Second Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Annual Lecture

BEYOND "UNTOUCHABILITY"?

Challenging the Primacy of the Untouchables-Caste Hindu Divide

Delivered by
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PREFACE

One may be reminded of the statement of Karl Marx that in class struggle, the proletarians have nothing to loose except their slavery. A somewhat similar statement was made by Dr. Ambedkar as early as 1927 that in overthrowing or annihilating the caste system, the Untouchables had nothing to loose except their untouchability. Then, the question is what is beyond untouchability? The obvious answer to this is equality in a casteless society. That is what Dr.Ambedkar, in a nutshell, had visioned. This, however, does not go without inflammable resistance of the insulated powerful vested interests. Sociologically speaking, a sizeable of proletarian, for instance, have got co-opted in the existing system, though less materially but more mentally or psychologically through the passage of time. Similarly, a microcosm of the Untouchables or Dalits have also followed the same suit. Yet, their mode of resistance differs, both in forms and contents, from that of the toiling masses or of the socially and politically conscious as well as assertive Untouchables or Dalits. But beyond 'Untouchability' —in fact, amidst the processes preceding to it, is the 'Untouchables—Caste-Hindu Divide' which is, in one way or the other, not abrupt but the perennial one. The only difference, at present, is its most distinctive visibility in the form of conflict between the Untouchables and the caste Hindus, and more so the socio-psychological and physical atrocities inflicted on the former by the latter.

Anyway, title of the text of the Second Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Annual Lecture—*Beyond 'Untouchability'? Challenging the Primacy of the Untouchables-Caste Hindu Divide,* delivered by Prof. Simon R. Charsley of the United Kingdom on February 21, 1997, is based on a collaborative research conducted among nine villages in Karnataka. However, instead of presenting the analysis of field-data, the author has cogently and succinctly collated it, in a socio-historical perspective, with the present day Dalits and caste Hindu divide by venturing into a wide-ranging such divide prevalent in different parts of the country, especially since the beginning of the 20th century. This places, in a way, the contemporary Untouchables-caste Hindu divide in a proper perspective affirming it as an ongoing process. Interestingly enough, the Karnataka data reinforces the process through more and more Untouchables going out of the villages to the towns and cities which is taken as a challenge to the Untouchable-caste Hindu divide.

The revised version of text of the Memorial Lecture is quite crisp, yet comprehensive. It unfolds multi-dimensional ventures of the Untouchables or the Scheduled Castes or the Dalits. Challenging the primacy of the Untouchables-Caste Hindu Divide is, in effect, to be read as challenging untouchability through submitting petitions, tapping legal and legislative measures, organizing agitations and protests including protest movements, pursuing education and taking up white collar jobs in urban areas, and thereby challenging not only primacy of the Untouchables-Caste Hindu Divide but the traditional superior status of the latter especially in villages.

But the fact of the matter is that the primacy of the Untouchables and caste Hindu divide is an unceremonious reality of the day. This divide may perhaps terminate in embracing equality and human dignity, and thereby filling up void of Beyond 'Untouchability'. When and how this filling up would come through may be a conjecture at this moment. In fact, it is the future which has to tell us the truth. Due to some reason or the other, the text of the Memorial Lecture could not published earlier. Yet, I hope, the social scientists particularly the students of sociology and social anthropologists interested in this and related themes may find it useful in pursuing their further study.

20 October, 1999 — Nandu Ram
J.N.U., New Delhi. — Dr. Ambedkar Chair Professor of Sociology

BEYOND "UNTOUCHABILITY"? Challenging the Primacy of the Untouchables-Caste Hindu Divide

Simon R. Charsley

Academic papers are always of their time. They are product of particular experience in the sequence of history, in their authors' personal history, in their disciple and in more momentous politico-social contexts too. Timelessness—being a contribution for all people for all time—has been academic conceit often appealing to anthropologists, but it is peculiarly inappropriate to the paper which follows. It offers the text, only lightly expanded, of the Second Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Lecture, delivered at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi on 21 February 1997.[1] Not only did this come directly out of work in hand for the author and his immediate collaborators[2]—work which has inevitably progressed since—but no tribute to a figure with Dr. Ambedkar's many-sided impact on the historical development of his country can help being aware of the momentous and on-going political issues with which it necessarily interacts.

At the time the lecture was written and delivered, the campaigning by some leading Scheduled Castes (SCs) for reservation quotas of their own within the general allocation was already vigorous; it spread subsequently. The pursuit of caste identity and caste pride as a strategy for Untouchables' advancement was beginning to be debated: whether it was a necessary first step towards the dalit solidarity which, ever since Ambedkar's day, had proved elusive, or a betrayal of both that solidarity and the goal of eliminating castes so dear to Ambedkar was hotly contested. Dalit involvement in electoral politics and in alliance and larger grouping was mounting. The consolidation of a 'Dalit-Bahujan' category was being promoted by some as a way of overcoming the limitations of perpetual minority status and dependence in the electoral regime. For the society at large, as the 2001 Census approached, the desirability of once again extending the collection of membership data to all castes, preserved over the preceding seventy years of Scheduled Castes only, was widely debated, and at the highest levels. The era was one in which it was impossible to imagine 'academic' interventions in the field of Untouchability, slight as they might be, as safely free from the necessity of choosing between conflicting values and interests, indeed between living people as allies or opponents.

What follows is, therefore, essentially a lecture written to be delivered on a particular occasion. A short postscript has been added drawing attention to an aspect of Dr. Ambedkar's contribution on which the lecture did not dwell but which becomes more relevant year by year. With dalits being increasingly significant, collectively and individually, in shaping the evolution of society and nation and in representing it to itself and to others,[3] Ambedkar's role, pre-eminent and prototypical but far from straightforward in this respect, now deserves further attention.

The Lecture (1997)

I am honoured by the invitation to address you today, to commemorate the life and work Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. He was one of those rare and amazing people who seem to contain within one body, one life, the achievements of a whole set of remarkable carriers. I would claim him as a pioneering social anthropologist, my own discipline, in his contribution to understanding the true nature of those labelled 'Untouchables'. As economist too, we who are social scientists can claim him as our own. But he was also distinguished as a lawyer and historian. He was a key founder of modern India, first through his struggles with Gandhi and then through his writing and shaping of the constitution. And this is even before we come to the greatest of his works, his pre-eminence in the entire twentieth century as the leader of his people, the dalits. Here he tirelessly worked in organizing and campaigning, writing and speaking and inspiring. He gave people both the ideological resources and the courage to struggle for their rightful place in the society. So we remember today, with gratitude, a great and many-sided life.

As a British person, with no knowledge of any connection with India in my youth, I am sorry to say that it was only long after Dr. Ambedkar's work had prematurely ended that I first heard of it. It was only when friend, Professor G.K. Karnath, after some years of research in India turned my attention to the plight of Untouchables that I came to study Ambedkar's achievements. Even then, as a foreigner and one who has never been forced to suffer the indignities to which he was subjected and from which he fought so valiantly to enable others to free themselves, it is of course difficult for me to appreciate the true depth of feeling of those who are truly his people—those who have shared his experience and been given courage by his example. Nevertheless, we all as human beings have some capacity to feel for others. This I would say is the basis of all research in social anthropology. I have tried, following the lead of Babasaheb, to understand the circumstances and the achievements of some dalit communities at the end of the twentieth century. In doing so I am trying to see whether new contributions have been made—can be made—to fulfilling Ambedkar's vision of a final escape beyond Untouchability. This is the only claim I have to your attention in this commemorative lecture.

It is often said the Untouchability has existed in India for three thousand years and still continues to afflict many millions today. Indeed it was said to me just before I came to Delhi from Bangalore by Mr. V.T. Rajshekhar, the well-known editor of *Dalit Voice* who has for so many years prodigiously published and republished to the world the message of Ambedkar himself. And of course there is truth in what he said. When a friend of mine, who is a sociology teacher and researcher in Bangalore, goes home to his village at the weekend and finds there a great shortage of water in the section of the village where his relatives still live, and goes to fetch water from another section where there is a good supply, a great furore break out. Dicriminatory rules from which people have been suffering from ancient times are still being used against them. They continue to suffer: practically, as their already difficult daily lives are made still harder; and morally, by being reminded that others are excluding them and looking down on them. It is a regular humiliation, no less cruel for the fact that it is often casually, unthinkingly inflicted. The atrocities of which we are all frequently reminded by reports in the newspapers—and some less fortunate are tragically caught up in at first hand—also tell of the continuation of this very old and very painful story.

Let us understand and in no way minimize this, but when we have done so, as a social anthropologist or sociologist my duty is to probe the complexities of our social world and to see whether there are other facets of truth that can be useful for us to understand. I am sure I do not need to persuade an Indian audience that the simple-minded view of truth as singular is epistemologically quite untenable. One truth—to die for if need be—can be seen as a European fallacy. It is one which has, in my own part of the world, bedevilled the history of relationships between those who could not agree on a creed which would capture it. Demonising those who think differently is a sad part of my own Western heritage.

So the starting point is that truth is multi-faceted, and today I wish to persuade you—in case you do not already agree—that there is now more to be said, both as regards the age-old nature of Untouchability and as regards what has happened in the past century. I want to argue that to acknowledge these things is socially constructive, that it can contribute to fulfilment of Ambedkar's great enterprise, that it points to way of opening the trap in which so many are still caught.

The first matter to which I would like to draw your attention is the fact that these terms, 'Untouchable' and 'Untouchability', which have been so important in shaping the society we experience in India today, are of English-language origin though used in a new sense. Like 'caste' itself which came from the Portuguese, they are foreign terms which have seemed to catch distinctions which were not altogether catered for—or perhaps were available but less memorably—in most Indian languages. Why was this so in the case of 'Untouchability' and 'Untouchables'?

Notice first please the difference between the terms. 'Untouchability' is a label for discriminatory practices and the devaluing ideas which go with them; 'Untouchables' is a label for people. I have much more difficulty with labelling people in this way, saying that they are Untouchables, than with the basic category of Untouchability. It does not matter much if that is a little imprecise: Marc Galanter, a considerable expert on all things legal in this field, noted that 'Untouchability' had been abolished in the Constitution, but that it had never been defined (Galanter 1972:243). For the last half-century, the courts and the legislature have been trying to pin it down by specifying offences in connection with it. It is quite clear of course that legal abolition was very far from sufficient to bring about the disappearance of practices covered by the term. As a term, therefore, 'Untouchability' is not very problematic, but the corresponding term—the label for people, individually and collectively, is more so, and indeed in several ways more significantly so.

Why are these terms in English? Because they arose out of the activities of two sets of English-speaking people at the beginning of the twentieth century. On the one hand, there were the Census takers, on the other the social reformers. The Census takers were led by an Englishman, Sir Herbert Risley who was commissioner for the 1901 Census of India, the social reformers in the particular respect by the Maharaja of Baroda (Charsley 1996). The Census-takers were interested in classifying the people of India in a uniform way, so that it would be possible to aggregate data from different regions and make comparisons between them.[4] The kind of classifying that always gave them the greatest trouble was in terms of caste; some indeed wanted to abandon the attempt altogether, and may be it would have been better if they had. There were so many groups with which people might identify, so many different names and such variation between places, that the whole scene in the nineteenth century was very confusing. Strange as it now seems, it was not even clear then in many cases what was a caste, what was a clan, what was a religious sect of order, and so on. And even when they had decided what were the castes, the census commissioners were plagued by people claiming that their own caste was really superior to some others, or separate from them, and that others had mistakenly done them down in the past (see, e.g., Cornish 1974:130; Dalal 1902: 479-347; Gait 1902: 347; Gait 1913: 365 foll.).

Into his confusion Sir Herbert Risley boldly stepped. He had experience as administrator and as anthropologist in Bengal and was thought of as an expert on the topic. He took up the old Brahmanical theory of varna and tried to interpret all the mass of variation across India in terms of its familiar categories: there were to be identified Brahmans and the other 'Twice Born', and various grades of Shudras. For the lowest category, he proposed 'Asprishya Shudra'. Anyway, Risley asked the Census commissioner in all the areas around the country to discuss his scheme with committees of knowledgeable people and see if it would be appropriate for their areas. Almost unanimously they answered that it would not. Only from two small parts of Rajasthan, from British officers, the locally appropriate scheme which came back included a set of castes to be labelled, taking up Risley's idea of 'Asprishya', as 'untouchable'. The reports using it were published in 1902, and this appears to have been the first use in print of term. As I have put this in an article on the subject: 'From this unpropitious start, representing as it did more of a rebuff [for Risley] than a successful initiative, the career of a key term in modern India was launched' (Charsley 1996: 2-3; Risley 1904).

That source remained quite specialized and technical: the discussions are of great interest and historical importance to read now, but we can be sure that not many did so at the time. So how, less than twenty years later, did everybody know this term 'Untouchable'? The beginning of the answer is that a number of prominent social reformers began to refer to the idea and then to use the term itself. As early as 1903, Mr. G.K. Gokhale, at a Social Conference in Dharwad—now in Karnataka, used the idea in moving a resolution on the evolution of 'the depressed classes' (Gokhale 1920: 898-902). 'Depressed Classes'—not yet 'castes'—was the rather general and largely undefined English term already in use. In 1909, the Maharaja of Baroda in an article in *The Indian Review* argued that 'depressed' was not a useful term: 'untouchable' would be better because it picked out from amongst the huge mass of the poor and illiterate, who were all surely depressed, those who were disadvantaged in a special way. His article was republished two years later, with contributions from many leading social activists of the time, in a book titled *The Depressed Classes* (Natesan 1911). Subsequently, it began to appear all over the place: the first academic work to use it seems to have been a study of 'the untouchable classes of Pune' in 1912 (Mann 1912). As is well-known, Gandhi used it for a decade and then substituted for it something sounding more honorific—'Harijan'. Ambedkar adopted it as a banner under which to mobilize people for their own advancement; also, I would guess, to tweak the consciences of the superior, the rich and the powerful.

What are we learning therefore? That something distinctively new and momentous was taking place in the first decade or so of the twentieth century. Most of what the new term 'untouchability' stands for is very ancient and there was a Sanskrit term which was, according to Jaiswal (1998: 122), an exact parallel, and there have always been other terms in different languages used in more or less similar senses, including in the nineteenth century 'panchama' in Madras Presidency of the south referring to a fifth quasi-varna category, but there are ways in which giving it this new title in the twentieth century produced a new situation. How you name things always has consequences, as it was explicitly intended to in this case. There is not just something ancient here but something rather new as well, something which the new term caught more strikingly and effectively that any of its partial equivalents. It was created, please note, in order to challenge what it stood for. It was the reformers who named it in order to work for its elimination. In that sense, paradoxical as it seems, identifying 'untouchabliliy' as a general phenomenon has been something immensely positive. Apart from anything else, it provided the platform for Dr. Ambedkar's great work.

It turned out to be momentous for the way that Indian society was to develop through the rest of the century. In effect, it set up five axioms which became starting points for that development. That is to say, it established what was going to seem obvious to most Indians, the common-sense of the society such as can surprise only the outsider who has grown up with a different common-sense, or possibly the anthropologist as professional outsider. They came to seem obvious in the twentieth century as they had not been before, and could, therefore, form the basis for action and policy, forming and transforming the society. These were not things, I stress, which had previously been obvious in the same way.[5]

The first was that it set up a new all-India standard. What Risely had not been able to achieve in the way of a single scheme for classifying castes in 1901 had, as far as this supposedly lowest section was concerned, been achieved twenty years later. That there was still immense variation across the sub-continent might be acknowledged, but at least it could be said that there were Brahmans at the top of Hindu society and Untouchables at the bottom. This was, it may now be seen, in its origins a distinctively Brahmanical view of the matter.

The second was that a vast range of individual castes, very different in most ways, were officially subsumed into a single category. Not only three main, but numerous castes were very widespread and very different kinds of castes—those associated with sweeping, with leather work, and with agricultural labour and village service, and but also a mass of minor castes discriminated against in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons, were all to be classified as like 'Untouchables'. For people not encompassed by the category, whichever kind amongst this array loomed largest in their own experience and imaginations, could stand synecdochically for the whole new set.

Thirdly, it dichotomised society in a way that rarely had the same prominence before. The old Brahmanical scheme had divided it into Brahmans and the rest, or perhaps Twice Born and Shudras, but for the new it was 'Caste Hindus' versus Untouchables.[6] 'Caste Hindu' is a term now too familiar for its complexity, even oddity, to be easily noticed. 'Caste' here has to relate to inclusion within the Brahmanical four-varna classification scheme.[7] The 'Hindu' part allows a little ambiguity since the expression 'non-caste Hindu' is not used, but in combination with 'Caste' it appears to assume a Hindu identity for Untouchables. This has been the subject of intermittent contention since the 1920s, most recently highlighted by Kancha Ilaiah with his *Why I am not a Hindu* (1996).

Fourthly, it gave priority to one kind of exclusion that related to ritual pollution. It took up a prime value of orthodox Brahman ideology and made it the criterion with which to identify and place people. This was good in enabling positive action to be taken to try to help them, but it was dangerous in fixing this as the one hegemonic identity for them. I shall be saying more about this shortly.

And lastly, please observe that it defined them as victims only. It was an entirely negative characterization on the basis of what others did to them. Whereas for castes which escaped being so classified, their traditional work was something that gave them a distinctive and positive identify—one in which they could easily take a pride even if others were sometimes scornful, for those labelled 'Untouchables', their traditional work—tanning or chappal making for instance—was no more than a cause of their victimhood. The labelling was intended to be a basis of 'raising' them, but its effect was often in some respects to reduce them. It hid their positive contributions to the society, representing them as less than real people, as if they were creatures whose only destiny was to be either rejected or 'raised' by others.

This representation of them provided the basis for and led to the immense apparatus of well-meaning laws and welfare provisions familiar today. The Untouchable category was bureaucratised into 'Scheduled Castes', as they became in 1936 with a further distancing from particular local realities and differences. It became possible for some to be officially Scheduled who were being usually regarded as Untouchables. It obscured still further the variability of the discriminations and exclusions involved and their differing local applications. The Voddas of Karnataka provide a significant instance here, often identified as 'Touchable SCs' but sometimes locally treated as the lowest of Untouchables (Bhat 1984; Epstein 1962: 161-2). Though the whole enormous effort of positive discrimination has benefited many, it still has, as is often recognised, the feature that, in order to claim these benefits, people have to be prepared to accept the devaluing identity from which they are supposedly being helped to escape. May I give you a small example noted in a university library recently visited? It is the kind of thing that strikes a visitor but may well pass unnoticed by those who are used to it. In the library there, I was shown what in most ways seems an excellent scheme to make books available to SC/ST (Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) students. But the books were clearly labelled as not to be touched by any who were not SC/ST. Now, even books are made untouchable! But the point, of course, is that every time anyone used them, they are making a declaration about their own special identity. There is no way that labelling can be defeated by means of a system which depends on reasserting it. Daily experience in the society at large is less unified and rigid however. Empirical studies show how change, if always too slow, comes about.

A Karnataka Study

A set of nine villages in Karnataka—in one case small town—was studied in the mid 1990s.[8] They throw a rather different light on both the past and present. The villages are spread from the north of Karnataka on the Maharashtra border to the south close to Tamil Nadu. The study was a collaboration between the Institute for Social and Economic Change (ISEC) in Bangalore and the Department of Sociology at the University of Glasgow in Scotland, with the support of an eminent advisory committee, headed by Professor M.N. Srinivas.[9] We made intensive studies of SC communities in each of these villages, in the tradition of participatory fieldwork of which Srinivas himself was so significant a pioneer, and we have tried to understand their circumstances in the light of social and economic contexts of their lives. That means, we had also to understand the structure of the wider community of which they are a part and their relationship with other groups there and with the world outside it.

Our studies document two aspects of the society which have important consequences for our starting question: can 'Untouchability' be transcended? Is the society able to put it behind it? They show, on the one hand, that the negative and reducing effect of labelling people as 'Untouchables' was never justified, and on the other that there are, in the world of everyday rural interaction, examples of the real progress in removing its significance. We do not, of course, say that ancient discriminations have disappeared—everywhere we found signs and aspects of them. But our studies did show ways in which challenges to some have been successfully mounted, and an important shifting and reducing in the significance of others have occurred. If challenge is possible and change has occurred in some places, so can it in others. Even the variability in the speed and thoroughness of change begins to be understood.

The caste communities studied can be seen as placed on a scale from those in which old humiliations are still largely in place up to those in which they have disappeared from daily life. This should not really surprise anybody, but to document it and work out why there is this variation may be a useful contribution sociology can make to resolving the impasse over Untouchability felt by many. This may also be seen in the progress of contemporary Indian society by the outside observers, and represented in international arenas in complaints over dalit human rights (see e.g., Human Rights Watch 1999).

At the bottom end of our scale, we find represented the kind of village in which the caste dominance, long ago identified by M.N. Srinivas, is still exercised (Srinivas 1959). This is the structure in which a preponderance of the people of the village, owning the bulk of the land and enjoying relatively high status, belong to a single caste community. They, therefore, both by their numbers and their economic and social power, control the life of the village. The effects of this are reinforced where control of the region around the village is exercised by the same caste. Srinivas (1962: 90) characterized this spread dominance as 'decisive'. In such a village, all others are necessarily dependent on this dominant section for their livelihoods and for a tolerable life, and the poorer they are the more dependent. Here, therefore, members of our so-called 'Untouchable' communities have little alternative to accepting the rules as the dominant caste make them. This can mean that the old discriminations are largely still enforced.

We owe this study to my colleague Professor G.K. Karnath: even here he finds, very interestingly, that there are strategies to turn aside humiliation, resistance in quiet way—instances of 'the weapons of the weak', as J.C. Scott (1985) has called them. In particular, there is a strong tendency for people to absent themselves from situations in which they expect old and humiliating discrimination to be exercised against them. They find, that is to say, non-confrontational ways of avoiding the reinforcing prejudicial assumptions of their 'master'.

Even here, that is to say, there is a degree of change, and I argue that it comes from something very fundamental which has happened. Today, even those who are still subject to

Untouchability in their day-to-day lives at home have contacts elsewhere and may travel beyond their home villages. Whereas in the old days their humiliation might seem a universal fact of nature, now everyone knows that there are other places where things are different. If they are not allowed in their own village's temples, they know that they or their castes mates worship freely at the most famous centres of pilgrimage in the region. They know that if the barbers in their own village will not cut their hair, elsewhere---may be even in the next village—there is a barber who will. They know that in towns at least no one can prevent them using hotels and other facilities. That kind of knowledge makes a psychological difference. The younger generation who have grown up with it are to that extent a different kind of people to their forebears whose consciousness was formed by the knowledge that they would be treated as Untouchable wherever they might go. They are people whose potential for rebellion is enormously increased.

Higher on our scale and in a sense opposite to this first case was a single-caste village. Dr. Ambedkar advocated the creation of such villages in order to free Untouchables from the pains of subjection in villages envisaged as much like our first example (Ambedkar 1943: 17-19). This village was studied by another member of the team, Dr. Gayathri Devi. Here, there are no others to be dominated. Such villages may be very poor and undeveloped despite this difference: material resources are required to make freedom effective. However, the people of our example had been able to use their freedom to make remarkable advances. They were fortunate in being led in the 1930s by a remarkable teacher, a member of their own community, who was fired by Gandhian ideals of development through reformation and education. He forced boys into schooling and supported them through it, and he encouraged religion and the arts in the village. Boys—I am sorry to say that there is a very different story to tell about the girls—were able to take advantage of reservation in government employment at a time when they had few rivals as educated as themselves. They obtained a hold in the Police and in the Electricity Board, rising the time of senior rank in both. One entered medicine and rose to be a district surgeon, before retiring to the village. In the 1950s and '60s, their village was one of the most educated of any in the entire district. In the current generation, there are writers and broadcasters. But I must add, to this day, if their village borewell breaks down and they must go to the neighbouring village for water—as occasionally happens, there they are still not permitted to use of well themselves. They have to depend on some kind person drawing water and pouring it for them.

The rich range of experience available from the other villages includes one in which a large Untouchable caste community was conspicuously divided between a quasi dominant clan of supposedly original people and later arrivals. The former monopolized traditional 'rights' in relation to the upper castes of their large village—which might also be seen as status-destroying impositions—whereas the later-comers without them. This study is also owed to Dr. Gayathri Devi. In this context, two strategies for advancement were to be observed. One, available to members of the leasing clan, was to exploit their links to secure from patrons such advantages as land and sponsorship, the other was to seek to be independent and free of such demeaning relationships. Unfortunately, it was the former which had been the more successful in achieving individual advancement. Being willing to acknowledge older village expectations in symbolic context, not so difficult when it could clearly be cashed for material benefits in the wider world, proved a route to respect and success locally too.

Further studies highlighted the way in which formerly powerful families of village upper castes who, in preceding generations would have been deriving superior status as well as material wealth through their control of Untouchables' labour and other services in the village, have in recent times diversified their concerns and expanded into wider arenas. Through education and entry to professions, urban business and overseas migration such families now, even if they retained land and residences in the village, were deriving their status and material support elsewhere. Any vital interest in maintaining old inegalitarian relationships was missing, and there was little opposition to accepting new legal constraints. Yet, another case emphasised the way in which a village caste community might change its status by developing externally oriented businesses and taking the support of relatives and fellow caste members in urban settings.[10] Each case has its own particular circumstances and shaping factors, but cumulatively they add considerably to our understanding of the range of possibilities and changes in contemporary rural Karnataka, most probably in India more widely.

Let me conclude by referring to one of the villages in which the old dependences have been overturned. This is a village in the north of the state where the caste which had made a spectacular advance was one of traditional chappal-makers. They live in a multi-caste village where the main high-status, land-owning community are Lingayatas, followers of an ancient Hindu reformist movement (Ishwaran 1983). These people used to run the village but they never had anything like the decisive dominance of the first case considered earlier.

The particular caste community on which research focused here was, in the earlier part of twentieth century, in an impoverished state. The dry-land agriculture and frequent droughts meant that they could not depend even on finding agricultural employment to support themselves; by the second half of the century they had mostly long given up chappal-making, and the men were often having to migrate to Mumbai and other cities in search of work. One such, from a neighbouring town but with relatives in our village, became a labour organiser in Mumbai and also discovered there a market for the kind of chappals his own people could make. He managed to obtain orders, with advances from the merchants to pay for their production, and he came home and organised people in several villages to produce them. This was successful and more orders followed. A number of enterprising men, particularly in the studied village, took up the same work—getting orders and organising to fulfil them. They set up production lines in their own houses and then in neighbouring ones, with each person specialising in one state of production—from cutting the soles right up to neat finishing. Workers were employed to carry out the jobs. When they had more orders that they could themselves fulfil, they put out work to sub-contractors of their own caste who would get it done in their own homes.

The success of this operation meant several things. It meant that money was coming into the community: even the workers were earning two or three times the daily rate for agricultural labour, and they were getting it quite regularly round the year, not just seasonally. Their success attracted in other people from the same caste from other villages who settled and expanded their numbers. So they became, as my colleague Dr. Ashok Kumar who studied this village puts it, the money-spinners of the village. Some of the employers became very wealthy—when the village temple needed renovation, for example, it was one of them who was the biggest contributor in the entire village. The same man owned the village video parlour and had recently branched out from leather work to tanning. He has set up a modern chrome-tanning unit in the village. This caste community as a whole are the major users of the commercial services—banks, finance companies, shops, hotels and so on—which have come into the village because of them. Even the busy weekly market flourishes because of them. So, the prosperity of the village has come to rest of them. Because of wealth added to numbers, they had become a major political power in the village. One of their member had been elected to the mandal panchayat and was, at the time of conducting this research, mobilising a major irrigation scheme for the village as a whole.

They had, that is to say, decisively shed any dependence on upper castes; in fact, in economic life many members of upper castes were in effect dependent on them. In this situation, the practice of Untouchability had disappeared from public life. There were no restrictions on the use of facilities; caste Hindus even used their shops and came to sit alongside them in the video-parlour in their street. They would be invited to and would attend their weddings, though there was care to employ high-caste cooks so that everyone would feel comfortable in eating their food. None of this is very surprising, for it is simply bringing into the village context kinds of freedom which can be found in urban life: not surprising but, as our studies show, still only too rare.

The second main message of our studies concerns that negative view which is often taken of the culture and contribution of Untouchables castes. This is an exploration of the fact—again obvious once it is stated and far from original—that the Scheduled Castes are as varied and as positive in their contributions to the society at large as any others. Any idea that because people are poor, their life is only a struggle for daily survival is belied by the people we met in all the places we worked. They are people busy and enterprising in their economic lives—they need to be to make livelihoods for themselves and their families in the difficult circumstances they face. And they are busy in their religious and cultural lives, with a mass of deities to tend, and priests, and festivals to participate significantly in, and membership in religious orders. They play positive roles in the collective lives of their village. This continues to a remarkable extent in many areas and villages, though it has to be acknowledged that is running down as collective organization and activities of villages themselves decline. Some new contributions come up. In our experience the provision of bands for weddings and festivals, and of the sound and lighting equipment for them are businesses which have very often been developed out of older performing and support roles. Free of stigma as they may be, these new contributions rarely give the people the complex importance for their fellow villagers of the old. The work of Neil Armstrong, a further member of the team, highlights this aspect of change particularly.

It is utterly wrong, therefore, to see these castes only in terms of their rejection by others. Still today, where those others are powerful such rejection is of deadly seriousness for their life chances and for the humiliations to which they may be subjected. But even then, it is only one aspect of a whole range of partially positive links and important inclusions which have made them active contributors to the society.

To sum up our findings: do we see progress 'beyond Untouchability' as Ambedkar envisioned it? Yes, at the village level we do, though of course the progress has been uneven and still is painfully slow. We see it happening as people are able to shed their dependence on others, more powerful and wealthy than themselves who were able to define them as inferior. As control is surrendered, so Untouchability reduces in its practical significance. We see too that a basis for this advance is what has so often been hidden, all the positive sides of the identities of these castes. As people are now just beginning to build on these, we see another way in which the old category can be challenged and begins to lose its force. Leather-workers can be appreciated for their contribution to the society and the economy as mush as anyone else. The tragedy has been that immensely well-meaning as the social reforms, which began by identifying a whole set of castes as 'Untouchables' was, their effects have been mixed. They have created avenues to autonomy for some but have bound people—and notably those who move in the official world of reservations—to a new confining identity. It has required them to be dependent on the state and the law in special ways. That means, they are dependent on those who control the state and the law. They have often benefited materially but it has not released them as fully free people into the general life of the society. Now, other possibilities for advance are beginning to be seen.

Personally I think Dr. Ambedkar, if he were still with us, would have been—not of course satisfied—but a little optimistic that the great campaign he waged was at last winning through, that a real change for the better is now just coming into sight.

Postscript

The tribute to Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, with which the lecture began, acknowledged the many-sidedness of his contribution but quickly came back to his role as Untouchable leader of his own Untouchable people. It was written, that is to say, from a perspective usual in the society at large and amongst dalits influenced by his message. For both, he was the icon of dalit assertion. The erection of statues and the naming for him of public places and institutions—including annual lectures—were symbolic markers of advances for the one side—for dalits and their well-wishers—and of a sometimes grudging and occasionally contested acquiescence on the other. For those, far fewer, who had heard and understood his message of self-reliance and advancement through agitation, education and organisation, he was an inspiration to their own activism. He worked with huge energy to provide a context in which those he regarded as his own people, the Untouchables, could such activism and the development of their skills secure for themselves equal places in their society. He dreamt of a transformation and it was the goal of our studies, and of the lecture reporting them, to discover the extent to which a transformation had been achieved a generation after his own departure.

What seemed little changed, however, was the grip exerted on history by the 'Untouchable' category and those semi-equivalents, semi-euphemisms, which it had spawned: Scheduled Caste, Harijan, most recently Dalit. Ambedkar shows us, if we can ourselves see through the polaristion of Untouchable and Caste Hindu, a struggle to break out from the primacy of this opposition, to be a Mahar, a Maharashtrian and the Indian, as well as the Untouchable that many, whether supporters or adversaries, would repeatedly want to trap him as. He would be also a lawyer and an educationist, and a scholar delighting in study and writing, and sometimes the identities would war with one another. In his lifetime he was repeatedly returned to the Untouchable-Caste Hindu frame, as the Untouchable who should be judged as such, even if this was, as his career progressed, increasingly not in terms of traditional discriminations and exclusions but also the exceptional representative of his people so defined.[11]

He was, that is to say, seen as showing what was possible even for an Untouchable, rather than as challenging the distinction itself. He continued to be himself the victim, as well as the beneficiary, of the labelling he contributed so largely to establishing. He often said that he came into politics and took high office in government in the interest of his own people, but he also repeatedly tried to break out from its limitations. Most conspicuously as far as his later career is concerned, as Labour Member of the pre-Independence Executive Council in the 1940s, he promoted progressive labour legislation; as Justice Minister in Nehru's Independence government, he was Chairman of the Drafting Committee and the main architect and author of the Constitution for the new Republic; in the same ministerial role, he went on to formulate a revolutionary Hindu Code Bill to bring, in particular, Hindu property law and the legal position of women into agreement with the contemporary secular state to which the Constitution had committed the new Republic.

His achievements in these efforts were huge but incomplete. His attempt to modernize labour provisions, identifying with the working class as a whole, faltered in the face of more immediately urgent needs, particularly to secure Untouchables' position in the new order for an independent India being shaped as the Second World War came to its end (Keer 1971: 354 foll.). His concerns in creating, at Nehru's behest, the Constitution and pioloting it through the Constituent Assembly went far beyond the sectional interests and were widely acknowledged as doing so. His success here was amazing, but it was too soon overshadowed by a near fiasco over the ambitious Hindu Code reforms. His passionate efforts were undermined by chicanery within the government to which he belonged, his own impolitic expressions of the anti-Hinduism which had become a recurring expression of frustration for him, and a bitter and mishandled resignation (*op. cit.*: 425-26 and *passim*). It was to his educational work for the colleges he founded and to his leadership of the proto dalit movement that he retreated, even denouncing his own great achievement with the Constitution (*op. cit.*: 449-50).

The grand gesture of leading mass conversions to Buddhism, just before his death in 1956, was a final attempt to break from the Hindu trap. It was an amazing event at the time, and its significance was reinforced almost immediately by his death. This required public acknowledgements of the conversion even from Hindu leaders who had done their best to hold back from recognising it previously (Keer 1971: 517-18). In the longer run it changed conceptions of religious and social identity for millions in Maharashtra and beyond (Belltz 2000). Even more widely it has fed the dalit imaginations of many who never themselves became Buddhists. In the medium term, however, its effects were typically undermined for many by the paradox that Ambedkar himself had been instrumental in constructing for society and in which he was immediately trapped. On the second day of the conversions, he was already telling people that they would not lose their SC status and the benefits it offered them by converting to Buddhism. He assured them that the privileges they enjoyed were, as Keer (1971: 502) conveys it, "the fruits of his labour and that he was capable of retaining them for his people." He died too soon for the claim to be tested, but the result was a struggle which lasted until 1990 before the full status was restored. It meant that the challenge was immediately turned round, for many, to reinforcing the conceptual frame from which it was intended as an escape. At the same time for many observers, the nature of the conversion itself was made ambiguous. Differences between the Maharashtrian or Ambedkarite version of Buddhism and forms seen as authentic models elsewhere in the world were stressed. Distinguished as 'Neo-Buddhism', the object of conversion was seen as no more than a particular localized strategy of those who were and would remain 'really' Untouchables. 'Neo-Buddhist' was added to the string of near equivalents shaping thought and the development of state and society, to 'Harijan', 'SC' and of course 'Untouchable'. The paradox if not tragedy of Ambedkar is summed up in his own involvement in the category which they wished to rejoin. He had not created the Untouchable-Caste Hindu division, but he had certainly used it and promoted its entrenchment through privileges, just as had claimed to reassure the worried converts.

By the 1990s our study in Karnataka found, not surprisingly therefore, that whatever significant changes had occurred, what had not changed was the primacy of this conceptual framework which continued to shape individual lives and developments in society, the framework which asserted an Untouchable-Caste Hindu division as a fundamental and officially endorsed feature of Indian Society. If there is a particular message from the experience of Dr. Ambedkar for the new era, it may perhaps be found in his exemplary attempts to break out from the limitations which were the reverse side of his great work as Untouchable leader. The trend in recent years to reassert the identity of individual castes, surprising and even paradoxical as it seems in the dalit case, may itself be a move in this direction. In the context of conspicuous caste competition replacing old caste rankings, and of the spreading of declining state benefits ever more thinly across larger sections of the population brought within the ambit of positive discrimination, caste identity amongst those who were labelled Untouchables seems likely in time to undermine the power of the old category. With dalits increasingly significant, collectively and individually, in shaping the evolution of society and nation, the double bind which so frustrated Ambedkar may begin to recede. Dr. Ambedkar's own amazing achievements in trying to push it back can be seen as an inspiration to this struggle, as it has been in so many other ways already.

NOTES

1. Thanks are due to Professor Nandu Ram for inviting me to deliver lecture, for arranging the very successful event and for, later, pushing me to make a version available for publication. The long delay is my own unhappy responsibility.
2. The project and the collaborators in it are noted below. Financial support was provided by the British Economic & Social Research Council (Project R000234468) and by the University of Glasgow, Scotland. To both, acknowledgement and thanks are due.

3. A furore in 2000 over French identification of the President of the Republic as an Untouchable, on a state visit to Paris, drew striking attention to the troubling and sensitive nature of issues here. It is interesting that Ambedkar in the first of the twentieth century, and many of his followers since, could embrace a designation which can still cause so much disquiet.
4. Of course, there is much to be said about underlying assumptions and motivations, as well as consequences (See e.g. Dirks 1992, Cohn 1996).
5. These axioms are set out and discussed in more detail in Charsley 1996: 9-13.
6. Dumont (1980) develops these distinctions into an elaborate and unified structuralist scheme of distinctions supposedly axiomatic social thinking.
7. As far as belonging to castes in the more usual sense now commonly distinguished as 'jaati' is concerned, 'Untouchables' are not of course distinguishable from others of the Hindu population.
8. Detailed analyses of seven of the villages, under the names of those primarily responsible for each study, are to be found in Charsley & Karanth 1998. See also Karanth 1997.
9. The death of Professor Srinivas on 30 November 1999 was a grievous loss for his students and those who were proud to be his colleagues and dared of think of themselves as his friends, as well as for the world of social anthropology of which he was so significant a pioneer. His lively interest in this project and his practical support for it contributed greatly whatever the team was able to achieve in their own work for it. It is only mere formality to acknowledge that it was carried out under his aegis.
10. This case is owed to Dr Ashok Kumar.
11. That things have not changed as much as could be hoped is shown by the treatment of President K.R. Narayanan. Returning from Paris (see Note 3 above), he was quoted in the press as saying 'I am used to this kind of publicity in the Indian media, of being an untouchable in Rashtrapati Bhavan ... ' What the French did was just a reflection of what the Indian media has been saying for last three years' (*Deccan Chroicle* www. deccan. com/cover12.htm 23.4.00).

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1. Towards Understanding the Modern Dalit Movement, 1995—by Dr. John C.B. Webster, Connecticut, U.S.A.
2. Beyond "Untouchability"? Challenging the Primacy of the Untouchables-Caste Hindu Divide, 1997—by Prof. Simon R. Charsley, University of Glasgow, U.K.
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