a strong advocate of human rights as such equality, liberty and social justice, which are the fundamental principles of modern civilised society. To achieve all this he lead the downtrodden masses of India to come out of enclaves of Hinduism and secondly to take as much as possible control of political power. The Poona Pact and conversion into Buddhism are two historical examples of his struggle to achieve human dignity and equal rights for all.

VB: You got the title Alderman recently. Could you share with us what is it and why is it given?

BDB: ALDERMAN is an honorary title confirmed by the city council Wolverhampton. The council, under old custom and practice, can appoint a person an Alderman in recognition of his length and quality of public services.

KEVIN BROWN*

The Essence of African-American Culture is Resistance Against our Racial
Oppression

VB: Prof Brown, what inspired you to understand the Ambedkarite movement in India?

KB: I want to start by noting that I was born the evening of October 13, 1956. If you adjust for the time difference between India and the United States, then as Dr. Ambedkar was leading the conversion of Dalits to Buddhism, my mother was in labour delivering me. So, in a way, I was fated to learn about Dr. Ambedkar and the Ambedkarite movement in India.

From a more recent perspective, I applied for a Fulbright Scholarship to India for the academic year of 1995. Fulbright Scholarship is a program that was established in the United States by an Act of Congress. The Fulbright Board that governs the program is composed of three member appointed by the President of the United States. One part of the program awards funds for overseas research or lecturing to American Scholars on a very competitive basis. Because the best scholars throughout the country apply for Fulbright awards, it is a very prestigious award.

At the time I applied, I only knew one Indian national. But, he happened to be the son of a former justice of the Indian Supreme Court. What is more, he worked with my ex-wife who was employed at Cummins Engine Company in Columbus, Indiana. The Dean of my Law School also knew the Justice and had earlier invited him to speak at my law school, Indiana University Maurer School of Law. While I did not meet the Justice when he was in Bloomington, Indiana, he was obviously familiar with my Law School. Between my academic record at the time and the recommendation of the former Justice, I had one of the strongest applications of any scholar who applied for a Fulbright for India.

Since the Fulbright Board members are presidential appointees, they created a Subcommittee of Scholars to analyse applications and make recommendations for which scholars should receive an award. The Fulbright Board's normal practice was to approve all of the recommendations made by the Subcommittee.

* Prof Kevin Brown is an African American, who teaches law at the Indiana University, US and who is inspired by Dr Ambedkar's struggle for the untouchables and other marginalised sections of society in India. He has been a regular visitor to India bringing the African American, Hispanic, religious minorities in the United States to directly interact with the Dalit students and academics to understand their issues and commonalities between race and caste.

And, this happened the year I applied, with one exception, mine. Even though I applied in 1995, two years after the inauguration of President Bill Clinton, two of three Fulbright Board members at that time were appointees of George H. W. Bush, the 41st President of the United States. The Bush dominated Fulbright Board rejected my selection by the Subcommittee because “they did not want a black man with a white wife talking about race in India.” But, the State Department employee that was responsible for the Fulbright scholars going to India that year was an African-American female. When my application was rejected, she investigated and found out what happened. So she held on to my application and waited until President Clinton appointed his other 2 members to the Board. Once he did, she resubmitted my application and I was approved.

I ended up delaying accepting my Fulbright to India for a year because I went through a messy divorce with the same woman who put me in touch with the son of the former Justice of the Indian Supreme Court. So my Fulbright commenced in December of 1996.

I was initially assigned to the National Law School of India University in Bangalore. There my office was next to that of Professor Japhet, the only law professor of Dalit descent on the faculty. He and I talked about the comparisons and contrasts of the African-American struggle and that of Dalits often during the six weeks I stayed in Bangalore. On the second weekend after I arrived in Bangalore, Professor Japhet invited me to join him at a rally in Mangalore where he was going to speak. The rally was one of Dalit Christians who wanted to change the Indian Constitution so that they would be eligible for reservations. There were over 80,000 people who attended the rally.

As an African-American two aspects of this rally stood out. There was just one sign over the speaker’s podium that came from the Civil Rights struggle of African-Americans in the 1960s, “We Shall Overcome.” And one of the three speakers that day started his speech by saying, “I am a Dalit Panther, we take the name Panther from the struggle of the African-Americans in the United States because we are one with their struggle.” While Japhet had indicated that Dalits knew about the African-American struggle, this was incredible confirmation of that. The sense of pride that I had in knowing that our struggle was known by another group struggling against their oppression was overwhelming. It was at that point that I decided to learn what I could about the Dalit struggle. That determination led me to the writings of Dr. Ambedkar.

VB: How much are African American responsive to Dr Ambedkar’s struggle and philosophy? How could Ambedkar’s struggle be useful for the African American people?

KB: America is separated from Africa and Europe by the Atlantic Ocean and from Asia by the Pacific Ocean. America is also a country that was settled by British, Irish and Germans who were mostly interested in creating a culture that was different from that which existed in their home countries. Because of this, American culture has primarily privileged what occurs in the United States over what occurs in the rest of the world. As products of American culture, African-Americans are also primarily focused on our struggle in the United States. When we as African-American people think globally, we tend to think about Africa, not Asia. As a result, Dr. Ambedkar is not well known by African-American intellectuals as well as our general populace. One of my lifelong goals has been to spread knowledge of the Dalit struggle and Dr. Ambedkar to African-Americans.

For those African-Americans who are familiar with Dr. Ambedkar's struggle and philosophy, they are very impressed. Simply put, Dr. Ambedkar may be the greatest human that has ever lived. His understanding of the Dalit struggle and application of ideas from other countries to that struggle is extraordinary. But, what is impressive is how well he theorised the problems of Dalits at that time. However, I must note that Dr. Ambedkar's philosophy is far more relevant for Indian society than American society.

VB: How do you look at Gandhi Ambedkar debate from an African American viewpoint? Is there any parallel between it King-Malcolm X ideological conflict?

KB: My personal view is very different about Gandhi from an African-American viewpoint. From an African-American viewpoint, Gandhi is connected to the non-violent protest movement of Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. Reverend King often referred to the fact that he adopted his non-violence philosophy from Gandhi. Thus, when African-Americans think of Gandhi, we tend to think of him as a role model for Reverend King. As a result, Gandhi is held in high regard by African-Americans, despite the very racist views that Gandhi expressed about blacks while in South Africa.

Unlike most of my people, I am very aware of the Gandhi-Ambedkar conflict. At the core of African-American culture is a struggle against racial oppression. From that standpoint, Gandhi's stand on separate electorate for Dalits was most unfortunate. That move substantially undercut Dalit political power to this day. And political power has been a huge help to the African-American struggle for equality.

Both King and Malcolm X saw the American system of segregation as a fundamentally evil system. They also saw whites as the oppressors of African-Americans. Thus, they agreed about the evil of the system and who were the oppressors. What they disagreed about was the possibility that whites could be

redeemed. King believed it was possible to change the hearts and souls of whites so that justice for African-Americans could be obtained in an integrated society. Malcolm X, like the Nation of Islam, saw whites as irredeemable. For him the solution was not integration with fundamentally flawed oppressor, but “complete and utter separation of the races.” Thus, Malcolm X’s solution for the African-American struggle was for separate and independent black communities as an interim step on our way to a separate nation for African-Americans in the southeastern part of the US. As African-Americans, we understood the debate between King and Malcolm as a debate between integration and separation.

Gandhi believed that it was possible to reform Hinduism, but maintain the caste system. It was the hierarchy that he desired to eliminate. Ambedkar instead felt that Hinduism could not be reformed, but needed to be abolished. If you analogized this debate to that of King and Malcolm X, then where King and Malcolm were debated the ability to reform the basic characteristics of white people, Gandhi and Ambedkar were debating the ability to reform the basic character of Hinduism. Gandhi would say about Hinduism what King would say about white people, there is a need for reform, but reform is possible. Ambedkar would say about Hinduism what Malcolm X would say about white people, the character is too corrupt to be reformed.

VB: Gandhi’s statue has been removed in Ghana University campus. There was a campaign against it. What is your opinion on it?

KB: I think that is a very positive development. From an international point of view, Dalits must inform the rest of the world of their struggle. Caste Hindus have controlled the international image of the caste system. They typically discuss how things have changed in India and how caste is not very important anymore. They talk about reservation and how much Dalits have advanced since Independence. Because this is the typical story that caste Hindus tell, it is imperative for Dalits to publicise their experiences, perspectives and realities as much as possible.

From an African-American point of view, it must be pointed out that the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade was a conspiracy of black African rulers and Europeans. Estimates are that only about 1 to 2 percent of slaves were actually kidnapped by Europeans. The African rulers sold us to the Europeans. Thus, Africans also bear a very large part of the blame for black slavery in the New World. Even so, there is a strong feeling of kinship between African-Americans and Africans. So it is helpful to African-American understanding about the oppressive aspects of Gandhi’s philosophies as applied to Dalits that Ghana University has decided to remove Gandhi’s statue.

VB: America and India are two biggest democracies of the world. Both claim to be victim of 'terrorism' but both have deeper issues behind their back. America's un-comfort with racial issues are visible while Indians hate to talk about caste? Is there any similarity among the ideological and commercial interests of both the elites here and in your country?

KB: Yes there are similarities. Whites in the United States are fond of saying that America use to discriminate against blacks, but not anymore. The current problems of race have little to do with discrimination which has largely been eliminated. In addition, while there are racially conscious whites who conceptualise themselves as members of the white race, the majority of whites in the United States see themselves as individuals, not as members of a white race. For the majority of whites, their moral beliefs are based upon the idea that everyone should be treated as an individual. When it comes to unchosen characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, and gender, to the extent possible, these characteristics should be transcended (ignored). Thus, they too condemn those whites who make the white race something that should be recognised and honoured. As a result, racial conversations are often very uncomfortable for the majority of whites because it forces them to talk about individuals as members of racial groups and not as individuals. For them, this is a moral violation, because it denies a person their individuality.

When I tell Caste Hindus that I collaborate with Dalit intellectuals, they are quick to tell me that the evils of untouchability have largely been eliminated, especially in the urban areas. I am told that for purposes of employment, the only thing that matters is ability to do the job not caste. They tell me that there are no dietary restrictions and that people can live wherever they can afford to live. Thus, like whites, Caste Hindus seem reluctant to admit the continuing impact of caste based discrimination on Dalits.

As for commercial interest, American governmental views about India are primarily based on American interest. From that standpoint, trade between the two countries is most important to Americans. Thus, challenging India's oppression of Dalits is not a major concern. However, America's individualist culture can't help but see the Indian caste system with its oppression of Dalits as fundamentally unjust. Americans will understand India's caste system against the background of how they understand race and ethnicity. Caste Hindus who talk about caste differences and who speak negatively of Dalits because of their caste status will sound morally reprehensible to almost all Americans. Most Americans will instantly equate discrimination based on caste or untouchability with the conscious racism that was so prevalent in the United States through the 1970s.

VB: Martin Luther King seems to have more acceptability among the American elite than Malcolm X. Is it because Malcolm X's One nation Islam theory was too difficult for the Christian world to digest?

KB: Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X have become 2 of the most well-known historic figures of the Civil Rights Movement. This tends to obscure the reality that very few African-Americans are or have been Muslims. The figure is less than 1 percent. So the Nation of Islam never had a very large following among blacks in the US. In fact, the Nation of Islam has lost much of its little appeal to the Black Community in the past decade. The Nation of Islam's embrace of Islam clearly harmed their mass appeal to the Black Community. Christianity is the pre-dominant religion followed by blacks in the US, which is adhered to by about 85% of blacks.

But, the Nation of Islam had other problems in the 1960s that prevented it from being appealing to a large segment of the Black Community. The basic plan of the Nation of Islam for black liberation was for the creation of a separate homeland for blacks in the southeastern part of the United States. But, the idea of a separate black homeland in the US never had much support among blacks. I would doubt that more than 1 in 100 saw it as appealing in the 1960s or beyond. Blacks of the 1960s had experienced decades of segregation. The Nation's plan was simply a more aggressive brand of segregation. Since blacks were finding themselves oppressed within their separate black communities, many felt that moving to a separate black homeland would simply make oppression worse, especially one within the territorial boundaries of North America. Blacks in the 1960s were embracing integration as the way to black liberation. So, the Nation of Islam was offering to increase the very segregation that blacks were already trying to overthrow. As a result, the Nation of Islam and Malcolm X were actually pushing a far more conservative agenda for black liberation than was Reverend King at the time.

VB: Is America witnessing the same ideological gap between the whites and blacks as we have seen in India between the Dalits and caste Hindus? The resentment against hegemony and dominance is growing among the marginalised sections in both the country. What is your take on this.

KB: This is a much more difficult and nuanced question. The American culture is steeped in individualism. It is also steeped in racism. The racism is something that African-Americans reject, but the individualism is something that any individual can choose to adopt. Thus, there is much in American culture that says to the individual black person that you can be successful, even if blacks in general cannot. Indeed, it would even say that you have no duties or obligations to other black people just because they are black. It is your choice to help in that struggle. American hegemony of individualism allows for successful blacks

to enjoy much of what America has to offer as long as they are not too upset about the group based problems of blacks. In addition, America is a preferred country for immigration. As a result, we have seen a substantial increase in black immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa over the past 50 years. All of this is changing the nature of what it means to be black in the US, and, correspondingly, the nature of the African-American struggle.

In India, the dominant culture continues to view a person as a member of their subcaste, at least for purposes of marriage. Marriage is also viewed as the merging of two families. The result of these beliefs is that the caste system continues to be strong even in the face of a rapidly modernising Indian society. In America, marriage is viewed as a contract between two people. The individualism of America also means that we don't typically have arranged marriages. Individuals are to find their own spouses. With that being the case, individualism means that interracial marriages involving blacks are much more common in the US than inter-caste marriages involving Dalits.

One of the things that Dr. Ambedkar pointed out in *Annihilation of Caste* is that inter-caste marriage could substantially alleviate the problems that Dalits face. The problem was how to bring it about. But, the individualism has helped to increase interracial marriages involving blacks in the US and that increase is one of the factors that is changing the nature of the African-American struggle. Since the 1960s, much has changed with regard to the racial and ethnic ancestry of American society, including that of blacks. As time passed, the objections to interracial dating and marriage between blacks and whites began to wane. In 1958, for example, only 4 percent of whites approved of interracial marriage with blacks.¹ However, in its 1967 decision of *Loving v. Virginia*,² the US Supreme Court struck down anti-miscegenation marriage statutes, which prevented such marriages, throughout the country. This decision and other societal changes led to more acceptance by Americans of interracial sexual relationships. By 2003, the Gallup poll showed that 70 percent of whites and 80 percent of blacks approved of such unions.³ The portion of those who accept interracial marriage continues to increase during the twenty-first century.⁴ This is especially true among younger adults, the ones in their prime reproductive

¹ See KIM WILLIAMS, MARK ONE OR MORE: CIVIL RIGHTS IN MULTIRACIAL AMERICA 89 (2008).

² *Loving v. Virginia*, 388 U.S. 1 (1967).

³ *Id.*

⁴ In the General Social Survey conducted in 2002, only 10 percent of Americans and 4 percent of young adults objected to interracial marriage. See Michael J. Rosenfield, *CCF Briefing Paper: Interracial Marriage 40 years after Loving v. Virginia* (2007),

years. According to a 2010 Pew Research Center report, almost all Millennials (18- to 29-year-olds in 2010) accept interracial dating and marriage. The Report notes that 92 percent of white and 88 percent of African-American Millennials say that they would be fine with a family member marrying someone outside of their group.⁵

The greater societal acceptance of interracial dating and marriage also increased its frequency. Figures from 2010 show that about 9 percent of married blacks were married outside of the race.⁶ The percentage of black males who marry outside of the race continued to be significantly higher than black females, 12.5 compared to 5.5 percent. Interracial marriages also made up a much larger percentage of new marriages by blacks than existing marriages. Thus, among 2010 newlyweds, 23.6 percent of black males and 9.3 percent of black females who married, married outside of their race.⁷ And, according to a 2015 Pew Research Center Report, 19 percent of blacks who married in 2013 married a person of a different race, including one in four black men.⁸ The increasing numbers of mixed-race couples is now embraced by many advertisers of products and services. Thus, it is no longer uncommon to see a commercial on American television with a black/white interracial couple. And many television programs also include interracial couples.

⁵ See PEW RESEARCH CTR. PUBLICATIONS, *Almost All Millennials Accept Interracial Dating and Marriage* (2010).

⁶ See Paul Taylor, Wendy Wang, Kim Parker, Jeffrey S. Passel, Eileen Patten & Seth Motel, Pew Research Ctr., *The Rise of Inter marriage: Rates, Characteristics Vary by Race and Gender* 11 (2012).

⁷ *Id.* For black men, these represent substantial increases from the 15.7 percent figure in 2000 and 7.9 percent in 1980. While it also increased for black women, the increase went from 7.1 percent in 2000 and 3.0 percent in 1980. See Jeffrey S. Passel et al., Pew Research Center, *Marrying Out: One-in-Seven New U.S. Marriages is Interracial or Interethnic* 11–12 (2010). With respect to blacks having a white spouse, more recent statistics show a similar trend. In 2010, 8.5 percent of married black men had white spouses, an increase from 6.6 percent in 2005. U.S. Census Bureau, *America's Families and Living Arrangements* (2010), available at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/families/>. While, only 3.9 percent of black women were married to white men, an increase from 2.8 percent in 2005. *Id.* According to a recent N.Y. Times article, intermarriage between blacks and whites “make up 1 in 60 new marriages today, compared with fewer than 1 in 1,000” a half a century ago. Sam Roberts, *Black Women See Fewer Black Men at the Altar*, N.Y. TIMES, June 4, 2010, at A12.

⁸ Wendy Wang, *Interracial Marriage: Who Is 'Marrying Out'?*, Pew Research Ctr., June 12, 2015, available at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/06/12/interracial-marriage-who-is-marrying-out/>.

Increased interracial dating, cohabitation, and marriage have also increased the percentage of blacks with interracial parents. According to the 2010 census, 7.4 percent of blacks⁹ (up from 4.8 percent in 2000¹⁰) indicated another racial category, over two and a half times the 2.9 percent of the American population as a whole.¹¹ As one might expect, the younger blacks are, the more likely they are to be multiracial. Census figures from 2012 show that the portion of mixed-race blacks between the ages of 20 and 24 was only 7.9 percent.¹² However, the portion of mixed-race blacks among blacks between the ages of 15 and 19 was 8.9 percent, between 10 and 14 years it increased to 10.9 percent, between 5 and 9 years to 15.0 percent, and for those under the age of 5 it was 19.1 percent.¹³

In addition to the increase in Black Multiracials, the ethnic ancestry of blacks has also changed significantly since the advent of affirmative action. The emergence of independent predominately black nations in the Caribbean and Africa, globalisation, and changes in American immigration law, starting with the landmark Hart-Cellar Act of 1965, led to substantial increases in the percentages and numbers of foreign-born blacks in the United States. The percentage of blacks who were foreign-born increased from 1.1 percent in

⁹ See KAREN R. HUMES, NICHOLAS A. JONES & ROBERTO R. RAMIREZ, OVERVIEW OF RACE AND HISPANIC ORIGIN 2010, 6 tbl.2 (2011).

¹⁰ See CensusScope.org, *United States Multiracial Profile*, http://www.censusscope.org/us/print_chart_multi.html. (date last visited, April 29, 2014).

¹¹ See Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin: 2010, 8 (2011)..

¹² According to the 2012 Census Bureau figures, of the 3,588,000 individuals between the ages of 20 and 24, who were classified as Black Alone or in Combination, 3,303,000 who were Black in Combination. Thus, the percentage of Black in Combination to total blacks was 7.9 percent $(285,000 (3,588,000 - 3,303,000))/3,588,000$. For Black Alone or in Combination see U.S. Census Bureau, tbl.1. *Population by Sex and Age, for Black Alone and White Alone, Not Hispanic: 2012* (Numbers in thousands). For Black in Combination see U.S. Census Bureau, tbl.29. *Population by Sex and Age, for Black Alone or in Combination and White Alone, Not Hispanic: 2012* (Numbers in thousands Civilian non-institutionalized population). Then subtract the totals of Black Alone or in Combination from the total for Black Alone.

¹³ For ages 15 to 19, the corresponding figures were 8.9 percent $(322,000 (3,624,000 - 3,302,000))/3,624,000$; For ages 10 and 14 the corresponding figures were 10.9 percent $(384,00 (3,511,000 - 3,127,000))/3,511,000$; for ages 5 to 9 the corresponding figures were 15.0 percent $(532,000 (3,545,000 - 3,013,000))/3,545,000$; for under the age of five the corresponding figures were 19.1 percent $(718,000 (3,769,000 - 3,051,000))/3,769,000$. *Id.*

1970,¹⁴ to 4.9 percent in 1990,¹⁵ to almost 10 percent in 2012.¹⁶ Since 1960, the number of foreign-born blacks in the United States has also increased over thirty-fold to almost 3,900,000.¹⁷ As a result, the percentage of younger blacks in the United States who are either first or second-generation Black Immigrants is also on the rise. Whereas only 2 percent of black children are foreign-born, approximately 12.7 percent of black children under the age of 18 have at least one foreign-born black parent.¹⁸ However, this percentage is on the rise because of the significant increase in foreign-born blacks in the country and the possibility that foreign-born black women will continue to have more children than native black women. For example, foreign-born black women bore approximately one out of every six black children in 2004. In Massachusetts where one out of every three blacks is currently foreign-born, since 2008 a majority of black babies born there have been to the immigrant mothers.¹⁹ It is important to realise that these Black Immigrants are not descendants of those who were enslaved in America. Thus, they do not feel as connected to the struggle against racial oppression in the United States. As time passes, the percentage of blacks who do not trace their entire ancestry to blacks who were enslaved or segregated will become the majority of blacks.

What this suggests is that we may be seeing a redefinition of “blackness” in the US. For a long time race was a socially ascribed character. For example, according to 1960 census figures, 88.8 percent of all Americans were classified as white and 10.6 percent as black. Latinos did not exist as a category.²⁰ Rather,

¹⁴ Campbell Gibson & Emily Lennon, *Race and Hispanic Origin of the Population of Nativity: 1850 to 1990* (1999).

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ U. S. CENSUS BUREAU, THE BLACK ALONE POPULATION IN THE UNITED STATES: 2012 tbl.7. *Nativity and Citizenship Status by Sex, for Black Alone and White Alone, Not Hispanic*: 2012 (2012)..

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ Jeffrey S. Passel, *Demography of Immigrant Youth: Past, Present and Future*, in THE FUTURE OF CHILDREN 19, 30 (2011).

¹⁹ See Mary Mederios Kent, *supra* note 15, at 4. (asserting that the figure drops to just 13 percent of black children if only non-Hispanic blacks are considered). For Massachusetts statistics see, Maria Sacchetti, *The Changing Face Of Citizenship* in the Boston Globe March 25, 2014.

²⁰ See Campbell Gibson & Kay Jung, *Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and by Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, for the United States, Regions, Divisions, and States*, at tbl.1 (United States Census Bureau, Working Paper Series No. 56, 2002).

they were classified based on their race. Thus, as the Civil Rights Era dawned, 99.4 percent of Americans were either black or white. With the one-drop rule used to determine a person's race, one drop of black blood makes you black, it meant that anyone with colour was normally presumed to be black. A person's race was, therefore, readily apparent. But, now Latinos, Asians, and Multiracials make up over a quarter of the American population, twice the percentage of blacks. In addition, many light skinned blacks are indistinguishable from Latinos, South Asians, Middle Easterners, and Multiracials. And, unlike Indians, Americans don't have many other ways to determine a person's race without asking the person directly. But, for mixed-race individuals, they can give different answers. For example, I brought a light-skinned young man with me to India whose father was white, but his mother was Haitian. When he is asked, "what are you?" he can truthfully say any of the following: "I am white," "I am Haitian," "I am black," "I am African-American," "I am multiracial," "I am biracial," or "I am just me and my race and ethnicity should not matter."

What this means is that it is no longer possible to tell the race of a growing percentage of American people based on their physical appearance. This also means that for a growing percentage of Americans, race is becoming a matter of self-identification in any given context. But, this requires a redefinition of American thinking about race, because all of our previous ideas were built upon the firm convictions that race was an immutable characteristic that one is born with, not a matter of personal identification that can change with the contexts.

So to respond directly to your question, there are an increasing number of people with some African ancestry who do not feel connected to the historic struggle against racial oppression. For them, the dominant American hegemony rooted in individualism is far more likely to be acceptable. Thus, we may be watching the process by which the dominant individualistic hegemony of the US succeeds in attenuating the group based cultural force of African-Americans as it dissolves our Community.

VB: Do you think caste and race are similar term? If not then what could be an international mechanism to address the caste discrimination issue?

KB: While I believe that Dalits and African-Americans can learn a tremendous amount from each other, I don't believe that caste discrimination based on untouchability is the same as race discrimination. But, as I noted above, any American will draw an analogy of caste discrimination to race discrimination. Americans have no other way in which to comprehend caste discrimination. Also, because the international condemnation of racism is stronger than it is against caste discrimination, Dalits are correct at arguing that these two concepts are the same despite the differences. If caste discrimination is labelled

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race discrimination, that label will bring with it additional international pressure on India for change.

It is the primacy placed on the individual in the United States and the West that makes the grouping of a person with people who share a similar involuntary trait so problematic. This is true whether the trait is race, ethnicity, or caste. To discriminate against someone because of their skin colour, ethnicity or caste in the United States is inconsistent with the fundamental belief of a secular liberal society with the fundamental belief that the value of human life lies in self-determination.

The oppression of Dalits is tied to Brahminism, which is still the predominant form of Hinduism. Because this system has such deep roots in Indian soil, it will not be easy to disestablish it. This is a system that will not reform itself from the inside, but must have outside pressure exerted on it. International condemnation is, therefore, very important.

VB: What do you think about the Parliamentary system of Indian democracy when you compare to US model. In terms of representation it seems Indian model seems to be far superior to America as the number of Dalits in our power structure is much more than the number of blacks in US Congress but it seems in terms of entrepreneurship, culture, presence in literature, art, music, and sports is definitely far superior to us. What could be the reasons?

KB: This is an interesting question. My understanding is that the first loyalty of most elected members in India is to the party, as opposed to the people. Whereas in the US, individuals are elected to represent a geographic area. Because of that the interests of the people in their geographical area are the politician's paramount concern. So there are about 40 blacks in the House of Representatives (the Lower House of Congress), yet virtually all of them are elected from predominantly black legislative districts. Thus, they all represent the interest of the Black Community in Congress. Also, all but 1 or 2 of the black members of Congress are members of the Democratic Party. In fact, non-white voters made up over 40% of the votes that Hilary Clinton received in the 2016 Presidential elections. In contrast, some 90% of the votes that Donald Trump received were from white voters. However, since the elections in November of 2016, the Republicans are in control of the central government and two-thirds of the state governments. So the power of the black elected officials in the federal government and many state governments will be limited for the next few years. But, when the Democrats are in power, blacks tend to wield a considerable amount of legislative power.

I think another major difference between Dalits and African-Americans is the black experience of segregation. Slavery is a far closer analogy to oppression

based on untouchability than is segregation. Thus, when comparing Dalit progress since Indian independence with that of African-Americans, the starting point for African-Americans should be the late 1860s, not the 1950s. Because we were in separate autonomous communities during segregation, blacks had to diversify our talents. We needed black doctors, lawyers, accountants, newspapers, movies, musicians, actors, banks, insurance companies, stores, teachers, and other business people to serve a predominantly black clientele. What this meant was that we were developing business and professional skills within our own communities. So we had separate schools where our children were taught by caring black teachers. We also had a network of Historically Black Colleges and Universities where our people could pursue higher education taught by predominantly black faculties. This period of segregation was very valuable to the Black Community, because it put us in a much better position to take advantages of the opportunities that became available during the Civil Rights Era.

VB: What is the position of blacks in various government jobs in America? Are the transnational corporations ready to accept them as equal partners? Is there any wage gap between blacks and whites?

KB: Due to the lingering prejudice in the private sector, black professionals tend to be overrepresented among governmental workers. So the government, especially the federal government and state governments where blacks exercise considerable political power are important employers. Black complaints about discrimination in employment are the same whether we are discussing transnational corporations or American corporations.

Yes, there is a wage gap between blacks and whites. There always has been, and likely always will be. The median household income of blacks in 2012 was \$33,321, which was only 58.4 percent of white family income and 48.4 percent of Asian family income.²¹ With respect to per capita income, black earnings of \$19,267 are only 57.6 percent of white and 60.4 percent of Asian per capita income.²² The 2012 unemployment rates for blacks (13.8 percent) was more

²¹ Black family income was also less than that of Hispanic household income (\$39,005). In contrast, white non-Hispanic household income was \$57,009 and Asian household income was \$68,636. See Carmen DeNavas-Walt, Bernadette D. Proctor and Jessica C. Smith, *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2012 Current Population Reports*, 6 tbl 1, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU (Sept. 2013).

²² See *Historical Income Tables: People, Black CPS Population and Per Capita Income Table P-1B*, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, available at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/data/historical/people/index.html>. Per capita income for blacks is actually 19.4 percent higher than the per capita income of

than twice that of Asians (5.9 percent), nearly twice that of whites (7.2 percent), and significantly more than that of Hispanics (10.3 percent).²³ A much larger percentage of blacks also live in poverty. The poverty rate in the Black Community stands at 27.2 percent, in contrast to Hispanics at 25.6 percent, Asians at 11.7 percent, and whites at 9.9 percent.²⁴ The disparities in poverty rates are even higher for blacks under the age of 18. Over a third of black children, 36.7 percent, live below the poverty line, in contrast to Hispanics at 33.8 percent, whites at 18.5 percent, and Asians at 13.8 percent.²⁵ Beyond racial differences in income levels, black families also have considerably less accumulated wealth than white families. According to an April 2013 report issued by the Urban Institute, in 2010 the average white family possessed \$632,000 in wealth, compared to \$98,000 for the average black family.²⁶ In other words, the average white family was more than six times wealthier than the average black family.

Hispanics of \$16,125. *See id.*; *Historical Income Tables: People, Hispanic of Any Race CPS Population and Per Capita Income Table P-1B*, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, available at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/data/historical/people/index.html>. The per capita income for whites is \$33,434. *Historical Income Tables: People, White non-Hispanic CPS Population and Per Capita Income, Table P-1*, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU. For Asians it is \$31,905. *Historical Income Tables: People, Asian CPS Population and Per Capita Income, Table P-1A*, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU.

²³ *BLS Reports Report 1044 Labor Force Characteristics by Race and Ethnicity, 2012*, 6 chart 4, U.S. BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS (October 2013).

²⁴ *Table 3. Poverty Status of People, by Age, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 1959 to 2012*, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, available at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/historical/people.html>.

²⁵ *Table 2. Poverty Status of People by Family Relationship, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 1959 to 2012*, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, available at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/historical/people.html>.

²⁶ SIGNE-MARY MCKERNAN, CAROLINE RATCLIFFE, EUGENE STEUERLE, & SISI ZHANG, URBAN INSTITUTE, *LESS THAN EQUAL: RACIAL DISPARITIES IN WEALTH ACCUMULATION 1* (2013) available at <http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/412802-Less-Than-Equal-Racial-Disparities-in-Wealth-Accumulation.pdf>. The average wealth of a Hispanic/Latino family was \$110,000. *Id.* Another measure shows for greater wealth disparities between blacks and whites. According to the US Census Bureau statistics, the Household median value of white alone family household in 2011 was \$110,500, in contrast for black alone it was \$6,314. US Census Bureau, *Wealth and Asset Ownership, tbl 1 Median Value of Assets for Households, by Type of Asset Owned and Selected Characteristics:* 2011 available at <http://www.census.gov/people/wealth/data/dtables.html>

VB: Why is the discrimination against blacks in America growing during the past one decade? Is it because people are asking for their rights and standing with their head high? Is it because President Obama has been very forthright and has reminded the country about the dangers of racial barriers? Are the American whites now feeling threatened with more political social expressions of the blacks?

KB: I don't think I would agree with the statement that "discrimination against blacks in America has grown over the past decade." All Americans are confronted with evidence of the weakening hold of racial discrimination against blacks, because they encounter very successful black individuals on a daily basis. In *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America*, noted black journalist Eugene Robinson pointed to several recent divisions that now exist within the Black Community.²⁷ Robinson not only pointed to emergent groups of mixed-race blacks and foreign-born blacks, he also noted a small elite group of blacks with enormous wealth, power, and influence. He called them "Transcendents."²⁸ Thus, Americans live with the reality that Oprah Winfrey is on the list of the wealthiest Americans²⁹ and that a number of blacks, including Robert Johnson, Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, and Bill Cosby, have amassed substantial fortunes.³⁰ Blacks have run or run some of the most powerful corporations in the world including: Ursula Burns, President of Xerox Corporation; Stanley O'Neal, former Chairman/CEO of Merrill Lynch & Co. Inc.; Richard Parsons, Chairman of Citigroup and former Chairman/CEO of AOL Time Warner; Don Thompson, President of McDonald's USA; Ronald Williams, Chairman/CEO of Aetna, Inc.;³¹ and 2012 Republican presidential candidate Howard Cain, the former CEO of Godfather's Pizza. Black athletes like Tiger Woods, Kobe Bryant, and LeBron James are among the most highly paid marketing

²⁷ EUGENE ROBINSON, *DISINTEGRATION: THE SPLINTERING OF BLACK AMERICA* (2010).

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ According to Forbes Magazine, Oprah Winfrey was #141 on its list of 400 Richest Americans with a net worth of 2.3 billion. See FORBES, *THE RICHEST PEOPLE IN AMERICA* (Matthew Miller and Duncan Greenberg eds., Sept. 30, 2009).

³⁰ According to Forbes inaugural list of the Wealthiest Black Americans, after Oprah Winfrey comes Tiger Woods with a net worth of approximately 600 million, Robert Johnson worth 550 million, Michael Jordan worth 525 million followed by Magic Johnson worth 500 million and Bill Cosby worth 450 million. See MATTHEW MILLER, FORBES, *THE WEALTHIEST BLACK AMERICANS* (May 6, 2009).

³¹ For additional heads of corporations run by blacks see *Ebony Power 150*, EBONY MAG., May 2009, at 74.

personalities in America.³² More than one hundred blacks are presidents of traditionally white universities.³³ A black Miss America or Miss USA is no longer a major news item.³⁴ In 2014, there were forty-three black members of the House of Representatives³⁵ and three served in the Senate in 2013,³⁶ the most in any given year in the history of the United States. When David Patterson succeeded Eliot Spitzer as Governor of the State of New York in March of 2007, for the first time in American history, two blacks were serving as the chief executive officers of their respective states. Patterson joined Duval Patrick, whom the voters of Massachusetts elected in 2006 and again in 2010.³⁷

³² See 100 Highest Paid Celebrities in the World: Power List 2011, (Oprah Winfrey #1, Tiger Woods #14, Kobe Bryant #24 and LeBron James #29) available at <http://www.ranker.com/list/100-highest-paid-celebrities-in-the-world-power-list-2011/worlds-richest-people-lists>.

³³ See Karin Chenoweth, *African American College Presidents in Decline*, DIVERSE ISSUES IN HIGHER EDUCATION (July 13, 2007).

³⁴ Up to 2010, there had been at least eight black Miss Americas. See Joanne Fowler, *Caressa Cameron of Virginia Crowned Miss America*, PEOPLE (Jan. 31, 2010), <http://www.people.com/people/article/0,,20340574,00.htm>. The other seven were Vanessa Williams (1984); Suzanne Charles (1984); Debye Turner (1990); Marjorie Judith Vincent (1991); Kimberly Aiken (1994); Erika Harold (2003) and Erica Dunlap (2004). In 2012, Nina Meriwether became the sixth black woman to win the Miss USA pageant. The other 5 are, 2008 Crystle Stewart; 2007 Rachel Smith; 2002 Shauntay Hinton; 1995 Chelsi Smith; and 1993 Kenya Moore. *Crystle Stewart crowned Miss USA*, THE DAILY VOICE: BLACK AMERICA'S DAILY NEWS SOURCE, April 12, 2008

³⁵ See Jennifer E. Manning, *Membership of the 113th Congress: A Profile* 7 (from Congressional Research Service) available at <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R42964.pdf> (date last visited December 15, 2013).

³⁶ Tim Scott was appointed on January 2, 2013, by South Carolina Governor Nikki Halley to serve out the term of Jim DeMint who resigned to run the Heritage Foundation. William Maurice Cowans served in the Senate from January 30, 2013 until July 16, 2013. He was appointed by Governor Deval Patrick to fill the vacancy left by John Kerry who resigned to become Secretary of State. Cory Booker, the former Mayor of Newark, was sworn in on October 31, 2013. He won the special election in October 16, 2013 to succeed Frank Lautenberg who died in office.

³⁷ There have been four black governors in America's history. In addition to Deval Patrick and David Patterson; the other two were P.B.S. Pinchback who served as governor of Louisiana for thirty-six days in 1872-1873 and L. Douglas Wilder who was elected governor of Virginia in 1990. See *Spitzer Successor will be Nation's 4th Black Governor*, CNN POLITICS, Mar. 10, 2008, http://articles.cnn.com/2008-03-10/politics/paterson.bio_1_lieutenant-governor-black-governor-hofstra-law-school?_s=PM:POLITICS.

Most notable of all, Barack Obama ascended to the seat of power in the White House as the popularly elected 44th President of the United States. He was elected not once, but twice.

Obama's election was certainly a turning point for America. But, it helped play into a narrative in the US that blacks have made tremendous progress. Certainly that is true, however, as you can tell from the economic statistics noted above, we still continue to lag behind on important economic measures. I actually think that whites in America are feeling far more threatened by Hispanics than blacks. This is especially true in politics. It is the Hispanic population that has grown tremendously in the US.

VB: Why have the blacks been living in ghettos in US? Is there any historical relationship with that? The capitalist model does not seem to care for their mixing up with white population?

KB: When thinking about the historical experience of the Black Community, it is important to keep in mind that up to 1860 about 93% of them lived in the South where slavery was legal. Of those who lived there, 94% were slaves. But, some of the slaves were house slaves, so they actually lived with their white owners. Because of slavery, there was a need for the white community to keep a watch on blacks. So blacks were not subject to total segregation in the South. In contrast, free blacks in the North tended to live in separate neighbourhoods, ride in separate stage coaches and railroad cars, go to separate schools and be buried in separate cemeteries. Simply put, segregation was a doctrine that grew up in the North before the Civil War.

Capitalism was important in regard to slavery because it was a system that made it profitable to employ slaves in economic activities that were labour intensive. For the US, that turned out to be the production of cotton. The overwhelming majority of slaves were employed in the growing and marketing of cotton. But, capitalism doesn't demand or require segregation along racial lines. In fact, when there is a good reason to do so, many people can overcome their racist sentiments. Capitalism and the pursuit of material wealth can provide those good reasons. So, even though the economic system of the US as a result of slavery was based on race, racism is not a necessary aspect of capitalism. Racism can exist with or without capitalism. I don't believe that the way to eliminate racism is to reject capitalism. Racism needs to be fought on its own grounds. Plus, by eschewing making money means that a group is losing out on a very important source of social power.

VB: Do the black suffer from 'outsider' complex or the Christianity has killed the rebellion spirit inside them?

KB: THE ESSENCE OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN CULTURE IS RESISTANCE AGAINST OUR RACIAL OPPRESSION. THAT IS WHAT BINDS US TOGETHER. SO BY DEFINITION, WE ARE OUTSIDERS.

The process by which a people define themselves and are defined by others is dynamic. Cultural identity is not fixed or static; rather it ebbs and flows as history unfolds.³⁸ The American motto *E Pluribus Unum* (out of many one) is an apt description of the historical black experience in the United States. The best estimates suggest that about 4 percent of the ten to twelve million Africans brought to the New World landed in what would become the United States.³⁹ Scholars estimated that 72 percent of the African base of U.S. slave population arrived during the colonial period. The Chesapeake Bay area had received all of its Africans by then, and the states in the North had received 98 percent of their total.⁴⁰ Although some Africans came from the east coast of that continent, most came from a region in West Africa between the Senegal River in the north and the Congo in the south.⁴¹ They came from coastal areas, inland forests, villages in the shadows of mountains, and riverside towns. Some were from advanced nations with long traditions of kings, courts, and well-defined civil societies. Others were from small clans composed primarily of family members. Some were farmers or herders, others were fisherman, craftsmen, and soldiers, and some were even slaves. These Africans came from different ethnic and kinship groups that held different cultural and religious traditions, but in the United States they were melded into one people. Many scholars estimate that 15-30% of Africans imported as slaves were Muslim. The majority of the remaining practised indigenous forms of worship. All, however, were converted to Christianity.

As time passed those brought directly from Africa died off. Hampered by misconceptions about their mother country, faulty information, incorrect conjectures, omissions of historical facts, and inaccurate oral traditions, the

³⁸ See Ramón A. Gutiérrez, *Changing Ethnic and Class Boundaries in America's Hispanic Past*, in SOCIAL AND GENDER BOUNDARIES IN THE UNITED STATES 37 (Sucheng Chan ed., 1989).

³⁹ ROBERT J. COTTRILL, THE LINGERING SHADOW: SLAVERY, RACE, AND LAW IN THE AMERICAN HEMISPHERE 5-6 (2013). For a discussion of different estimates of how many blacks were transported to North America see David Eltis, *The U.S. Transatlantic Slave Trade, 1644-1867: An Assessment* 54 CIVIL WAR HISTORY 347 (2008).

⁴⁰ See David Eltis, *The U.S. Transatlantic Slave Trade, 1644-1867: An Assessment* 54 CIVIL WAR HISTORY 347, 357-8 (2008).

⁴¹ *Id.* at 347, 356.

ability of North American-born descendants of those Africans to identify with various African identities weakened. As they weakened, a new collective African American identity emerged.⁴² Scholars typically point to the 1820s and 1830s as the time of the creation of the separate African-American identity.

Without question, the central feature of the African-American experience in the United States was the treatment of an individual as an involuntary member of a historically oppressed racial group. Until the institution of affirmative action programs, blacks in America came face-to-face with laws, customs, and social practices designed to restrict or confine their social, political, economic, and educational rights and opportunities. As noted black scholar W.E.B. DuBois summarised it, “The So-called Negro group . . . while it is in no sense absolutely set off physically from its fellow Americans, has nevertheless a strong, hereditary cultural unity born of slavery, common suffering, prolonged proscription, and curtailment of political and civil rights. . . Prolonged policies of segregation and discrimination have involuntarily welded the mass almost into a nation within a nation.”⁴³

Race was the dominant feature of the historical experience of African Americans, and it will help to recognise two different aspects of that experience. One aspect involved what it meant to be a victim of racial discrimination. With regard to the descendants of the soil of Africa, for much of America’s history, dominant American culture was deeply invested in notions of white (or at least Anglo-Saxon and Teutonic) superiority. Thus, dominant American cultural attitudes had clear concepts of what it meant to be black and imposed those notions on dark-skinned people. From this perspective, African Americans were viewed as passive objects that were moved around by whites for their purposes rather than as people with their own wills, hopes, and desires, who influenced their own destiny. This aspect also presupposed that blacks were inferior or substandard in some important ways to whites. This belief obscured the injustice of the discriminatory treatment that blacks experienced and made their subjection appear as the natural order of things. By imposing upon black people

⁴² I distinguish this view of the struggle of African Americans against racial oppression from those who view the black perspective as one of victimology. See, e.g., JOHN H. MCWHORTER, *LOSING THE RACE: SELF-SABOTAGE IN BLACK AMERICA* (2000). When I discuss this liberation perspective, it is not as an embrace of victimhood. Rather, it is a desire to eradicate the victimization that is a result of historical racial oppression. As such, it is derived from a perspective that takes the struggle against racial oppression, not the effect of that oppression, as its primary feature.

⁴³ W.E.B. DuBois, “Three Centuries of Discrimination,” *The Crisis* 54 (December 1947): 362-63.

a system that required their servitude and treated them as menials, their actual condition made them inferior. Thus, one aspect of the experience of historical discrimination is the experience of what it means to be “raced” or branded as inferior.⁴⁴ But, this aspect of the historical experience is not the true African-American culture.

Against the background of racial domination the descendants of the sons and daughters of the soil of Africa were melded into one people. Out of the uniting factor of race they shaped a counter discourse to how mainstream American society viewed and treated them. They actively engaged in a collective struggle that resisted white supremacy. Commenting on this, Mari Matsuda noted that “Black Americans, the paradigmatic victim group of our history, have turned the Bible and the Constitution into texts of liberation.”⁴⁵ From the perspective of the counter discourse, blacks are not viewed as inferior, but as oppressed. Thus, in contrast to the “raced” aspect of the historical experience of blacks was the active experience of a group who did not control the visible reins of power, but still served as the architects of their own struggles against the conditions of their oppression. This counter historical experience was limited by and responsive to the racial oppression imposed on the Black Community. Nevertheless, this counter narrative of resistance to racial oppression represents what I would call the true African-American culture.

In sum, the experience of the history of discrimination against black people in the United States is like a two-sided coin. On one side, race was, and is, the immutable characteristic that formed the basis of the oppression of blacks. On the other side was the Black Community’s collective effort to struggle against its oppression. But, the true African-American culture is the part of the experience that embodies the fight against racial oppression. Thus, at our core, African-Americans are warriors engaged in a constant battle for our racial liberation.

VB: Are Americans afraid that a new Malcolm X might influence the black psyche. Will Martin Luther’s attempt to get acceptability have more acceptance

⁴⁴ See, e.g., Kendall Thomas, Comments at Frontiers of Legal Thought Conference, Duke Law School (Jan. 26, 1990), *quoted in* Charles R. Lawrence III, *If He Hollers Let Him Go: Regulating Racist Speech on Campus*, 1990 DUKE L. J. 431, *in* MARI J. MATSUDA, CHARLES R. LAWRENCE III, RICHARD DELGADO & KIMBERLÉ W. CRENSHAW, *WORDS THAT WOUND* 53, 61 (1993); *see also* D. Marvin Jones, *Darkness Made Visible: Lam, Metaphor, and the Racial Self*, 82 GEO. L. J. 437 (1993) (arguing that racial categories are neither objective nor natural, but ideological and constructed. In these terms race is not so much a category but a practice: people are raced).

⁴⁵ Mari Matsuda, *Looking to the Bottom: Critical Legal Studies and Reparations*, 22 HARV. C.R.-C.L. L. REV. 323, 335 (1987).

among the black population or they would have more from the likes of Muhammad Ali ?

KB: It is important to understand that blacks in the US are overwhelmingly Christian. Today, Muslims make up less than 1% of the Black Community. Thus, despite how important Malcolm X appears to us looking back into the past, during his life he was not highly regarded by blacks outside of New York and Chicago. In fact, Spike Lee did an autobiographical movie about Malcolm X in 1992 that became a movie that virtually everyone in the Black Community saw. Malcolm X gained more of a following as a result of that movie than he had before 1992. Thus, to address your question directly, “no, Americans are not afraid of a new Malcolm X.”

I also want to point out that you have the wrong impression of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. He is without question the most significant popular leader of blacks in our history. For the time of segregation, Reverend King was a radical who was considered a major threat to the racial socio-economic structure. Unlike the Nation of Islam and Malcolm X, who preached separatism, Reverend King’s anti-segregation, pro-integration movement was a direct attack on the white power structure. It was King, not Malcolm X who led the fight for voting rights for blacks. So between King and Malcolm X, King posed a much greater threat to the white power structure.

VB: What is your solution to the current crisis that America faces? What could be the repercussions if the issue is not resolved? Is there any message for the African Americans as well as the whites in America to learn from Dr Ambedkar’s middle path doctrine of Buddha ?

KB: Beyond racial oppression, the problems of the Black Community include poor education in the urban areas, mass incarceration, a lack of jobs in our communities, a breakdown of the black family (some 2/3 black children grow up in single parent households and mass incarceration of black men contributes to this), and inadequate job opportunities (mass incarceration contributes to this as well). But, there is a very significant and powerful black middle class. So in total the Black Community in the United States is more powerful right now than we have ever been. All of our major problems are ones that people in the Black Community are working on, but they are huge problems. Given that the driving force of African-American culture is this collective resistance to racial oppression, we will continue to work on our problems no matter what. As we continue to say to our young black people, “Lift others as you climb.”

One of the things that struck me about my time in India and my understanding of Indian religions, especially the doctrine of reincarnation, was how different it is from the religions that Americans practice. Americans are generally

committed to the idea that we live once and only once. That means that whatever one does or wants to achieve, they have to do it or achieve it now, in this life. Added to this is the fact that America has always been an anti-traditional society. This is a country founded by people who were trying to escape the traditions of Europe. Thus, Americans do not hold on to the past, but are future oriented. They live with one foot in the present and one foot in the future. This creates a far greater sense of urgency than what a society that believes in reincarnation and tradition will produce. Thus, there is a much more rapid pace of change in the US than what exists in India. Almost as soon as something becomes standard, there is an effort to change it.

If America has a problem it will be that the pace of change comes too quickly to develop the cultural or mental thought forms to deal with it. Our technological advances will literally evolve in such a way that it leads us into a crisis that we cannot get out of.

I say this to say that Dr Ambedkar's philosophy was developed for the soil of India, not America. America is a country that is founded on notions of individualism, equality, and liberty (defined as the ability of the individual to pursue his or her own determined desires). The American culture does not see "fraternity" as a concern. In America you do not have to feel any kind of special concern for your fellow person, only refrain from interfering with their right to pursue their own plans and purposes. Individuals will find companionship with like-minded individuals, not with strangers or humanity as a whole. Except in times of war, Americans don't really worry about some under arching concept that unites all of us.

In addition, it is hard to truly convey the difference in the time horizons of Indians compared to Americans. America is a country that is less than 250 years old. There are only a handful of buildings on this continent that have existed for over 300 years, none of them outside the east coast. I live in the middle of the country and never see a structure that is over 150 years old. So the Indian mind lives with relics of the past as part of the landscape of the present that the American mind does not. We don't have places of worship or traditions that go back several hundreds or thousands of years. In fact, most American Christians are Protestants. This is a form of Christianity that has only been around for 400 years, not two millennia. For the American, the 1950s are so far in the past that it is difficult to see its relevance today. The result is that Americans are not likely to embrace philosophies developed by Dr. Ambedkar. The American mind simply believes that the conditions of the 1930s, 40s, and 50s have changed to a point that those philosophies are not relevant today.

VB: Are you seeking more or should I say, fair, representation of blacks in police and military of the US. Is representation more important than the

understanding of the issue? Do you think that the white officers are unable to understand the psychology of blacks.

KB: We are not seeking fair representation in the military. Simply put, the American military is an external force. So it is rarely involved in the policing of black neighbourhoods. The percentage of blacks in the American population is about 13%. We make up 16% of the males in the Armed forces and 31% of the females. Blacks are, therefore, overrepresented in the military. There is a sense that America's military is less racist than the general population. President Truman announced the desegregation of the military in 1948. It became the first major organisation to desegregate. In addition, because of the need to have soldiers depend upon each other, racism in the military undercuts its effectiveness. And the American military is a volunteer fighting force. Blacks often find jobs in the military more appealing than whites because our opportunities for other jobs are not as good as theirs.

The percentage of blacks among the police officers of the country is about 12%.⁴⁶ So we are slightly underrepresented among police officers. This underrepresentation is exacerbated by the fact that the police are more likely to police our neighbourhoods than those of whites. But, I would suspect that in urban areas, the percentage of black police officers is higher than the national average, but less than the percentage of blacks living in the urban areas. Nevertheless, there are a significant number of black police officers.

Our problems with over policing and mass incarceration stems from that reality that whites have always had negative attitudes about blacks. But, generally, they saw blacks as subservient during slavery. Coming out of slavery blacks were viewed as lazy, lacking in intelligence, lacking in motivation, dirty, and inferior, but not prone to violence. While black troops were important in the Union war victory during the Civil War of the 1860s, by the end of the century whites had once again subdued the Black Community. Thus, the change in the view of blacks, especially males, as prone to violence changes in the 1960s. First, while America has a long history of race riots, the first ones where blacks were the ones rioting, as opposed to whites, did not occur until the 1960s. Second, in the 1960s America saw the rise of militant Black Nationalist movements like the Black Panthers, the Nation of Islam, the Black Stone Rangers, and the Soledad Brothers. At this same time, America was also experiencing the changes to society due to the proliferation of television sets. One of those changes was that American football became more and more popular. Thus, Americans started to increasingly be exposed to images of big black male athletes who were coming

⁴⁶ See, <http://www.blackenterprise.com/career/percentage-african-americans-police-department-remained-flat-since-pre-recession/>

to dominate America's favourite primary spectator sport, a sport known for its violence. In addition, from 1910 to 1970, blacks left the rural south where their ancestors were held as slaves for the urban north. Conditions in northern cities were very different than the rural south. These areas required different personality traits to thrive. Blacks in urban areas were more aggressive than the ones in the rural areas of the South. As blacks migrated from the rural south to the urban north, a new sense of black militancy developed. So I am most persuaded by the scholars and historians who argue that the stereotype of black males as dangerous and violent people developed in the 1960s.

In the Black Community we have law abiding people and criminals. So just because you are a black police officer doesn't mean that you aren't concerned with the destructive potential of black criminals. As a result, what we as blacks are fighting is the dominant American attitude that sees black males as dangerous and prone to violence. It is this cultural idea that allows all Americans, including black ones, to be afraid of black males. So the problem that we have with the policing is not just a black/white problem. It is more a police/Black Community problem or an American problem.

Unfortunately, I don't really think that America will end its association of black males with violence. As I noted, beyond the images that Americans see about black criminals, black males are associated with violence in our most popular sport. Thus, Americans are constantly exposed to threatening images of black males. I believe that the most likely way that police killings of black males will be resolved is through the development of non-lethal ways for the police to subdue people that are as effective as shooting someone with a bullet.

VB: The recent killings of black youths clearly suggest that the incidents were result of prejudices prevalent in the minds of the American whites against the blacks. What would you suggest to the people so that these prejudices are done away with?

KB: It is important to understand that the killings of black males by the police is not a new occurrence. The only time this wasn't a problem in the US was when blacks were slaves. Therefore, killing one of them (us) was destruction of someone's property. So this has been a problem since abolition. What is different today is that the issue has received so much publicity because of the ubiquitous presence of video cameras.

Once an idea like blacks are prone to violence takes a hold of the American consciousness, it takes on a life of its own. For example, according to Bureau of Justice statistics, violent crime rates, which include homicide, robbery, rape and aggravated assault, have fallen by more than 50 percent between 1993 and

2013.⁴⁷ This, however, has not led to a decrease in the sense that America is a place where violent criminal behaviour is rampant. I, therefore, think that the best we can do is constantly attempt to combat the notion that black males are prone to aggressive and criminal behaviour. But, I would also suggest that blacks buy their own car video cameras and record their interactions with the police to the best of their abilities to do so at the time.

VB: In the popular political discourse Martin Luther always come near to Gandhi and not Ambedkar who should have been there. What do you think is the reason? Is Martin Luther ideologically closure to Gandhi or because both were religiously inclined people, they suit well to the ruling elite.

KB: Much of the American image of Gandhi is a product of the 1982 movie entitled *Gandhi*, where Ben Kingsley played him. In that movie, Gandhi is portrayed as a protector of the Dalits. *In American culture, Gandhi is viewed as a major spokesperson for the Dalits.*

The connection of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. with Gandhi comes from King embracing the philosophy of non-violence espoused by Gandhi. Simply put, Reverend King did not appreciate the Dalit struggle, he was more focused on the colonial struggle of India against the British. But, King was aware of non-violence. So the connection of Reverend King with Gandhi is a connection that King himself made. Frankly, I don't think that this is a connection that can be severed. Dr. Ambedkar can be revered on his own, but I would not seek to try and connect him with Reverend King.

I have said this before, but I think it needs to be repeated. You seem to have an image of Dr. King that sees him as a spokesperson for the dominant white community. Nothing could be further from the truth. I have included a link to Dr. King's most famous speech, the *I Have a Dream Speech*. <https://www.archives.gov/files/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf> I would suggest that you read the entire speech.

It is also important for everyone to realise that Dr. King was assassinated in 1968 while he was planning the Poor People's March on Washington DC. His goal was to bring 1 million poor people to Washington DC to advocate for a Trillion Dollar program to attack poverty in the United States. In today's dollars, his program would cost \$7,000,000,000,000 (Seven Trillion dollars). This was something he was doing after having successfully obtained Congressional legislation to outlaw discrimination in federally funded programs,

⁴⁷ Neil Howe, *What's Behind The Decline In Crime?* Forbes March 28, 2015 available at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/neilhowe/2015/05/28/whats-behind-the-decline-in-crime/#323b11d66f61>

housing, and public accommodations and securing passage of the Voting Rights Act that gave the vote to most blacks in the southern part of the US for the first time since the 1890s. King was correct in thinking that the late 1960s was a time to try to eliminate poverty. President Lyndon Johnson actually declared a “War on Poverty” during his State of the Union speech in January of 1964. Because of that, there were several major pieces of Congressional legislation that was passed in the 1960s to benefit the poor. But, Johnson’s War on Poverty was sidetracked by US spending on the Vietnam War.

The revolutionary aspect of Reverend King was muted in the conscious effort to re-describe him in terms that made him more acceptable to mainstream American society. This occurred during the 1980s, because when many advocated for making his birthday a national holiday. A country cannot create a national holiday for a person who was committed to restructuring the socio-economic order of the society. It seems to me that India may be doing the same with Dr. Ambedkar. I have noticed over my 20 years of coming to India how his images have proliferated. He is increasingly being embraced as the architect of the Indian constitution as opposed to a relentless critic of Hinduism. To the extent that he seen as the architect of the Indian constitution this becomes a conservative image to Dalits. It suggests that Dalits should accept the structure of Indian government because it is what Dr. Ambedkar’s work produced.

VB: How can we bring together the victims of caste system in Indian subcontinent and victims of racial discrimination in America and Europe. Is it important to bring them together and what purpose will it solve.

KB: Hopefully by now, you know I am a strong believer in Dalit/African-American cooperation and alliance. I believe that we can learn a tremendous amount from each other. Comparing our struggles and our solutions helps each group gain a better understanding of the nature of the struggle that each group is engaged in, as well as possible strategies and policies to employ. I have studied and taught about the struggles of African-Americans and Dalits, but also blacks in the UK, blacks in South Africa, and Palestinians/Arab Israelis in Palestine. From this, I have learned many lessons. Issues of oppression and subordination are local. They are tied to a particular history of a particular place. The form of oppression that Dalits struggle against, is, different from what African-Americans struggle against. The dominant Hindu culture of India is very different from the secular individualist/white supremacist culture that African-Americans struggle against. Consequently, your solutions may not be ours and ours may not be yours. But, we can understand our different struggles better as we look at them against the backgrounds of the other groups that are fighting oppression.

More importantly, African-Americans benefit tremendously from learning about the Dalit struggle and the fact that you know so much about our struggle. Generally speaking, African-Americans are not aware of how well-known our liberation struggle is among so many different people in the world. This is a very empowering concept for us. For Dalits, the ability to publicise your struggle on international arena is crucial to its success. There is a limit to what Dalits can accomplish without pressure being exerted on Hindu believes from outside. Thus, trying to let as many people know about the discriminatory conditions that Dalits face has to be a major aspect of the Dalit struggle for liberation. African-Americans can be very powerful allies in spreading that the word of that struggle. I also think that we can both draw inspiration from the realisation that we have brothers and sisters who share in the experience of oppression and the desire for liberation. And, it may very well be that we can find joint projects to work on that would advance our common interest.

VB: America has a museum for African American. I think it is a great tribute to the people there who devoted their lives to build the modern US. Do you think, India needs to make a similar museum to honour the Dalits and accept that it has wronged them for centuries?

KB: What is important for African-Americans is to make sure that our tradition of struggle against our oppression is passed on. The African American Museum is very much a part of making that occur. But, the museum was funded by private money, not government money. Among the major contributors of the museum were Oprah Winfrey (\$21 million), Lilly Endowment (headquartered in my hometown of Indianapolis of \$20 million), Robert Smith (\$20 million), the Andrew Mellon Foundation (\$12 million), The Atlantic Philanthropies (\$12 million) and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (\$10 million).⁴⁸ Since the museum was financed by private money, not public money, it does not represent a statement that America or Americans accept that they have wronged black people for centuries.

In some real way, the American culture doesn't allow the acceptance of white collective responsibility for the oppression of people of colour. While some whites think in terms of whites as a group and recognise a debt that they owe to right the wrongs of their group's past, most white Americans have a strong individualist ethic. What this means is that the son is not responsible for the sins of the father and the father is not responsible for the sins of the grandfather. In other words, Americans can say that individuals in the past oppressed black people, but that doesn't mean that they are being oppressed today or that

⁴⁸ See, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/lifestyle/national-museum-of-african-american-history-and-culture/biggest-museum-donors/>.

today's individuals bear any responsibility to alleviate the oppression done in the past, even if that oppression continues to have negative effects in the present.

Like African-Americans, Dalits are engaged in what may be a perpetual struggle, or at least one that will last for centuries, against their oppression. There are no easy fixes or quick solutions. But, a necessary aspect of success in that struggle is the need for Dalits to continue to cultivate a spirit of resistance to caste based oppression. If there is a museum developed for Dalits, it should be dedicated to the concept of a struggle against Dalit oppression and the justice of the cause of Dalits who struggled against their oppression. I have been to Rashtriya Dalit Prerna Sthal and Green Garden in Noida. A Dalit museum should be along the lines of this place, a museum to glorify the resistance to caste based oppression.

VB: What do you suggest as biggest challenge to Dalits and blacks in our times and how can they cope with it whether it is political battle or socio cultural fights. Do you think conversion is a potent weapon or you go with those who suggest Dalits don't need any religion?

KB: I have pointed to the biggest challenges for blacks already. The main problems facing the Black Community, (or portions of it) are not ones that religion or religious conversion will solve. The Black Community tends to focus primarily on material differences as the basis of our oppression.

I agree with Dr. Ambedkar, the problem that Dalits have is rooted in Hinduism. Dalit liberation is tied to either the significant reform or collapse of Hinduism. I can't see much in Brahminism that benefits Dalits. But, I would not suggest that Dalits ignore religion altogether. Religion has the ability to provide people with meaning for their lives. Secularism is often tied to consumerism, especially in capitalist countries. This means that you have to find the meaning for your life primarily in material things. And for people who do not have a lot of economic resources materialism is not likely to be the best place to find meaning for one's life.

The larger Dalit question is the conversion to Buddhism as opposed to say "American Style Christianity." I understand Ambedkar's desires to keep Dalits within the Hindu fold when he decided which religion for his conversion. Also, the Christian religious groups that operated in India at the time were of European origin, not American. But, Europe does not have the same tradition of anti-traditionalism that you find in the US. Nor is equality and individualism as deeply rooted in Europe as it is in America. Dalits converting to American Christian groups, especially the United Methodist, would be cultivating very powerful allies. Admittedly, that would mean losing the benefits of government reservations and other benefits that Dalits receive as long as they remain in the Hindu fold. So there would be a tremendous cost to be paid. It might very well

not make sense to consider such a conversion at the present. But, there may come a time when the Indian governments have done away with reservations. If so, then it would be time to reconsider religious conversion of Dalits.

VB: How do you react to Donald Trump in America? Is it the defeat of inclusivity that brought Obama or that he was talking about? How are African American people feeling at the moment? Are they feeling more insecure today?

KB: Certainly the election of Donald Trump is a significant blow to the African-American cause and to inclusivity. According to exit polls, of those who indicated who they voted for, Hilary Clinton won 92% of the black vote, 70% of the Latino vote, and 71% of the Asian vote. Clinton, therefore, won 77% of the non-white votes. In contrast, Trump won 61% of the white vote. In fact, while Trump won the white male vote 2 to 1, he won the white female vote by 10%. So there is much in Trump's election to suggest it was a white/coloured people election won by the whites. But, it should be noted that Clinton received nearly three million more votes than Donald Trump.

There is no question that Trump's election will negatively impact our struggle for at least a generation. We have already seen the Trump Administration nominate a conservative white Supreme Court justice and try to dismantle the Affordable Care Act that extended health coverage a large number of people in the black and Latino communities. Trump's tax proposals will benefit wealthy Americans at the expense of the poor and middle class. His budget cuts are directed at programs that serve the poor, while increasing military spending. But, at least to this point, the Trump Administration has been racked by scandal, failure, and chaos. One possibility is that his election is the last real attempt of the white, Protestant, heterosexual, conservative Americans to stem the tide of change. It could be that this is how the old order that has dominated American society since before its founding finally falls.

So for African-Americans, there is a feeling of dejection, but there is also a strong sense of hope. We have become reenergized to actively resist our oppression. We didn't do as much of that during President Obama's administration because he generally had our best interests in mind, subject to the limitations of his need to be President to everyone. So it may be that this is the darkest part of the night that occurs before the dawn.

VB: Do you think Trump's anti-immigration law will adversely impact America's growth as well as its vast diverse inclusive culture. Is it done to protect white hegemony in the United States?

KB: With the Great Depression, immigration into the United States would probably have fallen anyway in the 1930s; Congressional immigration reforms of the 1920s assured that it would. For forty years after the passage of the

Immigration Act of 1924, Congress seldom turned its attention to overseas immigration reform.⁴⁹ During this time, the percentage of foreign-born Americans fell to its lowest level on record. In 1970, just over 9.6 million foreign-born people resided in the United States, constituting only 4.7 percent of the population.⁵⁰ In contrast, the portion of foreign-born Americans stood at 13.2 percent in 1920⁵¹ and 12.9 percent in 2010. As I noted earlier, this immigration also included the first truly significant waves of black immigrants in the country's history. The percentage of blacks who were foreign-born increased from 1.1 percent in 1970, to 4.9 percent in 1990, to almost 10 percent in 2012. All of these changes have substantially reduced the percentage of non-Hispanic whites in America. As of 2015, they constituted only 61.2% of the American population (yet they made up 71% of the 2016 electorate) with Latinos making up 17.4%, and blacks 13.3% and Asians at 5.6%.

So yes, the 2016 vote was an effort to maintain white hegemony. Now, it could be that this was the last dying effort by whites in America to do so. We will begin to get a sense of whether the 2016 vote will be a reassertion of white hegemony or the last dying effort with the 2018 elections.

VB: Do you feel that fears of Hispanic, blacks and other migrants particularly Muslims in America are real and how do we face them? What would be the biggest challenge for these people and what are the ways to fight it out.

KB: There are fears of all 3 groups, but the fears are different. There is a genuine apprehension about Muslims. And, there isn't much of a Muslim/Black or Muslim/Latino alliance. The overwhelming percentage of blacks and Latinos are Christians. If you look at the words of the American Declaration of Independence it says,

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and *the pursuit of Happiness* (emphasis added).— That to secure

⁴⁹ See Richard A. Boswell, *Racism and U.S. Immigration Law: Prospects for Reform after "9/11"* 7 J. GENDER RACE & JUST. 315, 325 (2003). However, Congress did enact immigration reform measures that affected Mexican immigrants. See Kevin Brown and Tom I. Romero, II, *Social Reconstruction of Race & Ethnicity of the Nation's Law Students: A Request to the ABA, AALS, and LSAC for Changes in Reporting Requirements*, 2011 MICH ST L REV 1133, 1152-6 (2011).

⁵⁰ See Campbell J. Gibson & Kay Jung, *Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850-2000*, at tbl.1, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, WORKING PAPER SERIES NO. 81 (2006).

⁵¹ *Id.*

these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

For the American psyche, happiness is what the person is to seek in this life through his self-determination. So Americans have a very difficult time understanding people that are willing to kill themselves for a religious cause. And, Americans are not aware enough of how policies of our government are harming Muslims in their own countries. Thus, the fear of the Muslim is the fear of a fanatical person who will do anything, including committing mass murder, for their religious beliefs. Before 9-11, this fear of Muslims was not deeply rooted in the American consciousness.

For the Latino, there is a sense among whites that so many of them have come into the country that they are taking over. Their percentages of the US population have increased dramatically since 1980s. People who are as old as I am, remember when we didn't separately count Latinos. We might have had Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans, but they were seen as white ethnic groups, unless they were too dark. The dark ones were simply viewed as black. But, now, Latinos make up 17.4% of the American population. They, even more so than blacks, make whites feel that their country is changing demographically. So the fear of America no longer being a white country is in large part related to the increasing numbers of Latinos, and to a lesser extent, Asians.

The American government is ultimately responsive to the will of the people, even if the will of the people can be manipulated. We will see a shift in American politics as the demographics change. Thus, it is critical for minorities to vote. There will be a change in the interpretation of American law that will follow the political change by a few decades. Such changes can improve the functioning of American government on behalf of racial/ethnic minorities. The other strategy I would suggest minority groups pursue is wealth building. Because America is a society committed to materialism, minority groups will do this as a matter of course. In America, money is power. The more a group has, the more political and judicial power they can amass. So anything that would improve a group's economic conditions is worth pursuing. This would include educational achievement.

VB: Do you believe that the protests by African American community in the past few years for their rights, inclusion actually consolidated the whites to vote to Trump, a pattern that we witnessed in India too. The more we talk about the rights of the marginalised who have been historical wrongs, the bigger the risk of consolidation of the other people. How do we fight it democratically?

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KB: I have responded to this earlier, but, to restate, yes, I do believe that part of the reason Trump won such a high percentage of the white vote was because he was coming after a black President. After all, Trump received over 60 percent of the white vote, yet he lost the popular election by nearly three million votes.

But, the American presidential election was more than about blacks, it was also about Latinos and Asians. If you go back to say, 1980, Latinos were 6.5% of Americans, Asians were 1.5%, but whites were 83.7%. In 2015, single race non-Hispanic whites make up just 62% of the American population. And, the projections are that white children under the age of 18 will be less than half the children in the United States by 2020. Blacks at that time will be 13.5% of those under 18, with 25.7% Hispanic and 5.4% Asians.

The white majority may have sensed the changing demographics and voted for Trump as an effort to stop the trend of the “browning of America.” We can expect that the Republican Party will use its legislative powers to reduce immigration of people of colour, deport as many people of colour as possible, and adopt restrictions on voting that are intended to reduce the number of people of colour who are voting. So in the US, the way to fight it may simply prove to be a matter of time.

VB: A large part of radical Dalits in India were influenced by Black Panther movement in the United States. Dalit Panthers were born in 1970s and it influenced a whole lot of generation. Unfortunately it also passed away very fast. Many ideologues in India termed Dalit Panthers influenced with the ideology of left too. What is the status of Black Panthers movement in the United States now. Does Marx-ism or communist ideology could make any influence on the Black Panthers or black movement in the US. If not why? Do you think religion particularly Christianity played a bigger role in Black liberation movement than Marxism who rarely spoke of racial discrimination in Europe and America?

KB: The Black Panther Party (BPP) was a very influential group. There were over 40 party affiliation groups throughout the country. Everyone in America is familiar with the current “Black Lives Matter” movement directed at curtailing police violence of blacks in their community. The BPP also had similar origins. It was a self-defense organisation to protect the Black Community from police violence. But, it developed into more than this. It sought to attack problems that were common to poor urban Black Communities such as inadequate housing, poor education, and lack of economic opportunities. The BPP preached a message of self-empowerment and self-help. The BPP also became active in the political process. Its influence would be felt in the 1980s, particularly in Chicago, where Harold Washington became mayor.

But, the BPP became the focus of governmental efforts to destroy it. There was a fear that it would be an incubator for revolutionary and Marxist inspired rebellion by the Black Community. After all the Oakland branch of the BPP, which was the original branch founded in 1966, began to patrol the streets of Oakland with guns openly displayed. At the time it was legal to carry weapons as long as they were not concealed. So Panther members would converge on the police who pulled over black residents to observe what the police were doing in order to protect black citizens. In 1967, armed Panther members went to the California Legislature in Sacramento. This led then-governor Ronald Reagan, a Republican, to call for gun-control legislation. “Anyone who would approve of this kind of demonstration must be out of their mind,” Reagan said. But as Bobby Seale said, the BPP wasn’t about guns, it was about empowering the black community in the face of a racist system.

The BPP developed a 10 point program to empower black communities. The points advanced included basic demands for self-determination, decent housing, full employment, education that included African-American history, and an end to police brutality. The BPP instituted programs to provide free breakfast for children, food banks, health clinics, and education outreach. Unfortunately, attacks and political assassinations by the police and the FBI substantially reduced the effectiveness of the BPP by the 1980s.

The problem with Marxism for the African-American community is it tended to treat racism as a product of capitalism. But, blacks know that racism can exist with or without Marxism. Thus, Marxist ideology tends to underplay the very thing that the African-American community is fighting against. While there is certainly disagreement, most in the Black Community are attempting to compel America to share the wealth of our society more evenly as opposed to adopting a new economic system altogether.

There is no question that religion was more important to the black struggle against oppression than Marxism. From the black leaders of slave rebellions such as Nat Turner, Demark Vesey, and Gabriel Prosser to Martin Luther King Jr and Reverend Jesse Jackson, Christianity has always been at the centre of the black struggle. Many, if not most, of the leaders in various black communities are ministers. And, blacks have always found comfort and the strength to endure oppression in the message of the Bible.

VB: You spoke of different identities and assertion by the Blacks. There was a time when people were called Negroes and that was considered to be offensive. Then came the Black identity assertion in the form of Panthers. Now the most acceptable term was African American. How and why these perceptions of nomenclature changed over a period of time. Secondly, not all the blacks in the

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United States are from African origins, many of them are from the Caribbean. What is the basic difference between the two communities?

KB: The term “Negro” was the Portuguese word for “black.” So it was a nomenclature that was imposed on us. Up through the early 1960s, calling us “black” was considered an insult. This was in large measure due to the negative connotation that American society placed on the word. But in the 1960s, along with the Civil Rights Movement, we had a “Black is Beautiful” Movement. This wasn’t the result of the BPP, but a much larger movement by the Black Community. We sought to change the definition of the word “black” from something negative to something positive. Thus, we embraced the term “Black” as what we wanted to be known by. In the late 1980s, in order to make a stronger connection with our homeland, we began to refer to ourselves as “African-American.” So both the term “Black” and “African-Americans” were terms that we embraced.

Even though blacks from the Caribbean did not arrive in the US directly from Africa, they were part of the blacks transported during the TransAtlantic Slave Trade. I would, therefore, consider those from the Caribbean to be from Africa as well.

There was not much voluntary immigration into the US by blacks from the Caribbean until 1900. Then there was a large influx, who primarily went to New York City. Marcus Garvey, the leader of the largest movement encouraging blacks to immigrate to Africa in the 1920s, was from Jamaica. Malcolm X’s mother was born in the West Indies. Stokely Carmichael is also a descendant of West Indians. So many leaders in the Black Community have ancestral connections to blacks from the Caribbean.

Of late, however, there has been a tremendous influx of black immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean that I have already discussed. This is the first time in American history where we have had such a large number of voluntary black immigrants. Foreign-born blacks have their negative experiences with racism in the United States. However, many foreign-born blacks may assert an ethnic identity in the United States as opposed to a black identity in order to make a case that they are ethnically different from African-Americans. In addition, having grown up and matured in their countries of origin, Adult Black Immigrants do not have the same extensive years of experience with the historical discrimination encountered by blacks in the United States. Even when Adult Black Immigrants encounter or address racism, many of them do not experience the same psychological, sociological, and philosophical reactions to it. This is because they do not come from a line of ancestors that grew up in the United States.

Adult Black Immigrants encounter conflicting sociological forces in the United States. They come to a land with a long history of voluntary immigration, yet they also come to a place where their race places them at the bottom of a racial hierarchy. As a result, Adult Black Immigrants do not fit within the historic traditions of voluntary immigrants from Europe or within the historic traditions of blacks in the United States. Adult Black Immigrants tend to have a more optimistic and positive outlook on their conditions in American society than African-Americans. In addition, because Adult Black Immigrants mature in their home country, they do not bring with them to the United States the oppositional aspect to mainstream American culture that developed in the African-American culture with the history of resistance to racial oppression. Also, most foreign-born blacks come from countries with substantial black majorities, so race does not play nearly as important of a role in their psychological and emotional development as it does for African-Americans. Coming from countries with substantial black majorities, Adult Black Immigrants are familiar with seeing blacks wield significant economic, political, and educational authority. This may provide them with the empowering expectation that success in society is not tied to race, an idea that African-Americans with their experience growing up in the United States find more difficult to embrace. Finally, the reasons that Adult Black Immigrants come to the United States militates against them having experiences rooted in the history of racial discrimination suffered by blacks. Adult Black Immigrants come to America for many of the very same reasons that other immigrants come to America. These reasons reflect a desire to improve their social, economic, political, or educational standing. They wanted to make a better life for themselves, and they realised they could make more money in the United States or receive a more valuable education than they could back home. Engaging in a collective struggle against racial oppression of African-Americans is not very important to them. They would rather focus on helping their families and friends they left behind in their countries of origin.

VB: You mentioned to me that a fairly large number of black children are mix race now. Americans have grown into individuals and hence at the end of the day these racial divisions will disappear. Do you think so with people like Donald Trump in power, there seems to be a feeling of white revivalism. In India the situation is different and perhaps more difficult because here the mix marriages are very few and that too face social ostracisation. You have been married to a white woman too. Did you ever face the perceptual differences and challenges during your marriage period with the white woman. Was your break up with her purely technical or simple like any other or was it ideological.

KB: I do think that over the long haul, American individualism has and will continue to weaken the importance of race. This is especially true as the

percentage of mixed-race Americans and blacks increase. However, many whites will continue to hold on to the notion that “pure whites” are superior. So the racism will not completely disappear and will linger as an important force for centuries.

Yes, of course, I experienced obstacles being married to a white woman. One of the more compelling issues with the Black Community today is the lack of marriageable black men, especially for highly educated black women. Over the age of 25, black women constitute 55 percent of blacks. You must further reduce the pool of eligible black men by those who are in prison. Nearly 1 million black men are behind bars. Add to all of this is the fact that black men are 2 to 3 times more likely to date and marry outside of the race than black women. The more education a black person has and the more money they earn, the more likely they are to marry or date outside of the race. Since the early 1990s, 2/3rds of black college graduates have been women. All this means is that for black women there is a shortage of black men and this is most severe for the well-educated black woman. So for black women to see a professional black man with a white woman, is an added insult. Most of those who objected to my marriage to a white woman were black women.

The other thing that the lack of black men means is that for black women they are increasingly presented with the reality that to find a potential husband or mate requires that they look outside of the race. Thus, we can expect that the percentage of black women dating and marrying outside of the race will increase over time as well.

VB: How do you rate India as a country since you have been travelling to this country for long. The African students have always complained that they are victim of racial discrimination in India. In your interaction with Indians in United States and in India, have you ever come across incidents where you have felt to be discriminated against or made to feel embarrassed about your identity or colour of your skin.

KB: Unfortunately, India has a terrible race problem. I often deal with Indians who are prepared to discriminate against me because of my skin colour and race. Normally that changes once they learn that I am American. The fact that I am American means that Indians treat me much better than they treat Africans. But, Indians treat whites much better than anyone else. In truth, this is something that I have also noticed in my many trips to Africa as well.

I have had dozens of conversations with Africans in India over the past two decades. Every one of them has complained about the discrimination that they experience in India. Indeed, few of them find their time in India to be

enjoyable. In truth, I seriously doubt that I would have visited India 17 times if I were African.

VB: The Civil Rights Movement in the United States succeeded with the participation of a significant number of the whites activists, intellectuals and human rights defenders. They were part and parcel of the entire movement and accepted with open arms. Of course, every movement is related to the history, geographical and cultural context too but would you suggest that such solidarities and support strengthen the movement and can have positive impact in the historical struggle of the Dalit movement in India.

KB: Yes!! Dalits need allies in your struggle. Overcoming the oppression that Dalits face is something that cannot be done alone. The challenge is to make sure that Dalits do not compromise their goals of liberation as they look for allies. Not all allies will be helpful.

CHAKMA M.K*

Understanding Indigenous people's issues in Bangladesh

VB: Mr. Chakma what are the main issues of Chakma community in Bangladesh?

CMK: There are not only Chakma in Chittagong Hill Tract (CHT). It is a land of 11 multilingual indigenous peoples consisting of Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Mro, Bawm, Pangkhu, Khyang, Khumi, Chak, Lushai and Tanchangya. They all are collectively known as Jumma (Highlanders). Besides, a very small number of descendants of Assamese, Gorkha and Santals also live in there. They are distinct and different from the majority Bengali people of Bangladesh in respects of race, language, culture, heritage and religion.

The CHT is divided into three hill districts, namely, Rangamati, Khagrachari and Bandarban. The legal and administrative system in the CHT is nevertheless separate and distinct from those in other parts of the country. The general administrative setup does equally exist in CHT i.e. elected bodies of people's representatives at two levels – Union and National level – along with the implementing line agencies at Upazila, District and National level. Alongside there are decentralised government institutions in CHT i.e. CHT Regional Council at regional level and Hill District Councils at district level. In addition to the above institutions, the CHT has a three tier traditional structure based on the customs of the local indigenous Jumma people with Circle Chiefs, and Headmen at Mouza and Karbaries at village levels. The Chiefs are the heads of their respective revenue and administrative circles. There are three Circles in the CHT, the Chakma Circle, the Bohmong Circle and the Mong Circle. All of these institutions are supervised by a new ministry, the Ministry of CHT Affairs. These are reflective of the distinct socio-political, cultural and historical background of the region.

Main issues of Jumma peoples are:

- Government's policy of Islamisation of CHT region and ethnic cleansing as well
- Infiltration of Bengali Muslim population to CHT
- Non-implementation of CHT Accord that was signed between the Government of Bangladesh and the Parbatya Chattagram Jana

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Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) on 2 December 1997 for peaceful and political solution of CHT problem

- Systematic land grabbing by government authorities including forest department and military forces, Bengali Muslim settlers, business companies, influential political leaders and military-civil bureaucrats etc.

VB: How much is the population of the community in Bangladesh and what is their representation in government services and political parties?

CMK: The CHT comprises a total area of 5,093 sq. miles with around 1.6 million populations (as per census 2011). Among them, the indigenous Jumma peoples are around 845 thousands and Bengali Muslim settlers are around 752 thousands.

CHT Accord provides, against all the posts of officers of all ranks and employees of different classes in government, semi-government, local government and autonomous bodies of the CHT, the permanent dwellers of the CHT shall be appointed, subject to priority being given to the tribals.”

The CHT Regional Council gave its recommendation to the CHT Affairs Ministry along with the Ministry of Establishment to take necessary measures for inclusion of the said provision in the concerned appointment/service rules and regulations. But this provision has not yet been included in the concerned appointment/service rules and regulations applicable in the CHT region by the Ministries concerned. As a consequence, the outsider Bengali settlers are encroaching upon all employment facilities created for the Jumma peoples and permanent Bengali residents. Thus the Indigenisation process of the administration of three hill districts of CHT is going to be blocked. The proper implementation of the CHT Accord cannot be possible by the outsider Bengali Muslim functionaries. As such the current trend of appointment and transfer of non-Jumma ethnic Bengali officers and staff to the CHT region is to be stopped right now in the greater interest of the Jumma peoples of the region and permanent residents of Bengalis.

VB: How much rights have been given to Chakma Hill Track people? Do you have any political, administrative autonomy there?

CMK: Before the British annexed the region to Bengal, Jumma people of CHT were independent. Even during the British colonial period (1860-1947), the CHT was regarded as an ‘Excluded Area’, in order to protect the indigenous Jumma people from economic exploitation by non-indigenous people and to preserve the indigenous peoples’ socio-cultural and political institutions based on customary laws, community ownership of land and so on. In fact, several

provisions of the CHT Regulation of 1900 functioned as a safeguard for the Jumma people and it prohibited immigration into the region and land ownership by non-indigenous people.

The Pakistan government, however as per the provision of the Independence Act, recognised CHT as a fully Excluded Area and retained it even in the first constitution of Pakistan, which was passed in 1956, along with the CHT Regulation of 1900. It destroyed the economical backbone of the indigenous Jumma people completely. In the second constitution of Pakistan, the Excluded Area Status was changed to "Tribal Area" in 1962. But it was abolished in 1963 by constitutional amendment. The entire administration including the police was manned by Bengali Muslims from plain districts.

Bangladesh became independent in 1971, indigenous Jumma people hoped that the new rulers of Bangladesh would realise their hopes and aspirations as Bangladesh rulers also struggled against the oppression and suppression of Pakistani ruler and the Jumma people would be free from oppression and discrimination. So the Jumma people demanded to the then government for autonomy in a democratic way. Unfortunately, the government of freshly independence Bangladesh did not respect their fundamental rights and did not write even a single word in the constitution regarding the entity and safeguard of the Jumma people. Rather immediately following the independence of Bangladesh in early 1972 the CHT underwent militarization. Three cantonments were established in Dighinala, Ruma and Alikadam during Sheikh Mujib period. Wide range discontent to unrest that resulted from terror throughout CHT let loose by the Mukti Bahini, forced the people to assemble into a common political platform with the formation of Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) on 15 February 1972 under the leadership of M. N. Larma.

Hence, Jumma people started democratic movement for rights to self-determination. But the democratic movement of Jumma people turned into armed struggle when all democratic avenues are closed following assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in August 1975. After holding decade-long dialogues with the successive governments of General Ershad government (1985-1989), Begum Khleda Zia-led BNP government (1991-1995) and lastly Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League government (1996-1997), the 'CHT Accord' was finally signed between the PCJSS and Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League government in Dhaka on 2 December 1997. The CHT Accord could conclude the decades-long fierce internal conflicts and paves the way for the peace, development, demilitarisation of the region and opportunities to meaningful engagement and representation of the Jumma peoples.

The main objectives of the CHT Accord was to restore and protect rights of the indigenous Jumma people of CHT i.e. to restitute lands of the indigenous

people, to have self-rule (proper representation of the Jumma people in the CHT administrative institutions) and to enhance fiscal decentralization for equitable economic development of CHT and also to accommodate rights of the permanent Bengali residents and thereby replace the previous policy of assimilation of the indigenous Jumma people with the policy of integration. The CHT Accord of 1997 provides-

- for recognition of the CHT region as "tribal-inhabited region";
- strengthens the special governance system (a kind of self-rule) in CHT with the establishment of the CHT Regional Council and three Hill District Councils;
- demilitarisation of the region (withdrawal of more than 500 temporary camps);
- resolution of land disputes which were arisen due to forcible land grabbing by Bengali Muslim settlers;
- rehabilitation of returnee Jumma refugees and internally displaced indigenous persons;
- establishment of a CHT Affairs Ministry at national level;
- rehabilitation of Bengali Muslim settlers outside CHT with dignity, and so on.

The Government of Bangladesh implemented some provisions of the Accord, such as, enactment of CHT Regional Council Act 1998, amendment of three Hill District Council Acts in 1998; formation of interim CHTRC and Ministry of CHT Affairs; repatriation of Jumma refugees from India; withdrawal of around 66 temporary camps (where the government claims withdrawal of 172 camps); formation of CHT Accord Implementation Committee, CHT Land Dispute Resolution Commission and Task Force on Rehabilitation of Returnee Refugees and IDPs, etc.

However, no effective initiative for implementation of the unimplemented provisions of the Accord has been taken even after 18 years. The main issues, such as preservation of tribes-inhabited characteristics of the region, devolution of effective authority to the CHTRC and three HDCs, resolution of land disputes, demilitarisation, rehabilitation of returnee Jumma refugees and internally Jumma displaced families, rehabilitation of Bengali settlers outside CHT with dignity etc. Substantial progress is yet to be achieved due to non-implementation of the main issues of the Accord.

Provision for more strengthening of power and functions of three Hill District Councils with 33 transferable subjects, such as, law and order, general

administration, district police, land and land management, forest (except reserved forest), primary and secondary education, youth welfare, environmental protection and development, local tourism, agriculture etc.

Provision for formation CHT Regional Council with the aim of making CHT a unique political and administrative unit. This Regional Council was bestowed upon the power of supervising and coordinating to the subjects transferred to three Hill District Councils (HDCs), law and order, general administrations, development, CHT Development Board, traditional and social justice etc and the power of giving license for heavy industries. In making any law in connection with CHT, the Government shall enact such law in consultation with the Regional Council.

Provision for establishment of Ministry for CHT Affairs where a cabinet minister would be appointed from among Jumma people and an Advisory Committee shall be constituted to lend support to this Ministry.

VB: Do Chakma people enjoy any particular benefit in the government services like in India where 7% seats are reserved for Scheduled Tribes? Do you have any affirmative action programme for your community?

CMK: The government of Bangladesh undertakes some affirmative actions in favour of indigenous peoples living in CHT and plain land of the country. Notable among these are:

- setting up of a Special Affairs Division under the Prime Minister's Office particularly for plain lands indigenous peoples;
- signing of the CHT Peace Accord with the PCJSS as a solution of the CHT problem through political and peaceful means and accordingly establishment of CHT Regional Council and three Hill District Councils as special administrative arrangements for the CHT;
- providing quota reservation in the government jobs (5%) and educational institutions for 'tribal' people;
- setting up of 7 small ethnic cultural institutes throughout the country for preservation and development of small ethnic unique cultures.

In fact, the number of recruitment is much lower than the number of available posts allocated for indigenous candidates as per 5% reserved for tribal quota. After breaking down the figure on year basis, for example, it is found that only 22 indigenous candidates were appointed against 261 posts in the 24th BCS.

VB: While the government in Dhaka is secular, the Islamist forces have been raising their ugly head in Bangladesh and the minorities are the biggest target. Does this Islamisation has impacted lives of Chakmas? If yes, then in what way?

CMK: Islamic militant groups in Bangladesh, under sponsorship of various vested quarters, have built up their well-fortified positions in CHT in the recent years taking advantage of the existent fanatic atmospheres. As the communal mood is existent under state patronization in CHT, the terrorist and fanatic organisations had to have no trouble in getting the hilly CHT as a field quite fertile and favourable to them. These terrorist groups, with direct or indirect support of the communal and ultra-nationalist groups including some officials of the local administration and local leadership of national political parties, are utilising the CHT as their safe hinterland. These elements have been obstructing the implementation process of CHT Accord under various forms and guises.

It is learnt that there are base camps of armed terrorist group named "Rohingya Solidarity Organization" (RSO) in Naikhyongchari of Bandarban hill district. A bulk amount of money is being spent in organising the Rohingya-camp-based terrorist outfits through several NGOs functioning in Bangladesh. It is also learnt that the terrorist groups active in the country are recruiting their members from among the Rohingyas who are unregistered and living outside the refugee camps, such as from Chittagong, Cox's Bazaar and Bandarban. It is further known that noxious ideal of terrorism is being spread among the Rohingyas deliberately. Many extremist Islamic outfits including Jamat-E-Islam by providing arms training to the Rohingyas are getting them involved in armed 'Jihad'. It is through discoursing religious messages 'extremism' is being spread by various means. News of preparation of the terrorists for sabotage activities in the three hill districts of CHT has come to limelight in the mass media.

It has been learnt that the Rohingya outfits were involved in killing a Buddhist monk in Naikyongchari Upazila of Bandarban hill district on 14 May 2016. In investigation reports of various entities, the Rohingyas were shown with evidences to have attacked and plundered the Anser camp at Teknaf under Cox's Bazar district on 13 May 2016. The Rohingyas, mostly of unregistered and illegal categories are dispersing in the three hill districts of CHT and getting involved in various criminal activities, arms & drug smuggling, and killings and robberies. But utterly surprising enough that these terrorist activities of national and foreign terrorist groups including that of Rohingyas are not brought to light in the anti-terrorism program of local administration and local Awami League in the three hill districts. Contrarily, the Rohingya terrorist leaders have been provided seats in the Anti-terrorism Committees in some cases. For instance, Shafi Ullah, the Rohingya leader has been made President of Upazila Anti-

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Terrorism and Extremism Committee in Naikhyongchari Upazila of Bandarban hill districts.

It is learnt that in these days, many national and foreign terrorist groups are reported to be active in the Rohingya-inhabited areas including Bandarban and Cox's Bazaar district. Islamic radical groups want to destabilise CHT to open a new front against Myanmar and north-east India.

VB: You mentioned that Bangladesh authorities tried to influence the demography of the CHT and a number of Muslim families were planted there to make a population balance. Can you tell us about what kind of process it was ? Did you oppose it ? Since when has this been being done?

CMK: During the partition of India and Pakistan, the total population of CHT was only 247,053 out of that only 2.5 percent Bengali including 1.5 percent Bengali Muslims. But after 20 years of Pakistan Period and 31 years of the Bangladesh period, the picture of the demography of CHT has significantly changed especially after the systematic illegal settlement of Bengali Muslims by the successive governments.

Noted the more than 500,000 Bengali Muslims from the plain districts of the Bangladesh has illegally been given settlement in CHT by the government of Bangladesh in 1980s. Fresh political migration of Bengali Muslims from different districts of the country to the CHT still continues alarmingly. So, presently according the Bangladesh census report 2011 the total population of the CHT is around 1.6 million populations comprising Jumma peoples are around 845 thousands and Bengali Muslim settlers are around 752 thousands.

During the partition of Indian sub-continent in 1947, the indigenous Jumma and Bengali Muslim population were 98.5% and 1.5% respectively. By now the ratio has been further aggravated with 51% Jumma people and 49% Bengali Muslim settlers. It is crystal clear that the Jumma people are going to be a minority in their own homeland very soon, because of successive governments' prolonged and sustained Islamization policy.

VB: You mentioned that on 14th August 1947 Indian flag was hoisted at CHT and not the Pakistani flag. The entire CHT wanted to be part of India but was merged with Pakistan against the wishes of your people. Could you please explain it further as who were the leaders and what were your demands during independence and why were they not acceded.

CMK: Indian subcontinent was partitioned on the basis of two-nation theory under the provisions of Indian Independence Act, 1947. The Muslim-dominated regions were to constitute Pakistan and the non-Muslim dominated regions were to constitute the Indian Union. It was quite natural for the Jumma

people who constituted 98.5% of the total population of the then CHT to express desire to be included in the Indian Union. But the result was quite opposite, Sir Cyril Radcliffe, Chairman of the Bengal Boundary Commission with a stroke of pen trampled down the aspiration of the people of CHT. The Bengal Boundary Commission recommended CHT to be part of Pakistan and on 17 August 1947 two days after the declaration of Pakistan independence the CHT was declared as part of Pakistan.

In fact, according to the primary survey reports of the Boundary Commission, CHT was to form a part of India. The mystery lies in the fact that the district of Zira and Ferozpur sub-division of Punjab, predominantly a Sikh populated area fell into Pakistan as envisaged in the early reports of Punjab Boundary Commission. As the Sikh are brave and warrior nation they might not abide by the decision of the Punjab Boundary Commission if a part of Sikh-dominated area would fall into Pakistan. Lord Mount Batten, Governor of the then India that the plan for Indian division might go futile; so he took it with serious concern. Therefore, Lord Mount Batten cancelled his primary plan and awarded CHT to Pakistan two days later after the declaration of Pakistan independence in exchange of Zira district and Ferozpur sub-division with India. It was incompatible with the Indian Independence Act of 1947 by the British government.

The indigenous Jumma people of CHT could not abide by the decision of the Bengal Boundary Commission. The CHT Peoples' Association, a socio-political organisation of CHT under the leadership of Sneh Kumar Chakma, unfurled the Indian national flag on 15 August 1947 at Rangamati, capital of the CHT, as a mark of protest against this injustice. The leaders of the Peoples' Association formed resistance squads to defy the decision of the Bengal Boundary Commission. It was really an injustice to the CHT people meted out by the British at the fag end of their rule. The Jummas vehemently protested against the decision but to no avail. All their efforts were thwarted when the Baluch Regiment of Pakistan Army entered into CHT and proclaimed control over the area. They lowered the Indian flag at Rangamati six days later at gunpoint and raised the flag of Pakistan on the 21 August 1947.

VB: In the common parlance we heard that Bangladesh government always looked towards Chakmas as suspect? Why? Did you not support the Bangladesh war of liberation? If not, why?

CMK: From the very outset, the Pakistani government looked upon the Jummas with an eye of suspicion as anti-Pakistani as well as anti-Islamic. It considered the indigenous people as hostile elements and pro-Indian. Therefore, the Pakistan governments' ultimate aim was to exterminate the people of CHT through its socio-political-economic policy. Even in 1950s, in

implementing her brazen designs violating the principles and spirit of the CHT Regulation of 1900 the government of Pakistan started Bengali Muslim settlement in various areas of CHT in 1950s. The Section 51 of the CHT Regulation, which put a restriction on the outsider Bengali Muslim migration into the CHT, was repealed in 1965 to facilitate migration as well as infiltration of outsider Bengali Muslim settlers.

In 1960, in order to materialise its evil design and breaking down the economic backbone of the people of CHT, in the name of so-called industrial development the Pakistan government built the Kaptai hydroelectric project on the Karnafuli river in the heartland of the indigenous Jumma people which flooded 1,036 sq. km. of lands and submerged 54% (54,000 acre) of the best arable land and also displaced about 100,000 Jumma people from their ancestral hearth and homes for good. Rehabilitation Program was a cruel farce. By Karnafuli project people became panicky and because of insecurity, finding no alternative among these some 40,000 Chakma were forced to migrate into India and about 20,000 other Jumma people had to take refuge in Myanmar. The people who are living in the Indian State of Arunachal are yet to be given citizenship.

After nine months of war of independence against Pakistan, Bangladesh emerged as an independent state on 16 December 1971. The victorious 'Mukti Bahini' (Freedom Fighter) entered into CHT with vengeance and communal hatred, creating a reign of terror situation throughout CHT. The Mukti Bahini fell upon the innocent Jumma people, killing, looting, arsoning and raping women, burning houses and villages, victimising and terrorising the inhabitants who was were forced to take refuge in the jungles. Soon after the Pakistani army had withdrawn, the Mukti Bahini went on a systematic rampage against the Jummas in the CHT. On 5 December 1971, 16 Jumma people were massacred by the Mukti Bahini at Panchari. Another 18 were killed at Dighinala. On 14 December 1971, the Mukti Bahini killed 22 Jumma people at Kukichara. Moreover, a huge amount of paddy land belonging to the indigenous Jumma people in Matiranga, Ramgarh and Manikchari under Khagrachari district was forcibly grabbed by the horde of Bengali Muslim from Feni district. They put lame excuse that Chakma Raja Tridiv Roy took with Pakistan side during Liberation War and Jumma youths joined to the Rajakar Bahini.

In fact, hundreds of Jumma people participated in the Liberation War. Mong Chief of Mong Circle played active role for Liberation War. He gave shelter hundreds of Bengali people who were on way to Tripura to take refuge there. He personally joined Mukti Bahini and fought against Pakistani army. There were hundreds of Jumma youths in the East Pakistan Rifle (EPR) who all joined Mukti Bahini. Many sacrificed their life in the war front. After independence,

one rifleman Ukhya Shing Marma of EPR was awarded as Bir Bikrom award for his brave fighting against Pak army. Many Jumma service holders also joined Freedom Fighter. Some of them were Bimaleshwar Dewan, Tripura Kanti Chakma, Boren Tripura, Kripasukh Chakma, Ananda Banshi Chakma et al.

Then Major and turned later into President, Ziaur Rahman with his forces went to Indian State of Tripura through Naniarchar, Mahalchari, Khagrachari and Ramgarh in CHT during Liberation War in 1971. At that time, Jumma people helped him in supplying food and ration and in crossing border guiding safe land road. Even a Chakma villager of Kamalchari village under Khagrachari district named Mriganga Chakma helped Major Ziaur Rahman to cross Chengi River taking Ziaur Rahman on his shoulder. As Jumma villagers helped Ziaur Rahman, Pakistan army later arrested many Jumma villagers including Mriganga Chakma, Sabhya Mohajan, Gouranga Dewan and Chitta Ranjan Karbari who were brutally killed later. Many Jumma women and girls were subjected to victims of rape by the Pakistani army for helping the Mukti Bahini.

However, a vested groups of Bengali Muslims spread propaganda with political motivation that Jumma people are anti-Liberation, they are pro-Pakistan, they helped Pak army etc. This way, soon after formation of Pakistan in 1947, Pakistan government termed Jumma people as pro-Indian and soon after independence of Bangladesh in 1971, Jumma peoples were identified as pro-Pakistan. The main objective of this vis-versa terming is to make lame excuse for oppression and suppression upon Jumma people.

Q. Did Indian government ever try to speak to their Bangladeshi counterpart about your issues and rights?

I did not see any instance in any open forum in speaking by the government of India to their Bangladeshi counterpart about our issues and rights. On the other, I am not sure whether Indian government ever try to speak in the bi-lateral meetings.

VB: What is United People's Party plan to achieve ? Is it the only party in your region or there are other parties too? Do you have any MNA in the National Assembly?

CMK: The Jumma peoples have established an unprecedented illustration in the history of struggle of the world's freedom-loving peoples in ascertaining their just rights, by waging heroic struggle for 45 years under the leadership of PCJSS. All through its glorious movement, the PCJSS, as the result of its flawless strategy and tactics has been able to-

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- Inspire and unite the Jumma peoples, who were in slumber and wary under constant exploitation, oppression, atrocities and suppressive measures meted out by the rotting feudal leadership, in the political spirit;
- Motivate and amalgamate the nearly abolishing Jumma peoples in the struggle for ascertaining their rights to self-determination;
- Inspire the multi-lingual Jumma peoples, who were absolutely confined in narrow nationalism, in the spirit of Jumma nationalism;
- Compel the government or rather the ruling class to sign the CHT Accord – the Charter of the Rights of the Jumma peoples and Bengali permanent residents – through waging steel-hard struggle against relatively very imbalanced power – the power of an established State.

PCJSS is in the movement for full, speedy and proper implementation of CHT Accord. Indeed, there is no alternative of the implementation of the CHT Accord to ensure the right to self-determination for the Jumma peoples. Insurance of establishment of Jumma peoples' political, economic, administrative, social, cultural and land rights is laid in the implementation of the Accord. Hence, the 41st founding anniversary of the PCJSS calls on:

- Compel the government to implement the CHT Accord aiming at the establishment of right to self-determination of permanent residents, both Jumma and Bengalis;
- unite and stand against the anti-Accord elements including all the conspiracies designed to ethnic attrition being meted out upon the Jumma peoples;
- take part of the democratic, non-communal and progressive movement at national level aiming to establish a democratic and progressive government.

In last parliamentary election held in January 2014, PCJSS candidate for Member of Parliament from Rangamati parliamentary constituency won the election. 22-member Interim CHT Regional Council was also formed by PCJSS.

VB: Was any Chakma made minister in Dhaka? If yes, did he do anything for the community?

CMK: Generally ruling party appointed a minister/state minister/deputy minister for CHT Affairs Ministry among from Jumma community. Awami League-led Current government appointed Bir Bahadur Ushwe Shing (who won election as MP from Bandarban parliamentary constituency) as State Minister for CHT Affairs Minister. As they appointed from ruling party, so they cannot do anything for the community beyond the party policy. Even, they do not have courage to raise voice for implementation of unimplemented core issues of CHT Accord.

VB: Have Chakmas faced violence in Bangladesh from the Islamic fundamentalists? If yes, please give us details.

CMK: The failure to fully implement the CHT Accord has led to widespread human rights violations. Bengali settlers, often with the help of a section of the civil administration and military forces, continue large scale attacks upon Jumma people with the primary aim of grabbing their land. Gross human rights violations against the indigenous peoples continue unabated. The violations include arbitrary arrests, torture, extrajudicial killings, harassment of rights activists and sexual harassment. In most cases the violations happen with impunity. The failure to thoroughly investigate human rights violations by Bengali settlers with the support of the law enforcement agencies in the CHT remained a matter of serious concern. As a result, the indigenous Jumma people are leading a very unsecured life.

Expansion of settlements and forcible land grabbing continue unabated in all the three districts including on the roadsides in particular. Communal attack on indigenous Jumma villagers continue even during the period of present grand alliance government with an aim to uproot indigenous Jumma peoples from their ancestral lands and occupy their lands by Bengali settlers. As part of this planning, so far, apart from frequent incidents of sporadic arson on Jumma dwellings, at least 18 massive communal attacks were perpetrated during the post-Accord period in different parts of the three hill districts of CHT, obviously, to uproot indigenous Jumma peoples from their ancestral land and to settle down Bengali settlers over there. Moreover, activities to incite communal frenzy in the CHT are being intensified. After signing of CHT Accord, the following communal attacks were committed by Bengali settlers with the help security forces and fundamentalist militant groups-

Attack	Date	No. of houses		No. of person killed	No. of person injured	Raped/ sexual harass
		Burnt down	Looted/ Damage			
Baghahat Attack	4 April 1999	--	--	--	51	1
Babuchara Attack	16 Oct 1999	--	74	3	140 (3 monks)	1
Boalkhali-Merung Attack	18 May 2001	42	191	--	5	--
Ramgarh Attack	25 June 2001	126	118	--	Several	--
Rajvila Attack	10 Oct 2002	11	100	--	3	--

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Bhuyanchari Attack	19 April 2003	9	--	--	12	--
Mahalchari Attack	26 August 2003	359	137	2	50	10
Maischari Attack	3 April 2006	-	100	-	50	4
Sajek Arson Attack	20 April 2008	78	78	-	-	-
Baghaihat (Sajek) Arson Attack	19-20 Feb 2010	435	Same	2	25	-
Khagrachari Arson Attack	23 Feb 2010	61	Same	-	-	-
Longadu Arson Attack	17 Feb 2011	21	6	-	15	-
Ramgarh-Manikchar Attack	17 April 2011	111	-	2	25	-
Baghaichari-Dighinala Attack	14 Dec 2011	-	-	1	11	-
Rangamati Attack	22-23 Sept 2012	-	11	-	117	-
Taindong-Matiranga	3 August 2013	36	261	1	12	-
Kamalchari-Betchari	25-26 Feb 2014	-	6	-	5	-
Bogachari	16 Dec 2014	59	5	-	3	-

VB: Does administration take your issues with sympathy or cases are never resolved?

CMK: Civil and political rights of indigenous peoples are often intimidated in many cases. Right activists engaged in their legitimate actions to protect and promote their rights to self-government, land and resources, are frequently criminalised resulting in their arrests, detention, enforced disappearances and even sometimes become victims to political killings. In 2015, at least 74

members of indigenous communities including women and school girls were arrested. They were charged with criminal offences. However, most of them were released later on bail. On the other hand, fabricated cases were framed against at least 117 indigenous souls. Over the past few years, apparently, the most appalling issue facing indigenous women and girls in Bangladesh is the alarming rate of violence against them and the impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators. Due to the absence or weak enforcement of existing legal and non-legal measures by the State, indigenous women and girls continue to encounter different forms of violence. According to Kapaeng Foundation's statistics, from January 2007 to September 2016, there have been at least 466 reported incidents of violence against indigenous women and girls in Bangladesh.

In comparison to 50 indigenous women and girls who were victims of rape, attempted rape and gang rape as reported by Kapaeng Foundation, there were 615 victims of mainstream Bengali women and girls reported by Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) in 2014. It is worth mentioning that 7.52% of the victims/survivors in 2014 were from indigenous communities, who are merely 1.8% of country's total population, while the remaining 92.48% victims were from the Bengali community, who are the majority in the country with 98.2% of the total population. From the statistical data given earlier, it is clear that the propensity of committing sexual and physical violence against indigenous women is higher than the violence faced by mainstream Bengali women. While indigenous women have a possibility to fall victim by the men from own community, they face a high rate of violence and discrimination from the men from outside of the community. Over past three years (2013-2015), on an average above 90% of the alleged perpetrators of violence were from non-indigenous background. Such incidents occur massively due to ethnic and cultural differences. Violence against indigenous women and girls is one of the weapons used widely to evict them from their ancestral lands. Hegemonic chauvinism to dominate over and subdue minorities also acts as an inducement to exploit indigenous women sexually and physically.

VB: As a minority group, how much you associate with other minorities in Bangladesh like Hindus and Christians?

CMK: PCJSS leadership is involved with Bangladesh Hindu Bouddha Christian Unity Council, national platform of minorities in Bangladesh and also Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples Forum, national platform of indigenous peoples in Bangladesh. PCJSS also has closed relationship with different civil society organisations of Bengali community.

VB: Chakma practice Buddhism. What are your main traits. Which kind of Buddhism do you practice?

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CMK: The Chakma, Marma Tangchanya and Chak are mainly Buddhists, the Tripuras are Hindus and some smaller groups such as the Bawm, Khiyang, Lushai and Pangkhua are Christians. Mro and Khumi practise what is known as Animism, though some of them also follow Buddhism. Religious tolerance has been a long tradition of the Jumma people. CHT Buddhists follow Theravada Buddhism.

VB: Do you have any association, support, solidarity with the Dalits in Bangladesh. If yes then what kind of association or commonality of issues do you have?

CMK: We have loose relationship with the Dalits in Bangladesh. Many organisations are networking with organisations working for Dalits.

VB: Do you face discrimination in day today life due to your Chakma identity. If yes, please let us know as what kind of discrimination?

CMK: The first constitution of Bangladesh adopted in 1972 did not mention a single word about Jumma people and separate administrative arrangement for CHT. Rather, the Constitution says, the citizen of Bangladesh will be regarded as Bengalees. Manabendra Narayan Larma, then member of Constituent Assembly and founder of PCJSS protested against this constitutional provision and walked assembly protesting the adoption of this racial Article. Even, he did not sign Constitutional Bill in 1972.

In the Fifteenth Constitution (Amendment) Bill passed in the Parliament on 30 June 2011, the government ignored the demand of indigenous peoples for recognition of their fundamental rights including recognition as indigenous peoples. However, the government recognised the culture of indigenous peoples in the fifteenth amendment stating that “the State shall take steps to protect and develop the unique local culture and tradition of the tribes, minor races, ethnic sects and communities”. It is mentionable that the terminologies of “tribes, minor races, ethnic sects and communities” are not accepted by the indigenous peoples.

Further, fifteenth amendment provides that “the People of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangalees as a nation and the citizens of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangladeshies”. Indigenous peoples rejected this provision arguing that they are Bangladeshi as citizens, but they are not “Bangalee” as a nation. They all are a separate nation possessing separate identity, culture, customs, language and society apart from Bengalis. Indigenous peoples rejected the Fifteenth Amendment of Constitution saying that it undermined the human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous peoples.

Indigenous peoples demanded to review the 15th amendment to the constitution, which did not recognise them as 'indigenous people and their fundamental rights. They urged the government to ensure indigenous peoples' right to land along with their political, economic, cultural and social rights in the constitution.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vidya Bhushan Rawat,49, is a well-known political commentator, a human rights defender and a humanist. He has been engaged in public discourse on important issues of human rights particularly related to caste discrimination, religious intolerance, untouchability and Minority Rights issues for the past 25 years. He formed Social Development Foundation, in 1998, to work with the most marginalized communities and develop community leadership to raise their voices. He worked extensively with communities like Mushahars, Kalandars, Swachchkars, Kols, Tharus and was able to bring their issues particularly related to hunger and landlessness at national and international platforms. So far he has written over 15 books and made an equal number of documentaries which are available on youtube at the moment. Some of his most important works are : Press and Prejudice : The insightful analysis of Hindi Media, Dalit Land and Dignity, Land Acquisition and Land Alienation in India, Special Economic Zones in India : A Study with special reference to Polepally SEZ in Andhra Pradesh, Ayodhya : Sanjhi Sanskriti Sanjhi Virasat, Tark ke Yoddha, Ambedkar Ayodhya aur Dalit Andolan etc.

Some of his interesting documentaries are : Ayodhya or Saket : The Politics of Ram Temple, Mushahar fighting Hunger, Badlav Ki Chah : Stories of successful initiative by the Swachhkar community in Mohammdabad, Ghazipur, Struggle of Swachhkar community in Uttar Pradesh, Ayodhya : Virasat Ki jung, The Silence of Tsunami etc.

The author is also the recipient of Ambedkar International Award for his services to strengthen the Ambedkarite movement in India for the year 2016 by Ambedkar Association of North America. He has also been awarded 'Distinguished Services to Humanism Award' for year 2011 by International Humanist and Ethical Union, London, at its conference in Oslo. He has spoken at various national and international forums on human rights issues in India particularly on caste, communalism and land question in India.

