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# David Mumford

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### 'All men are created equal'?

June 16, 2015

In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson famously wrote "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Anyone with a brain knows how much these ringing words have been flagrantly ignored, certainly in the US and over pretty much the whole rest of the world. For some years I have been helping Prof. Shankar of the Chennai Mathematical Institute support an orphanage for Dalits (aka untouchables, "Harijans", scheduled castes) near Chennai in India and following to some extent his bulletins on the horrors endured by most Dalits and how they have none of the above rights. I stuck my neck out a few weeks ago writing a letter criticizing the "de-recognizing" of an activist pro-Dalit student group by the Director of the Indian Institute of Technology in Madras. The large reaction to this letter drew my attention to the

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extent to which this is a huge issue in India, so the purpose of this post is to look at the Indian struggle between the caste system and the ideals embodied in Jefferson's challenge.

First, some background on India for those who are not avid India-philes. The origins of the caste system are shrouded in mystery and hotly debated but what is clear is that they were codified in the last centuries BCE in the "rules of Manu" (the *Manusmṛiti*). This is a long treatise that can be found online [in English translation here](#). It lays down the Dharma, the rightful rules of conduct, for each of the four *varnas* (the major groups of castes), the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras and their relation to the outcastes, especially the Candalas, who must live outside the village and do jobs despised by the Hindus. Each Varna is divided into multiple *jatis*, these being the effective castes with each assigned a specific occupation and marrying (and eating) only within the jati. Your jati is inherited from your parents and is yours for life. Manu assigns specific punishments for anyone who violates the rules, often demoting them all the way to untouchable status. It prescribes such heavy sentences as cutting off the tongue, or pouring of molten lead in the ears of the Shudra who recites or hears the Veda!. The castes are nearly linearly ordered in status, like Huxley's Brave New World, with castes whose members were named alphas, betas, gammas, deltas and epsilons. The 200 million untouchables in India today, its epsilons, are prohibited from entering Hindu temples and even their gaze is believed to defile. One of their notable occupations today is manual "scavenging"

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(cleaning latrines), considered the ultimate defiling task. And indeed, since they have no pumps nor even gloves or protective gear, descending into pits to manually clean them causes many diseases, which do defile them. Attempting to change their occupation has led, in many villages, to hideous retribution from higher castes.

Such a rigidly structured society has, of course, drawn strong reactions. Nietzsche approved: "Close the Bible and open the Manu Smriti. It has an affirmation of life, a triumphing agreeable sensation in life and that to draw up a lawbook such as Manu means to permit oneself to get the upper hand, to become perfection, to be ambitious of the highest art of living." (quoted in Wikipedia's article on Manusmrti). Today, the right wing Hindu nationalist party, the BJP, is in power but Indian politics has always been complex (e.g. some states have been ruled by coalitions of Brahmins and Dalits) so they have tempered their message to gain a majority. But many members of the ruling coalition advocate forcing all Muslims and Christians to convert or leave the country and have demolished mosques inconveniently located where temples once stood. They view the Manusmrti as sacred literature; "smrti" is just shy of "sruti", literature such as the Vedas given directly by the gods.

On the other side is B. R. Ambedkar, a Dalit who was the principle author of the Indian constitution and the first Law minister of independent India under Nehru. His influence in India and especially among Dalits cannot be underestimated. He converted to Buddhism

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and urged all Dalits to follow him to escape the tyranny of the Hindu castes. He expanded his criticism as early as 1936 in a famous undelivered speech entitled "Annihilation of Caste" in which he recognized that he was disputing the very core of Hindu beliefs. Here is a **short quote**:

You cannot build anything on the foundation of caste. You cannot build up a nation. You cannot build up a morality. Anything that you will build on the foundation of caste will crack and will never be a whole.....Caste may be bad. Caste may lead to conduct so gross as to be called man's inhumanity to man. All the same, it must be recognized that the Hindus observe Caste not because they are inhuman or wrong-headed. They observe Caste because they are deeply religious. People are not wrong in observing Caste. In my view, what is wrong is their religion, which has inculcated this notion of Caste. If this is correct, then obviously the enemy you must grapple with is not the people who observe Caste, but the Shastras which teach them this religion of Caste. Criticizing and ridiculing people for not inter-dining or inter-marrying, or occasionally holding inter-caste dinners and celebrating inter-caste marriages, is a futile method of achieving the desired end. The real remedy is to destroy the belief in the sanctity of the Shastras [DM: Hindu scriptures].

Some more relevant quotes from Ambedkar:  
 "'My social philosophy may be said to be

enshrined in three words: liberty, equality and fraternity. Let no one however say that I have borrowed my philosophy from the French Revolution. I have not. My philosophy has its roots in religion and not in political science. I have derived them from the teachings of my master, the Buddha." . And " In Hinduism everyone is unequal, but some are more unequal than others."

Clearly, there is a major conflict between liberal values and some of the ancient and deeply rooted Hindu values with passionate Indian adherents on both sides. This is the context in which the fight at IIT-Madras is taking place. There are two student groups, the Vivekananda Study Circle believing in traditional Hindu values and the Ambedkar Periyar Study Group advocating Dalit rights. The first complained of hate speech by the second and the administration responded by "de-recognizing" it. My friend Shiva (incidentally born a Brahmin, converted to Buddhism), who works tirelessly for Dalit rights, wrote me about this, sending me a petition to sign. I suggested I might be more helpful writing the Director at IIT-Madras because I have stayed in their Guest House and given talks there. So I wrote this:

Dear Dr. Bhaskar Ramamurthi,

Although, as a foreigner, I acknowledge that it is difficult to understand the complexities of local disputes, I write as a long term friend of many distinguished academics in India and especially in Chennai. In addition, I have several times

enjoyed the hospitality of IITM's guest house and have had the honor of giving a number of talks at your Institute. I am in your and your colleagues debt for this warm reception.

But, all this said, I have strong ideas about the importance of free speech and especially the importance of allowing students to discuss vital and difficult issues that confront society today. I have also become increasingly aware, during my nearly 50 years of visiting India, of the deep social struggles that quite possibly are coming to a head as India takes a central role in the world. For all these reasons, I was deeply shocked that the Ambedkar Periyar Study Circle was "derecognised". I believe campuses must allow open discussion of divisive issues even when it offends some people so that all aspects of an issue are out in the open. Today's youth are tomorrow's leaders and one wants them to think deeply about the direction in which we are all headed.

On a more personal note, I see many similarities between India's Dalit problems and the African-American problems that have rocked the US since its beginnings. For this reason, I personally take Dr. Ambedkar as one of my heroes.

sincerely yours,

David Mumford

Perhaps inadvisably, I agreed to let Shiva send

my letter to others. To my amazement, it was reprinted in the *Times of India* and *The Hindu* (the major South Indian paper) -- and triggered a deluge of criticism. Allow me to paraphrase some of the criticisms and make some replies,

The soundest defense of the de-recognition was based on arguing that a genuine, deep and passionate love for India, for its ancient glories and wonderful achievements is being torn apart by advocating, as Ambedkar did, de-sanctifying the shastras. I was told by quite a few people that I should read the books of Rajiv Malhotra, an Indian-American living in Princeton. He argues in his book *Breaking India* that three foreign groups have worked to undermine true Indian identity: Muslim invaders, the Christian missionaries and the Communists preaching Marx and Mao. Specifically, the Christianizers have now been joined by NGOs and think-tank preachers bearing liberal ideas with no understanding of true meaning of Hinduism. He argues in *Being Different: An Indian Challenge to Western Civilization* that India's spiritual traditions and specifically, its dharma (as I said, meaning the rules of correct and moral behavior) are threatened and that India should return to an earlier, purer form of Hinduism and purge these foreign influences. And what about the things criticized by liberal thinkers? On his website, he downplays these saying: "Caste, dowry, child marriage, sati, poverty, and illiteracy: Many of these phenomena certainly existed in earlier Hindu society, but in a different form, perhaps milder and not so rigid, and usually not consistently or homogeneously over time. " This idea that you

can have castes and yet not oppress anyone goes back to Vivekananda himself. He believed the caste system to be an integral part of Hinduism but argued for people, even Muslims and foreigners (see *Prabuddha Bharata*, April 1899), being able to join a caste or form new ones by virtue of their abilities:

To the non-Brahmin castes I say, wait, be not in a hurry. Do not seize every opportunity of fighting the Brahmin, because, as I have shown, you are suffering from your own fault. Who told you to neglect spirituality and Sanskrit learning? What have you been doing all this time? Why have you been indifferent? Why do you now fret and fume because somebody else had more brains, more energy, more pluck and go, than you? Instead of wasting your energies in vain discussions and quarrels in the newspapers, instead of fighting and quarrelling in your own homes ? which is sinful ? use all your energies in acquiring the culture which the Brahmin has, and the thing is done. Why do you not become Sanskrit scholars? Why do you not spend millions to bring Sanskrit education to all the castes of India? That is the question. The moment you do these things, you are equal to the Brahmin. That is the secret of power in India. (in *The Future of India*, Collected Works, Vol. III, p.292)

Will the scavenger who learns Sanskrit then be allowed in the temple? He acknowledged this would take many generations but one is tempted to reply 'dream on'.



So the issue is whether to take the *Manusmṛti* literally or to adapt its precepts to modern times. This is an issue that has caused endless fights in all religions. I would argue that reading their founding documents with absolute literalism is always a trap. Not only does the meaning of words change but the boundary between allegorical and metaphorical stories on the one hand and the description of literal empirical facts on the other shifts as mankind itself changes. The texts are reinterpreted in each generation. Galileo is no longer considered to contradict the received truth in the Bible. Sufis read the Quran differently from the Sunni legal scholars of Shariya. Personally, I find many Indian texts and many of its stories inspiring though not the *Manusmṛti*. Who knows -- Ambedkar might have found common ground with Vivekananda in a Hinduism that treasured certain shastras but considered others pertinent only if grossly reinterpreted. The quality that comes and goes in all religions is *tolerance*. Ashoka's reign of the Maurya empire, the Umayyad Caliphate in Spain, Akbar's Mughal court, Roger Williams' Rhode Island are treasured instances where very different religions co-existed peacefully. Unfortunately, intolerance seems to be the default position.

Another group of respondents threw in my face the case of Prof. Subramanian Swamy, saying it was hypocritical of me to ask for freedom of speech in Chennai when it was being denied in Cambridge. Swamy had been invited to teach an economics course at Harvard, but after a stormy faculty meeting, he was dis-invited. The context is this: Swamy is an extreme right

wing politician and had written an Op Ed piece in the Mumbai newspaper DNA, that besides calling for the destruction of 301 mosques in retaliation against Muslim terrorism, he proposed to "make Sanskrit learning compulsory and singing of Vande Mataram mandatory, and declare India as Hindu Rashtra in which only those non-Hindus can vote if they proudly acknowledge that their ancestors are Hindus. Re-name India as Hindustan as a nation of Hindus and those whose ancestors are Hindus ... Enact a national law prohibiting conversion from Hindu religion to any other religion." etc. Not exactly a tolerant guy! Whether Harvard should have allowed him to speak in deference to the freedom of speech principle or ban him as propagating hate speech was controversial. Before jumping to one conclusion, note that most of the US press supported *Charlie Hebdo's* right to print cartoons highly offensive to Muslims after the cartoonist was murdered. Even if the cartoons were considered part of a political discussion by sophisticated Parisians, they were clearly hate speech to Muslims. It seems that in the West the distinction between allowed and prohibited public expressions is inconsistently drawn. We try but as in Chennai, emotions intrude.

Finally, one of my closest lifelong friends, C. S. Seshadri, wrote me giving a clear headed review of Indian politics but also questioning light heartedly what "All men are created equal" can really mean? "Men" of course refers to men and women: this is not the issue. The issue, as I see it, is that our genes are not equal, some babies are born with horrible deficiencies and some with unique gifts (take

having perfect pitch as a simple example). My belief is that what we all share equally is having the sense of "me", that is, of being conscious of being alive, and of having or not having opportunities to carry out our universal and natural drives. (Do other mammals have all these? That's a good question.) Note that Jefferson did not use the word "happiness" alone. No, he wrote "pursuit of happiness", meaning having as reasonable a share of opportunity as the prosperity of their society permits, not being humiliated for some irrelevant attribute. I certainly realize that this is an ongoing struggle in the US but this does not mean it is hypocritical to be equally troubled at the degree to which it is denied to virtually all Dalits in India.

This post has been translated into various languages: I would first like to thank Johanne Teerink for translating this post into Estonian: [ESTONIAN HERE](#). It has now been translated into German by Laura Fields [GERMAN HERE](#). Thank you Laura. It has now been translated into Italian thanks to Paul Diaz: [ITALIAN HERE](#). Thank you Paul.

The above post has also been translated into Gaelic thanks to Brian Kiley, into Polish thanks to Mathias Hose. It is on the websites [GAELIC HERE](#) and [POLISH HERE](#). Surprisingly, you will see if you click the first two links that both are part of on-line casino reviewing websites! This alarmed me and I feared these operations were spam, but Brian wrote me explaining:

We are an online casino reviewing website for Ireland. And we know for sure that the

Gaelic language can die soon. So we decided to provide also useful content on this language and make our own contribution. Yes, it will attract more people and they'll be able to find our gambling related content but at the same time, they'll have an opportunity to read high-quality information on the different topics. You can check, there are not so many articles like that in Gaelic. Irish use English instead. That's sad for our community. That's why we decided to hire 2 professional translators who manually translate texts like yours and we are planning to make our blog as a HUB of useful content soon. I hope this will assure you that it's not a scam.

Good luck to you Brian and I'm happy to make my little contribution. And Mathias wrote me too saying:

I'll explain everything to you. We are a company that develops its brand translating articles is a popular and positive way to fatten our site development. It will also add even more foreign readers to your article. We select options for the relevance of the article in a given time period. This is more readership for both you and us. Also our editors translate and our company pays for their work. I hope for good cooperation. Thank you

So OK, fine, the on-line life of the 21st century is getting stranger and stranger.

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