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Policy and Politics in the Career of B. R. Ambedkar

The mandate of the selection of B. R. Ambedkar's writings and speeches under review, edited and introduced by Sukhadeo Thorat and Narender Kumar, is to demonstrate a sustained pattern in his thought on inclusionary policies for Dalits that culminated in today's constitutional provisions for reservations. Topical collections of Ambedkar's writings are relatively rare, and as such, the editors have produced not only a valuable resource for seasoned scholars and activists, but also an entree to sections of Ambedkar's oeuvre that have not been published individually, and are therefore comparatively little known. Thorat and Kumar present Ambedkar's writings over a nearly four-decade period (from 1919-55) as representing a straightforward elaboration of thought in which the forms of discrimination against untouchables, as well as the kinds of redress necessary, are expressed with greater perspicuity over time. Thus, for them the late teens represent a "formative stage of reservation policy that culminated into [sic] a proper and exhaustive policy in the Constitution of India in 1950" (p. 15). The trajectory of Ambedkar's thought, however, is comprehensible not as the gradual refinement of essentially unchanging ideas, but as a distinctive adaptation to a changing political landscape in which Ambedkar was himself a key figure. To view Ambedkar's writings as a contribution to an *ongoing* political dilemma, as our editors would wish, requires they be read not merely chronologically but also historically.

The most valuable feature of Kumar and Thorat's introduction is a discussion of Ambedkar's analysis of caste. Briefly, Ambedkar saw caste as a concerted form of economic, social, cultural, and political oppression, and therefore as the denial of the bundle of rights that to him comprised citizenship. This

may not seem an exceptionable thesis when so plainly put, but it was precisely the multiplicity and inextricability of facets of caste oppression that was denied consistently by Ambedkar's political opponents—whether the Gandhians for whom ritual degradation was paramount, or the social reformers who saw politics as an unsuitable domain for redress—and is indeed still at issue today. On the basis of this analysis, Dalits were, Ambedkar argued, a genuine political minority (not simply a disadvantaged segment within some other group) and therefore deserving of both governmental protection and independent political representation.[1] As a corollary, Ambedkar insisted on the irreducibly *relational* character of caste; in Kumar and Thorat's words: "Castes can only exist as a plural number. They get interlinked to each other in unequal measures ... of rights" (p. 5). That is to say, the enjoyment of rights on the part of high castes entirely depends on the infringement of the rights of others; Dalits are not immiserated by mere circumstance but are actively dominated by others. This understanding furthermore renders the solution of problem of caste one to which all members of society have a duty to contribute.

The editors divide Ambedkar's writings into five sections, roughly corresponding to important phases in nationalist and devolutionary politics. The first section, covering the years from 1919 to 1929, contains texts critical to establishing Ambedkar's argument that Dalit subordination required a specifically political solution, and that it was not enough for Dalit *interests* to be represented in government. Dalits must themselves be *personally* involved in the legislature—they must be "law-makers" and not just "electors" (p. 70). For entrusting their interests to caste Hindus, however well intentioned, was

to neglect a signal yet often overlooked feature of governance—viz., that merely having been elected to representative government does not remove a man from his social position or inoculate him from social prejudice. Thus, “a Legislature may be sovereign to do whatever it likes, but what it will like to do depends on its own character. The English Parliament, we may be certain, though it is sovereign to do anything, will not make the preservation of blue-eyed babies illegal.... In the same way Legislature, mainly composed of high caste men, will not ... [remove] untouchability. A Legislature is the product of a certain social condition, and its power is determined by whatever determines society. This is too obvious to be denied” (pp. 80-81). The Congressite claim to distinguish social and political questions rested on an interested refusal to acknowledge this fact of government.

The second section of Ambedkar’s writings covers the period 1930-33, and includes the well-known depositions at the Round Table Conferences and the confrontation with Gandhi culminating in the Poona Pact. The Gandhian conception of untouchability, which disallowed political redress, focused exclusively on the religio-moral transformation of caste Hindus and denied the necessity of socioeconomic change, became the party line of Congress very early on.[2] The colonial state, however, accepted Ambedkar’s thinking on caste, acceding to his demand for separate electorates in the form of the Communal Award. To the argument for Dalit self-representation, Gandhi famously responded with a statement at once mystical and minatory, “I claim myself in my own person to represent the vast mass of Untouchables. Those who speak of the political rights of Untouchables do not know their India.... I would resist it [i.e., claims to such rights] with my life” (p. 163).[3] Ambedkar’s repeated insistence on what he called “personal” representation in legislatures was not just the expression of an abstract principle, but simultaneously a historically situated challenge to his most formidable and intransigent political rival.

The state’s position, however, dramatically reversed in 1946 when the transfer of power was imminent. Although Ambedkar’s arguments regarding a political solution had long been accepted as valid, officials now privately expressed the view that untouchables needed to cast their lot with Congress, since the state was in no position politically to alienate either Congress or Gandhi.[4] (Some have understood the endgame of empire as driven by the logic of *divide et*

impera. Yet with respect to Dalits, unifying maneuvers such as this took precedence in the final decades of colonial rule.) In fact, Ambedkar had feared all along that what mattered was not whether his analysis was correct, but rather whether he and his followers could count as a politically significant enough constituency to be heeded. He had rebuked colonial officials as far back as 1928 for disproportionately allotting representation to Muslims in comparison with Untouchables. Minorities should not, he had argued, be graded on a scale of *political* importance. Rather, those with the least political importance ought to have an even greater share of representation to allow them the time to acquire a political status (p. 93).

The state’s *volte face* (nowhere explicitly discussed in this volume) determined the future course of Ambedkar’s career, and therefore the shape of his politics. Indeed, it precipitated a remarkable turn in Ambedkar’s own position—his acceptance, for a period of four years, of a post in a Congress ministry. The details of how this rapprochement was effected—so soon indeed after the publication of the scathing *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables* (1945)—remain unclear. The political exigencies that prompted this turn, and the violence of the years that preceded it, have, however, been illuminated by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay. Bandyopadhyay describes how Ambedkar’s erstwhile negotiating partner, the colonial state, abruptly withdrew, claiming that the poor showing of Ambedkar’s Scheduled Castes Federation in the 1943 elections proved they were not truly representative of untouchables.[5] Yet victory in these elections, as Anupama Rao has observed, was an impossible task given the dispersal of Dalit populations that was in turn constitutive of their unique disenfranchisement.[6] Thenceforth, only minorities identified unambiguously by differences of religion were granted a place in devolutionary negotiations. The Federation responded by staging satyagrahas against Congress meetings that only succeeded, in the fervor of “Quit India,” in producing the widespread view (actively promoted by Congress) that Ambedkarite politics was antinational.

It is in this context of growing Dalit militancy and increasingly violent reprisals against it that Ambedkar began to stress the need for allocating land to settle landless Dalits, removing them from the forms of violence—so-called social boycott, corporal punishment, and prevention from access to natural resources, as well as forms of humiliation—to which they

were routinely subject in the village. In the proximity of caste Hindus, emancipation for untouchables would be impossible—because the two were, according to Ambedkar, “separated by a fundamental and deadly antagonism” (p. 245). Sharing the village meant that “a perpetual war is going on everyday” (p. 248).

Thus, the section of writings written during 1946–50, which spell out Ambedkar’s vision of the constitution, advocate intervention in the national economy, including a scheme in which landless citizens—most Dalits fell into this category—would be equipped by the state to collectively farm lands for which the state would be landlord (p. 307). The scope of what Ambedkar wished to enshrine in the constitution itself grew larger, I would suggest, as his political experience underscored the difficulties elected governments would pose to genuine social transformation. The brutality of everyday life did not appear to be abating, while the promises of a conciliatory politics with caste Hindus had come to seem more and more naive. That is to say, Ambedkar’s longstanding observation that the domination of untouchables was deep rooted in the culture and practice of daily life in India led him increasingly to demand a state that would actively transform quotidian practice. Indeed, at this juncture, he even sought to indemnify, *within the constitution itself*, against the possibility that constitutional protections could be altered, calling for the prevention of amendments to protective clauses for twenty-five years, and for such amendments to be ratified by a two-thirds majority in not one but two successively elected legislatures (pp. 307–308)! This formulation represents more than the mere *refinement* of ideas that had been with Ambedkar since the beginning of his career, as Thorat and Kumar’s introductory essay suggests. It is a response to political and social conditions in which the socially embedded character of elected representatives was brought home to him again and again. After all, in the three years of Congress rule between 1937 and 1939, not a single one of his proposals for protection was accepted—although he represented the largest minority second only to Muslims—revealing how thoroughly Congress could resist both putting new protective measures in place, and implementing those that existed.[7] Ambedkar’s evolving political views cannot be derived from abstract arguments about the relative merits of constitutional and legislative powers, and such arguments could not, moreover, tell us much about why Ambedkar’s reliance on the constitu-

tion grew exponentially at moments such as this. Yet the editors give short shrift to these operant historico-political turns in their introductory essay and sectional prefaces.

The editors introduce the final section of writings, post-constitution reflections written in the last phase of his life, with the litotes that at this point in his career Ambedkar “seem[ed] to be discontented” (p. 350). The writings from this period—in which a deeply embittered Ambedkar resigned from the Congress Party with which he had been precariously reconciled for only a short time—offer a dismal picture of the effects of independent India’s governance on Dalit citizens. Dalit numbers in the army, for example, long a source of valuable employment in the face of few options for those with little education, had actually decreased since independence *despite* reservations (p. 363). If there is one constant in Ambedkar’s career it is his effort to engender the economic, social, and political conditions that would make full citizenship for Dalits possible. Here, at the close of four decades of political activity, he is left to point to their near total absence, and concludes a review of the situation in 1954 thus: “It seems to me a matter of great regret that the Hindu civilization ... has produced five crores of untouchables.... Hindus ought to think twice—not twice, a hundred times— ... whether they could be called civilized with this kind of results” (p. 367).[8]

The writings collected in the present volume both illuminate the time in which they were written and add a dissonant voice in our own, in which bids to ascertain the *differentia* of Dalits and other minorities—religious, political, economic, or social?—remain matters of great political moment. Yet the publisher’s copyediting of this worthy project is extremely inadequate. Typographical and grammatical errors mar virtually every page, often more than once, of the editors’ introductions. It is my hope that this volume will be reprinted before too long, and that Thorat and Kumar’s laudable effort will be given the editorial attention it so richly deserves.

Notes

[1]. For a sensitive analysis of the Ambedkarite concept of minority, and its political entailments, see Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 118–160.

[2]. Eleanor Zelliot, “Congress and the Untouchables, 1917–1950,” *Congress and Indian Nationalism*,

ed. Richard Sisson and Stanley Wolpert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 184.

[3]. Gandhi's promise to resist with his life the idea that untouchables have distinct political rights from Hindus (e.g., the right to self-representation) was not an idle threat. He began a "fast unto death" in 1932 shortly after the Communal Award, announcing separate electorates for untouchables, was promulgated. Aware that ordinary untouchables would have been subject to violent reprisals if Gandhi had been allowed to follow through on his suicide threat, Ambedkar relented and gave up the demand for a separate electorate.

[4]. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, "Transfer of Power and the Crisis of Dalit Politics in India, 1945-47," *Modern Asian Studies* 34, no. 4 (October 2000): 904, 932.

[5]. Ibid., 921.

[6]. Rao, *Caste Question*, 158-159.

[7]. Zelliott, "Congress and the Untouchables," 192.

[8]. This quotation is cited as it appears in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol. 15, ed. by Vasant Moon (Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1997), 918. The quotation in the volume under review contains an error.

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