



Dalit Assertions and the Politics of Aesthetics: A Reading of *Annihilation of Caste*

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Abstract: The essay is thus an attempt at not only a reinterpretation of Indian history (and religion) but also a plea towards the then existing socio-political movements towards self inquiry. In retrospect Ambedkar's work represents, first, the unfinished project of renaissance in India, and second, the need for the Dalit assertion within the working class movement for a democratic revolution.

Keywords: Dalit assertion, Dalit aesthetics, Dalit movements, Upper-caste ideology, Dalit Revolution

Dr B.R. Ambedkar's political treatise *Annihilation of Caste* remains to be his most radical and controversial work, revolutionary in character which has led Anand Teltumbde to write that "what the *Communist Manifesto* is to the capitalist world, *Annihilation of Caste* is to India". In his work while Ambedkar deeply criticizes the social foundations of Hindu society built upon a system of economic exploitation and socio-political inequality masquerading as divine providence, he also critiques the social reform and the socialist movements for failing to address the issue of caste. The essay is thus an attempt at not only a reinterpretation of Indian history (and religion) but also a plea towards the then existing socio-political movements towards self inquiry. In retrospect Ambedkar's work represents, first, the unfinished project of renaissance in India, and second, the need for the *Dalit* assertion within the working class movement for a democratic revolution.

Arundhati Roy's essay titled 'The Doctor and the Saint' (added as the introduction to the annotated critical edition of Ambedkar's work published by Verso in 2014) underlines the relevance and lingering importance of his work in the present day. Taking her arguments from Ambedkar, Roy asserts how the situation of the *Dalit* population (who comprises the so-called lower castes) in the 21st century democracy is not distinct from the reality of India's colonial and pre-colonial past. Roy in her article points out how the interconnection between capitalism and liberal democracy has helped to sustain and perpetuate the old social hierarchy all the while giving the impression of national progress. In the current social structure the issue of caste is tactically "erased" as a "conscious political act" (14). This erasure of the visibility of caste in liberal spaces is combined with the politically conscious erasure of violence on *Dalit* lives. The state's response to the caste motivated atrocities

committed against the scheduled castes as merely a matter of “breach of peace” brings to question not only the nature of ‘democratic’ institutions in India but also the very character of the evolution of the idea of a nation.

Ambedkar’s essay, written first as a speech prepared for addressing a conference organized by the *Jat-Pat Todak Mandal*, a social reformist organization, in 1936, was later published in the succeeding year following the conference being cancelled and his speech undelivered. The reason for cancelling the conference was due to objections raised by some of the members of the Mandal on the contents of Ambedkar’s speech which many saw as being too severe on the Hindu religion which could invoke the sentiments of the Hindus present. Ambedkar’s refusal to comply with the request from the mandal to censor parts of his speech and the mandal’s decision to cancel the conference works as instances of silencing and the “breach of peace”. This contradictory stand by an organization claiming to be a social reformist one points to the limits and lack of ideological convictions of the social reform in India. Roy writes, “At that particular moment in time, the threat of religious conversion by an Untouchable leader of Ambedkar’s standing came as the worst possible news to Hindu reformers” (29).

From the middle of the nineteenth century along with Britain’s tightening grip on the political administration also saw in India a social, cultural and intellectual regeneration which sought to define and create a new culture distinctively Indian and modern. However unlike the renaissance that happened in Europe, the historical progression through which it reached its state of modernity, what happened in India followed a completely different trajectory.

The rebirth of man which the Renaissance connoted hardly happened in India. That raises the question whether Indian society really experienced a renaissance and whether it was later enriched by enlightenment. What Indian society witnessed was reform, both social and religious, which, caught between tradition and colonial modernity, could not fulfill its historic mission (Panikkar).

The emerging new Indian intelligentsia, middle class and upper caste, tried to disseminate a new culture that would imbibe both western ideals of modernity and Indian cultural traditions. This was however a relationship of conflict and domination. The prevailing caste inequalities and religious differences in India demanded a social reorganization in order to arrive at modernity while the social pressure of ‘traditions’ meant a preservation of the social order. The social reform movement that took precedence over renaissance therefore on the one hand tried to resolve social issues within particular communities which were explicitly upper castes and formulated the idea of an Indian past that was against the colonial discourse of the orient as an intellectually and culturally inferior civilization.

The dichotomy that was created between ‘tradition’ or ‘past’ and modernity was problematic and alluded to the colonial mentality of the upper caste, upper class Indian intelligentsia. The reinterpretation of the ‘tradition’ as against western cultural dominance meant an uncritical acceptance of its ideological foundations (Panikker). The reformist movements circumscribed themselves to caste and religious concerns alone while maintaining an ambivalent approach to both colonial and feudal political dominance. In return the Nationalist movement separated itself from the social reform movement and hence also was indifferent to the political demands of the communities. The social reform movement having limited itself to social changes within particular communities or caste could not radically alter or challenge the very structure of pertaining inequalities, the caste system. Ambedkar criticizes the separation of social reform movement with the political movement as a contradiction in achieving their aim. He argues citing historical facts that no society can bring about a political revolution without at first bringing about a social revolution.

The political revolution led by Shivaji was preceded by the religious and social reform brought about by the saints of Maharashtra. The political revolution of the Sikhs was preceded by the religious and social revolution led by Guru Nanak. It is unnecessary to add more illustrations. These will suffice to show that the emancipation of the mind and the soul is a necessary preliminary for the political expansion of the people (124).

Ambedkar criticizes the Arya Samaj for what he argues to be their vacant and elitist intellectual radicalism which is not only impractical but also reactionary. He is equally critical of the socialist movement for being too short sighted to see caste and being reductionists in believing that caste is but a superstructure that shall wither away once economic freedom is achieved through class struggle. The limitations of the socialist movement, he says, in India is its blind adherence to Eurocentric theory without trying to first understand and then adapt it for Indian social context. He writes, "The caste system is not merely a division of labour. It is also a division of labourers"(128). It is interesting to note that Ambedkar constantly combines caste with class while refusing to see the working class as a casteless homogenous entity with only one demand. He stresses again on the division and as a consequence on the weakening of the working class because of its internal divisions based on caste lines. Anand Teltumbde writes, "Communists refused to see him as an ally. His movement was seen as dividing their proletariat. This is the attitude that precipitated in Dange's vile call to the voters to waste their votes but not to caste it in favour of Ambedkar in the 1952 elections. As a result, he was defeated."

The issue of caste and class is closely associated with the idea of both social and political revolution. In a process of reversed orientalism religious identities were reworked by social and religious reformers. While a strict separation of state and religion did not follow the secular state building in India, the "westernized ruling elite had neither the means nor perhaps the strong urge to consolidate its legitimacy by nurturing relevant symbols of India's incipient statehood" (K. Kumar). The caste and class nature of social reform and nationalist movement led by elitist thinkers and leaders was seen in the revision and not revolution of Indian society. Indian renaissance as a project of modernity evolved within this "counter-enlightenment" (Nanda). The interrelation between the religious and the political shows the peculiar dualistic nature of Indian nationalism which as Christopher Pinney writes is divided between the western concept of "homogenous time" and the Indian "messianic time".

Images have played a central role in the Indian national movement as a resultant of print capitalism. Mythical representation that related to existing political reality gave them a nationalistic meaning while being embedded as culture in public consciousness. Christopher Pinney, examining the progression of Indian history through the visual makes the characteristic distinction between the European (as explained by Anderson) and Indian models of nationalism. Following Benedict Anderson he argues that while the idea of nation or the "imagined community" in Europe arose "historically when three fundamental cultural conceptions all of great antiquity lost their grip on men's minds" (namely the divine right of Kings, absolute truth in religious scriptures and the merging of cosmology with history) Indian nationalism derived its spirit from combining and not separating or disregarding the three. Embodied in the images of gods, mythical characters and even political leaders, Indian nationalist ideology invoked the "messianic time" where the past and the future are converged in the present. Images depicting the exile of King Harishchandra or Shivaji and the deification of Gandhi played its part in establishing the public culture in India.

Lyotard distinguishes between discourse and figure associating discourse (the textual) with the hegemony of reason and the latter with the symbolic, the sublime which is formed fundamentally on sensual experience. Pinney uses the textual and figural as two distinct modes of cultural production along with Adorno's notion of the 'high' and 'low culture' to elaborate the idea of the "split public", the class nature of India's distinct anti colonial and nationalist ideologies. Associating the textual discourse with the elite and educated urban middle class who

maintains the separation between religion and politics, Pinney associates the figural with the popular, the general masses where religion and politics are aligned. The distance between “elite secular forms of nationalism and popular messianism” manifests itself in the performative aspect of images in constructing public spaces and shaping political ideas.

While the aspects of “counter-enlightenment” is arguably present in the social reform and nationalist movement, the ‘figural’ with which the masses identified and related to were distinct in nature according to the various social groups. The masses themselves did not exist as a homogenous entity. The caste and class nature of the nationalist movement meant that it not only excluded certain social groups, but also that the social movements itself were divided and distinct among caste/class lines. Gail Omvedt distinguishes between the revisionist political ideology of elitist social reformers and the revolutionary ideals of *dalit* organic intellectuals and social reformers. For Omvedt, it is Jotirao Phule who is the revolutionary renaissance thinker who envisioned the socio-political transformation.

It is one of the tragic dilemmas of the colonial situation that the national revolution and the social revolution in a colonial society tend to develop apart from one another. Jyotirao Phule represented a different set of interests and a very different outlook on India from all the upper caste elite thinkers the so-called Indian Renaissance who have dominated the awareness of both Indian and foreign intellectuals. The elite expressed an ideology of what may be described as the “national revolution”; it was nationalism of a class combining bourgeois and high caste traditions. Phule represented the ideology of the social revolution in its earliest form, with a peasant and anti-caste outlook (Omvedt).

Gail Omvedt distinguishes between upper-class ideologies with mass ideologies by arguing that while the former holds a functionalist view of society, the latter takes a polarizing view that is class conscious in character. She asserts that the *Dalit* subaltern social movements rejected the upper caste Hindu religious imagery used in the nationalist movement while creating their own. By subverting the religious mythologies and characters of Popular Hindu gods and replacing them with the ‘demons’, they were challenging the caste Hindu nationalism. Pertaining in the realm of the ‘figural’ these embodied a counter cultural movement towards social, economic and political reorganization of society against the dominance of upper caste elite ideology and power. However, Omvedt argues that the nature of the “non-Brahman organizational development” were “sporadic” rather than offering a consistent and comprehensive movement. These were “unsystematic, sporadic, pictorial rather than discursive, hard hitting” which were “designed more to shock people into an awareness of the situation than to provide an extensive analyses”. What distinguished them from the dominant nationalist struggle was that while the latter’s preoccupation was on the colonial nature of India’s problem, the former critiqued the social situation of the peasants as well as the untouchables as a consequence of both the colonial as well as feudal Brahmanical oppression.

The silencing of the subaltern voices within the nationalist movement was necessary to promote both a sense of Indian alternative modernity that was not modeled after the western liberal values as well as to picture a unified Hindu religion. It became the reason for the leading ideological conflict between Gandhi and Ambedkar, between the notions of the pre modern and eternal and the rational and liberal. Ambedkar’s act of writing the treatise, as Arundhati Roy writes, is an act of dissent, resistance, a “breach of peace” against the silencing of the subaltern by the establishment and dominant discourse.

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