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Book Reviews

The Ambedkar-Gandhi Debate: On identity, Community & Justice, by Bindu Puri, *Singapore: Springer,* February *2022; pp. xv + 266, ₹ 8,259.*

Gandhi's notion of 'identity, equality, community, and justice' [p. 26] - premised on his uniquely theological vocabulary of *Ahimsa, Sewa, Tapasya, and Swaraj* - faced definite political and philosophical marginalization/defeat during his final years through Ambedkar's formidable critique concerning their 'inability to respond to the Dalit demand for agency and absolute loss of personhood'. [p. 139] This reasoning has been honed by contemporary Ambedkarite writings that continue to either skeptically underscore the extremely demanding and impractical ontological nature of Gandhi's "thick Swaraj", or epistemologically dismiss the ability of Gandhi[-ians] to 'author' or speak for the experience of the marginalized, particularly the Dalits, for a lack of an 'ownership' of their 'lived experiences'.

To present a dialectical corrective to this scholarship, Bindu Puri's *The Ambedkar-Gandhi Debate: On Identity, Community and Justice,* adopts the theoretical lens of decoloniality within a methodological framework of *Purva-Paksa,* to construct a granular explanation for such dismissals by tracing their genealogical roots to the incompatible, close-ended and irreconcilable *a priori* assumptions of Ambedkar[ites] and Gandhi on 'the nature of the self, the relationship between the constitutive attachments/encumbrances of the self and a conception of justice and the ways in which one can come to the truth about the past'. [p. 1] For, Puri *hypothesizes* that, "[. .] the Ambedkar - Gandhi debate . . . [is] the space in which one can locate the forging of modern identity as it came to be in its confrontations with more traditional notions of the self which had hitherto dominated the mind of India [and Gandhi]." [p. 26.]

In aid of this argument, the book opens with *three central questions* in the introductory (first) chapter: "[. . .] can an individual access the truth of the past from the standpoint of the present? How should one

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to [sic] relate to an emotion (whether it be in the present or in the past) which overrides all other emotions and indeed overwhelms everything else? And lastly, how ought one to understand and respond to the politics of suffering?" [p. 2] The corresponding five chapters delineate (in a rather unstructured manner) the epistemologically divergent responses of Ambedkar and Gandhi to these questions to contextualize their apparent ontological differences on the issue of "untouchability, separate electorates, Hinduism, conversion, temple entry, caste, *varna*, history and tradition" [p. 1] by arguing that, "There could be no meaningful dialogue between . . . [Ambedkar and Gandhi] because though they used the same words, they meant very different things . . ." [p. 125]

In this regard, Puri, in her second chapter, begins by emphasizing the 'importance of memory to the conflicts between Gandhi and Ambedkar and consequently to the self-definition of the contemporary Dalit movement'. [p. 48] This is because she contends that their different approaches to methods of remembering and responding to the atrocities of the past (as history v. *itihaas*) reveal their philosophically distinct (modern v. ancient) assumptions regarding the nature of the self and its position in the world. For, as Ambedkar subscribed to the modern Kantian understanding of the "punctual" self as a rational-autonomous-unique *manuski,* he harped upon using 'History' as a measure to pass an objective third-party judgment on the past to legitimize a remedial politico-legal contractual arrangement in the present.

Ambedkar's modern self was therefore at odds with Gandhi's belief regarding the situatedness of the self in an unbroken critical continuity within the 'past'/*itihaas*, which implied that the past could (not be objectively studied but) only be remembered as 'it so happened' through its "unique immeasurable singularity" [p. 2]. This translated into Ambedkar's impatience with Gandhi's rejection of history as the tool for retrospectively accessing (what Gandhi assumed was) the multi-dimensional truth/*satya* of the past, while forwarding his alternative preference of 'working through' the memories of past atrocities through 'individual atonement'. However, Puri notes that this impatient dismissal of the Gandhian notion of a situated self in favour of the modern approach to *tabula rasa* and selective rewriting of the past memories has produced for the post-Ambedkarite dalit movement and scholarship an absolute loss of dalit cultural past and a resultant "self-minoritization" and "self-closure", as evidenced from their shift in self-representation from a previously multi-dimensional self to a re-constructed "two-dimensional" dalit self, constituted by "only humiliation and pain". [p. 49]

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Chapter three then picks up an epistemic discussion on the distinct notions of agency, as constituted within Ambedkar and Gandhi's self, to articulate their responses to the second central question regarding the modality through which an individual can relate to an overwhelming emotion. Here, building upon the ideas of Charles Taylor, Puri suggests that agency/empowerment is understood by the modern self as a 'rights-based' ability to articulate "what I am, what I want, and what I will be", arising from an 'inward' *a priori* Cartesian assumption that 'all order, all control, and all valuation was located in the individual mind' [p. 75]. This helps Puri draw parallels between the rise of the modern "expressivist" self in India and Ambedkar's emphatic need to erase his past sufferings (as noted in the previous chapter) through such remarkable acts as the public burning of the Manu Smriti in 1927, his subsequent re-writing of two separate histories for *Shudras* and untouchables, as well as his conversion to Buddhism and its re-formulation as *Navayana*. Once again though, this expressivist self's rights-based perception of agency dismissed Gandhi's emphasis on true freedom as *swaraj* (rule of soul over mind-body), which understood agency/empowerment as not only the ability to distance oneself from extreme emotions to achieve a state of perfect *sthitaprajna*, but also the *atmabal*/soul-force/love-force to undertake *satyagraha* and *yajna/sewa* of even the most distant to transform their hearts.

Chapter four builds on this difference in notions of self and agency further to contextualize the incommensurate solutions to untouchability as proposed by Ambedkar and Gandhi. Contrasting the former's rights-based 'revolutionary' emphasis on the annihilation of caste, with the latter's widely criticized 'insurrectionary' advocacy of an idealized *varna* system, Puri states, "Given that Gandhi did not share the modern understanding of the inwardness of the self as the source of all value, he sought to keep the *a priori* continuity of the self as a part of his/her *itihaas* essentially unbroken. This led him to seek reform rather than annihilation of tradition." [p. 146] As evidence, the chapter puts forth eight characteristics of Gandhi's "absolute equality", to be understood as *Samata*, *Samadarshana,* and *Samabhava,* that derive from his emphasis on interpreting the self as the "silhouette/*pratibimb* of God" [p. 109] such that it is driven with the *Swabhava* of accepting a unilateral obligation of kinship with and deference to the human and non-human world. How Gandhi deployed this idea of absolute equality to epistemically re-interpret *yajna/sewa*/'bodily labour' in a manner that completely rehauled (rather than erase) the traditional Indian understanding of the *varna vyavastha* then forms the (primarily theoretical contra workable) argument of this chapter.

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Chapter five, therefore, projects Gandhi's conception of Justice as a more contextual admixture of *dharma-dhamma-nyaya-niti* which is drawn from each individual's obligation towards maintaining a universally inclusive absolute equality or "[. . .] *Samdarshita* and its derivative . . . *ahimsanat* individual sense of deference to the 'other' whether friendly or hostile." [p. 204, original emphasis] Gandhi, accordingly, invoked the idea of *satyagraha*/soul-force/love-force as well as *tapas* ('intelligent suffering') to harp on individual ownership of responsibility as the only acceptable sanction of justice. This was because he conceived of justice as 'an irreducibly particular and uniquely contextual experience of arriving at the truth in situations of conflict while (all the time) remaining equi-minded to the unjust other.' [p. 226] This is juxtaposed against Ambedkar's preference for a politico-legal contractual notion of Justice (like a separate electorate) that is based on an overlapping consensus which, in turn, is derived from within a 'positionally sequestered' liberal-institutional framework of 'closed' third-party impartiality. For Puri, such a universally closed and non-inclusive conception of Justice came naturally to Ambedkar's inward expressivist modern self given its emphasis upon treating an individual's experience as rather unique, such that, "[. . .] no one who is not born to such suffering/*duhkha* or has shared such an experience can be in a position to know enough . . . about it, so as to be epistemically fit, to enter into debates about . . .[their] justice . . ." [p. 200]

Finally, as the book closes with chapter six, Puri articulates her own response to challenges on the ethics of theorising on the Dalit 'politics of suffering' by stating that, "[. . .] by definition theory involves communication and exchange with other practitioners . . . [hence] one should not exercise ownership over ideas and experiences but share insights in a dialogical space which allows for debate and discussion." [p. 245] In line with this argument, she paves a way forward using Rabindranath Tagore's argument concerning the ability of individuals to mediate a just recourse to their conflict through "trust", that arises from the *surplus*/generosity of the human self which allows them to understand and relate to the sufferings of the other constructively.

The book is a must-read for encapsulating the deeper philosophical issues informing the debate between Ambedkar and Gandhi. The author's long-term familiarity with Gandhi-Ambedkar scholarship (chapter 9, pp 129-143) has gained fresh new ground evident in the deep, insightful, and critical reflection on the contradictions involving the two great leaders on the universal ideas of freedom, autonomy and justice. The book will be of value to those who wish to unravel

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Gandhi-Ambedkar scholarship beyond the conventional polemics and hagiography surrounding the two scholars.

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