

BE YOUR OWN LIGHT !

“On a balmy evening in May 1950, two gentlemen seated themselves on a bench in Bombay’s Cuffe Parade and proceeded to hold a conversation. One of them was the architect of the Indian Constitution Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. The other was noted writer Mulk Raj Anand, author of ‘The Untouchable’.

Forty years later, Dr. Anand recalls the illuminating conversation with the Messiah of the downtrodden.

Mulk Raj Anand : Namaskar, Dr. Ambedkar !

B. R. Ambedkar : I prefer the Buddhist greeting—Om mani padmaye ! May the lotuses awake.

MRA : I agree. How thoughtless we are ! We inherit words without questioning their meaning ! Of course, namaskar means I bow before you

BRA : That perpetuates submission ! May the lotuses awake is a prayer for enlightenment!

MRA : Indeed, old habits die hard. We adopt them unthinkingly

BRA : In everything.

MRA: Come to think of it, one is not born stamped Hindu ! Or

Muslim ! or Christian! Hindu parents give their child a name during the naming ceremony ! Sanctified by a priest reciting verses in Sanskrit, which the child does not understand. A sacred thread is put on his body. And to and behold the boy is a Hindu !

BRA : Idiocy !

MRA : If you by mean the Greek word, idiot-going round and round in circles !

BRA : One must question all old habits, ideas, practices. Education should encourage the new young to ask the teacher, one new question a day

MRA : The best way to teach teachers ! They often don't know what is not in the text book. As a matter of fact, even in one's mature youth, one can only grow by asking questions. I learnt this from Henri Bergson's book *Creative Evolution*. I was in difficulties about various philosophical problems after reading Hegel, Kant and Descartes. Bergson said : One can heighten consciousness by questioning every philosophical proposition

BRA : Buddha argued with Brahmins about every one of their beliefs. They had degraded whole people as outcastes. They said, God had ordained you varnas—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras. Buddha asked : What about man himself—the individual ? Because a man is born in a family which handles corpses of dead cattle, he is condemned to be an Untouchable. All forest people are junglis to the Hindus

MRA : Rejected !

BRA : Indeed ! Everyone who works with hand was, and is, rejected. Those who skin animals! Those who carry dung! Those who do menial labour on the land ! All branded and bonded forever ! After five thousand years it is still worse ! An Untouchable can't enter a temple even if he has a bath before he goes there ! He can't draw water from the village well—he must take it from the filthy pond outside the village ! He can't graze his cattle on the landlord's land. He is dirty because he cleans dirt. Always considered impure ! An animal can be touched, not an Untouchable

MRA : As a member of the Constituent Assembly have you been able to assert the rights of the individual ? I see that your committee gives fundamental rights—the right of the individual to freedom. But we see that you have also conceded the right to property as a fundamental right Does not the right to property give a decisive advantage to those who have inherited wealth ? So the poorest of the poor, the Untouchable will always be at a disadvantage.

BRA : In our Constitution, we have put forward the ideal of a secular, socialist democracy... If every one can have the right to till the land from the State tenancy rights then equality of privilege

can be assured and there need be no exploitation. So far Untouchables and even many Caste Hindus and Muslims do not have tenancy rights. All these landless peasants are mere hands.

MRA : Then the right to work should have been recognised as a fundamental right.

BRA: I was only one of the members of the drafting committee.

MRA : So you became a lamb before the lions ! BRA : I bleated good deal ! I am now roaring !

MRA : As a lawyer, you know how the judges will always decide in favour of the high caste, upper class Hindus.

BRA : Of course, the only Non-Brahmin in our Government of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru fought hard against the right to own property being a fundamental right But Babu Rajendra Prasad felt that Nehru wanted to make India into Russia. The Caste Hindus, therefore, only conceded the other rights of man as directive principles to be fought for in Parliament.

MRA : Which would be weighted in favour of men of property.

BRA : The socialists can win a majority one day. And ask for redress. Any how, the outcastes and tribals have been declared Scheduled Castes. They will be given certain privileges to uplift them—like reservation for admission to schools and colleges and scholarships.

MRA : The Caste Hindus will always resent reservation.

BRA : We must organise ourselves. Arouse the disinherited to fight. There are more outcastes than Caste Hindus—if we include the Muslims who are also regarded as Untouchables by the casteists. And the tribal people. Together, with the socialists they can abolish ownership of private property ! No landlords, no tenants ! No landless labourers !

MRA : State capitalism might also prove to be dangerous. You know what Stalin has done in Russia. Imposed a set of bureaucrats on the people in the name of Communism !

BRA : Of course, we must protect the individual from invasion of his rights from other individuals. Liberty of the person must always be a primary concern. That was in my mind when I urged for fundamental rights.

MRA : If that was in your mind then you might urge Parliament to revise fundamental rights. We must fight against both State capitalism and Private capitalism. You know how the vast majority of people everywhere are subject to the will of the employers.

BRA : Indeed, liberty so far seems to be the liberty of the landlord to increase rent. The capitalist always wants to reduce wages and increase hours of work. Capitalism is a dictatorship of private employer.

MRA : The fundamental rights—right to life, liberty and happiness—remain a dream

BRA : The new young must go on fighting. They can change the Constitution.

MRA : This may not be possible without upturnings like the 1789 revolution in France.

BRA : Strange to hear this from you ! I thought that by making Gandhi the liberator of Untouchables in your novel, you have been converted to non-violence.

MRA : I could not live up to the Mahatma's ideal. We had to face Hitler and Mussolini. I went to Spain and joined the International Brigade. Though I fainted at the sight of blood in a clinic and was asked to opt out.... But one had to take sides in the second world war. A poet called the so-called war for freedom of the democracies against fascism, the fight for a "half lie" against a "big lie."

BRA : You know, though the Mahatma was all for the Harijans, he did not get up his beliefs in the Varnashram dictated by the Bhagwad Gita By calling them sons of Hari, the supreme God, he thought he was exalting them. In fact they were left at the lowest levels.

MRA : Is that why you have adopted Buddhism as your religion ?

BRA : May be that was the chief consideration. Also by remaining a Scheduled Castes citizen, one accepts the status of the outcaste. I have felt the faith of the Buddha, which does not believe in the Hindu God Brahma aspires for human beings, man and women, to be free of dogmas. Obscure myths and legends ! One can pursue knowledge ! One can disown casteist heroes of the Hindus like God King Ram, the avatar of Vishnu ! And many other sentimental myths of Hinduism.

MRA : Indeed, I find the Buddha's hunches far more plausible than the guesses of the Brahmins. He was the first existentialist of the world. He cried out. *Dukha, dukha, dukha !* The Hindus were always for make-beliefs. God is *ananda*. A consolation prize for beggars who ask the feudal Lord God for favours by offering gifts of flowers, bribes of garlands and fruits !—via the priests.

BRA : That is why most priests have big bellies.

MRA : What is your message for the rejected ?

BRA: I say to the Untouchable : Be a lion ! Hindus sacrificed goats before the image of Kali. You be your own light '*atta deep bhav !*'

MRA : Like the Buddha said to Ananda : Be a lamp unto yourself !...."¹

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¹ : Dr. Mulk Raj Anand, An eminent writer and author of "The Untouchable"—Tribal World, April, 1991, P. 13.

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