



GANDHI AND AMBEDKAR: WHERE SHALL TWAIN MEET? READING DR NAGARAJ'S 'THE FLAMING FEET' AND MORE.

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ABSTRACT

The author of the much acclaimed book 'Flaming the Feet', DR Nagaraj was influenced by great socialist thinker and leader Ram Manohar Lohia's political and social thoughts. He was one of the leading intellectual figure of 'Dalith Sangharsh Samithi', of Karnataka.

KEYWORDS : Dalits, Caste, Untouchability, Interdining and Segregation.

The new politics gained strength from the Dalit literature that had earned widespread popularity in the 1960s and 70s. It had its reverberations in UP, Bihar, Punjab, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andra, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. In kannada Devannur Mahadeva, Siddhalingayya and D.R. Nagaraj were in the forefront of this movement. They inturn were inspired by the group of new literary scholars (writers) from Dr.Ananthamurthy to Chandrasekhara Kambar. All of them had involved themselves in political activism along with their literary activities. They also held academic positions (posts).

In 1997 the nation was celebrating the 50th year of independence. Two great men who had responded disinterestedly (unexcitendly) and indifferently to the attainment freedom of 1947 were viewing the celebrations from adjacent rooms in heaven, with anger and a shade of melancholy. Ambedkar responds grievingly (gloomingly) to the religious strife (hostility) and evil practices that had frown over these fifty years. "My staunch (all time) rival, the Gujarathi Baina Saint would not Sanction (agree with, approve of) all these". Gandhiji replied thus, "If the man next door, Babasaheb, the great Acholar, had written my 'The Hind Swaraj', how could it have been? The well acclaimed atheist and renowned economist would have (proven) my arguments with statistical evidence (data)". None (but) like Nagaraj could have brought about (could have envisioned such a communion harmonious union).

Gandhi and Ambedkar pervade the entire text of Nagaraj's flaming feet as an unseen presence. The 21 century readers would not have witnessed a face to face interaction (such an encounter) between Gandhiji and Ambedkar. However they have a rebirth and seem to be in real conversation in the works of Nagaraj. He unveils (opens) the Gandhi – Ambedkar debate using the device of Dramatic irony that is extensively found in Kannada literature.

He tried to explain low the (miserable condition) plight of the Dalit has improved through the conflict between self purification and self esteem. The aim of both Gandhi (respect) and Ambedkar has been to uphold the self esteem and dignity of the Dalits.

Untouchability was the problem (issue) of the upper caste Hindu, when the upper caste Hindu would convince his conscience and purify his soul untouchability would end. Untouchability is the consequence of the caste system in Hindu society. The Dalit and the Sudra are the outcaste in this system. The mental transformation (reformation) of the upper caste Hindu is the solution. Through self purification he would overcome untouchability. Gandhiji's plan was idealistic and at the same time practical. It would help in transform and restoring /regaining the self regard (dignity) of the Dalit.

Nagaraj understands that this attitude of an upper caste Hindu is progressive. But he disagrees with it because the

Dalit does not have any direct role in the process (directly participate).

They are passive viewers of the (a passive audience to) play where the upper caste Hindu plays the main role. Ambedkar used a language of rights and political struggle which was in contrast with (contrary to) Gandhiji's language of conscience. When Gandhiji talked of self purification, Ambedkar used the language of self esteem. Gandhiji desired a totally reformed Hindu society whereas Ambedkar wished for complete freedom from Hindu Society. (a breaking off). He was against the kindness and of the upper caste Hindu.

The eradication of untouchability, interdining and inter caste marriage became a part of mainstream politics through the work of Gandhiji. Ambedkar efforts helped in enhancing the dignity of the Dalits. They also became a part of the democratic process.

However this could neither effect (trigger) a complete social change nor (bring a closeness) realize a union of the upper caste and lower caste people. The peace that was attained was very feeble shallow Nagaraj makes his assessment that Gandhiji's intervention was needed to make it more meaningful. Ashish Nandi observes Low Nagaraj has made a Gandhi and Ambedkar. In the Flaming Feet we could see images of the Dalit encounter with history and modernity. As a writer Nagaraj was adventurous. He feels that a romantic imagination is essential in the study of history. The context can be drawn clearly with metaphors. (Metaphors can make the context clear). He uses imagery from Kannada words and drama to introduce Dalit political ideas.

Flaming Feet was published in 1993-the only book he has published in English. The second edition came out in 2010. It was edited by Prithvi Datta Chandra Shobhi and the foreword was written by Ashish Nandi. It contains historical and ideological issues of Dalit politics. The idea of "Poetry as weapon" is the undercurrent of Flaming Feet.

Unlike Gandhi, Ambedkar, refused to recognize the national/ colonial division as the principal fault line; he was willing to join hands with anyone, including the colonial power, for realizing his ultimate objective of social emancipation.

During the transfer of power, many who fought for the emancipation of the downtrodden stayed away from the Constituent Assembly and the provisional government; Ambedkar played a crucial role there. After independence, unlike the most leaders who opposed to all camps in world politics; Ambedkar would have liked India to be close to the Atlantic camp. Ambedkar drew upon the liberal tradition.

As Yogendra Yadav commented , "Ambedkar represented a moment of departure of the social justice movement: it required a painful rupture with Gandhi whose presence was

both enabling and disabling for politics of social justice. This moment required a stylized picture of caste and sharp instruments of external critique, of legal/constitutional provisions and the language of western rationality. In many ways the politics of social justice in post-independence India has taken fifty years to catch up with Ambedkar's theory" (Yadav:2012).

Both recognized that caste is an autonomous and significant dimension of inequality, injustice and oppression in Indian society; this recognition sets both of them apart from the Marxists and other socialists who either did not acknowledge caste or privileged class over all other dimensions of inequality.

They held the caste system responsible for a number of ills in Indian society, from economic stagnation to cultural degeneration and vulnerability to external powers. Thus, the caste system was a national malaise and not just a problem for its victims. The causal significance they attached to caste did signal some form of primacy to caste. Unlike the Hindu reformers, both of them were convinced that this system of inequality could not be repaired or reformed, that an end to caste based inequalities is possible only if the caste system is brought to an end. Both of them engaged in an open-ended search for ways of bringing about an end to the caste system.

Ambedkar emphasized on the use of the modern state and democratic politics as an instrument to end the caste system. The first difference pertains to their political strategy. Ambedkar followed a strategy of political segregation of Dalits from the rest of Hindu society. Forging a distinct identity, recognition of differential interests and securing separate political representation were central to Ambedkar's political strategy for the destruction of the caste system. Specific actions like support for a separate electorate, system of reservations or conversion to Buddhism followed from this understanding. To be sure, there was an aggregative element to this segregate strategy. (Yadav:2012). It meant bringing together thousands of castes and sub-castes which were then called 'untouchables'. The formation of the Labour Party and then the Republican Party of India also indicated a desire for joining other victims of injustice. But Ambedkar's principal strategy remained a politics of, for, and by the 'untouchables'. Both recognized the spiritual need of the oppressed and underscored the necessity of combating caste ideology at the level of principles. But they proposed radically different ways of doing so. Ambedkar believed in destroying the fountainhead of the ideology of the caste system. He was convinced that the caste system drew its foundational principles from and was sanctified by the Hindu scriptures. Therefore, the high textual tradition of Hindu shastras was the principal site of his critique. (Yadav:2012). His method was that of a hermeneutics of suspicion. (Yadav:2012).

For him the tradition was nothing but hierarchy and oppression and any voice of protest within this tradition was necessarily compromised. Hence it requires for a critique from outside. Ambedkar drew upon traditions of western rationalism to attack the Hindu ideology of hierarchy. Much of the Dalit movement after Ambedkar has followed him in this strategy. The trouble with this strategy is that more often than not it fails to establish a meaningful connect with the world view of those whose cause it espouses; by depriving its subjects of identity, memory and history, this politics often disempowers itself.

In this age of corporate and communal fascism, it is high time to locate a space where both 'Gandhi' and 'Ambedkar' could meet and carve out a politics to encounter the present tide and work out a future plan for the emancipation of the masses.

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