

CALCUTTA RESEARCH GROUP WEDNESDAY LECTURE SERIES

Universalism of the Oppressed: B.R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste*
Lecture by
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The universals of the oppressed have emerged from concrete circumstances and concrete determinations. They are the concrete universals which become pathways to alternatives. In this way they become the truth. Truth, and we are here speaking primarily of political truth, does not come from any special knowledge of the world or knowledge of the world to a greater degree, but from specific political engagements with its own history. The historical questions radical anti-colonial thinkers confronted were: What is this condition in which the colonial society finds itself racially and caste wise abused, discriminated against, and dominated internally by a few and externally by a colonial master power? What is this history that pushes the society into the prehistory of slavery, into savagery, into the mysterious frontiers of inequality? How does this condition give birth to a State and a type of politics that perpetuates discrimination, domination, and inequality? B. R. Ambedkar's *The Annihilation of Caste* (1936) revolved around these questions. Articulated in interrogative and polemical style, the book succeeded in enunciating the principle of non-discrimination, equality, and justice.

This talk will draw attention to some of the sections of this remarkable tract to show that its messages are aimed at wider audiences by way of untying particular questions and working out the resolutions of those particular questions. This is what has ensured global relevance to what Ambedkar wrote nearly ninety years ago. The talk suggests that the emancipative ideas growing within the colonial and postcolonial milieu have much to offer in terms of a transformative thinking of the future, for these ideas attain universality not through an espousal of universal principles, but through determining particular questions of society and politics. The determination of the concrete has been the way to attaining universal significance. In the case of this remarkable manifesto, the universal ideal of non-discrimination, equality, justice, abolition of race, caste, and colonialism emerges through concrete determinations of the associated questions.