

THE FIRST AMBEDKAR MEMORIAL LECTURE:

THE POWER OF CHANGE

REPORT BY MASTER TIMOTHY SHUTTLEWORTH

To mark the centenary of the admission of Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar to Gray's in 1916, His Excellency Mr Dinesh K Patnaik, the Acting High Commissioner for India, delivered the first Ambedkar Memorial Lecture in Hall on 6 December 2016.

After a welcome from the Treasurer, Master David Hunt, and a short address from the Indian Minister of State for Social Justice, the Honourable Vijay Sampla (on film), Mr Patnaik began a wide-ranging and thoughtful lecture on 'The Power of Change', a theme closely associated with Dr Ambedkar as lawyer, economist, socialist, politician and statesman. But what Ambedkar achieved was not merely social change but 'a disruption in the very way that India thought'. Mr Patnaik suggested Ambedkar's life might be seen as a metaphor for liberty and he himself as an icon of progress and change. Ambedkar's most lasting achievement though is the Indian Constitution, described by Nelson Mandela as 'the greatest safeguard of human liberty'.

Ambedkar felt that political equality in India could not be achieved unless socially backward or depressed groups were on an equal footing politically. In 1932, largely due to pressure from Ambedkar, 148 seats were allocated to the lower castes in the Indian legislature. Thus began positive discrimination as an inalienable Indian ethos spreading equality to socially deprived groups. This change brought great civic disruption to the fabric of Indian Society.

Ambedkar also devoted his attention to gender equality and equal rights for women both within marriage and in respect of inheritance laws. Mr Patnaik quoted Ambedkar, who had ventured that 'one can measure the progress of a community by the progress of its women'.

Transferring his gaze to the wider world, Mr Patnaik said that the biggest disruption was yet to happen across nations, as the traditional mould of how we do business and interact is broken. 'Artificial intelligence, driverless cars will take away jobs ... Instead of being employees, people are [already] becoming independent contractors ... [or] independent entrepreneurs. [This will have] profound social and political consequences [that might see] the end of collective bargaining ... This dismantling of the social safety network is going to herald large disruptions in society.'

What can be done? The answer lies in collaboration and co-operation between regions (and, by implication, between



nations), said Mr Patnaik, which was Dr Ambedkar's message, too. This is how India, a country of a billion plus people, speaking more than 30 languages and diverse dialects and containing all religions, has managed to remain unified and strong post independence, not to mention becoming one of the fastest growing economies in the world. Ending his lecture, the Acting High Commissioner suggested that the world needed to develop this approach so that, in Dr Ambedkar's words, 'Life is great not (needlessly) long'.

Following the lecture, there was a reception in the Large Pension Room, hosted by Mr Patnaik. A new portrait of Dr Ambedkar, painted by Hazel Morgan, was also unveiled. The portrait, the generous gift of the Indian High Commission, has already taken its place in the Large Pension Room and is a striking addition to the Inn's art collection.

The evening received extensive press coverage in India. ■