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Radical Equality: Ambedkar, Gandhi, and the risk of democracy

By Aishwary Kumar. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015

Aishwary Kumar's intellectual history makes a novel and exciting contribution to the progressively expanding literature concerning Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956), a Dalit[1] lawyer, political thinker and social reformer, who is often typically referred to as the "architect" or "father" of the Republic of India's first independent constitution.[2] For Kumar, treating Ambedkar in this manner is "profoundly delimiting" (25). Doing so reduces him to "simply a rights theorist" who draws exclusively upon the institutional frameworks of the nation-state as the only imaginable environment for democratic citizenship (16). By contrast, Kumar restores Ambedkar as a radical thinker of a theologico-political freedom that was inseparable from equality, and not circumscribed by the strictures of law, constitution, representation and franchise.

At the heart of Kumar's monograph are the supposedly "universal" tensions between equality and freedom, "the political" and "the social," insurrection and constitution. Kumar argues that Ambedkar's refusal to accept these as strict demarcations allowed him to conceive of an unprecedented form of political freedom based around the egalitarian sovereignty of the multitude. By simultaneously exploring how this conception was inseparable from the problematic of the theologico-political, Kumar demonstrates how Ambedkar was able to mount a fierce critique of "the collusion between theology and government, scripture and office, in Indic traditions" (36). Yet Ambedkar's antipathy towards ecclesiastical authority (evident in his decision to burn a copy of the ancient Hindu legal scripture, the *Manusmriti*, in December 1927) did not overdetermine his relationship with religion. In fact, what Kumar terms Ambedkar's "nondialectical 'non-negative negation' of religion" underscored his belief in an ethical and political religion that would serve as a "faith proper to justice" for India's Dalit community (32, 333). Ambedkar's ultimate decision to convert to Buddhism in October 1956, two months before his death, can be seen as part of this struggle.

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These aspects of Ambedkar's thinking emerged in an era when Indian nationalism was primarily and obsessively focused on freedom over and above equality and justice. At the same time, the nationalist thought of many high-caste Hindus centred on their own interpretation of the theologico-political, in which "calls for political sovereignty… [became] difficult to separate from the rhetoric of religious renewal and the spiritual force of the majority" (18). It was these political and religious exclusions that shaped Ambedkar's alternative democratic understanding of sovereignty. Kumar explores this relationship between freedom and equality by examining both the discontinuities and the commonalities of thought that existed between Ambedkar and India's most famous anticolonial nationalist, M.K. Gandhi. Both shared an egalitarian imperative: Gandhi stressed Hindu-Muslim fraternity and parity between coloniser and colonised. Yet the "untouchable" (Dalit) is conspicuous by its absence in Gandhi's seminal work, *Hind Swaraj*. For Ambedkar, this was indicative of Gandhi's reluctance to recognise that "friendship" and "trust" between 'touchable' (caste Hindu) and 'untouchable' was unable to fully resolve the perniciousness of Hinduism's caste-based inequalities.

The book's chapters alternate in their focus between Ambedkar and Gandhi, beginning at the turn of the century with Gandhi in South Africa and Ambedkar in New York. Chapters Two and Three consider their engagement with the category of force, both in relation to Gandhian *satyagraha*, which emphasised the "force of non-violence" and rejected the English misnomer of "passive resistance," and Ambedkar's "*coup de force*," as an essential part of his understanding of a revolutionary democracy, where force was "the right to an equal life and the militant freedom to sacrifice it too" (162). The next chapters move on to the 1930s, which witnessed sustained intellectual engagement between Gandhi and Ambedkar, in the context of an expanding franchise and devolved constitution in British India. Kumar explores the conceptual and rhetorical features of their confrontation over separate electorates for "untouchables" in 1932, which led to Gandhi's "fast unto death" and the subsequent compromise contained within the Poona Pact. Chapter Four focuses on Gandhi's depiction of the "untouchable" as *harijan* (literally "god's people"), through which Kumar demonstrates the vulnerability of Gandhian thought to "the majoritarian rhetoric of the greatest good of the greatest number" (170). In these moments,

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Gandhi's apparent commitment to a "radical equality" was undermined. Chapter Five, meanwhile, reveals how Ambedkar, in his undelivered but subsequently published lecture *Annihilation of Caste*, picked apart these linkages between nationalism and majoritarianism to critique nationalists' inability to visualise an egalitarian sovereignty. Kumar's focus on the significance of the concept of "annihilation" in this chapter provides the scope for an innovative departure from existing literature on Ambedkar's politics. It allows Kumar to demonstrate Ambedkar's ambivalence towards the classical republican tradition, and highlights his support for an "insurrectionary constitutionalism" instead. The third and final part of *Radical Equality* offers new insights into Ambedkar's engagement with religious politics, particularly in the context of his conversion to Buddhism.

Kumar's book has wider significance for any scholar examining modern non-Western philosophy and anticolonial nationalism, because it challenges those who might characterise Ambedkar's thinking as "derivative" of Eurocentric models and paradigms. In this telling, Ambedkar's preoccupation with legal safeguards is contrasted with Gandhi, whose "horizons were cognitive, geared not merely toward the physical emancipation of the colonised but toward freedom from the mentality of servitude" (22). By contrast, Kumar has restored Ambedkar's focus on the "reclamation of liberty as the freedom to 'reason,'" and his engagement with faith as the foundation of an immortal justice, as central elements of an innovative cerebral approach to integrating the pursuit of equality with freedom from empire (22). In doing so, Kumar has demonstrated the moments of symbiosis in Gandhian and Ambedkarite thought, as much as their contradictions. *Radical Equality* thus deserves to be essential reading for anyone interested in questions of democracy, sovereignty and anticolonial nationalism in the twentieth century.

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Notes

[1] Dalit, meaning “ground down,” “broken to pieces,” is the preferred designation of India’s former “untouchables,” who suffer from forms of social, political and religious exclusion and discrimination at the hands of caste Hindus.

[2] Swapan Kumar Biswas, *Father of the Constitution of India* (Delhi: Orion, 1997).

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