

THE STRUGGLE FOR DIGNITY OF INDIA'S UNTOUCHABLES:
ACTIVISM IN BANGALORE

The untouchables of India have suffered humiliations for centuries as their divinely ordained lot. Lately, they have in addition become victims of massive violence in the forms of rapes, lynchings and pogroms by "caste Hindus" who target the untouchables as defenseless scapegoats for their numerous economic and social frustrations. But the untouchables' reputation for passivity and defenselessness may be becoming obsolete, as grass-roots resistance organizations, modeled in part on the struggles of American Blacks in the 1960s, become more widespread in the Indian villages.

In a small apartment in the city of Bangalore, its shutters closed against the bright South Indian sun and the street noises, untouchable activists D. M. Thimmarayappa, K. Chandra Shekar and U. Chandra described the village problems and their organizing strategy. Thimmarayappa, a dark man with a fierce

black mustache who gives the impression of tremendous energy, and Shekar, slight, in his mid twenties, outwardly gentle, are typical of the new organizers in that they are urban, college-educated, and impatient with the pace of change for their illiterate caste-brothers in the villages. U. Chandra, a retired civil servant who years ago abandoned what we might call his "slave name"--the surname that identified him as of an untouchable caste--is a link between these young men and that earlier generation that rallied behind the great untouchable statesman and philosopher, Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1881-1956).

"Day in and day out, we have been seeing in newspapers and radios and we actually were seeing in villages many atrocities committed on our people," said Thimmarayappa. "There are nobody to go to their rescue, even their so-called representatives and ministers, they are failing their duties."

Thus he explains why he, Shekar and other young untouchables in Bangalore banded together in 1976 to form a new kind of organization, one that would combine Ambedkar's philosophy with tactics borrowed from the Black Panthers of the United States: the "Dalit Action Committee."

By "Dalit"--a Sanskrit word meaning "those who are cast down"--they mean all of India's oppressed groups: the scheduled Hindu castes (including the untouchables and semi-untouchables "scheduled" by special legal provisions), the scheduled tribes, and the non-Hindu minorities. Added altogether, these "Dalit"

groups make up a very sizable potential constituency--as many as one third of India's 630 million people, according to the Committee's estimates. Deep-seated religious and caste prejudices make Dalit unity difficult to achieve, however, so the Action Committee sees itself as an opponent simultaneously of the caste system and of Hinduism. In India, this is a very radical position.

Significantly, our meeting took place in the home of a radical journalist who is himself a member of a high-ranking merchant caste. V. T. Rajshekar Shetty of the daily Indian Express, a prolific anti-caste polemicist, and his wife Hemlata had defied tradition by bringing the untouchables into their home. Caste, class and politics do not always coincide in predictable ways in contemporary India.

II

It is difficult for a non-Indian to accept just how pervasive caste is in India. Even in a modern urban institution--a university department or a corporate office, say--caste will be an important consideration in assigning office space, forming work teams or determining promotions. It may not

be the highest caste Brahmin who is favored but a caste-mate of the boss, or sometimes a head of a department may simply try to have people of compatible subcastes working together. In the villages, caste rules are enforced much more strictly and without subterfuge.

Although the term is sometimes extended to other, secular forms of discrimination, caste (Hindi: jati) is, strictly speaking, unique to Hindu India. Of course, since Hindus comprise eighty-five percent of the Indian population, their beliefs and practices affect--and may even be imitated--by Indian non-Hindus as well. No one can say how many castes there are--estimates range from a minimum of four (with hundreds of "subcastes") to thousands--because there is no definite number. Rather the terms caste and jati (and their equivalents in other Indian languages) are used variously to describe small localized groups or some larger aggregations of such groups which may have certain ritual duties in common. What is essential is that the group have its own precise rules governing every aspect of life from occupation to choice of marriage partner, from style of attire to frequency of sexual intercourse, and, most importantly, its rights and obligations with respect to every other caste group. Caste membership is hereditary and unalterable--although in the real world, a few individuals successfully "pass."

The notion of an individual, possessing inalienable human rights simply because she or he is human, is alien to

traditional Hindu culture. People have rights and/or obligations according to their caste's ranking in the hierarchy, and this is determined by the caste's supposed religious purity. The Brahmins (actually a group of castes) are regarded as so pure that they must avoid many ordinary foods, most occupations, and contact with members of most other castes, or else they will be "polluted" and have to go through a ritual purification. At the opposite extreme are the castes that are regarded as so impure that mere contact with them pollutes almost anybody else; for this reason they are "untouchable," and are forbidden to use the same wells and in some cases to tread the same ground as other castes. Even they are divided into many castes, some more untouchable than others. In between the Brahmins and untouchables are hundreds of castes whose precise rank is the subject of heated dispute.

Because of the association of particular jobs with particular degrees of purity, every caste is dependent on the castes below it and ultimately everyone depends on the untouchables. A Brahmin may not build his own house or plow his own land, but must have people of lower castes do these things for him; even a fairly low-caste Hindu cannot bury his dead or dispose of waste, but must call upon members of the appropriate untouchable caste. This has two important implications: first, everyone but the very lowest untouchable has some sort of stake in the system; second, refusal by untouchables to fulfill their traditional obligations will threaten the entire

hierarchy. These two facts explain much of the force of resistance to changes in the system.

The origins of castes are lost in Hindu mythology. Many Indians believe that they grew out of the four ancient Hindu varnas: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisaya and Sudra. Because one meaning of varna is color, it is suggested that the varnas were originally racial categories distinguishing the conquering Aryans from their darker subjects. The fact that Brahmin is the name both of the highest-ranking varna and of the highest-ranking group of castes supports this theory in the popular mind. Some historians however deny that jati (caste) has anything to do with varna, but instead derives from the actual structure in precolonial days of the distribution of wealth, occupations and power. The association of caste with varna certainly does not explain the elaboration of many hundreds of castes and "subcastes," but it does give them an appearance of antiquity which is used by caste incumbents to justify their particular privileges.

Although the ancient Vedic texts (the most authoritative in Hinduism) do not speak of caste per se, they propound the principles of hierarchy and purity which are, according to French scholar Louis Dumont, the ideological underpinnings of the caste system. So deeply embedded are these principles in Indian culture that even the fifteen percent of the population that is non-Hindu (Muslims, Jains, Sikhs, Christians and others) practice discrimination among themselves very similar

to caste. In the Hindu concept of hierarchy, the part receives its meaning from its relation to the whole; the social group receives its worthiness or meaning from its relations (obligations and rights) to every other social group.

The hierarchical position of a group or thing, according to traditional Hindu teaching, is determined by its relative "purity." Food, rivers, animals and places, as well as human groups, are all so ranked. Religious purity has nothing to do with secular hygiene, of course; a favored way of purifying oneself is to bathe in the filthy Ganges river, which is religiously the purest of waters. A relatively pure person is polluted by contact with a less pure object or person, and is required to purify himself through bathing and other rituals. The purest people, the Brahmins, are also the most easily polluted. Therefore they must be especially careful about their food, the objects they handle, and the people they permit to approach them; otherwise they would be forever bathing.

The least pure are called "untouchables," because contact with them pollutes anyone. Since they are already irredeemably impure, it is they who must handle all the impurities inevitably produced in social life: human wastes, corpses, dead cattle and their hides, and so on. Since an untouchable pollutes anything she or he touches, drawing water from wells used by higher castes is intolerable defilement; for just such an offense, an untouchable woman's ears were cut off in Uttar Pradesh last August.

In actual practice, the relative status of many localized caste-groups is subject to contention. Not all castes claiming to be Brahmin are accepted as such, for example; in fact there is at least one self-styled Brahmin group that is regarded by others as untouchable. Members of a low-ranking caste may adopt customs associated with Brahmins (for example, abstaining from meat) in order to claim a higher status, and castes have been known to go to great lengths to "prove" that they are descended from one of the higher varnas. Thus reformers have generally found it easier to try to raise the status of particular groups, often through religious argumentation, than to attack the caste system as a whole.

British rule modified, but did not eliminate, caste practices--although the Raj did succeed in suppressing those aspects of Hinduism that it regarded as most obnoxious, such as the immolation of widows. By their creation of a national army and civil service, their destruction of native industry (especially textiles), and the impetus they gave to an export-import bourgeoisie, the British created new opportunities for achieving status which interacted with, but failed to supplant, caste. Nevertheless relations within the system were significantly altered, as some previously lower castes (quicker to take advantage of the new opportunities) moved into positions of greater wealth and power.

The most important challenge to the system in modern times (that is, since Gautama Buddha) was led by the untouchable

statesman Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1881-1956). This remarkable man despite his poverty and stigma was able to complete a college degree in Bombay, then to acquire a Ph.D. in economics from Columbia University. These credentials did not preserve him from the indignities due his caste and he again escaped to western academe, this time earning a D.Sc. in economics in London, where he was also admitted to the bar in 1923. Returning to India, he devoted the next thirty years to the struggle against caste.

Dr. Ambedkar at first opposed the independence movement, reasoning that the untouchables would be more oppressed under the rule of high-caste nationalists than they were under the British. Mohandas K. Gandhi himself recruited Ambedkar to the nationalist cause, but Ambedkar maintained that an independent India must be one in which the untouchables had real political power. To this end, he maintained that untouchables must have their own electoral rolls--that is that they, and they alone, should be permitted to vote for the untouchable representatives in the new Parliament.

Gandhi strenuously opposed this position, seeing it as a challenge to his policy in favor of the harmonious integration of all castes. In 1932 he undertook a celebrated "fast unto death" to force Ambedkar to relent. This roused Gandhi's mass following to bring enormous pressure on Ambedkar, including threats of violence. As Gandhi neared death, and the hostilities of his followers to untouchables generally

and Ambedkar in particular intensified, Ambedkar finally gave in. The two leaders met in Poona to sign the "Poona Pact," in which Ambedkar agreed to accept unified electoral rolls but with a certain number of seats reserved for untouchables.

The reason separate electoral rolls were so important is a peculiarity of caste demography: because every community must have its own low-caste people nearby in order to function, they are dispersed throughout the country. Thus, although they are such a large minority, the scheduled castes do not have a majority in any electoral district. The result is that, although eighteen percent of the seats are reserved for scheduled castes and tribes, the majority of electors are members of other, higher castes, so that an untouchable unwilling to compromise with caste privilege is unlikely to be elected.

The present Indian constitution was in fact drafted by Ambedkar in 1949. It does not outlaw caste but, following Gandhi's policies, does outlaw the stigma of "untouchability." No one can legally be refused a seat on public transportation or other public accommodations, or access to wells, temples, etc., on grounds of caste. Besides the parliamentary seats, eighteen percent of government posts and university admissions are also reserved for the scheduled castes. Since, by law, there are not supposed to be any more "untouchables," the former untouchables are officially called "Harijans," a label given them by Gandhi which means "children of God."

As a general sociological principle, it would seem that a policy of raising the lowest-ranking group while preserving

the ranking system would be doomed to failure. In any event, the "children of God," despite their new name, remain very definitely on the bottom in the opinion and practice of most Indians. The anti-discrimination laws have proven difficult to enforce, especially in rural areas, and the reservations--quotas--of parliamentary seats have not given the scheduled castes political power commensurate with their numbers.

Ambedkar finally despaired of bringing about any meaningful reform within the Hindu tradition, and toward the end of his life converted to Buddhism--an Indian religion that denies caste. Many of his followers in Maharashtra state also converted. They are called "New Buddhists" and are regarded, and treated, by Hindus generally as untouchables.

India's electoral politics, far from resolving caste differences, may even increase caste antagonisms. Parties cannot ignore caste and expect to get elected, so it is general practice to put forward candidates who are members of either the most numerous or the least likely to offend caste in a particular electoral district. The right-wing Jan Sangh party exploits caste antagonisms as an explicit electoral strategy: the party advocates "Indianization," which in practice means maintaining the privileges of the upper-caste Hindus against untouchables and non-Hindus. Its upper-caste Hindu ideology has given the Jan Sangh a pretext for violent attacks on working class and peasant organizations, much of it carried out by the disciplined stormtroopers of its parent body--the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or RSS. The party's slogan is "One country,

one nation, one culture"--a very menacing slogan, in a country with fourteen official languages and seven major religious groups. What the slogan suggests is repressive rule by the rural rich in the Hindi-speaking north.

The effort to combat discrimination through reservations of government posts and university admissions for scheduled castes has created other unanticipated problems. The reservations stimulate resentment among members of the non-scheduled castes, a kind of "backlash." In addition, they require individuals to identify themselves as members of a scheduled cast in order to qualify. This means that those who have renounced caste, like the "New Buddhists," make themselves ineligible. In other cases, students may be embarrassed to have their friends learn, from published lists of scholarship recipients, that they are members of a scheduled caste. The reservations have undoubtedly aided many individuals to improve their station, but they are a kind of half-way measure that fails to satisfy the aspirations of the most oppressed and at the same time arouses the hostility and sometimes violence of the non-scheduled groups.

The backlash, frequently taking the form of organized pogroms against untouchable residential districts, would not be expected to be so severe if India were prospering. But it is not. It is a poor country which is growing poorer.

Indian researchers repeatedly find that the majority of the population is living below any reasonable "poverty line"--

calculated as the minimum income necessary for an extremely simple but nutritionally adequate diet, minimal shelter, and so on. Studies in Bombay, for example, have indicated that as many as 57 percent receive less than that minimum. In fact many people there--62,000, according to the 1961 census--are not only starving, but live absolutely without shelter, sleeping on the pavement itself. Similar situations exist in other cities, including Bangalore--although the homeless population is most evident and probably most numerous in Calcutta. The population as a whole is growing more rapidly than the economy, so that real per capita gross national product (GNP) declined four-tenths of a percent in 1976-77.

Caste is inextricably bound up with Hinduism. As the German sociologist Max Weber wrote over sixty years ago, "Before everything else, without caste there is no Hindu." Besides the principles of religious purity and hierarchy discussed above, the caste system is bolstered by the Hindu belief in reincarnation. This belief encourages untouchables and other low-ranking Hindus to submit to their caste obligations, in the hope that faithful performance of duty will be rewarded by a more favored status in the next incarnation.

However studies by Abraham Ayrookuzhiel of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society (Bangalore) indicate that Hinduism is changing in response to modern technology and social developments. For example, electrification and deforestation have deprived the old spooks and

spirits of their gloomy woodland habitats, thus making them much less frightening; transportation timetables have become more important than astrology in determining the times of voyages. In addition, as anthropologists have pointed out, the use of modern mass communications to mobilize voters and to carry on political debates has greatly increased pressures for social equality, and thus has also changed popular interpretations of Hinduism.

Ayrookzhiel has been conducting research into the actual religious beliefs of the rural poor in Kerala, a state just to the south of Karnataka. Traditional Hindu concepts such as Iswara (usually translated^d as "God") and dharma ("the moral way") are interpreted in original ways by the believers he interviewed, and these interpretations sometimes differ greatly from those in the ancient texts.

In the village of Chirakkal, he interviewed 175 people who considered themselves "believers"--and twenty unbelievers, who considered themselves Communists. One-hundred eight of the believers held a view directly contrary to the traditional belief, that there are many distinct gods whose mutual relationships are unknown to men. Instead, they held that "Iswara is one and many." That is, there is one God with many manifestations, which may either be discrete "parts" of the one God or simply the manifold perceptions of the One by human beings.

Even more interesting is what has happened to the concept of dharma, often employed by Hindu conservatives to justify

economic and social inequalities as determined by fate. In its classical context dharma assumes a very rigidly stratified society. But today the concept of "social justice," implying some degree of socialization of wealth and greater equality among men, has been assimilated into the Chirakkal villagers' concept of dharma. Ayrookzhiel attributes this in part to the mobilizing and agitational efforts of the mass political parties.

India has commonly been regarded as a society highly resistant to change, a culture in which the celebration of harmony and order, coupled with a belief in reincarnation, pre-disposed people to submit to even the harshest exploitation rather than disturb the equilibrium. In reality, the objective experience of most Indians throughout their long recorded history has been of turmoil, invasion, civil war, riots and uprisings. The dominance of the upper castes, whose position has frequently been made precarious by foreign invaders, has been maintained at the cost of tremendous violence, ranging from routine female infanticide in the upper castes in earlier years, to the bloody suppression of peasant uprisings.

Thus it is not surprising that the untouchables of the Dalit Action Committee have no patience for the caste system or the Hindu pantheon, which they see as its last line of defense.

III

On August 8, 1977, in Nagasandra village in Karnataka, Sri Najundappa was called out of his house by some twenty people "with deadly weapons in their hands," according to an account by the Dalit Action Committee. When he did not come out, they "broke open the door and Sri Nanjundappa was persuaded to come out of his house. As soon as he stepped out he was given a deadly blow on his head. He was then taken to the village panchayat (council) office from where his neck was cut. From there he was again taken to the house of one N. S. Hanumantha Reddy where he died." Nanjundappa was an untouchable, "done to death in broad daylight in the presence of a large number of people."

In this case, the Dalit Action Committee saw its duty as pressuring the authorities to arrest the culprits and provide proper protection. The incident was also taken as an opportunity to begin organizing a local committee of untouchables.

As Thimmarayappa explains the Dalit Action Committee's general modus operandi, whenever such an atrocity occurs the Committee mobilizes as many as a hundred of its young men to travel to the afflicted village. "We can't take women, because we are going to a dangerous place," he adds, pointing out that they have sometimes been attacked on these excursions by angry caste Hindus.

"First we begin with a march," continued the journalist and Dalit-supporter Shetty, "shouting slogans, mostly Ambedkarite slogans, and Gandhi is denounced, the Hindu gods are denounced, the religion is denounced. We say, 'Long live Ambedkar!' and we denounce the caste system particularly and the holy scriptures. And we also tell them to throw away their portraits of the gods." Sometimes the group is accompanied by Dalit poets, who sing their songs to the people.

The young urban Dalits then go to every untouchable home in the village, explaining to the people their rights and discussing their problems. Their aim is to set up a political action and education committee to develop what might be called "Ambedkar consciousness" and to defend the constitutional rights of the Dalits. In this way they have formed hundreds of village committees.

In the village of Sudda Guntena Palya (population 10,000, including 4-5,000 untouchables), within the corporate limits of Bangalore, the untouchable sector has two wells but no drinking water, no toilets, no electricity in the homes, and precisely one streetlight. A survey found that the untouchable families average a daily income of two to three rupees (28 to 42 cents).

In this village, the Dalit activists were mobilized by the discovery of slavery--ten young people who had been sold into bondage by their parents. An "Ambedkar Welfare Association" was formed in June, 1975, to agitate for their emancipation.

Slavery is of course illegal in India, but it took mass pressure to get the state authorities to order the owners to release their bondsmen.

The Ambedkar Welfare Association then helped the ten freed laborers to secure bank loans which enabled them to buy bullock carts and go into business for themselves. The Association now has "nearly 100" members paying monthly dues of a half-rupee (about seven cents). Despite this very modest budget--less than seven dollars income per month--the Association is very active. Another college-educated young Dalit, D. K. Kemparaju, volunteers his time as coordinator. The Association distributes free milk and bread from the state government to children from one to four years old, and is pressuring the city and state governments for services such as medicaid, electricity, and construction of housing (to little effect, so far). Fifty-two untouchables attend three shifts of adult education classes offered by volunteers, in which they learn literacy in Kannada (the principal language of the state) and "Ambedkar philosophy." It takes two to three months to teach basic literacy in Kannada, two years to learn to read a newspaper. Kemparaju estimates that five to ten percent of the untouchables in the village are literate.

In the more remote little village of Doddanekkundi (500 caste Hindus, 80 untouchables) the untouchables were delighted to see Thimmarayappa and Shekar, whom they seemed to know well. For the first time in India, I was surrounded by poor, gentle

people who were not begging. On the contrary, they seemed to regard themselves as our hosts. One man insisted on carrying my bulky shoulderbag as we walked among the huts--at first, from prior experience, I assumed that he was after a tip, but it was apparent from his whole demeanor that he was not (beggars are never subtle in India). Later, some villagers brought us fresh coconuts to drink.

Here the untouchables live in a kind of rural slum separated from the caste Hindu section by about two and a half acres of land that is scheduled to be divided into 40 to 50 plots for untouchable families. Meanwhile, in the interstices between their huts, they grow wheat, tomatoes, and seeds for oil. There were a few chickens, some cows, a pig or two--all free to wander about, foraging for food as best they could. Both men and women here hire themselves out as coolie (i.e. unskilled) labor in construction or lime quarrying.

Their huts are simple hovels of sun-baked mud, with dirt floors. Their well is a simple hole in the ground, with a pole set up on a fulcrum for dipping a bucket into the water--in which, on that day, swam an enormous frog.

Just outside Doddanekkundi village a tableau vivant seemed to sum up how much had changed, and how much has yet to change, in India's caste-ways. Seven young men squatted on the ground in a semi-circle around the swollen corpse of a cow. Her horns were still gaily painted from the Pongal festival, a celebration of cowdom in southern India, that had taken place just days

before. The seven were the owners of the cow but, as caste Hindus, they would not touch it now that it was dead. But, since the untouchables of Doddanekkundi now refuse to handle such wastes for the caste Hindus, the owners had had to send away to another village, and now they were waiting for the arrival of a professional cow-disposal service, run by untouchables for a money fee.

IV

Civil rights activists in India and the United States have learned much from each other in the past, and continue to do so. Martin Luther King, Jr., adapted Gandhian tactics of mass civil disobedience to the American context, and now the young Dalits are applying the direct action and political education tactics of the Black Panthers and the old Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to the organization of village untouchables.

To judge from the experience of the radical movements among the Blacks and other minorities in the United States, the significance of the work of the Dalit Action Committee and its kindred organizations--the "Dalit Panthers" in Bombay, for example--is likely to go far beyond their specific actions: the freeing of ten bonded laborers in Doddanekkundi, bringing the murderers to justice in Sudda Guntena Palya, the many hundreds of untouchables made literate in all the many villages, and so on. Rather the most important long-term effect lies

in the demonstration that such things are possible, that "those who are cast down" have the will and capacity to assert their dignity and defend their rights.