

**hindustantimes**

■ Tuesday, April 10, 2012

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April 09, 2012

First Published: 21:26 IST(9/4/2012)

Last Updated: 18:07 IST(10/4/2012)

## Not caste in stone

Narendra Modi was entirely right to try to keep the people of Gujarat away from Joseph Lelyveld's wonderful new book *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle With India*. Not because of what it says about his sex life (or mostly the lack of it), but because it shines such a clear light on the distance between the nation Gandhi wanted us to be and the nation we were and, to a substantial extent, remain. For all our attempts to claim lineage from him, all the pictures beaming down on us in government offices and corporate lobbies, he was less the proud paterfamilias than the irascible uncle who always wanted us to be so much better than what we were prepared to be.

Given that, I was struck by how little of what Lelyveld calls Gandhi's struggles with India had to do with economics (but then I am no expert on Gandhi). He certainly cared a lot about his vision of a village-based economy for India but he never made a political cause out of it. Gandhi's main battles, when they were not against the British, had to do with religious harmony, caste relations and to a lesser extent, our sanitary habits.

It's no accident that all these issues continue to trouble us today. Lelyveld talks about a fact that always slightly baffled Gandhi: the same people who heaped such adulation upon him found so many ways to resist his attempts to reform them. Confronted with the Indian practice of relieving themselves at the nearest convenient spot, Lelyveld quotes him saying "Let the people defecate wherever they choose; Let us not even ask them to avoid a particular place or go elsewhere. But let us go cleaning up without a word... If this does not work, then there is no such thing as non-violence". But it didn't seem to work: Gandhi tried this strategy of radical shaming a number of times, starting in Kolkata in 1901, when he came for his first Indian National Congress meetings and was dismayed to find the conference premises littered with human refuse. When, 30 years later, he settled in Segaon (near Wardha) seeking insight into how to change rural India, he asked his team to carry out exactly this policy. But the villagers didn't seem to be particularly shamed: Lelyveld quotes the son of Gandhi's secretary Mahadev Desai complaining: "What is the advantage of this work? There is no effect on the villagers. On the contrary they go on giving orders to us to clean various places." Gandhi counseled patience, but eventually the effort was quietly given up and a member of the (low) caste that traditionally did such jobs was hired to keep the public places clean.

Despite this and many other similar experiences, Gandhi never gave up on the idea that social reforms need to be rooted in the mind-shared values and empathy. This was at the heart of his disagreement with that other great social reformer, Babasaheb Ambedkar. Gandhi wanted the upper castes to embrace their kinship with the rest of Hindu society. Ambedkar was happy if they could just be

compelled to behave. Gandhi thought a change of heart was possible (and necessary), and he travelled 12,500 miles across the country holding public meetings on what he called the Harijan question to make this happen. Ambedkar thought that prejudice was so ingrained in the caste Hindu psyche that this was a waste of time (or, in his less generous moments, a deliberate dilatory tactic on Gandhi's part). As it turned out, Ambedkar's views carried the day — no surprise, given that Gandhi was not getting enough traction even within the Congress central assembly which, despite his three separate fasts on the issue, failed to pass the resolution he wanted on the opening of temples to all Hindus. The constituent assembly, under Ambedkar's leadership, produced a constitution that was in many ways breathtakingly original, not least in the radicalism of its break with tradition. Caste discrimination of any form, unless it was positive discrimination for the erstwhile depressed castes, was made illegal.

What we often forget, and Lelyveld's book ends too early to discuss, is the public reaction to the new constitution. There were, of course, disagreements and negotiations and many things never really happened the way they were intended to, but there was little public protest, certainly by comparison with the reaction to the philosophically similar US civil rights legislation in the 1960s or the later Mandal commission report. May be this was Gandhi's gift to Ambedkar: he might not have actually persuaded Hindus, but perhaps he did succeed in making a lot of them uneasy with their own prejudices.

But Ambedkar also had a gift for Gandhi. Gandhi wanted conversion rather than compulsion. Ambedkar went for compulsion, but compulsion can sometimes lead to conversion (though I am not sure that Ambedkar had enough faith in the upper castes to anticipate this). In West Bengal panchayats where there is reservation for women pradhans are chosen by lots. As a result, there are otherwise identical places that have never been reserved, places that have been reserved once and places that have had two rounds of reservations. In the never-reserved panchayats, male voters are convinced that women can't do the job. By the time they have had a woman pradhan twice, prejudice, as measured in the study, is entirely gone and men are willing to vote for women even when they are running against a man. We see a similar phenomenon in Mumbai municipality elections.

And almost surely something like this is happening with caste. Being forced to live, study and work together has normalised the other. When the school meals programme was launched, there were complaints about children eating together, but in the end everyone somehow accepted that this is how it had to be. Prejudice and discrimination are far from having vanished, but they are clearly in retreat. Of all the achievements of modern India this might well be the greatest.

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