

QUARTERLY

# AMBEDKAR VISION

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**How B.R. Ambedkar  
has Become a  
Global Icon in the  
Fight Against Injustice**

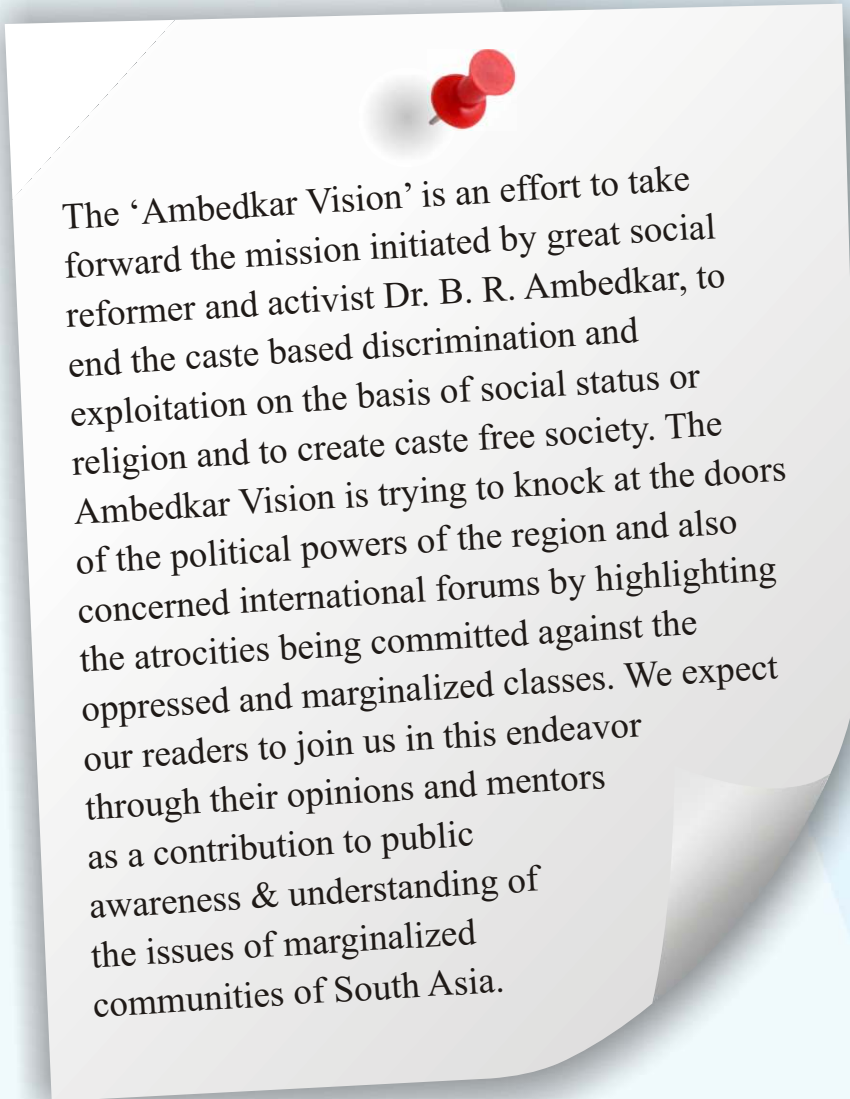


*Ambedkar Society for South Asia*

# QUARTERLY AMBEDKAR VISION

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The 'Ambedkar Vision' is an effort to take forward the mission initiated by great social reformer and activist Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, to end the caste based discrimination and exploitation on the basis of social status or religion and to create caste free society. The Ambedkar Vision is trying to knock at the doors of the political powers of the region and also concerned international forums by highlighting the atrocities being committed against the oppressed and marginalized classes. We expect our readers to join us in this endeavor through their opinions and mentors as a contribution to public awareness & understanding of the issues of marginalized communities of South Asia.














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*Ambedkar Society for South Asia*



## from the Editor

Caste system is a system of social stratification characterized by notions such as heritability, purity and pollution occupational hierarchy and inherent superiority and inferiority, exist only in India and South Asia but also in many parts of the world. Most Americans have a vague idea of what the word caste means. US has its own home ground caste system which is based on race. Although racial discrimination still exists in US but their federal and state civil rights laws address it by providing legal remedies to victims. But many immigrants who come to US bring different kinds of caste system with them from their country of origin. Caste discrimination exists in America but California can ban it. California legislature is considering a bill against caste system. It has been passed in senate and is awaiting action in Assembly, if enacted then California law will provide legal protection to victims of discrimination based on caste. Caste is deeply embedded in culture and customs and in psyche. We should aim at a cultural revolution. Caste system is globally spread. It has become a virus in US, Canada, Europe and Australia, US has now recognized its danger and are being framed in different states, cities and institutions to criminalize caste practices. Earlier the Seattle City Council and some universities added caste to the anti-discrimination list. Such casteism does not help the world. Let's take a clear stand on equality where ever human lives. Due to this inequality, the realistic and practical B.R Ambedkar persuaded and convinced Dalits to convert to Buddhism because it safeguard the personality of each oppressed Dalit and it is the only religion based on ethical principles which teaches how to work for good and wellbeing of the common man. The principles of equality, compassion, fraternity and brotherhood which are essential for the welfare of humanity are found only in Buddhism. Buddhism has no place for caste system. Dalit Ambedkarites diaspora for more than two decades has been highlighting the persistence of caste based discrimination in the West. California State University and Harvard University has added a clause to their non-discrimination policy prohibiting caste based discrimination. A Californian senator has tabled a bill to outlaw caste discrimination. Ambedkarites diaspora are playing a crucial role in various institutions, through their initiative more people outside South Asia are becoming aware of caste based practices. Caste system survives and thrives in all sorts of environments. The greatest weakness of the Dalit freedom struggle is lack of leadership and organizations. There are intelligent and educated Dalit leaders and activists but are controlled and plagiarized by political parties which are all controlled by higher caste that's why cultural revolution is needed. University of Oxford has launched a full funded scholarship to support Dalits and Advasi who have been subject to generations of social discrimination and prejudice under caste system.

# Society: Revisiting the Concept of Minority

Dr Rubina Feroze Bhatti

Zeph, a seventh grader who hails from a small village located in the district of Gujranwala, was preparing a meal for her cooking class exam. The teacher - who was rotating around the classroom to assess her student's dishes - came to Zeph's table, looked at her with visible disdain and whispered, "Christian girl".

She then moved on to Zeph's Muslim classmates, without even touching or tasting the dish Zeph had prepared as a part of her graded exam. Zeph was humiliated in the face of such overt discrimination and returned home crying, enraged at this verbal assault.

While she was left jarred by this incident for months, Zeph finished her education and ventured into teaching to create a healthy, non-discriminatory and safe space for her students - for free. She started a school in the courtyard of her home and decided to fight against different obstacles that prevent people from pursuing education in Pakistan - such as religious discrimination, child labour, early marriages, corporal punishment, cultural biases and patriarchal values which impede girls' access to the education.

She earned two masters degrees in political science and history and numerous international recognitions for her work in the field of female education. Channel News Asia Singapore made a biopic documentary on Zeph, titled "Flight of the Falcons" to chronicle her life and work. The film won a gold medal from the New York Film Festival.

To honour such unsung heroes in Pakistan, on March 6, 2023, the first-ever Women Leadership Conference was organised exclusively for Christian women, in commemoration of International Women's Day at the Governor House Punjab. It was a joint initiative of the Pakistan Partnership Initiative (PPI) and the Life for Guardians' Foundation (LGF).

Minority women are triple-disadvantaged in Pakistan on account of their gender, class and religion

Punjab Governor Muhammad Baligh Ur Rehman said, "Today we have opened the doors of our historical Durbar Hall [Governor's House, Lahore] for minority



women in the honour of their demonstrated leadership and commitment towards women rights. The government of Punjab has taken number of initiatives to promote and protect the rights of minority women."

## What Is A Minority?

Women are considered a minority group not because they are less in number but because they do not share the same privileges, rights and opportunities as men.

In a country like Pakistan, the concept of 'minority' is further convoluted to understand particularly in relation to women. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) defined 'minority' in 2021: "An ethnic, religious or linguistic minority is any group of persons which constitutes less than half of the population in the entire territory of a State whose members share common characteristics of culture, religion or language or a combination of any of these."

'Minority' is an identifying factor which takes into account both, the fact of discrimination and the awareness of discrimination.

The Constitution of Pakistan classifies the religious minorities both as non-Muslim and minorities. Article 260 defines 'minorities' as 'non-Muslim', which includes Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Parsis, Ahmadis, Bahais and persons belonging to any of the 'Scheduled Castes'.

Article 36 of the Constitution uses term 'minority': "The State shall safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of minorities, including their due representation in the Federal and Provincial services."

As pointed out by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (UNCERD) in the combined 21st to 23rd Periodic Reports of Pakistan, the Constitution of Pakistan restricts 'minorities' only to

religious minorities, not including linguistic or ethnic minorities.

### Minority Women in Pakistan

The Constitution of Pakistan explicitly provides a proactive, focused and affirmative policy approach for empowering the marginalised groups and discouraging discrimination in various manifestations.

Articles 20, 21, 22, 25, 26 and 27 specifically prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, religion, caste, sex, residence or place of birth.

Various political parties holding power have taken concrete steps to improve the status of minorities, such as the creation of a Ministry of National Harmony, enhancing minority representation in the Senate and the reservation of five percent job quota for religious minorities and two percent quota in higher education in Punjab to safeguard their rights.

Yet the minority women are victims of both a male-dominated society and a Muslim-dominated country. They face discrimination on the basis of gender and religion, which is aggravated by their poor socio-economic situation. The intersectionality of gender, class and religion are the three most important organising principles in development of the cultural ideology in Pakistan in relation to the women of religious minorities.

Recent surveys have revealed for instance that 87 percent of scheduled caste Hindu women were illiterate, compared to 63.5 percent of males in their community, given that the national illiteracy rate among Pakistani women reaches 58 percent.

The number of minority women in a leadership role is virtually zero because of women's low socio-economic and political status. Despite Article 106 of the Constitution requiring each provincial assembly to reserve 66 out of the total 371 seats for women and eight for non-Muslims, in the last Punjab assembly, only one Christian woman was a representative in the house of 371, while no Hindu woman was there.

Minority women face two key challenges: the dearth of statistical data on their socioeconomic situation and the invisibility of minority women in leadership. To address these challenges, it is pertinent to recognise that the nexus of gender, class and religion plays a key role in nurturing religious minority leadership in Pakistan. This social hierarchy develops mindsets which subjugate the minority women in sociopolitical and



religious spheres.

Ms Asiya Nasir, a former Member of the National Assembly of Pakistan and a renowned Christian politician, said that Christian women leaders are unique and have abilities of doing wonders by their work, but they lack recognition and space as leaders due to bigotries against women.

### The Way Forward

Some concrete measures must be taken by the government for the protection and development of the status of minority women in Pakistan.

Firstly, the term 'minority' is better to use than 'non-Muslim' since it protects the rights of minority women within the Constitution of Pakistan as well as the international human rights instruments.

Secondly, to honour the recommendations and observations made by international treaty bodies, it is strongly recommended that collecting and revealing statistical data on the socio-economic situation of minority women is the utmost responsibility of the state.

Thirdly, discriminatory laws against minority women should be repealed, their personal laws must be updated, new laws for their protection and development must be promulgated and their implementation should be assured.

Fourthly, special measures need to be taken to ensure the representation of minority women in decision-making structures in both non-profit and public sectors such as boards of statutory organisations, public sector companies and committees as well as special purpose task forces and committees.

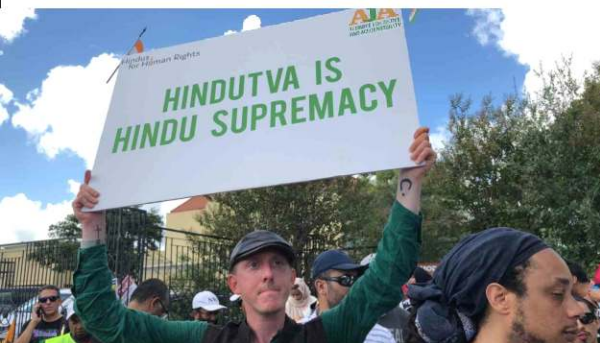
*Source: DAWN*





# US Report Condemns Religious Violence In India: Are Such Reports A Travesty?

Preeti Patil



The US has recently released its International Religious Freedom Report for 2022 and has listed attacks against religious minorities including Muslims and Christians in India, the world's most populous democracy. The report describes the status of religious freedom, government policies violating religious beliefs and practices of groups, religious denominations and individuals and U.S. policies promoting religious freedom in nearly every country and territory throughout the world.

The report's release comes a month before Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi travels to Washington for his first official State visit, which will include a state dinner at the White House. He has previously visited the U.S. on five other occasions classified as “working visits.”

Indian Government has yet again dismissed the findings of the report calling them “biased,” and “motivated.” External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Arindam Bagchi said the Commission continues to regurgitate such comments and India rejects the “misrepresentation of facts” which only serves to “discredit USCIRF itself.”

“The US Commission on International Religious Freedom continues to regurgitate biased and motivated comments about India, this time in its 2023 annual report. We reject such misrepresentation of facts which only serves to discredit USCIRF itself. We would urge USCIRF to desist from such efforts and develop a better understanding of India, its plurality, its democratic ethos and its constitutional mechanisms,” said Arindam Bagchi.

The USCIRF requested that the U.S. State Department include India as a “country of particular concern” for religious freedom with several other countries in its yearly report on the subject. Similar suggestions have been made

to the State Department in 2020 also, however, they have not been followed after 2020.

Thus, these contradictory actions of the USA have given rise to speculations if its foreign policies actually reflect its vision towards promoting religious tolerance around the world or if it's just a procedural move, where its foreign policy is much backed by the USA's interest in the South Asia region especially with the rise of China.

### What does the report say?

The Indian constitution defines India as a secular nation, with an Indianised version of secularism where the state respects every religion equally but promotes none. However, the key findings of the report posit a different picture.

The report highlights incidences of violence by law enforcement authorities against members of religious minorities in multiple states, including plainclothes police in Gujarat publicly flogging four Muslim men accused of injuring Hindu worshippers during a festival in October and the Madhya Pradesh State government bulldozing Muslim-owned homes and shops following communal violence in Khargone in April.

It highlights how religious conversion is legally prohibited in multiple states, how religious minorities are attacked regularly and how Muslims have alleged systemic discrimination-including “cow vigilantism,” which often results in attacks for alleged cow slaughter or beef trade. The report also highlights incidences of violence against

Christians in India. It mentions that in multiple states, police arrested Christians accused of forcing others to convert. In its report covering events during the year, the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Indian American Muslim Council (IAMC) said Christians were “increasingly targeted using these ant conversion laws,” as “allegations of forced conversion, no matter if false, have led many Christians to be attacked, arrested and detained by police.”

The report mentions Attacks on members of religious minority communities, including killings, assaults and intimidation, which occurred in various states throughout the year.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, earlier once again recommended that the State Department put India on a blacklist over its record. However, that has not been done yet as the US is all set to host PM Narendra Modi for his state visit.

When asked how the U.S. would address these concerns with the Indian government ahead of Modi's visit, the official told reporters, “We're continuing to encourage the government to condemn violence and hold accountable and protect all groups who engage in rhetoric that's dehumanizing towards religious minorities and all groups who engage in violence against religious communities and other communities in India.”

### **US foreign policy of India and its interest in the geopolitics**

Considering the most recent steps the Commission has taken regarding India, in the Commission's 2002 report, India has downgraded from a nation “meriting scrutiny as a candidate for a CPC [Country of Particular Concern] designation” to a “recommended CPC” in 2003 and 2004. The State Department disregarded these proposals and never gave India a CPC designation. The majority of the commissioners decided to classify India as a CPC, despite neither the 2003 nor the 2004 Commission proposals being unanimous. They cited the massacres in Gujarat in 2002, which some have referred to as a state-sponsored pogrom and resulted in the deaths of almost 2,000 Muslims, as well as the activities of the “BJP-led government in Gujarat led by Minister Modi,” in reaching this determination

In 2005, the US Department of State used a 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) provision to revoke Modi's tourist/business visa citing section 212 (a) (2) (g) of the US Immigration and Nationality Act. The IRFA provision “makes any foreign government official who 'was responsible for or directly carried out, at any time, particularly severe violations of religious freedom' ineligible for a visa to the United States.”

However, in contemporary times the US's relationship

with Narendra Modi has deepened especially after Donald Trump became the US President and continues with the Biden administration. It is partly because India being a great trade partner of the USA for the past many decades as well as from the USA's interest in the geopolitics of Asia.

International Relations theorists have many times condemned US actions towards India where on the one hand the US publicly condemns India over religious intolerance but fails to discuss those issues with the officials over state visits and bilateral talks. The reasons for this change in contemporary times come from the realpolitik nature of the USA's foreign policy. With Russia's expansionist policies, the USA stands in the face of a new cold war and on the other hand China's rise in Asia has threatened the USA's sole position of a guarantee of international security to Asia.

In this context, India seems to be a perfect ally for the USA with its immense markets and human resource, thus the USA appears to be drifting away from the cause of serving the purpose of the reports like these and securing its strategic interest in the region. In light of this policies and reports like these seem like a travesty. They are also opposed in countries like India where secularism has a different meaning added to which reports as these look like a project of neo-imperialism where the USA overlooks its conditions of religious intolerance.

In the India part of its most recent study, the USCIRF claimed that in 2022, conditions for religious freedom in India have continued to deteriorate. The U.S. Commission also urged the Biden administration to implement targeted sanctions, including the freezing of assets, against Indian government organisations and individuals accountable for “serious violations” of religious freedom in the nation. Additionally, it suggested that Congress hold hearings on the subject of religious freedom and bring it up at bilateral discussions between the US and India. However, the USA has refrained from taking any such actions.

Thus in light of securing and fulfilling its strategic interests and commitment in the region to counter China the USA seems to be drifting away from its commitment to religious tolerance while making an exception for India and various organisations in India who are responsible for deteriorating acts of violence against minorities.

However, calling out India publicly but not taking any significant talks over the issues with Indian officials bilaterally also exposes the hypocrisy of the USA, where it is trying to play safe with its national interest and securing its potential ally in Asia overlooking the incidences of violence against the religious minorities in India at the same time calling out other countries like China over the same concerns.

*Source: feminisminindia.com*



# Caste Discrimination Exists in America. California Can Ban It

Patrick Patterson

Law Office of Patrick O. Patterson



Former senior counsel to the EEOC chair Patrick Patterson says California's legislature should pass bill SB-403 to add caste as a protected category in state civil rights laws and eliminate any doubt that caste discrimination is prohibited. Most Americans have at best a vague idea of what the word “caste” means. Isabel Wilkerson, in “Caste: The Origins of our Discontents,” defines it as “the granting or withholding of respect, status, honor, attention, privileges, resources, benefit of the doubt and human kindness to someone on the basis of their perceived rank or standing in [a social] hierarchy.”

Caste systems—that is, systems of social stratification characterized by notions such as heritability, immutability, endogamy (the prohibition of marriage and sex between castes), purity and pollution, occupational hierarchy and inherent superiority and inferiority—exist not only in India and elsewhere in South Asia, but also in many other parts of the world.

As Wilkerson has explained, America has its own home-grown caste system. Ours is based on race. While racial discrimination still exists in the US, there are federal and state civil rights laws that address it, in part by providing legal remedies for its victims.

But when immigrants come to the US, they sometimes bring different kinds of caste systems with them from their countries of origin. It's not always clear that American laws are sufficient to address some of the resulting problems. Take, for instance, the case of Civil Rights Department v. Cisco Systems, Inc., originally filed in 2020 and still pending in a California state court. A Cisco engineer who had emigrated from India to the US as an adult filed a complaint with the Civil Rights Department saying he had been subjected to unlawful discrimination, harassment and retaliation on the job because he was a Dalit. A Dalit is a member of the group at the bottom of (some would say below) the Indian caste system, formerly known by the dehumanizing term “untouchables.”

After investigating his complaint and finding cause to believe it was true, the CRD filed a suit alleging, among other things, that:

- Cisco has employed a predominantly South Asian Indian workforce for decades

- More than 90% of Indian immigrants to the US are upper-caste and the same is true within Cisco's workforce
- The complainant worked in a team composed entirely of employees who grew up in India and immigrated to the US as adults
- Other than the complainant, his entire team was composed of upper-caste Indian immigrants who “imported the discriminatory system's practices” into their team and into Cisco's workplace
- And the discriminatory acts violated California's Fair Employment and Housing Act.

Cisco moved to strike from the CRD's complaint all allegations of discrimination based on caste, pointing out that the word “caste” does not appear anywhere in the act. The CRD responded that caste is encompassed in a number of the categories expressly listed in the statute, including race, color, national origin, religion and ancestry.

While the Cisco case has gone up to and back down from an appellate court on other issues, no court has yet issued a decision on the fundamental question of whether the Fair Employment and Housing Act prohibits discrimination based on caste. The case is now in mediation which, if it results in a settlement, will leave this question unanswered.

The California legislature is considering a bill that would answer this question. SB-403 would amend the Fair Employment and Housing Act and other California civil rights statutes to expressly add caste to the protected categories in those laws.

By stating that the proposed amendments clarify existing law, the bill codifies that the state's existing civil rights laws should be interpreted as prohibiting caste discrimination. The specific addition of caste would remove any remaining doubts.

The bill has passed the Senate on an overwhelming bipartisan vote and is awaiting action in the Assembly. If enacted, it will assure that California law provides legal protection to victims of discrimination based on caste.

# Bangladesh: Gathering momentum for inclusive anti-discrimination legislation



In a significant step towards fostering equality and social justice, the Bangladesh Dalit Parishad (BDP) and Parittran recently organised a National Consultation Meeting on the Anti-Discrimination Bill-2022. Held in Dhaka, the event served as a platform for diverse stakeholders to provide feedback and recommendations on the proposed legislation. The meeting aimed to address the concerns and aspirations of Dalits in Bangladesh, while paving the way for a more inclusive society.

The Executive Director of Parittran, Milan Das, delivered a warm welcome speech, setting the stage for an insightful dialogue. Mr. Rashed Khan Menon, a Member of Parliament, took part in the consultation and emphasized the importance of a consultative approach before passing the bill into law. Mr. Menon urged Dalit leaders to submit their proposed amendments in writing, underscoring the need for a comprehensive review process to address the community's long-standing demands.

During the meeting, participants engaged in open and constructive discussions. Notable personalities, such as Manoranjan Ghoshal, the artist of Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra and Sohrab Hasan, Joint Editor of Prothom Alo, shared their perspectives on the bill.

## **Recommendations for Effective Legislation:**

Participants at the consultation provided valuable recommendations to strengthen the Anti-Discrimination Bill-2022. They stressed the need for clear and comprehensive definitions within the law. They suggested refining the definitions of Dalits and marginalised communities to ensure precise identification and targeted redressal of discrimination. By addressing these fundamental issues, the bill would be better equipped to tackle discriminatory practices effectively.

Moreover, participants recommended expanding the list of discriminatory practices to include crucial concerns faced by the Dalit community. These included the use of derogatory terms and discriminatory media representations. By

encompassing these important issues, the bill would strive to safeguard the rights and dignity of all individuals, irrespective of their backgrounds.

## **Institutional Strengthening and Inclusion**

To ensure the effective implementation of the legislation, participants emphasized the need for robust monitoring mechanisms. They suggested establishing a Monitoring Committee comprising representatives from the Dalit community, the National Human Rights Commission and other relevant organisations. This collaborative approach would ensure comprehensive oversight and facilitate regular review and improvement.

The participants also advocated for the inclusion of Dalit representatives in all committees at the national and local levels. By ensuring their meaningful participation, the bill would benefit from a diverse range of perspectives, enhancing its inclusivity and effectiveness.

Additionally, participants recognised the importance of leveraging the expertise and reach of non-governmental organisations working with Dalit communities. By involving these organisations as supporting forces, the bill could generate greater public awareness and foster societal change.

## **Moving Forward**

The National Consultation Meeting on the Anti-Discrimination Bill-2022 provided an invaluable opportunity for stakeholders to voice their concerns, share insights and offer recommendations. The constructive discussions underscored the significance of unity and evidence-based dialogue in shaping legislation that addresses the specific needs and aspirations of the Dalit community.

While the journey towards inclusive legislation faces challenges, the commitment and determination exhibited by participants throughout the consultation meeting serve as a testament to the importance of this legislation.

# How B.R. Ambedkar has Become a Global Icon in the Fight Against Injustice

Sumeet Mhaskar



April 14 marks the 132nd birth anniversary of B.R. Ambedkar, India's foremost civil rights leader, scholar, statesman and the most powerful crusader against the inequalities perpetuated by the caste system. From the remotest Indian village to the major cities around the world, Dalit Ambedkarites observe the day as their most important festival. Ambedkar is the only Indian leader whose birth anniversary is celebrated globally by Dalit Ambedkarite groups.

This year is unique because the state of Michigan and Minnesota in the US have officially announced April 9-April 15 as "Social Equity Week." Likewise, the state of New Hampshire in the US and the City of Burnaby in Canada have declared April 14 the "Day of Equality." The state of Washington has gone further and decided to observe April 2023 as "Dalit History Month."

These declarations have instilled a great deal of confidence among the Dalit Ambedkarite diaspora and their struggle to make caste a protected category. In recent years, Indian immigration to the West has witnessed a phenomenal increase, especially among those in the Information Technology industry. The growth in the overall South Asian population has also resurfaced the caste problem. The problem of caste is, thus, no longer the problem only of the Indian government. For nearly two decades, the Dalit Ambedkarite diaspora has been mobilising in West to highlight the persistence of caste-based discrimination.

For instance, in the United Kingdom, Dalit Ambedkarites took the opportunity of the Equality Bill (which became an Act in 2010) to make their case for prohibiting caste discrimination. However, the opposition from upper-caste Hindu diaspora organisations stalled the inclusion of caste in the Equality Act.

In contrast, Dalit Ambedkarites successfully lobbied in Seattle, which became the first American city to include caste as a protective category. Since December 2022, Brown University, California State University and Harvard University have added a clause to their non-discrimination policy by explicitly prohibiting caste-based discrimination. Several companies in the US have taken similar measures. The Californian senator of Afghan origin, Aisha Wahab, has tabled a bill to outlaw caste discrimination.

Even though these efforts have met staunch opposition from the upper-caste Hindu diaspora organisations, the mobilisations by Dalit Ambedkarite diaspora in the West have received attention and support from other socially marginalised communities and minority groups. Ambedkar has been the central binding force among the South Asian diaspora, who have asserted their right to live in an environment that protects them from caste discrimination. Today, prominent universities in US and Europe and Dalit Ambedkarite organisations will celebrate Ambedkar's birth anniversary. The Dalit Ambedkarite diaspora is playing a crucial role in installing busts of Ambedkar in various institutions. Through these initiatives, more people outside of South Asia are becoming aware of caste-based practices.

Ambedkar has truly become a global icon to fight injustice. A little over a decade ago, the British newspaper, The Guardian remarked along these lines. The Guardian editorial "Unthinkable? An Ambedkar Memorial" dated April 30, 2011, noted the remarkable journey of B.R. Ambedkar. It detailed Ambedkar's role in the emancipation of the untouchables and his fight "for a free India and for the freedom of all castes within that state". It concluded that Ambedkar's "message intended for 20th century India, is just as relevant for 21st century Britain" and proposed a public memorial to him in Great Britain.

A decade later, one can safely argue that Ambedkar's message is not only relevant to Great Britain but also globally significant where the South Asian diaspora exists. A public memorial of Ambedkar in the West, especially where Indian diaspora is present in large numbers, would play a vital role. It would remind the world that a deeply hierarchical, exploitative and unequal structure such as the caste system can be challenged through democratic means.

*Source: Scroll.in*



# CULTURAL REVOLUTION NEEDED



The plane landed in the southwestern town of Nepalgunj and as I disembarked, I was hit by a blast of mid-May heat. Driving north for half an hour past the highway town of Kohalpur, I arrived at a little village in Chisapani, Banke district. A group of local Dalits waited in the shade of a large bombax tree. I'd been invited to share my views on the best course of action for liberating Dalits from social oppression. Some 150 Dalit men, women and children from nearby settlements joined us. A few local officials and politicians, belonging to high and low castes, also came. They were migrants or descendants of migrants from the northern highlands. They'd left the hills of Dailekh, Jajarkot, Surkhet, Rukum and Humla districts, hoping to escape not just poverty, but also the atrocious cruelties of caste.

Giving up the cooler and healthier mountains for the furnace of the plains had opened up economic opportunities, but the stigma of caste remained. Caste oppression follows migrants like their shadow. Research (such as the 2016 study of Pokhara Dalits by academics Bishnu Pariyar and Jon C Lovett) has shown that many Dalits have been able to conceal their caste after moving from their villages to the anonymity of large towns and thus evade discrimination. Some urban Dalits have become conspicuously wealthy, mainly through the commercialisation of their traditional trades as goldsmiths and tailors. But some forms of caste separation and humiliation persist even among the wealthy.

Migration seems to have made little difference in the lives of Dalits settled in rural areas such as Chisapani. The power relations remained unchanged because people came with their excess baggage. The upper castes from the hills adhere to their customs and cultures and Dalits continue to be excluded and humiliated as part of the sacred tradition. Thus, the caste system has been extraordinarily resilient. It survives and thrives in all sorts of environments.

The Dalits of Chisapani were angry about two recent incidents in particular. The first is the case of a Dalit woman who'd played a pivotal role in raising donations to build a Hindu temple. She'd invited many people to the opening ceremony where she was humiliated by being made to sit separately and denied the holy offering panchamrit. The Dalits took offence at this blatant humiliation and planned to file a case at the local police station. According to anti-caste discrimination laws, an offender can be fined and jailed for up to three years. The Dalits of Chisapani wanted to teach these upper castes a lesson for humiliating a Dalit woman at the temple ceremony. But the powerful high-caste people used the usual strategy of "iron cuts iron" to protect their own. They got a glib Dalit politician to talk the Dalits into dropping the case. In another more recent incident, some upper-caste neighbours participating in the funeral of a Dalit woman refused to accept apples that had been cut

into slices by Dalits. But they had no qualms about accepting the whole fruit!

The norm here is that nobody, as in vast swathes of Nepal, accepts food and water from a Dalit. In the upper-caste mind, inter-dining will offend their ancestral spirits and deities, whose wrath could be devastating. Fear of the gods is used to segregate and disempower Dalits in Banke district as everywhere else. The Dalits of Chisapani took solace in the fact that at least their upper-caste friends and neighbours accepted their fruits, which are the only foods not transmitting ritual pollution. But this time even the fruit cut into slices was deemed unacceptable.

The greatest weakness of the Dalit freedom struggle is lack of leadership and organisation. There are intelligent and educated Dalit leaders and activists, but they have been effectively co-opted and appropriated by the political parties which are all controlled by the higher castes. The same was evident at our gathering in the village of Chisapani. The ward chairman and a few other local leaders from the upper castes, as usual, downplayed the severity of Dalit suffering and claimed that untouchability would vanish after a few generations. The worst part was that Dalit politicians, including a former Member of Parliament and junior minister, parroted the words of their upper-caste masters. They noted that society had changed much as a result of their decades-long struggle and that there could be no Dalit freedom movement separate from party politics.

## Religious injunctions

Along with my PhD thesis, I've done much academic research on diasporic castes and found that Nepalis have spread out as far afield as England and Australia. Living a new life in a relatively secular environment has obviously changed things, but the fundamental religious injunctions to keep Dalits away continue to hold sway even in the migrant communities. Caste in the context of international migration is a whole new topic.

It is evident from my recent trip to Chisapani village as in many other places I've visited over the past two years that people don't give up caste hatred even when they move from their ancestral villages to other parts of Nepal. As anthropologist Mary Douglas has shown in her famous book *Purity and Danger*, cultural conceptualisation of purity and pollution dies hard. There's no place to hide from caste as it is deeply embedded in our cultures and customs and in our psyche. We must think outside the box and aim at a cultural revolution (I don't mean the Chinese variety) to create a new culture of equality and unity.

*Source: Kathmandu post*

# How a pragmatist Ambedkar persuaded and convinced Dalits to convert to **Buddhism**



**Ambedkar's appeals for conversion began in earnest after 1935, but his rhetorical activity changed in significant ways in his final years. Eventually, Buddhism was announced as his preferred religion one that would safeguard the personality of each oppressed Dalit. By 1950, some in the Indian press had tired of his attacks on Hinduism and did not believe the justification behind the anticipated conversion.**

For instance, the Free Press Journal of May 18, 1950, included a short but scathing note on Ambedkar's recent moves toward Buddhist conversion, demanding, "Let him make up his mind once for all... Dr. Ambedkar should make it clear why the Hindus should embrace Buddhism and what is wrong with the Hindu religion at present." The unsigned commentary even echoed Gandhi's critical comments on conversion from the 1930s, incredulously asking, "Does he imagine that changing one's religion is as easy as changing one's walking stick?"

Ambedkar's speeches to his followers in the 1950s served as his way of directly or indirectly answering

such skeptical questions about the planned conversion to Buddhism. The frequency of these discussions of religion and conversion increased during his final years. Emphasizing his calculated uses of communication as a way to effectively change agents and the socially problematic situations they inhabit is a vital part of understanding Ambedkar as a pragmatist. If a central part of rhetoric, or the art of speech aiming to persuade, is attention to the particularities of self and audience in such problematic situations, it follows that understanding Ambedkar as a rhetor means attending to the specifics of how he attempted to move his various audiences through his speeches and texts, given their specific concerns.

When Ambedkar addressed his followers in the 1950s, he typically spoke in Marathi, the tongue of his stronghold of Maharashtra. Keer tells us about the power of his speaking style: "Ambedkar was a powerful speaker both on the platform and in Parliament. Galvanic and embarrassingly brutal to a fault in his speech, he showered a fusillade of pistol shots at his opponents. . . . Simple, direct and trenchant, his speech had a charm of its own. Its



fearlessness was sharpened by a vast confidence and experience which he had attained by his ceaseless study.” This directness was altered in his speeches to friendly audiences, however and augmented by his personal ethos as a successful Dalit in modern India.

Instead of addressing confrontational arguments to his followers, Ambedkar was direct and clear about the need for his audience to convert to Buddhism. In a Marathi speech entitled “I Shall Devote Rest of My Life to the Revival and Spread of Buddhism” and delivered to an audience at Bombay's Buddha Vihar on September 29, 1950, Ambedkar extends his earlier point (made in Annihilation of Caste and elsewhere) that the problems of India were not merely political; they were primarily those of religious orientation. The Sunday News reports Ambedkar claiming to his audience that “as long as there is no purity of mind, wrong doing and utter disregard of morals would continue in every day life; and as long as man does not know how to behave with man and creates barriers between man and man, India can never be prosperous.” The problem with India, still reeling from the pains of independence and violent partition with Pakistan, is cast in terms of purity and impurity.

Instead of Dalits being a source of impurity, Ambedkar believed that it was the mental habits associated with Hinduism that brought impurity and division into a society that otherwise could be whole. This habit-spurred division among social groups is anathema to Ambedkar's reconstructed notion of Deweyan democracy. In the 1930s, in texts like Annihilation of Caste and “What Way Emancipation?,” Ambedkar calls for consciousness of this problem and a renunciation of the problematic orientation. Now, in 1950, he tells the audience what orientation to convert to: “To end all of these troubles, India embrace Buddhism. Buddhism is the only religion based upon ethical principles and [that] teaches how to work for the good and well-being of the common man.”

Ambedkar's rhetorical activity with his Dalit audiences continued to gain in strength. On January 14, 1951, he delivered a Marathi address to a meeting of the Buddha Doot Society in Bombay known as “Buddhism Will Once Again Be the Religion of This Country.” In the heart of his most favorable constituency in his native state of Maharashtra, Ambedkar puts more detail into the orientational solution of Buddhism.

One of the reasons Ambedkar was drawn to Buddhism was that it, unlike Christianity, both prized equality and was native to the Indian subcontinent. He attempts to establish this point by noting that “Buddha lived in this



country in blood and flesh for 80 years. He spent 45 years of his life counseling the people of this country.” Yet this person who traveled by walking to help relieve individuals of their suffering “is not even remembered in this country! Nowhere his name is even uttered. I am very puzzled.” Of course, Ambedkar is betting that those hearing this utterance will also be puzzled and be pushed to reflect on why this state of affairs is unjustified. Buddha's views are portrayed as the truth and “the truth always prevails. Today, that time has come. Buddhism will be again the religion of this country, I am sure about it.”

His enthusiasm is matched with a dichotomous way of approaching Buddhism, buried in Ambedkar's way of parsing the complexity of Indian history. He follows this personal exclamation with a matter-of-fact reading of the Hindu religion being like a stream formed from two other rivulets, “one of clean water and the other one of dirty water.” The former is “that of clean Buddhism and another rivulet was that of dirty Brahminism,” the interpretation of the Vedic tradition that placed Brahmins as the superior caste, much to the disadvantage of the lowest castes.

The resulting third stream is dirty and impure; the audience must see Buddhism as retaining a lost sense of purity that must come with the entropy of its merger in ancient times with Vedic Hinduism. What is the audience to do? Ambedkar follows out his own evocation of the rhetoric of purity and claims, “We must clean it by removing the dirty customs imposed by Brahminism, so that the Hindu religion becomes clean and pure.” Cleansing modern Hinduism of Brahminism arguably returns it to Buddhism, a fact revealed by his advocacy of Buddhism as a replacement for Hindu habits of mind.

This is why he claims that once his listeners join the Buddhist fold, “you will not be allowed to carry the Gods, customs or rites of Hinduism along with you.



Khandoba (Hindu god) inside your hearts and Buddha on the front of your house will not be allowed.” The return to pure Buddhism-of habit and observable practice-also means leaving behind the concept and practice of caste.

Ambedkar senses that this path will be difficult, so he exhorts his audience to “take time off to come here [to the Vihar or temple], learn it and then only if keen, [they] should adopt it.” He also states that he and others must assist would-be converts by formulating “some rules” for converts to Buddhism. He concludes his appeal to his followers by evoking guiding principles and values that echo his early appeals for self-respect among Dalits: “The principles of equality, compassion, fraternity and brotherhood which are essential for the welfare of humanity are found only in Buddhism.” Harkening back to his initial pronouncement to leave Hinduism at Yeola in 1935, he completes the circle of conversion by indicating, “I have studied all the religions of the world for the last twenty years.

And only after that it is my firm belief that everybody should adopt Buddhism.” The stages of reflection and renunciation happened long before for his followers in regard to their original religion of Hinduism, but now he was certain enough to advocate a positive path of orientational reconstruction: all Dalits should choose to convert to Buddhism, as it is more useful and meaningful for their need for equality, freedom and dignity. In short, it fulfills the conditions needed for the flourishing of personality of individuals that he sought in the 1930s.

Ambedkar's appeals to his followers to convert to Buddhism began to grow in detail and strength in his final years. In a Marathi speech titled “The Tide of Buddhism Would Never Recede in India” (given on May 24, 1956), Ambedkar speaks to around seventy-five thousand followers at the celebration of the 2500th Buddha Jayanti in Bombay.

There he links Hinduism to a belief in the caste system, thereby emphasizing his concerns that the mental orientation connected with this religious tradition divides individuals and ranks them in a pain-producing hierarchy. Buddhism, however, as a mindset or religious orientation “has no place for the Caste System and Chaturvarnya.” Buddhism foregrounds equality among all humans. Reports of the speech highlight that during his address he compares himself to Moses, most likely because of his status as positive lawgiver in the form of the Indian constitution and in terms of advancing the spiritual law of Buddhism to an Indian people that had



long forgotten it.

He also indicates three causes for the decline of a religion, presumably Buddhism in India: “Lack of abiding principles in it; lack of versatile and conquering orators; and lack of easily understandable principles.” The first cause is important, as it establishes continuity with his appeals in the 1930s to reflect on and then renounce Hinduism. Ambedkar evokes the Deweyan distinction between set “rules” and flexible “principles” in criticizing the Hindu mindset in *Annihilation of Caste*, in which he expresses longing for a religion of principle, not of rules.

What he wants his audience to do in 1936 is to abandon Hinduism, since it is a religious orientation that is fixated on rules, not on general guiding principles that allow for an adaptive engagement with changing social situations. By 1956, at the very end of Ambedkar's life, Buddhism had become the orientation to convert to because it holds the possibility of being such an adaptable religion of principle. Even if its past instantiations suffer from being too rigid, Ambedkar implies that this isn't inherent in it in the same way that caste is integrated into the Vedic worldview.

We simply need creative and brave lawgivers-strong reformers with will and an emboldened personality-who also serve an oratorical function as a spur to further Buddhism's renewed growth. These willful agents and individual reformers will be the “versatile and conquering orators” who will spread the understandable principles of Buddhism, just as Ambedkar demonstrates in his own example in his address. Reflection and renunciation now achieve their promised culmination in the act of conversion to Buddhism, a tradition reimagined for his audience as a religion of principle.

*Source: The print*

# Hindu Panchayat's protest over toddler's abduction by gangsters spreads to many towns



**A protest drive, started three days back by the Hindu Panchayat of Kandhkot-Kashmore district over disappearance of a three-year-old boy, sparked off demonstrations in neighbouring Jacobabad and Ghotki districts.**

The boy, Samrat Kumar, had gone missing from a locality, Mirzapur, in the Kandhkot-Kashmore district. When police failed to locate the boy, the Hindu community along with the affected family, held demonstrations in the area. His family told the police that dacoits riding a motorcycle had kidnapped the boy for ransom and took him away into the gangs-infested riverine area.

The Hindu Panchayat set up a protest camp at Ghanta Ghar Chowk in Kandhkot to press the police and provincial government to get the boy recovered safely. Over the last two days, a large number of activists belonging to various nationalist groups and civil society organisations joined in the protest at the camp to express solidarity with the victim family and Hindu community.

Elite of the area and prominent activists including Sardar Teghu Khan Teghani, Akram Bajkani, Dilmurad Dahani, Ghulam Mustafa Mirani, Mohammad Ibrahim Khaki, Shahnawaz Marhato, Ghayal Sindhi, Comrade Abbas and Sultan Nandwani were among those who visited the camps and expressed solidarity with Dr Suresh Kumar Talreja and other Panchayat leaders.

Meanwhile, Panchayat leaders condemned the area police for their failure in checking gangsters' activities in upper Sindh where, they noted, criminals were kidnapping men, women and children at their whim and killing their hostages. The gangsters were attacking and looting commuters without any fear, they said. They appealed to the Sindh government and higher police authorities to take effective measures to protect the life and property of citizens.

They said all hostages, including Samrat Kumar, held by the gangs should be safely recovered and complete peace be restored in upper Sindh districts. In Pannu Aqil, a large number of PPP-Shaheed Bhutto took out a rally and raised slogans for the recovery of the kidnapped toddler and other hostages. In Jacobabad city also, PPP-SB activists held a similar rally, which was addressed by the party's chief organizer Noor Mohammad Manjhu, Babul Khan Korejo, Abdul Sami Soomro, Riaz Lashari, Shahzad Soomro and others.

They deplored that police had miserably failed in establishing the writ of law in Sindh while the provincial government seemed helpless in checking dacoit gangs' criminal activities. "Kidnapping of men, women and children every day in the area is a slap on the face of Sindh government," Noor Manjhu remarked and urged it to take steps for the recovery of all hostages held by the gangs.



*Source: Dawn*





# Oxford University Launches Savitribai Phule Scholarship for Bahujan Students



Tejas Harad

As a response to the low representation of Bahujan students among Indians studying abroad, an India centre at the University of Oxford has launched a fully-funded Savitribai Phule Graduate scholarship for lower caste and first-generation students applying to the university for postgraduate studies.

The scholarship was officially launched on 12th May, with a keynote speech by Lord Harries of Pentregarth, co-chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Dalits, followed by a panel discussion with Barbara Harriss-White (Emeritus Professor at the University of Oxford), Surajkumar Thube (representative of Project EduAccess and the Oxford South Asia Alternative Forum), Raju Kendre (co-founder and CEO of Eklavya India) and Niharika Singh (the first Savitribai Phule scholar).

The Oxford India Centre for Sustainable Development at Somerville College offers a set of graduate scholarships to Indian students working on topics relevant to India's sustainable development and the Savitribai Phule Graduate scholarship is the latest addition to that list.

“With its long history of women's education and empowerment, Somerville College is honoured to establish a new scholarship in Savitribai Phule's name to support the next generation of leaders from Dalit, Adivasi and other underrepresented backgrounds,” said Jan Royall, Principal of

Somerville College.

“Our motto of including the excluded extends to people who have been subject to generations of social discrimination and prejudice under the caste system and it is thrilling to think that these scholarships will offer brilliant young people from these under-represented groups a platform by which to change the world,” she further added.

Lord Harries, who has been fighting to include caste in the United Kingdom's Equality Act, lauded the work done by Savitribai Phule and Jotirao Phule in the field of education and against caste discrimination. He said, Source: Ground Report.

The scholarship covers course fees and a grant for living costs. The students who belong to the Scheduled Caste, Schedule Tribe or Other Backward Class category or are first-generation learners can apply for the scholarship. The courses that are eligible for the scholarship include MSc Biodiversity Conservation and Management, MSc Economics for Development, MSc Environmental Change and Management, MSc Global Governance and Diplomacy, MSc Modern South Asian Studies, MSc Nature, Society and Environmental Governance, MSc Water Science, Policy and Management and MSc Energy Systems.

Source: *The Quint*



# What it took for the West to wake up and notice casteism

Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd

Brahminism is possibly the worst philosophical school that took birth and survived among human beings. Brahminism as an ideology of casteism was constructed around 1500 BCE. The only source from which we know about its birth is the first major Brahmin spiritual book, the Rigveda.

By the 21st century, it became a source of global discrimination, inequality and untouchability. Millions of Indians suffer from this barbaric socio-spiritual philosophy.

In India, in Hinduism, this philosophy does not allow the Dalits/Shudras/Adivasis to become temple priests and does not allow them to intermarry and inter-dine to date, as those things form a core part of caste culture. Intercaste marriages resulted in many brutal murders of young couples or one of the partners.

One of the reasons why this philosophy was constructed was because a small section of Aryans in ancient times wanted to remain outside productive labour and survive. Hence, they gave a spiritual sanction to the caste, cultural and spiritual ideology. It destroyed the Indian social ecosystem and the positive growth of human relations, talents and socio-spiritual character. This should have ended a long time back. Instead, what has happened?

## Global spread

This philosophy, with all its negative values, has spread to the United States, Canada, Europe and Australia. It has become a virus. The only hope is that the US has now recognised its dangers and laws are being framed in different states, cities and institutions to criminalise caste practices. On March 22, 2023, a Bill was introduced in the California Senate to outlaw caste practices.

Earlier, the Seattle City Council and some universities added caste - along with religion, race,



gender and sexual orientation - to the anti-discrimination list.

In Canada, the Toronto Education District Board has outlawed caste practice. The laws that are being passed in the US are more radical than what the Indian Constitution did. It abolished only untouchability but not caste.

But the anti-caste laws in the US go beyond to criminalise all caste-based humiliations, discriminations and bullying. There is a lesson here for Indian lawmakers.

The gurus who uphold this system as the most revered Hindu divine system are also migrating to the US. They spread caste-discriminatory culture from their temples and cultural institutions and finally use their practices at workplaces in those countries too. They use food, cultural practices, family names and accents in the speech to dig out the caste background of immigrants.

The first-generation migrants inculcate the culture of caste among the second- and third-generation American or Canadian citizens. They would want to turn America gradually into New India. Immigrant

dwijas (Brahmins, Baniyas, Kshatriyas, Kayasthas and Khatris) reportedly treat migrant Dalits/Shudras and Adivasis as lesser beings within the Indian diaspora.

### Lack of awareness

Christians in the West did not appear to seriously study the philosophical and ideological mind of Brahminism. Though there are several South Asian Centres in the academic institutions in those countries, those centres rarely researched caste and Brahminism.

The caste-based discrimination in the US was brought into the public domain by Equality Labs headed by Thenmozhi Soundararajan and other Dalit Buddhist Organisations like the Ambedkar Association of North America (AANA), Boston Study Group (BSG), Periyar Ambedkar Study Circle (PASC), Ambedkar Buddhist Association Texas (ABAT), Ambedkar-King Study Circle (AKSC) and Ambedkar International Mission (AIM). They have conducted their own studies and surveys. The outcome is the present awareness of caste in the western world. The question then is what have the centres of South Asian Studies done all these years? Most of the so-called top-class academics from India have been working in these centres. They have conducted millions of dollars of studies on South Asian societies and states. But until the beginning of the 21st century, by the time the Durban UN Conference on Racism, Racial Discrimination and Xenophobia took place in 2001 and the world and the Dalit organisations took the caste question there, the West remained ignorant of caste and untouchability. Why?

Most of the left-liberal scholars teaching and researching in those centres wrote tomes on India. But all that writing and teaching did not help the people who were facing caste discrimination and untouchability. Did they go to the US to live a better life there? Did they help the immigrants to the Western world live a life of equality? Caste and untouchability migrated along with Brahmins, Baniyas, Kayasthas, Khatris and Kshatriyas.

The centres of South Asian studies did not organise seminars and symposia on the issues of equality by abolishing caste. They did not participate in anti-caste discourses in Indian universities till the Mandal movement arrived in the 1990s. And, even after that,



they appeared to cold-shoulder Dalit/Shudra/OBC scholars.

They studied class, gender, subalternism and so on. But those studies remained abstract without giving any hope to the oppressed castes and those who have been suffering human untouchability, while producing food for the nation. They did not question the rigid caste structure in the Hindu religion, though they did myriad studies on Hinduism.

### Solidarity

This whole process of fighting caste and untouchability in recent years came to the US after Dalit-Buddhist organisations there took these issues to the black women and men. They came forward to support them in several ways. Cornel West, Isabel Wilkerson and others got fully involved in writing and speaking about the caste system in a more creative way than Indians did.

Then, women like Ksama Sawant, herself an upper-caste woman but concerned about human equality and Aisha Wahab got involved in fighting against casteism. The Seattle Bill was introduced by Sawant. The California bill was moved by Wahab, a Democratic senator of Afghan origin. What great solidarity.

But by and large, the Dwija academia working in the US remain neutral or silent. Many among them support the theory that caste is a colonial construct and may result in Hinduphobia if such laws are passed in the US and Canada. Such casteism does not help the world. Let us take a clear stand on equality wherever humans live.

*Source: The Federal News*





*Ambedkar Society for South Asia*

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