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An Insightful Account of the Life and Work of B.R. Ambedkar

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A new voluminous biography of B.R. Ambedkar, drawing on diverse sources, including material in Marathi, attempts to shed new light on this icon, avoiding most pitfalls of past accounts of his life.

Over the last two and half decades, B.R. Ambedkar has become an intriguing phenomenon in India's political and social life. The renewed interest in him is reflected in a resurgence of writings on caste and identity politics. Writers, scholars, and public intellectuals, particularly since the 1990s, have been taking an increasing interest in Ambedkar's life and works.

For a long time after India's independence, there was a discomfiture and reluctance to engage with Ambedkar and incorporate him and Dalit histories into mainstream academic writings. The same intellectual world is now enthusiastically celebrating his legacy. The renewed academic interest in Ambedkar and Dalit studies has emerged from the extensive socio-political churning India has witnessed after the 1990s.

In the last few years, there has been a range of studies dealing with Ambedkar's life and times, which has reinvigorated scholarly interest in him. In 2023, more than five works on him were published, providing scholars, researchers, and curious readers access to the world of the anti-caste movements that have shaped the political contours of post-independent India. Of this bunch, *A Part Apart: The Life and Thought of B.R. Ambedkar*, authored by Ashok Gopal, is an important addition.

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Despite lacking academic training in history, Gopal has penned the most updated biography on Ambedkar in English. Published by Navayana Publishing, it has 20 chapters, a postscript, and a detailed bibliography, all spread across 864 pages. Multi-volume works on Ambedkar's writings and speeches and Marathi biographies of him have been carefully sourced to construct a narrative of him from a refreshingly new perspective. Changdev Khairmode's 12-volume Marathi biography of Ambedkar and scholarly works by Vasant Moon and Y.D. Phadke are frequently referred to in the book.

Ambedkar's contributions are often only mentioned when speaking about the inception of organised Dalit politics in modern India. Popular narratives about him primarily focus on his association with caste, untouchability, and the politics of social justice that he propounded. At the same time, his contribution to drafting the Indian Constitution is also widely recognised and celebrated.

Yet, few recognise his abilities as a mass mobiliser and a leader of the peasant movement, a stellar scholar, a passionate communicator, and a loving family man. Valerian Rodrigues (2002) has astutely noted elsewhere that India would have been a different country without Ambedkar—potentially a society characterised by greater inequality and injustice. Gopal's work captures the many facets of Ambedkar's life with vivid details and sharp insights. His thorough research and compelling narrative offer a rich tapestry of Ambedkar's eventful life.

Early Life

After a preface and an introduction, Gopal moves to the inner world of Ambedkar's life and ideas. His dynamic picture of Ambedkar is backed by rich references and an extensive bibliography. The primary sources are listed, and the problems associated with missing translation texts/references are discussed. The narrative begins with Ambedkar's birth in 1891 and ends its way to his end in 1956. This timeline provides an expansive but synoptic look at Ambedkar's life and several important historical events.

The first few chapters discuss the Ambedkar family's history. It also touches on his relationship with his father, Ramji Ambedkar, and his marital life with Ramabai, who he married in 1907. There is also a detailed history of the Mahars, an untouchable caste of western India, and their links to the military establishment, colonialism, untouchability, and assertive politics of the Satyashodhak Samaj. Gopal's narrative thus elegantly sets the scene for more extensively exploring the Ambedkar phenomenon.

The 19th century’s social and familial contexts deeply impacted Ambedkar’s life and thoughts, and the biography attempts to emphasise this. It has accounts of those who played a significant role in Ambedkar’s personal and academic life—his wife Ramabai; Sayajirao Gaikwad, Maharaja of the Baroda, who funded his studies in the United States; and Krushanaji Arjun Keluskar, a public intellectual associated with the non-Brahmin movement (pp.104–109).

Gopal shows how Ambedkar employed [the political philosopher] Dewey’s concepts in modified forms, thereby adopting the latter’s “pragmaticist approach” but not being tied down to any –isms.

In the last few years, numerous scholars have taken a deep interest in Ambedkar’s experiences as a student in India and abroad. One of them, Scott Stroud, in his *Evolution of Pragmatism in India* (2023), presents a persuasive account of how one of Ambedkar’s teachers at Columbia University, John Dewey, had a monumental influence on his life.

Pointing to Ambedkar’s relationship with Dewey, Stroud argues that the American philosopher and psychologist’s influence on him was not limited to an academic familiarity with his concepts and categories. Instead, according to Gopal, Deweyian pragmatism played an important role in pushing Ambedkar to draw up practical strategies for his movement.

Gopal has insightful observations on Ambedkar’s pragmatism. While agreeing with Stroud that Dewey played a major role in Ambedkar’s intellectual journey (pp.125–136, p.183), he also does not want to reduce him to just a Deweyian pragmatist. He shows how Ambedkar employed Dewey’s concepts in modified forms, thereby adopting the latter’s “pragmaticist approach” but not being tied down to any -isms (p. 132).

He also traces the intellectual impact of Western scholars and philosophers, such as Edmund Burke, William Robertson Smith, Karl Marx, Edwin Seligman, and Reinhold Niebuhr, on Ambedkar’s development. This portrait of Ambedkar situates him in the broader intellectual history of modern India.

Compared to other English biographies of Ambedkar, this one is fully engaged with his scholarly world, his writings, and the institutions that shaped him. It discusses Ambedkar’s early works such as “Caste in India”, “Small Holding in India”, a review of Bertrand Russell’s *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, and his Columbia doctoral thesis, *Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India* (pp. 141–169).

Throughout the book, Gopal traces the roots of Ambedkar’s ideas and explores their nuances. This is helpful in critically evaluating the works Ambedkar produced during different phases of his life and understanding their significance to contemporary times.

Gopal examines Ambedkar’s scholarly essay *Caste in India*, which he wrote as a student at Columbia University. Gopal discusses the essay’s strengths and argues that it highlights that caste cannot be merely understood as a random social group but as a system of relations between groups, provided with a self-definition (p. 151). This understanding is reflected in Ambedkar’s celebrated statement that the caste cannot exist in a singular form but only in relation to other castes—“Castes exist only in the plural number. There is no such thing as caste; there are always castes.”

That said, like many scholars, Gopal reiterates how Ambedkar’s early training in anthropology, history, religion, and economics prepared him well for a life as a leader, statesman, and intellectual. Ambedkar’s training in economics—with two doctoral dissertations, one dealing with the history of colonial finance, and the other, with the Indian currency system (pp. 156–169), has been largely ignored in academic studies. But Ambedkar’s grounding in economics helped him comprehend the exploitative character of colonial rule.

Though Gopal strives to grasp Ambedkar’s economic ideas by examining his doctoral dissertations, it becomes apparent that he could not delve much into them. His analysis of Ambedkar’s economic philosophy lacks depth and does not say much about how his doctoral studies affected his leadership and the movement he led.

Organisational Politics

The book examines Ambedkar’s public life from 1919 to 1956 in detail. Chapters 4 to 9 lay a strong foundation for understanding the major milestones in Ambedkar’s life in the 1920s, which influenced his leadership in the next three decades. They also offer a concise overview of the burgeoning Dalit mobilisations that ultimately carved out a prominent space for organised Dalit politics in western India. There are details of a variety of public initiatives undertaken by Ambedkar in the 1920s, such as the establishment of the

Bahishkrut Hitkarni Sabha in 1924, his anti-landlord (anti-*Khoti*) activism in the Konkan region, and his role in launching the Marathi newspapers *Mooknayak* (1920), *Bahishkrut Bharat* (1927), and *Janata* (1930).

It is often found that scholars studying Ambedkar's philosophy and ideas seldom engage with the histories of the organisations that he established. While his thoughts and writings are significant in the history of the anti-caste movement, the organisations he founded and led during his public life are no less so. The book throws significant light on organisations such as the Bahishkrut Hitkarni Sabha (founded in 1924), Samaj Samta Sangh (1927), and Samata Sainik Dal (1928), which are inadequately dealt with in other English biographies of Ambedkar.

Gopal examines old documents to gather information and attempts to connect many dots that could be missed (pp. 216–225, 333–340). For example, the rise and fall of Maratha caste leader Vitthal Ramji Shinde, a well-known sympathiser of the untouchable movement in the early 20th century, is well documented.

It can be argued that the Mahad agitations inaugurated a new era of mass-based Dalit politics in modern India and the significance of this cannot be overlooked.

Despite comprehensive details on Ambedkar's early public life, Gopal's account fails to highlight the churning within the Dalit community in the 1920s that ushered in assertive Dalit politics. From 1920 onwards, a vibrant and articulate leadership among Dalits emerged across western India, leaving upper-caste Hindus such as Shinde on the sidelines. In this era, there were notable shifts in the organisational growth and mobilisation patterns among Dalits in the Bombay Presidency.

These transformations promoted Ambedkar and drew lesser-known young leaders across western India into a broader movement. During the 1920s, Dalit mass politics in western India was essentially shaped by translating the community's grievances into an effective political language. All the while, it was concerned with moulding Dalits into a political entity.

The book discusses the context and aftermath of the agitations at Mahad in 1927. Most of the facts used in Gopal's narrative are from the Marathi writings of Khairmode, Y.D. Phadke, and R.B. More, and he assembles them to build a coherent narrative of the satyagraha.

It can be argued that the Mahad agitations inaugurated a new era of mass-based Dalit politics in modern India and the significance of this cannot be overlooked. However, unlike Anand Teltumbde's work (2022) on the Mahad agitations, Gopal avoids taking a sanctimonious position on its legacy.

Chapters 3 to 9 provide a decent backdrop to the emergence of Ambedkar's politics in the 1920s. Yet, they do not engage much with the factors contributing to Ambedkar's rise as a popular leader in that decade. Although Gopal provides an overview of the prominent campaigns undertaken by Dalits in the 1920s, he overlooks the response of the masses to Ambedkar's campaigns.

National Leadership

Chapters 10 to 16 cover the most significant period of Ambedkar's life, the 1930s. The Gandhi-Ambedkar clash, the Round Table Conferences, and Ambedkar's establishment of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) were the significant events of the decade that later shaped Dalit politics. As he traversed the country during this period, Ambedkar emerged as the foremost national leader of the untouchables.

Gopal covers all the important events of the 1930s, and the Ambedkar and Gandhi tussle is minutely documented. Despite exhaustive discussions among scholars on the conversations between the two, Gopal's approach is refreshingly different. Many accounts have reduced both of them to stubborn and eccentric figures—in popular Dalit narratives, Gandhi is usually portrayed as an obstinate politician indifferent to Dalit demands. While many scholarly works have genuinely tried to understand the relationship, they have frequently neglected to consult vernacular sources. Gopal does this assiduously.

A major limitation of Gopal's treatment of the Gandhi-Ambedkar relationship is that he does not engage with the history of antagonism between assertive Dalits and the nationalist political movement of the time.

Gopal rightly points out that the tendency of academics to ignore essential sources such as the *Janata* (a newspaper Ambedkar founded in 1930) has been a factor in the lack of clarity on the Gandhi-Ambedkar relationship (pp. 403–405). He provides detailed accounts of conversations between Ambedkar and Gandhi in the 1930s and later by consulting the *Janata* and other sources. Contrary to popular political and academic narratives, the relationship between Gandhi and Ambedkar was not immediately one of hostility.

It is often overlooked that the differences between the two leaders evolved over a period of time. Gopal provides an account with nuanced details, highlighting how Ambedkar ultimately rose to oppose Gandhi in the 1930s. According to him, the clash was not just a consequence of differing viewpoints but also due to Gandhi's inflexibility, which caught both allies and adversaries off guard. Using vernacular periodicals as sources, Gopal shows that Gandhi and Ambedkar were willing to compromise, but it did not lead to a settlement (p. 428).

A major limitation of Gopal's treatment of the Gandhi-Ambedkar relationship is that he does not engage with the history of antagonism between assertive Dalits and the nationalist political movement of the time. The newspaper sources used by Gopal, like the *Janata* and the *Times of India*, reported many clashes between nationalists and Ambedkar's followers in the early 1930s. This is missing in Gopal's account. If he had delved deeply into the provincial politics of western India, he would have more fully comprehended Ambedkar's strong criticism of Gandhi and the nationalist politics led by the Congress.

Conversion and Class Politics

The last few chapters discuss the dynamics of religious conversion and its effect on Ambedkar's later life, though this theme reverberates throughout the book. While Gopal points out that non-Mahar Dalits kept away from the conversion movement, he tends to present a simplistic picture of the antagonism between Mahars and non-Mahar Dalits. He argues that the conversion further alienated non-Mahar Dalit leaders from the Ambedkar-led political movement (p. 221).

However, this is an incorrect reading. Prominent Chambhar caste leaders such as S.N. Shitarkar and P.N. Rajbhoj, both mentioned by Gopal, did not leave Ambedkar immediately after the conversion announcement. Instead, other factors led to their distancing from him. Ambedkar's conversion did not become so contentious an issue for Dalits in the 1930s as to split the community.

Gopal emphasises that non-Mahar Dalits were apprehensive about the Ambedkar-led movement. While it is true that non-Mahar participation was limited, Ambedkar's political leadership was undisputed from the 1920s to the 1940s. Most non-Mahar leaders supported Ambedkar's nomination to the first Round Table Conference. The most celebrated Dalit cricketer, P. Baloo, a Chambhar, welcomed Ambedkar's nomination in 1930.

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An article written by Chambhar leader Sakharam Narayanrao Kajrolkar, published in *Lokheet*, a Marathi periodical, echoed the sentiments that Baloo expressed. He rejected Congress Depressed Classes Party leader B.J. Devrukhkar's idea that Ambedkar should not be recognised as a representative of all Dalit castes. Kajrolkar interestingly argued that while Ambedkar's "political leadership" was unquestionable, it was confined to the "political realm". This disallowed him from interfering in "internal" caste matters (*Lokheet*, 7 October 1930).

The fragmentation of Dalits in western India during the 1940s and 1950s was not solely because of inter-caste conflicts. It was also spurred by the shifting political and electoral landscape. The provincial elections of 1937 were a significant catalyst, prompting many to distance themselves from Ambedkar's leadership. While conflicts between Mahars and Chambhars were evident, other non-Mahar groups largely supported Ambedkar's leadership till the 1940s. However, Ambedkar's criticisms of Mahars and non-Mahar Dalits for their caste rivalries underline the growing challenges of inter-caste tensions in the movement.

The book engages with Ambedkar's active participation in the peasant and working-class movements. While scholars scramble to make a conclusive point about Ambedkar's politics of the 1930s, Gopal rightly avoids drawing hasty conclusions. He touches on Ambedkar's Konkan-based anti-Khoti peasant politics and Bombay-based labour politics, the two areas in which he was most active. However, Gopal understands Ambedkar's politics of the 1930s primarily as an "abrupt swing to the left" (p. 562).

This, in my view, is incorrect. If we investigate Ambedkar’s politics of the 1920s and 1930s, we see there was no sudden “swing” to a socialist agenda. The writings in the *Janata* also help us counter Gopal’s argument that the move to the left was abrupt. Gopal’s narrative does not go beyond the electoral politics of the ILP to understand the import of Ambedkar’s politics. Contrary to popular understanding, communist ideology was never rejected by Dalits in the 1930s.

During the first two years of the *Janata*, it was edited by Devrao Naik, a Brahmin associated with Ambedkar since the late 1920s. Naik was sympathetic towards communism as a political ideology. As editor, Naik attempted to bridge the gap between Marxist ideas and anti-caste Dalit politics. Early writings in the *Janata* put forth the Marxist perspective on class struggles and encouraged Dalits and communists to adopt this approach to understand Indian caste politics.

Ambedkar faced challenges in balancing his roles as both a Constitution maker and a leader of marginalised social groups, Gopal argues.

The final four chapters (17 to 20) focus on the last 14 years of Ambedkar’s life, from 1942 to 1956. They focus on his diverse roles, including his involvement in the Viceroy’s cabinet, his leadership of the Scheduled Caste Federation, and his pivotal contributions to the Constitution-making process. They also touch upon his concerns on the “Pakistan question”, his critical engagement with the Congress during the 1940s and 1950s, and his decision to embrace Buddhism in 1956.

While not exhaustive, Gopal examines Ambedkar’s participation in the Constitution-making process and points out that his role was paradoxical in a sense. Ambedkar faced challenges in balancing his roles as both a Constitution maker and a leader of marginalised social groups, Gopal argues, resulting in an inability to effectively fight for the demands he outlined in *States and Minorities* (1947) (p. 682). This facet of Ambedkar warrants further exploration within a broader context.

Gopal traces the history of Ambedkar’s interest in the conversion movement and his dialogues with other religious leaders on conversion. Right from the introductory chapter, he begins engaging with Ambedkar’s Buddhism. Gopal attempts to explore the nuances of Ambedkar’s announcement on leaving Hinduism in 1935 and seeks to uncover a “hidden” meaning behind the declaration. In doing so, he unnecessarily problematises a simple statement and ends up confusing readers. This aspect of Gopal’s commentary does not gel with his insights on conversion-related events in the last few chapters.

Concluding Remarks

The evolution of Ambedkar-led politics in western India cannot be fully understood without considering the history of organised Dalit politics. After Ambedkar’s era, Dalits from the region played a significant role in shaping the anti-caste discourse of today. However, there are very few historical studies on Ambedkarite activism—only a handful of scholarly works from the late 1990s and early 2000s address it.

Most Dalit histories primarily focus on Ambedkar’s pronouncements, neglecting grassroots movements. The challenge for Ambedkarite scholarship and politics now is in elucidating the historical links between Ambedkar’s movement and Ambedkar the historical figure.

The book scarcely goes beyond Ambedkar’s life, and despite its length, revolves around the usual narratives, such as the Mahad satyagraha, Round Table Conferences, Gandhi-Ambedkar differences, and Buddhism. It overlooks many other crucial aspects of Ambedkar’s life.

For example, Ambedkar’s relationship with provincial Dalit movements is conspicuously missing. As a result, the Hyderabad-based Dalit movement that shaped the anti-caste politics of the Marathwada region (a Marathi-speaking region in the princely state of Hyderabad) in post-colonial Maharashtra is not discussed in the book. Second, Ambedkar’s intervention as a labour minister who passed wide-ranging labour legislation is not discussed in detail. Third, Ambedkar introduced the first maternity bill in the late 1920s in the Bombay Legislative Assembly, but this is missing from Gopal’s account.

The challenge for Ambedkarite scholarship and politics now is in elucidating the historical links between Ambedkar’s movement and Ambedkar the historical figure.

Discussions of this nature would have helped challenge the conventional view about Ambedkar, which narrows him down to things concerning caste and untouchability. Even though Gopal covers other details of Ambedkar’s life, his narrative re-establishes Ambedkar within the framework of caste and untouchability.

The biography vividly foregrounds the limitations inherent in producing a comprehensive account of Ambedkar’s life. While Gopal’s efforts are commendable, it is doubtful whether a single volume can fully include all facets of Ambedkar’s life and his contributions. Notwithstanding some limitations, this book moves beyond being a stereotypical description of Ambedkar’s life and offers us thought-provoking insights into the complexities of caste politics in modern India. It is an important addition to the literature on Ambedkar and the Dalit movement.

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