

Lesson 3:

B. R. Ambedkar's speech "the annihilation of caste" and the universalist struggle against racial discrimination

Reading: The Annihilation of Caste, Chapter 4 "Annihilation of Caste"

We will devote this week to a reading of the most well known text by the pre-eminent Dalit leader (and architect of the Indian Constitution) B. R. Ambedkar. As you read the text, try to identify with precision Ambedkar's understanding of the sources and roots of caste: what keeps caste in place? Can we compare it to race?

Ambedkar is most famous for his struggle for the freedom of untouchable castes in India and his writing of the Indian constitution. He also founded a trade union, worked in education, and authored many books.

One of his major points regarding the caste system in India was that you cannot just link it to class and economic exploitation. Here he was differentiating himself from the concepts of Marx. Karl Marx believed that all oppression, including racism, was founded on economic exploitation. Karl Marx therefore created the concept of socialism, where the workers would unite and remove the system of economic exploitation by taking control of factories and farms. This, Marx believed would end all other discriminations, including racism. But, Ambedkar was part of a tradition of those who tried to show that racism was not something that was always linked to class. This tradition asserted a view of freedom not only from economic exploitation, but also of social exploitation – calling for the destruction of the caste order and of untouchability.

Ambedkar also tried to understand caste by invoking a range of global examples – Roman slavery, African American slavery, and the plight of the Jews, and the plight of the Africans under colonialism.

You can see that the African Americans were not ideologically enslaved as the Dalits were and hence had a different trajectory of struggles. African Americans, or Black Americans, could hate their oppressors, their oppressors were clearly marked out, they had kidnapped their ancestors and enslaved them. With Dalits, Ambedkar argued, it was different because they were often ideologically blinded to their oppression. They had internalised the caste system over millennia, believing it to be their destiny. Despite this difference, Ambedkar saw clear similarities between the two communities.

In the essay, 'Slaves and Untouchables', Ambedkar shows that there were many such similarities but also differences. Another difference was that slavery was never permanent. In untouchability, there is no escape, once an untouchable, always an

untouchable. There is a simplicity in slavery that doesn't exist in the caste system, because the slave knows he's a slave.

The removal of a man's freedom by an open and direct way is a preferable form of enslavement. It makes the slave conscious of his enslavement and to become conscious of slavery is the first and most important step in the battle for freedom. But if a man is deprived of his liberty indirectly he has no consciousness of his enslavement. Untouchability is an indirect form of slavery.

There are similarities of course, as explained before. One major aspect of the discrimination of Black Americans and Dalits in India is colourism, the discrimination because of skin colour. Colourism is not something that is historical only, but exists very much today. It is nuanced and is based on real intellectual prescriptions – these can be seen internationally whether the value of paler skin in southeast Asia, or colourism in Europe or US, there are clear patterns, regardless of the historical and specific aspects of all of these examples. There is a danger perhaps in ignoring the universal side of it though and see every discrimination as different. As we discussed in Lesson 1, the idea of caste neutrality, or diverse ethnic states, can be used by dominant groups to ignore real discriminations.

So for example, racists and caste abusers, can easily say that they are against colourism, against any discrimination and for human rights. But when it comes to admitting that upper caste Indians, or Euro-Americans are privileged in their societies, they often reject the ideas. Those who belong to dominant groups would rather continue imagining that their fortunes are purely based on rights, and skills and hard work. Colourism does not play a part in the success stories of dominant groups. It is this false belief of the dominant group that Ambedkar was rejecting and fighting.

For him, anti-caste struggle was a universal struggle against racism and oppression – not just of class but also social hierarchy and culture.

When we read Ambedkar's Annihilation of Caste – perhaps we can think about it in universalist terms? Can it be replaced by the annihilation of tribes? Of race? Of class? Annihilation of ethnic groups?

In this section of the lesson I will be reading from the Annihilation of Caste from 1936. The speech starts with Ambedkar saying that Indian political class has focused on political reform, trying to create a new state free from foreign influence, but they have not focused on social reform.

He writes,

"The Social Conference was a body which mainly concerned itself with the reform of the highcaste Hindu family. It consisted mostly of enlightened high-caste Hindus who did not feel the necessity for agitating for the abolition of caste, or had not the courage to agitate for it. They felt quite naturally a greater urge to remove such evils as enforced widowhood, child marriages, etc. — evils which prevailed among them

and which were personally felt by them. They did not stand up for the reform of Hindu society. The battle that was fought centred round the question of the reform of the family. It did not relate to social reform in the sense of the break-up of the caste system. It was never put in issue by the reformers. "

Ambedkar's speech is therefore perhaps relevant for other contexts where political justice is being fought for, and social justice is placed on hold.

Ambedkar later turns to the socialists,

"Let me now turn to the socialists. Can the socialists ignore the problem arising out of the social order? The socialists of India, following their fellows in Europe, are seeking to apply the economic interpretation of history to the facts of India. They propound that man is an economic creature, that his activities and aspirations are bound by economic facts, that property is the only source of power. They therefore preach that political and social reforms are but gigantic illusions, and that economic reform by equalisation of property must have precedence over every other kind of reform. One may join issue with every one of these premises—on which rests the socialists' case for economic reform as having priority over every other kind of reform. One may contend that the economic motive is not the only motive by which man is actuated. That economic power is the only kind of power, no student of human society can accept.

Why do millionaires in India obey penniless sadhus and fakirs? Why do millions of paupers in India sell their trifling trinkets which constitute their only wealth, and go to Benares and Mecca? That religion is the source of power is illustrated by the history of India, where the priest holds sway over the common man often greater than that of the magistrate, and where everything, even such things as strikes and elections, so easily takes a religious turn and can so easily be given a religious twist."

Here, Ambedkar is showing the power of religion and tradition, over class.

He continues later on,

"What I would like to ask the socialists is this: Can you have economic reform without first bringing about a reform of the social order? The socialists of India do not seem to have considered this question. I do not wish to do them an injustice. I give below a quotation from a letter which a prominent socialist wrote a few days ago to a friend of mine, in which he said, "I do not believe that we can build up a free society in India so long as there is a trace of this ill-treatment and suppression of one class by another. Believing as I do in a socialist ideal, inevitably I believe in perfect equality in the treatment of various classes and groups. I think that socialism offers the only true remedy for this as well as other problems."

"Now the question that I would like to ask is: Is it enough for a socialist to say, "I believe in perfect equality in the treatment of the various classes?" To say that such a belief is enough is to disclose a complete lack of understanding of what is involved in socialism. Men will not join in a revolution for the equalisation of property unless they know that after the revolution is achieved they will be treated equally, and that there will be no discrimination of caste and creed.

That the social order prevalent in India is a matter which a socialist must deal with; that unless he does so he cannot achieve his revolution; and that if he does achieve it as a result of good fortune, he will have to grapple with the social order if he wishes to realise his ideal—is a proposition which in my opinion is incontrovertible. He will be compelled to take account of caste after the revolution, if he does not take account of it before the revolution. This is only another way of saying that, turn in any direction you like, caste is the monster that crosses your path. You cannot have political reform, you cannot have economic reform, unless you kill this monster.”

The issue Ambedkar is clearly aware of is what we discussed in lesson 2 – the ways in which the nation celebrates diversity, and talks about democracy and unity really being a mask for racism. Ambedkar is aware of this problem and writes, *“The assurance of a socialist leading the revolution that he does not believe in caste, I am sure, will not suffice. The assurance must be the assurance proceeding from a much deeper foundation —namely, the mental attitude of the compatriots towards one another in their spirit of personal equality and fraternity. Can it be said that the proletariat of India, poor as it is, recognises no distinctions except that of the rich and the poor? Can it be said that the poor in India recognise no such distinctions of caste or creed, high or low? If the fact is that they do, what unity of front can be expected from such a proletariat in its action against the rich? How can there be a revolution if the proletariat cannot present a united front?”*

Many argue that the issue of caste is very different, the religious elements, the specific Indian context, makes it incomparable to others. But the question here is, can we compare *some* aspects. One of these aspects that we could think about is the effects of ethnic groupings and racial hierarchies on the privileged class, on the majority:

“The effect of caste on the ethics of the Hindus is simply deplorable. Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible. A Hindu’s public is his caste. His responsibility is only to his caste. His loyalty is restricted only to his caste. Virtue has become caste-ridden, and morality has become caste-bound. There is no sympathy for the deserving. There is no appreciation of the meritorious. There is no charity to the needy. Suffering as such calls for no response. There is charity, but it begins with caste and ends with caste. There is sympathy, but not for men of other castes.”

Here Ambedkar continues to explain that no person is against freedom, against democracy, or against fraternity, but when it comes down to it in practice – many are uneasy about changing the social order as it exists.

Ambedkar is careful to accept any struggle for freedom that does not from the very beginning admit the privileges that the dominant groups has.

Questions for discussion:

1. In your own context, do you think that economic exploitation is the root cause of racial discrimination?

2. Is Ambedkar's strategy of putting race and ethnicity based discrimination first in any struggle for liberation a ?

Comprehension questions:

1. What did Karl Marx argue was the origin of racial discrimination?
2. Why does Ambedkar say that slavery is simpler than caste-based discrimination?
3. What is the "monster" that Ambedkar says you must kill before you can have a successful revolution?