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Remembering Ambedkar in Bangalore

- *Nepali Dalits lack the generations of affirmative action through reservations in politics, the civil service and other state organs*

David N. Gellner



‘Could the conference offer lessons for Dalits and the Dalit movement in Nepal?’

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In the third week of July, when I had planned to be in a village in mid-Western Nepal, I found myself instead in Bangalore, as a guest of the Government of Karnataka, attending a massive conference entitled 'Reclaiming Social Justice, Revisiting Ambedkar', on the 126th birth anniversary of the great Dalit leader Bhimrao Ambedkar. Could there be lessons, I asked myself, for Dalits and the Dalit movement in Nepal?

The conference had (we were told) 12,000 registered delegates (many seemed like young college students at a mela).

There were 84 foreign academics and activists, over 300 Indians, as speakers. The opening day featured a 40-minute speech by Martin Luther King III.

He noted that he had been only 10 years old when his father was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee in 1968. He told a story from his father's visit to India:

My father recognized this kinship [between Dalits and Blacks] 50 years ago. He said, "I went to a school attended by the children of former Untouchables. As the principal introduced me, he said, 'I would like to introduce you to an Untouchable from the USA.' Initially I was taken aback.

Then I thought of all the places where I couldn't go because of the colour of my skin. And I thought of all the millions who couldn't live in places because of their skin colour. And I had to say to myself, 'I am an Untouchable and every Negro in the United States is an Untouchable'."

The great leader's son went on to ask why Ambedkar did not even have a walk-on part in Richard Attenborough's film about Gandhi.

He also condemned attacks on Muslims and Dalits and stated bluntly that "Modi, like Trump, has unleashed ferocity against minorities." He concluded by saying that "Unlike my father, Dr Ambedkar is not known well enough outside India. WE MUST CHANGE THAT!" before leading everyone in a chorus of 'We Shall Overcome'.

There followed speeches by Kailash Satyarthi (the famous Indian child labour activist), Prakash Ambedkar (the great man's grandson), the Chief Minister of Karnataka, Siddaramaiah, and finally by Rahul Gandhi.

The 2,000-seater hall was packed to the gills and the atmosphere was that of a Congress Party rally. Many speakers ended their peroration with the salutation 'Jay Bhim' and every mention of Ambedkar's name was likely to receive claps and whistles.

Some lessons

Impressive though the subsequent speeches were, none could match Martin Luther King III's. So here was lesson number 1: there are many important parallels between the inequities meted out to Blacks in the USA and Dalits in South Asia.

This lesson was hammered home over the next two days in many of the presentations by the 10 or 15 Black academics and activists from the USA, South Africa, Kenya, and Europe.

Lesson number 2 was that Ambedkar's thought needs to be better known. For many years he was lauded as the architect of the Indian constitution or as the man who brought Dalits to Buddhism, but his analysis of the caste system as a system of graded hierarchy has been ignored by social scientists for far too long.

As a political thinker, he deserves to be far better known. His reputation outside India remains much less than it should be. Where he ought to be paired automatically with Gandhi, he is barely remembered.

This neglect is now changing. Ambedkar's thought is finally being read and studied far beyond the restricted circles of Dalit activists. Perhaps as a result of this conference, it will be taken up beyond India in a much more thoroughgoing way than heretofore.

The conference unfolded over the next two days. The 'plenary' sessions took place in the main auditorium and featured luminaries such as Lord Bhikhu Parekh, Sukhdeo Thorat, Jairam Ramesh, Shiv Vishvanathan, Ashis Nandy, Neera Chandhoke, Rajeev Bhargava, and Prabhat Patnaik. Alongside this were 12 parallel sessions in smaller rooms; a couple in Kannada, the rest in English.

Similarities and differences

In my presentation I attempted to educate the Indian audience about the situation of Dalits in Nepal, in many ways so parallel to their situation in India. Young Nepalis from all walks of life feel obliged to migrate abroad for work or study. Data—collected with the help of my colleagues Dr Krishna Adhikari and Arjun BK, as part of a project supported by the UK's ESRC ('Caste, Class, and Culture: Changing Bahun and Dalit Identity in Nepal')—show that Dalits migrate more, and are much more likely to be among the poorest sections of society, than other castes.

Nepali Dalits lack the generations of affirmative action through reservations in politics, the civil service, and other organs of the state, which means that in India there is now a sizeable and influential Dalit middle class.

On the other hand, the Indians in the audience were very interested to see the extensive protections (to healthcare, education, land, and housing) now afforded to Dalits, at least on paper, by Article 40 of the Nepal's 2015 Constitution—guarantees that Dalits do not have in India.

In another of the parallel sessions, Ashok Gurung (of the India-China Center, New York) and Pradip Pariyar (Samata Foundation) represented Nepal in a roundtable where other speakers came from or talked about Fiji, Kenya, Northern Ireland, and Sri Lanka.

The conference, which was a piece of political theatre from start to finish, concluded with a session in Kannada where the Chief Minister faced questions from invited Kannada celebrities.

Then there was the ceremonial release, by Karnataka's Public Works Minister, HC Mahadevappa, of the Bengaluru Declaration on Dalit Rights.

The importance of Dalit issues to Nepal was emphasised three days later. Last week in the Shanker Hotel there was standing room only at a packed session on 'Dalits in a Changing Society', part of the Annual Kathmandu Conference on Nepal and the Himalaya co-organised by the Social Science Baha.

Apart from burnishing the reputation of Ambedkar and reminding people how much remains to be done before the evil of untouchability is finally overcome, the Bangalore conference had one further important aim, no doubt evident to all: firming up the Dalit vote for Congress in the Karnataka state elections that must be held by April of next year at the latest. Whether Congress can withstand the BJP in its current mood remains to be seen.

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