

Reading *Annihilation of Caste* from a Cultural Perspective

DIPAK BARKHADE¹

ABSTRACT

Annihilation of Caste is a layered text about and against the caste-system. It reveals political thought of Babasaheb Ambedkar in an elaborate manner. The present paper aims at unravelling a multi-layered face of this text and a multi-dimensional nature of the Ambedkarite thought from a cultural perspective. It uses the philosophic letter of Rohith Vemula, film, interview, anecdote, etc. in this regard. It argues that though Ambedkar is impersonal in his mode of writing as a political scientist and a social scientist, he presents his critique of caste problematic with an affective force. While Babasaheb wanted to convey Hindu reformers their intellectual fallacy and an urgency for them to listen his critique of the caste-system, *Annihilation of Caste* illustrates his affective force by inviting readers to participate in the debate on the abolishment of the caste-system. The paper calls for a strong relevance of *Annihilation of Caste* to highlight that this text has a status of after-life and Babasaheb is a larger figure in the arena of cultural studies.

KEYWORDS: *caste, culture, Hinduism, Ambedkarism, identity and affect*

¹ Dipak Barkhade (dipakmbarkhade1987@gmail.com) is a PhD student at Centre for Comparative Literature, University of Hyderabad.

Annihilation of Caste is Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's (Babasaheb's) undelivered speech which he prepared in 1936. It was prepared for the annual conference at Lahore. The organizers of the conference were well known social activists and part of Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal. They did not allow Babasaheb to deliver his speech. They did not agree with his idea of conversion into another religion out of Hinduism. His project of social reformation did not fit into their scheme of Hindu morality.

The present paper is an attempt to read *Annihilation of Caste* by placing it against the cultural context. Babasaheb is concerned in it more with the methodologies than giving answers to the problem of caste. He believes that Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal has no ground to tell him how to explain the problem of caste. In the prologue to his speech, he rather expects it to simply tell him that he is either right or wrong in this case ("Annihilation" 33). Babasaheb argues for a movement that is able to accommodate 'Dalit' as a universal category. The speech demands inclusion of—Dalits, Adivasis, religious minorities and women—marginalized groups. It argues that "political revolutions" can't escape "social and religious revolutions" (43). Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal, on the other hand, praises and pressurizes Babasaheb to modify his speech and avoid his criticism against Hindu scriptures (25). Babasaheb chooses to stick with his words firmly in his intellectual battlefield. He takes side with the minority and demands for them "safeguards" from the Hindu majority (43).

Babasaheb observes a dichotomy created by Hinduism. He views two categories in relation to Hinduism; the insiders and the outsiders. He does not just construct more sociological categories based on the existing social realities; in fact, he goes into the philosophical roots of the same realities. For instance, he is suspicious of a Hindu socialist. A Hindu socialist places himself in the narrative of historic materialism. He imports the ideas of economic revolution from Europe but alienates himself to the facts of India. He refuses to historicize his caste. He does not mind "tyranny and oppression" of one class against another in this case (46). He speaks against oppression but he is alien to the 'Other' of his liberal self. The Other of his self is signified in his act of keeping distance from the Dalits. Dalits are segregated geographically and culturally. Indian village is a classic

example to understand this phenomena (Ambedkar, *Words* 77). This leads us to mark an emotional lacuna in the Hindu culture.

Babasaheb discusses the "callings" of Hindus ("Annihilation" 48). A Dalit is entitled to enter elite institutions today but he or she may not be 'called', meaning a Dalit may not be socialized positively and helped by Brahmins and savarnas. It becomes difficult for a Dalit to feel worthy of playing roles in such institutions. Hindu society is "*a division of labourers*" (emphasis in original 47) but it is more than that. It is a division of the Dalit 'self'. The case of Rohith Vemula, a PhD research scholar in the University of Hyderabad, from Dalit community also alludes to such a division of self in the suicide letter penned by him. Vemula was charged with the penalty of a "social boycott" by the administration (Senthilkumar 19). He writes: "I feel a growing gap between my soul and my body. And I have become a monster" (75). A break with one's own self draws attention to a metaphysical condition of the Dalit existence. It inflicts "the ultimate torture" on the Dalit mind and body (15). Severe penalties of the caste system are imposed on Dalit youth who represent the self-respect movement. They harm young Dalits. They can disturb their nervous system, damaging self-identity, bodily and mentally. Babasaheb distinguishes between caste and race because the effect of the caste system is more complex. The complexity of its effect can be illustrated in the social experience of a woman from a privileged background as well.

Many have discussed caste and race as the two incompatible axes of identity. Caste is not a descent of any racial or genetic magic (Ambedkar, "Annihilation" 49). It is not produced by genetically selected samples. It has nothing to do with science. Even scientists call Caste a variety but of the same species of men. It is a social construct. It is followed by "a perverse section of the Hindus" which is arrogant, selfish and obsessed with caste supremacy (50). Having noted this, it is important to depart from the analogy between two individual categories of caste and race. Caste does not denote a scientific reality. A "judicious mating" (49) between the social entity of caste and the scientific entity of race can 'reproduce' hybrid identity by coincidence. Such case of mating challenges the cultural supremacy of Brahmins and savarnas. For instance, Priyanka Yoshikawa, the Miss World-

Japan 2016 is born to Indian/Bengali male and Japanese female. In one of her interviews published in YouTube with a title “Define Yourself,” Yoshikawa explains that she faced identity crisis. She grew up as an “outsider” in Japan. She experienced social obligations to reflect Indianness when she traveled to other places (2:20-2:59). She does not identify herself either with Indian (Caste identity) or Japanese (racial identity) but with a global identity (8:57-9:08). The story of Yoshikawa indicates that the caste system is not open to foreignness.

Babasaheb argues that Hindus fail to communicate with the world because they are always conscious of their caste. They cannot possess “things in common” with other fellow beings (“Annihilation” 50-51). For instance, it is believed that a Hindu festival demonstrates a moment when all castes erase the lines of social divisions, come together and lose themselves in the flow of a celebration. Such a moment looks similar to the concept of “carnavalesque” or “carnival” which is proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin in cultural theory. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan show that carnivalesque is “opposed to the official feast” (686). However, Bakhtinian concept of “carnival” does not resonate with Hinduness. It does not explain the social reality of Hindu culture because a collective celebration of a Hindu festival, in its popular space, cannot escape exclusion of the Dalit identity. The concept of “carnavalesque” or “carnival” is rather caught by a dominant gaze of caste at the Dalit body in literary context of India. Dalit films of Nagraj Manjule, a Dalit filmmaker, can illustrate this point in terms of his cinematic intervention. His Marathi film, *Fandry* (2014) narrates the world of Jabya (played by Somnath Avghade), a young boy from a Dalit community and his attraction for Shalu (played by Rajeshwari Kharat), an upper-caste (Maratha) girl. Jabya is looked down upon by the upper-caste Hindus in the village. He finds out an opportunity to dance in a Hindu festival. He participates in the festival. He tries to impress Shalu who watches the celebration from the other side. It is shown that the festival allows all caste members to come together and participate in the celebration except Jabya. Jabya cannot enter the Hindu space and dance together in a cultural harmony. He is pushed out from the middle of celebration by his class mate and a haughty man (Manjule 01:05:51-01:06:50). Chankya (played out by Manjule himself) is a bicycle mechanic and friend of Jabya. His

entry challenges such a moment of cultural exclusion in this particular scene. Chankya gets drunk heavily and enters the crowd in a frenzy. He takes Jabya along with him on his shoulder to the middle of celebration (01:07:00-01:09:00). Jabya is a pork-eater and Hindus cannot eat pork as per their belief system. Manjule dismantles Hinduness in his narrative of a collective celebration. He plays out the visibility of a Dalit boy and his attempt for love, though temporarily, by playing out madness of Chankya on the screen.

A Dalit boy like Jabya cannot be loved for his belonging to the past of a stigmatized caste. Against this background, Babasaheb argues that caste is "anti-social" because it trains a high-caste Hindu in "protecting its own interest" on the ground of pastness ("Annihilation" 52). He equates love with the notion of civility and finds its manifestation in Adivasi culture. He states: "Civilizing the aborigines means adopting them as your own, living in their midst, and cultivating fellow-feeling, in short loving them. How is it possible for a Hindu to do this? His whole life is one anxious effort to preserve his caste" (53). Unlike caste Hindus, an Adivasi is neither "anxious" of the "contact" of others nor he/she is bound by a "duty to preserve his caste" (53). Hindus cannot civilize Adivasis and raise humanity (52). *Annihilation of Caste* offers "the constructive side of the problem" in response to the uncivility of Hindu culture (57).

Babasaheb contextualizes the principles of fraternity, liberty and equality respectively in the larger projects of nationalism, democracy and modernity (57-58). He finds that nationalism is built on the communicative praxis. It necessitates social cohesion and mobility of citizens through all channels and contacts. He argues that democracy is not simply a matter of governing people. He demands the redistribution of power for all social groups so that the latter can choose freely. He counts that modernity does not mean simply equalization of people in one homogenous society. Indian society cannot be marked by modernity when it fails to recognize the diverse identities and their rights. Babasaheb engages in the politics of naming, conversion, memory, emotions, justice and universality to actualize the mentioned principles.

A Dalit is challenged by his/her ascribed designation in the caste hierarchy (58-59). The use of name is political act in this case. It travels with a person mentally. Its agenda

must be taken seriously (Guru). For instance, the discourse of past is dominated by high caste elites. It is based on Brahminical belief-system. The reconstruction of past based on Buddhist thought is essential to reimagine a new political culture. Babasaheb reconstructs an alternative past because there are “certain notions and sentiments, which determine a person’s attitude towards men and things” (“Annihilation” 59). He claims that “the Maurya Empire” signifies “a period of freedom, greatness and glory” (63). He argues that “social significance” of caste is completely different in the socio-political context of religious minorities, particularly, Buddhism (65-66). Caste is not built on the relationship between master and slave in religious minorities. A converted Dalit is not obliged to be the “ward” of caste system. He/she liberates himself/herself from the social contract with an upper-caste who claims to be the “guardians” of Hinduism (62-63).

The conceptual words such as “courage”, “mind”, “sacredness”, “notions”, “sanctity”, “the spirit of Caste and the consciousness of Caste”, etc. are used by Babasaheb in *Annihilation of Caste* to answer how caste can be abolished. He also questions the dominant “prescription” of Hindu reformers for the abolishment of caste (67-69). These categories denote that the problem of caste is qualitative more than quantitative. They pertain to the deeper issues with the enslavement or the colonization of mind. Babasaheb makes it clear that the holding of “inter-caste dinners and inter-caste marriages is like forced feeding brought about by artificial means” (68). They might be played out as a political gimmick. *Annihilation of Caste* encodes the narrative of affect or emotion against such intellectual artificiality. Hence, Ambedkarite notion of fraternity demands attention.

Babasaheb can be called a pessimist because the internal structure of Caste system is very much “graded” (72). He counts it unbeatable by organizing “a common front” since the intellectual class among “secular” sections poisons each caste with a reminder that it may be the “slave” in political hierarchy but “not equal in status” to other castes in social context. Brahmins play the role of “mischief-mongers” (72). They predominantly distribute the “social and religious rights” (72). Babasaheb has different dimensions to his intellectual thought while observing a person who believes in caste-supremacy. One of such dimensions is of laughter too. When the upper-caste person travels with men/women

belonging to “lower” castes, the situation becomes “a source of amusement” (73). There is a tacit compromise in Brahminical practice of untouchability. Caste culturally mediates the mind of Hindus (Jaaware 271). This reminds the event about Mangal Pandey, who is cherished as a freedom fighter in history. However, Pandey is a subject of mockery. He was ridiculed by an “untouchable” because he didn't know that he had touched with his mouth beef fat, while using his gun, against his tradition every day. He fought in defense of his tradition. Caste blinds a man/woman making a joke out of him/her in this context.

Hinduism is a “misconception,” a “misrepresentation” (“Annihilation” 76). It is propagated by the media as religion by the means of social and political engineering. Babasaheb calls it a “bounded duty” of the reformers (of Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal) to unmask Hinduism which wears the face of spirituality (76). He asks them to “realize” by themselves and make the dominant castes “realize” the distinction between “principles” and “rules” (75-76). He argues that religion is not a manual for cooking (75). It is an ideal as long as it is built on the principles. An ideal religion is subject to amendments. Its follower bears the objective of “justice” in mind and a universality in character (76).

The present article was an attempt to highlight the significance of *Annihilation of Caste* as an anti-caste text and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar as an anti-caste philosopher. It reinstates that Babasaheb and his speech embody a life in productive manner. Babasaheb doesn't claim a finite truth but a critical acumen in the reconstruction of a casteless religion. This is exemplified in the use of the metaphors of “a new body” for “a new life” in *Annihilation of Caste* (78). The metaphor of “new body” signifies new “outlook”, “values”, “attitude”, etc. towards a new conception of religion which must be consistent with democracy. Babasaheb proposes a new body of historiography of a democratic religion—written like never before—to change the human mind, life and existence itself towards a better future.

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