



**South Asia Studies Association 2010  
South Asia and the West: Entwined, Entangled and Engaged  
University of Southern California**

**My Conference Report**

**April 24th, 2010**

**David Blundell**

It was the 4th annual conference, April 10th-11th. There were 86 presentations and across 28 panels. Twenty-eight participants came from overseas, including the UK, Poland, Taiwan, Russia, India, and Pakistan.

Our hosts at the University of Southern California embraced the focus on collegiality and networking, hosting both luncheons and all four coffee breaks, thereby greatly relieving the strain on our budget and allowing us to build a cushion against future operating expenses.

Five presentations were primarily featured:

1. Dr Bonita Chamberlain. Her presentation on current conditions in Afghanistan was both provocative and informative. Because of her work on women's rights in Afghanistan there is a *fatwa* calling for her death should she ever return to the country.
2. Ms. Paula Fouche, filmmaker. Her documentary, "Not in God's Name," was a provocative exploration of religious intolerance.
3. Prof David Blundell. His documentary on the life of Dr. Ambedkar provided important insights into one of India's most important advocates for civil rights.
4. Dr Muhammad Khalid Ejaz, Consul General of Pakistan, gave a provocative lecture on US-Pakistan-India relations.
5. Mr. Navneet Chugh, a highly successful entrepreneur, provided a penetrating yet humorous analysis of the Indian diaspora living in the United States.

Conference Success:

1. Because of the success of the conference and the large number of quality academic presentations, it was proposed to establish a journal to provide the wider academic community access to this great work.
2. Dr. Chamberlain, because of the fatwa, has withdrawn from active academic involvement. Dr. Blundell, an active researcher, was invited to join the Board of Directors.

Conference Description:

### **The Ballad of East and West**

Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the two shall meet,  
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat;  
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,

When two strong men stand face to face,  
tho' they come from the ends of the earth.

Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)

Papers were invite to explore cultural and religious interchanges, entertainment cross-fertilization, economic globalization, and the diaspora experiences addressing the rich tapestry that is South Asia: past, present and future. Presenters were encouraged to give stimulating, intellectually refreshing contributions from across the world. The conference organizers – SASA enjoys a reputation as the place to network in the most congenial, relaxed atmosphere to be found in academia. By attending, people offer a South Asian Studies commitment to programs required in university life across around the world.

### **Conference Host**

Co-hosting the SASA 2010 conference are the University of Southern California's Office of Religious Life and Asian Pacific American Student Services. One of the world's premier research and teaching universities, slightly more than half of USC's 33,500 students are enrolled in its graduate and professional programs. USC has the largest South Asian student population of any university in the Western Hemisphere.

### **About the Conference and my Participation**

#### **Notes from Paper**

**Dr Ambedkar -- Quest for Liberation:  
Rights for Women and Religious Toleration --  
The Hindu Code Bill**

David Blundell, Ph.D.  
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## Abstract

This paper explores the determination of Dr B. R. Ambedkar to provide basic human rights for the people of India during his tenure as Law Minister from 1947-1951. As Dr Ambedkar made it his life's struggle to open the legal process for egalitarian conditions in India from the early 20th century, it was his appointment by Prime Minister Nehru to prepare the constitution of newly independent India.

Constitution provisions were made for equal civil rights regardless of caste, class, or religion. Yet, inequality of gender prevailed. Ambedkar initiated The Hindu Code Bill to address disparities among religious groups -- primarily Hindu and Muslim in India.

As politics favored the ruling caste Hindu rights and sensibilities, women subject to men in reality did not share equal rights. Dr Ambedkar's campaign for social and religious tolerance of all people in India failed to become law in 1951. Therefore Dr Ambedkar resigned as Cabinet Law Minister and pursued his own quest for social and religious liberation among the dispossessed peoples of India as a model for the downtrodden peoples of the world.

The World Economic Forum in its 2009 report on global gender disparities ranks India 114th in a list of 134 countries. Given the troubling statistics starting with the worsening sex ratio in the 0-6 age group in the population, eliminating the gender gap in its various dimensions should be a top political priority for rising India. Greater representation of women in legislatures and Parliament is likely to force a shift of focus towards this priority. The world over, women's empowerment and advancement through progressive struggles, and by right, have had a highly beneficial impact on politics, the economy, health, education, culture, and society. With the ruling party, the main opposition, and other significant political players deciding to join hands on a key issue, a rare and historic opportunity presents itself. The polity and Parliament must not fail the women of India.

### Women and property rights

Dr Ambedkar was of the firm opinion that until or unless, by applying legal change to Hindu Dharma-*shastras*, nothing is going to happen. In the name *sanskaras*, the Hindu women are tied up with the bondage of superstitions, which they carry till their death. They are also responsible for inculcating these wrong notions learnt by them through baseless traditions and preaching of the *shastras* in the budding minds of their offspring.

Otherwise also the women in India have remained a source of amusement as such she was used and misused by men. She has been used just like a machine for procreation. It

has also been mentioned in Hindu *shastras* that the woman is the bond slave of her father when she was young, to her husband when she is middle aged and to her son when she is a mother. Of course, all the epigrams, aphorisms, proverbs, platitudes and truisms bear necked truth about the stature of women in India.

Efforts were made in the past to bring dignity to women. There is also a very long tradition of social reforms by our saints and other social reformers. But the proprietors of the orthodoxy thwarted these efforts. In the absence of any legal sanction or authority, these efforts could not sustain.

In this direction Dr B. R. Ambedkar has tried to brake down the barriers in the way of advancement of women in India. He laid down the foundation of concrete and sincere efforts by codifying the common Civil Code for the Hindu and the principle is capable of extension to other sections of the Indian society. Prior to these efforts of Dr Ambedkar, the destiny of the Indian women depended upon the wrong notions and perceptions chalked out by the proprietors of orthodoxy.

The prevailing two schools of Hindu created and sustained inequality. According to *Mitakshara* the property of a Hindu is not his individual property. It consists of father, son, grandsons and great grandsons by reason of birth. The property passed under *Mitakshara* by survivorship to the male members who remain behind. Whereas *Da-ya-bhag* recognised the property held by the heir as his personal property with an absolute right to dispose it of either by gift or by will or any other manner that he chooses. The chaotic conditions of the Hindu law were reduced to eat propositions in the form of judicial pronouncements and codification was the legislative recognition of the judge made law. Dr Ambedkar explained reasons for consolidation and codification.

Article 25 of the Indian Constitution permits freedom. The reforms introduced by Dr Ambedkar through Hindu Code-Bill have been adhered to and have been accepted by and large. He, by codifying Hindu Law in respect of marriage, divorce and succession, rationalized and restored the dignity to women. Prior to the Hindu Succession Act, 1956 and Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, the Hindu Law was un-codified in a large measure,

though Hindu Women's Right to Property Act, 1937 was the subject legislative intervention.

In the Hindu Code Bill, the principles of codification covered:

- (1.) Right to property,
- (2.) Order of succession to property,
- (3.) Maintenance, marriage, divorce, adoption, minority and guardianship.

Needless to say, the Bill was a part of social engineering via law. It was by any standard of any time a revolutionary measure. It was really a first step towards the recognition and empowerment of women in India. Under these revolutionary measures, a woman will have property in her own right and be able to dispose of her property.

The Hindu Code Bill introduced by Dr B. R. Ambedkar in the Constituent Assembly on 11th April 1947. A debate on this bill continued for more than four years and still remains inconclusive. Here once again, the orthodoxy prevailed upon the reforms. In the words of Dr Ambedkar, it was killed and died unset and unsung. He felt that the then government led by Prime Minister Nehru was not eager to clear the Hindu Code Bill. He, therefore, tendered his resignation but continued to participate in the Parliamentary debates on the request of Nehru.

**Also I showed a Film:**

**Arising Light:**

**Dr B. R. Ambedkar and the Birth of a New Era in India**

David Blundell, Ph.D.  
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NAVALOKA PRODUCTIONS<sup>1</sup>

Presents

*Arising Light Series 1:*

***Dr B. R. Ambedkar and the Birth of a New Era in India***

26 min Documentary Educational Film

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<sup>1</sup> NAVALOKA is a Pali word meaning new world.

迎向曙光 系列之一

安貝卡博士

與他開創的印度新紀元

26分鐘教學版

導演 卜道 (David Blundell)

I have produced a film on social transformation in India from the perspective of Dr Ambedkar. Currently I am visually tracing the life of Dr Ambedkar as a project series entitled *Arising Light* with its first film *Dr B. R. Ambedkar and the Birth of a New Era in India*. My purpose for the research is to present strategies for a continuation of social economic transformation in India as models for mobilizing world development. The focus of this project is to understand social transformation in India based on the Dalit (disenfranchised people) experience and the legacy of Dr Ambedkar as a model for development.

### Project Beginnings

There is nothing fixed, nothing eternal ...  
everything is changing,  
change is the law of life for individuals  
as well as for society.  
-- Dr B. R. Ambedkar

My key informant is Eleanor Zelliot (Ph.D. on life of Dr Ambedkar, 1969 U. Penn.) working with her at her home in Northfield, Minnesota. I traveled to Mhow, Dr Ambedkar's birthplace, collecting books, writings, interviews, and digital recording of historic photographs. In Nagpur, October 2005, I attended the workshop *Transcending Barriers: Dr. Ambedkar and the Buddhist World* and corresponding International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) Conference: *Buddhism and Social Equality*. Then to England where I filmed interviews with Sangharakshita who personally knew Dr Ambedkar at his residence Madhyamaloka, Moseley, Birmingham. In October 2006 my research was presented as a film in Nagpur to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Dr Ambedkar embracing Buddhism and untimely death in 1956. The study has grown to include Dalit communities in the United States and Canada where especially local Punjabi followers of Guru Ravidass have become involved offering research materials. This is a story different from other attempts in following the personal life and social movement of Dr Ambedkar. It's a project that seeks an intimate telling of a story based on his letters, place locations, and events in a life process that led to the making of a great civil rights leader.

The essence of the project is to trace Dalit agendas from the life of Dr Ambedkar to assess social, political, and economic strategies, current and in the past, that have sought to improve the lives of Dalits. It brings together the thoughts and actions of people who continue their peaceful mobilization by the slogan of Dr Ambedkar “educate, organize, and agitate.” As an anthropologist I am examining the individual and community dilemmas of social mobility of the Dalit. This is a story different from other attempts in depicting the personal life and social movement of Dr Ambedkar. It’s a project that seeks an intimate telling of a story based on his letters, place locations, and events in a life process that led to the making of a great civil rights leader in India’s struggle for equality and justice. After independence in 1947, Dr. Ambedkar became India’s first Minister of Law. In October, 1956, at Nagpur, with a multitude joining him, Dr Ambedkar embraced Buddhism.

## Introduction

Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956) rose from the *dalit*<sup>2</sup> “undercaste” community (untouchables) in India. He educated himself in India and the West and became a national leader in India’s struggle for equality and justice. Ambedkar framed the Indian constitution making it a secular state and provided the national emblems of state, in particular the Asoka lions and the dharma wheel on the national flag. Dr Ambedkar was India’s first Minister of Law. On October 14th, 1956, Dr Ambedkar embraced Buddhism with 500,000 others. Today there are 20 to 30 million Buddhists in India.

Originally the project was about the social work of the Buddhist movement in India stemming from the work of Dr Ambedkar. It was a visual documentary depicting 20th recent humanitarian self-help education, health care, and spiritual development. Dhammachari Lokamitra<sup>3</sup> came up with the idea, inviting me to film the work of social welfare through dharma practice. In 2002 I traveled to India to document the daycare centers, hostels, clinics, retreat centers, and institutes of *dalit* social service. I photographed in the communities across Maharashtra—in Mumbai, Pune, and to the geographic center of India: Nagpur. At the town of Nagpur, an ancient crossroads of the Deccan Plateau, it was the place where Dr Ambedkar held a ceremony to embrace Buddhism in 1956. To this day it’s pivotal for Buddhist activities in India. I filmed the *diksa bhumi*, or grounds, and the stupa commemorating the event where a half million people followed Dr Ambedkar becoming Buddhist.

When Lokamitra first came to Nagpur it was on the occasion of the 21st anniversary of this event that started with Dr Ambedkar and his *dalit* community seeking economic and social liberation. Lokamitra was impressed by the devotion of the people to carry the movement forward and by Dr Ambedkar himself. I was also coming around to think more about the Dr Ambedkar story.

My story was to show the Buddhist civilization in India from the 2nd to the 9th centuries as a dreamy montage of cliffs, rock cut shrines, fragments of murals, and stone steps leading up to a film-cut into the 20th century Mahavihara shrine in Pune. The next

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<sup>2</sup> Known as “untouchable” or the community below the lowest caste in India. Gandhi called them “*harijan*” or children of god.

<sup>3</sup> Founder and Director of the Jambudvipa Trust and President of the Nagarjuna Institute.

scenes were a health clinic, daycare center, meditation retreat center, boys hostel, and the *diksa bhumi* in Nagpur. At the Nagarjuna Institute in Nagpur, my interview of Lokamitra came next. He told of his first visit to Nagpur on that 21st anniversary commemorating the rekindling of a social Buddhist movement in India.<sup>4</sup> Lokamitra said that it was important to attend the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) in Nagpur in mid-October 2005. The theme would be *Transcending Barriers: Dr Ambedkar and the Buddhist World* held from 9th-16th October 2005 at Nagaloka Campus, Nagpur, Maharashtra, India. This conference encouraged an understanding and communication between the Buddhist followers of Dr Ambedkar and the international community.

Dr Ambedkar viewed Buddhism as a means of bringing about social change based on individual practice and service to society. The world community has much to gain from understanding the life and approach of Dr Ambedkar, in his conviction that Buddhism could bring about social revolution.

I participated in the 2005 International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) Conference and workshops on *Transcending Barriers: Dr Ambedkar and the Buddhist World* 9th-16th October at the Nagarjuna Institute at Nagaloka, Nagpur, Maharashtra, India. At the conference I met with a community interested in the Ambedkar movement including the Dalai Lama. I could see that the Ambedkar story was needed, not only in India, to be brought to the attention of the world. People in Korea, Taiwan, the UK, Thailand, Australi, New Zealand, and the USA made clear interest statements about producing the film. Yes, the story of Dr Ambedkar was necessary as a first step. A second film project could be on the “social welfare” and a third on the *dalit* boy’s story “Jivita.” When leaving India, Lokamitra said that I should return to film the events commemorating the death anniversary of Dr Ambedkar on December 6th 2005. And before that time, while in the United States, to interview Prof Eleanor Zelliot at Northfield, Minnesota. I discovered that Eleanor Zelliot was an acquaintance of my “god father” Gordon Lewis in the 1940s as they shared a Quaker youth education in Pennsylvania. I shared a few wintry days viewing films related to Dr Ambedkar and interviewing Prof Zelliot at her home on a riverbank near Carleton College. From Minnesota I returned to India dedicated for the filming about the life of Dr Ambedkar.

Once in India from early December I filmed in Mumbai the places in the daily life of Dr Ambedkar, from the tenement building where he lived most of his years in the city, the colleges he established or taught in, and the cremation site. The cremation was set on a bay shore of the Arabian Sea opposite the playing grounds of Shivaji Park. Multitudes of pilgrims crowd to the site annually on December 6th. My filming continued at the birthplace of Dr Ambedkar. It’s known as Mhow, a military base (a place where I first visited in 1976), Following that visit to Pune, and again Mumbai.

The film production is a celebration of the 50th anniversary of Dr Ambedkar embracing Buddhism. It’s a 60-minute film looking in depth at the historical and sociological implications of Ambedkar's peaceful revolution. The story of Dr Ambedkar unfolds from a narrative about his leadership and a social humanitarian movement with reflections on the roots of Buddhism and ancient sources and inspirations from India.

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<sup>4</sup> The short film was put together with a team in Taipei, Taiwan, led by Dean Karalekas and T. C. Lin with visual selections by Steven Martin, and editing by David Blundell, Anika Tokarchuk (June 2005), with previous editing by Christian Anderson.



The goal of the project is to reach an international audience worldwide for telling the story of Dr B. R. Ambedkar. The resulting knowledge could then possibly assist people of the underclass *dalit* community.



Children's day-care centre, Mumbai, 2002, film clip, David Blundell.

### **Synopsis of the Film Treatment**

The film introduces India's heritage to a general viewing audience including a walk through the Ajanta Caves and legacy of the Sub-continent. In Nagpur, central India, on 14th October 1956, Dr Ambedkar embraces Buddhism with thousands of followers: the greatest non-violent revolution in India since the Buddha exactly 2,500 years earlier.

In the late 19th century the story comes to the birth of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891) unfolding the current situation in India and his parents' situation: untouchable, yet working with the British at a military camp, and father influenced by Kabir who was a 15th century poet critic.

Bhimrao lived a sheltered life as his father's military base, not really comprehending being untouchable: the menial under-caste of India (below the four castes of Hinduism). For the first time when visiting his father stationed at another place, the journey opened his eyes to his community status in India since most cart drivers refused untouchable people in their cart.

Since untouchable children were forbidden education, it was one high caste teacher who noticed Bhimrao's intelligence, helped to guide him, and eventually gave him the name Ambedkar, his own name. Bhimrao suffered insult and humiliation from other students, yet overcame that to become the first graduate of his community.

The Maharaja of Baroda noticed his brilliance and gave him a scholarship to Columbia University where he encountered the Afro-American community in Harlem. The 14th Amendment to the United States Constitution and the views of his professors, such as John Dewey who an American philosopher and education reformer, propelled him to campaign for human rights.

From his doctoral studies in economics at Columbia, Bhimrao ventured to London to achieve similar success in law. Upon his return to India in 1917, his patron the Maharaja

of Baroda awarded Dr Ambedkar with a high position in government. Dr Ambedkar felt obligated at first, yet because no other staff in the government office would deal with an untouchable and there was no lodging available for an untouchable, he resigned.

In Mumbai, Ambedkar found government low-cost housing where he could reside in a 10x10 foot room. He tried a law practice, yet his attention quickly turned to the suffering of the millions in the untouchable community. Gandhi called them Harijan, children of god. Later known a Dalit, deprived people.

Dr Ambedkar worked for injustice wherever it existed. To satisfy his determination he proclaimed the slogan: educate, organize, agitate.

To educate he taught in colleges, and later built institutions of high learning in Mumbai and across Maharashtra (central India). To organize he became a writer, publisher, social and labor leader, and established political parties. To agitate he sparred with other leaders of his time, such as Gandhi.

The Ambedkar–Gandhi “Pune Pact” story is a centerpiece in the independence movement in India. Millions of untouchables were fighting for their social rights against the caste Hindu society. They belonged to the same religion, yet untouchables were treated as polluted people. Caste Hindu people by centuries of tradition considered themselves pure, and could be polluted if touched by an untouchable. Though untouchables honored the same deities they could not enter the Hindu shrine. They were bound to hereditary occupations of menial labor considered unclean.

Gandhi appealed to the good heart of Hindu people. Dr Ambedkar wanted social reform and political rights. Gandhi granted untouchables their indivisible rights as part of Hindu society. Dr Ambedkar’s slogan to educate, organize, and agitate was designed to uplift deprived people to equal status under the law. The untouchable population should then have own political voice. Gandhi wanted independence from the British first.

The years from 1932 to 1947 were turbulent for the independence leadership in India. Jinnah, leader of the Muslim League, wanted the formation of Pakistan, Dr Ambedkar demanded separate representation for the untouchable community.

Once India became independent from the British, Gandhi insisted that Dr Ambedkar to be the first Minister of Law under Prime Minister Nehru and to draft the constitution.

Bhimrao Ambedkar’s life was dedicated to reform in society. He championed a moral social order that would not sanctify the exploitation of people. This egalitarian quest led him to Marxism and Buddhism. As the Buddha’s teaching were born in India, and the non-violent and rational approach impressed him, Dr Ambedkar showed the way to his community in their struggle for equality.



Girls performing *naga* dance at the Women's Development Centre, Nagpur, 2002, film clip, David Blundell.

Ambedkar emerges as the authentic Indian icon of the twenty-first century. This project is to help deprived people in India.

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