

"Race, Caste and Untouchability: Lessons from India"

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"You Can't Touch That!" -- M.C. Hammer

"Caste Means Never Having to Say Thank You" -- paraphrase of Eric Segal's "Love Means Never Having to Say You're Sorry"

Of all the places visited so far on this voyage--Venezuela, Brazil, South Africa, Kenya--there is no question that India is the one most unlike the United States. Yet, despite the massive differences in people, religion, sights, sounds, smells and culture, India resembles the United States in one highly significant way. In both countries a caste system divides people in ways that are far more rigid and enduring than differences based on class or religion or culture. In the United States, of course, the caste division is based on race; in India caste distinctions exist without any obvious physical or racial basis. In its system people have nonetheless been rigidly divided according to rank, status and occupation, from the high Brahmins to the lowly untouchables. As someone who teaches black history in the United States, I was eager to meet and talk with persons of various castes, and especially from the lowest caste, the so-called untouchables.

The Semester at Sea program had arranged for a visit to an untouchable village and a stay-over in that village. Participating in that has been one of the most memorable experiences of this voyage, and in fact of my life. Many of the students who went along with me agreed that it was that for them, also.

We first traveled to the offices of the Dalit Liberation Education Trust in Madras. This welfare group works with the children of Dalits to help them adjust to city life, to get an education, to build their self-esteem. They receive backing from a Catholic German charity, "Bread for the World," and for work with women from an American group Codel.

There we were met by Henry Thiagaraj, a leader and spokesman for the social organization, who gave us much useful information about the untouchable situation and their efforts to improve it. Henry informed us that the untouchables have gone by several names--"Scheduled Castes" by the British, "harijans" or "Children of God" by Gandhi, and now Dalit, or "oppressed" people. About 15% of India's population is officially considered untouchable, but the DLET believes the figure is more like 20%. The hero of the untouchables was a man named Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, himself of untouchable background but educated in India, England and the United States, and who in the 1930s or so began a movement for untouchable rights. Ambedkar differed fundamentally from Gandhi in how to approach the problem. Gandhi wanted to appeal to upper-caste Hindus' charity and sense of fairness to end discrimination; Ambedkar wanted the untouchables to unite and campaign politically for their rights. Ultimately Ambedkar capitulated to Gandhi's program, and helped write the constitution for independent India. In that constitution, which took effect in 1948 with independence, caste discrimination was made illegal. Today, however, discrimination continues with great force in the rural areas--where 70% of Indians live--although it is weaker in major cities like Delhi, Bombay, Madras and Calcutta. The Dalits remain the poorest of India's many impoverished citizens. Many dalits continue to perform the menial jobs that they had always done--sweeping streets, hauling garbage, cleaning latrines, handling dead cows--while others have become agricultural and urban laborers. There are government-set quotas giving Dalits a percentage (15%) of political representation, of civil service jobs, and access to higher education commensurate with their proportion in the total population. Despite these quotas, the Dalits remain undereducated and vastly underrepresented in the upper reaches of India's civil service. According to Henry, the Brahmins still control most of India's politics, and at the root of much political tension in the country (in

addition to religious and language tensions) are demands by lower castes--not just the untouchables--for greater political power.

Untouchability is rooted in Hindu religion, which divides people into four castes--the Brahmins, the warriors, the merchants, and the workers (farmers and artisans). Outside the pale of even these castes are the untouchables. They were probably the original inhabitants of India, Dravidians, who were conquered by invading Aryans from the north and enslaved. They cannot be identified physically, although they tend to be dark-skinned and Brahmins relatively light-skinned. However, in the south, most Tamils (the dominant group) are quite dark-skinned, so this is not a sufficient criterion.

Henry explained why it is not so easy for untouchables to escape by simply migrating to the city and passing, or by switching religion. First, even in the cities, people will inquire about one's village of origin in order to inquire later about his caste background. Second, many untouchables have demeaning names, like Karuppan and Kuppan, meaning "Black" and "Rubbish," which betray their background. Third, those who convert to Christianity or Buddhism are looked down upon as not "true" members of the faith but untouchable converts. Moreover, converts are often ineligible for quota benefits of untouchables. Finally, Dalits are unable to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by governmental affirmative action programs. They don't speak English because of inferior education, and they don't mix well with upper caste people because of their inferiority complex and lack of assertiveness. They are undereducated partly because, as agricultural laborers and persons who perform the menial tasks of society, families see no need to sacrifice the immediate earnings of working children for an education. Moreover, the Dalits are physically segregated from upper caste persons. They must live outside the village, typically about a mile or so away. Their settlement has no school, so they must walk to school in the upper caste village, which poses both a physical and a psychological handicap for them. Those who persevere do so despite low expectations. Henry, who is of untouchable background, had been told that he could not learn, but rather than being discouraged, he took it as a challenge. In DLET Henry encourages the group leaders (all dalits) to become more self-confident and assertive. For example, he had each of the staff members appear before us and introduce themselves. It was obvious they were shy in front of strangers and not assertive. they spoke so quietly, for example, that sometimes it was difficult to understand them.

The struggles by the Dalits have received little positive coverage in the press. Violence against dalits by caste Hindus was rarely reported, but in the past few years, the press has been giving more ample attention to such violence, even including pictures.

I asked Henry whether there was support from upper caste society for improvement of their condition, as in the United States, whose Civil Rights movement had had the support of liberal whites and students. He said he was trying to promote such inter-caste cooperation, but there was little interest from upper caste people, and Dalits were often suspicious of the motives of those who did want to help.

Finally, Henry gave us a little background on Dalit culture. It is based on Hinduism but is not the same as "official" or classical Hinduism as written in the classical works like the Vedas. The Dalit version includes their own local or village gods. Dalits' religion does not oppress women like traditional Hinduism, but stresses their importance in what amounted to female cults. The traditional classical Hindu writings, notably Manu of Hindu law, made women subservient. For this reason, upper caste Hindu men feel it is acceptable to rape Dalit women, which is a major problem.

After Henry's briefing, we participated in a ceremony to prepare us mentally and emotionally for what we would soon experience. On the floor of the DLET assembly room was an elaborate design done in colored powder. This type of pattern we had seen around the city, and is some sort of welcoming design. Candles were lit in the center of the pattern, we were each handed a small, shallow clay vessel filled with oil and a wick, and we each stepped forward to light our candle. We stood in a circle meditating silently, and then those who felt moved to do so, uttered a thought for our upcoming experience. It was an unforgettable moment, and created a type of bond among us and the Dalit people even before leaving for the village.

Following the ceremony we went to eat at a local hotel and then set out in several taxis for the village of Vippedu, located just south of Madras near the coast in the vicinity of Chengalpattu and Tirukkalukkundram. The countryside was very dry, but we passed rice fields still flooded with rice coming up. The sights were straight out of a travel documentary--children swimming happily in pools of probably stagnant water where buffalos drank and no doubt dropped feces; women walking with pots piled high on their heads; white-water buffalo with horns painted blue or red or green or yellow, and with little bells jangling on the ends of their horns, pulling wagons piled very high with straw.

On the roads absolute chaos reigned. Well, the chaos was not really absolute, since the unwritten law of the road clearly stated: larger vehicles have the right of way and smaller vehicles must yield--something like the caste system perhaps. People weave in and out, accidents are continuously avoided. How I do not know. It seemed a miracle occurred every minute, since during the entire stay in India I saw only one accident (or the remnants of one)

In order to give us a sense of the physical layout of an untouchable settlement, our DLET guide had us climb a hill from where we could look out and survey the countryside. We could see the rice fields, the nearby village, a road that ran around the village and, about a mile beyond the village, the untouchable settlement. Both clusters of houses looked similar, but our guide told us that the dalits got only the water left over from the caste village.

This was not the village where we were to stay, so we drove on. As we passed through the villages, there was excitement as people came to the porches, children smiled and waved, adults smiled and waved. Most houses were made of brick, although some were of mud and a few of palm leaves. Most had a tile roof plus a thatched-roof front portico. I did not see many animals, other than cattle--a few thin chickens, some goats, and no pigs. Nor did I see any vegetable gardens or fruit trees, although there were some palm trees and coconut trees. The excitement of the villagers made me wonder whether our coming solely to a dalit settlement might not trigger jealousy among these caste villagers. I later learned that with another group, the caste villagers put thorns in the road which would have punctured the tires of the taxis as they left the next day.

We got to our village about 4 pm and the welcome we received was incredible. One group of women came forward to place wreaths of white jasmine around our necks. Another group of women came forward with pans of red dye, which they would swirl three or four times in each direction, and then apply a round red dot on our foreheads. This was followed by pans of yellow dye (sandalwood), which was applied in horizontal stripes on either cheek and on the front of the throat.

The men then gathered a small pile of leaves and twigs in the center of the settlement's lone dirt road, which they lit. They passed drums through the fire, as if to heat them. The drums looked like large tambourines, without the shakes. The men then began a spirited drumming and dancing, welcoming us. As they moved down the street, about every ten or twenty yards they stopped and made another bonfire, re-heated the drums and resumed dancing. They invited us to join in the dancing, which some of our female students did, to everyone's glee. I think they especially wanted our fellows (there were only two) to dance also. It was clear that public dancing was the prerogative of men, because none of the dalit women danced. When our girls danced, they managed to drag some dalit boys into the center to dance also, but dalit girls always refused.

During this time, the villagers gathered and smiled and spoke to us, although we had no possibility of conversation, since they did not speak English. The children desired greatly to touch us, and utter the few English phrases which they knew. "Hello. How Are You? What's your name?" People invited us into their back yards to see how they live, to see their goat or cow tied up behind the house, to see the mud stove on which they cooked, to step inside their humble houses. They were very warm and welcoming.

Perhaps half the houses were stucco-covered brick with a tile roof, and another third were mud houses with a thatch roof. Typically, the walls were about five feet high, with a steeply pitched roof that was about ten feet high at the peak, and came down quite low to the ground, perhaps only two to three feet. had to bend way over to enter, but once inside could stand up comfortably. One entered a central living room, about six feet deep and the width of the house wide (perhaps twelve feet). A central passage went through to the back yard, and on either side of the passageway was a small room, presumably for sleeping and storage. A few houses had sides made of palm branches

a roof of grass thatch; these were considerably smaller, and seemed to consist of only one room. Behind the house was a mud stove, with two small openings toward the front, where branches would be passed in and lit, plus two round holes on the top, over which would be placed pots with food to be cooked--typically brown rice. I saw only pots cooking rice--no vegetables or meats or fruits.

The people were friendly and joyful. It was like a festival. We were made to feel very welcome. There was no begging, no hostility, no surliness or resentment. At first their stares, even though accompanied by smiles, were unsettling and made us self-conscious, but as the evening wore on we became more relaxed and felt at home. They danced and danced, and then--during a beautiful sunset--led a procession down the road to another dalit settlement, where a similar welcoming was held for us. It seemed the dancing and drumming would never stop.

On the way to the second settlement, we passed a Hindu temple, but it was too dark to see much. We also passed a Christian church, quite plain and sitting alone in a field. After the welcoming reception in the second settlement, we went back to the church and unloaded our supplies for the night. We had brought box lunches, which we ate sitting on the church's cement floor, with hundreds of curious eyes of children staring at us through the windows. All those eyes were truly eerie.

In the meantime, another group of students, who were staying at a nearby village, came to join us. We were then informed that the first settlement wanted to put on a performance for us, and so we walked back to them. This consisted of some drumming and singing by a number of soloists, followed by several skits. These skits had been taught them by the DLET, and focused on problems of courtship, marriage, and women. They seemed to be satires of "bad" customs, and provoked considerable laughter. Our group sang a few songs for them, from the "Star Spangled Banner" to "I Been Working on the Railroad."

We returned to spend the night in the church. Most of India's Christians come from the dalits, as one might imagine. Given their treatment by Hinduism, the major question is why so few have converted, since dalits make up 15-20% of the Indian population, but Christians are only about 3% of the total population. On the church was a plaque saying "This Chapel was Built With The Financial Assistance of Katolische Jungschar Osterreichs Bundesleitung" (Federal Leadership of Austrian Catholic Youth Group). The date was 1977, and the plaque closed with the plea "Please Pray for Them."

There were ample toilet facilities (i.e., trees, shrubs and fields), but no place to wash our hands, so people felt quite hot, sweaty, and dirty. We bedded down on the cement floor of the church, unfurled our sleeping bags, mats, and/or sheets. I had a sheet, and felt it too hot to sleep inside, so opted to sleep on the front porch of the church. This proved to be a good idea--nice breeze, no mosquitoes, no creepy-crawlers of any kind, just lots of kids hanging around, a toad who hopped by, and some dogs. It was like summer camp. People stayed up late playing cards and talking. The night passed without incident, we rose about 6 am. Villagers began to pass by, curious at us. Others came working, throwing hay high onto a wagon. Kids came to see what we had. We taught them to throw a frisbee and to give the "high-five" handshake. We took pictures and had a good time. However, folks now were feeling very tired, hot, sweaty and dirty, and eager to get back to the Big white Mother (the name of the SS Universe) and a big hot shower.

We had to pass out the goodies we had brought. This we did in the village, and the people were ecstatic. The DLET folks divided our booty into piles for girls and boys, then ran a competition among the kids with goodies as prizes. After some contests (mainly foot races), the rest of the goodies were passed out in an orderly manner, reading off the list of kids in the settlement. (I wonder where they got the list.) We then piled into the taxis to return to Madras.

The original plan had been to return to DLET offices to discuss what we had seen, but people were so uncomfortable that we let the taxis take most of them straight to the ship. I traveled back with the two other fellows, and stopped at the office in order to notify the DLET officer and our tour leader (Jeanette Barker) what had happened. when we got there, Jeanette was being interviewed by a newspaper reporter.

This visit left me with several strong impressions. First and foremost, I was surprised by the joy and friendliness of the people. I had thought they would be rather listless, unhappy and perhaps rude to outsiders, especially "rich" Americans. I was struck by their vitality and dignity. Their clothes were generally neat and clean, and the children

showed no signs of poor nutrition or poor health. I did see one girl with a bad foot--perhaps from polio, since it flopped around--and a boy with a bad eye. But the children had smiling faces and love in their bright, shining eyes. I was impressed by the cleanliness of the village. One might assume that, given the intense poverty, the village would be like a pig sty, but that clearly is not the case. The lack of material possession showed in that there were no cars, and only a few bicycles in the settlement. However, the pride showed in that the streets and yards were without litter, and had been swept; the houses were furnished quite simply, but were clean and orderly. Nor were there offensive odors.

This experience left me with two questions. How can people treated so miserably be so beautiful and joyful? How can people so beautiful and joyful be treated so miserably?