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Ambedkar and Gandhi

In his article “Ethics in Ambedkar’s Critique of Gandhi” (EPW, 15 April 2017), Gopal Guru questions the hitherto unexamined and largely accepted antagonism between Ambedkar and Gandhi on the problem of untouchability. Those who take rigid positions, for or against the two leaders, fail to locate the space in which the “inclusive discourse of emancipation” is possible. For this reason, the tone of Guru’s article is reconciliatory as he finds Gandhi involved in the emancipatory struggle of Dalits, just as Ambedkar makes efforts to involve Gandhi and the caste Hindus in the interlocutory framework of conversation.

The question of untouchability can be properly understood and resolved if the approaches of the two leaders are taken together. Gandhi mainly looked at the problem of untouchability from a moral standpoint, whereas Ambedkar looked at it from a rational, intellectual and political point of view.

Gandhi was reluctant to accept Ambedkar’s contention that the problem of untouchability was rooted in caste which was supported by religion and thus, could be solved only when scriptural support is withdrawn. Ambedkar’s indictment of caste Hindus in the *Annihilation of Caste* is unsettling. According to him, Hindus ill-treat untouchables not because they are inhuman or cruel; they do so because they are deeply religious. In order to judge the veracity of Ambedkar’s contention, Gandhi asked some high-caste Hindus to find evidence in the Hindu scriptures in support of untouchability. At a meeting with the head priest of the Shiva Temple, he failed to convince the priest that the untouchables should be treated like the other castes and be given equal status. The priest justified the distinction on the basis of past karma. Gandhi, though apparently unsatisfied with this argument, could not defend his position. Despite this, Gandhi agreed with Ambedkar that the caste problem was historically created and therefore, could be historically solved.

Ambedkar finds genuineness [truthfulness] in Gandhi’s acceptance of the

truth of untouchability and moral and ethical consciousness “in his effort to create moral reason among the caste Hindus.” Just as Gandhi was able to rise above his caste self to see the reality of untouchability, Ambedkar was able to transcend his embittered self to modify his earlier stand that not all Brahmins practise discrimination, but only those who have the mindset of Brahmins do. Ambedkar never gave up his effort of persuading the caste Hindus, Gandhi in particular, to accord equal status to the untouchables.

While Guru’s article provides an ethical perspective for evaluating Gandhi’s thought on untouchability, it also suggests that Dalit consciousness can be represented by non-Dalits. U R Ananthamurthy rightly calls Gandhi a “critical insider.”

S D Kapoor

JODHPUR

A Dalit Rite of Mourning

Speculation on death is a philosopher’s domain, of extreme necessity and rigor in thought. Notwithstanding this, I would like to open a realm of experience where an event such as death invokes a reaction in the form of mourning.

From Gandhi to Rohith Vemula, political resistance has turned full circle in India and the state is no longer at the centre or even the nation state it has proclaimed itself to be. The state, which was absolved of all violence in the assassination of Gandhi and rose to the immaculate heights of purity, is trying to relocate itself as a decentred state of knowledge. This is the reason why it is facing scathing criticism for the institutional murder of Rohith.

This is also where bereavement or the pain involved in death fails our assessment of the transition of the state from an active role as a nation state in valorising heroism, to a passive role as a knowledge-state in mourning the victim of political resistance. This passivity cannot be better expressed than in its portrayal of Rohith as someone who, according to it, becomes “the instrument of punishment and the one who suffers or merits it—the victim.”

Sasheej Hegde has recently sought to evaluate what grounds there are for the social sciences to predicate an “eloquent death” such as the suicide of Rohith (“Rohith Vemula and ‘Us’: The Gift of a Life and Death,” *EPW*, 3 December 2016). Admitting that there could be hardly any, he suggests that the “gift” (Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*) may be a suitable metaphor for identifying where we stand vis-à-vis the death of Rohith. I would like to thank him for having opened the door into the chaos that exists amongst us for which this gift bears a testimony or witness. But, let me ask if it will not be long before such chaos is substituted with an immortality of some kind?

For, we have seldom run short of heroes, icons, deities or gods that represent the extremes of chaos, which we have designated as our culture, eventually to be forgotten altogether as real men or women who lived amidst us. This is the aporia in the gift of death, which Jacques Derrida himself alludes to while trying to explain it through abstraction: if death invokes immortality, then it is sure to be that of a god, and it is a well-known fact that all men try to become immortals and wish the death of gods.

This shared feeling amongst us is what disturbs us in the death of Rohith. Hegde has made it clear poignantly that it is not the work of mourning, of reason, of background socialities that will determine the meaning of his suicide.

Two thinkers throw light on the question of historicism of death, especially death as righteous citizens. Martin Heidegger says, “Where history is genuine it does not pass away by merely ceasing; it does not just stop living like the animals. History only dies *historically*.” As if in a continuation to this, Georges Bataille maintains that a death that escapes history also means chaos, to the point of revealing the absence of chaos, that of life itself that opens up to death.

To ask whether the victim should be the grounds on which victimhood is built, as Hegde does, is also to escape history and enter chaos, as much as to enter politics itself. This denial of the victim to be the instrument of one’s own punishment, then, remains also the point of a Dalit arrival at

the doorsteps of a rite of mourning as a deconstruction of the heroic identification of death with politics. The unusually long rite of passage for Rohith’s mourning is due to its denial of victimhood, which augurs a politics beyond martyrdom and is, hence, unknown to the state of knowledge itself.

K V Cybil
NEW DELHI

Noel Sheth S J (1943–2017)

Noel Sheth S J journeyed through life with purpose. His Jesuit identity always before him, he applied himself meticulously to every task with the hope that it would benefit others. The eldest of four brothers, he lost his father when he and his siblings were still young. He felt responsible for the family. His mother hailed from Kandivali in Mumbai, and with faith and fortitude looked after her sons and provided for their education through her earnings.

Noel completed his schooling at St Xavier’s High School, Dhobitalao and then decided to join the Jesuits of the Bombay Province; he did so on 20 June 1960. His flair for languages showed in his knowledge of Gujarati—his father was a baptised Gujarati—Marathi, Hindi and English. After philosophy, Noel was asked to prepare himself in Sanskrit and Indian Culture to be part of the staff of St Xavier’s College, Mumbai. He performed brilliantly in his masters in Sanskrit from Pune University and was offered a full scholarship to Harvard to complete his doctorate in Sanskrit. At Harvard, he impressed both staff and students and, on occasion, was invited by the professor to teach his confrères. His name is included in the *Who’s Who of Sanskrit Scholars of India*. Back in India, his superiors in the Jesuit Assistancy, considering the wider needs of the order, decided to assign him to Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth (JDV), Pontifical Institute of Philosophy and Religion, Pune. He resided in the Papal Seminary and functioned as dean of the Inchoate Department of Indian Studies and Social Sciences in the Faculty of Philosophy.

Noel had the capacity to put together an immense amount of detail so that

the knowledge of the subjects he taught was almost exhaustive. His effort to excel in all that he attempted also meant that he had high expectations of his students. With a mind for detailed planning as well as sensitivity to the views of others, he served terms as rector of the Papal Seminary (1991–94) and later of JDV (1999–2005). He helped bring technical modernisation to the JDV campus and was presented the Dr Sam Higginbottom award for best principal (president) in India, 2004–05 by the All India Association for Christian Higher Education.

His identity as a Jesuit priest characterised his commitment to the Church and the Society of Jesus. Ordained on 23 March 1974, Noel cherished the priesthood and the ministry that it implied. Because of his deep knowledge of oriental religions, he could appreciate the contribution of other faiths in understanding the world of religion and be pluralist while preserving his Christian identity. At the time of his death, Noel was a member of the International Secretariat for Ecumenism and advisor to the Jesuit General in inter-religious matters.

Noel had noteworthy qualities of both head and heart. He walked tall yet made everyone feel that they mattered to him. He enjoyed meeting Jesuit companions and shared in the fun and food of such gatherings. When he returned from an overseas engagement, he brought something not only for his own community but also for others. Noel’s Jesuit confrères are grateful to God for having him in their midst for 57 years; we feel his loss acutely.

It was my privilege to chat with Noel on the very day (26 June 2017) he was to fly to Bogotá, Colombia, where he suffered a fatal heart attack. He was busy packing, but asked me to sit and chat for a while. During the long flight, he had planned the free stopover in the United States to spend time with a friend and his family.

We offer our condolences to his two surviving brothers and his many friends both in India and abroad.

Errol D’Lima S J
MUMBAI

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