Gandhi and Ambedkar

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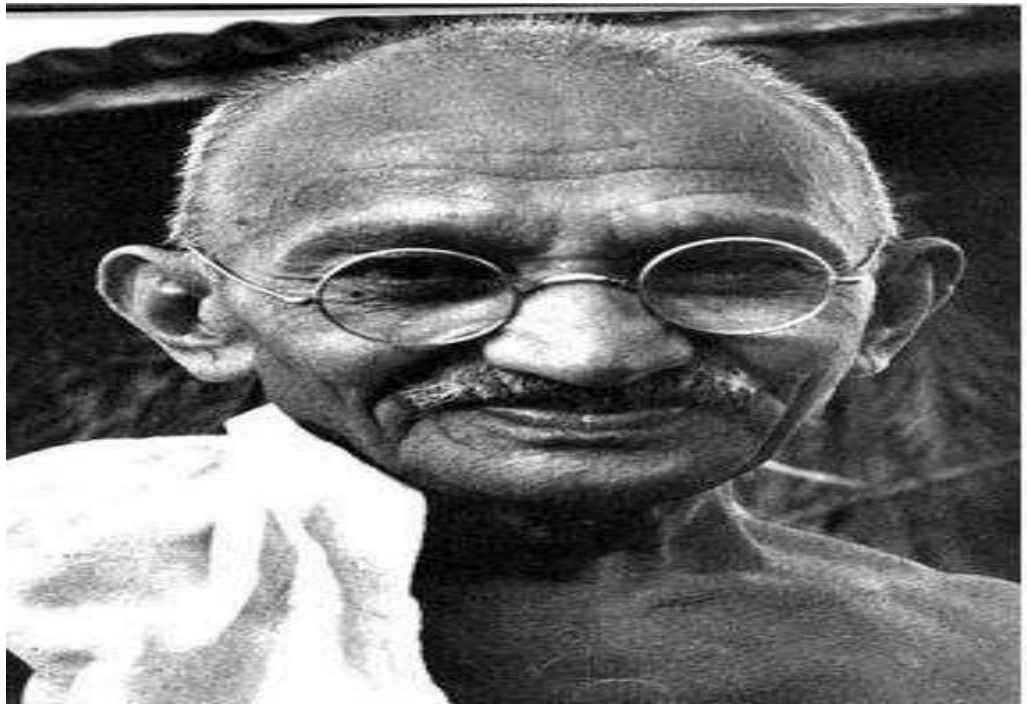
Arth, Venkat, Zainab, Kartheek

D. R. Nagaraj

- An expert on medieval and modern Kannada poetry and Dalit movement.
- Wrote in Kannada and English languages.
- Winner of some of India's highest literary awards including:
  - Vardhamana Award (1988)
  - Shivarama Karanth Award (1995)
  - Sahitya Akademi Award (1998)



Self-Purification vs Self-Respect: On the Roots of the Dalit Movement





Is the irreconcilability between the two real and fundamental?

Untouchability

"I DO NOT want to be reborn. But if I have to be reborn, I should be born an untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings, and the affronts leveled at them, in order that I may endeavour to free myself and them from that miserable condition. I, therefore, prayed that, if I should be born again, I should do so not as a Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya or Shudra, but as an Atishudra."

- Mahatma Gandhi (YI, 4-5-1921, p144)

Untouchability: From the eyes of Yogis and Sadhus

- Task of fighting the caste system was one of the spiritual requirements of their tradition.
  - Liberation of the self from the phenomenal world was the ultimate goal.
  - Arrogance and humiliation of the caste system was a major obstacle in the path of Moksha or Nirvana.
- Did not see it as a political problem.
  - Notion of society was a cultural one, consisting of smaller communities in terms of geographical and social space.

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- Anxiety and nervousness, central to colonialism, were never the dominant states of these Yogis.
- Treated temporal power as alien, on which very little influence could be exerted.
- Did not see it as a political problem. Hence the inability to influence historical events in any significant way.

Gandhiji and Yogis

- Had many things in common with the Yogis.
  - Drew inspiration from the Bhakti schools of Shaiva and Vaishnava.
  - For instance, centrality of temple symbolism from the Vaishnavite tradition.
- At the same time, was very different in many ways.
  - Anxious about the colonial power.
  - Made Untouchability one of the crucial questions of Indian politics.

Non-Brahmin movement of the South

- Politics of colonial intervention, a crucial factor.
- Fought the hegemony of superior castes through gradualist and constitutionalist methods that they had learnt from their white masters.
- Demands of Shudras were materialist.
- Social policy of British Raj, combined with an intense desire for upward mobility among the lower castes generated a strong optimism among the Shudras.

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- Couldn't make a huge impact.
  - Lacked big ideas.
  - Was given to opportunistic and anti-nationalist political manoeuvers.
  - Many of them had internalized Brahminical value system entirely.
  - Upward mobility of a certain section within the multitude of Dalits.

Ambedkar on the failure of non - Brahmin movement

"Then what was wrong with the party to make it fall like a pack of cards, notwithstanding the long period in office? What was it that made the party unpopular with a large majority of non-Brahmins themselves? In my view, two things were responsible.

Firstly, they had not been able to realize exactly what their differences were with Brahminical sections. Though they indulged in virulent criticism of Brahmins, could anyone of them say those differences had been doctrinal? How much Brahminism had they in them? They wore namams and regarded themselves as second class Brahmins. Instead of abandoning Brahminism they had been holding on to the spirit of it as being the idea; their anger against Brahminism was that they (the Brahmins) gave them only a second class degree.

The second reason for the downfall of the party was its very narrow political program. One defect in the political program of the non-Brahmin party had been that the party made it its chief concern to secure a certain number of jobs for their young men. That was perfectly legitimate. But, did the non-Brahmin young men for whom the party fought for twenty years to secure jobs in public service remember the party after they received emoluments for their jobs? During the twenty years the party had been in office, it forgot the 90 per cent of the non-Brahmins living in the village, leading an uneconomical life and getting into the clutches of moneylenders."

-B.R. Ambedkar (In a dinner speech (1944), when Justice Party was trounced in the general elections)

Dalit Movement

- B.R. Ambedkar : Father of the Dalit movement.
- Product of the mental state that believed in firm rejection of the Gandhian model of tackling the problem of Untouchables.
- Congress – Harijan leadership : a paradoxical convergence of articulation and silence.
  - Revolted by the angry young generation of Dalits in 1960s.

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- Convergence of the transcendental aspect of fighting caste ego and mundane reality of fighting for real opportunities in jobs and education.
- Two broad themes of the Dalit movement introduced by Ambedkar.
  - Phenomenon of wilful amnesia regarding one's own past.
    - Dr. Siddalingaih portrays it in his play '*Panchama*'.
  - Defining alternative cultural values.
    - One of the areas where Ambedkar clashed with Gandhiji.

Untouchability: From the eyes of Gandhiji

- Problem of the self.
- Movement of eradication of Untouchability a sacred ritual of self - purification.
- Yerwada fast and Poona Pact of 1932.
  - Ambedkar defined the problem in terms of building an independent political identity for Dalits in the structure of social, economic and political power.
  - Gandhiji saw it as purely a religious question, that too an internal one for Hinduism.

Caste System: Gandhiji vs Ambedkar

"Untouchability as it is practised today in Hinduism in my opinion, is a sin against God and man and is, therefore like a poison slowly eating into the very vitals of Hinduism. There are innumerable castes in India. They are a social institution and at one time they served a very useful purpose, as, perhaps, they are even doing now to a certain extent ... There is nothing sinful about them. They retard the material progress of those who are labouring under them. They are no bar to the spiritual progress. The difference, therefore, between caste system and Untouchability is not one of degree, but of kind."

-Mahatma Gandhi

"The outcaste is a by-product of the caste-system. There will be outcastes as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of the caste-system. Nothing can help to save Hindus and ensure their survival in the coming struggle except the purging of this odious and vicious dogma."

-B.R. Ambedkar