

Scripting Subalternity and the Crisis of Contemporaneity: Reading B. R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste*

Arjun R

Independent Researcher

Former MA English Student

St. Thomas College

Kozhencherry, Kerala, India

arjunr6395@gmail.com

Dr. Tom Thomas

Assistant Professor

St. Thomas College

Kozhencherry, Kerala, India

tom.zemeckis@gmail.com

Abstract

The paper attempts a subaltern reading of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* and tries to highlight the importance of the speech as a subaltern script in the contemporary world. It foregrounds how subaltern voices are suppressed in India with the influence of religious and caste politics. The representation of the subaltern mass is problematized by this nexus which further leads to a total control over their lives. A resurrection of silenced voices is the need of the hour.

Keywords: Subaltern, Dalit, Caste, Democracy, Religion

“In the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak” (Spivak 287). The Dalit question is a question of subalternity which is denied a discourse and a proper connection to history. It lacks proper and sufficient representation in the socio-political sphere of the nation. Religion and holy scriptures play a key role in the preservation of the hierarchical structure that ensures the existence of this subalternity. B. R. Ambedkar’s speech, *Annihilation of Caste* discusses this Dalit issue and undertakes a trenchant analysis of the crisis of subalternity. This paper tries to foreground the scripting of subaltern texts and spell out their significance for the contemporary world.

When the history of India got focused to the history of Hinduism, the history of Dalits was forgotten. This purposeful ignorance of history ensued in a situation where a “fraternity” is foregrounded yet inequality plays a formative role in the background. This ignorance has helped the forces in power to cement themselves.

Ramachandra Vasu and Rama Chandra Bose articulate: “The idea of brotherhood and equality of all mankind before God, I am sorry to say, is not to be found, because it is never mentioned in any of our ancient writings. The idea is decidedly foreign, Western, and I think I might say Christian”(18) Though Hinduism has drawn ideas from several other cultures, the concept of brotherhood and equality was unacceptable for them even though different castes united under the umbrella term Hinduism.

Ambedkar held the view that a social reformation was vital to ensure the uplift and representation of the Dalits in the country and believed that a social reform should reflect in the whole society and bring about liberty, equality and fraternity so as to ensure the proper working of democracy. Democracy runs according to a belief that every individual is equal to one another and that the choices of every individual are not hindered by a social structure or another individual. Regardless of whether the individual is a Dalit or a Brahmin, a man or a

woman, their individual choices require equal respect. For that they should be given equal opportunities and equal education.

For providing equal opportunity and representation, Ambedkar suggested the Communal Award in the Round Table Conference in 1932, which would have created a separate electorate for the Depressed Classes (Ambedkar 220). Many leaders including Gandhi opposed this idea claiming that it would divide the Hindu.

Ambedkar was forced to sign the Poona Pact in 1932, considering the political pressure from the Indian National Congress and the possible risk the Dalit community would be in if Gandhi died because of his first ever Hunger Satyagraha to oppose the Communal Award (Ambedkar 220). Though Poona Pact provided reservation for candidates from depressed classes, the threat of biopolitics was not dealt with. For instance, when the candidates were chosen by the upper-caste leaders of the political parties they could choose a candidate who would not question them and would act according to their will. Thus, the only candidate with a chance to win the election would be a person who would not question the interest of the upper-castes. Sovereign power thus gets vested in the hands of the upper-castes.

“Foucault continued to investigate the ‘processes of subjectivization’ that, in the passage from the ancient to the modern world, bring the individual to objectify his own self, constituting himself as a subject and, at the same time, binding himself to a power of external control” (Agamben 71). When elections favoured upper-castes, their representatives became the sovereign power, that could control every aspects of the lives of the downtrodden. “The problem of sovereignty was reduced to the question of who within the political order was invested with certain powers, and the very threshold of the political order itself was never called into question” (Agamben 14). “A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” says Foucault (136). A Dalit body has been docile for centuries,

moulded by the dominant culture and used for creating electoral gains to the elite. The seeds of this biopolitics were sown during the colonial period itself

In a caste-based society the social status of a person does not change along with his economic status. “The social status of an individual by itself often becomes a source of power and authority” (Ambedkar 227). Ambedkar proves this by pointing out the example of millionaires in India who obey sadhus and fakirs and consider them Mahatmas or saints (Ambedkar 227). Religion gives the priests power over the common man, regardless of whether that man is a magistrate or a higher official. It thus holds sway over events such as strikes and elections.

The Preamble of Indian Constitution words it as “socialist” but, socialism cannot be effectively brought into practice in India without the eradication of caste. A socialist trying to bring about a revolution will definitely have to address this issue too.

He will be compelled to take account of caste after the revolution, if he does not take account of it before the revolution. This is only another way of saying that, turn in any direction you like, caste is the monster that crosses your path. You cannot have political reform, you cannot have economic reform, unless you kill this monster. (Ambedkar 233)

This forces Dalits to remain backward economically too as long as the caste system exists. Caste is a hierarchy which lacks mobility of status or even prohibits it. Ambedkar holds the view that

A man's power is dependent upon (1) physical heredity; (2) social inheritance or endowment in the form of parental care, education, accumulation of scientific knowledge, everything which enables him to be more efficient than the savage; and finally, (3) on his own efforts. In all these three respects men are undoubtedly unequal. But the question is, shall we treat them as unequal

because they are unequal? This is a question which the opponents of equality must answer. (Ambedkar 261)

Caste has the right to excommunicate anyone who breaks the rule of caste. “Caste is ever ready to take advantage of the helplessness of a man, and to insist upon complete conformity to its code in letter and in spirit” (Ambedkar 258). This makes a reformation impossible by giving each caste power to excommunicate the transgressor. “Caste in the hands of the orthodox has been a powerful weapon for persecuting the reformers and for killing all reform” (Ambedkar 258). Thus, caste becomes an inescapable social structure.

Chaturvarnya also creates the concept of higher and lower social status just like caste system. Arya Samajists tried to abolish caste system through the revival of *varna* system (Ambedkar 263). They proposed the concept of *chaturvarnya* for the division of labour. They claimed that this division is not based on birth but on worth (*guna*). The circumstance under which this attempt to revive *chaturvarnya* gained prominence needs to be understood. Ambedkar questions the tendency to give permanent labels for men as *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra*. He writes,

It is common experience that certain names become associated with certain notions and sentiments which determine a person's attitude towards men and things. The names Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra are names which are associated with a definite and fixed notion in the mind of every Hindu.

That notion is that of a hierarchy based on birth. (Ambedkar 264)

It is this notion that has to be changed. As long as these terms exist, they will be perceived as hierarchical divisions based on birth. The revival of *chaturvarnyathus* became a retention of caste system in this guise. It was not an attempt for social reform; it was just the opposite, an attempt to “to save India from Christian proselytization” (Hardiman 62).

Caste prohibited the marriage between two individuals belonging to different castes. Ambedkar points out the problems that could arise when *chaturvarnya* would be established. “If the status of women were to be the consequence of marriage” he asks whether this system allows women to take the status of her husband after marriage. If so, whether their classification is “nominal or real” (Ambedkar 270). Also, the theory of *chaturvarnya* assigns “Shudra as the ward and the three higher *varnas* as his guardians” (Ambedkar 272).

Why make one person depend upon another in the matter of his vital needs?

Education, everyone must have. Means of defence, everyone must have. These are the paramount requirements of every man for his self-preservation. How can the fact that his neighbour is educated and armed help a man who is uneducated and disarmed? The whole theory is absurd. (Ambedkar 272)

The transgressors were given heavy punishments. Shudras were punished for reciting or hearing *vedas*. They had to endure tortures such as “cutting off the tongue or pouring of molten lead in the ears” (Ambedkar 270).

While the Constitution ensures that all people are equal before law, a law itself cannot eradicate caste consciousness. As John Fiske points out: “Interpellation is the larger process whereby language constructs social relations for both parties in an act of communication and thus locates them in the broader map of social relations in general” (1271). Caste consciousness emerges as a result of the interpellation of hierarchies written in the scriptures. What language has created can be destroyed by language only. For the annihilation of caste, caste and its concepts should be removed from everyday discourse.

Does removal from the discourse mean a complete ignorance towards history? It should not mean an ignorance of history, but a better and clearer understanding of it. This understanding of history can reveal the futility of caste system. Religion has been an important part of social life for about fifty-two centuries. It has become an important part of

society as human relations have become more and more vast and complex. It is one among many factors that bind society.

Fiction has enabled us not merely to imagine things, but to do so collectively.

We can weave common myths such as the Biblical creation story, the

Dreamtime myths of Aboriginal Australians, and the nationalist myths of

modern states. Such myths give Sapiens the unprecedented ability to cooperate

flexibly in large numbers. (Harari 27)

Belief in religion helped human race to co-exist and co-operate within a group with a large number of members. But such blind beliefs have also led to the interpellation of caste system in the minds of Indian people.

Religion has a major role in sustaining caste notions. Caste is considered to be sacred as it is a part of a religion. So, for the annihilation of caste, it is religion that has to be tackled. The sacredness associated with caste makes it impossible to destroy it. Ambedkar says that asking people to give up caste would be like asking them to practice something contrary to their religious notions. "Caste has a divine basis. You must therefore destroy the sacredness and divinity with which caste has become invested" (Ambedkar 289).

The concept of upper and lower caste exists in religions other than Hinduism too. As Dalits started converting from Hinduism to other religions, the titles Dalit Christians, Dalit Muslims, Dalit Sikhs and so on emerged as a result of the existence of this collective unconscious. As long as the caste identity of an individual is known, there is no escape from casteism for that individual and his/her descendants, even through conversion. According to a status report prepared for the National Commission for Minorities in 2008:

Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians suffer from the familiar vicious circle of lack of formal recognition as a social category leading to absence of authoritative data (specially statistical data), and the lack of such authoritative

data in turn creating difficulties for their recognition as social categories.

While considerable information including statistical data is available for the constitutional categories of the SCs and STs, and more recently (and to a lesser degree) for the OBCs, there is an almost complete data vacuum when it comes to DMs and DCs (Deshpande and Bapna 2).

Conversion has not only failed to eradicate caste oppression, it leads the converts into more miseries. What Ambedkar suggested for the annihilation of caste was the destruction of a religion of laws, and that there should be religions based on principles. He says, “rules are practical; they are habitual ways of doing things according to prescription. But principles are intellectual; they are useful methods of judging things” (Ambedkar 204). Ambedkar believed that a religion of principles could not lead to hierarchies such as caste system. He urged to make priesthood a usual job like any other and that opportunity be given for everyone who wishes to practice it (Ambedkar 308).

Abolition of casteism through law has provided economical uplift for a few educated Dalits. It ensured opportunities for their education and job. Due to this economic stability they are not subjected to violence, but are still subjected to caste oppression in other ways. But these laws have not saved all the Dalits from oppression. Dalits face violence against them even today. According to a statistics released by National Crime Records Bureau that appeared in *The Indian Express*:

Of the 5,775 offences registered solely under the SC/ST Act in 2017 with Dalits as victims, 3,172 (55%) were related to ‘Intentionally Insult or Intimidate with Intent to Humiliate.’ There were 47 cases of land grabbing related to Dalits; they faced social boycott in 63 cases; and they were prevented from using public spaces in 12 cases. (Tiwarly)

Also, Dalit women face more violence than other women in India. They live a doubly marginalized life.

Dalits become subaltern where they are denied their rights of expression and choices. Their social uplift is made impossible through the interpellation of caste system in the minds of the Indians. They are denied fair representation due to biopolitics. Thus, the Dalits are denied a discourse. “Revolutions can, and often have, begun with reading. If you have heard of Malala Yousafzai but not of Surekha Bhotmange, then do read Ambedkar” (Roy 17). Surekha Bhotmange was a Dalit woman who was gang-raped and murdered along with her daughter for trying to farm on her own land. Like every subaltern, Dalits too speak, but are not heard. The spark that Ambedkar ignited has to be carried forward for the true emancipation of subaltern voices.

Works Cited

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Ambedkar, B. R. "Annihilation of Caste." *Annihilation of Caste, The Annotated Critical Edition*, Annotated by S. Anand and Introduced by Arundhati Roy, Navayana, New Delhi, 2014.
- Deshpande, Satish, and Geetika Bapna. "Dalits in the Muslim and Christian Communities: A Status Report on Current Social Scientific Knowledge." 2008.14.139.60.153/bitstream/123456789/222/1/Study-DALITS%20IN%20THE%20MUSLIM%20AND%20CHRISTIAN%20COMMUNITIES.%20A%20STATUS%20REPORT%20ON%20CURRENT%20SOCIAL%20SCIENTIFIC%20KNOWLEDGE.pdf. Accessed 17 Aug. 2020.
- Fiske, John. "Culture, Ideology, Interpellation." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, Edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, Blackwell Publishing, 2004. pp. 1228-73
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, 2012.
- Harari, Yuval Noah. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. Vintage Books, London, 2015.
- Hardiman, David. "Purifying the Nation: The Arya Samaj in Gujarat 1895–1930." *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, vol. 44, no. 10, 2007. pp. 41–65
- Roy, Arundhati. "The Doctor and The Saint." *Annihilation of Caste, The Annotated Critical Edition*, Annotated by S. Anand and Introduced by Arundhati Roy, Navayana, New Delhi, 2014.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, Macmillan, London, 1988. pp. 271–313

Tiwary, Deeptiman. "NCRB Data: Insults Made Up 50% of Crimes Against Dalits, 'Traps' of Corrupt Officials Spiked." The Indian Express, 23 October 2019, [indianexpress.com/article/explained/ncrb-data-insults-made-up-50-of-crimes-against-dalits-traps-of-corrupt-officials-spiked-6082791/](https://www.indianexpress.com/article/explained/ncrb-data-insults-made-up-50-of-crimes-against-dalits-traps-of-corrupt-officials-spiked-6082791/). Accessed 17 Aug. 2020

Vasu, Ramachandra, and Ram Chandra Bose. *Brahmoism Or History of Reformed Hinduism: From Its Origin in 1830, Under Rajah Mohun Roy, to the Present Time: With a Particular Account of Babu Keshub Chunder Sen's Connection with the Movement*, Funk and Wagnalls, 1884, New York.