

AKSC's 4th Annual Conference Shines Light on Building an Equitable Society

Ambedkar King Study Circle hosted its 4th annual conference on August 19th 2023, centered around the goal of constructing a caste-free and equitable society right from the grassroots. Insightful talks and presentations based both on the personal and the theoretical and the connections between the two, were heard throughout the day. And the event came alive with thoughtful questions from the audience. These discussions not only raised the level of understanding in the gathering about the changing nature of the different kinds of bigotry that plague our society today but also showed us how to come together to see the oppressive forces clearly, gather strength strategically, and fight back effectively. In this report, we share excerpts from the day, and the resolutions that will guide our work in the upcoming year.

Professor Ajantha Subramanian's talk was on Engineering as a Technology of Caste in India and the USA. She explained the caste dynamics brought to the USA by the so-called upper caste individuals in general and the Brahmins in particular, and how they have managed to conceal their structural privilege tied to caste, while simultaneously taking advantage of the racial issues in the American public sphere.

Responding to a question about affirmative action and diversity policies from a member of the audience, Prof. Subramanian pointed to the collective redressal of a collective historical disadvantage as being essential to redistributing social capital. And by drawing a contrast between the quota system in India to the system of handpicking diverse "meritocratic" individuals through diversity policies in the USA, she showed us why the focus on selective action on an individual basis doesn't have a chance to fundamentally shake up the operations of privilege in the way that a collective mechanism of redressal would.

Prof. Thomas Blom Hansen's presentation on 'Beyond Prejudice: Reflections from South Africa and India' explored how caste structures within the Indian diaspora in Africa partially dissolved due to state intervention, leading to a unified "Indianness".

Following up on the speaker's point about how the internalization of hierarchy among this population hindered assimilation into black culture, a member of the audience raised a question about the anti-black bigotry present in both of the two very distinct waves of Indian immigrants, those who moved as indentured servants to South Africa, and as high tech students and workers to the USA. Prof. Hansen responded by saying that the colonial powers strategically separated people to keep them from joining forces, and systematically built anti-blackness into every one of their societies through social and economic isolation.

Dr. Murali Shanmugavelan in his discussion on 'Castelessness of caste in digital cultures' uncovered the myths of castelessness within Digital cultures. He explained the reasons behind why despite claims of transcending social hierarchies, digital cultures often fall short of this in caste-affected societies. He also narrated instances indicative of how caste pride was gaining credibility and seeing a resurgence within corporate spaces.

Answering a question about caste pride, Dr. Shanmugavelan touched upon the psychological power trip that people derive from these mental postures, and went on to articulate the need for the

well-being debate in the anti-caste solidarity space. This, he said, is sorely lacking today, but is an essential need that will allow people to be able to talk about the stigma and the humiliation that comes with feelings surrounding caste identity, but also, on the other hand, help people with shame from feeling caste pride to be able to work through that issue.

Prof. William T. Armaline addressed the gathering on the topic of 'Caste, Capital, and Human Rights.' During his talk, he delved into the evolution of wealth and power, moving from feudalism to capitalism. He also explored how corporate interests, driven by short-term gains, often collaborate with the government at the expense of human rights, perpetuating labor exploitation and capital accumulation. He emphasized the potential for positive change through grassroots education and mobilization.

When asked to imagine a future where the current oppressive structures don't hold sway, he said that the increasingly multi-racial and multi-ethnic labor movements are providing exciting opportunities. He stated that the cooperative struggle of shared material goals, whose output also impacts power relations, was a proven way to build solidarity while taking strides towards a more just future.

High school students Ms. Shakthi Karthikeyan and Ms. Kavina Kanakarajan shared their perspective on Social Justice in the 21st Century, offering insights based on their personal experiences within their school community. They highlighted the dangers we face as a society when we make quick and easy judgements about a person, and reminded us that when we do that, we stand to lose a portion of their humanity, and indeed a piece of our own humanity as well.

Ms. Niang Hangzo addressed the Ethnic Cleansing of Tribals in Manipur. She called upon all segments of society to unite and demand accountability from the Indian government regarding the violence against the Kuki-Zomi tribes in their land. Ms. Sunita Singh, Treasurer of Shri Guru Ravidass Gurudwara of Pittsburg, CA, and Mr. Ram Kumar, President of the Ambedkar International Center(AIC), engaged in a dialogue on SB403 CA Senate Bill, moderated by Mr. Ajinkya Ashok. Their conversation covered its introduction, key takeaways, and legal safeguards for marginalized communities.

Representatives from the following organizations offered their felicitations at the conference: Ms. Geetha Krishnamurthy from Maitri; Mr. Prajwal Thool representing AIC; Ms. Vidya Palaniswamy from the Association for India's Development (AID); Mr. Balvir Thind of Shri Guru Ravidass Gurudwara; Mr. Raju Rajagopal of Hindus for Human Rights (HfHR); Dr. Sharat Lin from San Jose Peace and Justice Center (SJPJC); Mr. Mohamad Sulaiman of the Indian American Muslim Council (IAMC). These organizations are dedicated to educating and raising awareness among their respective social bases about social justice issues, and they are committed to being part of the anti-caste struggle in the future. We thank them for being on this journey with us.

AKSC's 4th conference expressed gratitude to Seattle Council Member Kshama Sawant and Senator Aisha Wahab for their work on legal protections for the caste-oppressed. The conference also resolved to create educational materials to promote constructive anti-caste conversations that will advance us towards a caste-free future.