

BOOK REVIEW

Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical by B.R. Ambedkar, Edited and Annotated by S. Anand; Navayana Publishing (New Delhi, 2014), 415 pp., ₹499

'Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition' as the title itself suggests, is a reprint of one of Ambedkar's classic and most radical works, which had originally been published on 15 May 1936. This famous text forms an integral part of Indian sociocultural history, and has been a repository of spiritual and moral support for Dalits in our country who have had the misfortune of living in a society where they are constantly made the subject of stigma and ridicule. 'Annihilation of Caste' by way of its robust new annotated edition of 2014, once again brought to the forefront of socio-political discourse, the debates surrounding caste based stratification which had otherwise been relegated to the backburner. Broadly, this edition been divided into three sub-parts. The first part consists of a fairly lengthy introductory essay by Arundhati Roy titled , 'The Doctor and the Saint', the second part is an undelivered speech by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and the third reproduces the debate between Ambedkar and Gandhi that was triggered subsequent to the publication of Ambedkar's speech which was meant to be delivered in Lahore before the *Jaat-Paat Todak Mandal*.

The first part of the book, an essay titled "The Doctor and the Saint" by Arundhati Roy, examines the persistence of caste, and also lays down the much needed premise of the ideological differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar, which continues to resonate to a large extent even in the present day. She portrays Gandhi as an orthodox Hindu who, while proposing to do away with the concept of untouchability, advocated the retention of 'caste' and its associated occupational identities. That is to say, Gandhi deeply admired the Caste system, yet idealised an absence of hierarchy among castes inter se. Ambedkar on the other hand, greatly differed from Gandhi and believed that "There would be outcastes as long as there is caste". He wanted the concept of Caste to be denounced in all its forms and facets, and said that it was the root cause of all social segregation at the time, and perpetuated evils like systemic inequality and oppression of the lower castes, thereby posing a massive

roadblock in the attainment of an egalitarian society. Further, Roy gives the reader an insight into the beginning of Gandhi's political career in South Africa, which played an instrumental role in shaping his views on imperialism, race and the like. Also, she takes one through the trajectory of Ambedkar's emergence as an eminent political figure in the national movement, and projects him as the lone warrior who managed to inspire a struggle against sectarianism. She urges the reader to reflect upon Ambedkar's ideology which was based on pragmatic western liberalism, as the current socio-political structure in India has further heightened and modernised the concept of caste, while having promised to eradicate it. Roy's essay is also significant for it puts together the countless unspeakable realities of caste-based discriminatory practices prevailing in the present day, including denial of drinking water, and innumerable instances of horrid violence including lynching and sexual abuse.

In its second part, the book consists of Ambedkar's speech, which remained undelivered because it was deemed to be exceedingly provocative by the Jaat-Paat Todak Mandal, a group of radical Hindu reformers, who sought to eliminate and abolish caste. Ambedkar's speech pierces the conscience of the Hindu and advances logical critiques upon the holy scriptures of the religion as well as its material manifestations such as the Caste system. He also questions the basic tenets of the religion, calling them a 'multitude of commands and prohibitions' and their ramifications on collectivization, harmony and liberation. Ambedkar associates the idea of political reform with that of social as well as economic reform, giving his argument a truly subaltern perspective. For him, it is only such fundamentally iniquitous laws and commands of Hinduism that hinder growth, progress and peaceful coexistence, while rendering certain groups of people feeling cramped and crippled. Ambedkar's disbelief and aversion towards the entire institution of caste rests on four pillars. Firstly, it is because the institution permits and perpetuates the horrendous and archaic practices of untouchability, insult and violence. Secondly, while attempting to enforce a hereditary division of labour in society, the upper castes have perennially deprived the lower castes of education as well as the right to bear arms, both of which are crucial means of revolution. Thirdly, caste tramples upon the basic human right of being able to freely practice a profession of one's choosing, based on their natural inclination or talent. Fourthly, he regards caste as a mass of rules and regulations camouflaged as religion, and a notion which

pays mindless subservience to tradition. If for these four reasons, caste is annihilated, Ambedkar simply states that it would amount to the doom of Hinduism in entirety. Hence, through 'Annihilation of Caste', what Ambedkar calls for is the reconceptualization of religion itself, and concludes the text with a sense of optimism - that people are willing to challenge this dated value system and bring about radical reform in Hinduism itself. Over the decades, this text has become a massive source of inspiration for Dalits towards attainment of justice and liberation.

The third and final part of the book involves a series of back and forth letters between Gandhi and Ambedkar. It is noteworthy at this juncture that their debate is not a new one, and by no means has ended. Putting their ideological conflict into context would require an insight into their very different backgrounds as well as political trajectories. Ambedkar was an 'Untouchable' and was a flagbearer of the anti-caste tradition. M.K. Gandhi on the other hand, was a Vaishya, born into a Gujarati Bania household. That is to say, each of them represented starkly distinct interest groups. Gandhi responded succinctly to Ambedkar's essay in his journal 'Harijan', which was included by Ambedkar in the 1936 reissue of *Annihilation Of Caste*, as well as his own reply to the same. While Gandhi persists on reformation of Hinduism without wiping out caste, yet in saying so, he fails to respond to Ambedkar's logical and powerful arguments. Gandhi seems to be conservative and reverential in his approach, as he heavily sympathizes with archaic ideals of Caste. He certainly does recognize the need to ensure human dignity, but also upholds the authority of religious texts and tradition. Ambedkar on the contrary, does not make peace with any half-way measures, and only uses critical reasoning to further his argument. For instance, an unresolved point of discord between them pertains to the ideal mode of societal development. Here, Gandhi denounces the ways of the West and predicts that if we too take that route, there would be mass ecological damage, the environment would be ravaged and we would all be living in hellish conditions. In saying so, he idealizes the self-governing villages of India. For Ambedkar however, cities are the only place where the Dalit can break free from the shackles of oppression and tyranny. The intellectual rivalry between the two men wasn't merely theoretical, and unfolded quite in the middle of India's national movement. Even today, it bears relevance in contemporary politics, and

seemingly, these ideological differences have been and would continue to remain irreconcilable.

In summary, *Annihilation of Caste* is a book of immense importance, not just because of its historic relevance, but for its bearings even in the contemporary Indian era. At a point in time where caste is viewed as an obsolete concept, yet cases of discrimination persistently make headlines not just in our country, but across the globe in different guises, Ambedkar's work becomes a must-read. It imbibes in the reader tremendous moral strength, and gives them a greater sense of hope for the future, than disappointment at the present. Through this book, the finer yet complex details pertaining to exclusionary and exploitative practices, dehumanizing vocations, physical/structural abuse, violence and deprivation become astonishingly apparent. While these issues are seemingly addressed by way of constitutional and legal mandates, yet their social manifestations have only seen minute shifts. Further, to read Ambedkar now and learn from his example ought to not only involve the annihilation of caste for attainment of true liberation, but annihilation of all forms of marginalization and subjugation as a whole.

Garima Chawla¹

¹ Ph.D. Scholar at Gujarat National Law University (GNLU), Gandhinagar.