

# My Dream: A Casteless India

By Dr. Thilagavathi Chandulal



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Dr. Thilagavathi (Tilly) Chandulal has practiced obstetrics and gynecology in India, the United Kingdom, and the Middle East, and has taught at the University of Madras and the Sultan Qaboos University of Oman.

While in south India she served the high and low castes through Christian mission hospitals, and in Abu Dhabi her patients included mothers with HIV/AIDS, the “Untouchables” of our modern society. Later, in Canada, with an Masters in Divinity from Wilfred Laurier University, she volunteered to serve the recent Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in Toronto.

For her masters thesis in philosophy, “The Use and Abuse of the Bhagavad-Gita,” she was given the 2012 Distinguished Student Award for MA in Philosophy by Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario.

She has also served as the Secretary of the Torch Club of St. Catharines, where she presented this paper on September 11, 2013.

Sixty-six years after India’s independence and fifty years after Dr. Martin Luther King’s iconic Dream Speech, my dream of a casteless India still remains unrealized. I am proud of Mother India’s most ancient civilization and her brilliant history of philosophy, art, literature, mathematics, and science. I am delighted at her recent economic progress and her being the world’s largest democracy. Nonetheless, I am distressed at her cancer, the caste system, which requires

urgent, complete, and permanent eradication.

Caste was started by the Indo-Aryan pastoral nomads who entered the Indus valley about 4000 years ago with high-speed horses harnessed to light chariots and defeated the agricultural local Indians. With fair skin, brown hair and hazel eyes, they imagined themselves superior to the defeated Dravidian races with dark skin, hair and eyes (Burnett 34).

A “color-coded” system of racial discrimination, an oligarchic monopoly of privileges by a small minority, caste is a fixed pyramidal hierarchy of four castes, *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaisyas*, and *Sudra*, with the Brahmin at the narrow top and the native Sudra at the base. The first three castes took the top three jobs of the society (priesthood, kingship and trade-cum-agriculture, respectively) and pushed the Sudras, 90% of the society, into the fourth level of servitude. Most accepted the alleged Aryan superiority; those who resisted were cast out as *Pariahs* or *Panchamas* (the casteless fifth level), who had no rights to the streets, wells, shops or jobs, except the most polluted, even though both the Sudras and the Panchamas were highly civilized Dravidian races that had lived in the land for centuries before the nomads arrived (Basham).

The caste system is not a temporary “division of labor” used in the early days of Aryan colonization, but rather a permanent “division of laborers.” Even a mere glimpse at the long history of caste and current caste-unrest would expose it as an ingenious Machiavellian scheme that Brahmins employed in hopes of holding power and privilege forever.

## *No evidence of castes in pre-Aryan India*

Katti Padma Rao, scholar and activist, writes that while the Dravidians had only professional guilds of equal dignity, the imperialistic Aryan invaders first united all human groups, tribes, and races in India with themselves into one solid group, and next divided them into four castes, giving certain definite status to each. Every level in this society was to keep itself pure through rules made by its own members to keep social life, cultural life, and marriage exclusively within the caste. Brahmins lived in their choice *agraharams* in the centre of the village, Sudras in the margins, and the Untouchables in the *cheri* outside, worse than Soweto in South Africa. Thus, the Indian caste system, practiced as part of the Hindu religion, was more miserable than the *apartheid* in South Africa.

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## *Authenticity, origin and authority*

The four-caste system derives its power from three sacred texts, the *Rig Veda*, *Bhagavad-Gita*, and *The Laws of Manu*.<sup>1</sup> The *Rig Veda* (10.90.12) and

Manu (1.31) declare that God created Priests out of his mouth, Warriors from his arms, Commoners from his thighs, and Servants from his feet. The *Bhagavad-Gita* (3.35; 4.13; 9.32; 18.42, 44) claims that Krishna, the *avatar* (incarnation) of the supreme God, Vishnu, created the “three inner energies” that make the priests wise, warriors active and all others dull. Thus the *Brahmins*, allegedly born with an inborn wisdom, robbed the lowest caste of all humanity and dignity. (This is in contrast to the Biblical model, in which God created all human beings equally in his own image and likeness, *imago dei*.)

According to the law-giver Manu, a low caste person is a dehumanized slave expected to do his caste-job for no wage. He will be punished if he challenges the sacred *Bhagavad Gita* or the law of Manu; his only pleasure must be to do his God-ordained caste-duty, even if he has no will or ability to do it. Defiance of caste laws will bring punishments now and degraded births later, according to the laws of *karma* (Manu 10.51-56). (In contrast, while Immanuel Kant’s “Categorical Imperative” does require that one do one’s prescribed duty, it insists that one can be morally obliged to do only what one actually can do.)

### *Untouchables*

Until the middle of the 20th century, some Indians of the lowest caste were called “Untouchable,” a derogatory label given to members of the lowest hereditary Hindu class. The Untouchables were exploited to do unclean tasks, deemed impure, and imagined to pollute others by their touch, and therefore were segregated from society permanently. Manu’s deterrent punishment (c. 2nd century CE) of making an Untouchable walk the streets with thorny branches round his waist for letting his shadow pollute a Brahmin, and of pouring hot lead into his ears for listening to a sacred Sanskrit chant meant for the Brahmin ear alone, indicate clearly enough what

the social standing of the Untouchables once was. Fortunately, these barbarities are no longer in practice.

### *Caste and class*

Caste and class are two different inequalities not easily understood in the west. Caste did not come from class, but was created by the Aryan religion. One’s class can temporarily move up or down the vertical scale with changes in one’s fortune, fame or marriage, but caste is inherited at birth and passed on to the descendants forever. Usually, caste destroys social equality and class destroys economic equality, but most Untouchables suffer both social and economic exploitations.

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### *Some real life accounts*

When I was ten, I walked to school with a Brahmin girl. As I waited for her while she was getting ready, she strictly told me not to touch her widowed aunt’s wet white *Sari* hanging on the line. Since I was a Sudra, my touch would pollute the *Sari* and her aunt would be annoyed to rewash it. I felt humiliated, as my hands were as clean as hers. Though her grades in class were mediocre, her attitude towards others was one of superiority and purity, inherited at birth.

In the same year, I remember talking to a poor untouchable scavenger. I asked him, “Why are you doing this dirty job?” and “in what grade is your son?” He said sadly, his caste law restricted him to doing only this job and banned his son from entering any school. Seeing my eyes brimming with tears, he consoled me, “God who gave me this caste will take care of me.” I wondered if God created caste inequalities. At present, education of the low castes and the poor is high on the agenda of the Indian government, but slow in implementation. As the needy live in the villages, more schools and teachers are needed there; their curriculum must be the same as in the cities because, the human brain being wonderful, given the opportunities, the poor will soon catch up with the rich.

### *Caste in the British Raj*

The British railways had First Class carriages but no separate coaches for the upper caste. When I was travelling by train one night in the 1940s, two Brahmin women entered our compartment, already crammed with sleepy passengers, who made room for them. As the train jogged along, an untouchable woman happened to touch the older Brahmin woman, who yelled, “Sit away from me!” When the other screamed back louder, “Go to the First Class compartment, if you don’t want to be touched,” silence reigned once again in the compartment.

Although the Raj noted caste identities in its census system, it gave people jobs unauthorized by caste, so the Sudras became teachers and Brahmins turned into soldiers. But Brahmins somehow always wound up in the higher posts, and their monopoly of power continued even after the British had left. According to one regional election study (2004), Brahmins were 5%, Christians, Buddhists and Muslims together 20%, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes 26%, and Backward castes were 49%. Thus 5% of the population politically dominated the other 95%.

### *Caste in India in the 21st century*

Caste is on-going and rampant. When I visited south India in 2008, the cover page of every newspaper of Tamil Nadu had pictures of a seven-year-old low caste girl whose arm had been broken with a ruler by an upper caste teacher. Her crime? Using an upper caste cup to drink water from an upper caste pot. The police took no action; protest marches were of no avail. Apparently there was no rule against such inhuman violence, or the rule was not enforced. Caste roams in the house like a tiger, but is not seen by most.

Although some may deny it, caste even matters among Indians outside of India. Indians are courteous to Canadians and eat with them, but they do not eat food cooked by lower caste Indians, although they may eat with them in restaurants, whose Canadian cooks have no caste. More traditional-minded Indians do not inter-marry, but bring a bride or groom of their own caste from India; however, the more broad-minded Indian youth do marry inter-caste, inter-race, or inter-religion, thus facilitating the demise of castes.

A couple of years ago, I interviewed an educated Brahmin woman for a volunteer position in Canada. Within the first few minutes of our meeting, she asked me what my caste was. Though shocked by her question, I said calmly, "As a Christian, I do not believe in caste; as an Indian Christian, the Indian government gave me no caste, and as a human being, I chose not to own any caste in my school, hospital or society." She said, politely, she thought I was a Brahmin. That, I replied, was no excuse, for caste is evil. Beloved India, your castes cross the seas!

### *Origin of the new name, Dalit*

I was shocked to learn from Sir A.R. Ramasamy Mudaliar's editorial in the *Justice* newspaper of 8 September, 1927, and from Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's essay *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) that

Gandhi adored the Brahmin caste and "Four-Color-Justice," and even went on a Fast-Unto-Death to stop the British Parliament from awarding the Untouchables a separate electorate similar to those of the Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians. Gandhi gave them a new name, Harijan—children of God—a perhaps well-intentioned gesture that nonetheless still identified them as low castes. Gandhi did get Untouchability abolished, but without abolishing Brahminic privilege and power. After independence in 1947, the Indian government gave the Untouchables a new name, the "Scheduled Caste," that was merely a new indignity. India needs no new caste names, but new laws against all caste names.

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Caste name being a symbol of status, the upper castes add it to the given or family name. Ashamed of their caste-names, such as *Pariah*, many untouch-

ables write only their given name and father's name. In the 1990s, the Untouchables named themselves *Dalit* (crushed).

Ambedkar, who was the greatest Indian after Gandhi, said that the only alternative to caste is castelessness, and that caste reforms had failed because the reformers did not attack the real issues. Since caste problems have not only a religious aspect but also social and economic aspects, he argued, it is impossible to destroy caste by merely attacking the religious myths without also destroying the systems of social inequality, cheap labor and slavery. The Dalits, Ambedkar believed, have to organize themselves into a single social class that will build an alternative democratic moral social order. However, modern Dalits disagree with Ambedkar's advice for the Hindus to convert to democratic religions, Christianity or Buddhism, because both these are minority religions (3%) with poor economic resources.

Ambedkar, who was born a Dalit and rose to being a barrister, professor, and legal constitutional expert, admired the egalitarian teachings of Christ and rightly despised the caste-ridden nature of the Church, but mistakenly doubted the patriotism of the Indian Christians. He entered casteless Buddhism along with 500,000 Dalits saying, "I was born a Hindu, but will not die a Hindu."

Christian *Dalits* are twice as unfortunate as Hindu Dalits. The Indian Constitution gave protective privileges and reserved seats in the parliament, legislatures and municipal governing bodies to Dalits of all religions except Christianity, although all knew that Christian Dalits also were suffering caste injustices inside and outside the church. As Christian Dalits did not receive equal protection, some Hindu extremists burned their churches, homes and schools or raped and killed them.



### *The difficulty of reform*

Caste rolls on inexorably, as both the beneficiaries and the victims are puppets tied to the wheel of the Hindu religion. The Gupta emperors (320-540 AD) ruthlessly defeated the influence of imperial Buddhism against castes. In the middle ages, the egalitarian teachings of the *Bhakti* saints, Tukaram, Kabir, and the Tamil *Alvars* and *Nayanmars* could not remove societal inequalities, but only connect the victims to God for solace. The reform movements of Ambedkar, Mahatma Phule, and Periyar Ramasamy in the 19th and 20th centuries could not achieve their goals because wealthy upper caste land-lord-politicians were diverting government awards for poor laborers into their own pockets.

Non-Brahmin castes sometimes take new names that sound Brahminic or become vegetarians, but the Brahmins do not consider them their equals; political parties with Hindu religious names and upper caste politicians in rural areas and Brahmin Chief Ministers ignore caste injustices and inequalities.

As Martin Luther King, Jr., said, “the oppressor never gives freedom voluntarily.” But there are signs that change is possible. Broad-minded educated youth in urban settings, for instance, are having marginal success in breaking caste walls through mixed marriages. Dalits join modernized Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and those of humanistic faiths of all castes and tribes to build their own future. Struggling against their poverty and in-house rivalries, they are trying to advance their education and moral vigour to realize a humane social order of complete freedom, honour and equality. They do not want others to be their saviours, but are ready to be their partners.

I am pro-Dalit but not anti-Brahmin. I dream of a casteless socie-

ty, where Dalits of all religions will rise high without revenge in their hearts and all non-Dalits will accept the equality of all Indians. I dream also that when the Dalits thunder their just demands with one voice, from one platform, the honourable leaders of the Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist, and Christian religions will collectively proclaim eradication of the entire caste system throughout India; the Christians will follow the Dalit footsteps of Christ, the glorious deliverer of the oppressed. Thirdly, I dream that the government of India will fulfill the constitutional utopia of secular casteless democracy proclaimed in 1947.

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If *apartheid* in South Africa could cease and the Berlin wall could fall, caste could end too, with healing and without bloodshed, perhaps, within our own lifetime!

### Note

1 The four *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* are the most authoritative Hindu sacred texts; the law books and epics are less authoritative, the Puranas and Agamas written in the vernacular languages of the peoples even less so.

*Rig Veda*, the earliest scripture of the Aryans, contains hymns recited at rituals and sacrifices to nature-gods, fire, wind, sun, thunder and lightning. Ralph Griffith, who translated the *Rig Veda*, says that out of its 1028 hymns, only one verse in the last chapter (x .90.12) enumerates the four castes, and R. C. Zaehner, who translated the *Bhagavad-Gita*, deems that this verse could be an interpolation to derive authority to practice castes.

The semi-historical epic *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavad-Gita* (*The Song of the Lord*), which is the central part of the epic, are not so sacred as the Vedas and the Upanishads. The epic *Mahabharata* is seven times longer than the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined. In the *Gita*, Krishna, the *avatar* (human incarnation) of the Supreme God, Vishnu, claims to have created and authorized the four castes, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya, Sudra, and visits the earth “whenever justice fails and evil multiplies in the world, to destroy evil doers and bless the righteous.” Modern Hindus consider the Buddha as one of the ten *avatars* of Vishnu even though he made many anti-caste statements.

Manu’s secular law book, written around the early Christian era, taught the Aryan conquerors how to use to the caste system to control the conquered races and women perpetually.

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