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An Iconoclast on an Iconoclast

By: Ashok Gopal

This reflective biography of B.R. Ambedkar offers a detailed account of Ambedkar's life and work. Its strength lies in author Anand Teltumbde's insightful evaluation. There are shortcomings, but the analysis provides a valuable perspective on Ambedkar's legacy.

In his posthumously published tome, *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, B.R. Ambedkar presents his view of the Buddha's life and his teachings, according to purposes he considers important. In the process, he departs from established narratives and interpretations.

In *Iconoclast: A Reflective Biography of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar*, Anand Teltumbde follows the same approach, with one crucial difference. Ambedkar does not criticise the Buddha. Teltumbde, on the other hand, asserts that Ambedkar was wrong on many issues.

But this opinion does not form the bulk of his book. As is the case with *Dhamma*, *Iconoclast* is mainly a detailed account of the life of a person and his ideas on several issues. Into this account, Teltumbde inserts evaluative comments.

The comparison of *Iconoclast* with *Dhamma* may seem gratuitous, particularly as Teltumbde does not discuss *Dhamma* at all. The parallel did not strike me either, until I re-read *Iconoclast* and paused at a question posed by Teltumbde in his preface.

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If, he asks, Ambedkar could challenge the "well-entrenched story" of the Buddha by "weighing 'facts' on the touchstone of reality" in *Dhamma*, why could not the same thing be done with the well-established account of Ambedkar's life and achievements?

By way of an answer, Teltumbde undertakes the daunting task. Anyone who has been following his writings over the past few decades would agree he is eminently qualified for the job.

Fiercely independent, he has been critical of the Indian Right as well as the Left, and all that supposedly falls in the middle. Born in a Dalit family and related to Ambedkar's family by marriage, he has also written critically about Ambedkar and the politics carried out by people who claim to be his followers.

Driving Teltumbde's trenchant writings is the conviction that what India needs foremost is a class-based people's movement, which recognises the reality of caste and seeks to annihilate it. Towards this end, he has worked as an activist and ideologue.

Taking time off from his professional life as a corporate business head and later management academic, he has also done valuable archival work. Before anyone else, he digitised the volumes of *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches* (BAWS) published by the Government of Maharashtra, and made them available online.

Digging into government records and other primary sources, he wrote *Mahad: The Making of the First Dalit Revolt* (2016), a detailed account of two events that took place in 1927 at Mahad (Maharashtra), marking the beginning of the Ambedkar *chalval* (movement). Among Teltumbde's other contributions towards a better understanding of Ambedkar is *Myths and Facts: Ambedkar on Muslims* (2003), a tract exposing the deliberate misreading of Ambedkar's *Pakistan or the Partition of India* (1945) by Hindutvavadis.

Against this background, the publication of *Iconoclast* is, in itself, a noteworthy event. The book emerged in difficult conditions, which Teltumbde recounts in the preface.

Soon after he began on the project in 2018, the powers that be decided he was an enemy of the nation, to be put behind bars under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA). Due to fortuitous circumstances, he managed to launch a legal defence before being arrested. A tortuous struggle for anticipatory bail followed.

Much of *Iconoclast* was written during this period of around 20 months, under the cloud of possibly prolonged imprisonment with the attendant risk of contracting Covid-19 at an advanced age (he is in his early seventies now).

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Teltumbde lost the first round of the legal battle, and was taken to Talaja (Navi Mumbai) jail on 14 April 2020, Ambedkar's birth anniversary. He was confined there for 31 months until the Supreme Court ordered his conditional release in November 2022.

During his time in jail, his book project came to a halt. However, he got to review my manuscript of *A Part Apart: The Life and Thought of BR Ambedkar*, sent to him by the publisher, S Anand of Navayana. (Teltumbde's comments led me to rewrite some portions and correct a few howlers.)

Teltumbde thought that *A Part Apart* was the kind of Ambedkar biography he "desired", but there was a need for a "reflective" biography that would "go beyond a dispassionate life story". Supplemented with his reflections, such a biography would help "people understand the forces that shaped their lives and enable them to assume agency to rethink their present".

After his release, he completed *Iconoclast* according to that scope. Most of the book is a detailed account of Ambedkar's life and work¹, drawn mainly from C.B. Khairmode's 12-volume *Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar* (Marathi) and BAWS, but the book's USP is Teltumbde's evaluation of Ambedkar, which is spread across several chapters. The gist of his report card is as follows.

Ambedkar was extremely lucky to receive higher education abroad. This gave him the capabilities to negotiate with the British government, with some success. However, the movement he launched could not spread, as he did not strive to include people outside his Mahar caste, and he had an irrational antipathy for communism.

After Independence (the report card continues), Ambedkar was co-opted by the Congress, under the directions of a scheming M.K. Gandhi. Ambedkar's role in Constitution-making, often exaggerated, fuelled a reverence for the Constitution of India among Dalits. But the reverence is delusional, as the ruling class subverts the Constitution with impunity. Realising this late in his life, Ambedkar himself dismissed the Constitution. However, the alternative he proposed, by turning to Buddhism as an egalitarian religion, was flawed, as caste thrives regardless of religion, and religion diverts people from pressing material issues.

Ambedkar's political thought, based on a philosophical school known as pragmatism, was easily abused by his successors. For, pragmatism relies on rhetoric to achieve immediate results, without considering the root causes or moral issues at stake.

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Nevertheless, for all his mistakes and failings, which include a "misogynist" attitude towards women, Ambedkar is an inspirational figure as an iconoclast, a person who challenged the "hegemonic social order", fought for "the most downtrodden", was "in the belly of the beast and fighting it", trying to "change the course of history", and failing ("How to see Ambedkar", Ch. 8).

This iconoclastic value is diminished by the blind worship of Ambedkar by Dalits, which is exploited by the ruling class. Through measures such as the construction of grand memorials, Ambedkar has been turned into an icon that is so "overpowering" that "any attempt to view the real Ambedkar" is "near impossible". "Intellectual exercises feigning objectivity" also contribute "skilfully" to Ambedkar's iconisation ("Impact of his praxis", Ch. 8).

The above summary points to the purpose of Teltumbde's project. He is not so much interested in giving a well-rounded picture of Ambedkar and his times as in debunking Ambedkar's iconic status and the forces that sustain it, so that a vibrant post-Ambedkar movement can emerge, sans the mistakes Ambedkar committed.

This objective is unexceptionable, and, as Teltumbde suggests, Ambedkar himself may have approved of it. Teltumbde goes about his task bravely, baring Ambedkar's numerous failings.

Two of the most important failings that emerge from his analysis are Ambedkar’s obsessive linking of caste to Hindu scriptures, and his changing stand on several issues. As Teltumbde shows, both actions had deep effects.

By only harping on the ideology of chaturvarna and its scriptural base, Ambedkar missed out on the economic dimensions of caste. Consequently, as Teltumbde lays out, Ambedkar did not undertake class-based political mobilisation, except during a brief period in the 1930s.

Compounded by Ambedkar’s “communist phobia”, this failure stymied mobilisation of Dalits around their material conditions. Dalit consciousness became dominated by an “identitarian and sectarian” obsession (“A coup against Shinde”, Ch. 2). This does not lead to an improved living status. The majority of Dalits remain “ill-bodied, ill-educated, and sans security of livelihood” (“Individual empowerment”, Ch. 8)

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Ambedkar’s changes in his political positions could be attributed to his practical approach of choosing the best option in situations where he had little power to dictate terms. However, these shifts were poorly explained. This had two effects.

First, unable to “stomach” the “sweeping changes” in Ambedkar’s views, his followers got into the “devotee (bhakt) mode where nothing really matters” (“State of the society”, Ch. 8). Second, without a “shared political orientation”, the Dalit movement suffered multiple divisions, and ‘vast political spaces’ became available for Dalit leaders to “fathom opportunities for profits” (“Collective empowerment”, Ch. 8).

Teltumbde makes many such points, marshalling facts with razor-sharp insights. But in his iconoclastic zeal, he frequently overreaches or underreports.

He concludes that since Ambedkar’s father, Ramji, earned a monthly pension of Rs 50 in the 1910s, which is “the equivalent of Rs 78,750 today”, the family was “relatively well-off” (Ch. 1). By the same logic, people living in the neighbouring chawls of central Mumbai, mostly mill workers earning an average monthly salary of Rs 30, were not poor either.

In his criticism of Ambedkar’s organisational efforts, he glosses over the countermoves of the Congress and Hindu Mahasabha to divide the “Depressed Classes” and diminish Ambedkar’s influence. More fundamentally, he ignores Ambedkar’s repeatedly expressed disinterest in political organisation (a point first noted by the pioneering Ambedkar scholar Eleanor Zelliot in her 1969 PhD thesis, published as *Ambedkar’s World* in 2013).

Teltumbde observes that Ambedkar’s conception of democracy was unprecedentedly expansive, but he does not acknowledge that this conception was the moral base of Ambedkar’s “pragmatism”, which he adopted from John Dewey. Instead, Teltumbde asserts, pragmatism has no “anchor or framework to judge the consequence of an action” (“State of the society”, Ch. 8).

Speaking about Ambedkar’s inconsistencies, Teltumbde claims Ambedkar “declared to the people that if they found his opinions conflicting, they should simply dismiss the previous ones and take the latest ones” (ibid). It was Gandhi who made such a statement (*Harijan*, 30 September 1939). Ambedkar said something profound, about taking responsibility for learning and unlearning (BAWS 1: 139).

On Gandhi’s role in Ambedkar’s entry to the Constituent Assembly (CA), Teltumbde says Gandhi figured the Constitution would “necessarily ... serve the bourgeoisie landlord interests”, and hence “would come in conflict with the vast majority of people”. Therefore, considering Ambedkar’s emerging “demi-god” status and “potential to become an icon”, Gandhi decided to install Ambedkar in the Constituent Assembly so that the “entire lower strata” would uphold the Constitution and not rise up in revolt.

In the manner of a triple jump, this entirely speculative exercise ends with a soft landing. Teltumbde concedes there is “no direct evidence” that Gandhi ensured Ambedkar’s entry into the Constituent Assembly (“A deal with the Congress”, Ch.5).

Teltumbde does not delve into Ambedkar’s central concern—how does one give democracy an ethical base in a country where religion has a powerful influence, and where the dominant religion does not espouse democratic

|| principles?

Regarding Ambedkar's views on women, the statement cited by Teltumbde ("Nagpur felicitation", Ch. 7) and some other statements made by Ambedkar, definitely indicate a conservative (or even ultra-conservative) streak. But there is a world of difference between conservatism and misogyny. There are several other loose statements and forays in *Iconoclast*, which take away from Teltumbde's case, though he makes it forcefully.

To return to *The Buddha and his Dhamma*: It is not discussed in *Iconoclast*. Nor does Teltumbde discuss Ambedkar's other posthumously published writings on religion, morality, the "philosophy of Hinduism", the Bhagvad Gita, and the "revolution and counter-revolution" in ancient India sparked by the teachings of Buddha.

Possibly, Teltumbde bypasses these writings because he thinks Ambedkar's approach to religion was fundamentally flawed. But in a biography of an intellectual ("reflective" or otherwise), omission of a major aspect of the person's thought is surely unfair.

Following the omission, Teltumbde does not delve into Ambedkar's central concern—how does one give democracy an ethical base in a country where religion has a powerful influence, and the dominant religion does not espouse democratic principles?

Ambedkar found the answer in the Buddha's dhamma. Teltumbde dismisses that solution. But he does not deal with the question itself.

He does perceptively note that Ambedkar's concern for regulation of "human actions to create and sustain an 'ideal' society" led him to "extrinsic instruments" in the forms of religion and the state. But he then makes a mystifying claim—neither the state nor religion are required for regulation because, as "explicated" by cybernetics, human systems can be "designed as self-organising, self-regulating systems" ("Cognitive framework", Ch.8).

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A notable feature of *Iconoclast* is that it has around 200 photos, including group photos of people associated with the Ambedkar chival. Their full names are listed in the captions. The listings support a point Teltumbde wants to make—the Ambedkar chival was not a one-man show. However, the purpose is not served well, as the captions do not provide biographical or contextual information. Even in the main text, names such as "Solanki" and "Anandrao Chitre" appear from nowhere, so to speak.

Of particular interest for Ambedkar archivists is a photo of Naval Bhatena, Ambedkar's Parsi friend in Mumbai, who helped him financially at crucial stages. They had first met as students at Columbia University, New York. Little else is known about Bhatena, and the photo procured by Teltumbde is a scoop.

Iconoclast appears to have been completed and sent for printing in a tearing hurry. Basic copy editing has not been done. Several sentences make little sense. One example:

Marxism's entire structure is constructed on the philosophical foundation to deal with the entire canvass [sic] of history for which there could not be a plausible way of discernible action or consequences, as they run homomorphous with the social life itself, Fabians devised a pragmatic method of gradual transition to Socialism, admitting it to be the desirable goal, in contrast to Marxism's class struggle and revolution. ("State of the society", Ch. 8)

There are numerous errors. In Chapter 2, "Bapusaheb" Sahasrabuddhe, Ambedkar's Konkanastha Chitpavan Brahmin associate, who was an admirer of the reformist writer Gopal Ganesh Agarkar, is said to have belonged to the "Agarkari caste"; in one subhead, the supposed surname of Ambedkar's close friend in England is printed as "Fitzerald"; and in a caption, Ambedkar's birth date is 14 April 1992. In Chapter 8, Ambedkar's *savarna* colleagues from the Chandraseniya Kayastha Prabhu (CKP) jati are said to be from the "RSD jati".

Readers, who must shell out more than a thousand rupees to buy a copy of *Iconoclast*, deserve better. Hopefully, they will overlook the book's flaws and grasp its message. By doing so, they would not be diminishing Ambedkar's greatness. For, as he once said, "No great man really does his work by crippling his disciples, by forcing on them his maxims or his conclusions" (BAWS 1: 240).

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Footnotes:

1 In several sections, such as a discussion on John Dewey’s influence on Ambedkar, Teltumbde reproduces whole sentences and arguments from 'A Part Apart', mostly without acknowledging the source. I am not complaining, but others might have a different view. (Incidentally, Ambedkar also freely used other writers’ statements to build his arguments.)