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Annihilation of caste br ambedkar

Verso Books24 August 2021 commentsReading ListFeaturing Priya Gopal, Walter Rodney, Stella Dadzie and more. \$29.99 \$0.00 / B.R. Ambedkar introduced by Arundhati Roy, edited and annotated by S. Anand B.R. Ambedkar’s Annihilation of Caste is one of the most important, yet neglected, works of political writing from India. Written in 1936, it is an audacious denunciation of Hinduism and its caste system. Ambedkar—a figure like W.E.B. Du Bois—offers a scholarly critique of Hindu scriptures, scriptures that sanction a rigidly hierarchical and iniquitous social system. The world’s best-known Hindu, Mahatma Gandhi, responded publicly to the provocation. The hatchet was never buried. Arundhati Roy introduces this extensively annotated edition of Annihilation of Caste in “The Doctor and the Saint”, examining the persistence of caste in modern India, and how the conflict between Ambedkar and Gandhi continues to resonate. Roy takes us to the beginning of Gandhi’s political career in South Africa, where his views on race, caste and imperialism were shaped. She tracks Ambedkar’s emergence as a major political figure in the national movement, and shows how his scholarship and intelligence illuminated a political struggle beset by sectarianism and obscurantism. Roy breathes new life into Ambedkar’s anti-caste utopia, and says that without a Dalit revolution, India will continue to be hobbled by systemic inequality. Praise for Annihilation of Caste: For the 1930s, Annihilation of Caste was a case of marvellous writing with conceptual clarity and political understanding— something the world should know about. The annotations illumine the whole book. Roy’s essay has the sharp political thrust one has come to expect from her. UMA CHAKRAVARTI, AUTHOR OF EVERYDAY LIVES, EVERYDAY HISTORIES: BEYOND THE KINGS AND BRAHMANAS OF 'ANCIENT' INDIA AND PANDITA RAMABAI: A LIFE AND A TIME Arundhati Roy’s The Doctor and the Saint works both at an emotive and an argumentative level. She manages to convey an intimate and deeply felt sensitivity to the history that produced Annihilation of Caste. Her essay is both well documented and closely argued. The annotations do an excellent job of providing supplementary information, corroboration and relevant citations... A robust edition of an under-appreciated classic.PROFESSOR SATISH DESHPANDE, DELI UNIVERSITY S. Anand’s annotations are very thorough and on the whole based on first-rate and current scholarship on South Asia and elsewhere. Their tone and style will appeal to a scholarly as well as lay audience ... an important accomplishment. Arundhati Roy’s essay is punchy, eye-opening and provocative.THOMAS BLOM HANSEN, DIRECTOR, STANFORD’S CENTRE FOR SOUTH ASIA Book details PUBLICATION DATE: November 2015 FORMAT: Paperback EXTENT: 416 pages SIZE: 234 x 156 mm ISBN: 9781742588018 RIGHTS: AU and NZ Note: This article was originally published on April 14, 2019 and is being republished on April 14, 2021. On Ambedkar Jayanti, we take a look at B.R. Ambedkar’s seminal, unspoken speech, ‘Annihilation of Caste’. The speech was written in response to an invitation extended by an anti-caste Hindu reformation group called the Jat-Pat Todak Mandal to speak at their annual conference in 1936. However, when Ambedkar sent the text of the speech to the group in advance, they balked at what they considered sentiments that would endanger Brahminical interests. They wrote back to him requesting that he remove sections that, in their words, were ‘unbearable’. Ambedkar famously refused to change so much as a comma. He went on to self-publish the speech, which is now an ever-relevant and iconic piece of anti-caste literature. In this excerpt, Ambedkar writes with his characteristic eloquence on how and why the indignities of caste are inseparable from Hinduism, the Brahminical hegemony implicit within it and offers intermarriage as a possible solution to the insidiousness of the caste hierarchy. § Another plan of action for the abolition of caste is to begin with inter-caste dinners. This also, in my opinion, is an inadequate remedy. There are many castes which allow inter-dining. But it is a common experience that inter-dining has not succeeded in killing the spirit of caste and the consciousness of caste. I am convinced that the real remedy is intermarriage. Fusion of blood can alone create the feeling of being kith and kin, and unless this feeling of kinship, of being kindred, becomes paramount, the separatist feeling—the feeling of being aliens—created by caste will not vanish. Among the Hindus, intermarriage must necessarily be a factor of greater force in social life than it need be in the life of the non-Hindus. Where society is already well knit by other ties, marriage is an ordinary incident of life. But where society is cut asunder, marriage as a binding force becomes a matter of urgent necessity. The real remedy for breaking caste is intermarriage. Nothing else will serve as the solvent of caste. Your Jat-Pat Todak Mandal has adopted this line of attack. It is a direct and frontal attack, and I congratulate you upon a correct diagnosis, and more upon your having shown the courage to tell the Hindus what is really wrong with them. Political tyranny is nothing compared to social tyranny, and a reformer who defies society is a much more courageous man than a politician who defies the government. You are right in holding that caste will cease to be an operative force only when inter-dining and intermarriage have become matters of common course. You have located the source of the disease. But is your prescription the right prescription for the disease? Ask yourselves this question: Why is it that a large majority of Hindus do not inter-dine and do not intermarry? Why is it that your cause is not popular? There can be only one answer to this question, and it is that inter-dining and intermarriage are repugnant to the beliefs and dogmas which the Hindus regard as sacred. Caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire which prevents the Hindus from commingling and which has, therefore, to be pulled down. Caste is a notion; it is a state of mind. The destruction of caste does not therefore mean the destruction of a physical barrier. It means a notional change. Caste may be bad. Caste may lead to conduct so gross as to be called man’s inhumanity to man. All the same, it must be recognised that the Hindus observe caste not because they are inhuman or wrong-headed. They observe caste because they are deeply religious. People are not wrong in observing caste. In my view, what is wrong is their religion, which has inculcated this notion of caste. If this is correct, then obviously the enemy you must grapple with is not the people who observe caste, but the shastras which teach them this religion of caste. Criticising and ridiculing people for not inter-dining or intermarrying, or occasionally holding inter-caste dinners and celebrating inter-caste marriages, is a futile method of achieving the desired end. The real remedy is to destroy the belief in the sanctity of the shastras. How do you expect to succeed if you allow the shastras to continue to mould the beliefs and opinions of the people? Not to question the authority of the shastras—to permit the people to believe in their sanctity and their sanctions, and then to blame the people and to criticise them for their acts as being irrational and inhuman—is an incongruous way of carrying on social reform. Reformers working for the removal of untouchability, including Mahatma Gandhi, do not seem to realise that the acts of the people are merely the results of their beliefs inculcated in their minds by the shastras, and that people will not change their conduct until they cease to believe in the sanctity of the shastras on which their conduct is founded. No wonder that such efforts have not produced any results. You also seem to be ering in the same way as the reformers working in the cause of removing untouchability. To agitate for and to organise inter-caste dinners and inter-caste marriages is like forced feeding brought about by artificial means. Make every man and woman free from the thralldom of the shastras, cleanse their minds of the pernicious notions founded on the shastras, and he or she will inter-dine and intermarry, without your telling him or her to do so. It is no use seeking refuge in quibbles. It is no use telling people that the shastras do not say what they are believed to say, if they are grammatically read or logically interpreted. What matters is how the shastras have been understood by the people. You must take the stand that Buddha took. You must take the stand which Guru Nanak took. You must not only discard the shastras, you must deny their authority, as did Buddha and Nanak. You must have courage to tell the Hindus that what is wrong with them is their religion—the religion which has produced in them this notion of the sacredness of caste. Will you show that courage? What are your chances of success? Social reforms fall into different species. There is a species of reform which does not relate to the religious notions of a people, but is purely secular in character. There is also a species of reform which relates to the religious notions of a people. Of such a species of reform, there are two varieties. In one, the reform accords with the principles of the religion, and merely invites people who have departed from it, to revert to them and to follow them. The second is a reform which not only touches the religious principles but is diametrically opposed to those principles, and invites people to depart from and to discard their authority, and to act contrary to those principles. Caste is the natural outcome of certain religious beliefs which have the sanction of the shastras, which are believed to contain the command of divinely inspired sages who were endowed with a supernatural wisdom and whose commands, therefore, cannot be disobeyed without committing a sin. The destruction of caste is a reform which falls under the third category. To ask people to give up caste is to ask them to go contrary to their fundamental religious notions. It is obvious that the first and second species of reform are easy. But the third is a stupendous task, well-nigh impossible. The Hindus hold to the sacredness of the social order. Caste has a divine basis. You must therefore destroy the sacredness and divinity with which caste has become invested. In the last analysis, this means you must destroy the authority of the shastras and the Vedas. I have emphasised this question of the ways and means of destroying caste, because I think that knowing the proper ways and means is more important than knowing the ideal. If you do not know the real ways and means, all your shots are sure to be misfired. If my analysis is correct, then your task is Herculean. You alone can say whether you are capable of achieving it. Speaking for myself, I see the task to be well-nigh impossible. Perhaps you would like to know why I think so. Out of the many reasons which have led me to take this view, I will mention some which I regard as most important. One of these reasons is the attitude of hostility which the Brahmins have shown towards this question. The Brahmins form the vanguard of the movement for political reform, and in some cases also of economic reform. But they are not to be found even as camp-followers in the army raised to break down the barricades of caste. Is there any hope of the Brahmins ever taking up a lead in the future in this matter? I say no. You may ask why. You may argue that there is no reason why Brahmins should continue to shun social reform. You may argue that the Brahmins know that the bane of Hindu society is caste, and as an enlightened class they could not be expected to be indifferent to its consequences. You may argue that there are secular Brahmins and priestly Brahmins, and if the latter do not take up the cudgels on behalf of those who want to break caste, the former will. All this of course sounds very plausible. But in all this it is forgotten that the break-up of the caste system is bound to adversely affect the Brahmin caste. Having regard to this, is it reasonable to expect that the Brahmins will ever consent to lead a movement, the ultimate result of which is to destroy the power and prestige of the Brahmin caste? Is it reasonable to expect the secular Brahmins to take part in a movement directed against the priestly Brahmins? In my judgement, it is useless to make a distinction between the secular Brahmins and priestly Brahmins. Both are kith and kin. They are two arms of the same body, and one is bound to fight for the existence of the other. In this connection, I am reminded of some very pregnant remarks made by Prof Dicey in his English Constitution. Speaking of the actual limitation on the legislative supremacy of parliament, Dicey says: “The actual exercise of authority by any sovereign whatever, and notably by Parliament, is bounded or controlled by two limitations. Of these the one is an external, the other is an internal limitation. The external limit to the real power of a sovereign consists in the possibility or certainty that his subjects, or a large number of them, will disobey or resist his laws ... The internal limit to the exercise of sovereignty arises from the nature of the sovereign power itself. Even a despot exercises his powers in accordance with his character, which is itself moulded by the circumstances under which he lives, including under that head the moral feelings of the time and the society to which he belongs. The Sultan could not, if he would, change the religion of the Mahomedan world, but even if he could do so, it is in the very highest degree improbable that the head of Mahomedanism should wish to overthrow the religion of Mahomet; the internal check on the exercise of the Sultan’s power is at least as strong as the external limitation. People sometimes ask the idle question, why the Pope does not introduce this or that reform? The true answer is that a revolutionist is not the kind of man who becomes a Pope, and that the man who becomes a Pope has no wish to be a revolutionist.” I think these remarks apply equally to the Brahmins of India, and one can say with equal truth that if a man who becomes a Pope has no wish to become a revolutionary, a man who is born a Brahmin has much less desire to become a revolutionary. Indeed, to expect a Brahmin to be a revolutionary in matters of social reform is as idle as to expect the British Parliament, as was said by Leslie Stephen,125 to pass an Act requiring all blue-eyed babies to be murdered.

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