

**Convocation Speech by N. Ram<sup>1</sup> at the 75<sup>th</sup> Annual Convocation of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Deonar, Mumbai on May 12, 2015**

I am honoured and very pleased to be here at the invitation of the Director of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences to attend this 75<sup>th</sup> Annual Convocation where students of ten Schools and Centres have been awarded degrees by the Chairman of the Governing Board.

When you ask the question, what is the real significance of a Convocation and what is the role of a Convocation speech, this answer given at a U.S. college website seems felicitous, particularly in the context of TISS having “Imagining Futures” as part of its logo:

The commencement ceremony affirms each student’s search for knowledge. It often includes a speech that seeks to put their recent hard (or not so hard) work into the context of their future.

One of the characteristics of India’s system of higher education, which has been widely remarked on, is its lop-sided concentration on engineering and technological education at the expense of the basic sciences and, in a more pronounced way, at the expense of the arts, humanities, and social sciences, which are often treated as soft subjects.

Thanks to the flourishing, against the odds, of a few major institutions of learning such as the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, we can entertain some hope that the imbalance can be redressed. TISS has a rich history. It is a history that tells many stories about Indian society and, in particular, its modern quest for knowledge about itself and its efforts to apply this knowledge in key areas. From its beginning in 1936 as the first South Asian

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institution for professional social work education, it has developed over eight decades into a first-rate social sciences institution involved in education, research, field action, and response to disasters – a combination that is unusual in the Indian context.

### **‘Rethinking TISS’ and Academic Restructuring**

I was particularly interested in the process and outcome of “rethinking TISS” and academic restructuring, which took place nearly a decade ago. I have learnt a little from your website about how this process came about and how the whole faculty came together, without outside help, to respond to the challenge. I look forward to learning more about your continuing quest for “converging excellence with relevance,” safeguarding and raising quality while expanding access and opportunity in society. This, after all, is the heart of the educational challenge in India.

As an outside observer, let me dwell for a few moments on the challenge and significance of the project of “re-imagining futures” in the pedagogy of the social sciences. Let us remind ourselves that the challenge has to be met in the context of declining resources available to universities, a situation that presents a stark contrast to the tremendously increased public resource support given to institutions of higher learning in China during the same period.

Against this backdrop, it is commendable that the Tata Institute of Social Sciences has pushed ahead in the last decade to stand out among leading universities and social science institutions as an Institute of excellence explicitly committed to developing and applying knowledge “in pursuit of social justice and human rights for all.” From the annual reports of its work,

it is clear that TISS provides an outstanding example of theoretical and practical engagement with some of the most significant issues that affect Indian society. It has stepped out boldly beyond its established pedagogy and scope of work to include several emerging or innovative areas of study in its research and teaching portfolio. At a more practical level too, it has initiated work in several new directions ranging from the promotion of vocational education and the expansion of training in mental health care to encouraging young graduates to take up the challenge of rural development work in the most backward districts of the country. And it has expanded institutionally to become a multi-campus, multi-centre institution.

The Institute, guided by the leadership, vision, and personal example of Professor S. Parasuraman, its Director during this period, is to be commended warmly for these achievements. They take forward in a new, upscaled, and imaginative way a long tradition of scholarship and practice committed to the welfare and well being of the people, especially the poor and marginalized sections, of our country.

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I imagine that at a Convocation the foremost thought among those receiving their degrees is about the future, about careers in which everyone aspires to do well, to excel, and to reap material as well as moral rewards from years of hard work in acquiring specialized knowledge, experience, and skills.

As I understand it, the pedagogy and learning culture of TISS spring from a certain philosophical understanding. It is that aiming for academic and professional excellence and enabling young scholars to gain knowledge,

hands-on experience, and skills to do well in a growing number of social science fields cannot be separated from learning to be good citizens, imbued with humane, just, and high ethical values and an active sense of responsibility to society.

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### **A central challenge and a profound response**

This necessarily involves thinking beyond your narrow or specialized field towards larger issues affecting society and the masses of our people. It means using your imagination to see how things can be different, and also the difference you can make in your professional as well as personal lives. In inviting you to think about the larger issues in which we all have a stake, I will confine myself today to one central challenge facing contemporary India – caste as an institution of oppression and social discrimination and its relationship to class, justice, and democracy. And I will look at this challenge largely through the powerful lens provided by Babasaheb Ambedkar's life, struggles, studies, and experimentation in ideas in the social sciences, supplementing this with some fairly brief concluding observations on this subject.

Let me begin by noting that as democratic India prepares to celebrate the 125<sup>th</sup> year of his birth, Dr B. R. Ambedkar stands taller than he ever did before. In the long view of history, his profound and radical approach to social questions, and his place in the struggle for a modern, democratic, and socially just India, have acquired enhanced relevance and value at the expense of various other outstanding national figures who figured in the great debates and controversies of the freedom movement era. This is

essentially because the deep-seated problems spotlighted by Dr Ambedkar's life and work remain very much alive while the bold and often profound questions he raised about Indian society remain unanswered.

He was born Bhimrao on April 14, 1891 at Mhow in Central India in an austere and religious Mahar family with a military service background and unusual respect for education. In school (Satara and Bombay), college (Bombay), service under the Maharaja of Baroda (briefly in 1913 and again between July and November 1917), and study abroad (Columbia University, the London School of Economics, Gray's Inn, the University of Bonn), the young man displayed a scholarly orientation, a commitment to the life of the mind, and well-honed intellectual gifts that few other contemporary political leaders of the era could match.

Bhimrao benefited from opportunities that had just opened up, which none in his family or, for that matter, in the recorded history of his people had access to. Yet every one of his academic, intellectual, and professional achievements was hard earned, in social battle against entrenched oppression, discrimination, and anti-human caste prejudice. By the time he was finished with his formal studies in the early 1920s, Dr Ambedkar had acquired qualifications that surpassed the M.A., Ph.D., M.Sc. (Econ), D.Sc. (Econ), and Barrister-at-law academic credentials he had added, by right, to his name. By the time he was 30, he had been through a real-life education that most people, including the most renowned scholars, do not acquire in a lifetime.

There may be various opinions on the formidable range of issues and controversies in which Dr. Ambedkar figured as a protagonist during four

decades of his public life — which can be said to have begun with the brilliant paper he did on “The Castes in India, Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development” for Alexander Goldenweiser's anthropology seminar at Columbia University, New York in May 1916.

Dr Ambedkar was a transparently honest, challenging, and eclectic liberal thinker. He was attracted to utilitarianism, and eventually to Buddhism, in philosophy. He found inspiration in the ideals of the French Revolution and also in the socially forward-looking and humanistic elements and values in Indian culture and civilization over the millennia. He delved into the Marxist classics, going so far as to claim, during the historic anti-*khot* mobilization of peasants in Bombay in early 1938, that “I have definitely read studiously more books on the Communist philosophy than all Communist leaders here.” However, he was not persuaded either by the revolutionary theory of Marxism-Leninism or by the practice of socialism in his time. He was sharply and emphatically opposed to Gandhism and to the Congress’s ideology, although on certain social issues he held views in common with Jawaharlal Nehru – who, as Prime Minister, badly let down his Minister of Law on the Hindu Code Bill in the early 1950s.

From his early days, Dr Ambedkar stood out as a restless and courageous experimenter who did not always get it right when it came to balancing values and practical considerations that seemed to be in conflict. He had fallen in love with great ideas as a socially oppressed and humiliated schoolboy who refused to be treated with condescension by anyone, including Baroda's royalty. Throughout his life, which ended a couple of months after he publicly embraced Buddhism along with his followers, he

was interested in the big picture. The boy who was barred, by the curse of untouchability, from playing cricket with his schoolmates in Satara never took his eye off the ball. He concentrated in his public life on attainable, practical goals. And he never became too big to go into specifics, details, doubts, books, and the problems of ordinary people, especially the lowliest of the low in Indian society.

During Dr Ambedkar's lifetime, his many opponents and critics alleged from time to time that he had missed the main strategic task of the era – the winning of political independence, with the terms and pace of the struggle set by the Indian National Congress. Such criticism gained wide currency, especially in the press, which tended to patronize him as a sort of sub-national leader, a sectional leader of the Scheduled Castes rather than the towering national figure he was in a long-term historical sense.

Unfortunately, some of the heroes of the freedom struggle, social reactionaries themselves, completely missed the point about how Dr Ambedkar's studious, tough-minded, and powerful social questioning and battles fitted in the overall picture. Some of them even questioned his patriotism and called him names, but who remembers them today? Looking at the freedom movement experience today, we can begin to appreciate why Dr Ambedkar was unerringly on target on social questions and why his critics and opponents were dead wrong.

It can be argued that one of the defining weaknesses of the leadership of India's freedom struggle was its underestimation, if not neglect, of the big social questions raised by Dr Ambedkar and its compromising stance on these questions, notably on *sanatana dharma*. The time has come to

recognize that Dr Ambedkar represented the profound side of the social struggle that was not adequately represented in the Congress-led freedom movement.

Characterizing Dr Ambedkar's ideological-political outlook does present a challenge to political science; no easy answers are available, nor should they be sought. Although not of the Left in politics<sup>2</sup>, he tended towards radicalism in the social arena in which he spearheaded many a battle in his own style. His lifelong concern with the inequities, indignities, and oppression embedded in religion, conventional morality, and the values of so-called mainstream society led him to forge his own conception of socio-economic justice in an idealistic sense. He turned his back on class analysis, which might have given him new theoretical and political insights but he seemed intuitively to grasp the link between caste and class in India.

What is impressive is that this courageous fighter for social justice who considered himself a political liberal and was sought to be marginalized by his opponents during key moments of the freedom struggle commands a powerful following today as democratic India grapples, in great confusion, with the troubling questions he never tired of raising in politics and public life.

Ideologically, Dr. Ambedkar may not have been of the Left, but at times he moved sharply to the radical side. This happened especially when his ideas, campaigns, and political-organizational work were backed by powerful mass

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<sup>2</sup> For a Marxist critique of Dr Ambedkar's politics, see Namboodiripad, E.M.S. (1986), *History of the Indian Freedom Struggle*, Trivandrum: Social Scientist Press.

movements, for example during the 1938 workers' struggle in Bombay against the anti-strike Bill. He was the builder of the progressive Independent Labour Party, which did not take off at the all-India level, but yielded some useful political and organizational lessons to the Opposition around the country.

In an interesting article published in *Frontline* in 2002, Venkatesh Athreya argues that in his views on crucial issues relating to economic development, Dr Ambedkar comes across as a radical economist. This may surprise but Dr Athreya substantiates his characterization by showing that Dr Ambedkar was “a strong proponent of land reforms and of a prominent role for the state in economic development,” that he “recognized the inequities in an unfettered capitalist economy,” and that he went so far as to argue that “the system of social economy based on private enterprise and pursuit of personal gains violates” the basic requirements of political democracy<sup>3</sup>.

The social and class basis of the following Dr Ambedkar commanded; the deep nature of his social questioning; his passion for social justice; his openness to modern, scientific, and rational ideas; his unyielding secularism and forward-looking views on a number of questions, especially on the condition and future of women and on what it took to make a civil society; his intellectual gifts, tireless curiosity, and wide-ranging interests; his ability to concentrate on attainable, practical goals and his constructive sense of realism – these marked him out as a unique kind of leader.

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<sup>3</sup> Venkatesh Athreya, “A new resonance,” *Frontline*, July 20-August 02, 2002: <http://www.frontline.in/static/html/fl1915/19151150.htm>

It is not without political significance that the Hindu Right is currently attempting, against the grain of history, to appropriate Dr Ambedkar's legacy. In this situation, his uncompromising analysis of the caste system, of *chaturvarnya* and *sanatana dharma*, of notions of pollution, of unalterable or rigid social hierarchy, and of the implications of the hegemony of the *shastras* must be read, re-read, and made part of a national debate.

### **The defining text: *Annihilation of Caste*, 1936**

His major theoretical exposition of such questions is contained in a never-delivered 1936 presidential address that stirred up a hornet's nest, the radical "Annihilation of Caste" to which the writer Arundhati Roy, in a long introductory essay<sup>4</sup>, has provided fresh meaning and context. Dr Ambedkar's outstanding intellectual contribution to re-imagining and building a new India free from the debilitating, indeed soul-destroying, system of caste as an institution of social oppression and discrimination incompatible with democracy must be ranked on a par with Babasaheb's signal and justly celebrated contribution to the making of India's Republican Constitution.

In "Annihilation of Caste," Dr Ambedkar emphasizes the anti-social, anti-progress, anti-national character of an unjust social order as well as its vital connection, through networks of force and ideology, with political power. The caste system, in this classic Ambedkarite analysis, militates against

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<sup>4</sup> Ambedkar, B.R. (original publication 1936; 2014), *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition*, with an Introduction by Arundhati Roy, New Delhi: Navayana.

fraternity, “sanghatan and cooperation for a good cause,” public charity, and broad-based virtue and morality.

When critics challenged him to specify his “ideal society” in lieu of a caste-based order, he replied: “My ideal would be a society based on liberty, equality, and fraternity.” He specified that his ideal society would be mobile. There would be “social endosmosis.” There would be fraternity, which was only another name for democracy, and democracy was primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoining communicated experience and breeding an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellow human beings.

“*Chaturvarnya* must fail for the very reason for which Plato's Republic must fail,” warned the oppressed intellectual as social rebel. He pointed out that “the lower classes of Hindus” were “completely disabled for direct action on account of a wretched system.” He asserted: “There cannot be a more degrading system of social organization...It is the system which deadens, paralyses, and cripples the people from helpful activity.” He attempted to follow through the implications of this system in the political sphere. To Dr Ambedkar, the real remedy was “to destroy the belief in the sanctity of the *shastras*” and their caste-borne tyranny.

It was no wonder that nearly eight decades ago Gandhiji famously declared that “Dr. Ambedkar is a challenge to Hinduism.”<sup>5</sup> He remains so today.

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<sup>5</sup> M.K. Gandhi, “Dr Ambedkar’s Indictment,” *Harijan*, July 11, 1936. Criticising the Jat-Pat-Todak-Mandal of Lahore for not letting Dr Ambedkar deliver his presidential address, which was published as “Annihilation of Caste,” Gandhiji remarked that “no reformer can ignore the address” and “the orthodox will gain by reading it.” He recommended that “it has to be read only because it is open to serious objection.”

One battle in which social orthodoxy and opportunist politics allied to defeat social progress was the instructive fight over the Hindu Code Bill in the late 1940s and early 1950s. As one of the leading authors of the Constitution, Dr Ambedkar led the effort to institute a reasonably forward-looking and egalitarian Hindu Code law but it was sabotaged by orthodox elements. The Congress Party, despite Nehru's claim to rationality and progressivism, refused to support the Bill. The abandonment of this progressive legislative measure meant the betrayal of Dr Ambedkar's vision on such critical issues.

His contributions to constitutionalism and institution-building aside, he had a great deal to say about democracy as a real way of life and about citizens' rights, about authoritarianism, about hero worship and the cult of the personality.

### **A continuing ‘life of contradictions’**

*Make political democracy a social democracy; resolve the contradictions, else they will undermine democracy itself.* A magisterial exposition of this thesis came in an intervention by Dr Ambedkar towards the end of the Constituent Assembly debates, on November 25, 1949<sup>6</sup>:

“The third thing we must do is not to be content with mere political democracy...Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy. What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality, and fraternity as the principles of life...They form a union of trinity in the sense that to divorce one from the other is to defeat the very purpose of democracy.

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<sup>6</sup> *Constituent Assembly of India – Volume XI*, Friday, the 25<sup>th</sup> November, 1949: <http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/vol11p11.htm>

“Liberty cannot be divorced from equality, equality cannot be divorced from liberty. Nor can liberty and equality be divorced from fraternity. Without equality, liberty would produce the supremacy of the few over the many. Equality without liberty would kill individual initiative. Without fraternity, liberty would produce the supremacy of the few over the many...

“We must begin by acknowledging the fact that there is complete absence of two things in Indian Society. One of these is equality. On the social plane, we have in India a society based on the principle of graded inequality...we have a society in which there are some who have immense wealth as against many who live in abject poverty.

“On the 26<sup>th</sup> of January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. In politics we will be recognizing the principle of one man, one vote and one vote, one value. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man, one value. How long shall we continue to live this life of contradictions? How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life? If we continue to deny it for long, we will do so only by putting our political democracy in peril...

“The second thing we are wanting in is recognition of the principle of fraternity. What does fraternity mean? Fraternity means a sense of common brotherhood of all Indians...It is the principle which gives unity and solidarity to social life...In India there are castes. The castes are anti-national. In the first place, because they bring about separation in social life. They are anti-national also because they generate jealousy and antipathy between caste and caste. But we must overcome all these difficulties if we wish to become a nation in reality...Without fraternity, equality and liberty will be no deeper than coats of paint.”

This, you will agree, is truth telling in the finest traditions of social science. It is also speaking truth to power – the power of a socio-economic and political system that upholds, and from time to time celebrates, caste.

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### **Caste and some insights from new scholarship**

Social analysis cannot be unchanging, stagnant. The radical analysis and ideas put forward by Dr Ambedkar in “Annihilation of Caste” and other speeches and writings on this central social question need to be developed by social scientists in response to changes that have taken place in the economy, society, and politics in the six decades following his death and in light of the new data, insights, and studies that have become available.

In his Introduction to *Dalit Households in Village Economics*<sup>7</sup>, V.K. Ramachandran conceptualizes caste as “an institution of oppression and social discrimination,” specific to South Asia and born of Hinduism, which, among other things, is embedded in production relations and impedes the growth of the productive forces. Pointing out that “the status assigned to the Dalit people and the now-criminal practice of untouchability” is central to the caste system, he calls attention to “new scholarship and new attempts to understand the socio-economic conditions of life of Dalit people and households in India, particularly rural India, where oppression is sharpest.” Sukhadeo Thorat and many other scholars have contributed fresh insights on the massive practice of untouchability and atrocities against the Dalit people.

As Dr Ramachandran points out in his Introduction, category distinctions drawing from new social science scholarship are now being made between direct discrimination, differential impact discrimination, and cumulative discrimination and disadvantage. The conclusion that “there can be no end to

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<sup>7</sup> Ramachandran, V.K. & Swaminathan, Madhura ed. (2014), *Dalit Households in Village Economics*, New Delhi: Tulika Books.

poverty and deprivation in India without resolution of the agrarian question, and that there is no agrarian question in India to which the issues of caste, tribe, gender, and other forms of social exclusion and discrimination based on hierarchies of status are not intrinsic” is one that Dr Ambedkar would have approved of. In a way, this brings us back to the Ambedkarite proposition that “political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy,” which is a way of life that “recognizes liberty, equality, and fraternity as the principles of life.”

I would now like to close with the thought that as social scientists educated, trained, and accredited with degrees by TISS, you will be pursuing productive, interesting, and rewarding careers in a wide range of fields – and that while doing so, you will be able to contribute to society by developing and applying knowledge “in pursuit of social justice and human rights for all.”

I wish you hard work, success, and every happiness.

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