

**TEXT OF ARUNDHATI ROY'S MAHATMA AYYANKALI MEMORIAL LECTURE,
KERALA UNIVERSITY: 17th JULY 2014**

My comrades on the dais and friends, I'm a little nervous because I wasn't expecting that I would have to speak to such a large audience. I told Dr Suresh [Jnaneswaran Director, Mahatma Ayyankali Chair] when I was coming that I'm just going to come and make a few informal remarks. I thought there would be about a hundred people. Thank you so much for coming. I'm going to try and... please forgive me if I disturb the comfort level here because that is what I do. First of all I'm here not as an academic or a scholar but as a storyteller. We all know that every society needs heroes, and in India we are not short of heroes except that I think the ones we celebrate are mostly the wrong ones. When we look at the life of someone like Mahatma Ayyankali ... as a novelist, as a person who has written screenplays, I wonder how is it possible that we do not have a really amazing mainstream film about a man who is such a hero. He doesn't need a scriptwriter. You know he doesn't need us to add things or exaggerate things about him. He had everything that should make us so proud as a people, as a country and yet so little is known about him outside of Kerala and even inside Kerala among the elites so little is known about a person who as many speakers have said, even before the Russian revolution—many years before the Russian revolution—had organized peasants against landlords, and *successfully*. Ambedkar at the Round Table Conference, the First Round Table Conference [in 1930], was trying to make a legislation about social boycotts in rural areas... but years before that Ayyankali was fighting it on the ground. What a story! And what a political conspiracy it is to keep this person, this absolutely amazing man, away from the popular imagination. I did say that sometimes we celebrate the wrong heroes. In 1904 he (Ayyankali) started a movement to ask that his people, the Pulaya people, Pulaya children, be admitted to schools. We come from a nation that suffers a great ill health. The caste system is... it's not just that it has oppressed Dalits or oppressed, the *lower* caste as they call them, the subordinated castes—but it has made the dominant classes a sick people. So it's not just an act of charity for people to think of the annihilation of caste... it is for everyone, for our society as a whole, because we can forget about being like China or being like America as long as we have this disease in our souls.

While I'm talking about changing our heroes, I just want to read you something. In 1904, when here in Kerala there was a movement led by Ayyankali that was fighting for the rights of Dalits to be educated, the Father of the Nation Mahatma Gandhi was in South Africa. What is the legend of Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa? That he fought caste, that he fought race in South Africa... when he came back from South Africa in 1913, he was already being called a Mahatma. Let me tell you that the story of Mahatma Gandhi that we are taught in school and that we are made to believe is a lie and it's time we faced up to it. It is time we unveiled some real truths here because we cannot be basing our ideas of ourselves as a nation on a lie. So, while Mahatma Ayyankali was fighting for education of Dalit children here, Gandhi was in South Africa and I want to read to you what he said about Dalit peoples in South Africa. In South Africa at that time there were two kinds of Indians. One were the Passenger Indians who went there to do business, and the other was indentured labour who mostly came from subordinated classes and castes and here is what Gandhi said about the bonded labour.

“Whether they are Hindus or Mahomedans, they are absolutely without any moral or religious instruction worthy of the name. They have not learned enough to educate themselves without any outside help. Placed thus, they are apt to yield to the slightest temptation to tell a lie. After some time, lying with them becomes a habit and a disease. They would lie without any reason, without any proper... prospect of bettering themselves materially, indeed, without knowing what they are doing. They reach a stage in life when their moral faculties have completely collapsed owing to neglect.”(CWMG 1,200)

Now this goes on, this same tone is used about black African people... when Gandhi was in jail he talks about Africans in the most horrible way. Here is a passage written by Gandhi about [sharing] jails with Kaffirs, black people.

“We were all prepared for hardships, but not quite for this experience. We could understand not being classed with the whites, but to be placed on the same level with the natives seemed to be too much to put up with. I then felt that Indians had not launched our passive resistance too soon. Here was further proof that the obnoxious law was meant to emasculate Indians... Apart from whether or not this implies degradation, I must say it's rather dangerous. Kaffirs as a rule are uncivilized, the convicts even more so. They are troublesome, and dirty and live like animals. ... and I have resolved in my mind on an

agitation to ensure that Indian prisoners are not lodged with kaffirs or others. We cannot ignore the fact that there is no common ground between them and us and whoever wants to sleep in the same room as them have ulterior motives for doing so.” (CWMG 9, 256-7)

I have followed Gandhi’s writings in South Africa. I started out by looking at the debates between Gandhi and Ambedkar and his attitudes on caste and then went further back to examine his attitude on race. His doctrine of nonviolence was based on an acceptance of the most brutal social hierarchy the world has ever known, the caste system... what does it mean? What does it say to us? A person who believed that the hereditary occupation of people who belonged to whichever caste they belonged to should be maintained. So I ask you... a person who believed that a scavenger should remain a scavenger all their lives... I will read to you an essay Mahatma Gandhi wrote called *The Ideal Bhangi*, the ideal scavenger. So, my question is, do we need to name our universities after a person like Gandhi or do we need to name our universities after someone like Ayyankali?

At some point we have to stop being dishonest, at some point we have to face up to centuries of lies we have been told and lies we have told ourselves. There is nothing I’m saying here that is not straight from the horse’s mouth. Everything I’m saying is quoted from the writings of Gandhi himself. I’m not making any judgments. In 1936, when perhaps one of the most famous revolutionary texts, *Annihilation of Caste*, was written by Dr Ambedkar, one of the most brilliant intellectual, erudite, texts full of rage against a system that still exists today... that same year, in 1936, Gandhi wrote an essay called *The Ideal Bhangi*... bhangi, as you know in the North is a scavenger...

“He should know how a right kind of latrine is constructed and the correct way of cleaning it. He should know how to overcome and destroy the odour of excreta and the various disinfectants to render them innocuous. He should likewise know the process of converting urine and night soil into manure. But that is not all. My ideal Bhangi would know the quality of night-soil and urine. He would keep a close watch on these and give a timely warning to the individual concerned.” (Harijan, Nov 1936)

Many years later, today’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi wrote a text too, in a book called *Karmayogi*, and here is what he says. He is also talking about bhangis, the Balmiki community...

“I do not believe that they are doing this job to sustain their livelihood. Had this been so, they would not have continued with this type of job generation after generation. At some point of time, somebody must have got the enlightenment that it is their (the Balmikis’) duty to work for the happiness of the entire society and the Gods and that they have to do this job bestowed upon them by Gods and that this job of cleaning up should continue as an internal spiritual activity for centuries.” (Karmayogi, by Narendra Modi)

So this is what the powerful people in this country believe and our... the question we have to ask ourselves is that is it all right to go on naming roads and universities and bazaars and statues and programmes after them or is it time for us to be a little more honest.

I just want to end with a small assessment of caste today. Today we have a government that is proud to proclaim itself as a government of the Hindu Rashtra. It is proud to say that we are a Hindu nation. How did this idea of Hindutava first begin? Early on in the 17th century and earlier, the subordinated castes, Dalits, were converting to Christianity and to Islam in the millions. There was no problem. Nobody minded that. But at the turn of the century when the idea of an empire began to be replaced by the idea of a nation-state, when it was not enough to ride a horse into Delhi and say now I’m the emperor of India... when the politics of representation began, there was a huge anxiety about numbers. You know at that point the “upper” caste Hindus decided—the privileged caste Hindus let me say—decided that it would be terrible if the 40 million Dalits continued to convert. That’s when the whole upper caste reformist movement started, of which Gandhi was a legatee. Before that Hindus never referred to themselves as Hindu; they used to refer themselves as only their caste names. But then Hindu became not a religious but a *political* identity. They started to talk about the Hindu Nation, the Hindu Race and that’s how Hindutava started. Today you have the secular liberals. One of the differences between them and the Hindutva brigade is the debate about how Islam came to India. The seculars say, “You are exaggerating. The fact that is that there was no such vandalism.” And the Hindutava brigade says, “No, Islamists came and they broke all our temples and they destroyed our culture.” But then you have someone like Jotiba Phule, one of the earliest modern anticaste intellectuals, who said: “Yes, they broke the temples but thank God they broke the temples. They invited us into their dining rooms to inter-dine and inter-marry.” There was that

whole breaking of the caste system which people celebrated. So even our contemporary debates become so weak when you don't put justice at the core of things.

When Dr Jnaneswaran introduced me, he said: "She has always stood with the marginalized." I actually have a different view of myself. I think that it's an awful thing when people introduce me as a writer who is the "voice of the voiceless". I don't believe there is anything like the voiceless. There is only the deliberately silenced. Nobody is voiceless. I don't claim to represent anybody but myself. I think what we need to ask ourselves is: what kind of people are we? Are we the people who place justice at the center of our society or are we a people who enjoy the idea of institutionalizing injustice? Are we a people who are so sick that we actually believe that there are some people who are... who deserve more entitlement than others... because if we are that kind of people we are a very, very sick people. But once you put justice at the core of how you think, then the stories you tell are different.

Today people talk a lot about how this new economy has broken the caste system. They say there are a new set of networks now. I want to end with a very brief description of how caste and this new corporate capitalism are playing out. At the turn of the century, the debate on caste was actually what created Hindutva—the idea of trying to bring Dalits into the Hindu fold. Today we have a Hindutva government that has come to power and has proved that it doesn't need the Muslim vote, it doesn't need the Dalit vote, because it has the whole section of what is rather known obscenely as OBC, Other Backward Castes, which has swung towards Hindutva. So what does all this mean to the marginalized? In this nation of a billion people, 800 million live on less than 20 rupees a day. We celebrate the Dandi March for which Gandhi mobilized millions of people—however much we criticize him, we cannot deny that he was a great mobiliser. He mobilized millions of people against the British salt tax. But we do not remember the Mahad satyagraha where our own people [Privileged castes] prevented our own people [Dalits] from drinking water from public tank. That is the real satyagraha. But that was referred to as 'duragraha'. In the Mahad satyagraha Ambedkar fought for water, for the access to public water. In the salt satyagraha people fought against the salt tax. Today we have a corporation, the Tatas, who control the trade of salt. We have the Gujarat model put before us. In Gujarat studies show that 98 percent of its villages practice caste in egregious ways. Dalits are not allowed near

common water. They are murdered. Caste is practiced in the most egregious ways, and this, our media says, is the great model for development.

If you look at fact that a hundred Indians own more wealth than 25 percent of the GDP, now you look at these big corporations... Reliance, Adani, Mittal... the major corporations, all of them are owned and run by Baniyas. Ambani, Mittal, Birla, Adani, Shangvi, Jindal, Mittal again... all the top corporations... all the wealth on the top is controlled by Baniyas who own the corporations. At the bottom of the social ladder, whether it is the Maoists, the adivasis, in the Dandakarnya forest who are surrounded by the Baniya traders... or the people in the North East... Baniyas, who make up 2.7 percent of the population, virtually controls the economy. Who owns the newspapers? *Times of India*, *Indian Express*, Zee TV... now Reliance owns 27 news channels... even the media is owned by Baniyas and controlled by Brahmins. The corporations are owned by Baniyas so Capitalism and Caste have merged to become the Mother of Capitalism. And in the mean time, according to **National Crime [Records] Bureau**, a crime is committed against a Dalit by a non-Dalit every 16 minutes. Everyday more than four Dalit women are raped by upper caste. Every week 13 Dalits are murdered and six are kidnapped. In 2012 alone, the year of the Delhi gangrape which was reported all over the world, 1,574 Dalit women were raped and only 10 percent of rapes are reported ... so you can look at the figures. In 1919, in what came to be known as the Red Summer in the US, 76 black American men and women were lynched. In India in 2012, 651 Dalits were murdered and that's just the rape and butchering, not the stripping and parading naked, the forced shit-eating, the seizing of land and the social boycotts... As Ambedkar said, "To untouchables Hindusim is a veritable chamber of horrors", and today we live in a country where since 1947, when we supposedly became independent, there has not been a single day when the Indian army has not been deployed against "our own people." So from 1947 whether it's Kashmir, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Telengana, Punjab, Goa... every day of the year the Indian army is fighting its own people. And who are these people? Think about it. Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Adivasis, Dalits. So it's an uppercaste in its DNA... an uppercaste Hindu state always at war with the subordinated, with the religious minorities... so how are we going to change this? It has to be done in a hundred different ways. But it has to be done with a change of who we think our heroes are and our heroines are. Ayyankali, Pandita Ramabai, Savitribai Phule, Jotirao Phule, these are the people our people need to hear about. Enough of the

old bigoted people who have been sold to us on a sea of lies. I think we need to change the names of our universities to begin with. Thank you.

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