

FACTS against MYTHS

VIKAS ADHYAYAN KENDRA

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INFORMATION BULLETIN

The Tyranny of Untouchability: The Purity/Pollution Myths of Caste — II

COMMENT

Protests and resistance against Untouchability and caste oppression have not known to have taken place. Untouchables lacked any scope to protest. Dissatisfaction was generally expressed by performing the work carelessly and inefficiently. Any attempts to change the status quo were condemned as immoral. Mythological history of India also fails to provide details of direct revolts against Untouchability. At most, opposition was in the form of religio-ideological movements through Buddhist, Jain and Bhakti movements. Recent history is also devoid of any direct forms of revolts. Reformist measures were, however, wide and varied. A number of social reformers and religious leaders tried to eradicate it either by propagating a new religion/sect or laying down a set of principles free from prejudices of "high" and "low" to be observed by their followers. (See Box on pg.5) The impact of these endeavours was, however, localised, temporary and in many cases inadequate. The issue was also tackled by a number of princely States before Independence enacting a number of laws to eradicate Untouchability. There were 27 such Acts. In 1921 Krishna Raja Wodeyar, the Prince of

Mysore introduced the reservation of government jobs for non-Brahmans. In 1936 the Maharaja of Travancore had issued the "Temple Entry Proclamation". Limited as these efforts were towards even reforming the caste-system, they were strongly opposed by the orthodox Hindu sections of Indian society. Thus, there were also movements in support of status quo of social iniquities to the extent of valorising the 'varnasharam' order based on birth. The *Sanathan Dharam Sabha* was founded in 1889 with the sole aim of protecting the interests of the caste Hindus. They founded such organisations as the Sri Bharat Dharma Mahamandal and the All-India Varnashram Swaraj on behalf of *karmic* relations and obligations. There are forces even today who defend the caste system and those who whilst conceding the system's negative features also see positive features in it.

During the Independence struggle, Untouchability was incorporated into the programs to eradicate poverty. On Independence, incidentally, nine months after the assassination of Gandhi, the Indian Constitution (adopted in the Constituent Assembly in 1949), declared the use of the term and social restrictions illegal and made enforceable through an Act in 1950 viz., The Protection of the Civil Rights Act, 1955. Untouchability, however, has not been

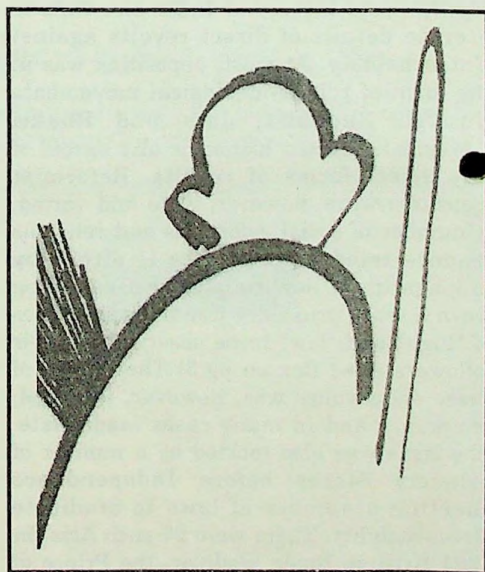
defined in the Act. Some members during the debates in the Constituent Assembly demanded for a precise definition of the term but was criticized as an attempt in hair-splitting and a ploy to distract the issue of Untouchability. The Act was later amended and renamed in 1976 as Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955. The Constitution proclaimed Fundamental Rights enforceable by courts. A clause was added in the First Amendment, the following year, making it clear that this is not to be incompatible with 'special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes'.

Despite all such reform efforts no significant impact in the lives of the Dalits has occurred. *The reforms failed to address the basic problems of economic dependency.* Instead it merely gave credence to the popular rationale for avoiding contact with all Untouchables by suggesting that ignorance and poor manners were the cause rather than the result of caste oppression. Modernisation and economic development has had some impact but it has mostly tended to modify the caste system rather than help in eradicating it. Thus, the caste system is being made to adapt to situations and existing socio-economic reality and Untouchability continues to be practised particularly in rural areas. A study of 69 villages in Gujarat by the late Dr. Desai⁹ showed that Untouchability is widely practised in Gujarat. A report by National Commission for SCs and STs also underscored its prevalence throughout the country. The practice was noticed by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 1996, while reviewing India's 10th to the 14th periodic report under the Convention of the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination. Little wonder then the issue of caste discrimination and Untouchability has been included into the agenda at the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance at Durban, South Africa in August 2001. Government of India is however attempting to scuttle the inclusion of the caste system into the Conference agenda. It maintains that caste discrimination is not a form of racial

discrimination but a "social" or "class"-based category rather than a racial one¹ (See Box on pg.3)

The fact that Untouchability and the caste system continues to be highly discriminatory and oppressive and has drawn international attention needs not only to be re-examined closely from the point of view of the oppressed people the Dalits themselves but to also re-appraise and de-mystify the reformist measures of the past. There is need therefore to also once again critically examine Gandhi's views some of which were retrograde. For instance his well-intentioned view on Untouchability and his struggle against it is as old as his public life, calling it the greatest blot on Hinduism. His approach however towards eradicating Untouchability vis-à-vis the caste system was ultimately based on a trickle-down approach. Gandhi is no doubt a personality of the millennium and continues to be an inspiration, in these times, for a vision of the world without wars, a world where there is enough for everyone's need but not for everyone's greed. That being said it is necessary to also realise that some few of his ideas and perspectives on issues like Untouchability and caste, for instance, was out of synch with reality and abominable.

MYTH: Gandhi was the foremost of all leaders to protest against Untouchability and his Constructive Programme, as a



The "Indian Position" on Caste¹

"Art.1 of the Convention includes in the definition of racial discrimination the term, 'descent'. Both castes and tribes are system-based on 'descent' since people are normally born into a particular caste or a particular tribe. It is obvious, however, that the use of the term, 'descent' in the Convention clearly refers to 'race'. Communities which fall under the definition of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are unique to Indian society and its historical process...it is, therefore, submitted that the policies of the Indian government relating to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes do not come under the purview of Art.1 of the Convention". - Government of India, 1996, CERD/C299/Add.3, para.7 (State Party Report)

In response to this Government's position, on the issue, reproduced below is the Statement from the UN Human Rights Mechanisms on it:

» "The Committee states that the term "descent" mentioned in article 1 of the convention does not solely refer to race. The committee affirms that the situation of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes falls within the scope of the Convention".

- Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination 1996, CERD/C/304 Add.13.para.14 (Concluding Observations/ Comment)

» Given, on the one hand ["d'une part"], the above-mentioned information, particularly as it relates to the constitutional provision cited by the Indian Government in its communication of 3-0 September 1997 - "Under article 366., the Scheduled Castes are defined as castes, races or tribes or parts of or groups within such castes, races or tribes as are deemed under article 341 to be Scheduled Castes for the purposes of the Constitution" - and given, on the other hand ("d'autre part"), the fact that the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, in its concluding observations on India's periodic reports, states, "the situation of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes falls within the scope of the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination" (CERD/C/304/ Add.14 para.14), the Special Rapporteur believes that the specific attention should be given to the situation of the untouchables in India".

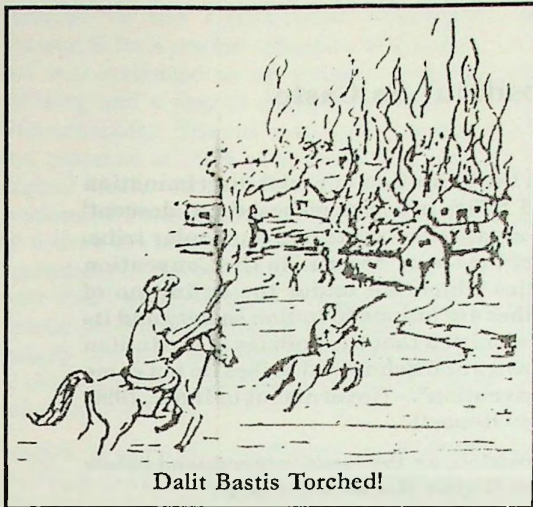
- Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance 1999, E/CN/4/1999/15, para.100.

crusade against its abolishment was a revolutionary initiative.

FACT: All social reformers even before Gandhi, from Rammohan Roy onwards had denounced Untouchability in unequivocal terms and Dr. Ambedkar even called for the eradication of the caste system itself.

On Gandhi's constructive program, his religious convictions and political arguments

were fused to eliminate the observance of Untouchability. This was to be achieved through constructive activities to arouse the masses against untouchability. He called on the more progressive caste Hindus to secure for the Untouchables their basic human rights by convincing the orthodox among them of their unjust and harmful practices. On the other hand, however, no efforts were undertaken to organise the Untouchables



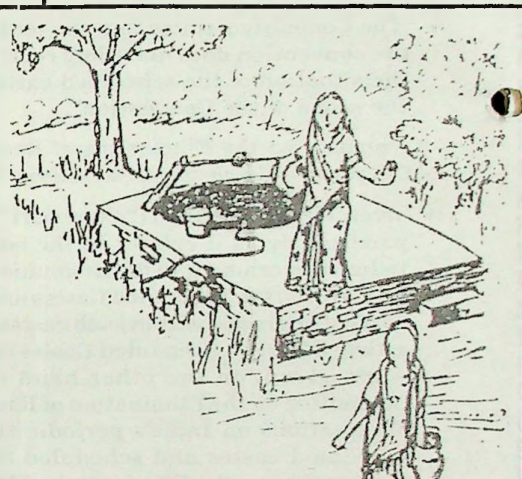
Dalit Bastis Torched!

The inner contradiction of Gandhi's programme was that if untouchability was basically a religious phenomenon, then the penitential work should have polluted the high castes down to the Untouchable level irrevocably. Instead, nothing of this took place! Most of the high castes actively participated without even having to resort to purification rites!

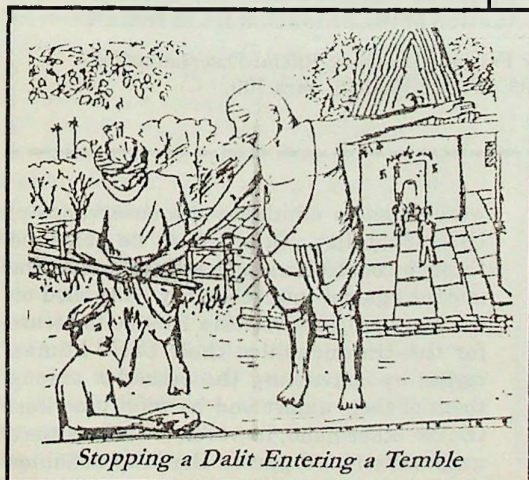
In outlining this Constructive Programme, Gandhi stated that 'The Untouchable should observe common cleanliness, should refrain from eating carrion and from drink, send their children to schools, remove Untouchability amongst themselves, and generally carry on such reforms from within as is possible'.

themselves in a strong movement for their own liberation. Instead, the initiative was placed exclusively in the hands of caste Hindus on the rationale that welfare work for the Untouchables was penitence and moral rehabilitation for caste Hindus.

The Constructive Programme was essentially concerned with symbolic episodes of repudiation of ritual taboos rather than with a long-term sustainable change in behaviour and attitudes. Thus the high castes were put on latrine cleaning for a penitential period, but after they had demonstrated their humility they were assigned other tasks leaving the everyday drudgery of menial work to the Untouchables.



Preventing a Dalit to Use the Well



Stopping a Dalit Entering a Temple

This paternalistic advice was anything but revolutionary! Social reformers had all advocated it earlier as already stated. Their efforts had however failed as it had not addressed the basic problems of economic dependency. Instead, it merely gave credence to the popular rationale for avoiding contact with all Untouchables by suggesting that ignorance and poor manners were the cause rather than the result of caste oppression. This does not imply that there was no scope for self-improvement among Untouchables (many recognised the need for this themselves) but by focussing on the negative stereotypes, caste Hindus arrogantly put

Reformers Against Untouchability

- » Jyothiba Phule tried to unite Shudras (non-Brahmins) and ati-shudras (Dalits) and founded the Satyashodak Samaj (1875)
- » Kisan Fagui Bansode, a pre-Ambedkar Dalit leader, demanded the 'Aryans' to stop harassment and torture of Dalits;
- » In Hyderabad, it was Bhagyareddy Varma, whose followers called themselves as adi-Dravida supported Ambedkar;
- » In UP, an untouchable ascetic from Manipuri district, calling himself Achutananda, organised Dalits on the basis of 'adi-Hindu' identity;
- » In Punjab, Mangoo Ram launched an 'adi-dharm' movement thereby creating a separate identity as 'quaum';
- » In Tamil Nadu Ramaswamy Perrier's self-respect league in 1926 led to a mass upsurge against the caste system. Apart from opposing Brahminism he also supported women's liberation;
- » In Kerala, Ayyapan demanded 'no-religion, no-caste and no God for mankind'. Sri Narayan Guru angered orthodox Hindus by consecrating idols in Kerala temples. Asked how a 'low caste' could dare to perform such sacred rites, he responded: "Those who object can go worship in their temples. People will worship in the temples I have consecrated."

the blame on the discrimination on the backs of the victims themselves!

Further, Gandhi was opposed to any confrontation between the Untouchables and the caste Hindus. He warned them against any strategy involving Direct Action. Although he acknowledged that drastic measures such as strikes by city sweepers would probably succeed in removing disabilities, he insisted that such militant actions would not change the minds of the opposite party but only precipitate their hatred. Hence, he instructed the Untouchables not to antagonise caste Hindus but to maintain a dignified attitude to make their oppressors feel ashamed of themselves. For the rest they had to depend on the welfare measures undertaken by the reformists.

To conclude, as Dhanagare (1983) points out, Gandhi's perspective reflects on the superficiality of the entire campaign against

Untouchability: 'The hiatus between public morals and private conduct was so large then, that there is no reason to believe that the new political enthusiasm, unleashed by the 'Constructive Programme' had narrowed it or had altered the status of the Untouchables.'

MYTH: *Harijans convert to religions like Christianity, etc., because of allurements and inducements, etc.*

FACT: As mentioned above, Untouchables had no scope to offer resistance against the tyranny of Untouchability. The only means they could express discontent with their plight was through religious strivings. This manifested itself by a number of religious movements that proclaimed the spiritual equality of high and low castes. By emphasising that even an 'Untouchable' could gain access to spiritual salvation through devotion to God, or Bhakti, some groups of Untouchables rebelled against the dominant

ideas and belief-system of the Hindu caste system which legitimised their oppression. They and other oppressed groups tried to escape their misery by a break with Hinduism and the transition to another religion. Islam, for instance, formed such an escape in medieval India after Afghan Muslim tribes established their reign in the Northwest India in 1206. Large numbers of socially underprivileged had converted to Islam particularly when the Moguls were in power.

Incidentally, the regions of mass conversions were not those that were sites of orthodox Brahmins. Western Punjab, for instance, after the gradual push of the Brahminical religion, moved to Buddhism and then to Islam. In the past 200 years, the largest conversion has taken place in the Northeast and Central India Adivasis belt, which were never Hindu. This, however, does not deny that the changes brought about by Christianity or Islam do not contain the elements of reaction and anti-people thrust and despite the fact that conversion did not lead to a general uplift of the whole community nor fulfil the promise of humanisation. However, this is a different matter altogether and not the issue at hand. Even in these circumstances, the option of conversion largely remained for some section of the Untouchables a useful tool or threat by which they could raise their bargaining power with caste Hindus.

Conversions should not therefore be explained simplistically and merely as a result of mystical or emotional experience. It is also not for mere material gain or due to force and allurements. And besides, to hold such a view is to undermine the intelligence of the Dalits.

Above all, the Hindutvadis have manufactured a situation where it appears that conversions by coercion are the *alpha* and *omega* of Christianity conveniently overlooking the fact that they themselves are equally if not more guilty on this count. They have been aggressively promoting re-conversion exercises named '*Shuddhi*' (purification) and '*Ghar Wapasa*' (homecoming) for years. Thus, the activities of the Hindu revivalists among also Adivasis

(termed *adharmi*) whose cosmological worldview and faith systems, anathema to mainstream Hinduism, are tantamount to conversion and colonisation.

There is need to therefore differentiate between the issue of conversion *per se* and the issue raised by Hindu communal forces. The former is an opportunity for change, while the latter is a set of canards.

(For a further elaboration of this myth see FAM #7/1999)

MYTH: *Untouchables cannot perform 'mantra pattana' in temples as a means against untouchability since they lack the essential prerequisite viz.,- the knowledge of Sanskrit - to chant these mantras.*

FACT: This is a casteist claim, conveniently blind to the fact that in defining any kind of relationship — even if between god and people — it is the *content* of the discourse of communication and *not* the medium — language in this case — that is of paramount importance! The content is the message — not the medium!

The universal assumption is that gods and goddesses can be worshipped or prayed to in any language within the sphere of the old prayers they can be translated into all other languages and new prayers can be written in any language that the '*bhakta*' of that goddess can communicate in. Besides, it is both absurd and unethical to maintain that communion with gods or goddess can only be in Sanskrit — not in other languages. "But how can they presume that a Goddess like Pochamma (to propitiate whom they recite Sanskrit mantras) would also understand a Sanskrit shloka. How can the priests presume that *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*, a son of a boat-man/woman who talked to people in Marathi wanted a mantra to be recited in Sanskrit"¹⁰.

People have every right to communicate with God/Goddess they believe in, in their own language. If a particular religion claims that a particular community is a part of that religion, it stands to reason that it should grant it the right to priesthood. In any organisation, the right to reach the highest position is central to the organisation —

Where Gandhi Failed

Unlike Dr. Ambedkar, Gandhiji was against the abolition of the caste system. He held that eradicating it, or even giving the Untouchables separate electorates, might lead to social conflict and too much for Hindu society to handle. Therefore, he decided to call them harijans and make them 'touchable' by working and eating with them, even cleaning people's shit as they, the Untouchables, were 'ordained' to do under the laws of what had become of the caste system. Dr. Ambedkar, on the other hand, being an Untouchable himself knew what it felt, for instance, to go to class where Brahmin children objected even to his presence. In his time an Untouchable, in certain parts of the country, would have to audibly announce his or her presence before emerging out into public space so that his/her shadow did not pollute a Brahmin's path.

Gandhi' devoted practically his whole life against Untouchability. Ironically, his approach was a trickle-down approach founded on the caste-hierarchy of "*chaturvarna*" on which the structure of '*sanatan dharma*' is built. '*Sanatan dharma*' - which in common language has acquired the appellation "Hinduism" - does not admit into its fold anyone not born a *brahmin*, a *kshatriya* or a *vaishya*. While farm workers, goldsmiths, tailors, dhobis, malis, sutars, potters, masons, and other such manual workers are at best accorded a kind of honorary membership to this exclusive club of priests, warriors and traders; cobblers, sweepers, butchers and Adivasis are summarily rejected as '*untermenschen*' whose very sight has been decreed as an ill omen by Manu, the High Priest of the '*sanatanis*'.

Instead of acknowledging the fact that a practicing '*sanatani*' is duty-bound to abide by Manu's diktat, Gandhi strove to keep the "Untouchables" within the '*sanatani*' fold, without however denying the sanctity of caste. Gandhi's failure as a social reformer was therefore inevitable.

Still further, Gandhi also condemned the Untouchables who used his own non-violent tactics in applying pressure on caste Hindus to give up their discriminatory practices. He persuaded them to have complete confidence in the work of the reformers and in the ability of self-suffering to win their cause. He insisted that 'need they offer '*satyagraha*' no Harijan need fast against anyone. Let them watch the caste Hindus who are on their trial and see what they do to remove the bar that separates Harijans from them. Let them have perfect confidence in the absolute justice of their cause and in the ability of self-suffering to win it.'

whether it is spiritual, political or economic. Since Hinduism claims that Untouchables are Hindus, the right to priesthood must necessarily be granted to them.

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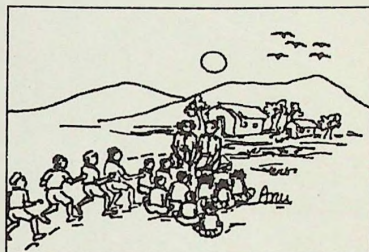
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A Six-day Course on Planning Child-Centred Approaches for Community Development July 2-7, 2001

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Holistic Development of Children



Children as Change Agents

development of their communities in the areas of health, education, water, sanitation, afforestation, environment etc. The course provides strategies on how to organise children to develop themselves, other children, and the community. The approaches used for organising children are child-to-child, child-to-adult, and child-to-community.

The course is designed to provide practical skills on how to plan and implement a programme with children as change agents. IHMP's 12 year experience in child centred

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Course Objectives:

1. To provide a conceptual basis for implementing child centred approaches.
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3. To develop planning skills to implement programmes with children as change agents.
4. To develop interventions which enable the holistic development of children including the change agent.

Venue: IHMP, Pachod

Course Fees: Rs 2000 inclusive of boarding, lodging and course material

Medium: Hindi

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July 9-19, 2001

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- ♦ Supervision and Monitoring – 3 days
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The course includes field exercises to enable participants to gain skills in conducting a needs assessment and situational analysis. This information forms the basis for planning and preparing the LFA. Supervision and monitoring of programme inputs and linking them to process output and outcome measures is an important feature of the course. The role of evaluation and its methodology is also taught in the course. The course focuses on participatory methods and tools for planning, monitoring and evaluation.

The objectives of the course are:

- ♦ Participants will be able to prepare a 3-year plan for health and development programmes in a LFA format.
- ♦ Participants will be able to make a community diagnosis based on needs assessment and situational analysis.
- ♦ Participants will be able to develop monitoring indicators.
- ♦ Participants will be able to use the LFA as a management and monitoring tool for community health and development programmes.
- ♦ Participants will be able to develop and apply a supervision checklist.
- ♦ Participants will be able to state and apply different evaluation methodologies to their programmes.

Venue: IHMP, Pachod

Course Fees: Rs 2500 inclusive of boarding, lodging and course material
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