

Race, Caste and Untouchability: Lessons from India

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“You Can’t Touch That!” — M.C. Hammer

India differs greatly from the United States in many ways, but resembles it in one sad but significant way. In both countries, a caste system divides people in ways that are far more rigid and enduring than differences based on class, 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 this 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, especially from the lowest caste, the so-called Untouchables.

In 1993, I visited India under the auspices of *Semester at Sea*, an educational program that sends students and faculty, by

ship, on a trip around the world. It arranged for a visit and an overnight stay at an Untouchable village. Participating in that was one of the most memorable experiences of my life.

I traveled with a group of about twenty students to the Madras offices of the Dalit Liberation Education Trust. Dalit (DLET), which means “oppressed or ground down,” is the term the Untouchables increasingly use to refer to themselves—they have appropriated it. DLET works with the children of Dalits to help them adjust to city life, get an education, and build their self-esteem. They receive backing from a German Catholic charity, “Bread for the World,” and for work with women from an American group called “Codel.”

That is where we were met by Henry Thiagaraj, a leader and spokesman for DLET, who gave us much useful information about the Untouchables’ situation and

their efforts to improve it. Henry informed us that they had 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 DLET believes the figure is more like 20%. This means that there are between 150 and 200 million persons officially classified as Untouchables in India.

Their hero was a man named Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, himself of Untouchable background, but educated in India, England and the United States. In the 1930s, he began a movement for Untouchable rights. Ambedkar differed fundamentally from the famous 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 with Indian independence, in 1948, caste discrimination was made illegal.

Despite laws and the constitution, caste-based discrimination continues with great force in rural areas—where 70% of Indians live. It is weaker in major cities. The Dalits remain the poorest of India’s many impoverished citizens. Many Dalits continue to perform the menial jobs that they have always done—sweeping streets, hauling garbage, cleaning latrines, handling dead cows, low-paid agricultural and urban labor. There are government-set quotas that give Dalits a percentage of political representation, civil service jobs, and a level of access to higher education com-

mensurate with their specific 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 Thiagaraj, the Brahmins still control most of India’s politics, and at the root of much of the country’s political tension (in addition to religious and language tensions) are the demands of the lower castes for greater political power—and not just the Untouchables.

Untouchability is rooted in the Hindu religion, which divides people into four castes—the Brahmins, the Warriors, the Merchants, and the Workers (farmers and artisans). Beyond the pale of even these castes are the Untouchables. No one knows the origin of untouchability, but many Dalits believe that they are descendents of Dravidians, the original inhabitants of India who were conquered and enslaved by invading Aryans from the north. Dalits do not necessarily differ physically from upper caste Indians, so there is no true racial basis for the caste system. Nonetheless, a visitor familiar with race-based discrimination in the United States is struck by the similarities between the treatment of Dalits in India and black Americans in the United States.

Thiagaraj explained why it is not so easy for Untouchables to escape by simply migrating to the city and passing as higher caste persons, or by switching religions. Firstly, even in the cities people will inquire about one’s village of origin, in order to later inquire about caste background. Secondly, many Untouchables have demeaning names, like *Karuppan* and *Kuppan*, meaning “black” and “rubbish,” which also betray their background. Thirdly, those who convert to Christianity or Buddhism

are looked down upon as “false” members of the faith and Untouchable converts. Moreover, converts are then often ineligible for the quota benefits Untouchables actually do receive. Finally, Dalits are unable to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by governmental affirmative action programs. Most of them don’t speak English because of their lack of access to or inferior education. Hindi and English are the official languages of the central government of India, but there are 22 ‘scheduled’ languages, which are ‘native’ to India and have official state status, too, and 1,683 ‘mother tongues.’ About 20-25 million Indians speak English out of a population of 1.2 billion.

In addition to their linguistic limitations, Dalits 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, their 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 villages, typically about a mile or so away. Their settlements have no schools, so they must walk to the school in the upper caste village, which poses both a physical and psychological handicap for them. Those who persevere do so despite low expectations.

Thiagaraj, 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 the staff members appear before us and introduce

themselves (in English, since they had some measure of education). 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 begun to give more ample attention to such violence, even including pictures.

I asked Thiagaraj whether there was support from upper caste society for the improvement of their condition, as in the United States, where the Civil Rights movement had the support of liberal whites and students. He said he was trying to promote just 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 local or village gods. Instead of oppressing women, like traditional Hinduism, the Dalit religion does not oppress women. Instead, it stresses their importance in what amounts 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 in India.

After Thiagaraj’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



Dancing to a pariah drum in a Dalit village.

assembly room was an elaborate design done in colored powder. We had seen this type of pattern all around the city it is some sort of welcoming design. Candles were lit in the center of the pattern. We were handed a small, shallow clay vessels filled with oil and a wick, and were expected to each step 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. Even before leaving for the village, this was an unforgettable moment that created a type of bond between the Dalit people and us.

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 paddies 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, red, green or yellow, with little bells jangling on the ends of their horns, pulling wagons piled high with straw.

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 (Dalit villages must be at a distance of at least one mile from upper caste towns). Both clusters of houses looked similar, but our guide told us that the Dalits only got the water that was left over from the upper caste village.

This was not the village where we were to stay, so we drove on. As we passed through, there was excitement as people came to the porches, children and adults smiled and waved. Most houses were made of brick, although some were constructed 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 scrawny chickens, some goats, and no pigs. Nor did I see any vegetable gardens or fruit trees, although there were some palm 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 upper caste villagers. I later learned with another group that the upper caste villagers had put thorns on the road, which would have punctured the tires of our taxis as they left the next day.

We got to our village at about 4 p.m. 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 in a round red dot upon our foreheads. This was followed by pans of yellow dye (sandalwood), which was applied in horizontal stripes on either cheek and on the frontside of our throats.

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-heating the drums and resuming the dance. 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 to dance, too (there were only two). 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, too, but Dalit girls always refused to do so.

During this time, the villagers gathered, smiled and spoke to us, but it was not possible to converse with them, since they did not speak English (and we did not speak their language either). The children desired greatly to touch us, and utter the few English phrases they knew. "Hello. How are you? What's your name?"

People invited us into their backyards to see how they lived, 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, coming



Main street of pariah village

down quite low to the ground, perhaps only two to three feet.

We 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 (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 and 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, 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 at 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 curious eyes of hundreds of children staring at us through the windows.

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 to 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 that said: “This Chapel was Built With The Financial Assistance of *Katolische Jungschar Osterreichs Bundesleitung* (Federal Leadership of Austrian Catholic Youth Group). Its date



Author with a Dalit family

was 1977 and it closed with the plea “Please Pray for Them.”

There were ample toilet facilities (i.e., trees, shrubs and fields) yet we felt quite hot, sweaty, and dirty. Nevertheless, we bedded down for the night on the church’s cement floor, unfurling our sleeping bags, mats, and/or sheets. I had a sheet but felt too hot to sleep inside, so I 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 that 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 began 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, dirty, and eager to get back to the Big White Mother (the name of the SS Universe) and a big hot shower.

We passed out the goodies we had brought, doing this in the village. The people were ecstatic. The DLET folks divided our bounty into piles for girls and boys, and 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.

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 ill health. 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 pigsty, but that clearly was not the case. The lack of material possessions showed in that there were no cars, and only a few bicycles in the settlement. However, 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.

This incredible experience left me with an unanswerable question: How can people treated so miserably be so beautiful and joyful?