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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ambedkar and Annihilation of Caste–Performing Theory, Praxis, Counter Identity

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Abstract: Caste needs to be denounced because it is downrightly unethical and immoral. Ambedkar has been at the forefront of the ethical battle against caste inequalities in India and has left an indelible imprint on Indian polity, governance, and human rights. The paper here attempts to read Ambedkar, the man, the theorist, and an anti-caste intellectual, primarily through his seminal work *Annihilation of Caste* (1936). An analysis of this undelivered speech, the text, and its context form the broad outline of the paper. Within this outline, Ambedkar's other texts like his paper presented at Columbia University titled *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development (1916), Who Were the Shudras (1946), Who Were the Untouchables (1948)*, and a select few speeches like the Mahad speech in December 1927 are some of the watershed events and interventions in the history of anti-caste struggle in India. These are landmark texts by Ambedkar and have been selected and analyzed in a manner that studies the ethical dimensions of the marginalized groups, the untouchables in this case. As for his praxis, his role as a politician, journalist, statesman, a trained economist, and as the chief architect of the Indian Constitution speaks for itself. The paper attempts to figure out the man's emergence, the ethical concerns in his works, his growth as a theorist, and his anti-caste praxis in developing an anti-caste consciousness primarily through Annihilation of Caste.

Keywords: : Ambedkar, Annihilation, Caste, Dalit, Ethics, Gandhi, Hinduism, Untouchables.

1 Introduction

In the history of the anti-caste struggle, Ambedkar remains at a critical juncture. It is quite possible that the contemporary struggle for caste as we know it today would simply not

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have been possible except for Ambedkar. Where we are right now as we speak about the emancipation of Dalits, we simply would not have been if not for Ambedkar. And not just about Dalits but rather the crucial role he played in framing the Constitution as well as safeguarding the interests of women and reforming Hinduism is unparalleled. To understand and read *Annihilation of Caste* means to have read Ambedkar in its entirety as it is an important document encompassing all of Ambedkar's anti-caste intellectual theory.

A reading of *Annihilation of Caste* must be substantiated with background knowledge of the rather infamous Jat Pat Todak Mandal and what led to its adjournment sine die. Ambedkar's views on the religious scriptures and his personal call for leaving the Hindu fold were the reasons why the conference never happened. Perhaps Ambedkar was too fiery and radical for them; perhaps they did not themselves open their hearts out to finish the caste system by attacking at the roots but were rather more inclined towards doing so superficially. The untouchables were not part of this Mandal, a point that Ambedkar draws our attention to. This also explains Ambedkar's lack of confidence in anti-caste movements and organisations like the Mandal, which was led by upper-caste reformers who were merely soft apologists of the chaturvarna system.

1.1 Mahad Speech, Castes in India and *Annihilation*-The Trajectory

As stated, before making any attempt to understand Ambedkar's *Annihilation*, it is necessary to see where his ideas are coming from. In the paper titled *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development (1916)*, he cites endogamy (marrying strictly within a community) as the reason for the emergence of caste, which was started first by the brahmans and later imitated by the other varnas as well: "When I say the origin of caste, I mean the origin of the mechanism for endogamy" (Ambedkar, 2020, p. 14). Now, this seems to be a pivot point in his understanding of caste issues in *Annihilation*. The paper was presented in 1916, and *Annihilation of Caste* happened in 1936 – twenty long years of praxis did not make Ambedkar give up the idea he held strong. This idea in his 1916 paper is something that Ambedkar held close to him throughout, and that is why he gives the idea of exogamy or intermarriage as a way of defeating caste in the 1936 Mahad speech as well. In a way, Ambedkar wishes to achieve a pre-endogamous structure once again to end caste discrimination, a choice that Gandhi never approved of. This also highlights the importance of reading Ambedkar as a sociologist. We need to read his 1916 paper along with the Annihilation speech in 1936 because it tells us how Ambedkar developed as a caste theorist. The importance of this paper is stressed by anthropologist and historian Nicholas B. Dirks (2001), where he says, "Ambedkar expanded his critique of caste and transformed an academic argument into an explosive political intervention in an undelivered address for the 1936 annual conference of the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal of Lahore" (Dirks, 2001, p. 267). That is why reading the 1916 paper is important to understand the 1936 speech, and the brief introduction here attempted to put forth the same.

Another important event in Ambedkar's anti-caste struggle was his Mahad speech in 1927, without referring to which any attempt to read Ambedkar as a man of action would turn futile. The Mahad Satyagraha was held in March 1927 to assert Dalits' right to access public spaces and places. In the second conference to Mahad Satyagraha held in

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December of the same year, he gave a famous speech where he clearly was disillusioned and repeatedly mentioned how reforms like inter-caste dining, inter-drinking, temple entry, and drawing water from wells was not going to help but are only notional reforms and that inter-caste marriage is one solution. The Mahad Satyagraha in 1927 was a great event in the life of Ambedkar, which ultimately turned him more radical by the close of the 1920s. Ambedkar himself realised at this point, and more so after the Mahad satyagraha, that what he was trying to achieve in Mahad was not going to work and were just mere eyewashes. This is exactly what Jaffrelot 2005 calls the "logic of Sanskritisation" (p. 48), to which we shall return later in the paper. Temple entry was a part of the Sanskritisation process, which would not really destroy the caste. It won't help eradicate caste but will rather only aid in the Sanskritisation of lower castes. Hence, under such a circumstance, it is obvious that Ambedkar would deviate from his intellectual and political powers in achieving what would actually work for the untouchables, i.e., education, agitation, organisation, and annihilation of the religious foundations on which caste is established.

Within the long span of twenty years, from 1916 to 1936, how do we see Ambedkar's intellectual growth? In these twenty years, he first began as a student in an anthropology seminar in 1916, where he started as a calm analytic who was more interested in analysing and finding answers to caste with the keen insight of a sociologist. But now, speaking twenty years later, in 1936 to a group mostly comprising of caste men at Lahore, Ambedkar realised that theory and academic analysis would not suffice. This is evident in this undelivered speech. And hence this speech in 1936 and his subsequent conversion to Buddhism twenty years later is to be seen as his way of praxis and action in his theory. This is how a brief attempt has been made in this current study to trace the growth of Ambedkar, the man, and reformer. The *Annihilation of Caste* then is at the height of and represents the highest point of Ambedkar's deep scholarship at the pinnacle of his anti-caste struggle. It would not be wrong to say that this text represents a high mark in Ambedkar's career as a caste reformer, and it is his *tour-de-force* in his fight against untouchability.

2 Social vs Political – The Better?

One of the major points he makes in the speech is the tussle between social reform and political reform. In this, Ambedkar believes that without social reform, no political reform can come up. Political revolution, according to Ambedkar, should succeed in social revolution. First, society has to improve, and then the political structure will improve. Ambedkar seems to ask his audience first to emancipate their minds and society, then politics – because politics is but an extension of the society.

Ambedkar stands as a lone figure in the 20th-century political scene in India whose demand for social reform precedes political reform. It was a hard demand to bargain as it needed a widespread overhaul of the society. This, under the colonialist experiment of upper caste leaders, was too expensive a deal to strike. Hence, India went ahead with political reform rather than social reform during and after the Indian independence. Social reform was difficult to achieve as it required a large-scale redefinition of traditional thought to give rise to a new consciousness. If only stress were laid on social reform over

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political reform, then the freedom of India would have been the freedom in the real sense of the term. In their introduction to their book, Suraj Yengde and Anand Teltumbde (2018) write: "Ambedkar warned that the political democracy that India adopted would not last unless it was founded on social (the *Annihilation of caste*) and economic democracy (socialism)" (p. 18). But where does one find the middle way forward in this tussle of social vs. political democracy? In the same book, economist Jean Dreze (2018) highlights how the importance of social reform was overlooked deliberately: "This idea, however, was quietly buried soon after his death, and the democratic project in India was reduced to political democracy. This is one aspect of Ambedkar's political philosophy that needs to be revived today" (p. 118). Hence the solution lies in a balanced blend of social as well as political democracy. If we do not do this, we can call it what Ambedkar calls in his historic final address in the Constituent Assembly on 25th Nov 1949 as, the "life of contradictions" (Ambedkar, 2020, p. 12-16).

But how does Ambedkar analyse caste in Annihilation? It can be read at social, biological, and ethnological levels. Ambedkar identifies caste as a social phenomenon. In part 4.1 of Annihilation, Ambedkar (2014) famously proclaims caste as "not merely a division of labour but also of labourers." (p. 108) This is the essential reality of caste-based discrimination in India. Caste hence is established by Ambedkar as only a means of perpetuating power structures and hegemony over one section of society. Another apologist for caste is in theories of biology and ethnology (part 5.1). Ambedkar says all human races are mixed with each other in some way or the other. Ambedkar makes a revolutionary statement when he says that "The Brahmin of Punjab is racial of the same stock as the Chamar of Punjab, and the Brahmin of Madras is of the same race as the Pariah of Madras." (p. 109), and he provides ethnological proofs for it. Hence, in *Annihilation*, "caste has no scientific origin" (p. 110). On the other hand, Mahatma Gandhi and other leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak or even Rammohun Roy, who were soft apologists for caste, are interestingly termed by Braj Ranjan Mani (2005) as propagators of "status-quoist politics" (p. 236). The front-ranking upper-caste leaders and status-quoists understood that to rake up the issue of caste meant to necessarily disturb the social fabric of India. This is because the entire socio-cultural and political bedrock of Indian society and polity today rests on the rubric of caste. And hence any attempt to scoop up caste will create huge disruptions in the socio-political order. This was certainly a price that reformist minds like Gandhi, Nehru, Tilak, etc., were not willing to pay.

3 Critiquing Hinduism and the Sacred Texts

In part 6.2, Ambedkar states that the "Hindu society is a myth" (p. 110). He shows how Hinduism is but an abstract principle and points out the lack of unity and fellow-feeling between them. He justifies this by citing the example of Sikhism and Islam, where there is a call for universal brotherhood within each respective religion. But there is no such call for unity in Hinduism. Ambedkar then dissects the Hindu religion by calling it more as a set of rules, "What is called religion by the Hindus is nothing but a multitude of commands and prohibitions" (p. 130). Ambedkar decries that Hinduism is in itself not even a religion in the strictest sense of the word. It is rather a series of "commands and prohibitions," and like all commands imposed upon someone, these Hindu commands and rules also do not leave

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any scope for freedom. Ambedkar's main aim in Annihilation is at the books – ancient texts and shastras that the Hindu mind refers to. But is it only the text which is to be blamed? Now critics might argue that if Hinduism cannot really be accommodated as a religious code, then how can textual destruction of books lead to the abolition of untouchability? To answer this, it must be understood that, unlike Islam Christianity, rules are not so coded in Hinduism. This is exactly where dwells the problems and inconsistencies of this religion. The problem with Hinduism is that it is not strictly coded like other religions. However, it is strictly coded in discriminating against the untouchables as evinced in the Manusmriti. This is one of the central arguments that Ambedkar makes in Annihilation. The role of the British in perpetuating caste is instrumental and has been quite helpful to brahmans. According to Braj Ranjan Mani, the British thought that the correct view of India was the Hindu view. For the British, India meant Hindu. Manusmriti was accepted as a Hindu law book, but the British did not realise that it was the Brahmanical worldview and not the Hindu worldview (Mani, 2005, p. 189). And that is why it can be safely assumed that the priestly class's support was instrumental in perpetuating colonial rule on India – so much so that one may say that the foreign rule of Britishers was more on the lower classes rather than the upper classes. This has a lot to blame on the Manusmriti itself. The British were the ones who legitimised Manusmriti as the law book for the Hindus. Hence, Ambedkar's diatribe against the shastras in his *Annihilation of Caste* stands vindicated as the shastras themselves were responsible for their degrading position.

4 The Solution?

Now, what solution does Ambedkar offers? One solution lies in part 14 of the Annihilation when Ambedkar says that instead of caste, an ideal society would be based on "liberty, equality and fraternity" (p. 116). He also calls for annihilating socially infused notions and meanings that labels like 'Brahmin,' 'Kshatriya,' 'Vaishya,' and 'Shudras' carry. Isn't this a totally different worldview that he propagates here? Hence, this attempt by Ambedkar can be seen as his attempt at totally upturning the existing state of society into a totally alternate form of civilisation. Whether the aim of Ambedkar has been achieved or will be ever achieved or not is important; what is perhaps important is that such dialogues and discourses should continue unabated. His speech's thesis and arguments do much more than simply denouncing Hinduism. It calls for an alternate form of society as well. This is hence quite a radically profound assertion in that age.

Another solution he offers is intermarriage or exogamy. In a survey titled the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) conducted by the National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER) and the University of Maryland, it was found that only 5% of marriages today are inter-caste marriages, and since the last 40 years, the figure remains unchanged (Desai and Vanneman (2014). The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MSJE) has constituted a special 'Dr. Ambedkar Foundation' as a committee that formulates rules and incentives for inter-caste marriages in India. The scheme is the government recognised, and it also recognises Ambedkar's idea of caste as a system of graded inequality and his belief in inter-caste marriage. MSJE also awards incentives worth 2.5 lakhs under the 'Dr Ambedkar Scheme for Social Integration through Inter-Caste Marriages' scheme. The findings of the study by Desai and Vanneman (2014)

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have shown that this solution proposed by Ambedkar has still not been applied to a significant level and has certain administrative and social bottlenecks. But it acknowledges the solution propounded by Dr. Ambedkar on a pan-India level and at the policy-making level.

Part 20.9 of Annihilation is the climax, the crux of the entire speech. Here, the doctor is providing the real remedy to its sick patient. Here, Ambedkar propounds that to destroy caste, one has to "destroy the belief in the sanctity of the shastras" (p. 124). Ambedkar is often accused of being a heretic. But on a closer analysis it is quite clear that Ambedkar is not promoting atheism. Ambedkar understood that religion is an institution that is necessary to give meaning to humans. But not the religion which sanctions one set of humans to rule over others merely by an accident of birth. It is not that Ambedkar is just giving an impractical solution to the grave problem here. He is fully aware of the opposition he will receive. The first reason that he gives is that the Brahmin community will never abdicate its authority. Another reason is that the Brahmins are the intellectual class of India, and the local people are bound to follow them as they are the most influential class as well. This also draws our attention to the advantage that the brahmans have received since generations which have bestowed upon them the ontological and epistemological advantage and privilege. This makes us think about the lack of and absence of, or rather the deliberate exclusion of lower castes from the epistemological foundations of knowledge today.

Further in part 24.1, Ambedkar provides five reforms:

1. Only one religious book should be there and vedas, shastras, puranas should cease to be followed.
2. Priestly class to be disinherited and de-hierarchised.
3. Priestly class should come under the state control and hold a sanad to be a priest.
4. Priest should serve the state and be equal to state.
5. Should follow the ICS like pattern of regulation by the government.

To some, it may sound absurd and unfeasible. How can matters related to religion and individual faith be subjected to state control and regulation? Likening the priestly class to the ICS, modern-day civil services, or IAS seems to be a bit off the point. Does it also raise significant questions as to why only Hinduism is regulated under state control? But it is all the more important to understand that Ambedkar prescribes this solution because there seems to be a lack of any regulation on the priestly class. The stronghold that it held on the society needed some bars to control it. And to control it, the only way forward was to put it under the control of the state. For a statesman like Ambedkar, this was a natural recourse to a socio-political malady like Brahmanic hegemony and caste inequalities.

5 Ambedkar's Praxis and the Moment

Ambedkar's efforts in analysing the caste system and his writings on caste stem from his desire to put into praxis that he theorises. In Ambedkar's case, there is no disparity between theory and praxis. One of the classic ways in which Ambedkar worked was by obtaining legal rights and legal ways in his methods. This method was overtly ethical and effective in the face of the opposition received from the upper castes. Three years

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after the lawsuit that was filed against Ambedkar in 1927 following the Mahad satyagraha and the subsequent use of the public water tank, he finally won the court case. Without any outlet for militancy, he won the trial through legal enforcement. Ambedkar also used mass struggle like Gandhi but followed them up with legal rights and battles in the courts which legalised and protected the rights, at least in law.

Another very significant way of his praxis is his identity formation through his works. Gail Omvedt (2011) tries to understand Hinduism through the various anti-caste forces that challenged Hinduism. She tries to look at Hinduism from the prism of the "counter-revolution" (p. 48) led by Ambedkar in the 1920s-1950s. This establishing of a 'counter-revolution' is a very crucial part of Ambedkar's praxis in these three most active decades as an anti-caste intellectual and crusader. Works like Who Were the Shudras (1946), Who Were the Untouchables (1948), and his refusal to acknowledge Aryan theory (2020) are his moments of achieving a sense of self-esteem in the lower castes. Also, his affirmation of what Christophe Jaffrelot (2005) calls the "Prestige of autochthony" (p. 38), to which we will turn shortly, and his ultimate conversion to Buddhism is seen as a way of creating a separate identity and instilling a sense of dignity and pride in the lower castes. This formation of a new identity, an alternate to Brahmanism, an alternate to the Brahminic elite historiography – all this is a part of the praxis of Ambedkar. Hence, Ambedkar's works and his theory are significant as it proposes an alternate version of history in India – a history that has been deliberately hidden. Ambedkar (2020) succeeded in recalling this hidden/ lost moment for the untouchables – a moment of self-respect and strength. In Who Were the Untouchables (1948), Ambedkar refused to acknowledge the Aryan invasion theory and subsequent subjugation of untouchables. He rather brings a new sociological insight of the 'Broken Men' who started following Buddhism, and when they refused to give up eating beef, they were outcasted. This theory made him give a new identity to the untouchables, who started looking at themselves as former Buddhists. According to Christophe Jaffrelot (2005), Ambedkar's two leading works on caste, Who Were the Shudras and Who Were the Untouchables, were his way of "inventing a golden age for the lower castes: the prestige of autochthony" (p. 38) or the prestige of being native or indigenous. "His analysis was but the first stage of an ideological counter-offensive in which he sought to endow Untouchables with a glorious past and a prestigious identity" (Jaffrelot 9, p. 38), he claims. These two texts make some debatable comments, and leading historians and sociologists do not accept certain assertions by Ambedkar. But it has been widely accepted, as Ambedkar holds, that untouchability preceded the religious sanction of untouchability. This means that this structure of caste came into being first and was only later codified by Manu. Not just this, but several of Ambedkar's theories are potent enough, which make it hard for a critic to totally disprove his theories. Ambedkar's case theory doesn't evade praxis. His efforts to resist what sociologist MN Srinivas (1965) calls as the process of "Sanskritisation" (pp. 30-31) (imitation of the Sanskrit tradition or simply imitation of the brahmins) were visible a decade before he even wrote *Annihilation of Caste* in 1936. Srinivas popularised this concept in 1952, but Ambedkar had already given up Sanskritisation almost thirty years earlier. Ambedkar realised that this Sanskritisation (or imitation of brahmin tradition) was what did not give any success in eradicating caste prior to Ambedkar. He understood it during the Mahad Satyagraha in 1927. This concept of Sanskritisation was defeatist in its approach. However, Jaffrelot (2005) argues that Ambedkar can be seen as a gentle proponent of this Sanskritisation till

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the Mahad Satyagraha, and only afterward he realised that this Sanskritisation is what needs to be rejected completely. The Mahad conference in March 1927 was a gentle form of Sanskritisation; the symbolic entry into temples and drinking water from the tank – all qualify as Sanskritization. But in the December conference, he talked about the values of the French Revolution. This was the defining moment in his approach to the caste system. The earlier hints of Sanskritisation were now beginning to wane, and Ambedkar finally was becoming the Ambedkar that we know him to be. In his approach, a huge difference can be seen between March and December of 1927. Now he pitched for a new identity for the untouchables. This was the Ambedkarite moment of identity formation. The road was now ripe for annihilating caste and its foundations.

The counter to this Sanskritisation is what Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd calls 'Dalitisation'. He conceptualises this in his Introduction to Beef, Brahmins, and Broken Men (2020). The book comprises annotated critical selections from Ambedkar's Who Were the Untouchables (1948) and talks about the politics of beef eating and untouchability, and theorises "Dalitisation as democratisation" (Shepherd, 2020, p. 30). He says:

> Dalitisation is not simply about eating beef but about changing one's attitude to questions of dignity, food culture and labour...Dalitisation is about the democratisation of society by disregarding the false divisions of the sacred and the profane, of the high and the low. (Shepherd, 2020, p. 30)

In the scholarly Introduction, Shepherd (2020) calls for the need of "Dalitisation" (p. 30) in opposition to Sanskritisation. It is antithetical to Sanskritisation and remains a viable solution to anti-caste hegemony. Ambedkar was one of the earliest proponents of the process of 'Dalitisation' of the lower castes and paved the way for a new identity for the untouchables.

6 Gandhi vs Ambedkar–Struggle or Truce?

In the Preface to the 2nd edition (1937) of Annihilation, we notice Ambedkar denouncing Gandhian politics. Gandhi believed in change of heart, which was the real problem in his handling of caste. Gandhi believed that the privileged castes should act ethically and denounce caste of their free will. Unlike Ambedkar, who was a trained economist and sociologist, Gandhi could not foresee the entangles of caste the way Ambedkar did. He believed in the chaturvarna theory and did not want the break-up of the caste system. He only wanted some notional and cosmetic changes in it. If Gandhi represented ethical self-purification as a means of caste reforms, Ambedkar represented self-respect as a form of emancipation as we saw in his efforts of identity formation for the untouchables.

The misappropriation or misinterpretation of Ambedkarite politics has its genesis in the Gandhi-Ambedkar struggle for separate electorates. If we have to see how Ambedkar is misread and misquoted, then the genesis for the same has to be in the separate electorate episode and its aftermath. The supporters of Gandhi and the popular press were holding Ambedkar responsible for the decline in his health of Gandhi. Under relentless pressure and apprehension of possible persecution of untouchables, Ambedkar finally relented to the call and concluded the infamous Poona Pact by giving up separate electorates in return for some extra seats as reserved in elections. The Pact was just a farce for the untouchables.

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The dream of separate electorates was a "dream deferred" if one can take the term from Langston Hughes' poem 'Harlem.' It was a dream deferred for Ambedkar, and that is why even today, Dalit politics suffer.

But all was not lost. One of the most important enigmas of the modern history of India is the Gandhi-Ambedkar debate. It might be said that Ambedkar had to withdraw to save the life of Gandhi, but at the same time, in the words of Dr. Nagaraj (2010), it was the birth of the "Ambedkarite paradigm" (Nagaraj, 2010, p. 99) in Indian politics. In the context of the Poona Pact and Ambedkar's retreat, Nagaraj, in the book Flaming Feet and Other Essays, writes, "it could be said that he took birth; or by his withdrawal was born the Ambedkarite paradigm in Indian politics" (Nagaraj, 2010, p. 99). Hence, in the Poona Pact, all was not lost for Ambedkar. It was a moment of great upheaval and left a huge mark on India's pre-and post-independence caste politics.

7 Conclusion

Ambedkar was not just an organiser of political movements, but he also fought against the majoritarian ideas through his works and his praxis. *Annihilation of Caste* is not just Ambedkar's thesis on how to destroy the caste system, but it is also a very important social document as it also narrates the way in which the Hindu social order existed in the day. The Dalits have undergone civilisational violence and discrimination at the hands of the upper castes. If the different crusaders and anti-caste intellectuals try to locate and place untouchability and its atrocities in a localised manner, as we see in the case of Phule, Narayan Guru, Mangu Ram, Periyar or Bhima Bhoi – Ambedkar, on the other hand, broadens the scope to the level of the entire Indian civilisation. His insights and findings on history, economics, and sociology are of a universal level rather than local. There is an urgent need to look at Ambedkar as a sociologist. Today he is seen mostly as a Dalit icon. There is a need to mainstream him as a sociologist too. Apart from being christened as the supreme leader of the Dalits and a social reformer, we have to see Ambedkar as a sociologist as well. Works like *Annihilation of Caste* and some of the leading works taken up for analysis here can be a good starting point in that direction.

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