

**The Reclamation of Human Personality: Paulo Freire and Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar in comparative perspective; SIMON, Laurence R., Brandeis University, [simon@brandeis.edu](mailto:simon@brandeis.edu)**

**Summary**

On the walls of the Foundation of His Sacred Majesty in the Indian city of Chennai, an organization working against untouchability, Paulo Freire's photograph hangs next to the Dalit (untouchable) human rights leader, B.R. Ambedkar. Freire and Ambedkar were towering figures among radical social theorists of the last century. While Ambedkar is largely unknown outside of India, Freire is widely respected by Dalit leaders but without a close knowledge of his ideas and relevance to their situation. Now years after their deaths, their renown in the developing world remains iconic, particularly among oppressed groups fighting for recognition and social justice. While of different generations and emerging from communities of suffering half way around the world from each other, their thought and praxis deserve comparative analysis asking the relevance of their ideas to the rapidly changing and globalizing world of the poor and to the present notions of justice and human rights that permeate poor nations much more today than in their formative years. For both thinkers, freedom is a personal and social transformation of Wagnerian proportions, affecting not only the oppressed but the oppressor in a quest for a common humanity. Yet difference of context and culture imbue their work and these differences may yield lessons for the struggles ahead – particularly the role that religious movements play for liberation or oppression.

## **Justification**

With over a hundred million Dalits still stigmatized by untouchability, dehumanized and largely cut off from a globalizing economy and norms of justice, paths to emancipation are still rare. Freire's pedagogy of education, creating spaces where concepts of justice and hope emerge and are sustained, is of great interest to Dalit leadership. These ideas find a fertile ground largely because of their consistency with the thought of the historic Dalit leader, B.R. Ambedkar.

Ambedkar was born in 1891 in what is now Madhya Pradesh and into the profound alienation of untouchability. Permitted with a few other Dalits to attend primary school, he needed to sit in a separate room with the door open to listen to his lessons. When the teacher came to the threshold, he had to put his slate on the floor and retreat to a corner so that the teacher would not risk being polluted. He was the only Dalit in the school to pass his tests. While others internalized the oppressions that enveloped them, Ambedkar developed a determination to break free. This determination, with the help of an enlightened Brahman teacher in high school, where Ambedkar was the only untouchable, took him all the way to Columbia University where he received two Masters and the Ph.D. in Economics. In London he received the D.Sc. in Economics from the London School of Economics and was admitted to the Bar. Returning to India, Ambedkar rose to great prominence not only within the Dalit communities but within the future ruling class of independent India. His tense relationship with Mohandas Gandhi, however, is among the most important and least known facets of the struggle for Dalit dignity with

Ambedkar urging the total annihilation of caste and Gandhi arguing for its preservation, albeit in a humane form, as the basis of Indian social order. Gandhi renamed untouchables “harijan” (children of God) but Dalits rejected this naming for “harijan” were (and still are) poor Dalit girls given to Hindu temples for lives of devotion while in reality they were forced into lives as sex slaves to priests and wealthy donors to the temple.

There are many parallels in the thought of Ambedkar and Freire. One was their relationship with religious thought. Freire became interested in liberation theology while resident at Harvard during his early exile from Brazil. He encountered the thought of theologians like Gustavo Gutierrez who explored the social meaning of the gospels and sparked a revolution in the Catholic Church of his time that led to the 1968 Medellin Conference of Bishops that chose “the preferential option for the poor” and overturned centuries of Church alliance with the oligarchs and dictators.

For Freire, liberation theology became an ally through the tens of thousands of “base Christian communities” in Latin America where the poor formed Bible study groups that gave them courage that Jesus was a liberator. For Ambedkar, Brahman Hinduism with its defense of caste was the oppressor and he could not find a theology of liberation within.

In contrast to the liberation theology that grew from the social gospel of Catholicism, Ambedkar confronted the dominant religious culture of India, Brahman Hinduism, for creating and perpetuating the suffering of low caste and Dalit people and subjugating them to the deepest

of discriminations that flow from the eternal Laws of Manu, the order of caste-based society, articulated well over two thousand years ago. While epochs changed, Brahmanism did not. While universal norms of human rights emerged, Dalits were caught in a psychological isolation that like Freire's analysis of the Pernambuco of his time was ahistorical, without personal agency or notions of justice. The situation of Dalits was much like the poor of the Northeast of Brazil. When Helder Camara, the Archbishop of Recife y Olinda, asked why so many children die in childhood, his people offered the often repeated belief that this is the way God made the world. Determinism characterized both the poor of Pernambuco and of India. For belief in a closed system of thought, reincarnation based on karma, justified the birth into untouchability.

While liberal and reformist efforts have indeed been made in Hinduism, Ambedkar chose a more radical and, if I may characterize it, Freirean path. In 1956 Ambedkar announced to the world that since Brahman Hinduism would not allow a path to liberation for his people, he would just stop being a Hindu. He converted to Buddhism which does not have untouchability and 500,000 Dalits showed up for a mass conversion. This ceremony was the most powerful act of conscientization in Dalit history. It is almost unimaginable how profound an act it was to liberate oneself from the deepest of oppressive identities, to change epochs in the utterance of 22 vows of Buddhism, to emerge a new man and a new woman able to see the difference between culture and nature, between social construct and social contract. This great act of conscientization culminated Ambedkar's efforts for the liberation of his people. He died seven weeks later.

But this paper will not dwell on the past. Freire's thought is rising in India and I have been invited for the second year by the Indian Council of Social Science Research to tour India giving workshops on Freirean pedagogy and social movements. The conditions of poverty among Dalits today remind me of Freire's work in Pernambuco. Many in India are so oppressed that for them the awareness of injustice still does not fully penetrate their situation and for those more attuned to the social origins of their outcaste status, they do not possess the capacity to demand their rights. They live in a social reality that envelopes them and are subject to the tyranny of place and the simple need to survive. Freire talks about the utter exhaustion of immersion in deep poverty and how the structure of domination embeds itself in the very personality of the poor. He speaks of the cognitive bias of economic elite who live in the convenient myths of their superiority. And he writes of the yearning of the oppressed to recover their lost humanity. Ambedkar agrees: "For ours is a battle not for wealth or for power. It is battle for freedom. It is the battle of reclamation of human personality." These are ideas of critical pedagogy for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Dalit liberation.

About Prof. Laurence R Simon

<http://heller.brandeis.edu/facguide/person.html?emplid=a1717d052c37a3544bf6999199eb4dde9986541d>

Paulo Freire was Prof. Simon's mentor at the beginning of his career.