Ambedkar’s Appropriation by Hindutva Ideology

An E-Digest

Compiled by Ram Puniyani

(For Private Circulation)

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Preface

Many a debates are raging in various circles related to Ambedkar’s ideology. On one hand the RSS combine has been very active to prove that RSS ideology is close to Ambedkar’s ideology. In this direction RSS mouth pieces Organizer (English) and Panchjanya (Hindi) brought out special supplements on the occasion of anniversary of Ambedkar, praising him. This is very surprising as RSS is for Hindu nation while Ambedkar has pointed out that Hindu Raj will be the biggest calamity for dalits. The second debate is about Ambedkar-Gandhi. This came to forefront with Arundhati Roy’s introduction to Ambedkar’s ‘Annihilation of Caste’ published by Navayana. In her introduction ‘Doctor and the Saint’ Roy is critical of Gandhi’s various ideas.

This digest brings together some of the essays and articles by various scholars-activists on the theme. Hope this will help us clarify the underlying issues.

Ram Puniyani
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Section A

Ambedkar's Legacy and RSS Combine

1. Idolatry vs Ideology

The RSS-BJP’s enthusiasm to celebrate Ambedkar’s birth anniversary is seen as a key aspect of the Hindutva group’s social outreach agenda targeting Dalits for political ends.

By DIVYA TRIVEDI

(Portline)

POLITICAL parties, especially the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress, are falling over each other to claim the legacy of B.R. Ambedkar. While the two major parties are planning round-the-year celebrations for the 125th birth anniversary of Ambedkar, with an eye on the Assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, regional parties are not far behind. Delhi Chief Minister and Aam Aadmi Party leader Arvind Kejriwal demanded a “permanent” holiday on April 14, Ambedkar’s birthday. Kejriwal tweeted: “Salute to Baba Saheb Ambedkar. Let’s try to implement the Constitution in letter n spirit. That wud be best homage to him.”
The Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh’s (RSS) mouthpieces *Panchajanya* and *Organiser* are coming out with collectors’ editions on Ambedkar. Large hoardings announcing the publication of the special issues dot the skyline of the national capital.

Dalit ideologues, however, view the rush to claim Babasaheb’s legacy with mild amusement. Political observers describe the BJP’s moves to appropriate Ambedkar as a key aspect of its social outreach agenda wooing Dalits across India. Uday Chandra, a postdoctoral fellow at Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, said: “In the last general election, the proportion of Dalits voting for the BJP rose to 24 per cent from 11 per cent in 2009 [Suhas Palshikar and K.C. Suri in *Economic & Political Weekly*]. While this is a sharp increase, we should recognise that this trend in Dalit voting patterns is far from irreversible. Moreover, three quarters of Dalits did not in fact vote for Modi and the BJP. Hence, the need for an outreach programme with its promise as well as pitfalls.”

He said that mere symbolism would not increase the BJP’s vote share. “The BJP will be accused now of mere symbolism if Dalits do not benefit substantively or materially from the current regime’s policies,” he said.

Besides, it appears that neither of the major political parties has read or understood Ambedkar, who made his views on Hinduism and the Congress clear in his lifetime. His intellectual and political project was dedicated to the annihilation of caste and he believed that it could not happen within the fold of Hinduism, which has an inherently oppressive hierarchical structure. During the transfer of power from the British to the people of India and when Partition was a looming possibility, Ambedkar had said, “The Congress cannot expect any sane person who knows anything about conditions in India to agree to the government of the country being placed in the hands of the Hindu majority, simply because it is a majority. The Congress chooses to forget that Hinduism is a political ideology of the same character as the fascist or Nazi ideology and is thoroughly anti-democratic. If Hinduism is let loose—which is what Hindu majority means—it will prove a menace to the growth of others who are outside Hinduism and are opposed to Hinduism. This is not the point of view of Muslims alone. It is also the point of view of the Depressed Classes and also of the non-Brahmins.” (*Writings & Speeches*, Volume 17, Part One; Dr B.R. Ambedkar and his Egalitarian Revolution—Struggle for Human Rights; Dr Ambedkar Foundation, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India).

Ambedkar renounced Hinduism and gave a call to Dalits to join Buddhism. His words, “I was born a Hindu, but will not die a Hindu”, have gained popularity. He said, “Some people think that religion is not essential to society. I do not hold this view. I consider the foundation of religion to be essential to the life and practices of society. At the root of the Hindu social system lies Dharma as prescribed in *Manusmriti*. Such being the case, I do not think it possible to abolish inequality in the Hindu society unless the existing foundation of the Smriti religion is removed and a better one laid in its place. I, however, despair of the Hindu society being able to reconstruct on such a better foundation.”

Ambedkar was also opposed to Mahatma Gandhi’s views on the uplift of untouchables within the fold of Hinduism. The exchanges between Gandhi and Ambedkar over the issue of untouchability are in the public domain. Had the RSS and the Congress read Ambedkar’s writings, they would not be making such claims to his legacy. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the original inheritor of Babasaheb’s legacy by virtue of the extensive work done by its leader Kanshi Ram among Dalits, restricted itself to attacking the attempts by other parties to claim Ambedkar’s legacy. BSP supremo Mayawati said, “Other parties do a drama of celebrating Dr Ambedkar’s anniversary in a grand manner, but they never bothered to give him the due
respect in his lifetime. They are propagating that Dr Ambedkar supported the RSS for its work among Dalits. Had it been so, Dr Ambedkar would never have gone and accepted Buddhism, which professes equality and peace for all. During elections, the BJP calls every caste Hindu, and after the elections are over, it only works for the rich and privileged castes.”

In Uttar Pradesh and elsewhere, upper-caste BJP leaders ate food in Dalit homes. Earlier this year, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat called upon the cadre to picnic and share food with the “lower castes”. The sociologist Sujatha Surepally said, “but after all, they ate only daal at these homes, and not beef!” Beef is a major source of affordable protein for the lower castes and a ban on the slaughter of the cow and consumption of beef is the BJP’s important national agenda.

Sujatha Surepally, who is the convener of the Telangana Bhoomi Rakshana Sangam and principal of Satavahana University College of Arts in Karimnagar, said the BJP was “showing its actual colours but all the other parties, including the Telangana Rashtra Samithi [TRS], the Telugu Desam Party, and the BSP celebrate the birthdays of Ambedkar, Jyotirao Phule and Jagjivan Ram to sidetrack the real mission of eradication of caste”. These parties have set up “cells” for the Scheduled Castes (S.Cs), the Scheduled Tribes (S.Ts), women and others to divide Malas and Madigas, backward classes (B.Cs) and other marginalised groups and to push their own agendas; in the case of the BJP, for instance, the Hindutva agenda. She said the BJP’s move to appropriate Ambedkar could be a part of its reformist agenda, but it cannot be seen in isolation from its core agenda of Hindutva.

On the TRS’ plan to install a statue of Ambedkar in the Telangana Assembly, she said: “First install it in your own party office.” She said if Prime Minister Narendra Modi was really concerned about preserving Ambedkar’s legacy then he should call upon the BJP cadre to convert to Buddhism, follow the Hindu Code Bill, socialise banks and lands and redistribute land among the people. “Will the BJP dare to do this?” she asked.

**Tactics of co-option**

It is political pressure that is compelling these parties to reach out to the S.Cs and B.Cs and they are using the “outreach programme” to reconvert large sections of the populace. Until and unless any party dares to question the Hindu religious perspective on society, it will only be misquoting Ambedkar. “Mohan Bhagwat is only worshipping the idol of Ambedkar but breaking his ideology. Indian democracy has successfully failed to take forward the agenda of social revolutionaries such as Phule, Ambedkar and Jagjivan Ram,” said Sujatha Surepally. Apart from giving a token representation to Dalits in politics, nothing has been done to change their social and economic conditions. Dalits continue to face discrimination in subtle forms. Crimes against Dalits are unabated. And the two-tumbler system persists in several villages.

“Where are Dalits in the Land Acquisition Act? Who is going to lose in the privatisation process? Nobody is asking these questions. All parties are culpable in keeping the privileges intact. What is happening now is either you wage a battle against them or you co-opt them,” she said.

Prof. Kancha Ilaiah, director, Centre for Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy, Maulana Azad National Urdu University, throws light on the historical trajectory of the process of co-option.

“Until 1990, Ambedkar was untouchable to all mainstream political parties. The question of the BJP looking at him did not arise at that time. The implementation of the Mandal Commission report, the V.P. Singh government honouring Ambedkar [posthumously] with the Bharat Ratna [the highest civilian award] and the massive Dalit civil societal celebration of his role across the country triggered a new debate. From 1991 to 2015, emerging civil
societal forces acquired definite intellectual status in universities and colleges and became a force to reckon with. More significantly, Buddhism, has given Dalits a spiritual platform where they can have their own self-dignity, religion and God. It is a religious alternative to Hinduism. When Ambedkar embraced Buddhism in 1956, he opened the locks of religious transformation. Eighty per cent of Dalits converted to Christianity in south India. Similarly, 30 per cent of Mahars joined Buddhism. In Uttar Pradesh, 20-30 per cent of Dalits became Buddhists. This is an unrecognised fact.”

**Ambedkar as Prophet**

Ilaiah said that Dalits considered the Buddha the first prophet, Jesus Christ the second prophet, the Prophet Muhammad the third and Karl Marx, the fourth, whom they really loved and who they thought would really come and liberate them. But in the past 20 years, Ambedkar has become a prophet for Dalits. He is no longer simply a politician, a social scientist, an economist or a writer of the Constitution but a prophet. A large section of the population feels that the main prophetic role he played was abolishing the roots of untouchability. He gave Dalits equal rights in the domain of God, dignity, English education and a self-assertive role in society.

“The large masses of people rename their children and shave their heads and visit *dikshabhoomi*, Ambedkar’s burial place in Mumbai, or Shakti Sthal Ambedkar memorial park in Uttar Pradesh. This is not an issue of vote bank for them. Ambedkar is someone who liberated them. Imagine if 60 per cent of the people form their own religion, who will remain with Hinduism? It will simply crumble,” he said.

The RSS realises this. Earlier, it recruited cadre only from upper castes. From 1925 to 1975, its recruitment base was only upper castes. During the Babri Masjid agitation in 1992, the RSS recruited from Other Backward Class (OBC) and Shudra communities. A Brahmin or a Baniya youth could not participate in killing campaigns because they were already English educated and bound for foreign countries. The OBC youth were taken to Hanuman Vyamshalas and not schools. Instead of books, *trishuls* were distributed among them.

“If you look at [Vishwa Hindu Parishad leader] Pravin Togadia’s campaign, you will see that books were never distributed; only *trishuls*, with which they would have to attack Muslims. They tried to recruit Dalits in Andhra Pradesh but failed because Ambedkar was not on its banner then. The RSS put Vivekananda on its banner. Even the Congress has realised this. Now the RSS has started an underground network,” Ilaiah said. So a person who was seen as a lackey of the Imperialist, suited and booted and never clad in dhoti and kurta, and an agent of the British, suddenly became a social reformer. Although the Congress gave accessibility to Ambedkar to write the Constitution, it never put him on a gallery with its leaders. It was Dalits who started putting Ambedkar on their banners and the credit for this goes to Kanshi Ram.

Ilaiah said: “In a country that created untouchability, Ambedkar is more than a politician or a writer. Because of his stature, untouchability has become a global issue. U.S. President Barack Obama, the United Nations, and the World Bank and International Monetary Fund chiefs have spoken about untouchability. Ambedkar initiated the abolishment of untouchability, therefore, the BJP is claiming his legacy. Modi said, ‘I would not have been here if it was not for Ambedkar’s struggles’. He realises that he can become Prime Minister but not the priest of the Tirupati temple. Maybe it is his caste honesty. His stature will only grow. Under the BJP, Christianity and Buddhism will grow rapidly. Christianity has grown under repression. The RSS-BJP cannot stop it. But Hinduism cannot grow beyond a point as it is based on primitive ideology and superstitions. It will not sustain itself with the spread of education and the coming up of our thinkers.
Ambedkar’s texts cannot be misinterpreted. Among very advanced Dalits, there is a view that they should build Viharas and put Ambedkar and Buddha in them.”

The self-assertion movement of Dalits has gained so much strength that no party can afford to ignore it. But symbolism and vote-bank politics will alone not win the day for the BJP. The party is faring poorly on the action front. It has allowed an important ordinance to lapse. The S.C. and S.T. (Prevention of Atrocities) Amendment Ordinance, 2014, promulgated by the President on March 4, 2014, was sent to the Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment headed by BJP Member of Parliament Ramesh Bais. The committee submitted its report on December 19, 2014. The S.C. and S.T. (Prevention of Atrocities) Amendment Bill, 2014, proposed to replace the ordinance, which was introduced in Parliament in July 2014, has been pending although in January 2015, after the winter session ended, the Modi government had a slew of ordinances promulgated.

2. Top RSS leader misquotes Ambedkar on untouchability

By Vikas Pathak, Hindustan Times, New Delhi, 17-04-2015

In its latest bid to appropriate Dalit icon BR Ambedkar on his birth anniversary, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) seems to have got at least some of its facts wrong.

An article by RSS joint general secretary Krishna Gopal in the collectors' edition in its mouthpiece Organiser to mark Ambedkar's 124th birth anniversary year celebrations claims that the Dalit icon thought untouchability crept in India about 1,200-1,300 years ago and linked to Islamic invasions. However, Ambedkar's original writings do not seem to endorse the claim.

In fact, as his thoughts contained in Volume 7 of his writings and speeches – edited by Vasant Moon – make clear, he saw untouchability as beginning in 400 AD, the time when beef-eating was purportedly banned and beef-eaters shunned as untouchables. Significantly, while Ambedkar's explanation sees Brahmanism – loosely, an ancient term for Brahmanical Hinduism – as responsible for untouchability, Krishna Gopal seems to be pinning Islamic invasions as the culprit, thus seeking to bring Ambedkar in line with the Hindutva worldview.

"He (Ambedkar) says untouchability encrypted Hindu society 12 to 13 hundred years ago," Krishna Gopal claims.

"The first instance… can be seen in the family of Dahir. Dahir lost the war against Islamic aggressors. When the invaders entered his palace, the women of his family said, 'They are coming. They are mlecchas (meaning dirty or bad). They will touch us and we will be impure. We should kill ourselves…' This is the first reference to untouchability."

Dahir was the last Hindu ruler in Sindh and parts of Punjab in modern Pakistan.

Ambedkar's own explanation for the rise of untouchability is vastly different.

"Can we fix an approximate date for the birth of untouchability? I think we can, if we take beef-eating, which is the root of untouchability, as the point to start from… The date of the birth of untouchability must
be intimately connected with the ban on cow-killing and on eating beef...," he says.

"... Cow killing was made a capital offence by the Gupta kings sometime in the 4th century AD... Untouchability was born sometime about 400 AD. It is born out of the struggle for supremacy between Buddhism and Brahmanism..."

JNU professor and expert on Ambedkar Valerian Rodrigues told HT: "For Ambedkar, the institution of untouchability evolves in the 4th century AD. He does not talk about its origin in relation with Muslim advent in India."


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3. RSS going the whole hog in appropriating Ambedkar

Ambedkar believed in Sangh ideology, had called workers symbols of unity: Bhagwat

Piyush Srivastava | Mail Today | Lucknow, February 15, 2015

RSS chief Mohan BhagwatRashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat has claimed that Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution, believed in the ideology of the Sangh and had called its workers symbols of social unity and integrity. He also said Ambedkar wanted to adopt the saffron flag of the RSS as the national flag of India.

"We need to take steps to minimise the gap among social communities. Ambedkar, who worked in this direction, believed in the ideology of Hinduism. He and Dattopant Bapurao Thengadi, an RSS ideologue, used to discuss about it.

Ambedkar had told Thengadi that the Sangh was working to bring the Hindu communities closer to each otherâ€¦," the RSS Sarsanghchalak said at a meeting in Sant Puran Das Nagar, Unnao, on Saturday.

Thengadi was also a trade union leader and had founded Swadeshi Jagran Manch.

"Ambedkar was also of the view that bhagwa (the saffron flag of the RSS) should be adopted as the national flag and Sanskrit should become the national language. Unfortunately, we couldn't propagate his views," the RSS chief further said.

Bhagwat said it was the failure of the RSS that the downtrodden and poor were misused by certain forces as their political instrument. Such forces ensured that the country was divided on caste lines.

"Armed with the ideology of Ambedkar, the RSS will now take up the cudgels for the Scheduled Caste (Dalit) community to bring them in the mainstream. We will deploy our most experienced leaders on this mission," he said. In Kanpur for five days, Bhagwat held a series of meetings with the RSS members. He was quoted as saying in one such meeting in Kanpur that although the BJP-led Central government had failed to give indications that it would work for the well-being of the masses, the RSS would never stop strengthening the Hindu community. He held a meeting with Prant Sanghchalak Virendra
Jeet Singh, Kshetra Sanghchalak Ishwar Chandra Gupta, Prant Pracharak Anil Gupta and Mahanagar Pracharak Madhuram and asked them their views on the defeat of the BJP in the Delhi Assembly elections. These leaders were deployed at several levels to ensure the party's victory.

Bhagwat was also quoted as saying that he had summoned some BJP leaders, including ministers, at Delhi's Keshav Kunj. "Bhagwat has expressed hope that the Delhi debacle would be considered by the BJP leaders as a lesson. They had become arrogant within a short span of time and started insulting those who had campaigned for them. Some pracharaks of Delhi and UP, who were deployed to help the BJP, have been asked to submit a detailed report on the poll debacle. This report will be discussed next month in Nagpur," an RSS leader of UP, who was camping in Delhi during elections, told MAIL TODAY on the condition of anonymity. Bhagwat will camp in Kanpur till February 18 where he will hold a series of meetings.

Read more at: http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/mohan-bhagwat-ambedkar-sangh-ideology-rss/1/418998.html

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4. RSS rewrites history: Dalits 'created' by invaders | 100 historians deployed

DK Singh, Hindustan Times New Delhi, September 22, 2014

In its renewed impetus to woo Dalits, various other castes and sub-castes, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has embarked on an ambitious exercise to re-write history.

Emboldened by the BJP’s success in the Lok Sabha elections, the RSS has intensified its efforts to find and validate a common Hindu thread to unify all groups under one Hindu identity.

Three top RSS leaders have sought to attribute the genesis of Dalits, tribals and many other groups to “Muslim invasion” in medieval times.

They articulated these views in their forewords to three books, authored by BJP spokesman Vijay Sonkar Shastri and released by RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat recently — “Hindu Charmakar Jati”, “Hindu Khatik Jati” and “Hindu Valmiki Jati”.

The Sangh leaders claimed that these castes had come into existence due to atrocities by foreign invaders and did not exist in Hindu religion earlier.

According to Bhaiyyaji Joshi, No.2 in RSS hierarchy, ‘shudras’ were never untouchables in Hindu scriptures. ‘Islamic atrocities’ during the medieval age resulted in the emergence of untouchables, Dalits and Indian Muslims.

Joshi further elaborated, “To violate Hindu swabhiman (dignity) of Chanwarvanshiya Kshatriyas, foreign invaders from Arab, Muslim rulers and beef-eaters, forced them to do abominable works like killing cows, skinning them and throwing their carcasses in deserted places. Foreign invaders thus created a caste of charma-karma (dealing with skin) by giving such works as punishment to proud Hindu prisoners.”

Another top RSS functionary, Suresh Soni, echoed the same: “Dalits had their genesis during Turks, Muslims and Mughal eras. Today’s castes like Valmikis, Sudarshan, Majhabi Sikhs and their 624 sub-castes came
into being as a result of atrocities against Brahmins and Kshatriyas during Medieval or Islamic age,” he wrote.

Krishna Gopal, Sah-sarkaryavah, RSS, went on to bolster the Sangh’s new found agenda saying, “In pre-historic and Vedic age, Khatik castes have been recognized as Brahmins who affected sacrifices. It may be noted that before the advent of Muslim invaders, there is no reference to rearing pigs in India.

It was a vocation adopted by Hindus to defend their religion.”

The RSS has been focusing on research in this area of late. One of its affiliated organisations had recently organised a conclave of over 100 historians to discuss historiography and changes required to give a proper perspective. [...].


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"Inequality is the soul of Hinduism," wrote Ambedkar. He characterized the oppressive caste system as the tyranny of Hinduism. After spending a lifetime in a crusade against the oppressive Hinduism, Ambedkar finally renounced Hinduism, and converted to Buddhism and exhorted his followers to do the same. It is an irony that BJP and other Sangh Parivar outfits are trying to appropriate such a historic personality as Dr. BR Ambedkar.

They have started unveiling Ambedkar photos and statues. Some Sangh ideologues have torn some quotations of BR Ambedkar on Islamic invasions out of context and misinterpreted them to fit Ambedkar in their own anti-Islamic framework. Vinay Katiyar took out an Ambedkar Yatra in UP. Mayawati unveiled a statue of Ambedkar's wife even though her party, the BSP, shamelessly betrayed the Ambedkar tradition by aligning with his arch ideological-political foes, the Hindutva brigade, in a coalition for the sake of power.

To attract dalits to its fold, the BJP made Bangaru Laxman its ornamental chief but he had to ignominiously bow down from office for accepting Tehelka cash bundles. But before his resignation he made a speech in the Nagpur session of the BJP National Council almost equating Ambedkar with Hedgewar. In fact, the actual history convincingly refutes the dirty tricks of the Sangh Parivar.

During the freedom movement, because of the failures and neglect of the Congress a few political streams arose independent of it. Because of the Congress neglect of Muslims and the influence of Hindu conservatism and Hindu dominance in Congress leadership, Muslims rallied independently under the Muslim League. For similar reasons, Sikhs also rallied under the Akali Dal. Brahminical upper caste forces dominated the Congress leadership and the party turned a blind eye to the aspirations of nationalities. In Tamil Nadu, Periyar EV Ramasamy fought against this, first through the anti-Brahmin movement and then went on to represent the nationality aspirations of Tamils.

It was Ambedkar who squarely put social reform on the agenda during the freedom struggle and launched a simultaneous movement against untouchability and the caste order that were the hallmarks of Hinduism, and championed the interests of dalits. In this he was far to the left of Gandhi. On the other hand, far to the right of Gandhian leadership there was first Hindu Mahasabha and later RSS streams, which
often collaborated with the British and considered, with open hostility, even Gandhi too liberal. This hostility finally culminated in the assassination of Gandhi by an RSS man Nathuram Godse. Ambedkar was lifelong at loggerheads with the Hindu fundamentalists. Even in his Thoughts on Pakistan, (on which Katiyarpay's portrayal of him as an anti-Muslim Hindutva figure rests), he ruthlessly critiques the Hindu Mahasabha and Savarkar. He writes: "The Hindu nationalist who hopes that Britain will coerce the Muslims into abandoning Pakistan, forgets that the right of nationalism to freedom from an aggressive foreign imperialism and the right of a minority to freedom from an aggressive majority's nationalism are not two different things, nor does the former stand on a more sacred footing than the latter." (p.10-11) This clearly illustrates his criticism of aggressive majoritarian nationalism. He furthecriticizes Savarkar, commenting that "strange as it may seem, Mr. Savarkar and Mr. Jinnah instead of being opposed to each other on the two nations issue, are in complete agreement about it". But Ambedkar exposes Savarkar's authoritarian intent: "Mr. Savarkar wants the Hindu nation to be the dominant nation and the Muslim nation to be the subservient nation under it."

Such being the historical evolution of different political streams in India, it is clear that the legacy of Ambedkar and Hindu fundamentalism are irreconcilably hostile to each other. Hindutva forces today are trying to delink Ambedkar from his entire legacy, cover up their hostility towards him and try to appropriate him for electoral use.

The fundamental hostility of the Sangh Parivar against Ambedkar was clearly brought to the fore by the vile campaign unleashed against him by RSS ideologue and presently a BJP minister in Vajpayee's cabinet Arun Shourie through his book Worshipping False Gods. Shiv Sainiks, the soul mates of Hindutva forces, also launched a struggle against Ambedkar's book The Riddles of Hinduism. This is the actual record of Hindutava forces vis-à-vis the heritage of Ambedkar, which they are trying to hide now in order to appropriate his glorious image for their own vested interests.

Ambedkar was the architect of the constitution of India. Sangh Parivar is even opposed to the marginal secular and liberal features of this Constitution and that is why they have formed a committee to tinker with it. While Ambedkar had total enmity towards Hindu Mahasabha and RSS and other Hindu fundamentalists, he was generally pro-left and, befitting a true democrat in a semi-feudal society, he had a positive attitude towards Marxism though it was unfortunate that the communists in those days failed in their united front tactics and failed to develop a proper relationship with Ambedkar. This was part of their general weakness and shortcomings in India.

The contrast between Ambedkar and Savarkar

Savarkar's strategy of dissolving more than 3,000 castes into one pan-Hindu identity involves pan-Hindu temples, pan-Hindu dinners, inter-caste marriages, anti-untouchability programmes and the removal of injunctions on caste-ridden vocations and sea-voyage. Thus, Savarkar seems to have admonished Hindus to break off the seven shackles that according to him hindered the progress of the Hindu society. Did this programme really denounce Hinduism? The answer to this question has to be in the negative because the anti-caste programme particularly relating to injunctions against inter-caste marriage and advocating vedic rights for the shudras and ati-shudras given by Savarkar did not have vigour and genuine thrust to attack the Hindu shastras and caste system.

Savarkar's contention regarding inter-caste marriages looked to be so casual that he offered only a qualified support to such marriages, thus replacing the need for creating any conscious motivation necessary for the radical mobilisation of the people
towards reaching the desired end. Similarly, Savarkar's attempt to grant the study of vedas and vedic rituals to non-Brahmins though apparently liberal may effectively lead to the Brahminisation of the non-Brahmin castes thus according legitimacy to Hindu shastras.

On the contrary, Ambedkar considers inter-caste marriages as the effective means for abolishing caste system. But Ambedkar is also aware that inter-caste dining or even inter-caste marriages are not enough to eliminate casteism. He was of the opinion that for realising the desired goal of casteless society through inter-caste marriages it is necessary to destroy the belief in the sanctity of Hindu shastras. And for destroying this belief, Ambedkar suggests that people should not only discard the shastras, but they should deny their authority as Buddha and Nanak did. Thus, it can be argued here that socially radical Ambedkar was very unlikely to be attracted by Savarkar whose proposal, according to one of the sincere Savarkarites, contained reformative zeal aimed at revival of Hinduism rather than its denunciation. (From Appropriating Ambedkar by Gopal Guru, Economic and Political Weekly, July 6-13, 1991)

Ambedkar was never a Marxist. He could not carry forward his struggle for thoroughgoing abolition of semi-feudalism and against imperialism through a democratic revolution like Mao did in China. He focused mainly on the petty bourgeois and bourgeois intelligentsia from the oppressed communities and worked largely within the system representing their interests in the form of reservation etc. Nevertheless, despite this limitation, he remained an outstanding bourgeois revolutionary democrat who was head and shoulders above many in the Congress leadership and was clearly far more radical than Gandhi.

Against Brahminical Hinduism During his boyhood Ambedkar had to suffer lots of personal humiliation due to untouchability. In Chowder Tank satyagraha led by Ambedkar in 1927, the upper caste Hindus attacked him and physically injured him. During the freedom movement Ambedkar emerged as the tallest leader of social reform in India.

Ambedkar asserted: "I was born a Hindu, but never will die a Hindu. What is required is to get rid of the doctrine of 'Chatuvarna'. That is the root cause of all inequality and is also the parent of the case system and untouchability, which are merely other forms of inequality". It is relevant to note here that while both Hedgewar and Golwalkar upheld Manu and thus rationalised the caste system inherent to the Hindu religion, Ambedkar even burnt copies of Manusmruti through a campaign. On December 25, 1927 Ambedkar observed a "Manu Smruti Dahan Din", and publicly burnt Manusmruti. The struggle was known as the "Maha-Sangharsha" of Mahad Satyagraha, and it is an important milestone in dalit struggle against Brahmanism and Brahminical Hinduism. Manuvadis had conspired so that Ambedkar did not get a ground for the meeting, but a Muslim gentleman, Mr. Fattekhan, gave his private land to observe this protest. There was a strong reaction in the Brahmanical press, Babasaheb was called"Bheemaasura" by one paper. Dr. Ambedkar justified the burning of Manusmruti in various articles.

Ambedkar made a scathing attack on Hinduism: "I tell you, religion is for man and not man for religion. If you want to organise, consolidate and be successful in this world, change this religion. The religion that does not recognise you as a human being, or give you water to drink, or allow you to enter temples is not worthy to be called a religion. The religion that forbids you to receive education and comes in the way of your material advancement is not worthy of the appellation 'religion'. The religion that does not teach its followers to show humanity in dealing with its co-religionists is nothing but a display of a force. The religion that teaches its followers
to suffer the touch of animals but not the touch of human beings is not a religion but a mockery. The religion that compels the ignorant to be ignorant and the poor to be poor is not a religion but a visitation!"

He added this on the upper castes: "It is your claim to equality which hurts them. They want to maintain the status quo. If you continue to accept your lowly status ungrudgingly, continue to remain dirty, filthy, backward, ignorant, poor and disunited, they will allow you to live in peace. The moment you start to raise your level, the conflict starts. Untouchability is not a transitory or temporary feature; it is eternal, it is lasting. Frankly it can be said that the struggle between the Hindus and the Untouchables is a never-ending conflict. It is eternal because the religion which assigns you the lowest status in society is itself divine and eternal according to the belief of the so-called high caste Hindus. No change warranted by change of time and circumstances is possible." Such being the views of Ambedkar, those who offer political patronage to outfits like Ranvir Sena can have no claim over Ambedkar.

The ideologues of Hindutva are trying to rationalise caste system saying that it is a division of labour. Ambedkar refuted this saying, "Caste System is not merely a division of labour. It is also a division of labourers. It is an hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other." While the Hindutva brigade is known for defending Manu and the caste system, Ambedkar made a trenchant criticism of the caste system associated with Hinduism: "There cannot be a more degrading system of social organisation than the Chaturvarna. It is the system which deadens, paralyses and cripples the people from helpful activity." He further added, "Caste in the hands of the orthodox has been a powerful weapon for persecuting the reforms and for killing all reform." Relating the inseparable relation between caste system and Hinduism, Ambedkar wrote, "Hinduism is a veritable chamber of horrors. The sanctity and infallibility of the Vedas, Smritis and Shastras, the iron law of caste, the heartless law of karma and the senseless law of status by birth are to the untouchables veritable instruments of torture which Hinduism has forged against untouchables."

In Buddha and His Dhamma, Ambedkar has enumerated the evils of Hinduism in the following manner: 1) It has deprived moral life of freedom; 2) It has only emphasized conformity to commands; and 3) The laws are unjust because they are not the same for one class as of another. Besides, the code is treated as final. According to Ambedkar, "what is called religion by Hindus is nothing but a multitude of commands and prohibitions." The Sangh Parivar is out to make this code the official code in India under their scheme of authoritarian Hindu rashtra.

Sensing the alienation of dalits, many people, from Savarkar to Gandhi, made token gestures against casteism. The RSS was also forced to come out with some tokenist pronouncements. But Ambedkar put things in the right perspective by saying, "Caste cannot be abolished by inter-caste dinners or stray instances of inter caste marriages. Caste is a state of mind. It is a disease of mind. The teachings of the Hindu religion are the root cause of this disease. We practice casteism and we observe untouchability because we are enjoined to do so by the Hindu religion. A bitter thing cannot be made sweet. The taste of anything can be changed. But poison cannot be changed into nectar."

Ambedkar even made a sarcastic comment against Gandhi: "There have been many mahatmas in India whose sole object was to remove untouchability and to elevate and absorb the depressed classes, but everyone has failed in their mission. Mahatmas have come, mahatmas have gone but the untouchables have remained as untouchables." Ambedkar told dalits that,
"You must abolish your slavery yourselves. Do not depend for its abolition upon god or a superman. Remember that it is not enough that a people are numerically in the majority. They must be always watchful, strong and self-respecting to attain and maintain success. We must shape our course ourselves and by ourselves." He further stressed that, "What you have lost others have gained. Your humiliations are a matter of pride with others. You are made to suffer wants, privations and humiliations not because it was pre-ordained by the sins committed in your previous birth, but because of the overpowering tyranny and treachery of those who are above you. You have no lands because others have usurped them; you have no posts because others have monopolised them. Do not believe in fate; believe in your strength."

It may be recalled that Advani recently raised a controversy over a Buddhist symbol like Ashoka chakra figuring in the national flag and a Buddhist symbol being the national emblem. Regarding their origin Ambedkar explained, "Even though Buddhism is almost extinct in India, yet it has given birth to a culture, which is far better and richer than the Brahminic culture. When the question of the national flag and the national emblem was being considered by the Constituent Assembly we could not find any suitable symbol from the Brahminic culture. Ultimately, the Buddhist culture came to our rescue and we accepted the Wheel of Law (Dhamma-Chakra) as the national symbol." No wonder, a Brahminical high-priest of Hindutva like Advani wanted to do away with these symbols introduced by Ambedkar and his colleagues.

In his slanderous campaign against Ambedkar, the RSS ideologue Arun Shourie questioned the patriotism of Ambedkar. Ambedkar, however, defined patriotism thus, "I do not want that our loyalty as Indians should be in the slightest way affected by any competitive loyalty whether that loyalty arises out of our religion, out of our culture or out of our language. I want all people to be Indians first, Indian last and nothing else but Indians." And despite all his differences with the Congress, Ambedkar remained a staunch nationalist. For Ambedkar, the conception of a secular state is derived from the liberal democratic tradition of the West.

In contrast to the Gandhian misinterpretation of secularism as 'sarva dharma samabhava', Ambedkar said, "No institution, which is maintained wholly out of state funds, shall be used for the purpose of religious instruction irrespective of the question whether the religious instruction is given by the state or by any other body". He further explained the corruption of the concept of secularism in India, "This country has seen the conflict between ecclesiastical law and secular law long before Europeans sought to challenge the authority of the Pope. Kautilya's Arthshastra lays down the foundation of secular law. In India unfortunately ecclesiastical law triumphed over secular law. In my opinion this was the one of the greatest disasters in the country."

Ambedkar effectively punctured the false supremacy of the narrow Brahminical elite: "In every country the intellectual class is the most influential class. This is the class which can foresee, advise and lead. In no country does the mass of the people live the life for intelligent thought and action. It is largely imitative and follows the intellectual class. There is no exaggeration in saying that the entire destination of the country depends upon its intellectual class. If the intellectual class is honest and independent, it can be trusted to take the initiative and give a proper lead when a crisis arises. It is true that the intellect by itself is no virtue. It is only a means and the use of a means depends upon the ends which an intellectual person pursues. An intellectual man can be a good man but he may easily be a rogue. Similarly an intellectual class may be a band of high-souled persons, ready to help, ready to emancipate erring humanity or it may easily
be a gang of crooks or a body of advocates of narrow clique from which it draws its support."

Though changing one's religion through conversion is not going to abolish the semi-feudal inequalities, Ambedkar's decision to convert to Buddhism in the evening of his life - just a couple of months before his demise on 16 December 1956 - only underlined his disgust and bitterness with the highly iniquitous Hinduism. About 2 lakh dalits converted to Buddhism along with him in October 1956. Since then neo-Buddhism has remained a trend. This clearly rattled the Hindutva bosses who are clamouring for anti-conversion legislation in every state.

**A thorough democrat**

Though Ambedkar headed the committee that crafted the Constitution of the democratic republic of India, he was never fully satisfied with the democracy which came to be established in India. In his opinion, "A democratic form of government presupposes a democratic form of a society. The formal framework of democracy is of no value and would indeed be a misfit if there was no social democracy. It may not be necessary for a democratic society to be marked by unity, by community of purpose, by loyalty to public ends and by mutuality of sympathy. But it does unmistakably involve two things. The first is an attitude of mind, and attitude of respect and equality towards their fellows. The second is a social organisation free from rigid social barriers. Democracy is incompatible and inconsistent with isolation and exclusiveness resulting in the distinction between the privileged and the unprivileged." "Democracy is not a form of government, but a form of social organisation", he asserted.

He further elaborated, "What we must do is not to content ourselves with mere political democracy. We must make our political democracy a social democracy as well. Political democracy cannot last unless there is at the base of it, a social democracy."

Ambedkar underlined the limitations of formal law and Constitution: "The prevalent view is that once the rights are enacted in law then they are safeguarded. This again is an unwarranted assumption. As experience proves, rights are protected not by law but by social and moral conscience of the society. If social conscience is such that it is prepared to recognise the rights which law proposes to enact, rights will be safe and secure. But if the fundamental rights are opposed by the community, no law, no parliament, no judiciary can guarantee them in the real sense of the world. What is the use of fundamental rights to the untouchables in India?" "If I find the constitution being misused, I shall be the first to burn it," he declared.

Ambedkar also had certain premonitions about the rise of authoritarian forces in India which is coming true before our eyes: "On the 26th January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. In politics we will be recognising the principle of one-man-one-vote and one-vote-one-value. In our social and economic life, we shall by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one-man-one-value. How long shall we continue to live this life of contradictions? How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life? If we continue to deny it for long, we will do so only by putting our political democracy in peril". The Sangh Parivar outfits rally tribals and dalits only to use them to attack Christian missionaries as witnessed in Orissa or to launch pogroms against Muslims as seen in Gujarat, and thereby endanger democracy. To frustrate the designs of the Sangh Parivar it is necessary that today communists and genuine Ambedkarites should come together to defend democracy from communal fascists, a democracy to establish which Ambedkar fought so hard.
In his last days, Ambedkar raised a note of warning: "The point is that India once lost the independence she had. Will she lose it a second time? It is this thought which makes me most anxious for the future. What perturbs me greatly is the fact that not only India has once before lost her independence, but she lost it by treachery of some of her own people...Will history repeat itself? It is this thought which fills me with anxiety. Will Indians place the country above their creed or creed above their country? I do not know, But this much is certain that if the parties place creed above country, our independence will be put in jeopardy a second time and probably be lost forever. This eventuality we all must resolutely guard against. We must be determined to defend our independence with the last drop of our blood!" The rise of Hindutva forces who totally cringe before the US imperialism but at the same time are bent upon establishing a fascistic Hindu rashtra has proved how correct this warning was. As Ambedkar called upon us, we must defend this freedom and democracy with the last drop of our blood.

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6. Deconstructing Ambedkar

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Ambedkar’s samata is not samrasata and his world view is not the neo-liberal, social Darwinism that it is being made out to be.

If the number of statues, memorabilia, pictures and posters, songs and ballads, books and pamphlets, or the size of congregations in memory of him were the parameters to measure great-ness, there may not be any other historical figure that can rival Babasaheb Ambedkar. Newer and newer places are getting added to the list of his memorials wherever congregations take place every year. He has been such a phenomenon that after a while it would be difficult for people to believe that such a person—who had to struggle to drink water from a public water source, open for cats and dogs—ever walked on this planet. Even the gods in heaven, if they exist, would be jealous of him. What might be behind this miracle? There is no doubt that he has been a messiah for Dalits, initially only a section of them and now most of them. It is natural for them to be beholden for what he did for them, single-handedly and single-mindedly. True though, it would be pure naïveté to believe this to be the lone and only cause. The catalytic role played by the ruling classes in constructing and promoting Ambedkar as an icon has been a major one, and mutually reinforcing too. The recent overtures of the Sangh Parivar to claim Ambedkar are blatant enough to make Dalits understand the underlying dynamics.

Making of the Icon

The Congress, representing the political Hindu, was the main adversary of Ambedkar. Recall, Gandhi’s tooth-and-nail opposition to Ambedkar’s attempt to secure separate electorates for Dalits during the Round Table Conferences in 1932 and eventually blackmailing him into signing the Poona Pact that annulled the prospective independent political existence of Dalits. After the transfer of power, the Congress tendentiously saw to
it that Ambedkar did not enter the Constituent Assembly. But it soon made a volte-face. Folk-tale type of explanations notwithstanding, it was Gandhi’s strategic genius to get Ambedkar elected to the Constituent Assembly when he had no way left to enter it and then make him the chairperson of its drafting committee. Although Ambedkar played the statesman in exchange for safeguarding Dalit rights in the Constitution, this new-found affinity did not last long. Ambedkar had to resign from the Nehru cabinet on the issue of retrogression over the Hindu Code Bill. Later, Ambedkar had even disowned the Constitution saying he was used as a hack—that the Constitution was of no use to anyone, and that he would be the first person to burn it. He called the Congress a “burning house” which could be entered by Dalits only at their peril. But that did not deter scores of “Ambedkarites” from joining the Congress to serve “Ambedkarism.”

The Congress skillfully carved out a class of rich farmers out of the most populous band of Shudra castes in rural areas with such euphemistic policies as land reforms and Green Revolution. While this class remained its ally for the larger part, it developed its own political ambition, floating regional parties and gradually capturing local- and state-level power bases. Electoral politics became competitive bringing to the fore vote blocks in the form of castes and communities, both skillfully preserved in the Constitution in the name of social justice and religious reforms, respectively. It was from here that the conscious co-optation drive of the ruling parties began, of course, first with the Congress. Ambedkar’s core concerns were overshadowed and he was systematically idolised into a nationalist, a quasi-Congressman, and as a statesman and the maker of the Constitution. This propaganda killed many birds with one stone: it won over the Ambedkarite masses, accelerated the exodus of opportunistic Dalit leaders to the Congress, disoriented the Dalit movement to embrace identity politics and gradually de-radicalised Ambedkar. Slowly, other parties also had to enter the competition in projecting their own Ambedkar icon.

In order to widen its appeal and diffuse its ideology, the Sangh Parivar also floated second-generation outfits to deal with strategic and emergent issues. *Samajik Samra-sata Manch* (a social assimilation platform) was launched to woo Dalits into its fold. The RSS—born in 1925, around the same time as the Dalit and communist movements—initially banked on its imagined Hindu majority but failed to make a mark either socially or politically until it got 94 seats in the 1977 Lok Sabha elections, riding the anti-Congress wave.

**‘Saffronising’ Ambedkar**

Initially, scandalised by Ambedkar’s anti-Hinduism, it tacitly despised him and banked upon non-Ambedkarite Dalits as later professed by Bal Thackeray. However, having tasted the meat of political power, it realised it could not ignore Ambedkar who had grown into a pan-Indian Dalit icon. It planned to saffronise him, picking up some of his stray statements sans context and mixing them with its Goebbelsian lies. The first of the strokes of saffron on Ambedkar was in comparing the incomparable, Hedgewar with Ambedkar, calling them the “two doctors,” as though Hedgewar, just a licentiate medical practitioner with a diploma that comes after...
matriculation, and Ambedkar, with two doctoral degrees from world-renowned universities, were comparable. What could really be similar between them?

While Ambedkar’s pragmatism left behind numerous inconsistencies, nobody can miss the central theme of his life which was to usher in what he himself verbalised as his ideal society based on “liberty, equality, fraternity,” insisting on their simultaneity. He saw annihilation of castes and socialism (the annihilation of classes) to be its prerequisite; democracy their main constituent and Buddhism as the moralising force.

The RSS’s world view is diametrically opposed to this on every count. The saffron Ambedkar is a nationalist; the real Ambedkar argued that because of the consciousness of caste, Hindus cannot constitute a nation, and specifically warned that the “Hindu nation” would be calamitous. The RSS’s Ambedkar is a great Hindu despite his vow that he would never die a Hindu. It projects Buddhism, which Ambedkar embraced after discarding Hinduism, as just a sect of Hinduism, brushing away the entire history that it symbolized the shraman revolt against Hinduism and bloody counter-revolution of the latter that completely erased Buddhism from the land of its birth.

Claims that Ambedkar wanted Sanskrit to be the national language, a saffron flag as the national flag, and that he com-mended the RSS for its good work, and that he was for ghar wapsi, try to dwarf Ambedkar to the level of VHP monkeys and do not deserve to be even commented upon. Sangh Parivar intellectuals have been saying that Ambedkar was against Muslims, quoting stray sentences from his *Thoughts on Pakistan*. This book was written in a polemical style, Ambedkar donning the robes of both an advocate for Hindus as well as for Muslims. Unless one diligently reads it, one could miss many of the arguments. I have exploded this lie in 2003 in my book, *Ambedkar on Muslims: Myths and Facts*. But again, going by his liberal persona and a plethora of other references where he praised the Muslim com-munity to the extent that Islam would appear to be his preference for conversion (*Mukti Kon Pathe* 1936), he cannot be portrayed as a petty-minded, anti-Muslim person. The RSS better understand that it could cheaply project some Dalit stooges on its stage, but it would never be able to show Ambedkar as a communalist.

**Neo-liberal Compulsion**

The competing Ambedkar icons offered by various political manufacturers in India’s electoral market have completely overshadowed the real Ambedkar and decimated the potential weaponry of Dalit emancipation. While these icons differ in shades, they all paint Ambedkar in neo-liberal colour. One Ambedkar icon nearly dislodged Gandhi as the mascot of the state, which had worked right from 1947 through the 1980s. Gandhi suited the regime in managing the polity, camouflaging its anti-people strategic intent, its welfarist rhetoric and its Hindu rate of growth. But the regime began to lose its sheen as the capitalist crisis mounted, impelling the rulers to adopt neo-liberal reforms. The rhetoric of aggressive development, modernity, open competition, free market, etc, necessitated the projection of a new icon which would assure people, particularly those of the lower strata whom it would hit most, of
the possibility of a transition from rags to riches with the adoption of the free-market paradigm. None other than Ambedkar fitted the bill. It was the same strategic requirement as seen by Gandhi at the time when a Constitution had to be drafted for the newly-born, anaemic India. The social Darwinist ethos of neo-liberalism had a particular resonance with the supremacist RSS ideology, which is what catapulted the BJP to the stratosphere of political power.

While all parties have used an Ambedkar icon for wooing Dalits, RSS has exploited it the most, with the BJP, right from the 1990s, commanding more reserved seats than the Congress. The neo-liberal regime badly required balladeers from among the Dalits and it got them. A significant Dalit middle class, led by some of its heroes belaboured during the initial years to convince Dalits how neo-liberalism would be beneficial to them, how Ambedkar was a neoliberal and how Dalits have made fantastic progress with these policies unleashing a “revolution” of the Dalit bourgeoisie. This middle class finds particular affinity with the BJP, and it is therefore that most Dalit leaders today are in the BJP fold (see my “Three Dalit Rams Play Hanuman to BJP,” EPW, 12 April 2014).

This year, with extraordinary efficiency, the BJP government bought an innocuous building in London for Rs 44 crore just because Ambedkar stayed in one of its apartments as a student; it cleared the remaining hurdles in the grant of the Indu Mill land for the grand Ambedkar memorial in Mumbai and planned an equally grand Ambedkar International Centre at Delhi.

All these manoeuvres intoxicate Dalits, 90% of whom are relatively at the same levels of living as they were at the beginning of the last century or worse, as they had hopes then and now they have none. They would not understand that Ambedkar’s samata is not samrasata or that Ambedkar’s world view is not the neo-liberal, social Darwinism that is out to kill them. They do not even understand that a few hundred crores on Ambedkar memorials is pittance as compared to the over Rs 5 lakh crore the government stole from their share in budgets in just a single decade!

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7. THE HIGHJACKING OF BABASAHEB

Shamsul Islam

The real design behind the Sangh gang's attempts to appropriate the legacies of Gandhi, Sardar Patel, Subhash Chander Bose and Baba Saheb Ambedkar is to cover up its criminal past of dividing the people of India in the name of religion, like Muslim League, which only helped the British masters, writes Shamsul Islam.

The RSS is terribly busy re-writing history these days. It will be more appropriate to call it guillotining of history, as these are facts and realties of history which are being sacrificed in this process at the altar political ambitions of the Hindutva gang.

So far this creativity was restricted to the works and words of Mahatma Gandhi and Sardar Patel but of late Dr. B.R. Ambedkar appears to have become the latest victim of malafide manufacturing of history by the flag-bearers of Hindutva.

After Gandhi, who was killed by Nathuram Godse (a close confident of V.D. Savarkar and fanatic believer in Hindutva and Patel who as first Home Minister of India had banned RSS) Ambedkar becomes a newest victim of RSS game plan being presented as a leader in league with K.B. Hedgewar and M.S. Golwalkar defending the cause of Hindu Rashtra in India.

Vinay Katiyar the former head of Bajrang Dal and who now who heads BJP in UP, has been touring the state ruled by a Dalit Chief Minister, Ms. Mayawati, declaring that Ambedkar was great supporter of Hindutva and Hindu Rashtra like Hedgewar in India thus echoing the rhetoric of Narendra Modi.

It is really astonishing to hear this kind of bizarre thesis about Ambedkar who renounced Hinduism in 1956 for its repressive elements and converted to Buddhism. In his remarkable polemical piece, What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables, he wrote, “To put the matter in general terms, Hinduism and social union are incompatible. By its very genius Hinduism believes in social separation which is another name for social disunity and even creates social separation. If Hindus wish to be one they will have to discard Hinduism. They cannot be one without violating Hinduism. Hinduism is the greatest obstacle to Hindu Unity. Hinduism cannot create that longing to belong which is the basis of all social unity. On the contrary Hinduism creates an eagerness to separate”.

It will be a great injustice to Ambedkar and his legacy to parade him as a supporter of Hindutva. In fact, throughout his life he was a great opponent to the politics of Hindutva and Muslim League both. His book, Pakistan or The Partition of India (1940) is a living testimony against the nefarious designs of communal elements in India. His ideas and warnings on Hindutva contained in this book can work as great bulwark in checking the resurgence of forces of Hindu communalism.

Contrary to what likes of Katiyar in the Sangh gang are telling us, Ambedkar felt, “If Hindu Raj does become a fact, it will, no doubt, be the greatest calamity for this country No matter what the Hindus say. Hinduism is a menace to liberty, equality and fraternity. On that account it is incompatible with democracy. Hindu Raj must be prevented at any cost.” According to him the pet slogan of Hindutva—Hindustan for Hindus—is not merely arrogant but is arrant nonsense.
Ambedkar was of the firm opinion that Hindutva was nothing but a ploy of high caste Hindus to maintain their hegemony over the resources of the society. While comparing them with Muslim communalists he said: “The Hindus are the more difficult of the two parties to the question. In this connection it is enough to consider the reaction of the high caste Hindus only. For, is they who guide the Hindu masses and form Hindu opinion. Unfortunately, the high caste Hindus are bad as leaders. They have a trait of character which often leads the Hindus to disaster. This trait is formed by their acquisitive instinct and aversion to share with others the good things of life. They have a monopoly of education and wealth, and with wealth and education they have captured the State. To keep this monopoly to themselves has been the ambition and goal of their life. Charged with this selfish idea of class domination, they take every move to exclude the lower classes of Hindus from wealth, education and power...This attitude of keeping education, wealth and power as a close preserve for themselves and refusing to share it, which the high caste Hindus have developed in their relation with the lower classes of Hindus, is sought to be extended by them to the Muslims. They want to exclude the Muslims from place and power, as they have done to the lower class Hindus. This trait of the high caste Hindus is the key to the understanding of their politics.”

Ambedkar did not mince his words when he wrote, “It must be said that Mr. Savarkar's attitude is illogical, if not queer. Mr. Savarkar admits that the Muslims are a separate nation. He concedes that they have a right to cultural autonomy. He allows them to have a national flag. Yet he opposes the demand of the Muslim nation for a separate national home. If he claims a national home for the Hindu nation, how can he refuse the claim of the Muslim nation for a national home?”

Ambedkar was fully conscious of real designs of Hindutva towards minorities. He believed there would not have been any problem if Hindus and Muslims were allowed to live as partners with mutual respect and accord. “But this is not to be, because Mr Savarkar will not allow the Muslim nation to be co-equal in authority with the Hindu nation. He wants the Hindu nation to be dominant nation and the Muslim nation to be the servient one.”

Ambedkar as a true secularist stood for "forming mixed political parties based on an agreed programme of social and economic regeneration, and thereby avoid the danger of both Hindu Raj or Muslim Raj becoming a fact. Nor should the formation of a mixed party of Hindus and Muslims be difficult in India. There are many lower orders in the Hindu society, whose economic, political and social needs are the same as those of the majority of the Muslims and they would be far more ready to make a common cause with the Muslims for achieving common end than they would with the high caste of Hindus who have denied and deprived them of ordinary human right for centuries.”

Why is it that despite such strong anti-Hindutva ideas of Ambedkar RSS is trying to indulge in while lie about his legacy? The problem with the RSS is that it played absolutely no role in the freedom struggle of the country and with its present political ascendancy it is under great pressure to show that it was part of that great struggle and heroic heritage.
The real design behind its attempts to appropriate the legacies of Gandhi, Sardar Patel, Subhash Chander Bose and Ambedkar is to cover up its criminal past of dividing people of India in the name of religion like Muslim League which only helped the British masters.

Interestingly, it needs Ambedkar for another reason too. Despite the bluff game it has been playing about globalization, the Indian Government led by its favourite Swayamsevaks has been functioning as true stooges of the foreign forces of globalization. Dalits of this country have been the worst victims of this process of liberalization and globalization as these are they who have mainly lost jobs, homes and other means of livelihood. The present breed of Hindutva rulers by creating public facade of love for Ambedkar wants to hide its real anti people face.

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8. WHOSE RAJ IS IT ANYWAY?

Shamsul Islam

THE FLAG-BEARERS of Hindutva, in their task of manufacturing history, have now picked on B.R. Ambedkar as the subject. The RSS has presented him as a leader in league with Hedgewar and Golwalkar and as a defender for the cause of the Hindu Rashtra. VinayKatiyar, the BJP head in Uttar Pradesh—a state ruled by a Dalit chief minister—has been touring the state declaring that Ambedkar was supporter of Hindutva and the Hindu Rashtra, thus echoing Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi's rhetoric. This is nothing but injustice to a man who had renounced Hinduism because of its repressive elements and converted to Buddhism.

Throughout his life, Ambedkar opposed the communal politics of both the Muslim League and the Hindutva forces. His book, Pakistan or The Partition of India (1940), stands testimony to his opposition to the nefarious designs of communal elements. In fact, his ideas and warnings about Hindutva, as contained in the book, can even now work as bulwark in checking the resurgence of communal forces.

Ambedkar writes, "If Hindu Raj does become a fact, it will, no doubt, be the greatest calamity for this country. No matter what the Hindus say, Hinduism is a menace to liberty, equality and fraternity. On that account, it is incompatible with democracy Hindu Raj must be prevented at any cost." According to him, the idea of "Hindustan for Hindus...is not merely arrogant but is arrant nonsense". (p. 358)

Ambedkar was of the firm opinion that Hindutva was nothing but a ploy by upper caste Hindus to maintain control over society and its resources. He wrote: "They have a trait of character which often leads the Hindus to disaster. This trait is formed by their acquisitive instinct and aversion to share with others the good things of life. They have a monopoly of education and wealth, and with wealth and education they have captured the State. To keep this monopoly to themselves has been the ambition and goal of their life. Charged with this selfish idea of class domination, they take every move to exclude the lower classes of Hindus from wealth, education and power...This attitude of keeping education, wealth and power as a close preserve for themselves and refusing to share it, which the high caste Hindus have developed in their relation with the lower classes of Hindus, is sought to be extended by..."
them to the Muslims. They want to exclude the Muslims from place and power, as they have done to the lower class Hindus. This trait of the high caste Hindus is the key to the understanding of their politics." (p.123)

Ambedkar, in his struggle to establish a secular State, did not differentiate between flag-bearers of Hindutva and the Muslim League. He treated them as two forces of the same coin, which were bent on destroying India. He wrote: "Strange as it may appear, Mr Savarkar and Mr Jinnah, instead of being opposed to each other on the one nation versus two nations issue, are in complete agreement about it. Both not only agree but insist that there are two nations in India—one the Muslim nation and the other the Hindu nation." (p. 142)

Ambedkar did not mince words when he wrote, "It must be said that Mr Savarkar's attitude is illogical, if not queer. Mr Savarkar admits that the Muslims are a separate nation. He concedes that they have a right to cultural autonomy. He allows them to have a national flag. Yet he opposes the demand of the Muslim nation for a separate national home. If he claims a national home for the Hindu nation, how can he refuse the claim of the Muslim nation for a national home?" (p. 143)

Ambedkar, as a true secularist, stood for "forming mixed political parties based on an agreed programme of social and economic regeneration, and thereby avoiding the danger of both Hindu Raj or Muslim Raj becoming a fact. Nor should the formation of a mixed party of Hindus and Muslims be difficult in India. There are many lower orders in the Hindu society whose economic, political and social needs are the same as those of the majority of the Muslims and they would be far more ready to make a common cause with the Muslims for achieving common ends than they would with the high caste of Hindus who have denied and deprived them of ordinary human rights for centuries." (p. 359)

Why is it that despite such strong anti Hindutva ideas, the RSS is spreading white lies about Ambedkar's legacy? The problem with the RSS is that it played absolutely no role in the country's freedom struggle. Moreover, with its present political ascendancy, it is under great pressure to show that it was part of that great struggle. It hopes that by appropriating the legacies of Gandhiji, Sardar Patel, Subhas Chandra Bose and Ambedkar, it may be able to put a nationalist face to the organisation.

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When RSS Sarsanghchalak said that Ambedkar supported RSS ideology (16th Oct. 2005), it was not for the first time that a political movement was trying to fabricate lies to co-opt a major thinker and political leader of totally opposite views, for its’ selfish interests. Mr. Sudarshan was trying to buttress the RSS ideology of opposition to reservations by saying that Ambedkar did not support reservations as they are for political purposes. One recalls that reservations were part of the protective affirmative clauses for the weaker sections. The only point was that as per his scheme of things reservations will be for ten years by which time the social disabilities would be overcome and reservations will not be needed. Who could have foreseen that the machinery already in place for implementation of the government policies would partly sabotage the implementation of reservation policy in such a way so that the desired goals would not be achieved? No society can be democratic and strive to go in egalitarian direction unless the victims of centuries old discrimination are given special protection and nobody conceptualized it better than Dr. Ambedkar.

Sudarshan’s assertion that Ambedkar drafted a Western constitution under the pressure of Congress, insults Dr. Ambedkar in a deeper way. He was not the one to buckle under pressure. He had the values and ideas of his own, and the example of this was when he resigned from the Cabinet because Hindu Code Bill drafted by him did not pass through and also because he was side tracked in other matters of policy and planning. It’s a comment which is derogatory to the thinker and leader who did all possible to ensure that he stands for his values and ideas rather than compromises for the sake of power and pelf. At the same time Sudarshan seems to be promoting his own postulate that Indian constitution, is based on Western values and should be replaced by the one based on Hindu holy books. It is in that direction that BJP led NDA coalition appointed the constitution review committee, which of course was a dismal failure, thanks to the opposition of RSS formulation by most of the people of this country. Ambedkar did not buckle under any body’s pressure while drafting the constitution as he was committed to the democratic values of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity (community), the one’s which have been enshrined in this book. Also it was the constituent assembly, a reasonably accurate representative body of Indian people, which guided the constitution and not the Western influence. One can go on to say that the constitution itself was one of the major contributions of Babasaheb.

Sudarshan also asserts that Dr. Ambedkar stuck to Hindu culture while embracing Buddhism. Nothing could be farther from truth. By no stretch of imagination one can call all the tendencies prevailing in India as Hindu. The dominant tradition, which passes off as Hinduism is Brahmanism. Dr. Ambedkar called Hinduism as Brahminic theology and went on to say that he was born a Hindu that was not in his hands, but surely he will not die a Hindu. Buddhism is not a part of Hindu culture. The central part of dominant Hinduism is caste system, while Buddhism stands for social equality.
As per Ambedkar the clash between Braminic Hinduism and Buddhism is the major part of Indian history. In his understanding of Indian History he divides it into three parts. Part one Revolution, i.e. coming in of Buddhism to oppose Brahmanic caste and gender hierarchy. This is followed by counterrevolution, during which the Brahmanism attacks Buddhism at ideological level through Shankaracharya and at the social and political level by the onslaughts of kings like Pushmitra Shunga and Shashak. It is due to this that Buddhism, became extinct from India till Dr. Ambedkar brought it back.

He chose this religion, while rejecting Hinduism, mainly because its values of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity (Community). To present him as supporter of RSS and RSS ideology is a clever deceit, a political move, to win over sections of Dalits to RSS-Hindutva politics.

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10. Ambedkar’s Ideology: Religion, Nationalism and Indian Constitution

Ram Puniyani

In order to gain larger legitimacy, RSS has been making claims of sorts. One of that which was made few months back was that Gandhi was impressed by functioning of RSS. Now on the heels of that comes another distortion that Ambedkar believed in Sangh ideology (Feb 15, 2015). This was stated by RSS Sarsanghchalak, Mohan Bhagwat. Recently on the occasion of Ambedkar’s 124th anniversary many programs were held by RSS combine giving a pro-Hindutva tilt to presentation of Ambedkar.

There cannot be bigger contrasts between the ideology of Ambedkar and RSS. Ambedkar was for Indian Nationalism, Secularism and social justice while the RSS ideology is based on two major pillars. One is the Brahmanic interpretation of Hinduism and second is the concept of Hindu nationalism, Hindu Rashtra.

Where does Ambedkar stand as for as ideology of Hinduism is concerned? He called Hinduism as Brahminic theology. We also understand that Brahminism has been the dominant tendency within Hinduism. He realized that this prevalent version of Hinduism is essentially a caste system, which is the biggest tormentor of untouchables-dalits. Initially he tried to break the shackles of caste system from within the fold of Hinduism. He led the Chavadar Talab movement (right to access to public drinking water for dalits), Kalaram Mandir agitation (movement for access to temples). He also went on to burn Manu Smriti, the holy Brahmanic- Hindu text saying that it is a
symbol of caste and gender hierarchy. His critique of Hinduism, Brahminism was scathing and in due course he came to the conclusion that he will give up Hinduism. In his book ‘Riddles of Hinduism’ published by Govt. of Maharashtra (1987) he elaborates his understanding about Hinduism i.e. its Brahmanical version. Introducing his book he writes, "The book is an exposition of the beliefs propounded by what might be called Brahminic theology...I want to make people aware that Hindu religion is not Sanatan (eternal)...the second purpose of the book is to draw the attention of Hindu masses to the devices of Brahmins and make them think for themselves how they have been deceived and misguided by Brahmins" (from Introduction of the book).

Ambedkar had started moving away from Hinduism in 1935 itself when he had publicly declared that he was not going to die as a Hindu. In 1936, he had attended the Sikh Missionary Conference as he had toyed for some time with the idea of embracing Sikhism. In 1936, Ambedkar also wrote and published *Annihilation of Caste*, his undelivered presidential address to the *Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal* Conference at Lahore. At the end of his written address, Ambedkar reiterated his resolve to give up Hinduism. (http://bihar.humanists.net/B.%20R.%20Amb edkar.htm)

He said “I have decided for myself. My conversion is sure as anything. My conversion is not for any material gain. There is nothing which I cannot achieve by remaining an Untouchable. My conversion is purely out of my spiritual attitude. The Hindu religion does not appeal to my conscience. It does not appeal to my self-respect. However, your conversion will be both for material as well as for spiritual gains. Some persons mock and laugh at the idea of conversion for material gain. I do not feel hesitant in calling such persons stupid.” (http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/txt_ambedkar_salvation.html)

Lord Ram is the major symbol of Cultural Nationalism propounded by RSS. Let's see what Ambedkar has to say about Lord Ram, "The life of Sita simply did not count. What counted was his own personal name and fame. He of course does not take the manly course of stopping this gossip, which as a king he could do and which as husband who was convinced of his wife’s innocence he was bound to it." And further, "For 12 years the boys lived in forest in Ashram of Valmiki not far from Ayodhya where Rama continued to rule. Never once in those 12 years this model Husband and living father cared to inquire what has happened to Sita whether she was alive or dead, ...Sita preferred to die rather than return to Ram who had behaved no better than a brute." The signals to the Dalits in Hindutva cultural Nationalism are more than glaringly obvious as the Lord demonstrates in his own life, "...he was a Shudra named Shambuk who was practicing Tapasya with a view to going to heaven in his own earthly person and without so much as a warning, expostulation or the like addressed to him, cut off his head..."(From Riddles of Rama and Krishna).

Ambedkar envisioned ‘annihilation of caste’, which remains unfulfilled despite India getting Independence. Multiple factors have operated in the society due to which caste still remains a major factor in India. In contrast to Ambedkar’s ‘Annihilation of Caste’ the
politics of RSS combine says that there should be ‘harmony amongst different castes’ and so they have formed an organization called ‘Samajik Samrasta Manch’ (Social Harmony Forum). Contrasting approach to social issues, Ambedkar and RSS!

Core of RSS political ideology is Hindutva or Hindu nationalism. Ambedkar engaged with this issue in much depth, particularly in his classic book `Thoughts on Pakistan’. In this book he deals with the question of Hindu nationalism as represented by Savakar; the progenitor of RSS ideology of Hindu nation; and Jinnah, leading the ideology of Muslim nationalism, Pakistan. "Strange as it may appear Mr. Savarkar and Mr. Jinnah instead of being opposed to each other on the one nation versus two nations issue are in complete agreement about it. Both agree, not only agree but insist that there are two nations in India- one the Muslim nation and the other the Hindu nation." he continues, "They differ only as regards the terms and conditions on which the two nations should be. Jinnah says India should be cut up into two, Pakistan and Hindustan, the Muslim nation to occupy Pakistan and the Hindu nation to occupy Hindustan. Mr. Savarkar on the other hand insists that, although there are two nations in India, India shall not be divided into two parts, one for the Muslims and the other for Hindus; that the two nations shall dwell in one country and shall live under the mantle of one single constitution: that the constitution shall be such that the Hindu nation will be enabled to occupy a predominant position that is due to it and the Muslim nation to made to live in the position of subordinate co-operation with the Hindu nation." (Thoughts on Pakistan, Third section, chapter VII)

He was totally opposed to the concept of Hindu Raj as well. In the section “Must There Be Pakistan” he says, “If Hindu Raj does become a fact, it will, no doubt, be the greatest calamity for this country. No matter what the Hindus say, Hinduism is a menace to the liberty, equality and fraternity. On that account it is incompatible with democracy. Hindu Raj must be prevented at any cost.”

(http://ecumene.org/IIS/csss101.htm)

On all associated matters related to affirmative action for weaker sections of society, rights and status of religious minorities their positions are totally contrasting. Even in the matters of the very Constitution of India, Ambedkar was the chairman of its drafting committee while many a sections from RSS stable have called it as anti Hindu and need to bring in Hindu Constitution based on Indian Holy books. This attempt by Mr. Bhagwat is like putting wool in the eyes of people to achieve their political goals and to get legitimacy from amongst the sections of people who are deeply wedded to ideological values of Ambedkar.
11. Claiming Ambedkar, Trashing the Constitution
Parivar's crass hypocrisy

http://www.thedailystar.net/op-ed/politics/parivars-crass-hypocrisy-78109

Praful Bidwai

WHEN it comes to hypocrisy, it's hard to beat India's Hindutva-driven Sangh Parivar. It strenuously claimed the legacy of Dr BR Ambedkar, a principal author of India's secular Constitution, and a Dalit, on his 124th birth anniversary. Its motive lies in the coming Bihar election, where a Dalit (former Chief Minister Manzhi) has emerged as the BJP's potential ally against Laloo Prasad and Nitish Kumar.

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh is usurping Ambedkar by likening him to its own founder KB Hedgewar, a brazenly obscurantist casteist opposed to Ambedkar's values of equality!

The RSS has added a further communal twist to this by complaining that India's highest honour, the Bharat Ratna, was conferred on Ambedkar 10 years after it was given to Mother Teresa, its bête noire.

The Indian government had no choice but to honour Teresa after the Nobel Prize was awarded to her. Honouring Ambedkar was delayed because there was stiff resistance to doing so from the Parivar itself! Strangely, the BJP-RSS made no fuss when the award was bestowed on its real icon, Vallabhbhai Patel, even later than on Ambedkar!

The Parivar's ideology and politics remains the opposite of Ambedkar's. He had contempt for Hindutva, with its narrow faith-based definition of nationhood, as opposed to citizenship cutting across ethnic-religious identities. He repeatedly said “Hindu Raj” would be India's “greatest calamity”.

Ambedkar regarded scripturally sanctioned and actually practised Hinduism as inseparable from casteism, and incapable of reform within Gandhi's framework, which patronisingly yet piously saw Dalits as Harijans (God's children).

Ambedkar burned the Manu Smriti. He converted to Buddhism after declaring: “I was born a Hindu, I had no choice. But I will not die a Hindu because I do have a choice.”

Ambedkar wanted a separate electorate for Dalits, but was blackmailed by Gandhi into dropping the demand. The separate electorate remains a sacrilege for the Parivar, which champions mythical “Hindu unity”.

These Hindu-supremacists reject separation of religion from politics, which was pivotal to Ambedkar. Hence their dangerously misleading “pseudo-secularism” slogan!

Anti-secular majoritarianism now manifests itself virulently: banning the slaughter of bulls, old buffaloes and cows (Maharashtra); attacks on churches (Delhi, West Bengal and now Uttar Pradesh); and hounding Muslims out of “Hindu” areas through intimidation (as in Bhavnagar in Gujarat).

Hate speech is becoming “the new normal”. BJP MP Sakshi Maharaj makes hysterical statements about Muslims having “40 children from four wives”. Even worse, Sanjay Raut, editor of the Shiv Sena's “Saamna”, demands that Muslims be deprived of the vote altogether.
This is a flagrant attack on constitutionally guaranteed universal franchise. Raut is an MP. It's simply not open to him to make obnoxious anti-Constitutional statements. He must be punished.

India has been far too indulgent towards important functionaries' communal excesses. It took the Election Commission 13 years to declare Bal Thackeray guilty of seeking votes in the name of religion during a 1986 election—and bar him from contesting or voting for six years.

During the last Lok Sabha election, Narendra Modi repeatedly invoked Lord Ram in his campaign speech at Faizabad. A model of the BJP-proposed Ram Mandir formed the backdrop. Former chief election commissioner SY Qureshi, no less, asked why the Election Commission had not initiated action against the organisers.

Chronic inaction has created a culture of impunity for anti-minority atrocities. That's the message from the just-delivered Hashimpura verdict - on the gruesome killing of 42 Muslims in 1987 in Uttar Pradesh by the Provincial Armed Constabulary personnel.

The state took nine years to file a chargesheet. The accused were never arrested despite 23 non-bailable warrants. They were all acquitted. As Outlook magazine (April 6) has revealed, the massacre was an act of revenge by an army officer whose brother, an RSS member, was killed in a communal clash. The government knew all this, but did nothing.

A day after Hashimpura, the PAC joined a mob in killing 72 Muslims in Maliana next door. This trial hasn't even crossed the first stage—despite 800 dates. Only three of 35 prosecution witnesses were examined in 28 years.

These terrible failures of the justice delivery system have encouraged uniformed personnel to brutalise citizens - e.g. at Pathribal in Kashmir in 2000, where the army killed five innocent civilians falsely charged with the anti-Sikh Chittisinghpura massacre. The culprits were let off by an army court-of-inquiry.

The latest episode in Nalgonda (Telangana), in which five Muslim undertrials were killed, falls in the same category. The state won't bring the culprits to book unless public-spirited citizens and political parties intervene.

The greatest beneficiaries of such justice-delivery failures are the forces of Right-wing bigotry and violence. Self-styled “Chhatrapati” Bal Thackeray wasn't able to put the Shiv Sena in power on its own in Maharashtra. But he succeeded in inflicting grave damage upon the Left and trade union movements and shifting the state's political discourse Rightwards.

Similarly, a Sanjay Raut won't be able to disenfranchise Muslims, but he has further shifted India's entire political terrain towards anti-Constitutional forces. Those committed to secular democracy and humanism must actively combat this danger.

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Ambedkar – Gandhi Debate

12. The Ambedkar – Gandhi Debate: Reply to Arundhati Roy

Rajmohan Gandhi

*Taking exception to Arundhati Roy’s "The Doctor and the Saint," this article seeks to add to our understanding of the B R Ambedkar-M K Gandhi debate. It does not attempt to analyse or assess the debate as such, disavowing any desire to confront either Gandhi or Ambedkar. But it makes no secret of the fact that it disagrees with Roy, going so far as to insinuate that the chief purpose of "The Doctor and the Saint" was to demolish Gandhi.

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This piece is a response to Arundhati Roy’s “The Doctor and the Saint,” which appeared in March 2014 as an introduction to a new edition of B R Ambedkar’s Annihilation of Caste, first published in 1936, but it also bears an indirect connection to the historic debate between Ambedkar and M K Gandhi, which took place during a period well removed from our times.

The two were involved in a positive, if impersonal, relationship during the 1920s. Though they did not meet each other in this period, Ambedkar appreciated Gandhi’s concern for the plight of Dalits and welcomed the method of satyagraha that he had introduced. However, the 1930s saw sharp and, from a historian’s standpoint, revealing, exchanges between the two.

The first face-to-face meeting between Ambedkar and Gandhi took place in Mumbai in 1931, shortly before their piercing verbal encounters. Begun in the autumn of 1931 in a well-lit London arena (the Round Table Conference (RTC) on India’s political future, convened by the British prime minister), these encounters continued in 1932 in a dark Pune prison, where the British had incarcerated Gandhi, and where a successful negotiation took place. Robust exchanges were, however, resumed before the public in the mid-1930s, mainly via the press.

The Ambedkar–Gandhi debate was interrupted by Gandhi’s frequent imprisonments. From 1922 to 1924, from 1932 to 1934, and again from 1942 to 1944, Gandhi was behind imperial bars. In contrast, Ambedkar, who believed that the battle for social democracy was more important than the fight for national independence, was not only never jailed by the British, but also included in the viceroy’s executive council from 1942 to 1945.

In the summer of 1945, Ambedkar published What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables, a strong attack on Gandhi and on the Congress movement led by him. Absorbed from 1944 in what turned out to be a losing battle to avert partition, Gandhi offered no reply himself to Ambedkar’s 1945 charges, but he encouraged Ambedkar Refuted, a short tract written by Chakravarti Rajagopalachari.
The period from 1947 to 1951 saw an unexpected—and, from any perspective, remarkable—rapprochement between Ambedkar on the one hand and Gandhi, who was killed in 1948, deputy premier Vallabhbhai Patel, who lived until the end of 1950, and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who lived until 1964, on the other. This accord resulted in Ambedkar’s entry to free India’s first cabinet and his leadership of the Constitution-drafting process, culminating in the 1950 Constitution.

However, in 1951, Ambedkar resigned from the cabinet. In the 1952 elections, and again in a by-election in 1954, he opposed the Congress, losing on both occasions. Shortly before his death in 1956, he led hundreds of thousands of fellow Dalits out of Hinduism into the faith and vision of the Buddha.

By any standard, the Gandhi–Ambedkar relationship is a fascinating story. Many, including this writer, have looked at it (1995, 2006) and many more will in future. The Ambedkar–Gandhi debate is a vital part of that relationship and an important subject in itself.

However, the pages that follow do not seek to analyse or assess the Ambedkar–Gandhi debate, though I hope they might add to our understanding of it. And although these pages will touch on the Gandhi–Ambedkar relationship, analysing that relationship is hardly their chief purpose. I disavow any desire, in these pages, to confront either Gandhi or Ambedkar. However, I confess to a wish—call it temerity—to confront Roy.

I must admit that it took me a while, when reading “The Doctor and the Saint,” to understand its chief purpose. A discussion of the thesis of Annihilation of Caste is not her focus. Nor, certainly, is the Gandhi–Ambedkar relationship. Not even the Ambedkar–Gandhi debate. “The Doctor and the Saint” comes across mainly as a fierce indictment of the Mahatma, with indications here and there that the demolition of Gandhi is its true aim.

Many Dalits appear to have censured “The Doctor and the Saint,” not so much for its disagreements with Ambedkar, but largely, it would seem, because three-fourths of its text is about Gandhi, and only one-fourth about Ambedkar. Roy has only used Ambedkar to attack Gandhi. There is nothing necessarily illegitimate with that, except that she has not been upfront about her intention.

Not everyone agrees with all the unpopular stands Roy has taken, but many (including this writer) may agree with one or two of them. Since what Roy says carries weight with several good people, I thought it necessary to point out some of the flaws in her attacks on Gandhi. Before doing so, I should, of course, acknowledge that Gandhi merits criticism, including on some of the points underlined by Roy.

Though Gandhi constantly asked caste Hindus to repent for the great sins of untouchability and caste superiority, he only rarely led or encouraged direct struggles for Dalit rights, whereas he led and triggered a large number of direct battles for Indian independence. During his South African phase, he struggled for Indian rights, not directly for black rights. These are undeniable—if also well-known—truths, and Roy has every right to reiterate them.

I should freely concede something else. Some of Roy’s unreasonable attacks may have resulted from a lack of knowledge. She has not been a Gandhi scholar for any length of time. The omissions in “The Doctor and the Saint” constitute the text’s most serious weaknesses. These gaps prevent its readers from feeling, with mental fingers, the true textures of India’s intertwined movements for national freedom and social justice in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, and the tensions between the two.
I would like to argue that the narration in “The Doctor and the Saint” of the Gandhi–Ambedkar relationship, which saw both conflict and partnership, is seriously flawed. Even if examining it was not the central purpose of Roy’s text, this relationship features in it.

I would also like to show that Roy’s attacks violate the principles of historical debate. These principles require, first, that attacks on a statement that X or Y or even a Mahatma may have made 50 or 100 years ago should provide the context in which the statement was made. Second, the norms require that pertinent information is not scissored out.

**Omitting Facts**

Consider an allegation such as the following in “The Doctor and the Saint.” “[Gandhi’s] duality allowed him to support and be supported by big industry and big dams as well” (p 49). To this assertion, Roy append a long endnote, where she claims that Gandhi’s approach to big dams is revealed in a letter (5 April 1924) in which he advised villagers who faced displacement by the Mulshi Dam, then being built by the Tatas to generate electricity, ... to give up their protest (pp 151–52).

What are the facts? Roy omits a salient one, which is that three years earlier, in April 1921, when displaced villagers first began their satyagraha against what was then only a proposed dam, Gandhi had penned a biting, if also courteously worded, challenge to the Tatas in his journal, Young India.

_I wish the great house of the Tatas, instead of standing on their legal rights, will reason with the people themselves, and do whatever they wish in consultation with them ... What is the value of all the boons that the Tata scheme claims to confer on India, if it is to be at the unwilling expense of even one poor man?_

*I dare say the problem of disease and poverty can be easily solved, and the survivors will live in luxury, if the three crore half-starved men and women, and lakhs of the decrepit humanity, were shot and their bodies utilized for manure ... And yet nobody but a lunatic will put up such a suggestion. Is the case any weaker when men and women are not to be shot but compulsorily disposed of their valued lands, [around] which sentiment, romance and all that makes life worth living, have grown up? I suggest to the custodians of the great name that they would more truly advance India’s interests if they will defer to the wishes of their weak and helpless countrymen (CW 20: 40–41, 27 April 1921)._

The Tatas went ahead nonetheless. In less than a year, Gandhi was sent to prison—not for his views on the Mulshi Dam, but for sedition against the king of England. By the time he was released, the dam was half completed, and as Gandhi put it in the letter that Roy does quote in her endnote, “the vast majority” of displaced villagers had accepted compensation. Moreover, the leader of the still-continuing satyagraha was not, in Gandhi’s view, committed to non-violence. Stating all this, Gandhi advised that the satyagraha be dropped.

Whether or not this advice was sufficiently pro-peasant or sufficiently anti-dam is a fair question, which may elicit a variety of answers. (It would also call for genuine research.) Yet, Roy’s suppression of Gandhi’s remarkably strong and public words to the Tatas regarding the Mulshi Dam disqualifies her as a judge, while also obliging us to be hugely sceptical when, elsewhere in the text, Roy suggests that Gandhi was soft with the Tatas.

As for another famous business house from those and continuing times—the Birlas—Roy has this comment on Ghanshyamdas Birla, who often hosted Gandhi. In 1915, when Gandhi returned from South Africa, says Roy,
Birla “organised a grand reception in Calcutta, ... became Gandhi’s chief patron and paid him a generous monthly retainer...Gandhi’s arrangement with G D Birla lasted for the rest of his days” (pp 88–89). Roy does not provide any sources for this assertion.

Here is another account, that of Birla. When Gandhi arrived in Calcutta in 1915, a 21-year-old Ghanshyamdas and a few others unharnessed the horses in the carriage sent to the railway station to fetch Gandhi and pulled the carriage themselves. Four decades later, after Gandhi’s death, Birla recounted this first meeting to a Kolkata gathering, and also referred to a conversation they had had.

I informed him that I would ... send him a monthly donation ... ‘Fine,’ he replied. Look what I did—it was very silly of me! I said, ‘Very good then. I’ll expect a monthly letter from you.’ He retorted saying, ‘Does this mean I have to come to you with a begging bowl every month?’ I felt so ashamed.

I asked Gandhiji, ‘If I write to you, will you reply?’ ‘Of course,’ he said. Just to test him, I wrote a letter to him four or five days after he’d left. He replied—on a postcard (Birla nd).

Each of us can decide which account—Roy’s or Birla’s—carries a truer ring.

**Courageous Dalits of Mahad**

Ignorance cannot explain Roy’s near total suppression of Gandhi’s comment on the Mahad satyagraha of 1927. This was conducted in western Maharashtra under Ambedkar’s leadership. A large number of Dalits had been denied access to a tank of water in Mahad, and as part of their satyagraha, they surged forward in unison and drank its water. Thereafter, they were attacked with sticks and clubs by infuriated groups of the orthodox class.

Ambedkar, who was present in Mahad, wisely asked his people not to hit back. As Roy concedes (p 107), Gandhi wrote “approvingly of the Untouchables’ composure in the face of the attacks.” However, Gandhi had said much more than that in the *Young India* article cited by her, and therefore, one assumes, read by her.

Praising the Dalits’ “exemplary self-restraint,” Gandhi wrote that, the “so-called orthodox party,” not having reason on its side, had used “sheer brute force.” Gandhi went on in an article in *Young India* on 28 April 1927,

> Dr Ambedkar, [was] fully justified in putting to the test the resolution of the Bombay Legislative Council and the Mahad Municipality by advising the so-called Untouchables to go to the tank to quench their thirst.

The Mahatma also urged “every Hindu opposed to untouchability” to publicly defend the courageous Dalits of Mahad “even at the risk of getting his head broken” (CW 33: 268).

This, again, is radical stuff. Roy deliberately hides it.

These are only a few examples of the numerous concealments in “The Doctor and the Saint” regarding Gandhi and Dalit rights. Here is one more. While Roy concedes (p 123) that the Indian National Congress’s (INC) Karachi resolution of 1931 on equal rights for all—a forerunner of the equality pledged in India’s 1950 Constitution—was a “valuable, enlightened document,” she avoids mentioning that Gandhi had played a principal role in its drafting.

Here is another. She names “the beloved Bhakti poets...of the anticaste tradition”—“Cokhamela, Ravidas, Kabir, Tukaram, Mira, Janaba” (p 37). (Her spelling of Mahar poet Chokhamela’s name is incorrect.) But, of course, she will not inform her readers that several of these were among Gandhi’s
favourite poets too, or that their songs were frequently sung in his ashrams and prayer meetings.

**Sin of Untouchability**

At the time of Gandhi’s death, India remained caste-ridden and continued to ill-treat Dalits. Indian society has not changed radically in the decades since. Yet, Gandhi’s words and deeds contributed to the change that has occurred.

In South Africa, a young Gandhi interpreted the discrimination against Indians as a just reward for untouchability in India. In May 1907, in an article in *Indian Opinion*, Gandhi wrote of “the wicked superstitions about untouchability” and of how “in India some of us oppress the bhangis and force them to...speak in obsequious language” (CW 7: 470). When satyagraha sent many Indians to prison in South Africa, he rebuked those who refused to eat food touched by Dalits or sleep near them (CW 9: 181).

On 16 February 1916, a year after returning to India, this is what Gandhi said about untouchability in a public speech in Madras. “Every affliction that we labour under in this sacred land is a fit and proper punishment for this great and indelible crime that we are committing” (CW 13: 232–33). When orthodoxy attacked him, this is how Gandhi replied in Godhra (Gujarat) in November 1917. “I shall continue to be my own guru...It is no good quoting verses from Manusmriti and other scriptures in defence of this orthodoxy. A number of verses...are apocryphal, a number of them are quite meaningless” (CW 14: 73–77). Reiterating his position that verses quoted from scripture could not override the individual conscience, he added that verses from scripture “cannot be above reason and morality” (CW 14: 345).

A year later, in April 1918, in a preface to a book of poems by Gujarati writer Padhiar describing the cruel treatment of Dalits, Gandhi asked for the poems to be “read out to men and women in their millions, in the same way that works like the Bhagavat are read out to them in every square” (CW 14: 344–45).

Two years later, after the non-cooperation movement was launched, he said through his article in *Young India* in November 1920, “We shall be unfit to gain Swaraj so long as we keep in bondage a fifth of the population” (CW 19: 20). Before the year 1920 ended, Gandhi ensured that the removal of untouchability was made an integral part of the political programme of the INC. This had not happened until then, and Gandhi’s role was acknowledged by Ambedkar in his 1945 book against Gandhi.

After the non-cooperation movement for swaraj was launched in 1920, and national schools were opened, Gandhi’s orthodox foes in Gujarat attacked him in violent language because he refused to bar Dalits from these schools. Through the press, in letters, and via a whispering campaign, these men warned Gandhi that unless Dalits were excluded, they would support the raj and kill the swaraj movement. They also alleged that Gandhi’s interest in Dalits was borrowed from his Christian friends, in particular from Rev Charles Andrews.

Gandhi’s response was twofold. First, in his Gujarati weekly, *Navajivan*, on 5 December 1920, he expressed confidence that “God will vouchsafe me the strength to reject the swaraj which may be won by abandoning the Antyajas” (CW 19: 73). (Antyaja was at this time the word that many used for Dalits.)

Second, writing to Andrews and then in public speeches, Gandhi recalled the start of his work against untouchability. To Andrews, in a letter dated 29 January 1921, he said,

*I began this work in SA—before I ever heard of you and I was conscious of the sin of untouchability before I came under other Christian influences in SA. The truth came to*
me when I was yet a child. I used to laugh at my dear mother for making us to bathe if we brothers touched any pariah. It was in 1897 that I was prepared in Durban to turn Mrs Gandhi away from the house because she would not treat on a footing of equality Lawrence who she knew belonged to the pariah class and whom I had invited to stay with me (CW 19: 288–90).

Andrews having expressed keenness for Gandhi’s focus against untouchability to remain strong and sustained, Gandhi added the following in the same letter.

You are doing an injustice to me in even allowing yourself to think that for a single moment I may be subordinating the question [of untouchability] to any others. .... It is a bigger problem than that of gaining Indian independence, but I can tackle it better if I gain the latter on the way (CW 19: 288–90; emphasis added).

Three months later, on 13 April 1921, Gandhi addressed a Suppressed Classes Conference in Ahmedabad. He said,

I was hardly yet 12 when this idea had dawned on me. A scavenger named Uka, an ‘untouchable,’ used to attend our house for cleaning latrines. Often I would ask my mother ... why I was forbidden to touch him? If I accidentally touched Uka, I was asked to perform the ablutions, and though I naturally obeyed, it was not without smilingly protesting ... I often had tussles with [my parents] on this matter. I told my mother that she was entirely wrong in considering physical contact with Uka as sinful (CW 19: 572).

Exactly two years earlier, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre had taken place, under the aegis of Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer and Governor Michael O’Dwyer. Recalling that massacre in this speech to the Suppressed Classes Conference, he added,

What crimes for which we condemn the government as Satanic have not we been guilty of towards our ‘untouchable’ brethren? ... We make them crawl on their bellies, we have made them rub their noses on the ground; with eyes red with rage we push them out of railway compartments—what more than this has British rule done? What charge that we bring against Dyer and O’Dwyer may not others and even our people lay at our door? (CW 19: 572).

Roy does not allow her readers to know anything contained in the preceding paragraphs. It is also a fact, however, and one that Ambedkar would justifiably underline, that the fight against untouchability did not gather adequate momentum in the 1920s. It did not because of the rigidity of Indian society, and also because Gandhi and his colleagues had other tough goals which they were striving to reach, including swaraj and Hindu–Muslim unity.

**Separate Dalit Electorate**

On 2 August 1931, shortly before he was to go to London for the round table conference, and around the time when he and Ambedkar, who too was going to London, had their first meeting (in Mumbai), Gandhi made a significant statement in Ahmedabad.

If we came into power with the stain of untouchability unaffected, I am positive that the ‘untouchables’ would be worse off under that ‘Swaraj’ than they are now, for the simple reason that our weaknesses and our failings would then be buttressed by the accession of power (Pyarelal 1932: 303).

Gandhi was admitting here that swaraj would give India’s upper castes political power in addition to the social and economic power they already enjoyed, and thus make Dalits “worse off.” Since the swaraj goal could not be abandoned, the solution, as Gandhi saw it, was to attack untouchability alongside the struggle for swaraj.
At the London conference, Gandhi and Ambedkar had their famous clash over separate versus joint electorates. If the raj could provide separate electorates for Sikhs, Muslims, and India’s Europeans, why not a separate Dalit electorate? Gandhi answered with a counter-question, “Sikhs may remain as such in perpetuity, so may Mohammedans, so many Europeans. Will untouchables remain untouchables in perpetuity?” (CW 48: 298).

But there was something more worrying, a hurtful reality. Here is how Gandhi described that reality in London on 31 October 1931 at Friends House, the Quaker centre in Euston:

The ‘untouchables’ are in the hands of superior classes. They can suppress them completely and wreak vengeance upon the ‘untouchables’ who are at their mercy. I may be opening out my shame to you. But ... how can I invite utter destruction for them? I would not be guilty of that crime (CW 48: 258).

Gandhi said before the Minorities Committee of the RTC that “he would not sell the vital interests of the untouchables even for the sake of winning the freedom of India.” He claimed (on 13 November 1931) that those demanding the separate electorate “do not know their India, do not know how Indian society is today constructed” (CW 48: 297–98).

Though Roy devotes several pages to the Gandhi–Ambedkar debate in London, she carefully expunges the sentences I have quoted.

Ambedkar’s demand for a separate Dalit electorate was backed by many round table conference delegates in London, most of whom were nominated by the raj. A separate electorate could be introduced, the raj indicated. Gandhi declared he would, if need arose, fast unto death against it.

Selective and Prejudiced

A good chunk of “The Doctor and the Saint” is devoted to Gandhi’s oft-discussed and undoubtedly deplorable ignorance and condescension regarding black South Africans during some of his time in South Africa. However, here too Roy is carefully selective. Thus she totally leaves out a notable 1908 speech that Gandhi had made on the subject in Johannesburg during a period when he entertained high hopes of the British Empire:

It seems to me that both the Africans and the Asiatics have advanced the Empire as a whole; we can hardly think of South Africa without the African races ... South Africa would probably be a howling wilderness without the African races ... They (the African races) are still in the history of the world’s learners. Able-bodied and intelligent men as they are, they cannot but be an asset to the Empire.

It is well for me to be a loyal subject of the Empire, but not I hope as a member of the subject race.

If we look into the future, is it not a heritage we have to leave to posterity, that all the different races commingle and produce a civilisation that perhaps the world has not yet seen? (CW 8: 242–46).

This is from a well-known speech given at the YMCA in Johannesburg, reproduced at the time in two issues of Indian Opinion (6 and 13 June 1908), included later in the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, and discussed in more than one modern study, but Roy is either unaware of it (so much, in that case, for her diligence) or she does not want others to learn of it. Though hardly revolutionary by today’s standards, the speech was ahead of the times in which it was made. Not many Indians in South Africa or in India spoke in 1908 or later of the “commingling” of “all the different races.” In fact, few people anywhere did; not very many will even today.

Gandhi’s prejudices at that time (which almost all his contemporaries shared) should
be frankly faced, but why does Roy cover up the more favourable side of the ledger, which was rare for its time?

Predictably, Roy also leaves out Gandhi’s well-documented friendship with John Dube, one of the founders of the African National Congress (ANC), whose centre near Durban was not far from Phoenix, where Gandhi established his first ashram. Like Gandhi, Dube too hesitated to support the Zulu Rebellion of 1906 and said, in fact, that “we should...assist the government to suppress the rebellion” (quoted in Reddy 1995: 21). Heroic yet also tragic, that rebellion bore similarities to India’s 1857 rising, from which contemporaries such as Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Syed Ahmad Khan kept their distance, and which another contemporary—Jyotiba Phule—openly opposed.

Roy speaks of Gandhi’s alleged “disdain” for blacks (p 83), but fails to mention that Gandhi’s offensive remarks were provoked by the shocking conduct witnessed by him of men convicted for serious crimes, with whom he shared his prison cell.

Gandhi’s stance regarding South Africa’s blacks was influenced by the circumstances and prejudices and also the equations of his time. Since blacks lay at the lowest rung of South Africa’s political and social ladder, Gandhi’s fight for Indian equality with whites necessarily, if also regretfully, called for separating Indians from blacks. This angle is of no interest to Roy.

Nelson Mandela, whom Roy professes to admire (p 87), wrote the following in a 1995 publication, “Gandhi had been initially shocked that Indians were classified with Natives in prison ... All in all, Gandhi must be forgiven these prejudices in the context of the time and the circumstances.”

“One evening our Negro warder from Somaliland was bitten by a scorpion on his hand. He gave a shout. Mr Gandhi was quickly on the spot ... He first asked for a knife to cut the wound and to let out the poison. But he found the knife dirty. So missing no moment he quickly washed the area around the wound and applying his lips to the wound began to suck out the poison. He went on spitting after sucking and eventually stopped when Adan felt relief (Yagnik 1943: 303).

Was this the reaction of one who “disdained” blacks? Not that Roy would ask such a question, or even let her readers know that Gandhi reacted thus. She also suppresses or belittles Gandhi’s increasing willingness to write openly of black rights.
On 22 July 1926, Gandhi declared in *Young India* that he could not think of “justice being done to Indians [in South Africa] if none is rendered to the natives of the soil” (CW 31: 181–82). Two years later, when a few Indians in South Africa objected to a plan to send Indian students to Fort Hare College, which had been established for Africans, Gandhi, in an article in *Young India* on 5 April 1928, likened the reaction to what “is expressed by the South African whites in respect of ourselves,” adding, “Indians ... cannot exist in South Africa for any length of time without the active sympathy and friendship of the Africans” (CW 36: 190).

In 1939, he told a visiting black leader from South Africa, Rev S S Tema, that Africans “are the sons of the soil who are being robbed of their inheritance;” theirs was “a far bigger issue” than that of South Africa’s Indians (*Harijan*, 18 Feb 1939; CW 68: 272–74). By 1946, Gandhi felt that the time for a common African–Indian front had arrived.

**Gandhi’s Merry Side**

Here I ask myself, why bother to show Roy’s unconcern with the real Gandhi? After all, she has hinted at her aim with “The Doctor and the Saint.” She desires, she says, to “rearrange the stars in our firmament” (p 140), not to analyse or understand Gandhi. She wants to shoot Gandhi down from the sky, not get to know him. She wants—in her own words, expressed not in “The Doctor and the Saint” but at a meeting where she tried to explain her text—to “move the Gandhi monument out of the way,” in order, she says, that Ambedkar may be better understood and honoured (Roy 2014a).

It is not a tribute to Ambedkar to say that his legacy depends on the destruction of Gandhi’s.

I should also ask—what provoked this strong dislike in Roy? Was it Gandhi’s lifestyle? Or his oft-expressed belief that despite their conflicts, human beings—and races, castes, classes and nations—should find solutions that allow bitterness to melt?

“The Doctor and the Saint” makes clear Roy’s total disapproval of what she thinks to be Gandhi’s lifestyle. According to her, Gandhi “left his followers with a legacy of a joyless, joke-free world: no desire, no sex, ... no food, no beads, no nice clothes, no dance, no poetry. And very little music” (p 81).

How truthful is this picture? The “very little music” that she reluctantly concedes to the Gandhi legacy was actually a daily affair in his life, morning and evening. True, it was religious or spiritual music, yet Gandhi had an ear for song and, in fact, possessed a decent singing voice, which fellow ashramites and fellow prisoners spoke of.

It is true, too, that the ballroom dancing (and violin) lessons he took in London as a student were later never put into practice, but no one who spoke as often as Gandhi did of “dancing with joy” could have been an enemy of dance. And although Roy may not be aware, Gandhi frequently quoted poetry in his journals—English, Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, or Gujarati poetry.

As for his “joyless, joke-free” world, here is what William Shirer, the American author of *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, said, referring to a time that he and a few others had spent with Gandhi. “In no time at all Gandhi had us all laughing and completely at our ease ... If in this world of varied personalities there is a single man even half as charming as Gandhi, I have not seen him (quoted in Jack 1956: 399).

And he enjoyed others’ jokes. Writing, in 1932, from a Pune prison to Srinivasa Sastri, Gandhi said, “Sardar Vallabhbai is with me. His jokes make me laugh until I can laugh no more, not once but several times a day” (Parikh 2: 91–92). Everyone who spent more
than a few minutes with Gandhi came away with stories of his merry side.

Like some others in history who took on daunting goals, Gandhi had strict views on sex. Many will disagree with those views, but the dreary Gandhi painted by Roy was never encountered by his friends or foes. Such a Gandhi never existed.

**Condescending and Incorrect**

In the course of demolishing Gandhi, Roy pauses to describe him as “perhaps the most consummate politician the modern world has ever known” (p 58). Since most politicians usually nurse a clear aim, at least at any given time, we may ask, what was the goal towards which Gandhi applied his “consummate” skills?

Roy refrains from providing her own clear views regarding this, though here and there she insinuates that Gandhi was not really pro-poor and that equality was not his real goal. Yet, it is not enough a “consummate politician” know what, allegedly, he does not want. He must know what he wants.

At one point, Roy appears to inch towards understanding something about Gandhi’s goal. She writes,

> Gandhi returned to India in 1915 after 20 years of political activity in South Africa, and plunged into the national movement. His first concern, as any politician’s would be, was to stitch together the various constituencies that would allow the Indian National Congress to claim it was the legitimate and sole representative of the emerging nation (p 58; emphasis added).

She is hugely condescending here, and in some respects quite incorrect.

Gandhi was not part of the INC when he arrived in India in 1915. But he was perhaps the only Indian at that time with a conscious goal of involving all Indians—caste Hindus, Dalits, Muslims, peasants and industrial labour—in a national movement; the first person striving to enlist people from outside his or her linguistic/cultural region; the first person to insist on using local languages to reach the ordinary Indian; and perhaps the first person who was determined to get to know the whole land of India and as many as possible of its people. As for his “plunging into the national movement,” it might be fairer to say that in 1919–20 he created a national movement into which he and others plunged headlong.

But the “stitching together” notion is apt for Gandhi.

His imperial foes—men such as Winston Churchill, Lord Linlithgow and Archibald Wavell—were never in two minds as to Gandhi’s purpose, all of them agreeing that ending British rule was his dominant passion. While Churchill’s antipathy towards Gandhi is well known, not many may be aware that in 1947, Wavell, the British commander-in-chief during the Quit India movement and viceroy from 1943 to 1947, called Gandhi “an implacable foe of Empire” and the “most formidable” of the opponents “who have detached portions of the British Empire in recent years” (Moon 1973: 439).

Now, here is the interesting—actually damning—thing about Roy’s text. In the 153-page demolition exercise, Roy mentions the freedom struggle not at all and the “national movement” only once or twice. This great context of the debates on caste, class, race and gender that “The Doctor and the Saint” fervently (and selectively) discusses is missing altogether.

That context meant that Indians, pained and shamed not just by Indian injustices but also by alien rule, were obliged to prioritise. Time and again, they had to choose between struggling against an Indian oppression and struggling against European subjugation. Or,
they alternated and oscillated between the two.

In the last quarter of the 18th century, some persons of conscience in what until then was Britain’s American colony had also been forced to prioritise. Should they focus their energies on opposing slavery or on ending British rule? In the end, independence attracted more American energy than opposing slavery, which, in fact, was even subtly codified into the US Constitution. It was only in 1865, shortly before the South surrendered in the Civil War, that slavery was declared illegal.

As for that war, President Abraham Lincoln thought, along with many other Americans, that the Union had to be preserved, and the South’s secession ended, before slavery could be abolished. Ambedkar, who obtained a PhD at Columbia University in New York, was well aware of this (1945: 271).

The India that Gandhi and his generation faced also presented more than one challenge to people with a conscience. To name three, India was a subject nation ruled by aliens; Indian society practised untouchability; and there was the Hindu–Muslim divide.

Although, as we have seen, Gandhi’s imperial foes saw him primarily as an enemy of British rule, all of us know that he also embraced the struggles against untouchability and for Hindu–Muslim friendship. He was stitching together India’s divided constituencies.

**Unusual Human Being**

Gandhi was a prisoner of the empire in Pune’s Yeravada jail when, in September 1932, he announced a fast of indefinite duration, directed at the separate Dalit electorate as well as at the caste Hindu conscience. Meeting in Bombay a day before the fast ended, India’s most influential caste Hindu leaders resolved that “one of the earliest Acts of the Swaraj Parliament” would be to assure “untouchables” equal access to “public wells, public schools, public roads and all other public institutions” (CW 51: 159–60). Pressured by Gandhi’s fast, they signed a historic, if overdue, pledge.

While Ambedkar would note this pledge (1945: 103), Roy banishes it from her survey. Across India, goaded by Gandhi’s fast, temples closed for centuries to the “untouchables” opened their doors. Brahmins invited Dalits to meals in their homes. The empire, on its part, opened the doors of Yeravada prison, and Ambedkar went in to confer with Gandhi.

A settlement was reached. Gandhi not only agreed to what he had earlier opposed, namely, reserved seats for Dalits in legislatures, he also said that Dalits should have seats in proportion to their population. In its scheme of separate–electorate–cum–reserved Dalit seats, the raj had prescribed only half that number of seats. From his side, to save Gandhi’s life, Ambedkar agreed to give up his demand for a separate electorate where only Dalits would have voted for or against Dalit candidates. Finding common ground, the two agreed on their pact. A cable went to London, where his majesty’s government accepted the joint proposal, and Gandhi broke his fast. The essence of this pact was subsequently enshrined in free India’s Constitution.

Gandhi claimed during the fast that “an increasing army of reformers” would resist “social, civic and political persecution of the Depressed Classes.” The issue was of “transcendental value, far surpassing Swaraj,” he added (CW 51: 119). Expressing his “Hindu gratitude” to “Dr Ambedkar, Rao Bahadur Srinivasan and ... Rao Bahadur M C Rajah”—the Dalit leaders who had conferred with him in Yeravada—Gandhi added,

*They could have taken up an uncompromising and defiant attitude by way of punishment to the so-called caste Hindus for the sins of generations. If they had done so, I at least*
could not have resented their attitude and my death would have been but a trifling price exacted for the tortures that the outcastes of Hinduism have been going through for unknown generations. But they chose a nobler path and have thus shown that they have followed the precept of forgiveness enjoined by all religions. Let me hope that the caste Hindus will prove themselves worthy of this forgiveness (CW 51: 143–45).

To caste Hindus, he conveyed a warning, “I should be guilty of a breach of trust if I did not warn fellow reformers and caste Hindus in general that the breaking of the fast carried with it a sure promise of a resumption of it if this reform is not relentlessly pursued and achieved within a measurable period” (CW 51: 143–45).

Was reform “relentlessly pursued and achieved within a measurable period?” Much was done, but much more remained undone. Did Gandhi then start another fast unto death? No, he did not, though a 21-day fast by him in May 1933 was linked to the fight against untouchability. Was he, therefore, a hypocrite and a secret foe of the Dalits, as Roy alleges? Others might hold that he was an unusual human being fighting, with all his human limitations and the limitations of his people, for more than one tough objective.

‘You Would Become Our Hero’

Shortly after signing the pact, Ambedkar said he had been “surprised, immensely surprised” to find “so much in common” between Gandhi and himself. “If you devoted yourself entirely to the welfare of the Depressed Classes,” Ambedkar said to Gandhi, “you would become our hero” (Pyarelal 1932: 59).

Gandhi’s close British friend, Andrews—the one who called Gandhi “Mohan” and was called “Charlie” by Gandhi—tendered the same advice. Recalling that Gandhi had “again and again” said that with untouchability, Indians were “not fit” for swaraj, Andrews asked his friend to focus solely on untouchability and not try “to serve two masters” (Gracie 1989: 155).

Whether or not we agree with Gandhi, we can look at the reasons he gave for declining the earnest advice.

My dear Charlie: My life is one indivisible whole. It is not built after the compartmental system. Satyagraha, civil resistance, untouchability, [and] Hindu-Muslim unity ... are indivisible parts of a whole.

You will find at one time in my life an emphasis on one thing, at another time on [an]other. But that is just like a pianist now emphasising one note and now [an]other. But they are all related to one another.

It is utterly impossible for me to say: ‘I have now nothing to do with civil disobedience or Swaraj!’ Not only so ... Full and final removal of untouchability ... is utterly impossible without Swaraj .... Love. Mohan (CW 55: 196–69; emphasis added).

Roy briefly acknowledges Ambedkar’s warmth for Gandhi at the time of the Poona Pact, but immediately adds, “Later, though, having recovered from the trauma, Ambedkar wrote: ‘There was nothing noble in the fast. It was a foul and filthy act’” (p 126).

Ambedkar indeed used those severe words. But when? When he recovered from the trauma of Gandhi’s fast, says Roy. How many days would it have taken Ambedkar, Gandhi’s irreverent adversary, to recover from Gandhi’s “pressure?” Seven days? Seven months? The words that Roy quotes, while suppressing their date, were actually written in the summer of 1945—13 years after the fast and the pact—in an impassioned tract that Ambedkar titled What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables.

In this fiery text, Ambedkar attacks Gandhi’s fast, and the working out of the Poona Pact, but—let us clearly mark—not the terms of that pact.
In places in his 1945 text, Ambedkar, in fact, claims that the Poona Pact was a victory for him. Thus he writes, “When the fast failed and Mr Gandhi was obliged to sign a pact—called the Poona Pact—which conceded the political demands of the Untouchables, he took his revenge by letting the Congress employ foul electioneering tactics to make their political rights of no avail” (Ambedkar 1945: 259).

Roy says that Ambedkar “didn’t stand a chance” (p 126) when facing a fasting Gandhi. A few pages later, she speaks of “the debacle of the Poona Pact” (p 137). Yet Ambedkar not only refrained, in his tempestuous 1945 text, from criticising the pact’s terms, he also did not—then or later—try, as far as I can figure out, to have that pact annulled or replaced. Far from seeing the pact as a “debacle,” he seemed to view it as a compromise that benefited everyone, including Dalits.

Only two years after writing his 1945 text, he would begin the process of steering the passage of a Constitution that incorporated the pact, which from today’s perspective stands out as a statesmanlike settlement.

As for Gandhi’s 1932 fast, Ambedkar acknowledged in his 1945 text—even if Roy does not—that conservative Hindus too saw it as pressure on them and resented the pact it produced. While observing that “the Untouchables were sad” because of the concessions he had made, Ambedkar added, “The caste Hindus very definitely disliked [the pact], although they had not the courage to reject it” (1945: 90–91).

However, Gandhi felt that orthodoxy was losing ground. To Nehru, he wrote (15 February 1933),

*The fight against sanatanists is becoming more and more interesting if also increasingly difficult ... The abuses they are hurling at me are wonderfully refreshing. I

No wonder (as “The Doctor and the Saint” would not acknowledge), some sanatanists tried to kill Gandhi in 1934—there were attempts on his life in Jasidih in Bihar and in Pune.

‘Caste Has To Go’

Ambedkar was the clear victor over Gandhi in their 1936 argument over caste, varna, and hereditary occupations—an argument triggered by the former’s lecture of that year, *Annihilation of Caste*.

Some months before their 1936 argument, Gandhi had publicly given up defending caste. “Caste Has To Go” was his heading to a 16 November 1935 article in *Harijan* in which he wrote, “The sooner public opinion abolishes [caste], the better” (CW 62: 121–22). Before 1935, Gandhi had at times claimed that “an ideal” form of caste could be justified, while nearly always adding that “the ideal” never existed in practice, and always insisting that any notion of superiority and inferiority was utterly wrong. This seeming “defence” of caste was Gandhi’s way of sugar-coating the bitter pill he was asking caste Hindus to swallow.

In his 1936 debate with Ambedkar, Gandhi reiterated his rejection of caste, said that it was “harmful both to spiritual and national growth,” and did what he had thus far hesitated to do—he publicly affirmed his acceptance of inter-dining and inter-marriage (Ambedkar 2014: 326). However, he claimed that “varna” was different from caste, and tried to justify varna by saying that the hereditary occupations for which he claimed varna stood could ensure harmony and thrift. He added, however, that restoring a pure varna system was like “an ant trying to lift a bag of sugar” or “Dame Parkington pushing
back the Atlantic with a mop.” He was saying that the varna system was impossible. This seeming “defence” of varna was neither easy to comprehend nor convincing, and Ambedkar easily picked holes in it.

That is how we would judge the debate today. In 1936, what many took from Annihilation of Caste was Ambedkar’s categorical statement to all Hindus—“I am sorry, I will not be with you … I am going out of the fold” (2014: 317). What they also took from the 1936 debate was Gandhi’s defence of Hinduism and his regret that Ambedkar had “transferred” to Hinduism the “disgust” he justifiably felt against “a part of its professors” (Ambedkar 2014: 322).

Eight years after Gandhi’s death, Nehru would tell European journalist Tibor Mende,

I asked [Gandhi] repeatedly: why don’t you hit out at the caste system directly? He said, ‘I am undermining it completely by tackling untouchability.’ ... [Gandhi’s] genius lay in finding the weakest point of the enemy, the breaking of his front (quoted in Mende 1958).

Realising that he would unite pro-orthodox ranks if he started with an attack on caste, Gandhi chose to zero in on an evil none could defend.

**Joint Electorates**

In the election of 1937, the bulk of India’s Hindus, including a great many Dalits—called Harijans at that time by Gandhi and many Indians, including Dalits—voted for Gandhi’s Congress rather than for Ambedkar’s party. As Roy does not acknowledge, a Dalit minister was part of almost every provincial cabinet formed by the Congress in 1937. By December 1939, when the Congress quit office (because the war in Europe from September 1939 had sharpened the empire–Congress divide), these ministries had accomplished a few things for Dalit rights. In Madras Presidency, for instance, a 1938 law made discrimination against Dalits in jobs, wells, public conveniences, roads, schools and colleges an offence. As a result of another law that protected temple officials willing to open doors, Dalits entered several of the South’s great temples for the first time.

What was the context for the fierce language of Ambedkar’s 1945 text, which he wrote in New Delhi in his official residence on Prithviraj Road? At this time, he was a member of the viceroy’s executive council. The war was about to end. After three years of detention for Quit India, which had stirred much of India, the Congress leadership was about to be released. The British were on the verge of proposing a new political scheme for India, and new elections were imminent across the country.

The brilliant thinker and member (minister in effect) writing the 1945 tract was also someone who wished to influence any new British scheme. In addition, he was a political leader unable to forget the results of the 1937 elections, which—because the war had intervened—were the last to have taken place. He hoped to do better in 1945–46. Through this 1945 tract, an Ambedkar still vexed by the 1937 results presented his case to Britain’s leaders and simultaneously to India’s voters.

However, the election of 1945–46 confirmed that the INC attracted the bulk of the Indian electorate, including a good deal of Dalit support. Obtaining caste Hindu as well as Dalit votes, the INC won an even larger proportion of Dalit seats than it had in 1937.

Many Dalit candidates understandably resented that non-Dalit voters could cause their defeat. Unfortunately, this happened to Ambedkar himself in the 1952 general elections, after he had resigned from the cabinet in disappointment at the Congress’s slowness in passing the Hindu Code Bill, and again in 1954, when he contested a by-election. In a joint electorate, good people of all jaatis, including the Dalits, would at times
be defeated by votes from outside their jaati, and at other times be elected because of “outsider” votes.

Founded on Ambedkar’s legacy by Kanshi Ram, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) has more than once led a government in India’s largest state, Uttar Pradesh, thanks in part, some might say, to the Poona Pact and the joint electorate. That pact was hardly the folly that Roy paints it to be, and it would be difficult to make a case that the India of 2015, or the Dalits and Adivasis of 2015, would be better off with separate Dalit and Adivasi electorates.

**Powerful Symbol**

As independence seemed closer, Gandhi freed his radical side for tackling India’s society. On 1 August 1946, a year or so before independence, he wrote to Patel, “Who are the people who beat up Harijans, murder them, prevent them from using wells, drive them out of schools and refuse them entry into their homes? They are Congressmen. Aren’t they? It is very necessary to have a clear picture of this” (CW 85: 102).

Three months after writing this letter, Gandhi found himself in Noakhali in eastern Bengal, where communal violence had flared up. In January and February 1947, he and a handful of companions, walking from village to village, slept overnight in 47 East Bengali homes, where their hosts, many of them Dalits, included washermen, fishermen, cobblers, and weavers. In Noakhali, Gandhi told caste Hindu women that if they continued to disown the untouchables, more sorrow would be in store. The women of the village of Chandipur were given radical advice, “Invite a Harijan every day to dine with you. Or at least ask the Harijan to touch the food or the water before you consume it. Do penance for your sins” (Tendulkar 1951: Vol 7: 350; CW 93: 229). On 24 April 1947, he said in Patna that for some time he had “made it a rule not to be present or give his blessings for any wedding unless one of the parties was a Harijan” (CW 87: 350).

But Roy is not interested in any of this.

In June 1947—two months or so before independence—Gandhi proposed that “a Harijan like Chakrayya or a Harijan girl should be made the nation’s first President and Jawaharlal should become the Prime Minister...Similar arrangements [can be] made in the provinces too” (CW 95: 217). A purely symbolic suggestion? Perhaps. However, the symbol would have been powerful. It was one of the several suggestions made by Gandhi that Nehru, Patel, Rajendra Prasad, Rajagopalachari and other INC leaders successfully resisted in the last year of their “master’s” life.

On 14 June 1947, by when partition had been accepted and independence was only two months away, Gandhi asked the Congress to frontally address untouchability and caste injustice and also the question of the Adivasis.

And what about the ‘untouchables’? ...If you say that ‘untouchables’ are nothing, the Adivasis are nothing, then you are not going to survive yourselves. But if you do away with the distinction of savarna and avarna, if you treat the shudras, the ‘untouchables’ and the Adivasis as equals then something good will have come out of a bad thing [partition] (CW 95: 286–87).

The battle for swaraj having been won, the Congress had no excuse now, Gandhi was saying, to delay the battle for social justice.

None of this is of any consequence to Roy, according to whom, “There was never much daylight between Gandhi’s views on caste and those of the Hindu right.” She adds, “From a Dalit point of view, Gandhi’s assassination could appear to be more a fratricidal killing than an assassination by an ideological opponent” (p 128).
For herself, Roy acknowledges an ideological clash between Gandhi and the Hindu right. Thus, she writes, “The message of tolerance and inclusiveness between Hindus and Muslims continues to be Gandhi’s real, lasting and most important contribution to the idea of India” (p 82). The implication seems to be that while she can understand the ideological confrontation, Dalits cannot.

**Consequential Partnership**

There was one Gandhi proposal, initiated in December 1946, which Nehru and Patel did accept (Gore 1993: 180–81; Ramachandran 1964: 179).3 Dalit literature has recorded Gandhi’s crucial role in the remarkable invitation extended by Nehru and Patel to Ambedkar to join free India’s first cabinet (Gore 1993: 180–81; Shastri 1991: 32–33), but Roy throws a thick blanket over it. After providing scores of pages of Ambedkar’s sharp criticism of Gandhi and the INC from 1933 to 1947, she merely says,

*In a gesture of goodwill, and perhaps because there was no one as equal to the task as he was, the Congress appointed Ambedkar to the Constituent Assembly. In August 1947, Ambedkar was appointed India’s first Law Minister and Chairman of the Drafting Committee for the Constitution (p 138).*

That is it. Offering no comment on the statesmanship behind the invitation and behind its acceptance, she effectively suppresses a remarkable coming together of bitter adversaries, resulting in Gandhi’s partnership with Ambedkar in the final phase of his life.

Everyone knows of the amazing results of Ambedkar’s induction into Constitution-making. A brilliant and passionate human being, who happened also to be an Indian and a Dalit, piloted a Constitution assuring equal rights to all in a society that for centuries had called people like him inferior and untouchable and had treated them harshly, and an elected Constituent Assembly, where a large majority were caste Hindus, welcomed and adopted such a Constitution.

When, two months after Gandhi’s death, Ambedkar married Sharada Kabir, a Brahmin doctor,4 Patel wrote to him, “I am sure if Bapu were alive he would have given you his blessings.” Ambedkar replied, “I agree that Bapu, if he had been alive, would have blessed it” (Das 1971, Vol 6: 302).

This sort of exchange would make no impact on Roy. In her stern and pessimistic view, the Constitution that resulted from the Ambedkar–Gandhi rapprochement and from discussions in the Constituent Assembly “reflected the views of its privileged-caste members more than Ambedkar’s” (p 138). She also seems unhappy that many Ambedkar statues in the country show him holding the Constitution in his hand. She would rather have him hold *Annihilation of Caste* (p 44).

Nothing wrong with that wish. Yet, for Roy to suppress the partnership formed in 1947 between Gandhi, Ambedkar, Nehru, and Patel only strengthens our scepticism over her text.

Roy quotes a characteristic Gandhi statement, made in 1931.

*It has been said that Indian swaraj will be the rule of the majority community, that is, the Hindus. There could not be a greater mistake ... If it were to be true, I for one would refuse to call it swaraj and fight it with all the strength at my command, for to me Hind Swaraj is the rule of all the people, of justice.*

But, adds Roy,

*For Ambedkar, ‘the people’ was not a homogeneous category (p 45).*

Nor was it for Gandhi. Both understood the inevitability of struggle between different sections of a diverse and at times sharply separated people—between classes or castes of Indians, between groups formed by
language, religion, sect, or party. Both agreed, however, that struggle had to be peaceful—resolute, fearless and passionate, yes, but not violent, for killing usually damaged a struggle’s goal. For Ambedkar, and also for Gandhi, Dalit solidarity, Dalit education, and the Dalit vote were weapons far superior to the lathi or the gun; when used by a vulnerable Dalit, the latter only played into the hands of a better-armed enemy. Both realised that the culmination of a struggle for justice was usually negotiation and a settlement rather than surrender by the foe and complete triumph for one’s side. Despite harsh experiences, both knew that the adversary in a struggle, the Other, was a human being too, and that justice seldom endured without reconciliation.

The Poona Pact of 1932 and, 15 years later, the Gandhi–Ambedkar partnership at independence, represented victories for India’s society and polity, and also for the two individuals concerned. Their agreements with each other may only have been occasional, their arguments more frequent. But the agreements were hugely consequential for India and even beyond.

Roy and the Verbal Barricade

In February 1946, when Indian ratings of the Royal Indian Navy mutinied unsuccessfully in Bombay (not a single Indian officer supported them), Aruna Asaf Ali, whose support the ratings had sought, was involved in an interesting debate with Gandhi. A hero of the 1942 struggle, Ali was, like many others, concerned in 1946 about the Hindu–Muslim divide. Encouraged that the mutineers’ ranks included Hindus as well as Muslims, she said she would “rather unite Hindus and Muslims at the barricade than on the constitutional front.” Replied Gandhi (26 February 1946),

*Even in terms of violence, this is a misleading proposition ... Fighters do not always live at the barricade. They are too wise to commit suicide. The barricade life has always to be followed by the constitutional. That front is not taboo forever (CW 83: 182–83).*

My suspicion is that Roy loves the life of the verbal barricade. She loves justice, no doubt, and can vividly describe the torments of the vulnerable. But she does not like settlements. She wants barricade battles to be unending. I suggest this because I still search for a positive purpose for her writing “The Doctor and the Saint.” It is by no means clear that she is pushing for India to substitute Ambedkar for Gandhi as India’s “chief hero,” even if, for a moment, we imagine that there can be such a thing. Here and there in “The Doctor and the Saint” she appears to notice flaws in Ambedkar—his attitude to Adivasis, for instance. She criticises the Indian left for ignoring caste, but also regrets that Ambedkar did not nurture a steady alliance with the left.

She is free to do that. Yet, it is only fair to ask Roy, “Who is your inspiration, your star, your hope? Who is it that you want Indians unhappy with their land and world to follow or accompany?”

If it is Ambedkar, why does not she say so? If it is someone else, let Roy name her or him, or more than one person. Or she can name a philosophy, an idea, an approach. Or a political party. She can take something from the two fascinating subjects of her text, who knew what they opposed, but also what they wanted.

If Roy knows what she wants for India, she should drop hints for a path to the future while she hops and skips on what she claims is historical ground. Scattering dubious “findings” of failings in founding fathers is simply not good enough.

Notes

2. Chakrayya was an Andhra Dalit who had greatly impressed Gandhi in his Sevagram ashram.

3. Particularly, see Gore’s quotation from C B Khairmode’s biography of Ambedkar. According to G Ramachandran, apparently Gandhi insisted on Ambedkar’s inclusion as an essential part of the “atonement” due to India’s “untouchables.”

4 Ambedkar’s first wife, Ramabai, died in 1935.

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13. They were rivals, but with the same mission

Ramachandra Guha

I wrote in my last column about how the politics of today has set Nehru and Patel up as rivals, even enemies, although they worked shoulder-to-shoulder in the first, formative, years of independent India. This column is about another pair of great Indians, Gandhi and Ambedkar. It asks the question — were their visions conflicting or complementary?

Unlike Patel and Nehru, who were lifelong colleagues in the Congress, Gandhi and Ambedkar were never in the same party. When, in the mid 1920s, Ambedkar returned from his studies abroad, Gandhi had already assumed control of the Congress-led freedom struggle. There was a massive halo around him. He was the ‘Mahatma’ everyone deferred to. But, as the late DR Nagaraj once wrote, Ambedkar was too proud a man to play the role of Hanuman or Sugreeva to Gandhi’s Ram. So he charted his own political trajectory, independent of, and opposed to, Gandhi and the Congress party.

Through the 1930s and 1940s, Ambedkar fiercely criticised Gandhi. He thought the Gandhian approach to ‘Harijan uplift’ patronising and condescending. Gandhi wanted to purify Hinduism by removing the taint of untouchability. Ambedkar, on the other hand, rejected Hinduism altogether. He thought the Dalits must convert to another faith if they wished to become equal citizens.

Ambedkar and Gandhi were certainly political adversaries in their lifetime. Now, six decades after their deaths, must we still see them as such? The ideologues of the left and right do. In 1996, Arun Shourie wrote a long book dismissing Ambedkar as a ‘false god’.

He made two main charges against Ambedkar: first, that he sided with the British rather than with the nationalists (he was in the viceroy’s executive council at the time of the Quit India movement); and second, that he used polemical and occasionally abusive language against Gandhi.

Two decades later, Arun Shourie has found his left-wing counterpart in Arundhati Roy, who, in a book-length essay, has dismissed Gandhi as a false Mahatma. She claims that Gandhi was a conservative defender of the caste system who changed his views ‘at a glacial pace’.

Both Arun Shourie and Arundhati Roy see history in black and white, in terms of heroes and villains. A historian, however, must be attentive to nuance, to the shades of gray. So, contra Shourie, one must ask, why did Ambedkar side with the British?

This was because the Congress was dominated by Brahmans, who had of course oppressed Dalits in the past, and might do so again if they came to power in independent India. For the same reason, other great low-caste reformers such as Jotiba Phule and Mangu Ram (the leader of the Adi-Dharm movement in the Punjab) also thought the Raj a lesser evil as compared to the Congress.

As for Roy, it is only by selectively quoting Gandhi out of context that she can paint him as a slow-moving reactionary. As careful scholars such as Denis Dalton, Mark Lindley, and Anil Nauriya have demonstrated, Gandhi steadily became more direct in his critique of caste. To begin with, he attacked untouchability alone, while leaving the other rules of caste intact. Then, through his
temple-entry movement, he began advocating inter-mingling and inter-dining as well. Finally, he insisted that the only marriage he would solemnise in his ashram was one between a Dalit and a Suvarna, thus calling into question the very basis of the caste system itself.

Gandhi’s campaign to abolish untouchability may seem timid to the Leftists of today, but it was regarded as extremely daring at the time. It struck at the very core of Hindu orthodoxy.

The Sankaracharyas were enraged that a mere Bania who knew little Sanskrit dare challenge scriptural injunctions that mandated untouchability. In a petition to the colonial authorities, they demanded that Gandhi be ostracised from the Hindu fold. During Gandhi’s anti-untouchability tour of 1933-34, Hindu Mahasabha activists showed him black flags, threw faces at him, and in Pune in June 1934 even attempted to assassinate him.

Gandhi’s campaign was unpopular within his own party. Nehru, Bose, Patel and company believed the Mahatma should have set social reform aside and focused exclusively on the winning of swaraj.

Remarkably, despite their disagreements, Gandhi persuaded Nehru and Patel to make Ambedkar a member of the first Cabinet of independent India. Gandhi told them that freedom had come not to the Congress, but to the nation. The first Cabinet, he said, must draw upon the finest talent regardless of party affiliation. That is how Ambedkar became law minister.

For those who seek a subtle and scholarly assessment of the Gandhi-Ambedkar relationship, the book to read is DR Nagaraj’s The Flaming Feet. Nagaraj writes that “from the viewpoint of the present, there is a compelling necessity to achieve a synthesis of the two”. This is absolutely correct. For, social reform takes place only when there is pressure from above and from below. Slavery would not have been abolished had not guilt-ridden whites like Abraham Lincoln responded to the critiques of the likes of Frederick Douglass. Civil rights would not have been encoded into law had Lyndon Johnson not recognised the moral power of Martin Luther King and his movement.

Although they were rivals in their life-time, from the vantage-point of history one can clearly see that Gandhi and Ambedkar played complementary roles in the undermining of an obnoxious social institution.

For no upper caste Hindu did as much to challenge untouchability as Gandhi. And Ambedkar was of course the greatest leader to emerge from within the ranks of the Dalits. Although the practice of untouchability has been abolished by law, discrimination against Dalits still continues in many parts of India. To end it fully, one must draw upon the legacy of both Ambedkar and Gandhi.

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The views expressed by the author are personal

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14. Sea of Lies

Arundhati Roy begins her Mahatma Ayyankali lecture saying, “Forgive me if I disturb the comfort level here because that is what I do.” And she does disturb the comfort zone of a false Mahatma while making a case for a true one.

What did Arundhati Roy say in her Ayyankali Memorial lecture delivered in Kerala University, Trivandrum, on 17 July 2014? Major newspapers including the Times of India and The Guardian reported the event. Reading/viewing the full lecture here, readers can judge for themselves the accuracy of the reporting. While some protesters (who may not have read Annihilation of Caste) of planned to send copies of Gandhi’s autobiography to Roy, the Speaker of the Kerala Assembly, G. Karthikeyan, wrote in Malayalam Manorama saying Roy’s views on M.K. Gandhi must “hurt anyone who was born in India”. We think many of Gandhi’s views should hurt a lot of people—irrespective of where they are born.

Much of what Arundhati Roy said in her lecture has been elaborated at length in “The Doctor and the Saint” (excerpted in Caravan), her exhaustive introduction to the annotated edition of Dr B.R. Ambedkar’s Annihilation of Caste published by Navayana in March 2014. In the well-attended Kerala University public lecture, after outlining Ayyankali’s radicalism, she said: “Enough of the old bigoted people who have been sold to us on a sea of lies.” She asked people to question the “political conspiracy” that kept a person of Ayyankali’s stature “away from the popular imagination”. After detailing Gandhi’s views on Blacks and “bhangis” (Dalits), she cautioned against celebrating wrong heroes and said: “So, my question is, do we need to name our universities after a person like Gandhi or do we need to name our universities after someone like Ayyankali?”

For the record, this is the full transcript of the lecture (the video misses the first few minutes). It’s indeed time we decided whom we celebrated as heroes.

“My comrades on the dais and friends, I’m a little nervous because I wasn’t expecting that I would have to speak to such a large audience. I told Dr Suresh [Jnaneswaran
Director, Mahatma Ayyankali Chair] when I was coming that I’m just going to come and make a few informal remarks. I thought there will be hundred people. Thank you so much for coming. I’m going to try and… please forgive me if I disturb the comfort level here because that is what I do. First of all I’m here not as an academic or a scholar but as a storyteller. We all know that every society needs heroes, and in India we are not short of heroes except that I think the ones we celebrate are mostly the wrong ones. When we look at the life of someone like Mahatma Ayyankali … as a novelist, as a person who has written screenplays, I wonder how is it possible that we do not have a really amazing mainstream film about a man who is a hero. He doesn’t need a scriptwriter. You know he doesn’t need us to add things or exaggerate things about him. He had everything that should make us so proud as a people, as a country and yet so little is known about him outside of Kerala and even inside Kerala among the elites so little is known about a person who as many speakers have said, even before the Russian revolution—many years before the Russian revolution—had organized peasants against landlords and successfully. Ambedkar at the Round Table Conference, the First Round Table Conference [in 1930], was trying to make a legislation about social boycotts in rural areas… but years before that Ayyankali was fighting it on the ground. What a story! And what a political conspiracy it is to keep this person, this absolutely amazing man, away from the popular imagination. I did say that sometimes we celebrate the wrong heroes. In 1904 he (Ayyankali) started a movement to ask that his people, the Pulaya people, Pulaya children, be admitted to schools. We come from a nation that suffers a great ill health. The caste system is… it’s not just that it has oppressed Dalits or oppressed, the lower caste as they call them, the subordinated castes— but it has made the dominant classes a sick people. So it’s not just an act of charity for people to think of the annihilation of caste… it is for everyone, for our society as a whole, because we can forget about being like China or being like America as long as we have this disease in our souls.

While I’m talking about changing our heroes, I just want to read you something. In 1904, when here in Kerala there was a movement led by Ayyankali that was fighting for the rights of Dalits to be educated, the Father of the Nation Mahatma Gandhi was in South Africa. What is the legend of Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa? That he fought caste, that he fought race in South Africa… when he came back from South Africa in 1913, he was already being called a Mahatma. Let me tell you that the story of Mahatma Gandhi that we are taught in school and that we are made to believe is a lie and it’s time we faced up to it. It is time we unveiled some real truths here because we cannot be basing our ideas of ourselves as a nation on a lie. So, while Mahatma Ayyankali was fighting for education of Dalit children here, Gandhi was in South Africa and I want to read to you what he said about Dalit peoples in South Africa. In South Africa at that time there were two kinds of Indians. One were the Passenger Indians who went there to do business, and the other was indentured labour who mostly came from subordinated classes and caste and here is what Gandhi said about the bonded labour.

“Whether they are Hindus or Mahommedans, they are absolutely without any moral or religious instruction worthy of the name. They have not learned enough to educate themselves without any outside help. Placed thus, they are apt to yield to the slightest temptation to tell a lie. After some time, lying with them becomes a habit and a disease. They would lie without any reason, without any proper… prospect of bettering themselves materially, indeed, without knowing what they are doing. They reach a stage in life when their moral faculties have completely collapsed owing to neglect.” (CWMG 1,200)
Now this goes on, this same tone is used about black African people… when Gandhi was in jail he talks about Africans in the most horrible way. Here is a passage written by Gandhi about [sharing] jails with Kaffirs, black people.

“We were all prepared for hardships, but not quite for this experience. We could understand not being classed with the whites, but to be placed on the same level with the natives seemed to be too much to put up with. I then felt that Indians had not launched our passive resistance too soon. Here was further proof that the obnoxious law was meant to emasculate Indians… Apart from whether or not this implies degradation, I must say it’s rather dangerous. Kaffirs as a rule are uncivilized, the convicts even more so. They are troublesome, and dirty and live like animals. Then he goes on to call them savages… and I have resolved in my mind on an agitation to ensure that Indian prisoners are not lodged with kaffirs or others. We cannot ignore the fact that there is no common ground between them and us and whoever wants to sleep in the same room as them have ulterior motives for doing so.” (CWMG 9, 256-7)

I have followed Gandhi’s writings in South Africa. I started out with looking at the debates between Gandhi and Ambedkar and went back looking at his attitudes on caste and further back at his attitude on race. His doctrine of nonviolence was based on an acceptance of the most brutal social hierarchy the world has ever known, the caste system… what does it mean? What does it say to us? A person who believed that the hereditary occupation of people who belonged to whichever caste they belonged to should be maintained. So I ask you … a person who believed that a scavenger should remain a scavenger all their lives … I will read to you an essay Mahatma Gandhi wrote called The Ideal Bhangi, the ideal scavenger. So, my question is, do we need to name our universities after a person like Gandhi or do we need to name our universities after someone like Ayyankali?

At some point we have to stop being dishonest, at some point we have to face up to centuries of lies we have been told and lies we have told ourselves. There is nothing I’m saying here that is not straight from the horse’s mouth. Everything I’m saying is quoted from the writings of Gandhi himself. I’m not making any judgments. In 1936, when perhaps one of the most famous revolutionary texts, Annihilation of Caste, was written by Dr Ambedkar, one of the most brilliant intellectual, erudite, texts full of rage against a system that still exists today… that same year, in 1936, Gandhi wrote an essay called The Ideal Bhangi… bhangi, as you know in the North is a scavenger…

“He should know how a right kind of latrine is constructed and the correct way of cleaning it. He should know how to overcome and destroy the odour of excreta and the various disinfectants to render them innocuous. He should likewise know the process of converting urine and night soil into manure. But that is not all. My ideal Bhangi would know the quality of night-soil and urine. He would keep a close watch on these and give a timely warning to the individual concerned.” (Harijan, Nov 1936)

Many years later, today’s Prime Minister Modi wrote a text too, which was called Karmayogi, and here is what he says. He is also talking about bhangis, the Balmiki community…

“I do not believe that they are doing this job to sustain their livelihood. Had this been so, they would not have continued with this type of job generation after generation. At some point of time, somebody must have got the enlightenment that it is their (the Balmikis’) duty to work for the happiness of the entire society and the Gods and that they have to do this job bestowed upon them by Gods and that this job of cleaning up should continue as an...
internal spiritual activity for centuries.” (Karmayogi, by Narendra Modi)

So this is what the powerful people in this country believe and our... the question we have to ask ourselves is that is it all right to go on naming roads and universities and bazaars and statues and programmes after them or is it time for us to be a little more honest.

I just want to end with a small assessment of caste today. Today we have a government that is proud to proclaim itself as a government of the Hindu Rashtra. It is proud to say that we are a Hindu nation. How did this idea of Hindutava first begin? Early on in the 17th century and earlier, the subordinated castes, Dalits, were converting to Christianity and to Islam in the millions. There was no problem. Nobody minded that. But at the turn of the century when the idea of an empire began to be replaced by the idea of a nation-state, when it was not enough to ride a horse into Delhi and say now I’m the emperor of India... the politics of representation began.

There began a huge anxiety about numbers. You know at that point the “upper” caste Hindus decided, the privileged caste let me say, decided that it would be terrible if the 40 million Dalits continued to convert. That’s when the whole upper caste reformist movement started, of which Gandhi was a legatee. Before that Hindus never referred to themselves as Hindu; they used to refer themselves as only their caste names. But then Hindu became not a religious but a political identity. They started to talk about the Hindu nation, the Hindu race and that’s how Hindutava started. Today you have the secular liberals. The difference between them and the Hindutva brigade is how Islam came to India. The seculars say, “You are exaggerating. The fact that there was no such vandalism.” And the Hindutva brigade says, “No, Islamists came and they broke all our temples and they destroyed our culture.” But you have someone like Jotiba Phule, one of the earliest modern anticaste intellectuals, who said: “Yes, they broke the temples but thank God they broke the temples. They invited us into their dining rooms to inter-dine and inter-marry.”

There was that whole breaking of the caste system which people celebrated. So even our contemporary debates become so weak when you don’t put justice at the core of things.

When Dr Jnaneswaran introduced me, he said: “She has always stood with the marginalized.” I actually have a different view of myself. I think that it’s an awful thing when people introduce me as a writer who is the “voice of the voiceless”. I don’t believe there is anything like the voiceless. There is only the deliberately silenced. Nobody is voiceless. I don’t claim to represent anybody but myself. I think what we need to ask ourselves is: what kind of people are we? Are we the people who place justice at the center of our society or are we a people who enjoy the idea of institutionalizing injustice? Are we a people who are so sick that we actually believe that there are some people who are... who deserve more entitlement than others... because if we are that kind of people we are a very, very sick people. But once you put justice at the core of how you think then the stories you tell are different.

Today people talk a lot about how this new economy has broken the caste system and that there are a new set of networks and so on. I want to end with a very brief description of how caste and this new corporate capitalism are playing out. At the turn of the century, the debate on caste was actually what created Hindutva—the idea of trying to bring Dalits into the Hindu fold. Today we have a Hindutva government that has come to power and has proved that it doesn’t need the Muslim vote, it doesn’t need the Dalit vote, because it has the whole section of what is rather known obscenely as OBC, Other Backward Castes, which has swung towards Hindutva. So what does all this mean to the marginalized? In this nation of a billion people, 800 millions live on less than 20
rupees a day. We celebrate the Dandi March where Gandhi mobilized millions of people—however much we criticize him, we cannot deny that he was a great mobiliser. He mobilized millions of people against the British salt tax. But we do not remember the Mahad satyagraha where our own people prevented our own people from drinking water from public tank. That is the real satyagraha. But that was referred to as duragraha. In the Mahad satyagraha Ambedkar fought for water, for the access to public water. In the salt satyagraha people fought against the salt tax. Today we have a corporation, the Tatas, who control the trade of salt. We have the Gujarat model put before us. In Gujarat studies show that 98 percent of its villages practice caste in egregious ways. Dalits are not allowed near common water. They are given different glasses, they are murdered, you know, caste is practiced and this, our media says, is the great model for development.

If you look at fact that a hundred Indians own more wealth than 25 percent of the GDP, now you look at these big corporations... Reliance, Adani, Mittal... the major corporations, all of them are owned and run by Baniyas. Ambani, Mittal, Birla, Adani, Shangvi, Jindal, Mittal again... all the top corporations... all the wealth on the top is controlled by Baniyas who own the corporations. At the bottom of the social ladder, whether it is the Maoists, the adivasis, in the Dandakarnya forest who are surrounded by the Baniya traders... or the people in the North East... Baniyas, who make up 2.7 percent of the population, virtually controls the economy. Who owns the newspapers? Times of India, Indian Express, Zee TV... now Reliance owns 27 news channels... even the media is owned by Baniyas and controlled by Brahmins. The corporations are owned by Baniyas so Capitalism and Caste have merged to become the Mother of Capitalism. And in the mean time, according to National Crime [Records] Bureau, a crime is committed against a Dalit by a non-Dalit every 16 minutes. Every day more than four Dalit women are raped by upper caste. Every week 13 Dalits are murdered and six are kidnapped. In 2012 alone, the year of the Delhi gangrape which was reported all over the world, 1,574 Dalit women were raped and only 10 percent of rapes are reported ... so you can look at the figures. In 1919, in what came to be known as the Red Summer in the US, 76 black American men and women were lynched. In India in 2012, 651 Dalits were murdered and that’s just the rape and butchering, not the stripping and parading naked, the forced shitting, the seizing of land and the social boycotts... As Ambedkar said, “To untouchables Hindusim is a veritable chamber of horrors”, and today we live in a country where since 1947, when we supposedly became independent, there has not been a single day when the Indian army has not been deployed against quote and unquote “our own people.” So from 1947 whether it’s Kashmir, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Telengana, Punjab, Goa... every day of the year the Indian army is fighting its own people. And who are these people? Think about it. Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Adivasis, Dalits. So its an upper caste in its DNA... an upper caste Hindu state always at war with the subordinated, with the religious minorities... so how are we going to change this? It has to be done in a hundred different ways. But it has to be done with a change of who we think our heroes are and our heroines are. Ayyankali, Pandita Ramabai, Savitribai Phule, Jotirao Phule, these are the people our people need to hear about. Enough of the old bigoted people who have been sold to us on a sea of lies. I think we need to change the names of our universities to begin with. Thank you.

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E-Digest - Ambedkar’s Appropriation by Hindutva Ideology
15. Comments by Niloufer Bhagwat

Niloufer bhagwat

This is because of continuous and baseless propaganda among Dalits and their lack of knowledge of important facts one of them being that Dr. Ambedkar's election to the Constituent Assembly (elections were indirect) was entirely due to Mahatma Gandhi having requested the Congress Party to elect him as Gandhiji desired that he should have a voice in the framing of India's Constitution. Dr. Ambedkar was not in a position to be elected as he did not have the necessary support in any of the regional legislatures.

In their desire to venerate Dr. Ambedkar many have overlooked that in fact on the issue of the eradication of untouchability and emancipation of Dalits they were socially and politically complementary, though there is absolutely no doubt on that score that Dr. Ambedkar's contribution to the emancipation project was revolutionary and his contribution to the Constitution of India outstanding. In understanding the social and economic realities of India he was ahead of the then Communist party, though there political and mass struggles had a much wider base at that time across the country than Dr. Ambedkar commanded that is why the left was the leading opposition in Parliament.

Mahatma Gandhi it must never be forgotten led one of the most important National Liberation Movements against colonialism and imperialism in world history. It is in that vital area that his contribution lies, though from the outset and as he evolved politically and traveled the length and breadth of the country the social and economic issues of which he had developed an understanding in South Africa equally claimed his attention.

No individual who was cleaning latrines at the ashram in South Africa and threatened to leave his wife if she was not willing to do so as it was a path to understanding the dignity of labour and the harsh lot of those castes/classes condemned to this kind of labour, can ever be called a casteist.

In the course of my professional legal work I came across many who belonged to the RPI or were themselves SC who were referring to the Valmiki community some of whom were sweepers by caste as "Bhangis", when I stopped them from doing so aggrieved by the use of the word, they said we are not using the word as a form of abuse, it is just that some communities of sweepers have been referred to by this term.

We have come a long way and there is still a long way to go .......let us not
deliberately slander and distort a man who first brought to the notice of Indian society along with a valiant few who had a social and political conscience of what Indian society had done to a almost a quarter of its population . You have to look at Gujarat to see what is still happening and to other states and regions and to Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Haryana, UP and others as to what is happening.

Politically we can criticize Mahatma Gandhi for not going far enough and there was a reason, he did not desire to break the unity of the Freedom Struggle as he considered Indian Independence to be vital for India's emancipation. In his act of securing the presence of Dr. Ambedkar in the Constituent Assembly he tried to ensure that the emancipation project would be furthered.

On Mahatma Gandhi 's assassination Dr. Ambedkar grieving said : " He was the closest to us ." There could not be a bigger tribute though the earlier relationship between them had not been politically cordial and full of turbulence as Mahatma Gandhi 's paramount concern was independence from colonial rule, till then he desired unity, whereas Dr. Ambedkar 's paramount concern was emancipation as swiftly as possible.

India in the last two decades has seen a counter revolution politically, economically and socially under successive governments of different political complexion as policies have strengthened the feudal and upper caste/class and we are seeing the backlash.

Unfortunately those who have not made an in depth study of political forces are getting away with half baked statements on earlier leadership.

Caste has yet to be abolished in India, that political, economic and social revolution has yet to be accomplished.

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AS various political parties and forums compete to celebrate B.R. Ambedkar’s 125th birth anniversary, Bhalchandra Munkekar, a development economist and Rajya Sabha member, feels that all this does not do credit to the great man’s legacy. A former member of the Planning Commission and a former Vice-Chancellor of Mumbai University, Munkekar feels that there are contradictions in the ideological ethos of the present National Democratic Alliance government’s overt and loud celebrations for Ambedkar. As the founder president of the Dr Ambedkar Institute of Social and Economic Change, Munkekar is among the leading commentators on Ambedkar’s social and political philosophy. Excerpts from an interview he gave *Frontline*:

**Of late, there has been a lot of rediscovering and reinterpreting of Ambedkar, with several political parties**
vying with one another to celebrate his 125th birth anniversary. What do you make of all this in terms of Ambedkar’s legacy?

This country will have to rediscover and reinterpret Babasaheb Ambedkar’s whole mission of life. Unfortunately, Indian society has not understood Dr Ambedkar’s immense contribution to the making of the modern Indian nation. Until it understands or tries to interpret his mission in the context of contemporary India’s various problems—economic, social, political cultural, and so on—it will be difficult to solve any basic problem. Dr Ambedkar’s approach to the making of the Indian nation has to be discussed and deliberated on three levels. First, the mission of his life which remained throughout his intellectual and political life; second, the strategies and the various programmes and projects that he adopted and tried to put into practice from time to time; and third, the relevance of his philosophy in the context and problems of contemporary India.

As far as his mission is concerned, it is recognised that abolition of the caste system and untouchability was the historical mission of his life. Time and again, he tried to convince Indian society that until caste is annihilated and untouchability is abolished in every form, this country will never be founded on the three principles of his life, that is, liberty, equality and fraternity. He said that he borrowed these principles not from the French Revolution but from his Master, the Buddha. From 1920 until 1956, he tried in every possible way and at every level to establish an egalitarian Indian social order free from caste-based inequalities, discrimination, destitution, deprivation and exploitation. Between 1920 and 1932, he took recourse to Satyagraha—the Chaudar tank satyagraha of Mahad in 1927 and the temple entry movement in 1931-32, which were basically directed towards the basic human rights of the untouchables.

He was not interested in worshipping at the temple nor was he eager to drink the water of the tank; he said that he was struggling to establish basic human rights for every citizen of his country. After 1932, when the famous Poona Pact was signed between him and Gandhiji and when Dr Ambedkar was forced to accept the joint electorate and reserved seats for untouchables in the Central and the provincial legislatures, he took recourse to the movement and political strategy to secure the political and economic rights of untouchables. In 1935, when the Government of India Act was passed and the first provincial elections were to be held in 1937, Dr Ambedkar established the Independent Labour Party [ILP]. While keeping the mission same, he changed the means and methods of securing his objectives from time to time depending on the political situation in the country. His strategy was consistent with the demands of the time.

The situation of Dalits remains far from satisfactory. Does this mean that his legacy has not been taken forward in the way it should have been?

He recognised that the problems of untouchables were political problems and that unless they, in contemporary terms called Dalits, were able to share political power it wouldn’t be possible for them to get justice. That is why he formed the ILP [and took part in] the elections in Maharashtra, Bombay State, where he contested seats on behalf of the ILP and it won 13 of the 15 seats reserved for the Scheduled Castes, six of which were the non-S.Cs. Dr Ambedkar’s politics was not restricted to the castes but he was trying to build a party of all the labouring classes, of all oppressed and exploited sections of Indian society. The freedom movement was in progress and transfer of power was imminent. In view of this, in 1946 Dr Ambedkar formed the All India Scheduled Caste Federation. He could not repeat the success of the 1937 election in the 1952 elections.
When the Constitution was being prepared, he gladly accepted the responsibility of joining the Constituent Assembly. When he lost his membership owing to the Partition in 1947, it was the Congress party that got him nominated to the Constituent Assembly. He was assigned the task of Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution. The Constituent Assembly was dominated by the Congress party. Dr Ambedkar struggled hard to make provisions in the Constitution to secure economic, political and social justice for the deprived sections of society, and in this task Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru greatly helped him. His efforts in drafting the Constitution were so fundamental that respectfully and legitimately he came to be recognised as the architect of the Indian Constitution.

Sixty-five years have passed since then; it would be absolutely cynical to say that the conditions of the ex-untouchables have not improved. Taking into account the centuries-old caste-based exploitation and humiliation—the result of the pervasive caste system—the progress made by Dalits against all odds must be appreciated. However, we cannot lose sight of the fact that in several parts of the country, the practice of untouchability in one form or the other is rampant. Though the caste system is losing its hangover in the Indian social mind, it is far from being destroyed. Caste-based discrimination practically in all spheres continues unabated. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, is not implemented by various State governments in letter and spirit. As a result of this, Dalits in rural areas are still becoming victims. The most infamous recent phenomena are the so-called honour killings. When Dr Ambedkar prepared his lecture “The Annihilation of Caste” in 1936, he said that inter-caste marriage was the only lasting solution to the abolition of the caste system. It is strange that instead of making efforts for annihilation of caste, we have shameful instances of honour killing. This situation is dangerous as caste has become one of the main instruments of identity politics and of mobilising people for acquiring political power by various political parties. Regrettfully, not a single political party in this country can be exempted from this claim.

What do you make of the debate surrounding the words secular and socialist in the Constitution?

Dr Ambedkar wanted a genuine secular society. In 1976, the 42nd Amendment to the Constitution was enacted and it introduced two concepts into the Preamble, namely, socialist and secular. The Indian state always stood committed to the principle of secularism. Today, I think there is a threat to the very secular foundation of the Constitution. Indian society is inherently religious. The choice of an individual to practise and propagate a religious faith of his or her choice is under threat; in the last few months, particularly after the BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party] came to power, the entire Sangh Parivar considers the mandate the BJP government received in the May 2014 election as a mandate to establish a Hindu Rashtra. This is a travesty of truth. I must mention here that it would be absolutely erroneous, a blunder, to consider all Hindus communal. They are not. Even the 29 per cent of voters of the BJP should not be considered communal. This is for the simple reason that the BJP could not have come to power only with Hindu votes.

The peculiar phenomenon is that until now, because of Partition and its disastrous consequences, some sections have held Muslims alone responsible for all these. Communalists in both communities held their respective societies to ransom; now for the first time, Christians and their churches have come under attack. What is further agonising is that the communalists among Hindus are misusing Dr Ambedkar for their political ends. This is an injustice to his legacy. No social reformer, intellectual or political leader
in the last hundred years so vehemently attacked the iniquitous caste-based Hindu social structure as he did.

In several places, he used the term “Hindu imperialism” and the best example of this is found in his polemical works such as *Buddhist Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India; Untouchables: Who were they and how they became the Fourth Varna in Indo-Aryan society; Riddles in Hinduism*, [which has as an appendix] “Riddles of Rama and Krishna”; and his magnum opus *Annihilation of Caste*. Ambedkar demanded that before leaving India the British should provide measures to safeguard not only the rights of untouchables but also the rights of all minorities. In view of this, misusing Ambedkar to create animosity against Muslims and Christians, or any community for that matter, is doing him an injustice and, hence, unacceptable. Ambedkar embraced Buddhism precisely because it is a secular doctrine where there is no place whatsoever for caste-, religion- or gender-based discrimination. I also must mention the futile and unproductive efforts of the so-called Ambedkarites who claim to be taking his social and political legacy further. The Republican Party of India is so faction-ridden and disoriented that it does not hesitate to compromise Ambedkar’s political legacy for paltry and personal political gains.

**Do you think Ambedkar’s economic, social and political philosophy is being undermined precisely by those who are celebrating his 125th anniversary?**

In 1932, in his historic speech to the GIP [Great Indian Peninsula] Railway Workers at Manmad [Nashik district], he said that “capitalism and Brahmanism are the twin enemies of the labouring class”. He further added that he was opposed not to Brahmins as a caste but to their attitude of monopolising all sorts of power and considering all others inferior. He distinguished between Hinduism and Brahmanism, attacking the latter.

As far as his economic philosophy is concerned, that too is under threat. He believed in economic planning and nationalisation of land. The present government has abolished the Planning Commission, and land, the main source of livelihood in rural areas, is unequally distributed, causing an overwhelmingly large section of Dalits to become landless labourers. He believed in constitutional socialism. This could not materialise because of the dominant conservative sections in the Indian National Congress.

The more worrisome problem today facing the majority of Indians irrespective of caste, religion and region is the fact that health, education, sanitation, etc. are increasingly being privatised. If the present trend continues, all poor sections in the future will be deprived of access to health facilities and higher technical and professional education. I would say that his vision of a democratic, liberal, socialist and secular India is under threat. It is therefore imperative for all those who subscribe to his vision to join together and make the strongest possible efforts so that the Indian state becomes an instrument of establishing an egalitarian Indian social order.

One cannot prevent anybody from celebrating a great person’s birth anniversary. The question is, do those who celebrate accept the social, economic and political philosophy of that great man? The BJP is celebrating his birth anniversary. But does it really subscribe to the basic reforms in the Indian, particularly Hindu, social system? Will it carry on the mission for elimination of untouchability? Will it [conduct] a mass awareness campaign for abolition of the caste system, or will it accept the basic postulates of Buddhism, which Ambedkar embraced and which was dear to his mind and heart? If it does, that is welcome.
Interview with Kancha Ilaiah

By Ajmal Khan and Anish for TwoCircles.net,

Professor Kancha Ilaiah had well predicted that Narendra Modi would become the next Prime Minister under BJP, and he has also been instrumental in raising criticism on how Indian Left failed to understand the caste question. After the parliament elections, he described how the caste equations has been used in the country by the BJP. As soon as the BJP came into power, many decisions have already been taken by the ruling government, which will have far reaching consequences on the lives of dalits, adivasis, Muslims and Bahujans. In this context, Ajmal Khan and Anish engaged in conversation with Kancha Ilaiah, writer, a dalit rights activist and former Professor and head of the Political Science department at the Osmania University, Hyderabad, on contemporary politics in India, particularly on Muslim, Dalit and Bahujan politics. He argues, that Muslims will have to form their own national party or a national coalition of all the Muslim parties by retaining their political and social identity.

We have been talking about Beef and Beef ban, especially after Maharashtra government’s decision to ban beef completely. However, one important decision that didn't get much public attention was the Maharashtra government's decision to scrap the five % reservation for Muslims in education and employment. What are your thoughts on this?
Yes, The Mumbai High Court had stayed the proposal for 5% reservation for Muslims and 15 % Marathas’. But the court had allowed quota for Muslims in state-owned or aided educational institutions, saying that, the community suffers from high dropout rate and the youth in the community need to be brought under mainstream education. On Maratha reservation, the court had observed that the community was a socially advanced and prestigious community. They (BJP) seem to think that they will go to the Supreme Court for Marathas but not for Muslims. The argument of BJP is that the caste will disappear once people convert into other religions.

According to BJP and RSS, there is no caste among the non-Hindus like Muslims and Christians. The argument for Muslims is that, whether Sachar Committee, Dr Mehmoodur Rehman Committee in Maharashtra or people like me who always speak for the need of reservation for Muslims – caste is a very historical thing, generationally people carry caste. If somebody converts to Islam, his or her occupational status does not immediately change. Of course, their name changes, their access to God changes, they get to read Quran etc. When a Hindu barber converts to Islam, his occupational status does not change immediately, everything else changes, the occupational status doesn't change easily. Therefore, I argue that Muslims should be given reservation on the basis of their caste and occupational identity considering the backwardness. Reservation in education is also important, here Muslims are a community that is historically now being treated after the partition as second-class citizens, and there is double oppression. Muslims first, as the second-class Indian citizens, and then, the oppression according to their caste status.

BJP recently seems to have argued in the court that, Muslims and Christians should not be given reservation and reservation is Hindu specific. If that is the case already, Buddhists and Sikhs are getting reservation and Buddhists and Sikhs say that they have nothing to do with Hinduism and they are not Hindus. Then how does BJP explain this?

**Some of the Hindu nationalists argue that Buddhism and Sikhism are also part of Hinduism?**

Yes, even Narendra Modi says that. They (Hindus) respect Buddha, Buddha is their ancient god etc. but Buddhist are saying, we are not Hindus and we have nothing do with Hinduism. If Buddhism is like Hinduism, then Buddhism abolishes caste within itself, untouchable can become monks and even Vihara heads. In Hinduism, it is not possible, we all know. So how can they say that Buddhism and Hinduism are one and the same?

Sikhism also, yes some streams of Hinduism are there, but it is not the same, they have a Guru Granth, everybody can read it, all of them have one food cultural practice. If that is the case, why are RSS, VHP and other organizations talking about vegetarianism, which is only a Brahmin-Baniya food practice? It has never been all caste practice, so they seem to actually be practicing Brahmanism and projecting as Hinduism as monolithic religion, which is not true.

**We have seen the trend of Hindu right wing forces co-opting of everything and everyone after the new government came to the power. Will they be able to co-opt everyone?**

Yes, BJP and Hindu Right require to co-opt certain things. Once they have come to power, if they behave as they behaved earlier, than their legitimacy to rule the country will
go. Muslims are not a small community, they need somebody to negotiate with Muslims. They need negotiation without giving Muslims the substantial share, ok! If they want to give equal share to Muslims in all respects than that would have been a different thing.

Here, BJP wants Muslims to be with them without giving substantial share from state and society; they are using different tactics (for it). Of course, in appointments of University heads and other strategic positions, they have to find someone who is palatable to them, who works for them. There are positions in Universities and other places where persons from only the Muslim community has to be appointed. So, for that they will try to co-opt several sections. They have already co-opted many sections of Muslims and admitting a lot of Muslims into the BJP.

There is also a section of Muslims who think that, ok, if they go there and live a normal life, if they get some political benefit, or at least, if there is no communal riots. But, we will have to see what implications this will have for the larger community’s life. Right now, Muslim share in power has come down, Muslim parliamentary share has come down. How much Muslim share is there in business and other sectors is an issue, because Muslims do not have much share in agriculture. They survive largely on urban informal economy. But they (BJP) will attempt to co-opt even Muslims.

Now, the Maharashtra government is saying that they will send Christians for pilgrimage, government will finance them. But Christians are saying they don't want anyone to send them for pilgrimage, they say, instead they want right to propagate their religion, they are asking for security and protection. BJP is in a real contradiction now. Let’s see what happens, it’s not like Vajpayee’s times. During his time, it was a coalition government. Some unpleasant things had happened then also, but now they are in full power and they are straight away coming on minorities.

**How do you see the Muslim politics in this context?**

See, the Muslim political leadership is really weak, those who existed as Muslim leaders in the Congress were not connected to the poor and marginalized Muslim masses. The mass Muslim leadership did not get politicized. Recently MIM is a party which is trying to spread across the country. Asaduddin Owaisi is definitely a modern Muslim leader in India. Neither Congress nor BJP want a leader like him, who organizes his own people. So, in my view, a time will come when Muslims will have to form their own national party or a national coalition of all the Muslim parties by retaining their political and social identity. That will give them much more strength than working from within the other parties. They tried that in Congress, and except Abul Kalam Azad, I don't think anybody else got significant space in the Congress system. There may be ministers but they were not having significant powers.

**In one of your interviews, you said Nehru had used Ambedkar at the same time and thrown out when his role was over.**

My re-reading of early independent days is that, Jawaharlal Nehru had global vision and western education, who was also a model leader in many ways. If Dr Ambedkar would not have been allowed to become the chairman of Constitution Drafting Committee, the Constitution might have had many loopholes. Only Ambedkar could work out that kind of a Constitution.
If Nehru was not allowed to be first Prime Minister, then who would have been the real ruling person at that time? Gandhi's role in administration was minimal, Gandhi agreed upon Ambedkar's name to be the chairman of drafting committee, Gandhi said he should play a key role and Nehru supported and he became chairman of the drafting committee. That has really helped the nation. The combination of Nehru being the first Prime Minister and Ambedkar heading the drafting committee of the Constitution created a positive situation to experiment the adult franchise, it is not that easy to experiment adult franchise in an illiterate country like India. If Shyamaprasad Mukherjee or Sardar Vallabhai Patel or someone else from right wing would have been allowed to become the first Prime Minister, India would have ended up in dictatorship. So the so called Patel's legacy should not be taken seriously by people like us.

Is that the reason why Patel is getting much more importance now a days?

Yes, they will give lot of prominence to Patel. Firstly he is a Gujarati and Modi might also be considering him as a Shudra and he has also used the military force. So, there are certain combinations in him which are liked by RSS and VHP. But what would have been the situation of the country if Sardar Vallabhai Patel would have been the first Prime Minister? If he were to be the first Prime Minister perhaps KM Munshi, during that time, would have been appointed the chairman of the drafting committee of the Constitution, then we need not say what would have been the situation. India would have been Hindustan in the likeness of present day Pakistan.

You have been arguing that the Western theories will not fit for our realities and we have to work out our own theories. How will someone expect to work out one’s own theory when the theory building process itself is fully controlled by the Brahmins and the upper castes?

Yes, my strong belief is that, if all Indian children are given same quality education, preferably in English language, given the vast expansive space that we have, the kind of experience that rural children gain, the kind of exposure that they have with nature, production and so on, we would produce better intellectuals. India is capable of producing indigenous theory, which can be used by the rest of the world.

I don't mean any indigenous theory only we can use, but theories that emerge out of social practices, social convergences, social changes. Indians are capable of producing new books and theories which even other countries are not able to. Buddha is an example, he constructed a religion, he formed Sanghas; there is so much literature around it. The world is now using it. China, Japan, Korea, all are using it. For example, two prophets came from Asia – Jesus came from Israel and Muhammad came from Arabia. It’s not that, the world is against Asian thinkers but Brahmanical forces didn't produce such talent and a God who could be worshiped by the whole world. The only god India produced is Buddha, the world is willing to engage with him. So my feeling is that, Indian social sciences should examine the strength of the native social thinking. After all, we are a big society when compared with Europe. We have lot of new ideas, the only thing is that we should read, write and ask questions. In all my writings I make an attempt not to imitate anyone but to produce original thoughts from our own lives.

People like Amdekar become central even within the right wing discourses. So how difficult it is for the people like you to
defend yourself? Because, you all created another kind of knowledge which challenged the dominance of upper castes and the nature of Hindu religion.

Yes, it is a difficult struggle. When I wrote ‘Why I Am Not a Hindu’ there was a lot of opposition, backlash, criticism and even threats. But luckily the Dalit movements extended their support to me and the Bahujan Samaj Party was almost in power in Uttar Pradesh. I managed to get the support from within the civil society also in this regard. Also, either for Mahatma Phule or Ambedkar and people like me, we all took to very non-violent form of dissent, we took up that line. After all, historically India has the tradition of non-violence. The dalits/backward castes never fought with upper castes with violence. And Buddhism, which emerged here, also created a space with a theory of ‘Middle Path’ (Madhya Marga). Hence Buddhism became a big cushion for people like Phule, Ambedkar and even for me, because when I wrote my book ‘God as a Political Philosopher’ I had to struggle a lot, going back to the ancient texts and comparing them with Western thinkers, Indian Brahminic thinkers like Kautilya and Manu.

So we all are positioned in terms of reform, but even that was not acceptable to the Brahminical forces. There were many attempts to suppress my voice in the Osmania University. Even now some sections of people want my writings and speeches to be banned.

I think, we should create new knowledge, sometimes you may risk. (But) this risk factor cannot completely be ruled out. I think it is a social reform struggle. Luckily, first Buddha carried out, then came Jyotibha Phule, then Ambedkar, Periyar, Kanshiram have also done some kind of serious work. So now the Brahminical forces are on defensive mode otherwise there would have been more and more violence. They are basically the worshippers of violence, but when it comes to moral and ethical issues, the Buddhist morality has a very strong base.

**Does the electoral politics played by BJP possess a direct threat to small/regional parties, how do you see this whole dynamics of state making?**

Yes, there is, you are right. One is that the BJP putting Narendra Modi with a specific OBC identity in our national politics as a Prime Ministerial candidate. Congress never fielded either an OBC or a Dalit candidate for the post of the PM. BJP put up such a candidate with his own ambitions and organizational base. So, they came to power in the Center. Now they are gradually coming into power in different states, but there, they are also compromising and they are also going for manipulative methods.

In Maharashtra’s case, they were thinking that they would not come to power (as) Shiv Sena was weakened after the Lok Sabha elections. Though BJP could not come into power on its own but now they are the ruling party. In Jammu and Kashmir, PDP aligned with BJP, and the PDP seems to think that Modi’s approach is different from RSS. Modi wants to carry some history with him, that Kashmir he cannot leave behind, so let it be and PDP should go for a compromise. They will try with this model, if the PDP model works. Well, they will say that we solved the problem.

In any case, they are trying to expand, but where they are failing is on the front of talks with Christianity. Their attacks on churches is giving a bad impression of BJP across the globe. If investment does not come, then Modi’s development agenda itself will be in a crisis.
So they have not calculated the implications of attacking Christians or forcing them to reconvert. That is where the President of America had to say that religious freedom is universal in nature, it cannot be violated. During the BJP’s rule, it will globalise the caste and untouchability issue much more. If they want to address it, reconcile and tell the Brahmans and other priestly communities that you have to give equality to all people whom you define as ‘Hindu’, then may be Hinduism may reform.

I find problem with their books in this regard, things like God created human beings hierarchically. I think these kinds of writings in the texts itself pose challenges, for this, either they have to delete it or reject it. In any case, these five years will be a testing period. Because, this is the first time they got power on their own. If they create social tensions, if they go after people, the beef ban has created a strong negative feeling among the people, that signal is not going to keep quite. If they don’t allow the power to slip out of their hands, they will go for some time like this and then, they may try to transform and change themselves. Or, if they use this status for establishing Hindu Rashtra, then there will be a huge ‘civil war’ that I have been talking about for some time now. It all depends on their approach in the next four years. At this stage, it is very difficult to predict.

Simplenumbers in Parliament does not make any sense. Rajiv Gandhi had much more numbers but he could not sustain.

If this is the case, how do you look at parties such as AAP and other regional parties?

If small regional parties don’t use powerful tools such as English education and integrate their thinking with national level and give up their family control on parties, BJP will swallow them. That is possible. Most of these regional parties are family-oriented parties except BSP. But BSP, its leader Mayawati, did not show the required courage and confidence in handling the post-election crisis. She is not building up SC-OBC unity; she is also not building up the leadership in all stages.

I think the parties like APP will remain as a regional party, I don’t think that they can really challenge the BJP. The real challenge should be from the Congress and other political forces united, particularly the Leftists. The Leftists are in terms of caste, are with the upper caste and in terms of class they say that they are with working class. So the Left has absolutely failed in understanding the caste structure/religion in this country.

In this context how do you see the caste annihilation programmes proposed by Leftist organizations such as Communist Party of India (Maoist)?

No, they would not have a major role in annihilation of caste. Annihilation of caste was the agenda of Ambedkar but in those days dalits were not very well educated. Now dalits want to survive, they need identity and power. Among dalit leaders there is hunger for power. They are making alliances with parties such as BJP and Shiv Sena, leaders like Ramvilas Paswan and Athawale are best examples. So, the power without thinking about social reforms, ideological struggles and concrete writing of new theoretical formulations is not useful. I think BJP can finish them off but if they take them in, they don’t get any prominence. I have not seen any role for Ramvilas Paswan and Athawale after forming of the new government. Paswan has just become as an insignificant minister. You see only a few ministers nationally visible like Arun Jaitly, Nirmala Seetharaman, Smriti Irani, Ravi Shankar Prasad, Peeyush Goyal. Where is Ram Vilas Paswan who played such
a role? So, the dalit leaders are working with them only for power. I think it is self-degradation. I don’t want to see dalit leaders suffer that kind of self-degradation.

Recently, dalit leader Jitan Ram Mahji has been sacked from the post of CM paving the way for Nitish Kumar to take up the same post. In Telengana, the ruling party TRS leadership was criticized for betraying dalits. So how do you see these political upheavals?

This dialogue will go on. Dalits are not definitely a block, and there is an intellectual blossom. All of us came together and made these issues international; it went to the US Congress, British Parliament, European Union etc. So through internationalization of caste, untouchability and women trafficking and so on, we will have to have impact on this new style. But OBCs do not have that visible space, whereas OBCs have state power. Dalits do not have state power, except Mayawati, there is no other dalit leader, who could become Chief Minister on her own.

So this is a phase where all new experiments are taking place and BJP has given up the classical demand that Hindu-Brahmin-Kshatriya should rule. They have tried it with Vajpayee, but they seem to have shifted from that stand and brought a so called lower caste person as the prime ministerial candidate and now he is the Prime Minister. Within the next four to five years there will be a new combination of political forces; alliances and re-alliances will takes place, so we could see some kind of new unfolding is likely to happen.

Mulayam Singh is saying that he doesn't mind joining Congress, we have to fight it. In 2002, when I predicted that Narendra Modi would become the Prime Minister if the Congress and Left behave in the same way, they didn't take it seriously, and in reality, Modi became the PM of India. From here, where does it go? Already the negative results are coming out. Maharashtra banning beef and Haryana banning beef, it will definitely create crisis in agriculture.

Now, Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI) is also trying to organize beef festivals across the country to challenge the ban. But the discourse on food culture initiated by dalits/ OBCs especially students in academic institutions was ideological in nature. They articulated it in a distinct way and it was not just about the intervention of state on the food choice of citizens. So what do you think about these Leftist interventions?

The Left has committed a blunder earlier by not giving the power positions to dalits and OBCs. The upper caste hang on to the power in the party. But now, after communal party like BJP, there is re-working on the issue of caste, and then there is lots of debates and writings coming from the new intellectuals from dalit/OBC background. So, the Left leadership is now rethinking its position.

On food culture, it is totally different. After Osmania beef issue came up, they also fed participants with beef during the party Congress recently in Telengana. I think, some positive steps have been taken by them, but yet, the leadership remains the same. My feeling is that we should really take the Leftist along with us, though they are castiest, despite their limitations, it is better to take them along because they have at least a theoretical position.

In terms of financial corruption, they are not very corrupt. Let us negotiate with them, let us have a healthy relationship with them. Dalits, OBC’s and the women intellectuals should come together. Even for the feminist discourse, the Leftists opposed it initially. (But) later they accommodated it. Now they
are ready to debate cultural rights, food culture and so on. So, we need to educate the Leftists more and more and communist can re-educate us more through Marxism, Leninism, etc. They are re-thinking now. In CPIM when the road blocks like Prakash Karat and Sitaram Yechuri go, if they do away, may be some changes will come. I feel, we should work in friendly relations with the Communists. I think it’s inevitable and lets us hope something better will emerge.

**Despite the strong dalit movement in Maharashtra atrocities against Dalits continues?**

Atrocities also take place when oppressed fight for equality and equal rights, the upper caste get enraged with this. Secondly, atrocity happens because upper caste can commit atrocity and get away. It is like, there is resistance to rape. There are state battles but there is also response to this resistance. So it’s a transitory situation in a culture of rape and religious relationships which are projected into sexual relations and so on.

Caste group and cultural relationships are also changing. There are castes that get mobility through education and employment. There are also castes, their status remains constant or goes down. When one caste’s status increases due to education and employment, the other gets angry with them and fights emerges between them. They are competing within themselves. Today dalits are not competing with Brahmins, Baniyas and other traditional capitalist. If Mahars are growing, the Matangs get angry, this is a transitory phase.

See, during British period, the Brahmins fought more severely among themselves than they fought others, even than with British. They gotempowered by that. So, my point is that, let each dalits, Bahujan groups compete with each other among themselves and to others.Identities do not change easily and now-a-days dalit issues are being found in most of the political parties’ discussions and documents. This is a positive change.

The writings and creative interventions of Dalit-Bahujan intellectuals have contributed to this. It’s important that we need to engage in the thought process and creating more books of our own. It’s not that dalits, adivasis and backwards too could not fight with upper castes and Brahmanism, but they could not fight with their brains. They could not fight with their writings and books. Tukaram was told to burn his books in those days, who can remove my books “Why I am not a Hindu" from Internet today? More critical writings and thinking should be produced by the youth and students and I am hopeful about these new generations.

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18. The RSS won’t be able to internalize Ambedkar

Interview with Raosaheb Kasbe

By Makrand Gadgil

The Ambedkar and Dalit movements expert on ongoing fight to appropriate Ambedkar’s legacy and how young India can embrace his modernist views

Raosaheb Kasbe, maharashtrian dalit intellectual photographed in Nashik, Maharashtra, on April 15, 2015.
Photograph: Abhijit Bhatlekar/Mint

Raosaheb Kasbe, a former professor of political science at the Savitribai Phule Pune University, is a leading scholar on Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar and the Dalit movements in India, and is best known for his seminal work, *Ambedkar ani Marx* (Ambedkar and Marx), in which he tried to correlate the works of Ambedkar and Karl Marx. In an interview in Nashik, where he now lives, Kasbe spoke about the ongoing fight for Ambedkar’s legacy between various groups, including the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the ideological parent of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the Congress. Edited excerpts:

Both the Congress and the RSS, with which Ambedkar had political as well as ideological differences, are trying to appropriate his legacy in the year of his 125th birth anniversary. How do you explain this?

Let me explain this with an anecdote. When (Maharashtra) chief minister Devendra Fadnavis was expanding his government for the first time, a Dalit legislator, Rajkumar Badole, was sworn in the cabinet. After taking the oath, a tradition in Maharashtra requires the oath-taker to recite salutations like *Jai Hind* and *Jai Maharashtra*. Badole also added *Jai Bheem* to it. This is a
salutation normally associated with the Republican Party of India—the party that Ambedkar wanted to form, but died before its formal announcement—or those who are active in the Dalit movement, and not someone who is shaped by RSS traditions. This clearly shows Ambedkar is revered not only by Dalits, but across ideologies, including the RSS, Congress and even Naxalites. In the recent past, many young people arrested by police in urban areas because they were suspected to be active sympathizers or part of sleeper cells of the Naxal movement are from the Dalit community.

But the RSS is going beyond this. They are trying to project Ambedkar as a messiah of Hindus, who saved Hinduism by converting to an Indic religion like Buddhism and not Semitic religions like Islam or Christianity.

There is nothing new in these attempts of the RSS. The attempt to project Ambedkar as anti-Muslim or anti-Christian missionaries by quoting some of his writing out of context and then falsely propagating that he sympathized with the RSS and its world view have been going on for very long. One can find these attempts even in the writings of late Dattopant Thengdi, who was associated with the RSS since the organization’s early years.

But there is a problem for the RSS, too, when it tries to appropriate Ambedkar. It doesn’t know how to deal with Ambedkar’s modern world view based on the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. If it starts claiming it believes in these principles, then it will drive away its core support group who still believes in Chaturvarna, if not in the caste system. It outsources this work to groups like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP).

VHP leaders, attempting to keep their following, make outrageous statements on the caste system, women’s rights, conversion and so on. But the RSS is a clever organization; it does not hesitate in denouncing VHP’s statements if the need arises and trying to project itself as different from it.

The RSS won’t be able to internalize Ambedkar till they give up their core belief that there is a need to rewrite the Indian Constitution. They believe there is hardly anything Indian in the Constitution and it is nothing more than an attempt to cover constitutions of various Western countries with an Indian garb.

Why then are the RSS and the BJP able to attract so many other backward classes (OBC) and Dalits to their fold?

Sooner or later this dichotomy is going to explode in the RSS’s and the BJP’s face. Last year, during his campaign rally in Kochi, Narendra Modi, who is the OBC face of RSS, said a very interesting thing. He said the 21st century belongs to OBCs and BCs (backward classes or Dalits), but I wonder how well his statement was received by the Brahminical leadership of RSS. At present, one can only say it is trying to use OBCs to gain control over political power.

Some radical Dalit activists try to point out various instances of disagreement between Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi, and try to portray Gandhi as the prime enemy of Ambedkar and Dalits. In support of their argument they point to the Poona Pact because of which Ambedkar had to give up his demand for a separate electorate (for Dalits) due to Gandhi’s fast unto death and also Gandhi’s belief in the Chaturvarna system. Yes, there were differences of opinions, but one can hardly call them each other’s enemy. In fact, on many occasions, both have been complementary to each other.

On the issue of separate electorate, initially Ambedkar also did not support the idea of a separate electorate and was in favour of reserved seats for Dalits. But the Congress
rejected this demand. So in retaliation, Ambedkar hardened his stand and demanded a separate electorate for Dalits, and then 1932’s communal award was declared and Dalits were given separate electorate and 76 seats in the central legislature. To protest this, Gandhi started his fast unto death in Pune.

Ambedkar had to eventually negotiate with Gandhi and Ambedkar emerged as the winner as he walked away with 176 seats as against 76 seats in the central legislature. But those who do not care to read history or those who know facts very well, but still want to twist facts for their own political or ideological reasons, try to project that Gandhi and Ambedkar shared some kind of animosity and that Gandhi was against Dalits.

How has globalization affected the upliftment of Dalits in India?
It has had both a positive and negative impact on the Dalit community. Today’s Dalit youth, whose parents benefited from reservations in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, were ready to ride the wave of globalization when the doors of the Indian economy were opened in the 1990s. But globalization itself reduced the role of the state in Indian life, so job opportunities in government sectors were reduced. Dalit youth, who are first-generation graduates or postgraduates in their families, are finding it hard to get jobs in the government.

How can one make today’s digitally empowered generation aware of Ambedkar’s legacy? They are mostly divorced from caste realities in India.
This is true to some extent in the case of the youth in a few big metros who received education in elite institutes and for whom English is the first language of communication and not their mother tongue. But one can’t generalize this about all urban youth. But even so, there is a need to present Ambedkar in a different way to today’s youth. Most of them are aware of him as the father of the Indian Constitution, but they don’t know he was a modernist who advocated rapid industrialization and urbanization. He believed urbanization and industrialization were the first steps in making India a casteless society. He was in favour of technology, and if this aspect of Ambedkar is highlighted, he will be embraced by the young.

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