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Caste and Capitalism

To be Powerless is Not to be Defeated

by PRITI GULATI COX

October 10-12, 2014

Uttarakhand, the 27th State of the Republic of India is also referred to as *Devbhoomi*, or “Land of the Gods,” believed by Hindus to be where the sage Vyasa authored the epic *Mahabharata*. The sacred waters of the Ganges originate in the Himalayas of the state’s far north; the sources of the river’s four chief tributaries collectively make up one of the holiest pilgrim destinations for Hindus: the *Chota Char Dham*, or small four abodes of the gods. Travel to the area, once undertaken only by bearded, orange-robed sadhus, has become wildly popular in the past decade. By 2012, the state was seeing up to 28 million pilgrims and tourists annually, double its own population, and tourism was accounting for a huge 27 per cent of the state’s economy. But the good times didn’t roll on. Last year, tragedy struck.

The Kedarnath Temple is the highest of the Char Dham holy sites. It was there, on June 17, 2013, where one of our many experiments with ourselves unraveled, with nature’s fury triggering a very unnatural disaster. It started on the evening of the 16th with an explosive bang. A mile and a half upstream from Kedarnath, a freakishly heavy, too-early monsoon rainfall had melted the already greenhouse-warmed snout of Chorabari Glacier, triggering what science calls an “outburst flood” from a large lake that until then had been dammed up by the glacier. The lake

emptied instantaneously. And as if to tease us, the gods in heaven had the wall of water push before it a huge boulder, which stuck in place just above the Kedarnath temple, saving the ancient edifice from being swept away. The deluge skirted the temples' sides, bringing with it flash floods, landslides, silt, rock, more boulders, swallowing everything in its path. Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of pilgrims died. There's no accurate count. The torrent roared on for another hundred miles down through the foothills, destroying everything along the riverbanks and triggering massive landslides all the way down.

24 hours later, what lay scattered around the temple was a detritus of wild-eyed pilgrims, bare-backed mules, porters, and helicopters that had been carrying devotees up to the temple, along with rain coats, umbrellas, walking sticks, children's shoes, soda pop bottles, home-made samosas, collapsed guest houses and tea stalls, and Mahatma Gandhi's ashes, which had been immersed in that glacial lake back in 1948. Downstream lay a horror-scape of vanished wheat terraces, crumbled roads and helipads, ruined bridges, and schools buried in silt.



Detritus, Gaurikund, Garhwal, Uttarakhand.

The wise, elderly indigenous women of Uttarakhand had been saying for years before the disaster that they saw it coming. But who listens to them? Stretching far across the hills all around the sites of immediate catastrophe, accompanied by the footsteps and panting of local women as they collect and haul firewood, fodder, and water up the steep slopes day in and day out, cry the state's ravaged, fragile ecosystems, road-scarred and tunneled mountains, broken villages, dammed waters, displaced communities, and desperate household economies.

Seven months after the flood, my husband Stan, his son Paul and I visited the scene. We stood in the middle of a crazy-quilted landscape covered with fresh landslides that had been triggered by the road cuts and helicopter pads that had brought well-heeled pilgrims to the temple. Small remaining pockets of natural habitat remained scattered here and there, resisting the machines of unrestrained religion and capitalism that had come together and let loose all at once. Nandini, a co-founder of the School for Natural Creativity in Guptkashi described the scenery around us as a disruption of the earth's natural balance to which the gods of the Char Dham had reacted with a catastrophic regurgitation. And if you held your ear to the side of a mountain you might have heard the voices of one of the oldest environmental struggles in the world, now largely abandoned—the Chipko movement—and the singing of the Gharwali women who led it: “*Maatu hamru, paani hamru, hamra hi chhan yi baun bhi... Pitron na lagai baun, hamunahi ta bachon bhi.*” Soil ours, water ours, ours are these forests. Our forefathers raised them, it's we who must protect them.



Road-scarred mountains, Gaurikund, Garhwal, Uttarakhand

This recent tragic episode of Indian history is symbolic of what's unfolding throughout the nation's religious, socio-economic, and ecological fabric. You have Hinduism and capitalism on one side and natural ecosystems and the country's poor on the other, and a continuous experiment in all imaginable combinations and permutations playing out between them. Both of these paired systems are dying, but one of them is dying faster than the other.

The keystone of Hinduism is caste. The roots of what we refer to as the caste system today, Hinduism's *chaturvarna*, or four varnas, can be traced to *Purusha Sukta*, "The Hymn of Man." It is believed by some scholars to be a late addition to the *Rig Veda*, the earliest example of Hinduism's Vedic literature dating somewhere between 1200 – 900 BCE. The hymn contains the mythological origin of the universe, which involves the cosmic sacrifice of the *purusha* (primeval man) and his subsequent dismemberment. In this way the four-caste system was born. From the *purusha*'s mouth came the Brahmins, the priestly caste; from his arms, the Kshatriya, warrior/military caste; from his thighs, the Vaishya, business/trading caste; and from his feet were born the Shudra, the caste of toiling agriculturists, artisans, and fisherfolk.

But outside of this four-caste network, there was said to exist yet another, fifth artificial category of human being. It comprises those referred to as India's avarnas, or outcastes – those today called Dalits, literally meaning broken, crushed people, as well as the Adivasis, India's original inhabitants, its indigenous communities. Other titles given to these groups include, pariah, untouchables, depressed classes, and Gandhi's paternalistic epithet, harijan, or 'children of god.' In India, today, it is these communities that make up the low-paid farm hands and contract laborers.

One cannot help but see the irony in the Shudra's, or laboring castes', mythical birth from the primeval man's feet. They, along with the Dalits, Adivasis and other impoverished Indians of various faiths, share one of the world's tiniest per capita carbon footprints, much smaller than the footprints of those who sprang forth from *purusha*'s fat and muscle.

Over the millennia, within this four-caste structure, evolved thousands of endogamous castes and subcastes, or *jatis*. They are all intended to be distinct gene pools, with intercaste marriage frowned upon. Caste now burdens not only the Hindu population. It has proliferated throughout the Indian DNA and into the country's practice of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Sikhism. Each has its own specific norms and hereditary occupations, all of which employ caste-style hierarchies of their own. A century and a half ago, Marx expressed the view that mechanized transportation would dissolve the caste system. But caste fundamentalism not only has survived in modern times, it is thriving more than ever under technologically sophisticated, neo-liberal fundamentalism.

My friend Suprabha Seshan, an ecosystem gardener at the Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary in Wayanad, Kerala, India makes a very interesting observation, "I have a different theory about the diversity of the *jatis*. I think there is an older and still extant huge Adivasi diversity, which is what the *jati* system is trying to mimic, except it made this diversity into a hierarchical one, and

an exploitative one. The *jati* mosaic in a social and economic scape mimics the Adivasi mosaic that exists in a landscape.”

And attached to this creaking *jati* network are the twin doctrines of *karma* and *dharma*. *Karma* justifies a person’s caste-assigned status in this life according to his/her deeds in previous lives. And each individual is then expected to perform his/her *dharma*, or caste-assigned duties in this life. The hallucination is completed with a light at the end of a long tunnel: the possibility of a higher-caste birth next life around, or for the very good or lucky, *moksha* or salvation.

Looked at closely, these corporate divisions of the *purusha* dressed in religious finery that I have just described are all designed in accordance with their relationship to the land. But not with a sense of treading lightly on it. A minority of upper-caste Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas have managed to usurp knowledge, trade, land, natural resources, access to health care and justice by using full-force physical and psychological extractive mechanisms: drilling, bulldozing, *karma*, *dharma*, blasting, damming, and the sickening displacement of tens of millions of rural people. And the poor are left with nothing but calloused hands and a resilience to survive against unimaginable odds.

Today in India, more so since the recent triumph of economic fundamentalism in this year’s national elections, one hears talk of little other than the panacea of growth. Growth, like truth, is a very political word, and in India it can mean different things depending on where one stands on the caste ladder. But one thing is clear, that its application today creates a hundred losers for every beneficiary. So far at least, we have seen that for the religious technocrats and economic fundamentalists at the top, growth simply could not have reached the lopsided frenzy it has without simultaneously exploiting the earth’s resources and the hearts, hands, minds and livelihoods of the powerless laboring classes. It is largely the outcaste Dalits who are landless. And it is they, along with India’s tribal Adivasis, who have been displaced by large infrastructure projects like dams and mining operations.

To the fields, forests, and rivers of India, and to the Dalits, Adivasis, poor Muslims, Christians, and a majority of the Shudra population, India’s economic growth is a tumor, a cancer, breaking off of their skins, first slowly like a rash and then spreading, consuming them whole.

Such a campaign can’t be carried out without violence. We Hindus were way ahead of the world on this. Eras ago, we concocted for ourselves a uniquely potent blend of the dual-doctrines of ‘Shock and Awe’ and ‘Winning Hearts and Minds,’ and sanctioned it in our very own battle bible, the *Bhagavad Gita*, or “Song of the Blessed One.” It is a dialogue between the hero Arjuna and his charioteer Krsna. According to historian D.D.Kosambi, the *Bhagavad Gita* was added to the epic the *Mahabharata* “somewhere between 150 and 350 AD.” Kosambi writes, “The high god repeatedly emphasizes the great virtue of non-killing (*ahimsa*), yet the entire discourse is an incentive to war.” There is a “slippery opportunism” that “characterizes the whole book.” “It is” therefore “not surprising to find so many *Gita* lovers. Once it is admitted that material reality is gross illusion, the rest follows quiet simply; the world of “doublethink” is the only one that matters.”

Most of us are familiar with super *Gita* fan Mohandas K Gandhi's famous quotes. Here's one of his more infamous ones, referring to his vision of the ideal society: "The rich man will be left in possession of his wealth, of which he will use what he reasonably requires for his personal needs and will act as a trustee for the remainder to be used for society. In this argument, honesty on the part of the trustee is assumed."

As Arundhati Roy points out in her introductory essay to the 'Annihilation of Caste,' by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, entitled 'The Doctor and the Saint,' "Though Gandhi spoke of inequality and poverty.... at no point in his political career did he ever seriously criticize or confront an Indian Industrialist or the landed aristocracy." Furthermore, "In the ninety-eight volumes of his writing, Gandhi never decisively and categorically renounced his belief in chaturvarna, the system of four varnas." – that is, the caste system.

Roy goes on to say, "Gandhi's idea of trusteeship echoed almost verbatim what American capitalists – the Robber Barons – like J.D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie were saying at the time." In *The Gospel of Wealth*, 1889, Carnegie says, "This, then is held to be the duty of the man of Wealth: First, to set an example of modest, unostentatious living, shunning display or extravagance..... and to consider all surplus revenues which come to him simply as trust funds..... the man of wealth thus becoming the mere agent and trustee for his poor brethren, bringing to their service superior wisdom, experience and ability to administer."

My question is, why take something from somebody that they themselves have produced only to give it back to them? Wouldn't it be more efficient not to take it from them in the first place?

In saying, "The rich man will be left in possession of his wealth," Gandhi could just as well have said, "Poverty on the part of the majority is assumed." The message is clear – that the rich man is rich is his *karma*, but it is his *dharma* that he must give most of his wealth away. And it is their *karma* that the poor are poor, but it is their *dharma* that they enjoy poverty with humility and spirituality, while simultaneously shunning property. But here's the punch line. Gandhi goes on to say that "humility does not mean abjectness" The poor man "serves no one except God." So if society collectively keeps this caste-sanctioned tipped balance of property and poverty going, according to the mahatma, everyone, thanks to him, will attain *moksha* – that is, salvation. Sound familiar? Like someone who once said, "The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me"?

Traditionally Dalit livelihoods have been limited to tasks such as sweeping India's streets, and as manual scavenging of excrement. India's manual scavengers are usually from the Valmiki sub-caste and also go by the derogatory term Bhangis meaning "broken identity." In India as almost everywhere in the world, there is what Marx called a "metabolic rift" that occurs when nutrients are harvested from fields of grain, eaten and excreted by humanity, and not returned to the soil where new grain will be produced. The Bhangis' specific 'job' across India has been removing excrement by hand from dry latrines, gutters, and drains, cleaning sewers and septic tanks—and to deposit it in places considered to be out-of-bounds wastelands where nothing must be produced. (Incidentally, the Dalits themselves live out-of-bounds, on the fringes of towns and villages, in closer proximity to their harvest of excrement.) To Gandhi's credit, he believed the nutrients in excrement should be returned to the soil; however, his views on that, like those on

nonviolence, never prevailed. His views on retention of the Bhangi system did prevail; thus a precapitalist form of discrimination continues today, fulfilling another Marx adage: that profit results from “simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth — the soil and the worker.”

Gandhi could wax eloquent on the subject: “I love scavenging. In my Ashram, an eighteen-year-old Brahmin lad is doing the scavenger’s work in order to teach the Ashram scavenger cleanliness. The lad is no reformer. He was born and bred in orthodoxy. He is a regular reader of the *Gita*. When he conducts the prayer his soft, sweet melodies melt one into love.”

Nowhere in the *Gita* does it say that a sweeper voluntarily chooses sweeping Hindu society’s shit as an occupation. It was dealt to him by god in a game of cards. And there’s no bluffing your way out of this one.

This is not just an obsession from the time of Gandhi. In November 2012, when a scavenger named Gangashri along with 12 other women in Parigama village in Uttar Pradesh’s Mainpuri district voluntarily stopped cleaning dry toilets, men from the dominant Thakur caste came to their homes and threatened to deny them grazing rights and expel them from the village. Sona, from Bharatpur city in Rajasthan said, “The first day when I was cleaning the latrines and the drain, my foot slipped and my leg sank in the excrement up to my calf. I screamed and ran away. Then I came home and cried and cried. My husband went with me the next day and made me do it. I knew there was only this work for me.”

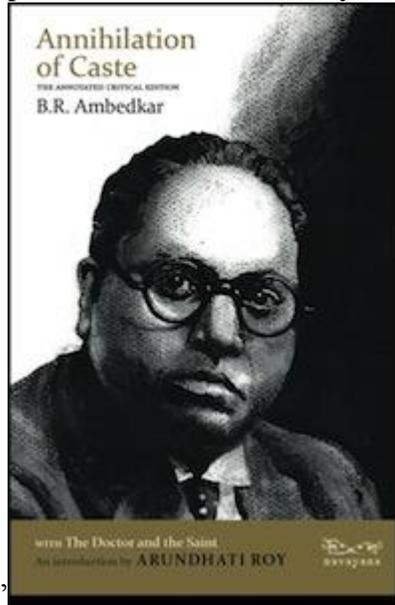
Dalit and human rights organizations have made a concerted effort in trying to expose day-to-day abuses and atrocities suffered by Dalits across the country. A 2010 Robert F. Kennedy and Navsarjan Trust study on caste-based discrimination conducted in more than fifteen hundred villages in Gujarat revealed, “As India emerges as the world’s largest democracy, the practice of untouchability remains, in stark contrast to the image of progress that the government of India seeks to promote to the international community.” Among other things they found—in 98 % of villages—a refusal to serve tea to Dalits in non-Dalit households, or to supply it in a segregated cup called a “Rampatar,” – meaning, cynically, a vessel of the god Ram; in 71 % of the villages there is no water tap at all in the Dalit area; and in 29 % of the villages, Dalits are denied access to common wells or taps.

“I do want to attain *moksha*,” Gandhi said. “I do not want to be reborn. But if I have to be reborn, I should be born an untouchable. A Bhangi.” (That is, a scavenger.) The question to ask here is not what Gandhi would do if in fact he was reborn a Bhangi, but what COULD he do as a Bhangi to change this cruel system.

Here’s what DID happen to someone whose who was born a Dalit. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, who eventually came to be known as Babasaheb (respected father), was born in 1891 and was one of the first Dalits to receive a university education, with doctoral degrees from Columbia University and the London School of Economics. He also became a barrister from Gray’s Inn. His focus was on the emancipation of his Dalit brothers and sisters. After India got its independence from the British, Ambedkar was elected chairman of the drafting committee for

the Indian Constitution. Ambedkar, as Roy points out “was Gandhi’s most formidable adversary. He challenged him not just politically or intellectually, but also morally.”

Annihilation of Caste is a speech that Ambedkar composed, but never delivered. It was meant as a lecture to a ‘moderate’ Hindu reformist group, the (Forum for Break-up of Caste) of Lahore (in modern Pakistan). The group had invited him in May 1936 to speak his mind. But they wanted a sneak preview of the contents of his speech first, and when they saw, well, they changed their



minds. They found it too “unbearable.”

The text survives. Here’s part of what Ambedkar had to convey in that undelivered speech: “What Hindus call religion is really law, or at best legalized class-ethics. Frankly, I refuse to call this code of ordinances as religion. But the worst evil of this code of ordinances is that the laws it contains must be the same yesterday, today and forever. They are iniquitous in that they are not the same for one class as for another. I have, therefore, no hesitation in saying that such a religion must be destroyed. Give a new doctrinal basis to your religion,” he said. “A basis that will be in consonance with liberty, equality and fraternity; in short, with democracy.”

So while Gandhi was front and center in liberating Indians from British rule, Ambedkar was trying to liberate Dalits from the shackles of “Gandhism.” In response to Gandhi’s desire to be reborn a Bhangi, Ambedkar said, “The first special feature of Gandhism is that its philosophy helps those who have to keep what they have and to prevent those who have not from getting what they have a right to get. This is the technique of Gandhism, to make wrongs done appear to the very victim as though they were his privileges. If there is an ‘ism’ which has made full use of religion as an opium to lull the people into false beliefs and false security, it is Gandhism. Following Shakespeare one can well say: Plausibility! Ingenuity! Thy name is Gandhism.”

“For whose freedom is the Congress fighting?” Ambedkar asked. When Gandhi met Ambedkar for the first time sixteen years before India got its Independence from the British, he reprimanded him on that statement, to which Ambedkar replied, “Gandhiji, I have no Homeland. No untouchable worth the name will be proud of this land.” Incidentally, Gandhi’s secretary Pyarelal pointed out that Gandhi at first mistook Ambedkar for a self-hating Brahmin.

What political analyst and author of, 'the Persistence of Caste,' Anand Teltumbde reinforces is that both caste and capitalism treat the weakest and poorest segments of society with equal apathy. That is, it's not capitalism's fault that you are poor. If you can make it in a capitalist world, then great. If not, well, tough. And casteism says it is their *karma* that the poor are poor. Tough. So, in effect, the capitalists and upper castes have collectively and conveniently rubbed their hands together and brushed the poor and weak of society from their greedy agendas. Here are a few examples of the types of structural violence that the privileged castes have emptied on Dalits over the years: forty-four Dalits burnt alive in 1968 in Tamil Nadu, hundreds of Bangladeshi Dalits massacred during a government eviction drive in 1978 in West Bengal, six Dalits murdered, three women raped and many more wounded in 1984 in Andhra Pradesh, in Haryana, five Dalits lynched outside a police station in 2002, In 2006, a Dalit farmer, Bhaiyalal Bhotmange's entire family of four subjected to "gang-rape, torture, unspeakable public humiliation and murder by a mob of caste Hindus, neighbors from their own village," Kahirlanji in Maharashtra.

Both Gandhi, the mahatma, and Mukesh Ambani, today India's richest man, belong to the Vaishya, the business/trading caste. One was driven by religious fundamentalism, and the other by economic fundamentalism. And they both used their position of power to further their own visions for India at the expense of the working classes' sweat, humanity, dignity and tears.

Mukesh Ambani is #28 on the Forbes' 2014 list with a net worth of \$ 23.5 billion. He lives in the world's largest "democracy," (also, by the way, in the world's most expensive personal residence), alongside approximately 960 million Indians who live on less than 50 cents a day. So, for every \$100 or so that Ambani owns, four Indians have no democracy.

Gandhi's net worth is that he is the last mahatma standing between two experimental mantras: "the market will take care of it all," or "social cooperation will take care of it all," both of which always tugged at the mahatma's hem for approval. And on the margins stand the last obstacle to total usurpation and destruction of India's landscape – The Adivasis, that land's original human inhabitants. Many thousands of these brave tribal people have been annihilated, and they, as Roy says, have "rebelled time and time again..... and fought fiercely to protect their land, culture and heritage..... but unlike the rest of India, they were never conquered. They still have not been. They are waging nothing short of a civil war against the Indian state."

In decades of struggle, the Adivasis have had almost no one (except Roy in recent years) on their side. Shockingly enough, even Ambedkar's views on Adivasis made him sound more like a Brahmin than a Dalit. He said, "these aborigines have remained in their primitive uncivilized state in a land which boasts of a civilization thousands of years old.... and are leading the life of hereditary criminals."

On October 14 1956, just a few months before his death, Ambedkar fulfilled a vow he'd made twenty-one years earlier to renounce Hinduism. He did it by embracing Buddhism, along with Sharda Kabir, his Brahmin second wife and over 400,000 other supporters, making it the largest religious conversion in history. He remains to this day the Dalit populations' most revered figure. These days if you go into a slum in Bombay, chances are you'll find a photograph of him, Babasaheb, not Gandhi, hanging on the wall, often alongside a picture of the Buddha.



Photos of the Buddha and Babasaheb hanging on the wall, Kadam Chawl (Footsteps Slum), Bombay.

All too often our response to conspicuous consumption triggered by market fundamentalism has been a conscious, personal demonstration of conspicuous abstinence. Again, as Roy says of Gandhi's pursuit of the simple life during his years in South Africa and later on in India, "The question is, can poverty be simulated? Poverty is about having no power. It took a lot of farmland and organic fruit trees to keep Gandhi in poverty." Can everybody in the world afford to live poor Gandhi-style? In other words, are we all islands by ourselves, able simply to wave the magic wand of localism and good-exemplism to stop ecological breakdown and solve the global imbalance of property and poverty? Can we not see the layered complexity of root forces beyond our control compounded by elitism that cuts off all rational communication? This is not to take a defeatist attitude, but to acknowledge that there is something that lies beyond the power of abstinence to contain. To do so is to know powerlessness. But to be powerless is not to be defeated.

Maybe somewhere there, contained, between the assassination of a universally adored and powerful Vaishya mahatma, the assassination of a radical speech by the Dalit Babasaheb Ambedkar, and the assassination of the last defenders of India's forests still on their tribal lands, lies powerlessness, and the spark of revolution. Waiting for the right moment.

Meanwhile, read the *Bhagavad Gita* by all means, but let us also pick up the historic undelivered speech, 'Annihilation of Caste' by Ambedkar, and Roy's introductory essay to it, 'The Doctor and the Saint,' published by Navayana. Roy is touring the US and the UK at the moment promoting the new edition of the book. On October 7, she delivered the Jean Yokes Woodhead

Lecture, ‘ The Doctor and the Saint,’ at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where she said, ” The problem is that you cannot reach Ambedkar without going through the smokescreen of Gandhi, hence the book.” On October 13 she will be at Teacher’s College at Columbia University; On November 20th she will be at University College London; and on November 24, she will be speaking at Southbank Central, Purcell Room.