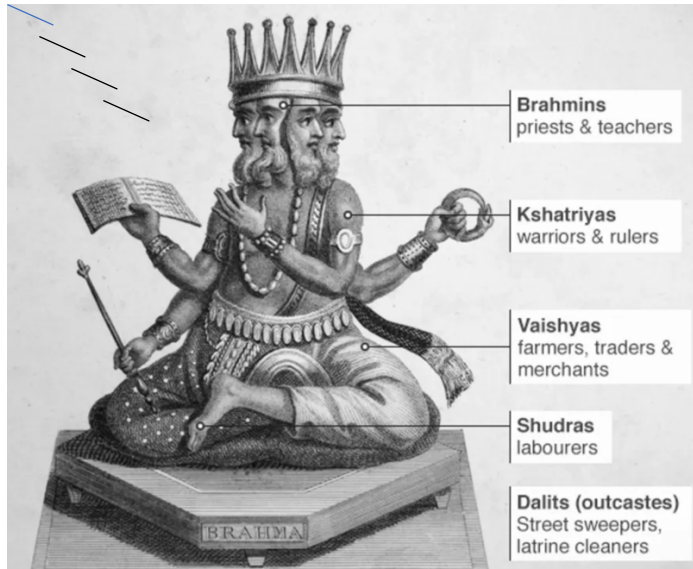


Humanist Readings Club Session III: Ambedkar

Ram Mohan Roy and his Brahmo followers attempted to create a radically reformed Hinduism, one that would reject social oppression especially the caste system and the oppression of women. Bhimrao Ambedkar believed that this was impossible, that meaningful social reform required rejection of traditional Hinduism altogether.

Caste 101:



Castes are grouped into four varnas (colors). Traditionally, they are associated with parts of the body as shown. At the bottom, the outcastes/Dalits/so-called Untouchables have no varna. Adivasi are groups living traditional lives outside mainstream society, often in remote areas.

Very rough numbers for India population

Brahmins	5%	"Forward Castes"
Kshatriyas	5%	
Vaishyas	10%	
Shudra	35%	"Other Backward Castes"
Dalit	15%	"Scheduled Castes"
Adivasi	10%	"Scheduled Tribes"
Non-Hindu	20%	Muslims, Sikhs etc.

One can divide modern Hindu opinions of the caste system into four schools.

I. Conservative: Our ancestors were right! Keep up the old traditions. India has no shortage of militant conservatives.

II. Mainstream Progressive: We should keep Hinduism and the caste system, but reform the caste system to make it less brutal on the lowest groups. This was the view of Gandhi. It was and is widely popular.

III. Religious Reformers : We should eliminate the caste system, but keep whatever bits of Hinduism are left. This was the view of Ram Mohan Roy, Tagore and many other intellectuals.

IV. Radicals: We should eliminate Hinduism entirely. This was the view of Ambedkar and other lower caste leaders. This view is held by millions of people today,

The readings below are written by Ambedkar and highlight Ambedkar's disagreements with mainstream progressives, especially Gandhi.

Ambedkar:

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956) was born an outcaste, or Dalit, one of the so-called Untouchables. Nevertheless, because of his great academic talents, and perhaps helped by his father's status as an officer in the British Indian Army, he received scholarships leading to him receiving a Ph.D. in economics from Columbia University in New York as well as a law degree from Gray's Inn in London.

Ambedkar devoted his life to political agitation on behalf of the Dalit community. The leader of an important minority, he could not win national elections, but was always respected by Gandhi, Nehru et al. He was the principle author of the Indian Constitution. Today, there are many statues of him throughout India. Politicians of all stripes publicly honor him, even if they would never agree with what he actually said.



In 1936 he was invited to address a conference of progressive Hindus dedicated to fighting the caste system and British rule. He sent them an advance copy of the speech he planned to deliver. The organizers demanded he delete portions of the speech explicitly attacking Hindu "Shastras". ("Shastras" literally means "teachings". In context attacking Hindu "Shastras" is like attacking Christian "scripture".) Even by progressive standards, the passages were inflammatory. Ambedkar refused to edit his speech and the organizers cancelled the conference. Ambedkar then printed the offending speech under the title *The Annihilation of Caste*.

Some of the offending passages: (from Ambedkar, *The Annihilation of Caste*, 1936)

*Caste may be bad. Caste may lead to conduct so gross as to be called man's inhumanity to man. All the same, it must be recognized that the **Hindus** observe Caste not because they are inhuman or wrong-headed. They observe Caste because they are deeply religious. People are not wrong in observing Caste. In my view, what is wrong is their religion, which has inculcated this notion of Caste. If this is correct, then obviously the enemy you must grapple with is not the people who observe Caste, but the **Shastras** which teach them this religion of Caste. Criticising and ridiculing people for not inter-dining or inter-marrying, or occasionally holding inter-caste dinners and celebrating inter-caste marriages, is a futile method of achieving the desired end. The real remedy is to destroy the belief in the sanctity of the **Shastras**.*

*How do you expect to succeed, if you allow the **Shastras** to continue to mould the beliefs and opinions of the people? Not to question the authority of the **Shastras**—to permit the people to believe in their sanctity and their sanctions, and then to blame the people and to criticise them for their acts as being irrational and inhuman—is an incongruous way of carrying on social reform. Reformers working for the removal of untouchability, including **Mahatma Gandhi**, do not seem to realize that the acts of the people are merely the results of their beliefs inculcated in*

their minds by the **Shastras**, and that people will not change their conduct until they cease to believe in the sanctity of the **Shastras** on which their conduct is founded.

*It is no use seeking refuge in quibbles. It is no use telling people that the **Shastras** do not say what they are believed to say, if they are grammatically read or logically interpreted. What matters is how the **Shastras** have been understood by the people. You must take the stand that **Buddha** took. You must take the stand which **Guru Nanak** [founder of Sikhism] took. You must not only discard the **Shastras**, you must deny their authority, as did Buddha and Nanak. You must have courage to tell the **Hindus** that what is wrong with them is their religion—the religion which has produced in them this notion of the sacredness of Caste. Will you show that courage?*

Note that in the second paragraph, Ambedkar is explicitly attacking Gandhi for believing that decent behavior can come from a bad religion. In the third paragraph, Ambedkar is attacking Roy and the Brahmos for cherry-picking religious tradition, what Ambedkar calls "seeking refuge in quibbles." Ambedkar has little faith in upper-caste reformers.

*I can respect those of the caste **Hindus** who try to realize a high social ideal in their life. Without such men, India would be an uglier and a less happy place to live in than it is. But nonetheless, anyone who relies on an attempt to turn the members of the caste **Hindus** into better men by improving their personal character is, in my judgment, wasting his energy and hugging an illusion.*

Gandhi responded directly to Ambedkar's attack in his magazine *Harijan*:

Gandhi: *The law of Varna [caste hierarchy] teaches us that we have each one of us to earn our bread by following the ancestral calling. It defines not our rights but our duties. It necessarily has reference to callings that are conducive to the welfare of humanity and to no other. It also follows that there is no calling too low and none too high. All are good, lawful and absolutely equal in status. The callings of a **Brahmin**—spiritual teacher—and a scavenger are equal, and their due performance carries equal merit before God, and at one time seems to have carried identical reward before man. Both were entitled to their livelihood and no more*

Ambedkar rejects Gandhi's argument defending castes as having "equal merit before God." Ambedkar is clearly unhappy about the situation here on earth. But what is Ambedkar _for_?

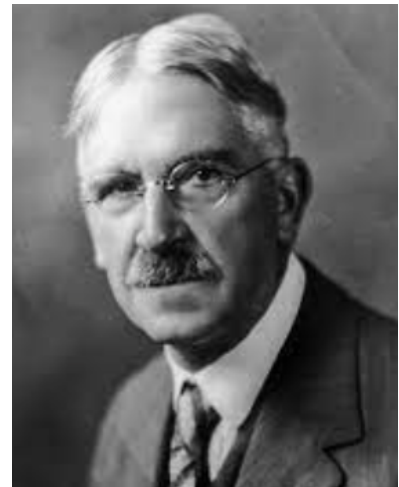
*I would not be surprised if some of you have grown weary listening to this tiresome tale of the sad effects which caste has produced. There is nothing new in it. I will therefore turn to the constructive side of the problem. What is your ideal society if you do not want caste, is a question that is bound to be asked of you. If you ask me, my ideal would be a society based on **Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity**.*

Reason and morality are the two most powerful weapons in the armoury of a reformer. To deprive him of the use of these weapons is to disable him for action. How are you going to break

up Caste, if people are not free to consider whether it accords with reason? How are you going to break up Caste, if people are not free to consider whether it accords with morality?

How exactly do we use reason to fix religion? Here Ambedkar's views are similar to those of his professor at Columbia, the American philosopher John Dewey. Dewey's philosophy was called "Pragmatism". Dewey was a humanist, a signatory of the 1933 Humanist Manifesto, who believed that religious feelings were an important part of being human. Yet Dewey had little interest in the fundamental truth of particular religions. Dewey advocated directing religious feelings towards democracy, which he believed was based on community and equality. A key to achieve this was public education, education which brought together people from different backgrounds and educated them towards a common purpose. To provide a glue for the ideology, Dewey used an idealized version of American history portraying America as an idea which united disparate peoples, particularly the new immigrant populations so prominent in Dewey's New York

Dewey's philosophy, as advocated by ministers such as A. Powell Davies, was enormously influential in US Unitarianism. Unlike nineteenth century Unitarians, who tended to see Unitarianism as an improved version of Christianity, followers of Davies emphasized a humanist tradition which took ideas from all over. The period from 1945 to 1970 saw an enormous advance in public education in the US, especially higher education. New state universities sprouted across the country, often accompanied by new Unitarian fellowships



John Dewey (1859-1952)

Ambedkar's desire was to do something similar in India, make up a new religion which would inspire people to promote education and other socially constructive ideas. He announced this goal in a famous 1935 speech:

Though, I was born a Hindu, I solemnly assure you that I will not die as a Hindu.

It was 21 years before Ambedkar decided what his new religion would be. In October 1956, he announced the formation of a new form of Buddhism, Navayana or "new vehicle", which combined the best features of Buddhism and Marxism. Ambedkar felt that traditional Buddhism is too individualistic and traditional Marxism is too collectivist.

Ambedkar describes Navayana

I tell you, religion is for man and not man for religion.

Some people think that religion is not essential to society. I do not hold this view. I consider the foundation of religion to be essential to the life and practices of a society.

A people and their religion must be judged by social standards based on social ethics. No other standard would have any meaning if religion is held to be necessary good for the well-being of the people.

What is the original foundation of Buddhism? Other religions and the Buddhist religion are very different. In other religions, change will not occur, because those religions tell of a relationship between man and God. Other religions say that god created the world. God created the sky, wind, moon, everything. God did not leave anything left over for us to do. So we should worship God. According to the Christian religion, there is, after death, a Day of Judgment, and all depends on that judgment. There is no place for God and soul in the Buddhist religion. Bhagvan Buddha said there is suffering everywhere in the world. Ninety percent of mankind is distressed by sorrow. Suffering mankind should be freed from sorrow— this is the basic work of Buddhism. What did Karl Marx say that was different from the buddha's sayings? [However,] what Bhagvan said, he did not say via a crazy, crooked path.



Navayana Shrine with Buddha and Ambedkar

The teachings of Buddha are eternal, but even then Buddha did not proclaim them to be infallible. The religion of Buddha has the capacity to change according to times, a quality which no other religion can claim to have... Now what is the basis of Buddhism? If you study carefully, you will see that Buddhism is based on reason. There is an element of flexibility inherent in it, which is not found in any other religion.

Positively, my social philosophy may be said to be enshrined in three words: Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Let no one, however, say that I have borrowed my philosophy from the French Revolution. I have not. My philosophy has roots in religion and not in political science. I have derived them from the teachings of my Master, the Buddha. In his philosophy, liberty and equality had a place. ...

He gave the highest place to fraternity as the only real safeguard against the denial of liberty or equality or fraternity which was another name for brotherhood or humanity, which was again another name for religion.

Most Buddhist scholars do not believe that Ambedkar's description of Buddha's teachings is historically accurate. They claim that Buddha believed that the answer to suffering was personal development, not political and social activism. Ambedkar argued that Buddha's original teachings had been distorted by later generations.

Today, Navayana Buddhism has about 7.5 million adherents, mostly in the vicinity of Mumbai/Bombay, Ambedkar's home. This is a small percentage of the ~200 million Dalits in India. Nevertheless, Ambedkar is widely revered in India today, including by many who, despite his atheism, treat him as a god.



Contemporary cartoon. The Manusmriti is an ancient Hindu text describing caste in detail.

Ambedkar hated idolatry famously stating, "make more statues of Gandhi and Nehru. Industrialists will order them. My people can't afford statues." Nevertheless modern politicians compete to build bigger and bigger Ambedkar statues.



Existing 125 ft statue in
Hyderabad



450 ft statue in Mumbai/Bombay
(under construction)