



Ambedkar Times

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Guru Nanak and his Vision of Egalitarian Social Order

Prem K. Chumber

Editor-In-Chief: www.ambedkartimes.com

After Tathagath Lord Buddha, it was Baba Guru Nanak who raised a thundering voice against the oppressive social system of caste divisions and untouchability. His engaging approach and consistent efforts for the establishment of egalitarian society both through teachings and practice distinguished him from his predecessors and contemporaries of the Prema-Bhakti path of famous North Indian Bhakti Movement (Great Revolutionary Movement), which is known for its emphasis on equality of all persons irrespective of their caste, sex and creed before the almighty God. Baba Nanak was for social and gender equality in both the realms of spirituality (Parlok) and terrestrial world (lok). He stood with the lowest of the low. He reiterated that if one was desirous of the grace of God, he had to take care of the lowest of the low. In order to institute the principle of social equality in the sharply divided Hindu caste society, he founded the tradition of common community kitchen (langar) which needs to be financed out of the hard earned living by sharing its fruits. KiratKaro, NaamJapo, VandShakko was the trilogy for the success of his social revolution. However, this trilogy of spiritual path needs to be understood in conjunction with the another postulate of the egalitarian social structure of Sikhism meticulously nurtured by Guru Nanak. Sharing the fruits of one's hard earned labor was to be practiced across caste boundaries of the given Hindu society based as it was on the divisive Varna order. Baba Nanak advocated decimation of all such oppressive caste based social boundaries. The inclusion of the Bani of different spiritual personalities cutting across caste lines vindicates the egalitarian intent of Sikhism. Had Baba Nanak been alive today, he would not have approved of the emergence of Gurdwaras on caste/community lines. Similarly, for the establishment of a true egalitarian society, Guru Nanak laid emphasis for the emancipation and empowerment of the women who were denied equal rights. While highlighting the various merits of women, Baba Nanak said why to condemn them who give birth to princess. He travelled far and wide to comprehend as well as enlighten the ignorant about their duties towards themselves, society and spiritual world. We need to sincerely adopt his teachings in our routine daily life and social dealings to give shape to the society which he envisioned and truly practiced in his earthly life time. Are we genuinely living the way he exhorted us to live? Let us do introspection within ourselves on the auspicious occasion of 550 Parkash Purab of Guru Nanak Dev Ji and resolve to follow his teachings in word and spirit. Read more: www.ambedkar-times.com

550th BIRTH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS OF GURU NANAK DEV JI IN PITTSBURG

550th Birth Anniversary celebrations of Guru Nanak Dev Ji Maharaj were held at Sri Guru Ravidass temple, Pittsburg, on November 17th, 2019 with a spirit of dedication and enthusiasm. Approximately seven to Eight hundred devotees from all parts of Bay Area participated in this historic and auspicious day. Three days Shri AKHAND PATH and

Other speakers who paid their tribute and homage to Guru Nanak Dev Ji included Mr. Raj Gumber, Bibi Kulwant Kaur, Bibi Navneet Kaur and Bibi Satnam Kaur and a group of young children from Rattu family.

SIGNIFICANCE OF OPENING KARTARPUR SAHEB CORRIDOR: - Opening of Kartarpur Saheb



All pictures credit: Prem K. Chumber Ambedkar Times

langar Sewa for the occasion was voluntarily hosted by a very dedicated family of Shri Varinder Kumar Sudhir of Concord.

Mr O.P. Balley founder member of the temple while managing the proceedings of the function from the stage addressed the Sangat with the message of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, an apostle of peace, love, equality and humanism.

Guru Sahib's message was meant not for any particular section of the community but for the entire spectrum of society. During the 14th and 15th centuries when the Political, religious and Social conditions had declined to its lowest ebb, Guru Nanak Dev Ji enlightened the people that God is one without any discriminations, delusions or ritual beliefs.

Bhai Gurnam Singh Ji and Om Pal Singh Ji (Jatha Gurughar) also shared with Sangat, Guru Nanak Dev Ji's spiritual message of love, peace and harmony through their Shabad Kirtan.

A very renowned Ragi Jatha from San Jose led by Bhai Laakhan Singh also embellished the occasion with their melodious Shabad Kirtan based on the teachings of Guru Nanak Dev Ji.

Corridor for devotees of Guru Nanak Dev Ji to visit Kartarpur where Guru Saheb spent the last 18 years of his life as an agriculturist bears an unprecedented significance on the part of both India and Pakistan to live in peace and harmony. There can be no better tribute and homage to the legacy of Guru Nanak Dev's divine preachings with a universal appeal.

In the end the Sudhir Family who hosted day and night Sewa during the recitation of Shri Akhand Path was honored with a Siropa from Guru Ghar.Guru Ghar committee also thanked Mr. Prem Kumar Chumber Chief Editor, Desh Doaba and Ambedkar Times for taking pictures and providing live-coverage of the entire event on the Facebook.

The program ended with the recitation of ARDAS and thanks to Sangat.

"NANAK NAAM CHARDI KALA -TERE BHANE SARBAT DA BHALA"

**SEWADAR,
O. P. BALLEY**

Founding Member

Sri Guru Ravidass Sabha Pittsburg, CA



Honorable Dr. Ronki Ram honored at the auspicious occasion of 550th Parkash Purv of Sri Guru Nanak Dev ji at IK Gujral PTU Kapurthala (Punjab) on November 10, 2019.

550th BIRTH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS OF GURU NANAK DEV JI IN PITTSBURG



All pictures credit:
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550th BIRTH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS OF GURU NANAK DEV JI IN PITTSBURG



Pictures credit: Prem K. Chumber Ambedkar Times



550th BIRTH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS OF GURU NANAK DEV JI IN PITTSBURG



Wedding ceremony of Ravi Singh Bhatia, son of Jagtar Singh Bhatia and Nirmla Bhatia with Alexandria Noelle D'Souza, daughter of Daughter of Luiz D'Souza and Cherylanne D'Souza was celebrated in Sri Guru Ravidass Temple, Pittsburg on October 9, 2019.

Wedding of Michael Chand RALH son of Mr. Ramesh Chand Rahl and Mrs. Jindo RALH with Kameshwary Devi Daughter of Mr. Trivender Kumar Ans Mrs.Kavia Sharma in Sri Guru Ravidass Temple Pittsburg on November 1, 2019



ਬਾਬਾ ਸਾਹਿਬ ਡਾ. ਭੀਮ ਰਾਓ ਅੰਬੇਦਕਰ ਦੇ ਭਰਾ ਦੇ ਪੜਪੋਤਰੇ ਸ੍ਰੀ ਰਾਜਰਤਨ ਅੰਬੇਦਕਰ ਸ੍ਰੀ ਗੁਰੂ ਰਵਿਦਾਸ ਟੈਂਪਲ ਪਿਟਸਬਰਗ (ਕੈਲੇਫੋਰਨੀਆ) ਪਹੁੰਚੇ।



ਸ੍ਰੀ ਗੁਰੂ ਰਵਿਦਾਸ ਟੈਂਪਲ ਪਿਟਸਬਰਗ (ਕੈਲੇਫੋਰਨੀਆ) ਵਿਖੇ ਬੀਤੇ ਐਤਵਾਰ 3 ਨਵੰਬਰ 2019 ਨੂੰ ਸ੍ਰੀ ਸੁਖਮਨੀ ਸਾਹਿਬ ਜੀ ਦੇ ਪਾਠ ਦੀ ਸੇਵਾ ਸ੍ਰੀ ਆਸਾ ਰਾਮ ਪਰਿਵਾਰ ਵੱਲੋਂ ਕੀਤੀ ਗਈ।

Religious Refiguration of Social Transformation: Drawing Lessons from the Teachings of Guru Nanak

From the very beginning of the appearance of human beings on the earth planet, religion kept on accompanying them. In fact, it remained perennial manifestation of the hopes, inchoate ideas, fears, phobias, aspirations, visions, socio-cultural norms, mores, ethos and emerging moral paradigms. Religion assigns meanings to abstract cultural worldviews in the mode of deciphering oblique social symbols and pagan marks. Cultural differences and social demarcations are often identified through the distinct mental cartographies of religious boundaries. Intensive pursuit of cultural studies within the relatively late emergence of the discipline of anthropology in the broader domain of Social Sciences could become possible perhaps due to the rich presence of varied tangible and intangible religious traditions across civilizations and continents around the globe. Religion and culture are interrelated and born of thought, which is what Clifford Geertz called "conduct and is to be morally judged as such". Thought like another social act is culturally and traditionally made available in nicely packed tedious religious foils. Since thinking is directly related to 'social' as opposed to 'personal', it materializes itself in the tangible framework of religious norms and ethos among others. In the realm of human community, 'personal' is invariably interchanges with 'social'.

The very existence of human beings is 'social'. It is within the 'social' of human beings that their 'personal' assumes distinct shape within its larger social self; and 'the presentation of self in everyday life,' to borrow the famous phrase of Erving Goffman, becomes 'less of an individual matter; less a personal project, more a collective, even a political, one'. And that collective/political 'social' reveals itself more vividly in the form of what contestably called 'religion'. Cultural anthropology seeks the explication of the socially hidden phenomena in the garb of religion while picking up its cultural threads on the surface of religious beliefs. It is in this critical context that the 'religious' metamorphoses into 'cultural'. Cultural and religious become too complex to get separated from each other in a neatly dividing framework. If culture is passage to both the 'personal' and 'social' of human beings, religion is the storehouse of that 'culture'.

Apart from this above mentioned highly productive functional agency of religion, it also plays an indomitable role of deep social transformation while building meta counter-public narratives through questioning as well as demolishing the given anti-social and anti-individual structures of discrimination, domination, oppression and marginalization. If religion was deployed to create hope and attain meaningful socially egalitarian existence, it was not spared at all from being used to promote partisan

and vested interests. Religious wars at different intervals are the most relevant case in point. Moreover, the given adamant structural mechanisms of well-established religious orders often give rise to new religious visions to respond to subdued human concerns buried under the dead weight of empty structure of once meaningful religions and the teachings of their heavenly founders. Religions are born of social contentions in a given society rooted in its internal and external environs and give rise to further social conflicts.

Each religion has its own long



life story from the initial stages of digging foundational channels to the finishing touches on its formal structural settings in the tangible form of sanctum sanctorum as pilgrimage centers with highly guarded sacred texts surrounded by never-ending ceremonies, rituals and prayers. Every religion took long time to reach its formally crystallized structure and often had to face untold difficulties on its thorny way. Religion had to assume varied forms to impact its followers as well as adversaries during its long torturous journey. It invariably began with an appearance of a great personality what Muhammad Iqbal called Marade-Kamil who exposed the world to a new way for leading a meaningful life in an egalitarian sphere of social interaction with humble deeds and selfless conduct. Called a Guru, Prophet or Son of God, the precursors in any of these nomenclatures dedicated their entire life towards the betterment of social conditions around and building good deeds within the hearts of humanity. Structures (temples, churches, mosques, gurdwaras, deras, ashram, rituals, rites, ceremonies, traditions, hukamnamas etc.) were laid down and traditions formulated to be meticulously followed by their descendants and followers.

What part of this long journey of concretisation of a religious order is more important - initial life teaching of the founder or the structural paraphernalia that evolved in the due course of its institutional rise up - is a difficult question to answer. Here enters incompatibility between the teachings of the precursors and the later on added structural paraphernalia allegedly built around their life stories and post thinking about them among their followers.

My immediate concern in this paper is to contextualize the teachings of Guru Nanak, the founder of

Sikhism, the youngest religion in the world, within his time and its relevance for a meaningful social existence. Guru Nanak was born at a time when the long Delhi Sultanate period (1206-1526) was coming to an end and the emerging Mughal dynasty (1526-1857) was taking its roots in turbulent Hindustan under the reign of Babur (1526-1530). It was a time when the country had already been ruled over for almost more than 500 years after the demise of Hindu Shahi (879-1026) that was able to establish its hold on the most turbulent regions of

Afghanistan after defeating the rulers of Turk Shahi (665-850). The period before the Delhi Sultanate was equally turbulent wherein Turkish invasions to capture power from various pockets of different Hindu dynasties was a routine affair. Hindu Shahi dynasties in Kabul valley and Gandhara, and Brahmin dynastic rule of last Hindu Raja Dahir of Sindh were replaced by Turkish origin Islamic rule after repeated attacks. Hindu rule in Sindh was brought to an end by the killing of Raja Dahir with the sword of Muhammad bin Qasim who sent his severed head along with his two daughters to Al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf, governor of Basra of the Umayyad Caliphate in 712. In fact, the period from the invasion of Muhammad bin Qasim on Sindh (712) to the establishment of the Mughal Dynasty in 1526 constitutes the most turbulent long phase of fight between the then fast expanding Islamic religion and the dwindling graph of the once well-established Hindu religion along with other equally respected religions of Buddhism and Jainism as is evident from the times of Gupta Empire (from the mid-to-late 3rd century CE to 543 CE). The common people of the region were the immediate victims of the ferocious atrocities perpetrated by the agency

and forces of the expansion of Islam. There were unending conspiracies being played within the corridors of Islamic ruling families, which were continuously engaged in savage internecine warfare among

themselves and the heat of their fights further afflicted the innocent people who were forced to lead a sub-human life. It was against such a long turbulent phase that Guru Nanak appeared on the scene what the theologian Bhai Gurdas aptly described in the following poetic words: The true Guru, Nanak, was then born The fog and mist evaporated And light shone on the earth.

As the rising Sun dispels the dark and outshines the Stars As flee the herd of deer when the lion roars

Without pause, without turning back for assurance

(So fled evil from the world) (as translated in Khushwant Singh, A History of Sikhs Vol. 1) .

Before and during the life span of Guru Nanak (1469-1539) there was no dearth of religious interventions to grapple with varied social, cultural and political evils of the time, but what makes Guru Nanak and his non-anthropomorphic God based approach different was an intense ability of his soul appeal to influence the followers of both Islam and Hindu religions and his valiant stand in favour of the downtrodden. The merit of his unique approach lies in his achievement to keep himself beyond and above the misconceptions of both Hinduism and Islam, on the one hand, and offering an alternative way of an egalitarian living based on inclusive social vision and rationalistic spiritual pursuits. However, as far as his social vision is concerned it needs to be contextualized more in his spiritual understanding of the ultimate truth and to get oneself immersed within it than in his contemporary social milieu. There is no doubt about his deep and all embracing knowledge of the varied dimensions of the social, economic, cultural and political aspects of life that he lived through. In his comprehensive compositions, he meticulously mentioned varied political offices, social ranks based on Hindu varna order, Muslim socio-religious nomenclatures and occupational segments. The 'social' for him was ephemeral and transitory. In fact, Guru Nanak termed it as false. That is why he did not weigh the merits and demerits of the followers of Hindu and Islam in a comparative equation from a judgemental point of view. He was equally critical of both

(Contd.. to next Page)



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the mullas and pandits from a larger perspective of the most tenable goal of salvation in the realm of truth.

For Guru Nanak it was not easy to question the surging Islamic influence under its cruel political force buttressed by the supplementary ecclesiastically organised institutional (shariat) set-up headed by Shaikhs, Pirs, Mullas and Qazis. With his meticulously articulated bani (spiritual poetry), Guru Nanak was not only able to prevail upon his detractors from a distance but showed them the true path by them. He convinced the Shaikhs at Mecca that God did not live in a particular direction on earth; indeed every direction was His abode. He conveyed his message to the rulers and the ruled in such a wonderful way that all of them found him speaking from a level though different from their convictions and religious conventions but with an appeal to their very being within. It was the reason that while in Baghdad when Guru Nanak was conveyed in a

symbolic manner that there was no more place left for any other person in the congregation of religious persons at a dwelling, he calmly placed some petals of a flower on a bowl full of milk without making it spill out thus making them realise the exclusionary nature of their behaviour. Similarly at home during his visit to Hardwar he proved the pilgrims who were bathing in the Hindu holy river Ganga and praying for the well beings of the departed souls of their ancestors by offering water to the Sun at a distance of "49.1/2 crore kos" that if the water offered by him failed to reach his agricultural field in Kartarpur which was only 250 kos away, how come yours would reach at such a long and high up distance.

Guru Nanak was adept in the ways of conveying his message across the religions and regions at a time when populace had long before resigned to fate in the face of tyrant rulers who simply relied upon brute force. How the Gazhnavid and Ghorids oppressed the people of Hindustan during their repeated raids raised hairs even today after hearing about such atrocities. Guru Nanak had the courage and audacity to rise up to the challenge posed by Babur and his associates, and minced no words calling spade a spade. In his intrepid Babur bani, he called the Kings lions and their officers dogs who troubled the people unprovoked in their leisure time. He travelled far and wide within the country and beyond in the four directions and indulged in dialogues with all sorts of people he met during his historic four odysseys. During his travels abroad, he visited

Sri Lanka, Nepal, Afghanistan Iran/Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Hindustan had very close trade and cultural interactions with these areas in its neighbouring states in the Asian continent. Moreover, after the long reign of Delhi Sultanate and the formative years of Mughal rule, foreign lands of Baghdad and Mecca ceased to be so remote at least in terms of cultural and religious contexts. Guru Nanak's prophetic

emphasis on these two most vulnerable and historical oppressed sections of the society. He reiterated in his spiritual poetry that why to condemn women without whom this worldly life was impossible to imagine.

ਭੰਡਿ ਜੰਮੀਐ ਭੰਡਿ ਨਿੰਮੀਐ ਭੰਡਿ ਮੰਗਣੁ ਵੀਆਹੁ
ਭੰਡਹੁ ਹੋਵੈ ਦੋਸਤੀ ਭੰਡਹੁ ਚਲੈ ਰਾਹੁ
ਭੰਡੁ ਮੁਆ ਭੰਡੁ ਭਾਲੀਐ ਭੰਡਿ ਹੋਵੈ ਬੰਧਾਨੁ
ਸੋ ਕਿਉ ਮੰਦਾ ਆਖੀਐ ਜਿਤੁ ਜੰਮਹਿ ਰਾਜਾਨੁ

ies that Baba Nanak started the tradition of taking an early bath to be followed by recitation of the holy shabds (hymns) of Japji Sahib, one of his most adored spiritual compositions, before taking up daily routine work. The purpose behind founding the tradition of taking bath in early morning within the precincts of Kartarpur Sahib and to meditate on the name of one God was perhaps to discard the age old tradition of making long voyages to far off holy rivers/places for ablutions. That traditions is preserved even today by Guru Nanak naam-leevansangat (followers of the Baba Nanak faith). The followers of Nanak prefer to take bath on auspicious days of Gurburavs (anniversaries of Gurus), punia (full moon night) and sangrand (the first day of every month) in the name of Waheguru at their respective nearby Gurdwaras.

The presence of sarovers in almost all Gurdwaras, especially the historic ones, is a

case in point of the continuation of the tradition set by Baba Nanak at Kartarpur for arranging bathing facilities within the living precinct of his followers. Its legacy can be seen in the early morning holy procession for the prakash (to begin the recitation of the celestial bani) of Sri Guru Granth Sahib at Darbar Sahib/ Golden Temple Amritsar. Tenth Nanak, Guru Govind Singh, also refuted the tradition of going on pilgrimage for ablutions by emphasizing that if one takes bath at holy places upto the seventh sea, he loses this world and also the next one (Twaprasad Swaiye).

Another equally consistent Sikh tradition laid down by Baba Nanak is kirt karo, band shakoo, Nam Japoo (earn with one's hand, share the fruits of hard earned labour with other and meditate on name of attribute less one God). However, this ethical trilogy of spiritual path of Sikh faith needs to be understood in conjunction with another postulate of itegalitarian social structure meticulously nurtured by Guru Nanak. Sharing the fruits of one's hard earned labour was to be practiced across caste boundaries within the given Hindu society based as it was on the divisive varna order. Baba Nanak advocated decimation of all such oppressive caste and gender based social boundaries. The inclusion of the bani of different spiritual personalities cutting across caste lines vindicates the egalitarian intent of Sikhism. Had Baba Nabak been alive today, he would not have approved of the emergence of varied Gurdwaras based on caste/community lines.



Honorable Dr. Ronki Ram honored at the auspicious occasion of 550th Parkash Purv of Sri Guru Nanak Dev ji at IK Gujral PTU Kapurthala (Punjab) on November 10, 2019.

visit at these places and his enchanting teachings therein proved to the local people that Hindustan was no longer the land of infidels that had to be conquered and enslaved. On the contrary, Guru Nanak proved them that spiritual knowledge is not only the fiefdom of Islam and Hinduism. It resided in every corner of the planet wherever the humanity was respected and the downtrodden were taken care of. He was able to win over his detractors through love, empathy and compassion. He convinced them with his reason based argumentation to locate where resided the reality. Whosoever had come into his contact got motivated and convinced about the eternal truth wrapped in the sacred words of his spiritual poetry. He spoke and conversed in the language of the common people - Punjabi. He addressed almost all sections of the society in the medieval Punjab and took special note of the socially excluded sections of the society and women. He was, as underlined above, spoke for the emancipation and empowerment of the socially excluded people and women while invoking the moral and ethical principles relating to the all pervasive existence of the attributeless God in each and every particle in the cosmos. Since God himself pervade in everyone and everywhere, no one should be victimized in the name of caste, gender and creed. In His eyes, all carry equal weight. Since lowest of the low (Nichan under Nich Jati) and women were denied equal rights and subjected to all sorts of humiliations and were made to suffer in ignominy, Guru Nanak placed special

ਭੰਡਹੁ ਹੀ ਭੰਡੁ ਉਪਜੈ ਭੰਡੈ ਬਾਤੁ ਨ ਕੋਇ
ਨਾਨਕ ਭੰਡੈ ਬਾਹਰਾ ਏਕੇ ਸਚਾ ਸੋਇ ਜਿਤੁ ਮੁਖਿ
ਸਦਾ ਸਾਲਾਹੀਐ ਭਾਗਾ ਰਤੀ ਚਾਰਿ
ਨਾਨਕ ਤੇ ਮੁਖ ਉਜਲੇ ਤਿਤੁ ਸਚੈ ਦਰਬਾਰਿ

Similarly while raising his bold voice against the oppressive living conditions of the lower classes, Baba Nanak exhorted that those who care for the lowest of the low receive the grace of God.

ਨੀਚਾ ਅੰਦਰਿ ਨੀਚ ਜਾਤੁ, ਨੀਚੀ ਅਤਿ ਨੀਚ
ਨਾਨਕੁ ਤਿਨ ਕੈ ਸੰਗਿ ਸਾਥਿ, ਵਡਿਆ ਸਿਉ
ਕਿਆ ਰੀਸ
ਜਿਥੈ ਨੀਚ ਸਮਾਲੀਅਨਿ ਤਿਥੈ ਨਦਰਿ ਤੇਰੀ
ਬਖਸੀਸ

In an unjust society sharply divided into low and high castes segments, the grace of lord could not be invoked. Guru Nanak's tirade against social injustice and his life long commitment towards building an egalitarian society free from caste and gender divisions manly attracted downtrodden (victims of caste and gender divisions) towards his newly emerging faith that culminated into a well-structured religious order at the pious hands of Tenth Master also called Dasma Nanak - Guru Gobind Singh.

Though Sikh religion took 160 years to get its accomplished shape after the exhibit of Baba Nanak, some of its basic features which nurtured by him continued to shape the moral and ethical conduct of its follower even today. After the conclusion of his odysseys, Guru Nanak finally settled at Kartarpur Sahib, a new habitat that he founded after the completion of the first course of his odysseys. A sarover (water pond) and khooh (well) were dug at Kartarpur Sahib. It was at these two water bod-

Dismantling Casteism & Racism Symposium

Continuing the Unfinished Legacy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar

Saturday, October 12, 2019 (10AM – 3PM)

“Jai Bhim! Jai Martin Luther King!” So began Professor Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd’s address to a packed audience at the Michigan League on Saturday, October 12. Invoking Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar and Dr. Martin Luther King—two stalwarts in the global struggle against racism and casteism—Professor Shepherd kicked

off a full-day of presentations and discussions for the symposium “Dismantling Casteism & Racism: Continuing the Unfinished Legacy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.” The event was a first-ever collaboration between the Ambedkar Association of North America (AANA) and University of Michigan’s Program in Asian/Pacific Islander American (A/PIA) Studies. Aimed at building solidarity and examining issues that pertain to the Dalit community in South Asia, the symposium explored the politics of dignity and equal rights for marginalized communities in a global context with an emphasis on intersections with issues of gender, race, and religion. As the organizers put it, “We seek to strengthen conversations between scholars, activists, and practitioners in analyzing caste-based discrimination and violence in South Asia and beyond.”



tor of the International Dalit Forum—spoke about his early years as an activist for the Dalit cause when he first immigrated to the U.S. in the late 1960s. Dr. Annamalai described his efforts lecturing across the country to African American audiences about the struggle against casteism and penning editorials in Indian-American newspapers that challenged the benevolent image of Gandhi by highlighting his record of anti-Black racism and his role in undermining Dalit self-determination.

The Vandenberg room of the Michigan League was filled with nearly one-hundred audience members, including guests from California, Chicago, Toronto, Indiana and Kentucky. Two longtime activists of the Ambedkarite movement, Dr. Velu Annamalai (Washington, DC) and Dr. Gary Bagha (Sacramento) were also in attendance. During a reception held in Sterling Heights on Friday, Dr. Annamalai—the former executive direc-

tor of the International Dalit Forum—spoke about his early years as an activist for the Dalit cause when he first immigrated to the U.S. in the late 1960s. Dr. Annamalai described his efforts lecturing across the country to African American audiences about the struggle against casteism and penning editorials in Indian-American newspapers that challenged the benevolent image of Gandhi by highlighting his record of anti-Black racism and his role in undermining Dalit self-determination.

The Saturday morning session featured speeches from Professor Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, who recently retired from the Center for the Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy at Maulana Azad University, and Thenmozhi Soundararajan, the director of Equality Labs and former director of AANA in the U.S. One of India’s most prominent anti-caste intellectuals, Shepherd spoke about the “spiritual fascism” that undergirds caste practice and sharply criticized the virulent Hindu nationalism of modern India that continues to persecute and disenfranchise the Dalitbahujan community. Continuing these themes, Soundararajan discussed the role of “Hindu fascism” in proliferating a climate of violence and hatred towards Dalits, Muslims, Christians, and other nonupper-caste communities. Her presentation displayed examples of the proliferation of hate speech against Muslims and Dalits on social media as well as the bipartisan inroads that the Hindu Right have made in U.S. electoral politics. Her presentation asked a captivated audience to consider, “What does it mean to be

an Ambedkarite during a time of fascism?” “It means more than just coming to a conference,” Soundararajan explained, imploring the audience to consider how to continue the struggle against casteism and Hindutva outside of ivory tower spaces.

An afternoon session featured three panelists who discussed

AANA and symposium organizer, presented plaques and a copy of the Indian constitution to each of the panelists.

The symposium was the culmination of a conversation that began in January 2019, initiated by Mahesh Wasnik and Vivek Chavan of AANA in coordination with Professor Manan



more personal impacts of casteism, colorism, and racism by focusing on the role of mental health. Ankita Nikalje, M.S., M.Ed, a doctoral candidate at the College of Education at Purdue, described her personal experiences of living as a Dalit woman and connected her narrative to recent studies which highlight the rampant caste-based discrimination in the Asian-Indian immigrant community in the U.S in education, employment, local businesses, places of worship, and interpersonal relationships. Professor Ronald Hall from Michigan State University, whose scholarship has focused on the role of “colorism” in the African American community, drew connections between colorism and caste in South Asia.

The final panelist, Professor Gaurav Pathania from George Washington University, explored the ways that student activism in India has empowered Ambedkarite scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and OBC students to construct a new narrative to counter the mainstream narratives of Hindu mythology within the sacred spaces of higher education. He closed the afternoon panel with a recitation of his poem, “The Moon Mirrors a Manhole” (“चँद मँहोल या लगता है”).

To conclude the event, Mahesh Wasnik, a co-founder of the

Desai of UM’s A/PIA Studies program. In the end, the symposium brought together a number of communities not only at the University of Michigan and Metro-Detroit region, but nationally. It was sponsored by community organizations including the Periyar-Ambedkar Circle, the American Federation of Muslims of Indian Origin, and the Association for India’s Development.

A long list of University of Michigan sponsors also generously funded and supported the event, including A/PIA Studies, the Department of American Culture, the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Rackham’s DEA Programmatic Support Fund, the LSA Humanities Institute Mini Grant for Public Humanities, the Center for South Asian Studies, the Department of English Language & Literature, the Department of Comparative Literature, the Center for South Asian Studies, the Department of History, the Global Scholars Program, and the Barger Leadership Institute.

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Rajratan Ashok Ambedkar's Historic Visit to California

