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Reconciling Gandhi with Ambedkar*

Revisiting the sites of old spars between Ambedkar and Gandhi that shaped the formative tenets of democracy in India and its concerns with caste and caste-system, Arundhati Roy recently came out with a long write-up called, "The Doctor and the Saint"; the article was her Introduction to the new, annotated edition of *Annihilation of Caste,* edited and critically annotated by S Anand, a renowned Ambedkar scholar and publisher of **Navayana**. As is widely known, Ambedkar's book is nearly an eighty-year-old text of a speech he prepared to give at the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal of Lahore, but did not eventually deliver. Roy begins her article by acknowledging the startling edge the text has always had: "When I first read it I felt as though somebody had walked into a dim room and opened the windows. Reading Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar bridges the gap between what most Indians are schooled to believe in and the reality we experience every day of our lives."

The book and her Introduction raked up (for all right reasons) an old debate that had hidden dormant for many decades in the writings of Dalit thinkers and Ambedkar followers. Without concealing her strong admiration for Ambedkar (the 'doctor' in her title) and his ideologies, Roy vehemently repudiates Gandhi and his methods in matters related to Caste by ripping the aura surrounding the man she refers to as the 'saint' with a slant on the term. Her fierce ideological battle is raged in the backdrop of the now infamous Poona Pact (24 September 1932), and the 'unholy' role Gandhi played in silencing Ambedkar and thereby weakening the empowerment of oppressed sections – strangely, a common cause for which both Ambedkar and Gandhi fought throughout their lives, albeit in different directions. Apart from kicking up much dust around Gandhi, Arundhati Roy successfully opened up the floodgates of fury that had buried deep within Ambedkar followers, which erupted as if it waited for a prod from a contemporary thinker. Unfortunately, thus to a certain extent, her article further distanced many Dalits from the life and ideologies of Gandhi, who undoubtedly played a pivotal role in strengthening the case and cause of Dalits, whom he called *Harijan* – Children of God. Despite his fierce opposition to Gandhi, it is evident from a subtle reading of Ambedkar's writings that he owed much to Gandhi when it came to his struggles against the mired mindset of the Caste Hindus.

We need to know that by keeping away Gandhi, oppressed sections may not be gaining much; turning away from Gandhi would be like doing disservice to Ambedkar as well.

* **A Blog Post on 3 May 2014; it is also available at: http://komalesha.blogspot.in**

Contemporary period has proved, time and again, relevance of Gandhi and his methods in democratic society's collective fight against colonialist ideologies such as globalization and commercialization. The need of the day is to synergize all sources of strength in our collective struggle against the neocolonial forces that are looming large on our political and economic horizon. In this background, is there a way to resolve the conflict between the ideologies of Gandhi and Ambedkar and bring them together? Is there a way to integrate Gandhi and Ambedkar and employ the doubled up strength in our battles against the oppressive ideologies? It is at this critical juncture that we can locate the significance of Devanoora Mahadeva (gifted writer and activist of the Kannada world) and major Kannada dalit poet, Siddalingaiah. Their enriching understanding of the conflict between Gandhi and Ambedkar can indeed pave the path for newer understanding of the relationship between the two great minds of India – Gandhi and Ambedkar – and put an end to the trend of pitting them against each other.

Both Siddalingaiah and Mahadeva begin with an understanding that the impact of the works and personalities of Gandhi and Ambedkar on younger, contemporary generation is altogether different. Siddalingaiah offers an interesting insight into understand these differences: Speaking of Gandhi, the grandpa tells his grandson – "during our times, we had a person called Gandhi who chased the British out of India and won freedom for us. He is the man behind the way we are now"; whereas, talking of Ambedkar, the grandson tells his grandpa – "Grandpa, when you were young, there was a person from our community called Ambedkar. Thanks to his sustained struggles, we have been able to live the way we are now". Acknowledging the significance of this insight, Mahadeva writes in his Kannada article, 'Gandhi and Ambedkar – A Few Words': "The ripened fruit speaks of Gandhi to the bud; and it is the bud that speaks of Ambedkar to the fruit! If the first has a slow pace, the second has the speed. Because of this difference in movement, the objective that both Gandhi and Ambedkar shared though same, looks different and contradictory". It might be because of the difference in pace and direction that the later generations began looking at Gandhi and Ambedkar as poles apart, or, as two political opponents who never met eye to eye. Probably, the first generation of the educated Dalits, who had felt the live presence of Gandhi and Ambedkar in their lives, who were the direct beneficiaries of the struggles of these leaders against the myopic and inhuman caste system in India could not even think of separating the common legacies of Gandhi and Ambedkar. Though they had witnessed public debates between Gandhi and Ambedkar over problems and solutions related to caste system, they never felt the crisis of choosing between the two because they apparently seem to have caught pulse of both the thinkers. Unfortunately, the wisdom of this generation did not or could not prevail upon Dalits and Dalit thinkers of later and younger generations as they began venerating Ambedkar as their sole saviour to the extent that even taking out the name of Gandhi along with Ambedkar became an anathema to them. Contemporary Dalit thinkers drifting away from Gandhi became serious and virulent when some of their organizations boycotted watching the epic biopic on Gandhi that Richard Attenborough

produced in 1982. The DSS in Karnataka was one among the many active dalit groups that had banned watching the movie because the movie did not provide any space for Ambedkar.

How did then, the older generation of Dalits construe the quarrels between Gandhi and Ambedkar. Were they indifferent to these quarrels? Taking up this question, Mahadeva answers: “the older generations considered these fights as quarrel between parents over the best interests of their children; if it is otherwise, how could they keep the photos of Gandhi and Ambedkar together? For instance, if the father argues for enrolling the child to a Kannada Medium school, the mother might insist on an English medium school. Obviously, a fight ensues. But, what is in the fight but the interest of the child? What is there in the fight over the Poona Pact? Isn’t it like saying, ‘it’s true, I may have some major shortcomings; but don’t desert me for that’?”

Even over their opinions on Hinduism, we tend to pitch Gandhi against Ambedkar in the boxing ring; quote from each other’s books, letters and speeches and derive pleasure from who scored over whom and with how many points. This is more or less what writer, Arundhati Roy does in her introduction. Such decontextualizing of differences between Ambedkar and Gandhi appears to be insensitive because it is doing disservice to the common objective. We need to understand the fundamental difference between both the thinkers when it come to their ideological temperaments; if Ambedkar’s perspectives are marked by sharp reasoning and logic, Gandhi’s views are shaped by forces beyond logical reasoning. Such difference between contemporaries might as well lead to quarrels. Writes Mahadeva: ‘We must learn to look at these fights in terms of the benefits/impacts they have had on society. Why did a fanatic Hindu Godse kill Gandhi? When Gandhi was killed, why did the Brahmin quarters feel elated, thanking god that ‘the avatar of Kalki born to contaminate castes’ ended? Why did they feel so relieved? What was Gandhi trying to do with Hinduism? Gandhi was filtering out fresh water from the dirty drainage water called Hinduism that reeked of inequality; as a result, the caterpillars that couldn’t turn themselves into butterflies were squirming out of discomfort. Is there any other way to construe the whole affair? How else do we understand Gandhi, who had, in his last years, taken a stand to attend and bless only inter-caste marriages?’

Mahadeva employs a brilliant metaphor of a house and two persons concerned with the house to describe the spar between the two thinkers: “Gandhi appears to be like a person standing within the dilapidated house of Hinduism to cut the moth-eaten pillars of inequality, caste and hierarchy; whereas, Ambedkar looks like an angry youngster, a rebel throwing stones at the bedraggled mansion breeding inequality. Because of this, some stones Ambedkar threw might have hit Gandhi and spilled his blood. And, the world watching the episode from outside can relay the event as a bitter and gory fight between Gandhi and Ambedkar. In reality, weren’t they both engaged at the same task?”

Then, why was Gandhi misunderstood? Mahadeva make a guess: 'Gandhi considered untouchables as his children and treated them like their father. Had he treated them the other way, I mean to say, had he treated untouchables as his parents and ancestors, he could have avoided being misunderstood. Though at the outset it seems to be simplistic, the idea can bring in a sea change in its outlook and treatment. Let's take up an instance to make the point clear: when something leads to a challenge or competition between a Caste-Hindu and an untouchable – the mindset that considered untouchables as children – might think it as "what arrogance of the one I reared" and lead to anger and intolerance. Instead, if it is the mindset that considered them as parents, it leads to the feeling, "so what if I lose, after all, they are my parents". Since Dalits belong to an older community, the attitude of treating them as parents is historically correct too'.

So, how should Dalits accept Gandhi? They should accept Gandhi's writing, not in total; should edit it to the extent they need and proceed ahead. Let's remember the dynamism and evolving nature of Gandhian ideology. Keeping this in mind, we should re-fashion Gandhi by closely following his objectives, by keeping track of his final movements. We can borrow Lohia's ideology and wisdom to achieve the task. Thus, concludes Mahadeva, 'after clubbing Gandhi and Lohia, if we integrate Lohia with Ambedkar, we can bring about harmony and reconciliation in society'.

References:

1. Arundhati Roy, "The Doctor and the Saint" – Introduction to *Annihilation of Caste*, B R Ambedkar, ed. S Anand (New Delhi: Navayana, 2014)
2. Devanoora Mahadeva, *Edege Bidda Akshara* (Bengaluru: Abhinava, 2013)