

Caste or Colony?: Indianizing Race in the United States*

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Abstract: Since the 1830s, thinkers in both the United States and India have sought to establish analogies between their respective countries. Although many have felt the U.S. black experience to have obvious parallels in India, there has been a fundamental disagreement about whether being black is comparable to being colonized or to being untouchable. By examining these two competing visions, this essay introduces new topics to the study of black internationalism, including the caste school of race relations, B. R. Ambedkar's anti-caste movement, and the changing significance of India for Martin Luther King, Jr.

In 1999, UNESCO published a short book, intended for a general audience, comparing the careers of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mohandas K. Gandhi and noting the obvious parallels in their use of nonviolence. Four years later, the Motilal Bhimraj Charity Trust put out a similar book, also comparing black politics to Indian politics, although with one major difference. Instead of casting Gandhi as the Indian analogue to King, as UNESCO had done, it cast B. R. Ambedkar, a leader of untouchables and one of Gandhi's most formidable opponents.¹ The difference is not trivial. Gandhi, the hero of the first book, stands as the implicit villain of the second, for Ambedkar believed that the greatest obstacle to the full flourishing of untouchables was the Mahatma himself. The irreconcilability of the two books, each affable enough when taken on its own, is a consequence of, and an emblem for, the irreconcilability of two competing visions of how blacks in the U.S. are understood to relate to Indians: one vision identifying race with caste, the other identifying race with colony.

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¹ Mary King, *Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.: The Power of Nonviolent Action* (Paris: UNESCO, 1999) and Mohan Dass Namishray, *Caste and Race: Comparative Study of BR Ambedkar and Martin Luther King* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2003).

The history of these two visions, in the United States and in India, reveals important complications in the effort of anti-racists in the U.S. to achieve their political goals. Recent scholarship has taken important steps toward an appreciation of these complexities. In the past fifteen years Paul Gilroy, Penny M. Von Eschen, Sudarshan Kapur, Brenda Gayle Plummer, Robin D. G. Kelley, Vijay Prashad, and Nikhil Pal Singh, among others, have demonstrated beyond refutation the persistence and centrality of internationalism in U.S. black thought. The stock story about King reaching blindly across the world to find a sympathetic soul in Gandhi has rightly been pushed aside in favor of a richer account of a longstanding, though not always prominent, dialogue between Indians and U.S. blacks running throughout the course of the twentieth century.

But although the recognition of internationalism in recent studies has added vital themes and characters to the study of black history, it has yet to fully draw them into focus. There remains a tendency, in discussion of internationalism of any sort, to romanticize the mere presence of transnational connections and to decline to make any more than general comments on their significance. With respect to India, we now know quite a lot about the numerous moments of contact between Indians and blacks, but have few conceptual categories through which to understand them. This lack is particularly unfortunate because, as I will argue, the desire throughout the twentieth century to analogize blacks in the U.S. to Indians has not been all of a piece but deeply divided. Thinkers in both countries have disagreed, sometimes passionately, over whether being black is like being colonized or like being untouchable. Once we distinguish between these two strains of the black-Indian analogy, we see not only moments of mutual inspiration between U.S. black politics and Indian politics, but moments of bitter contention as well.

The place to start is with the concept of “caste.” As a category of analysis, caste has been more fluid than most. Nevertheless, despite its long history of semantic shifts, a tradition of European social theory and colonial administrative practice—stretching from the early nineteenth century

until at least the late 1960s and including such varied thinkers as G. W. F. Hegel, Max Weber, and Louis Dumont—has cemented a basic notion of caste as the foundational element of an unchanging, non-voluntarist, and hierarchal social system in India.² In distinction to class, the archetypal form of European social organization, caste has traditionally been taken as a marker of a refusal or inability to engage with the forces of history. Although, for obvious reasons, theorizations of caste have historically been centered in Europe, they have had a specific relevance in the United States, where the themes of progress, individualism, and equality have animated national political discussions.

Caste first entered U.S. debates in the antebellum period, when abolitionists began to describe slavery as a threat to the country's core values. Although never central to abolitionist analysis, "caste" became at least a familiar locution, appearing on the front page of the *Liberator's* first issue, in the titles of two abolitionist books, and in the writings and speeches of such prominent opponents of slavery as Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, Horace Greeley, Harriet Beecher Stowe, William Seward, Gerrit Smith, Charles Sumner, Theodore Parker, and Cassius Clay. Its appeal was multiple. Most importantly, by invoking missionary accounts of India—of which there were many in antebellum journals—the caste comparison highlighted the atavistic and anti-republican aspects of racial hierarchies. Segregated churches, with their close ties to the mission field, proved especially vulnerable to the accusation that they were harboring the insidious caste spirit. "Caste," had the added virtue of allowing abolitionists to damn Southern slavery and Northern racism in a single breath. And because it avoided mention of race, it allowed abolitionists to insist on the biological unity of the human species.³

² See Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), chap. 2-3.

³ All of these uses of "caste" are on display in Charles Sumner's 1869 lecture, "The Question of Caste," in *Charles Sumner: His Complete Works*, vol. 17 (New York: Negro University Press, 1969), 131-183. Another thoughtful consideration of caste can be found in Thomas Van Rensalaer, "American Caste," *New York Evangelist*, 18 March 1837.

Abolitionists were not the only thinkers to see important similarities between race in the U.S. and caste in India. Anti-caste activists in India, from very early on, arrived at similar conclusions. Jotirao Phule, a lower-caste reformer traditionally taken to be the foundational modern anti-casteist, first took an interest in the United States in the late 1840s, when Brahman nationalists gave him a book by Thomas Paine. Although the Brahmans intended the young student to take from Paine's writings the message that Indians of all castes must unite to throw off British rule, Phule instead recognized in Paine the possibility of a more radical response to Indian society.⁴ While abolitionists had come to see caste as a threat to republicanism, Phule came to the complementary conclusion: that republicanism was a threat to caste. Acknowledging the connection, Phule titled his major anti-Brahman polemic *Slavery* (1873) and dedicated it to the people of the United States "as a token of admiration for their sublime disinterested and selfsacrificing [*sic*] devotion in the cause of Negro Slavery."⁵ By allying his cause with that of the abolitionists, Phule hoped to benefit from their international standing and successful rhetoric. Not surprisingly, Phule read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with great enthusiasm. "Anyone who reads this book," he wrote, "will have to cry with shame in public like the Marwadi women drawing the pallu of their saree over their heads and will have to sigh and sob."⁶

One of Phule's sponsors, Sayajirao Gayakwad, the Maharaja of Baroda, shared Phule's interest in the United States. Having visited Chicago during the 1893 Columbian Exposition, the impressed Maharaja brought back some educators and librarians with him to Baroda, where they prepared a U.S.-centered curriculum. "Because the textbooks, in Gujarati and Marathi as well as in English, had been prepared by American educators," explained a former pupil, "students in the elementary schools of Baroda began to read about the boy George Washington while their contemporaries

⁴ Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict, and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 110-111.

⁵ Jotirao Phule, *Slavery (in the Civilised British Government under the Cloak of Brahmanism)*, 2d ed., trans. Maya Pandit, 1911, in *Selected Writings of Jotirao Phule*, ed. G. P. Deshpande (Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2002), 25.

⁶ Phule, *Satsar II*, 1885, in *Selected Writings*, 222.

in nearby British-ruled territories were reading about Edward VII and George V.”⁷ Thus, when Krishnarao Arjun Keluskar, a friend and colleague of Phule’s, brought a talented young untouchable named B. R. Ambedkar to the Maharaja’s attention, Gayakavad sent him not to England, where most Indian elites finished their educations, but to Columbia University in upper Manhattan.

Ambedkar’s New York years prepared him well to continue Phule’s line of thinking. There, he studied with John Dewey and absorbed the philosopher’s distinctive enthusiasm for egalitarian democracy.⁸ In his energetic skewering of the caste system, Ambedkar compared caste repeatedly to slavery, which he came to understand not only as an affront to human dignity, but particularly as an obstacle to a vibrant society based on liberty and equality. “An ideal society,” he wrote in 1937, echoing his mentor, “should be mobile, should be full of channels for conveying a change taking place in one part to other parts. In an ideal society there should be many interests consciously communicated and shared. They should be varied and free points of contact with other modes of association.” This sort of mobility, he continued, could develop only in a society that obeyed the “rough and ready rule” of treating all citizens alike.⁹ In this reading, untouchability and slavery were linked in their hostility to democracy, and blacks and untouchables were linked by a shared social status. “There is so much similarity between the position of the Untouchables and the position of the Negroes of America,” he explained to W. E. B. Du Bois in a letter, “that the study of the latter is not only natural but necessary.”¹⁰ Accordingly, Ambedkar turned throughout his career to U.S. history—

⁷ Haridas T. Muzumdar, *America’s Contributions to India’s Freedom* (New York: World in Brief, 1960), 5-6.

⁸ Ambedkar looked back on his time at Columbia with great pride, writing in an article for the Columbia alumni magazine, “The best friends I have had in my life were some of my classmates at Columbia and my great professors, John Dewey, James Shotwell, Edwin Seligman and James Harvey Robinson.” After Ambedkar’s death, his wife Savita Ambedkar, remembered how her husband, even thirty years after studying with Dewey, would still imitate his old professor’s classroom mannerisms. Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (Delhi: Manohar, 1992), 84.

⁹ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Annihilation of Caste*, 2d ed. (Bombay: 1937), 38, 41.

¹⁰ From B. R. Ambedkar, circa July 1946, in *The Papers of W. E. B. Du Bois* (Sanford, N.C.: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1980).

particularly to the Reconstruction period—for inspiration and for cautionary lessons about how a free society might go astray.¹¹

Back in the United States, caste and India achieved a different sort of relevance with the publication of Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (1927), a bestselling screed against Indian culture. Focusing principally on the sexual deviance of Hindus but including familiar criticisms of other Indian practices such as animal sacrifice and untouchability, Mayo hoped to bolster the cause of British imperialism abroad and anti-Indian nativism at home. Mayo had previously worked for Oswald Garrison Villard, the abolitionist's grandson and editor of *The Nation*, as a research assistant for Villard's biography of John Brown, and the fiery radicalism of Brown and Garrison tinged her prose, not least in her castigation of untouchability. It was, she wrote, "a type of bondage compared to which our worst Negro slavery was freedom."¹² To her old employer Villard, Mayo insisted that, were William Lloyd Garrison still alive, he would take Ambedkar's cause as his own.¹³ But although Mayo undeniably struck a chord—*Mother India* provoked over fifty books and pamphlets in reply and sold almost 400,000 copies through its U.S. publisher alone by the 1950s—she was unsuccessful in winning opinion-setters like Villard to her side.¹⁴ As Mrinalini Sinha has shown, Mayo inadvertently set off a powder keg of international response, which, among progressives in the United States, tended to shore up support for Indian nationalism and undermine Mayo's own position.¹⁵

Mayo's book may not have won her as many admirers as she had hoped, but she did succeed overwhelmingly in drawing attention to India and its institutions. One consequence of this interest in India was the rise, in the 1930s, of the "caste school of race relations" within the social sciences.

¹¹ For Ambedkar's fullest treatment of the similarities between U.S. blacks and untouchables see B. R. Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches* (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1979-1993), 5:9-18, 80-88 and 12:741-759.

¹² Katherine Mayo, "Mahatma Gandhi and India's 'Untouchables,'" 1930, in Charles Chatfield, ed., *The Americanization of Gandhi: Images of the Mahatma* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1976), 250.

¹³ Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 105.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, chap. 2.

In 1936, W. Lloyd Warner launched the caste school with a four-page article in the *American Journal of Sociology*.¹⁶ There, Warner argued that the meritocratic class system in the Deep South had been violently distorted by the presence of a caste system, which deprived blacks of occupational, social, and educational opportunities, to the point where middle-class whites enjoyed greater social advantages than black elites. The short paper made no mention of India; the concept of caste, on paper at least, merely signified an unequal arrangement of persons into groups in which intermarriage and inter-group mobility were both forbidden. And yet, caste for Warner and his followers was never entirely a descriptive matter; it was also a moral one. On the one hand, by substituting “caste” for “race,” members of Warner’s school, like the abolitionists before them, emphasized the lack of biological grounding for racism.¹⁷ On the other, by choosing the word caste, they added a whiff of missionary zeal to their analysis. In the aftermath of *Mother India*, the mere assertion that there *was* a caste system in the United States—regardless of how it worked or what it looked like—was already a claim loaded with ethical valence.¹⁸

In the ten years following Warner’s article, he and his colleagues published as many books advancing his caste thesis, most famously John Dollard’s *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (1937). Warner’s remarkable success can in part be attributed to his institutional association with the American Youth Commission (AYC), where, as a research director, he helped to guide the methodology of a series of studies on black youth funded by the General Education Board. By the time the gregarious Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal arrived to begin his own big-budget study of race in the United States, Warner’s ideas had been accepted widely enough that much of the available socio-

¹⁶ W. Lloyd Warner, “American Caste and Class,” *American Journal of Sociology* 42 (1936): 234-237.

¹⁷ For example see W. Lloyd Warner, introduction to Allison Davis, Burleigh B. Gardner, and Mary R. Gardner, *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941), 7-8. Warner’s turn away from race also led to a re-emergence of “color,” a term that appeared frequently in the titles of books produced by his school.

¹⁸ Buell Gallagher, a professor of Christian Ethics at the Pacific School of Religion and perhaps the most reflective of Warner’s followers, described the term as “both a sociological description and a moral judgment” and traced its usage back to the American Missionary Association in the nineteenth century. Buell G. Gallagher, *Color and Conscience: The Irrepressible Conflict* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946), 2.

logical data on black life in the United States was expressed in terms of caste. It was thus natural that Myrdal, too, should take up the Warner thesis. In his *An American Dilemma*, Myrdal referred frequently to a “caste system,” arguing that a class-based vision—the sort used to analyze European societies—was “inapplicable” to the United States because of the “traversing systems of color caste.” The concept of “caste struggle,” he thought, was “much more realistic” for the U.S. than the Marxian notion of class struggle.¹⁹ Even Myrdal’s vaunted “American Creed” argument borrowed liberally from the Warner school. Two years before *An American Dilemma*’s publication, Robert W. Sutherland, summing up the conclusions of the AYC studies, concluded that there was an “American dream” of social mobility and equal opportunity, shared by all but frustrated, in the case of blacks, by “caste limitations” that prevented it from ever being a reality.²⁰

Not all social scientists accepted the race-caste analogy, and none opposed it with greater force than Oliver C. Cox, E. Franklin Frazier, and Charles S. Johnson, the three most important black sociologists in the country after Du Bois. The problem with caste, as Frazier put it, was that it was “essentially static” and “failed to provide an orientation for the dynamic aspects of race relations.”²¹ Comparing caste to race, they objected, reified racism as a timeless tradition based in compliance rather than a changing and contested form of oppression maintained by force. Cox, who believed racism to be the consequence of capitalism rather than of innate human wickedness, took especially strong umbrage at caste-school moralizing and, in an admirable fit of scholarly rage, read up on Indian caste in an attempt to sever the race-caste link. Cox’s research, however, was lamentably incomplete. He focused on anthropology to the exclusion of modern politics and accepted too read-

¹⁹ Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944), 676. In chronicling the impact of the Warner school, one might also mention another mid-century classic, Kenneth Stampp’s *The Peculiar Institution*. Not only did Stampp adopt the language of caste and the Warner thesis, but also his infamous claim, “Negroes are, after all, only white men with black skins, nothing more, nothing less,” can be connected to the Warner school’s dogged anti-racialism. Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), vii.

²⁰ Robert L. Sutherland, *Color, Class, and Personality* (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1942), 6-39.

²¹ E. Franklin Frazier, “Sociological Theory and Race Relations,” *American Sociological Review* 12 (1947): 270. Both Frazier and Johnson were authors of AYC studies and had made limited endorsements of the Warner thesis in their earlier writings.

ily the scholarship of apologists for empire. As a result, Cox took caste to be, if not ahistorical, than at least unshakeable. “Race conflict is directed against or toward the maintenance of the entire order of the races,” he wrote. “On the other hand, caste rivalry never brings the caste system into question.”²² Anthropologist Gerald D. Berreman protested that Cox had been sorely misled by caste Hindus who maintained, just as Southern whites had done, that their social inferiors were contented with their lot.²³ But Cox was not swayed. “There has been no progressive social movement for betterment among outcaste castes in Brahmanic India,” he repeated—a claim that, by 1960, was not only demonstrably false but plainly absurd.²⁴

Despite the prominence of caste as a basis of connection between India and the United States, its importance often goes unremarked by historians, even as we become more sensitive to transnational connections. The reason, of course, is that the race-caste analogy was largely eclipsed by another analogy tying the United States to India: the analogy between racism and imperialism, or race and colony. Much has been written recently about the rise of an international political vision, gaining prominence in the 1910s, that placed U.S. blacks alongside colonial populations worldwide. At a time when black citizenship was imperiled and struggles for home rule began to achieve worldwide recognition, it did not take any large stretch of the imagination for black intellectuals to see themselves as part of the colonized world.²⁵ In this regard, India, the world’s largest colony and the one most likely to achieve independence, carried a particular salience for black internationalists such as Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and Paul Robeson.

²² Oliver C. Cox, “Race and Caste: A Distinction,” *American Journal of Sociology* 50 (1945): 364. Cox’s later book-length discussion, *Caste, Class, & Race: A Study in Social Dynamics* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1948), takes the same view. For a valuable discussion of Cox’s views on caste, see Ursula Sharma, *Caste* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999), 17-19.

²³ Gerald D. Berreman, “Caste in India and the United States,” *American Journal of Sociology* 66 (1960): 120-127.

²⁴ Oliver C. Cox, “Berreman’s ‘Caste in India and the United States,’” *American Journal of Sociology* 66 (1960): 511.

²⁵ See Robin D. G. Kelley, “‘But a Local Phase of a World Problem’: Black History’s Global Vision, 1883-1950,” *Journal of American History* 86 (1999): 1045-1077.

The growing historical literature on black internationalism has stressed the importance of foreign nationals like George Padmore, C. L. R. James, Jomo Kenyatta, and Kwame Nkrumah coming to the U.S. to forge ties with homegrown black political movements. This was certainly true in the case of India. Although few blacks had the chance to visit India before the war, a number of Indian nationalists came to the United States for education, academic posts, or political asylum and preached their cause eloquently. The most important of these was Lala Lajpat Rai, the so-called “Lion of Punjab,” who spent the bulk of his five-year exile from India in 1914-1919 in the United States. Lajpat Rai explained that he chose the U.S. for his destination because he hoped to “study the Negro problem on the spot.” To this end, he acquainted himself thoroughly with black politics, befriending such luminaries as Du Bois, Garvey, and Booker T. Washington. Although he had initially identified blacks with untouchables, as the nationalist movement gained momentum he emphasized the colonial connection instead. In his view, Indians and blacks stood united in the fight against “white imperialism,” which could take either the form of domestic racism or the subjugation of foreign nations. In either case, it was “the greatest world menace known to history,” compared to which “the caste cruelties of India” were relatively unimportant.²⁶ In the following decades, Indians such as Kumar Goshal and Haridas Muzumdar, continued Lajpat Rai’s mission of educating blacks about Indian nationalism—not denying casteism, but subordinating it to imperialism.

The warm response of black internationalists to the appeals of Indian nationalists—and to all forms of anti-imperialism—has been well documented and need not be repeated here. We may take as a token Du Bois’s novel *Dark Princess* (1928), a romance between a black medical student from Virginia and the daughter of an Indian maharajah, the latter of whom convinces her paramour to join “a great committee of the darker peoples” of the globe “who suffer under the arrogance and tyranny of the white world.”²⁷ In a similar vein, black newspapers in the 1930s and 1940s issued re-

²⁶ Lala Lajpat Rai, *Unhappy India*, 2d ed. (Calcutta: Banna Publishing Co., 1928), 105, 141.

²⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dark Princess: A Romance* (1928; reprint, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 16.

peated calls for a “black Gandhi” to mobilize resistance to white racism. But as Penny M. Von Eschen has observed, the Gandhi that black internationalists wanted—a fierce and charismatic anti-imperialist—was not the Christlike pacifist whose image came to dominate the U.S. press in subsequent decades.²⁸ To understand how the language of empire came to trump the language of caste and how Gandhi the moral leader displaced Gandhi the militant activist, we must turn to a far-distant set of thinkers: liberal Protestant missionaries within India.

Liberal Protestantism among the missionary set meant a turn away from the older (but still active) Christ-and-good-government school of thought peddled by Mayo. If one book stood for this new movement, it was *The Christ of the Indian Road* (1925), penned by E. Stanley Jones, whom *Time* would later call “the world’s greatest Christian missionary.”²⁹ Jones’s chief insight, and the one which distinguished him most dramatically from thinkers like Mayo, was that Western culture was becoming the largest obstacle to the spread of Western ideas. One might hope, as Jones did, that Indians would become Christians, but one could never expect them to accept a foreign culture entirely. To proselytize in India, missionaries would have to strip their message of its cultural content, give up their moralizing about caste and child-marriage, and preach a simple, unadorned “Christ without Western civilization.”³⁰ Calls for the indigenization of Christianity were not new to India—Jones was anticipated by Keshab Chandra Sen of the Brahmo Samaj in the nineteenth century and by Robert Speer and the Bharat Christya Sevak Samaj in the early twentieth—but it was *The Christ of the Indian Road*, ultimately selling nearly a million copies, that marked a turning point for the fortunes of the liberal missionary project.³¹ Prominent among Jones’s allies were the older ex-missionary C. F. An-

²⁸ Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 31-32, 163.

²⁹ “One Hope,” *Time*, 12 December 1938, 47.

³⁰ E. Stanley Jones, *The Christ of the Indian Road* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1925), 12.

³¹ Remarkably, *The Christ of the Indian Road* also seems to have outsold not only Mayo’s *Mother India* but even Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt* (1922). For a careful assessment of Jones’s sales figures, see Susan Haskell Khan, “The India Mission Field in American History, 1919-1947” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2006), viii, 228.

drews, the former Bishop of the Calcutta Methodist Episcopal Church Frederick B. Fisher, and Congregationalist missionary Ralph R. Keithahn.

By accepting that Christianity in India might appear in different guise than in the West, Jones hinted at a possibility that was to become ever more tantalizing in the following decades: that the Christ of the Indian road might not be a Christ at all but, rather, a Mahatma. The great irony of India for Jones was that “one of the most Christlike men in history” turned out to be none other than the devout Hindu Mohandas K. Gandhi.³² Gandhi readily admitted the influence of Jesus and Christians like Leo Tolstoy and John Ruskin on his thought but protested that “philosophically there was nothing extraordinary in Christian principles.”³³ Jones and colleagues, however, were undeterred. Andrews explained that the Mahatma had been “profoundly impressed” by “the inner truth of the Christian message” and Fisher interpreted Gandhi’s Hindu reformism as simply a cultural variant of liberal Protestantism.³⁴ Unitarian minister John Haynes Holmes’s understanding was even more stark. “When I think of Gandhi,” he preached in 1921, “I think of Jesus Christ.”³⁵ For Jones’s fellow-thinkers, that sufficed.

Substituting Christliness for Christianity was not the only concession that Jones made to native conditions. Those seeking to Christianize India by claiming Gandhi for their side would have to break ties, he believed, with another powerful ally: the British empire. “Christianity must not seem a Western Partisan of White Rule, but a Brother of Men,” wrote Jones. “We would welcome to our fellowship the modern equivalent of the Zealot, the nationalist, even as our Master did.”³⁶ Accordingly, Fisher denounced British rule as “human slavery” and declared Gandhi to be the Indian em-

³² Jones, quoted in Louis Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (New York: Harper & Row, 1950), 334.

³³ Mohandas K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography, or, The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, 2d ed., trans. Mahadev Desai and V. S. Srinivasa Sastri, 1940, in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 2d rev. ed. (Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 2001), 44:192.

³⁴ C. F. Andrews, *Mahatma Gandhi’s Ideas* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1930), 81 and Frederick B. Fisher, *That Strange Little Brown Man Gandhi* (New York: Ray Long & Richard R. Smith, 1932), chap. 6.

³⁵ John Haynes Holmes, “Who is the Greatest Man in the World Today?” in Chatfield, *Americanization of Gandhi*, 620.

³⁶ Jones, *Christ of the Indian Road*, 23.

bodiment of the spirits of Emerson, Lincoln, and Wilson all in one.³⁷ Liberal missionaries were not the staunch critics of imperialism and racism that their contemporaries, the black internationalists, were, but neither were they insincere. It was in fact C. F. Andrews who convinced Benjamin E. Mays, the young dean of Howard University's School of Religion, that the British empire was founded upon racism.³⁸

Caste, formerly a central preoccupation of Christian missionaries in India, fit awkwardly with this new approach to missionizing. Since the 1860s, Christian missionaries in India had targeted lower-caste Indians, who had much to gain from leaving Hinduism and entering the church's care. Jones's embrace of Indian culture, however, meant a redirection of this attention toward Indian intellectuals, whom, he hoped, would oversee the indigenization of Christianity.³⁹ But caste presented its own problems for Indian elites. Imperialists like Mayo frequently cited the persecution of untouchables by Hindus as a way of suggesting that Indians were not ready for independence. And despite their unwillingness to defend British rule in full, untouchables had cause to agree. Ambedkar himself credited the empire with educating untouchables and defending them against caste Hindus.⁴⁰ He saw no liberation in *swaraj*; it was not British domination that worried Ambedkar, but Hindu domination. And without a guarantee that crown *raj* would not be replaced by an unfettered Hindu *raj*, he had little reason to join the nationalists. He explained this in a sophisticated rendering of the caste-race analogy. Untouchables, he wrote, "cannot forget the fate of the Negroes," who joined the fight for freedom and democracy but who were betrayed by the North and left with no substantive protection from racism and violence at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan and the Southern state gov-

³⁷ Fisher, *Strange Little Brown Man*, 78, 84.

³⁸ Benjamin E. Mays, "The Color Line Around the World," *The Journal of Negro Education* 6 (1937): 140-141.

³⁹ See Khan, "India Mission Field," chap. 1.

⁴⁰ B. R. Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, 2d ed. (Bombay: Thacker, 1946), 189.

ernments.⁴¹ In the eyes of worried nationalists, Ambedkar's skepticism threatened to divide the nascent nation and undermine the independence movement.

On the other side, the committed nationalist Gandhi was ambivalent in his support for untouchables. Much has been made of Gandhi's adoption of an untouchable girl into his household, of his coining the word "Harijans" (children of God) in reference to untouchables, and of his campaign against untouchability after 1932. But it must be remembered that, for Gandhi, the war against empire and the war against caste were to be fought by very different means. Although he originated the use of *satyagraha* (nonviolent resistance) as a means of protest, Gandhi was for a long time resistant to its use against Hindus. A series of *satyagraha* campaigns against caste restrictions led by untouchables in Maharashtra from 1927 to 1935 went unsupported by Gandhi and Congress. When untouchables in the Bombay Presidency used nonviolent resistance against their Hindu neighbors in order to gain access to wells and temples, Gandhi condemned the protesters, claiming that such methods were to be used only against foreigners.⁴² "No Harijan need fast against anyone nor need satyagraha be offered by them," Gandhi explained. "Let them not engage in quarrels with local caste Hindus. Their behaviour should be at all times courteous and dignified."⁴³ The only suggestion he offered for their self-improvement was a scheme of internal reforms: untouchables ought to give up alcohol, bathe more often, stop eating beef and carrion (the availability of carrion as food was one of the few occupational advantages of being a scavenger), educate their children, and improve their methods of scavenging and tanning.⁴⁴ To wage-earning untouchables, he preached the "gospel of industrial education" and pointed to the model of Booker T. Washington, "one of the great men of

⁴¹ Ibid., 177. Ambedkar continued the analogy later in the book by describing Gandhi as Lincoln—unwilling to emancipate the slaves if doing so meant destroying the Union (282). But while Lincoln was willing to emancipate the slaves in order to win the war, Gandhi, Ambedkar argued, was not even willing to do this. He would "let Swaraj perish if the cost of it is the political freedom of the Untouchables" (283). Ambedkar's interpretation of the Civil War and Reconstruction was taken from Herbert Aptheker's *The Negro in the Civil War* (1938), which he quoted at length.

⁴² Ambedkar, *Congress and Gandhi*, 275.

⁴³ "Statement on Untouchability—V," 1932, in Gandhi, *Collected Works*, 57:414.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 57:411.

the world.”⁴⁵ Gandhi’s lifelong fascination with Washington and his proclaimed goal of “producing from among the Harijans a prototype of Booker T. Washington” was the only hint Gandhi made of a parallel between the plight of U.S. blacks and that of untouchables.⁴⁶ At other times, he insisted that “there can be no true comparison between the two,” preferring instead to focus on the similarities between black liberation and his own nationalist struggle.⁴⁷

Gandhi’s hope for quietism on the part of untouchables was accompanied by a grim view of their capacities as political actors. “The poor Harijans have no mind, no intelligence, no sense of difference between God and not God,” he explained to an aghast C. F. Andrews. To think that they could act as a group would be “absurd.”⁴⁸ To the missionary John R. Mott, Gandhi insisted that untouchables lacked “the mind and intelligence to understand what you talked” and thus could never be the subjects of genuine conversion. “Would you preach the Gospel to a cow?” he asked.⁴⁹ Pessimistic about any possibility for real political action on the part of the untouchables, Gandhi denied that Ambedkar, an outspoken radical with an Ivy-league education, could ever represent them. For Gandhi, it was the saint in the loincloth, not the lawyer in jacket and tie, who must speak for the downtrodden people of India. Despite having been born into the *bania* caste, Gandhi insisted that he was “an ‘untouchable’ by adoption” and therefore “more of an ‘untouchable’” than Ambedkar, who was merely untouchable by birth.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ “Interview with Harijan Workers,” 1934, in Gandhi, *Collected Works*, 64:88.

⁴⁶ To G. Ramachandra Rao, 14 April 1933, in Gandhi, *Collected Works*, 60:371.

⁴⁷ “Interviews to Foreign Visitors,” 1929, in Gandhi, *Collected Works*, 45:148.

⁴⁸ “Discussion with C. F. Andrews,” 1936, in Gandhi, *Collected Works*, 70:59.

⁴⁹ Gandhi’s full statement: “Would you preach the Gospel to a cow? Well, some of the untouchables are worse than cows in understanding. I mean they no more distinguish between the relative merits of Islam and Hinduism and Christianity than a cow.” After some of his missionary friends objected, Gandhi published an explanation of his comment. “I have no remorse about the propriety of the analogy. There could be no offence meant to Harijans because the cow is a sacred animal. . . . That after a long course of training, Harijans can have their intelligence developed in a manner a cow’s cannot, is irrelevant to the present discussion.” “Discussion with John R. Mott,” 1936, and “The Cow and the Harijan,” 1937, in Gandhi, *Collected Works*, 70:76-77 and 70:258.

⁵⁰ Gandhi, quoted in Pyarelal, *The Epic Fast* (Ahmedabad: Mohanlal Maganlal Bhatt, 1932), 60.

Gandhi and Ambedkar collided most spectacularly in the aftermath of the 1931 Second Round Table Conference in London. Negotiating a scheme for increased Indian participation in government, the two leaders fell out about what sort of constitutional protections untouchables—a minority in every community—might have against the caste Hindu majority. Ambedkar feared Hindu tyranny while Gandhi feared that any special electoral status for untouchables would further divide India politically and, worse, reify untouchability in law. “We do not want on our register and on our census ‘untouchables’ classified as a separate class,” he explained.⁵¹ After hearing each argument, British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald unveiled the Communal Award, a scheme under which members of the Depressed Classes would remain part of the regular Hindu electorate (a nod to Gandhi) but would also have their own constituencies in which they could vote without fear of caste Hindus using superior numbers to block undesired untouchable candidates (a nod to Ambedkar). This arrangement would last for twenty years, at which point the untouchables’ separate electorate would be dissolved and they would become ordinary Hindu voters.

Gandhi opposed MacDonald’s solution vehemently, declaring that he would “fast unto death” were MacDonald to press forward with it. MacDonald refused to yield, and Gandhi began his promised fast on September 20. “Gandhi was immolating one person, himself, to prevent the dismemberment of Indian society,” observed the poet Rabindranath Tagore.⁵² What followed was an all-India race to wring concessions from Ambedkar in order to save the Mahatma’s life. “It was a baffling situation,” reflected Ambedkar. “There was before me the duty, which I owed as a part of common humanity, to save Gandhi from sure death. There was before me the problem of saving for the Untouchables the political rights which the Prime Minister had given them. I responded to the call of humanity.”⁵³ The result of Ambedkar’s eleventh-hour concession was the Poona Pact: an

⁵¹ Ibid., 7.

⁵² Tagore, quoted in Fischer, *Life of Gandhi*, 312.

⁵³ Ambedkar, *Congress and Gandhi*, 88.

agreement that increased the number of electoral seats reserved for untouchables while doing away with the protection of separate constituencies. After some hasty diplomacy in England by C. F. Andrews, MacDonald accepted the compromise and it was written into the Government of India Act of 1935.

Gandhi's fast brought the Mahatma uncomfortably close to death's door, and the image of Gandhi's life and the fate of the untouchables hanging perilously in the balance proved too dramatic to be ignored. For followers of both leaders, the fast became a pivotal and symbolic event in Indian history—Gandhians seeing it as Gandhi's great sacrifice for untouchables and Ambedkarites regarding it as his great betrayal. But when it came to exporting their account of the fast, Ambedkar and his fellow-thinkers were at a decided disadvantage. Whereas items from Gandhi's newspaper *Harijan* were occasionally reprinted in U.S. periodicals, untouchables had no such organ themselves and few means of influencing public opinion abroad. Katherine Mayo rallied for Ambedkar, declaring Gandhi to be "the faithful lieutenant of the Hindu oligarch, the Hindu plutocrat, the Hindu slave-master," but she found few supporters.⁵⁴ Liberal opinion-setters in the United States, having declared their allegiance to Indian nationalism, were unwilling to delve into caste politics.⁵⁵ And under the increasing influence of E. Stanley Jones's pro-nationalist brand of missionary thought, even missionaries were losing their former interest in chronicling the suffering of untouchables under Hinduism.

Gandhi's supporters in the United States, by contrast, wasted little time in importing their own interpretation of the fast. Before the fast had even finished, Richard B. Gregg, a pacifist who had known Gandhi well in India, lamented in *The World Tomorrow* that MacDonald's Communal Award was "a political and moral wrong" done to the "poorest and most oppressed group in India." Separate elections, he continued, were not a protection but a deprivation. "To the economic, social

⁵⁴ Mayo, 1931, quoted in Manoranjan Jha, *Civil Disobedience and After: The American Reaction to Political Developments in India During 1930-1935* (Meerut: Meenakshi Prakashan, 1973), 184.

⁵⁵ Ambedkar lamented that liberal U.S. journals like *The Nation*, had, by ignoring caste, inadvertently become "publicity agents of Indian Tories." Ambedkar, *Congress and Gandhi*, 248.

and religious separateness of the depressed classes,” he wrote, “The British government would now add political separateness.”⁵⁶ C. F. Andrews, Haridas T. Muzumdar, and E. Stanley Jones followed with similar interpretations, but it was Louis Fischer, Gandhi’s friend and biographer, who gave the incident its most memorable narration. In his hands, the fast became an epochal, almost sacred event. Brahmans dined publicly with scavengers, temples threw their doors open, and untouchables rushed to use formerly-forbidden wells after India witnessed the Mahatma’s suffering. “Gandhi’s Epic Fast,” Fischer wrote, “snapped a long chain that stretched back into antiquity and had enslaved tens of millions.”⁵⁷ Gandhi’s opposition to separate electorates for untouchables had become, in the eyes of his apostles, a fast against untouchability itself.⁵⁸

After his fast, Gandhi did campaign tirelessly to change the attitudes of his fellow Hindus toward untouchability. In this, he achieved some measure of success. By lashing caste reform to the independence movement, Gandhi drew international attention to untouchability and forced caste Hindus to confront the issue. Untouchables, however, continued to experience overwhelming deprivations in the areas of civil rights, education, employment, and the use of public facilities. Unwilling to alienate Hindus from the nationalist cause and skeptical of any reforms won by coercion, Gandhi could touch upon these problems only lightly. He preferred charitable remedies to legal ones and focused his campaigns on symbolic issues such as temple entry and intermarriage rather than structural ones.

⁵⁶ Richard B. Gregg, “The Meaning of Gandhi’s Fast,” *The World Tomorrow*, 28 September 1932, 299. Du Bois, in his own coverage of the fast, struck upon a similar formulation, quoting approvingly a description of the Communal Award as “the decree of the Raj that the higher caste should constitute an electorate separate from the Untouchables.” W. E. B. Du Bois, “Foreign News,” *The Crisis* 39 (1932): 351.

⁵⁷ Fischer, *Life of Gandhi*, 320.

⁵⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., who in 1957 cited Fischer’s *Life of Gandhi* as one of the five books that most strongly influenced him, clearly drew on Fischer’s account when, in 1959, he preached his own version of the fast. When Gandhi broke the fast, King explained to his parishioners, “untouchables from all over India went into the temples, and all of these thousands and millions of people put their arms around Brahmans and people of other castes. Hundreds and millions of people who had never touched each other for two thousand years were now singing and praising God together. And this was the great contribution that Mahatma Gandhi brought about.” Martin Luther King, Jr., Palm Sunday Sermon on Mohandas K. Gandhi, 1959, in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 5:154-155.

Ambedkar, for his part, put little stock in Gandhian schemes of moral suasion and felt that only substantial state intervention—economic as well as social—could end India’s long history of minority persecution. Although unable to win sufficient support for his economic agenda (which he described as “state socialism”), Ambedkar did, as Minister of Law in the Nehru Cabinet and one of seven members of the Drafting Committee for the Constituent Assembly, have the opportunity to implement his social policies. As the chief author of the Indian Constitution, Ambedkar introduced, with Nehru’s blessing, an elaborate system of protections and reservations for minorities. And in crafting these legal mechanisms, Ambedkar took the U.S. legal system as his primary foreign point of reference, citing the Fourteenth Amendment, the Civil Rights Acts of 1866 and 1875, and even a failed proposal from the 1940s to prohibit job discrimination.⁵⁹

As important as Ambedkar’s work was to India, it counted for little in the United States, where, as Susan Haskell Khan has shown on the basis of her research on U.S. missionary activity in India, missionaries like Jones were extraordinarily successful in influencing opinion.⁶⁰ This was true most of all in their support of Indian nationalism. By the 1920s, liberals, bitter about European war-making and concerned about their own government’s continuing intervention in the Caribbean Basin (particularly Nicaragua and Haiti), had come to identify imperialism as a major source of their foreign ills. Reports back from the mission field on the success of India’s Non-Cooperation movement built on this anti-imperialist sentiment and filled it out with a favorable account of Indian society. E. Stanley Jones’s *The Christ of the Indian Road* (1925) should, in this respect, be placed alongside works like Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) and Pearl Buck’s *The Good Earth* (1930)—explosively successful books dedicated to portraying non-European cultures with sympathy. By 1943, it seemed to Wendell Willkie, author of the bestselling *One World*, that “the moral atmosphere

⁵⁹ D. C. Ahir, *Dr. Ambedkar and the Indian Constitution* (Lucknow: Buddha Vihara, 1973), chap. 3 and B. R. Ambedkar, *States and Minorities: What Are Their Rights and How to Secure Them in the Constitution of Free India* (Bombay: Thacker & Co., 1947), 14, 33. Ambedkar did not specify which failed piece of legislation served as his model, but he was almost certainly referring to efforts by A. Philip Randolph and the NAACP to create a national and enforceable fair employment law.

⁶⁰ Khan, “India Mission Field.”

in which the white race lives is changing”—a statement that Willkie’s opponent in the 1940 presidential election, the ardently anti-imperialist Franklin Delano Roosevelt, would not have disputed.⁶¹ For India, all of this meant that liberals were far more interested in nationalists like Gandhi than in critics of Indian institutions like Ambedkar, who, to his chagrin, found more supporters among apologists for empire like Mayo than among progressives.

Building on the sympathy that black internationalists and liberal Protestant missionaries generated for Indian nationalism, Gandhians undertook a large-scale project to introduce Gandhism into the United States, particularly into black life. Here, the Indian side of things must be stressed, because for every eager importer of nonviolence in the United States, there was an equally eager exporter in India, often acting on Gandhi’s own instructions. Although Gandhi never visited the United States himself, he maintained an interest in race relations there and was keen to spread his message westward. When Howard Thurman, on leave from Howard University, came to visit India on the invitation of one of Gandhi’s many traveling ambassadors, Gandhi sent Thurman a telegram saying that if the theologian could not come to Gandhi’s ashram in Bardoli, then Gandhi would gladly travel to Bombay to meet him. When Thurman arrived in Bardoli, Gandhi came out to greet his car. “This is the first time in all the years that we have been working together that I’ve ever seen him come out to greet a visitor so warmly,” Gandhi’s secretary explained to Thurman.⁶² Gandhi rapidly pumped Thurman and his party for information about blacks in the United States, asking about voting rights, lynchings, discrimination, and slavery. As their time ran out, Gandhi asked Thurman’s wife Sue to sing a spiritual, and he left the party with his prediction that “it may be through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of nonviolence will be delivered to the world.”⁶³ The next year found Gandhi speaking at length to the black educator Benjamin E. Mays and churchman Channing

⁶¹ Wendell L. Willkie, *One World* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1943), 190.

⁶² Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 131.

⁶³ “Interview to American Negro Delegation,” 1936, in Gandhi, *Collected Works*, 68:237-238.

H. Tobias about the techniques of nonviolence. Even in the strained months leading up to the transfer of power, Gandhi scheduled at least four meetings with William Stuart Nelson, the Dean of Howard University, three of which, remarkably, took place the very week India was to become independent.⁶⁴

However much Gandhi may have cared about the plight of blacks in the United States, though, his decades-long role in the Indian independence movement gave him little time to do more than receive visitors. And yet, despite the cult of personality that had grown up around him, Gandhi was adept at extending his influence through ambassadors. Gandhians made frequent trips, giving lectures, writing books, and winning support for nonviolence. Indian and British Gandhians like Haridas T. Muzumdar, C. F. Andrews, Madeline Slade, and Rammanohar Lohia made important connections with black leaders and students, giving frequent presentations on nonviolence resistance at schools like Howard and Tuskegee. (“The hearts of those Negroes there in Tuskegee [*sic*] are with you in every way that is indescribably real and deep,” Andrews reported to Gandhi.⁶⁵) No two ambassadors were more important in this respect than Richard B. Gregg and Krishnalal Shridharani, both of whom had spent time by Gandhi’s side. Through their books, Gregg’s *The Power of Non-Violence* (1934) and Shridharani’s *War without Violence* (1939), they outlined a framework for nonviolent political action, which, they hoped, blacks in the United States could adopt. Unlike their missionary predecessors, Gregg and Shridharani took special care to remove from Gandhism any hint of obscurantism or excess religiosity, rendering Gandhian thought, in Shridharani’s words, “as concrete, scientific, and dehydrated of its mystical content . . . as possible.”⁶⁶ In their presentation, Gandhism

⁶⁴ For Nelson’s schedule, see Rayford W. Logan, *Howard University: The First Hundred Years, 1867-1967* (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 543 and Gandhi, *Collected Works*, 93:96 and 96:250.

⁶⁵ Andrews, quoted in Hugh Tinker, *The Ordeal of Love: C. F. Andrews and India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 234.

⁶⁶ Krishnalal Shridharani, *War without Violence*, rev. ed. (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1962), 2. On the secularization of Gandhi, see Richard G. Fox, “Passage from India,” in Richard G. Fox and Orin Starn, eds., *Between Resistance and Revolution: Cultural Politics and Social Protest* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 65-82; Vijay Prashad, “Pro-paGandhi Ahimsa in Black America,” *Little India*, 31 March 2002, 27-30; and Joseph Kip Kosek, “Richard Gregg, Mohandas Gandhi, and the Strategy of Nonviolence,” *Journal of American History* 91 (2005): 1318-1348.

was no more than a technique; “moral jiu-jitsu” for Gregg and “nonviolent direct action” for Shridharani. This focus on the technical aspects of nonviolence mirrored a similar trend in India, where Gandhi himself, acknowledging that not all nationalist leaders shared fully in his idiosyncratic religious beliefs, presented nonviolence “as a political weapon to be employed for the solution of practical problems.”⁶⁷

On the other end, an alliance of black colleges and predominantly white Christian and pacifist organizations cooperated to deliver Gandhi’s message to black scholars and activists.⁶⁸ Sending prominent blacks over to India became a sort of cottage industry in the 1930s and 1940s and the intent—to spark a nonviolent resistance movement to Jim Crow—could not have been clearer. Howard Thurman, Benjamin Mays, Bayard Rustin, and William Stuart Nelson all made their first trips to India in this period, funded by such organizations as the YMCA and the American Friends Service Committee. Of course, this ideological transfer did not go exactly as Gandhians and white Christians might have planned. Mays and Thurman, for example, expressed grave reservations about their funding sources; Thurman worried he might be seen as “an apologist for a segregated American Christianity.”⁶⁹ Both also came to identify closely with the untouchables they saw during their travels.⁷⁰ These slight detours did not distort the greater message, however, and Mays, Thurman, Rustin, and Nelson all became, as hoped, staunch advocates of the nonviolent cause.

By the time Martin Luther King, Jr., came to be interested in nonviolence, Gandhians throughout the United States were ready to deliver the message that had been years in the making. As the story is frequently told, King probably first learned of Gandhi through Benjamin Mays, whom King described as “one of the great influences in my life,” and who no doubt spoke frequent-

⁶⁷ “Speech at A.I.C.C. Meeting,” 1942, in Gandhi, *Collected Works*, 81:428.

⁶⁸ The best source on this remains Sudarshan Kapur, *Raising up a Prophet: The African-American Encounter with Gandhi* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

⁶⁹ Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 104. Edward G. Carroll and Phenola Carroll, the black couple who traveled with Howard and Sue Bailey Thurman, were also highly critical of racism within the U.S. church.

⁷⁰ Elizabeth Yates, *Howard Thurman: Portrait of a Practical Dreamer* (New York: John Day Company, 1964), 101-103. See below for Mays on untouchability.

ly of the Indian independence movement in his addresses to the students at Morehouse while King was there. King's Gandhian epiphany, however, came after hearing Mordecai Johnson in 1950, just back from India and preaching at the Fellowship House of Philadelphia. "His message was so profound and electrifying that I left the meeting and bought a half-dozen books on Gandhi's life and works," King recalled. It is highly likely that this half-dozen included E. Stanley Jones's *Mahatma Gandhi: An Interpretation*, Frederick Fisher's *That Strange Little Brown Man Gandhi*, and Louis Fischer's *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*. But despite his reliance on missionary interpretations, King's Gandhi was also the Gandhi of Shridharani and Gregg—a political tactician as well as a spiritual leader. Describing his own use of nonviolence, King wrote: "Christ furnished the spirit and motivation, Gandhi furnished the method."⁷¹

Once King signaled his interest in Gandhi and his ability to put nonviolence into practice, Gandhians roused themselves into action, feeding King a steady diet of their own writings and opinions about how nonviolence might be applied. In a three-month period in 1956, in the midst of the Montgomery bus boycott, Richard B. Gregg sent King a copy of *The Power of Non-Violence* and shared "a few ideas" about Gandhian practice, Harris Wofford passed along his own book and suggestions, William Stuart Nelson offered tips on adapting nonviolence to the United States, and A. J. Muste implored King to host a nonviolent activist on tour from India (nor were these the only Gandhians to write to King in this period).⁷² King was nothing but receptive; he invited Nelson to visit India with him a few years later (the plan fell through), read Gregg's book and wrote the foreword to the next edition, befriended Wofford, and accepted Muste's ambassador.⁷³ In addition, Benjamin Mays,

⁷¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), 145, 96, and 85.

⁷² King, *Papers*, 3:182-183, 3:211-212, 3:225-226, and 3:316.

⁷³ King, *Papers*, 3:316 and 4:532; Martin Luther King, Jr., foreword to Richard B. Gregg, *The Power of Nonviolence*, 2d rev. ed. (Nyack, N.Y.: Fellowship Publications, 1959), 9; and Harris Wofford, *Of Kennedys and Kings: Making Sense of the Sixties* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980), 112-117. Keith D. Miller makes a persuasive case that the influences of Wofford, Nelson, and Gregg on King's thought on nonviolence can be seen in King's writing, which borrows phrases and larger portions of text from all three. See Keith D. Miller, "Composing Martin Luther King, Jr.," *PMLA* 105 (1990): 73-74.

Howard Thurman, Mordecai Johnson, and Bayard Rustin offered King their own counsel. So thick was the cloud of Gandhism around King that King's advisors occasionally found themselves in competition with one another. Wofford, for instance, complained that Rustin had been treating King as a "precious puppet whose symbolic actions were to be planned by a Gandhian high command."⁷⁴

As an antidote to Rustin, Wofford recommended that King go to India for himself. "Getting away from the pressures upon him from all sides and talking with some of the key people who had worked with Gandhi while they were still alive would give him valuable firsthand information and a broader perspective," Wofford wrote.⁷⁵ Rustin, too, wanted King to go to India, and the three of them met with officials of the Libby Holman Reynolds Foundation in 1956 about funding King's tour. By the time King managed to clear time in his schedule three years later, more organizations and individuals had had time to get involved. The trip would be sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee on one end and by the Gandhi Memorial Trust on the other, each organization providing its own guide to accompany King. R. R. Diwakar, chairman of the Trust, traveled with a delegation to Montgomery in 1958 to meet with King beforehand and speak with him about his upcoming pilgrimage. Gregg and G. Ramachandran, a former disciple of Gandhi, both wrote to King with advice about whom he should meet during his trip. And Rustin, at his final meeting with King before the journey, gave him a stack of materials on the latest developments in Gandhian thought (nonviolent armies).⁷⁶ In short, Gandhians knew to make the most of King's trip, and intended it to be a sort of Gandhian boot camp.

The journey itself got off to a rocky start. Scheduled to land in Delhi, India's capital, where Congress ruled, King's party missed a connecting flight from Zurich and were forced to instead take

⁷⁴ Wofford, *Kennedys and Kings*, 115.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 115-116.

⁷⁶ Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 208, 237, and 250; From G. Ramachandran, 17 December 1958, in King, *Papers*, 4:553; and King, *Papers*: 4:549n.

a later flight to Bombay, the capital of Maharashtra, Ambedkar's home state. There, a very different sight greeted them than the planned welcoming party of five hundred well-wishers bearing garlands. "I will never forget it, that night," King later preached, telling a story that he would find himself repeating often. "We got up early in the morning to take a plane for Delhi. And as we rode out of the airport we looked out on the street and saw people sleeping out on the sidewalks and out in the streets, and everywhere we went to. Walk through the train station, and you can't hardly get to the train, because people are sleeping on the platforms of the train station."⁷⁷ Coretta Scott King also remembered it well. "We were appalled. When we asked why hundreds and thousands of people were stretched out on the dirty pavements, we were told that they had no other place to sleep: they had no homes. . . . It was very hard for us to understand or accept this."⁷⁸ One can well imagine their surprise. Nothing could be further from the archetypal image of Indian poverty—the Gandhian peasant piously spinning *khadi*—than the sight of hundreds of thousands of urban homeless sleeping on the streets of Bombay.

Shaken, the Kings continued on to Delhi, where they quickly rescheduled appointments with Nehru, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, and Rajendra Prasad, the Prime Minister, Vice President, and President of India. It was "like meeting George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison in a single day," King exclaimed.⁷⁹ His audience with Nehru proved particularly fruitful; the two talked for four hours "comparing the Indian struggle for freedom with that of American blacks for civil rights."⁸⁰ King was fascinated to hear of India's success in combating untouchability. Nehru told King of the anti-untouchability provisions that Ambedkar had written into the Constitution, and of the government's policy of spending millions of rupees toward developing housing and job opportunities for ex-untouchables. "Isn't that discrimination?" asked Lawrence Reddick, King's

⁷⁷ King, Palm Sunday Sermon, in *Papers*, 5:148.

⁷⁸ Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.*, rev. ed. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993), 159.

⁷⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., quoted in *ibid.*, 162.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 161.

traveling companion. “Well, it may be,” answered Nehru. “But this is our way of atoning for the centuries of injustices we have inflicted upon these people.” Clearly impressed, King repeated the story four years later in his *Why We Can't Wait*.⁸¹

Upon his return to the United States, King's views on the subcontinent shifted. Now, India was not only the land that threw off the British through civil disobedience, but also the greatest extant example of a country that fought poverty and discrimination through massive state intervention. As Reddick put it, the trip “made him see that ‘Love’ alone will not cure poverty and degradation.”⁸² Untouchability, which had formerly interested King only insofar as it figured into Gandhian myth, quickly rose in King's estimation to become India's central problem. Less than a month after his return, King asked William Stuart Nelson to send him some books or pamphlets on the subject, claiming that he was “in the process of making a study of untouchability” and needed material.⁸³ Whether he read the books Nelson sent or not, the importance of India and untouchability in King's later political and economic thought cannot be denied. In 1960, King demanded that the federal government “carry on an active program of propaganda to promote the idea of integration” and “seriously consider making federal funds available to do the tremendous job of lifting the standards of a people too long ignored by America's conscience.” These ideas, he explained, were “based on some recent insights that I gained while traveling in India,” where the government had not only made discrimination illegal but had spent “millions of dollars a year in scholarships, housing, and community development to lift the standards of the untouchables.”⁸⁴ The next year, in another push to expand the government's scope, King again cited India, claiming that his trip had “revealed to me the vast opportunities open to a government determined to end discrimination.”⁸⁵ Although there is no indi-

⁸¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 148-149.

⁸² Virginia Durr, quoted in David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Quill, 1999), 114.

⁸³ To William Stuart Nelson, 7 April 1959, in King, *Papers*, 5:181.

⁸⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Rising Tide of Racial Consciousness,” 1960, in *Papers*, 5:507.

⁸⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Equality Now,” *The Nation*, 4 February 1961, 95.

cation that King was familiar with Ambedkar, his model for positive governmental action, which he advanced most forcefully in his planned Poor People's Campaign and Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged, was the very model that Ambedkar had fought so hard to bring into existence—and that Gandhi had fought so hard against.⁸⁶

The most startling statement of King's new view on India came in a sermon that he delivered on the fourth of July, 1965. In it, King recalled visiting a school of ex-untouchables in Trivandrum, Kerala:

The principal introduced me and then as he came to the conclusion of his introduction, he says, "Young people, I would like to present to you a fellow untouchable from the United States of America." And for a moment I was a bit shocked and peeved that I would be referred to as an untouchable. . . . I started thinking about the fact: twenty million of my brothers and sisters were still smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in an affluent society. I started thinking about the fact: these twenty million brothers and sisters were still by and large housed in rat-infested, unendurable slums in the big cities of our nation, still attending inadequate schools faced with improper recreational facilities. And I said to myself, "Yes, I am an untouchable, and every Negro in the United States of America is an untouchable."⁸⁷

This anecdote, replacing the race-colony analogy that had been foundational to the importation of Gandhism to the United States with the race-caste analogy, is all the more remarkable because it is very likely that it never happened to King. Benjamin E. Mays, King's mentor, told the following story of his own visit to a school in southern India:

When [the principal] introduced me he made it clear that I was a Christian, from Christian America; yet he emphasized at the same time that I was an "untouchable" in America—"an untouchable like us," he emphasized. I was dazed, puzzled, a bit peeved. But instantly I recognized that there was an element of truth in what he said. As long as Negroes are treated as second and third class citizens, whether in the North where segregation and discrimination are spreading, where Negroes are frequently denied the privileges of eating in restaurants and denied occupancy in hotels, where discrimination against them in employment and civic life is rampant; or whether in the South, where segregation and discrimina-

⁸⁶ For an astute characterization of King's dissent from Gandhi on this score, see John J. Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of a Mind* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1982), 141-145.

⁸⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., "The American Dream," 4 July 1965, in *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson (New York: Warner Books, 1998), 131.

tion exist by law and where gross inequalities exist in education, politics and work opportunities, they are the “untouchables” of America.⁸⁸

King’s proclivity for cribbing the writing and speech of the others having been extensively noted, it is hard to imagine that King’s story was his own rather than a repetition of Mays’s, which it mirrors in content and rhetorical structure.⁸⁹ Moreover, Mays’s account appeared in a 1944 collection of sermons by Harry Emerson Fosdick, a radio preacher from whom King frequently lifted material.⁹⁰

More important, however, than the similarities between King’s account and Mays’s are the differences. In his version, Mays points, as one might expect, to the U.S. system of racial apartheid—segregation in hotels and restaurants and so forth. King, however, speaks not only of Jim Crow but also of “rat-infested, unendurable slums” and an “airtight cage of poverty.” One can hear echoes of his night in Bombay. For King, untouchability and racism were linked not by social segregation and prohibitions on intermarriage, but by economic deprivation. In this analysis, King veered away from Gandhi, for whom the only thing wrong with the caste system was its attendant social prejudice, and moved closer still to Ambedkar, for whom untouchability was as much an economic problem as it was a social problem.

There is an irony in King’s dramatic brush with Ambedkar’s ideas and policies. Within the national history of India, Ambedkar—the unsentimental, militant radical—bears less resemblance to King than he does to Malcolm X. Indeed, when a team of sociologists led by Sidney Verba assessed

⁸⁸ Mays, quoted in Harry Emerson Fosdick, *A Great Time to Be Alive: Sermons on Christianity in Wartime* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944), 148-149. Fosdick’s source for this quotation is not known. Mays published a very similar account of the same story later (after King’s sermon) in his autobiography. Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography* (Athens, Ga.: The University of Georgia Press, 1971), 158.

⁸⁹ The best study of King’s borrowing is Keith D. Miller, *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Its Sources*, enl. ed. (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1997). This instance, however, may be seen to be more extreme than others in that it involves King not simply repeating words or ideas, but claiming another’s experience as his own.

⁹⁰ If King did not get the material through Fosdick, he may have got it from Mays himself. “Mrs. Mays was forever reading passages from Martin’s speeches in the *New York Times* and finding them hauntingly familiar,” recalls Ralph Abernathy, King’s fellow minister and longtime friend. “Then she remembered where she had heard them: in the sermons that Dr. Mays preached at every Morehouse chapel service.” Ralph David Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 480. Miller, in his monograph about King’s language, was unable to confirm Abernathy’s claim, but wrote that he “would be anything but surprised” if corroborating evidence were to emerge. Miller, *Voice of Deliverance*, 223.

parallels between caste in India and race in the United States, they declared the closest analogue to the Ambedkar movement to be the Black Muslim movement.⁹¹ That no major black thinkers followed King in his new thinking on India is still more ironic, given the emphatically international orientation of the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Although historians previously saw Black Power as stemming from a frustration with the nonviolent tactics of King, Rustin, and James Lawson, more recent scholars have depicted the movement as not simply a tale of dashed hopes but of a newly energized internationalism fueled by the success of Third World decolonization.⁹² Certainly, the race-colony analogy was a central part of the Black Power generation's analysis. "Black Power," explained Stokely Carmichael, who coined the term, "means that black people see themselves as part of a new force, sometimes called the 'Third World.'"⁹³ This and other similar comparisons between domestic politics and foreign imperialism led black activists to advocate black nationalism and look with great care to the rest of the decolonizing world.

The cosmopolitan leanings of the Black Power movement, however, did not result in a return to India. In fact, one of the most remarkable aspects of the movement's internationalism was how thoroughly it dispensed with South Asia entirely. A review of the major writings and speeches of Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver, Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, Harold Cruse, and LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) reveals only a handful of oblique references to India. In part, it seems that India as an international analogue was too tainted with Gandhism and nonviolence to be of much use to the new generation. "Please do not give us the example of India and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi," pleaded novelist John O. Killens in 1965. "The situations are not similar; they could not be more dissimilar." Killens explained that nonviolence could only work in India; for the United States, he

⁹¹ Sidney Verba, Bashiruddin Ahmed, and Anil Bhatt, *Caste, Race, and Politics: A Comparative Study of India and the United States* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1971), 70.

⁹² See Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), chap. 3.

⁹³ Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Random House, 1967), xi.

preferred militant African socialism.⁹⁴ LeRoi Jones agreed. “The idea of ‘passive’ resistance is not the answer,” he wrote in 1962. “It is an Indian ‘rope trick’ that cannot be applied in this scientific country. No one believes in magic anymore.”⁹⁵ No longer an analogous region from which concrete lessons could be learned, India was once again wrapped in the fog of Orientalism.

Where older internationalists had looked to India, the new black internationalists took up a different set of analogies: Cuba, China, Vietnam, Kenya, the Soviet Union, Algeria, and, in some cases, the Cape Verde Islands and Guinea-Bissau. Merely ninety miles off the shores of Florida, Cuba was of especial interest and replaced India as a traveling destination for young black activists. In 1960, the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (a U.S.-based New Left organization) put together one such delegation—including Harold Cruse, LeRoi Jones, Robert Williams (who would later move to Cuba), Julian Mayfield, Sonia Sanchez, and John Henrik Clarke—to visit Cuba and hear Fidel Castro speak. The Progressive Labor Movement also sponsored a number of trips to Cuba for black students, trips which, according to Robin D. G. Kelley, proved important in turning black militants toward the Third World.⁹⁶ But despite the global significance of Nehruvian non-alignment, India was not part of the Black Power generation’s Third World—a Third World in which communism, pan-Africanism, and anti-Americanism spoke louder than civil neutrality.

Although the new black internationalists found little use for India, Indians maintained an interest in the United States. In particular, the generation of Dalits (ex-untouchables) educated under Ambedkarite reforms came to see themselves as an invisible colony within a nominally democratic state and took solace and inspiration from the very generation of black thinkers that had turned away from India. Among the most influential of Dalit activists were the Dalit Panthers, a Bombay-based group formed in 1972 and explicitly modeled on the Black Panthers of the United States.

⁹⁴ John Oliver Killens, *Black Man’s Burden* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), 120, 167.

⁹⁵ LeRoi Jones, *Home: Social Essays* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1966), 85.

⁹⁶ Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 75-77.

“Due to the hideous plot of American imperialism, the Third Dalit World, that is, oppressed nations, and Dalit people are suffering,” they declared in their manifesto. “Even in America, a handful of reactionary whites are exploiting blacks. To meet the force of reaction and remove this exploitation, the Black Panther movement grew. . . . We claim a close relationship with this struggle.”⁹⁷ Although the Dalit Panthers’ demands were political and economic (they called for a redistribution of land, free education, improved medical facilities, and housing), their greatest success was cultural, as their poems and programs sparking a vibrant Marathi-language literary movement, which also looked to black writers for inspiration.⁹⁸

The perceived success of the civil right movements in the United States has encouraged Dalits to continue to use the race-caste analogy. Whether blacks are connected to Dalits through shared ancestry, as V. T. Rajshekar, the editor of *Dalit Voice*, has often insisted, or through a similar social position and historical experience remains an issue of contention among Dalit activists. In either case, however, the value of the comparison is clear. Rajshekar has expressed his hope that identifying blacks with Dalits will spur the international community—including the African diaspora, the World Council of Churches, the Muslim world, and the Pope—to come to the aid of Dalits as it once did for blacks in South Africa and the United States.⁹⁹ This strategy became popular in the run-up to the 2001 UN World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance to be held in Durban, South Africa. Angry at the Indian government’s decision to keep Dalit issues off the agenda, Dalit activists made a concerted bid to establish casteism as equivalent to racism.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ “Dalit Panther Manifesto,” 1973, in Lata Maurugkar, *Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra: A Sociological Approach* (London: Sangam Books, 1991), 237.

⁹⁸ See Arjun Dangle, ed., *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1992) and N. M. Aston, ed., *Dalit Literature and African-American Literature* (Delhi: Prestige Books, 2001).

⁹⁹ V. T. Rajshekar, *Dalit: The Black Untouchables of India* (1979; reprint Atlanta: Clarity Press, 1987), 81. See also Vijay Prashad, “Afro-Dalits of the Earth, Unite!” *African Studies Review* 43 (2000): 189-201.

¹⁰⁰ See Deepa S. Reddy, “The Ethnicity of Caste,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 78 (2005): 557-565.

Despite international mobilization (including in North America) and a hunger strike, the Dalit movement failed to win recognition at Durban. This failure may be taken as a symptom of the larger difficulty facing Dalits in pleading their case internationally. They find themselves up against a triumphalistic narrative of Indian history in which their struggle ended in 1947, with the nation's independence. And yet, even in this, they betray a striking resemblance to blacks in the U.S., who also face continued deprivation decades after a climactic official victory. In both countries, formal minority protections have come under attack from those who argue that social discrimination is a thing of the past. At the same time, both governments have largely failed to protect their black and Dalit citizens from poverty, from the inadequacies of the criminal justice system, and from environmental disasters resulting from Hurricane Katrina and the Narmada Dam. One wonders if the world's largest democracy and the world's most powerful democracy might still have something to learn from one another.