

# India: Who gets to write about Ambedkar?

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## **Six new reappraisals show the gulf between Dalit-Bahujan and anglophone writing on B R Ambedkar**

In Dalit-Bahujan folklore, poetry, songs, novels and biographies, B R Ambedkar appears almost like a deity or messiah, equivalent to the Buddha, Jesus or Nanak. Ambedkar is often mythicised and raised up as an iconic superhero, who challenged the mighty Brahmanical realm and liberated the depressed masses from the dark of servitude, illiteracy and powerlessness.

Ambedkar is also shown as a brilliant academic, journalist, jurist and economist, as the architect of the Constitution of India, and, finally, as a religious revolutionary who reintroduced Buddhism to modern India. On occasions like his birth anniversary, large public gatherings are witnessed in major cities across India. For his followers, such passionate devotion has made Ambedkar a charismatic hero, above criticism and challenges.

The standard telling of his life is as follows: Born into the Mahar caste on 14 April 1891, it was “ordained” that he had to suffer humiliation and harassment from the social elites, most of them of the dominant castes. He educated himself against such odds and earned prestigious degrees from some of the finest universities in the world. Then, he applied his intellectual and academic training to initiate a heroic battle against caste inequalities and to provide a dignified location to the “untouchable” castes in the social and political spheres. By the time India got its freedom from British imperialism, Ambedkar was one of the tallest national leaders. As the architect of India’s new constitution, he contributed immensely to the foundational ideas of the modern republic. On 14 October 1956, just two months before his death, he shunned Hinduism and embraced Buddhism alongside thousands of his followers, and started a new era of socio-religious revolution in India.

But, with the rise of the rightwing political forces in India today - with the Hindutva duo of the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh at the forefront - attempts are being made to appropriate Ambedkar as a Hindu social reformist and popular nationalist leader, detaching him from his radical anti-Brahmanical thought. In this contest, though hagiographic representations offer Ambedkar an extraordinary pedestal and portray him as a radical, messianic leader of the oppressed, they also limit serious deliberation on his intellectual contributions and philosophical oeuvre. The populist literature on him is marked by emotional, un-intellectual acts that sometimes resist the scientific, secular and rational objectivity through which Ambedkar’s life and ideas can truly be discovered. Yet this latter vein of understanding is an essential tool in resisting the rightwing distortions of who Ambedkar really was.

An alternative stream of anglophone academic writings on Ambedkar, meanwhile, aim to showcase nuances in his character and ideas, and to treat him not only as a philosopher, constitutionalist and religious leader, but also as a modern individual with flaws and limitations. These writings on Ambedkar, even as they stand against the rightwing agenda and reflect sensitively on the emotive aspects of his life and legacy, keep a distance from the Dalit-Bahujan ideological orientation and the present conception of him among his followers. This means they fail to reflect an essential part of

what Ambedkar means today, and of his afterlife in the India he helped to create.

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In Dalit-Bahujan discourse, it is often alleged that mainstream academia has long overtly neglected Ambedkar's contribution to building India as a modern nation state. The small trickle of scholarship in English that was available on Ambedkar before the 1990s only offered a cursory sketch of him, depicting him narrowly as the “leader of the untouchables”. For example, the American writer Eleanor Zelliot, one of the major commentators on Ambedkar's life, almost relegated his social struggle under the narrow rubric of the “Mahar movement” – suggesting that his social and political activism was mainly restricted to the upliftment of a specific community and limited to Maharashtra, rather than aimed at the complete annihilation of caste and the reconfiguration of the future of India. Dhananjay Keer's 1966 biography of Ambedkar presented him as an emblematic figure of modernity that aspired to restructure the traditional caste-based Hindu social order into one of secular humane association, promoting the untouchables as new claimants of the facilities of the modern state, but showed limitations in exploring multiple other facets of his personal life.

It was only after the late 1980s, with the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party and its powerful impact on Indian public life and discourse as a political force led by Dalits, that scholars were prompted to examine Ambedkar more comprehensively, particularly as a political ideologue and social philosopher. Scholars like Valerian Rodrigues, Christophe Jaffrelot and Gail Omvedt examined his life and struggles with methodological rigour, analysing diverse historic and literary sources to present an intellectual version of Ambedkar. In more recent writings, scholars like Aishwary Kumar and Soumyabrata Choudhury have offered comparative linkages between Ambedkar and Western political philosophers like Pericles, Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, John Dewey and John Rawls, and examined his location as a political philosopher of modern and postmodern times.

Now, a wave of new books on Ambedkar present impressive extensions to the discussions and debates around him, examining him with sincere reverence as well as with honest criticism. The authors are careful not to relegate Ambedkar as just the “Messiah of the Dalits” and try to examine him as an individual, intellectual and leader who has substantively influenced modern ideas of justice, religion, rights and freedom. Distinct from the earlier academic writings, these latest accounts are deeper investigations of his life and thought, notably introducing into the anglophone corpus little-known Marathi sources like the 12-volume biography of Ambedkar by C B Khairmode, as well as archival materials and personal correspondence that corroborate various facts and trivia about Ambedkar's life.

The new publications can be divided into three sets. The first is of three authoritative biographies – one each by the historian Ashok Gopal, the philosopher Aakash Singh Rathore and the Indian National Congress politician Shashi Tharoor – that present a chronological account of crucial personal and historical events in Ambedkar's life. In the second set – the philosopher Scott R Stroud's *The Evolution of Pragmatism in India* and the scholars Christophe Jaffrelot, William Gould and Santosh Dass's edited volume *Ambedkar in London* – examine Ambedkar's philosophical grooming in the West and how certain foreign locations (mainly London), universities (Columbia University and the London School of Economics) and Western scholars (especially John Dewey) were responsible for shaping his ideological approach and motivating his political actions.

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Finally, there is a memoir by Savita Ambedkar, a social activist and Ambedkar's second wife, translated from the Marathi by Nadeem Khan and titled *Babasaheb: My Life with Dr Ambedkar*. The book narrates the political troubles and emotional concerns that affected Ambedkar's last ten years. Savita narrates fascinating details about her husband's persona, drawing on her personal experiences and from the letters that Ambedkar wrote to her. This is particularly interesting as, within the Dalit-Bahujan world, her marriage with Ambedkar and later her participation in socio-religious movements are not appreciated much. Savita's Brahmin heritage and privilege created rifts between her and Ambedkar's close aides and the Ambedkarite community, and for decades she was subject to rumours and allegations of being involved in Ambedkar's death.

Savita, who passed away in 2003, was not afraid to answer back. In the book's preface, she writes:

Dr Ambedkar himself was an active social revolutionary, which was why he married me and gave impetus to national unity. What lesson, however, have these educated people who call themselves Ambedkar's followers learnt from the grand ideal he created by establishing equality through marrying me? The question, therefore, that strikes me is: Have those who call themselves Ambedkarites understood Ambedkar?

The new books try to present an honest and fair account of Ambedkar's life, and show no hesitation even to reflect upon Ambedkar's private moments. They argue that Ambedkar generated his revolutionary thinking not due to divine ability or social inheritance, but by toiling hard as an academic mind. Often applying fresh analytical methods, the new studies offer a deeper intellectual and critical assessment of Ambedkar's life than was earlier available, and so expand our understanding of his maverick mind and personality. But, amid the competing approaches to Ambedkar, they also raise questions of who gets to write about him, and how the social background of those who do influences the reception and perceived value of their work.

### **The making of "Babasaheb"**

On his way to greatness, Ambedkar experienced everyday social humiliation, faced the disdain and hatred of the ruling social elites, survived poverty and bad health, and witnessed many tragic incidents, including close family members' deaths. In the new biographies, his social location and experiences of discrimination are presented with authentic descriptions and details. Many of the anecdotes are borrowed from Ambedkar's own scattered autobiographical notes - like the brief *Waiting for a Visa*, which Ambedkar wrote in mid-life to narrate his experiences of social exclusion (denial of a proper place in the classroom, not being allowed to drink water from the common pot in school), humiliation (barbers denying to give him a haircut) and harassment (caste-based slurs and denial of basic services). Interestingly, the authors hesitate to link his social experiences with his emergence as a leader of the oppressed castes. Instead, the emphasis is on his extensive academic and intellectual training as enabling his social consciousness and motivating him to struggle for social justice.

The new works are much invested in exploring the young Ambedkar's committed academic engagement in the specialised fields of economics, law and sociology. Except for Savita Ambedkar's memoir, the books focus strongly on his intellectual life and examine him not only as a popular leader but also as an academic, ideologue and philosopher of modern ideas. Stroud's work in particular labels him as the key spokesperson in India of the prominent philosophical school of "pragmatism", while Rathore examines Ambedkar by reflecting upon his individual characteristics and personal complexities.

Aakash Singh Rathore's *Becoming Babasaheb*, the first part of a two-volume biography, covers Ambedkar's life between 1891 and 1929, and deals extensively with his youth. The attempt here is to

examine Ambedkar as an everyday person, affected by familiar human characteristics and slippages. This includes a flimsy suggestion that he may have developed a liking for a European woman when he was a student at the London School of Economics. The bigger endeavour of this volume is to see Ambedkar as a modern man, a brilliant academic mind and social activist, and so trace how he arrived at the stage where he came to be revered as “Babasaheb”. Rathore presents the story by clinically reducing the inaccuracies and mistakes made by earlier biographers – for instance, his exploration of how Ambedkar came to change his surname for the original Ambadawekar challenges the popular perception that it was offered to him by a Brahmin teacher who also had the Ambedkar last name. Rathore also examines the financial problems and other difficulties Ambedkar faced during his academic journey to earn two PhDs from foreign universities, providing rich detail unknown in earlier popular literature.

Particularly interesting and important are Rathore’s observations on the legal battle Ambedkar fought against the social elites after the heroic Mahad Satyagraha of 1927, when he initiated a movement to win untouchable castes the right to access to drinking water from a common pond. The movement introduced Ambedkar to the wider world as a liberal democratic leader who looked to remedy social ills through legal and constitutional means.

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Rathore re-examines primary sources and interrogates various archival materials to uncover multiple anomalies regarding events in Ambedkar’s life, including confusion about his date of birth, travel dates and places that he visited. Though Rathore’s work brings to notice certain trivia and fascinating facts about Ambedkar’s character, which may be important to examining his life in a holistic manner, such details also divert readers’ attention from the grand philosophical questions other authors have highlighted in order to examine Ambedkar as a thinker.

In contrast to Rathore’s quite short first volume, Ashok Gopal’s long but tightly argued text is a profoundly important biography that pushes the reader to examine multiple intricacies of Ambedkar’s life, revealing hidden facts and engaging with exciting historical details along the way. For example, he offers a detailed picture of Ambedkar’s early activism as a legislator and statesman representing what were called the Depressed Classes in the British Raj. This early Ambedkar appears as a constitutional reformist, aiming to build a harmonious social order through socio-religious reforms, including the movement to allow the entry of the untouchables in Hindu temples. Ambedkar later diverged from the objective of internal social reform and found greater possibilities of emancipation in constitutional and political activism.

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Gopal marshalls an admirable wealth of corroborative references, adding to his brilliant reading of the contexts and influences that crafted Ambedkar’s personality. His examination of Ambedkar’s critical engagement with leftist and Marxist ideas and organisations in the political landscape of Bombay in the early 1930s. provides an explanation for why Ambedkar chose to establish his first political party, in 1936, as the Independent Labour Party. The author suggests that Ambedkar, more than falling under the influence of socialist ideas, was looking pragmatically to engage the non-untouchable castes and classes with the Dalits in order to have a significant impact in electoral battles. Gopal points out how Ambedkar recognised the deplorable conditions of untouchable workers in Bombay and reprimanded the Communist Workers’ Union for neglecting their issues. His party promised that it would combine the questions of class and caste oppression and provide better

meaning to socialist ideology.

Gopal's intention is also to place Ambedkar in his rightful place as a social revolutionary, who was deeply committed to humanitarian values and therefore chose Buddhism as the ultimate solution to ending caste-based social divisions. Some of his anecdotes - like in the chapter on "Saddhamma", which explores Ambedkar's ideas and activism on religious conversion and the need for religion in modern times - sound similar to Dhananjay Keer's approach. Keer noted how Ambedkar appreciated the idea of "good religion" and separated himself from the Marxist understanding of it. However, Gopal also takes precautions not to fall for a nationalist mooring. Instead, he shows that Ambedkar had deeply antagonistic views of the right wing and offered no comradery to V D Savarkar, the originator of the Hindutva doctrine.

Compared to these two biographies, Shashi Tharoor's work is a somewhat superficial account. It overtly depends on known secondary sources like Keer's biography to reassert obvious facets and events of Ambedkar's life. This almost looks like a hagiographic account, meant mainly to impress a non-Dalit audience with Ambedkar's secular and nationalist credentials. Though Tharoor has refused to call the book hagiographic and even claims to discuss "four flaws" in Ambedkar's life in one of his chapters, the book only touches upon certain popular criticisms - like the suggestion that Ambedkar ignored the problems of Adivasis (Arundhati Roy has also made a similar accusation earlier) or that he was dependent upon the modern state's welfare policies for the empowerment of oppressed communities (again, a criticism in wide circulation within left-socialist circles). Though there is an argumentative basis for such criticisms, Tharoor hardly provides the intellectual supplement necessary to examine these aspects. There is significant new literature available that examines Ambedkar's engagement with the Muslim question (Anand Teltumbde's *Ambedkar on Muslims*), gender issues (Shailaja Paik's work) and also the Adivasis or Scheduled Tribes (Nishikant Kolge's article in the *Economic and Political Weekly* titled "Is Ambedkar's Prejudice against 'Tribe' a settled matter?"). Tharoor appears unaware of these texts.

It is also worth noting that in another of his books, *Inglorious Empire*, Tharoor attributes India's caste inequalities and communal conflicts almost entirely to British colonial policies. For Ambedkar, it is the classical Hindu social order that condemns untouchables to precarious menial services, physical exploitation and social discrimination. Tharoor recounts Ambedkar's speech from the first Round Table Conference, where he voiced his frustration with British rule: "When we compare our present position with the one which it was our lot to bear in Indian society of pre-British days, we find that, instead of marching on, we are marking time. Before the British, we were in the loathsome condition due to our untouchability. Has the British government done anything to remove it?" But he fails to appreciate the fact that Ambedkar found the sources of the social disdain of the untouchables in the ancient Hindu caste system, and appreciated the modern period for its liberative potential - as, for instance, with the admittedly limited but still significant opportunities opened up to the oppressed castes by the colonial education system. These are not minor disagreements: it is strange, to say the least, for Tharoor to attempt a biography of Ambedkar while dismissing his subject's fundamental thesis - that Hinduism is responsible for the horrors of caste.

### **The formative age of Ambedkar**

Ambedkar is often stereotyped as a Dalit leader. His grand academic achievements, including two doctorates, and his training in legal affairs and qualification as a Barrister-in-Law, were earlier under-researched or relegated to footnotes. Few attempts were made to examine how international exposure, especially his experiences in the megacities of London and New York, and the historical context he encountered after the First World War, influenced his ideas and actions.

"The study of Ambedkar's life and intellectual oeuvre has emerged as a popular academic

discipline, and it is overtly dominated and curated by non-Dalit, non-Bahujan scholars and intellectuals, most of them men.”

In Tharoor and Rathore’s works, Ambedkar is loudly appreciated for his extraordinary achievement in getting advanced and prestigious educational degrees. Rathore demonstrates how Ambedkar suffered in London due to bad health and relentless poverty, and often spent nights without dinner. Even when Ambedkar returned to India, he survived for a significant part of his life without any financial support or professional employment. Rathore’s book narrates his heart-rending experiences of financial struggle and the structural obstacles he faced in his pursuit of higher education – presenting such things as letters written to him by the government of the princely state of Baroda, which had earlier given him an educational scholarship, asking him to repay his debts before landing permanent employment after his studies. Interestingly, Gopal suggests that although Ambedkar experienced financial burdens, his early writings show no impact of his dire conditions. This especially includes his first academic paper, “Castes in India”, which became a significant and original contribution to sociological studies and proved his impeccable academic rigour. It is sad, Gopal acknowledges, that later sociologists hesitated in accepting Ambedkar as part of their discipline.

The first part of *Ambedkar in London* offers a rich and detailed historical context, exploring the period of the 1920s especially in London and New York. William Gould’s chapter “Ambedkar the Activist Research Scholar in 1920s London” precisely explores Ambedkar’s nascent academic writings on political economy, his examination of British Imperialist exploitation and his thesis on changing nature of the Indian rupee. With his expansive intellectual engagement, Jesús F Cháirez-Garza’s chapter in the volume, citing the recent work of scholars such as Luis Cabrera and Suraj Yengde, argues Ambedkar should have been called an “internationalist”.

Jaffrelot proposes that his academic years in London, New York and also in Germany did not help Ambedkar in envisaging a concrete plan for his future social and political battles – instead, he was oscillating between and trying multiple options. It was only after the first two Round Table Conferences – organised by the British to deliberate upon India’s future constitutional modalities, and hosted in London in 1931 and 1932 – that Ambedkar showed greater ideological firmness and demanded exclusive political and legal rights for the Depressed Classes through constitutional means.

Scott R Stroud’s work examines Ambedkar as a “pragmatic” scholar, demonstrating the deep influence of liberal philosophers like Bertrand Russell and John Dewey in forming young Ambedkar’s intellectual abilities, which he later employed to examine India’s social and political problems. Ambedkar studied under Dewey as part of his time at Columbia University. Stroud’s investigation allows him to argue that Ambedkar’s versatile and multidimensional approaches to resolving civil and political crises were heavily influenced by Dewey’s philosophy of pragmatism, which emphasises the practical applications of ideas and beliefs. This conjecture pushes beyond the conventional wisdom that Ambedkar’s ideological positions were influenced mainly by his own social history or the teachings of the Buddha and Jotirao Phule, the pioneering 19<sup>th</sup>-century anti-caste thinker.

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Though Gopal endorses Stroud’s assessment, he also showcases how Ambedkar improvised upon Dewey’s ideas, especially on democracy, civil society, education and Buddhism, and emerged as one of the major proponents of modernity in India. Gopal also suggests that Ambedkar departed from Dewey’s pragmatism, especially in his discussion of religion. Though Dewey appears an anti-

religious atheist, Ambedkar tried to examine the relevance of religious and spiritual values in the making of a good society.

These explorations of Ambedkar's life and education in the West limit themselves to his personal and academic journey. However, Ambedkar simultaneously lived through a period of great global turmoil: socialist and communist revolutionary movements shook up Europe's political landscape; anti-colonial struggles were on the rise in Africa and Asia; a nascent anti-racist movement was taking root in the United States. Yet readers do not get to know Ambedkar's position on these crucial developments, and the writers hardly explore the reasons Ambedkar remained seemingly distant from these upheavals. Instead, Ambedkar remained open to cordial deliberation with the colonial state and tried to engage with it to achieve legal safeguards and political rights for the emancipation of the socially Depressed Classes. In this he took cues from Phule, who saw British rule as offering more hope to India's oppressed compared to the millennia-old Hindu social order.

### **The Gandhi-Ambedkar binary**

Gandhi is often used as a foil when writing about Ambedkar - as in Arundhati Roy's *The Doctor and the Saint* - and their relationship is widely studied and argued over. Both were active in social and political affairs in India after the early 1920s and often clashed in their lifetimes. Some of the new books wade into the debate as well.

Tharoor notes that the first exchange between Ambedkar and Gandhi took place only in 1931, when Gandhi invited Ambedkar to deliberate over the British government's possible grant of special rights for the untouchables. He does not endorse the conflictual dichotomy that is conventional among Dalit-Bahujan historians, but rather looks for sites of consensus between the two. In particular, Tharoor tries to find these in how both acknowledged untouchability as a blot and understood the need for action to end such inhuman practices. However, even in the details of his own telling, he achieves very little success:

Even though Gandhi and the Congress agreed with Ambedkar on several measures to counter caste discrimination - such as political reservations, temple entry, inter-caste dining and inter-caste marriages, eradication of untouchability, greater educational and employment opportunities - from Ambedkar's point of view it made perfect sense to stand apart from Mahatma Gandhi on the issue of the rights of the Depressed Classes. His reasoning was that had he opposed the British and sided with Gandhi, he would not have gained anything for his people from the British, while Gandhi, judging by the Congress's track record thus far, would not, in Ambedkar's view, have given his people anything more than pious blessings and hollow platitudes ... Supporting the Mahatma and the Congress would subsume his cause within the larger Congress struggle, within which it would not be a priority.

Tharoor further notes that the differences between Ambedkar and Gandhi transcended politics. As an economist, Ambedkar was in favour of economic growth, material prosperity and equal distribution over the Gandhian philosophy of limited consumption. Tharoor writes, "He had little patience with the Mahatma's faith in idyllic village life, which Ambedkar believed condemned the Depressed Classes to a life of degradation."

Gopal, in contrast, argues that the exchanges between Gandhi and Ambedkar demonstrate they both pursued independent paths to social change. He elaborates on the events of the second Round Table Conference, where the two met face-to-face, and examines the strategies Gandhi employed to defeat Ambedkar's proposal to create separate electorates for the untouchables - something Ambedkar saw as an essential mechanism for breaking the social and political stranglehold of the entrenched elite.

Gopal highlights that Ambedkar learnt about a secret deal between Gandhi and the Muslim League “to keep the Depressed Classes away from any constitutional scheme.” Jaffrelot notes that Ambedkar’s claim that he alone represented the political concerns of the Depressed Class displeased Gandhi, who furiously announced himself the true representative of every Indian, including the untouchables. Ambedkar also showed stiff animosity towards Gandhi, and was firm on establishing the untouchables as a new state subject, with minority status, and in order to receive constitutional benefits for their social and political advancement. Gandhi denounced Ambedkar’s “divisive” attempts and offered a patronising sermon, heralding the untouchables as an integral part of the Hindu religion and declaring that he was ready to resist with his life their division from the Hindu majority, which was inherent in Ambedkar’s proposals.

The Round Table Conferences were landmark events in Ambedkar’s life - after them, he took deeply critical stances against Gandhi and his Congress party, and built himself more and more as an independent leader. After the second conference, Ambedkar’s social and political stature skyrocketed as the British granted exclusive political rights to the untouchables. Gandhi resisted this by adopting the emotive means of satyagraha, specifically with a fast unto death, which coerced Ambedkar into accepting Gandhi’s political reforms in the infamous Poona Pact, fearing grave repercussions for the Depressed Classes if Gandhi were to die over the issue. The Poona Pact forced Ambedkar to shed the demand for separate electorates for the untouchables and accept the reservation of seats for the Depressed Classes in general electorates - something that, as history went on to prove, did little to free the oppressed castes from the control of the elite.

Gandhi is often used as a foil when writing about Ambedkar, and their relationship has been widely studied and argued over. New books wade into the debate as well.

Stroud notes that this hectic period of deliberation and Ambedkar’s deeper engagement with policy formation helped him evolve a newer version of pragmatism in India. This later became a practical tool for building up his ideas, translating into the impressive socio-political movements he helmed and even his decision to embrace Buddhism. Though Ambedkar remained an arch-rival of Gandhi and his politics, Gopal suggests that Ambedkar, despite all their disagreements, had a subtle admiration for Gandhi and his moral commitment, and found that between them there was “much in common”. For example, in his letters to his wife after Gandhi’s assassination by a Marathi Brahmin fanatic, Ambedkar showed deep sadness, reflecting his character as a sensitive being.

### **Ambedkar the man**

Rathore, in the preface of his book, announces that he wants to explore Ambedkar through a “personality-driven narrative”, as most of the other works on Ambedkar are “lifeless” accounts. This is an innovative method, as Ambedkar is often presented using high academic jargon or, as in Stroud’s work, presented as part of the greater galaxy of intellectuals and philosophers. But Rathore sets himself a difficult task, and the result is only a damp sketch of the man, not doing justice to his maverick personality rooted in the brutal experiences of caste discrimination, and in his response to it through innovative social activism and bold political action.

Gopal mentions that when Ambedkar returned from London and offered his legal services at Dalal Street in Mumbai, people soon discovered his low social location. They humiliated him with deplorable taunts, calling him a *Dhedh* - a caste name associated with the untouchables in Gujarat. Such routine discrimination must have tormented Ambedkar and affected his familial and social engagements. He was an emotional man, and on multiple occasions of personal crisis and tragedy he would weep. Still, he managed his emotions even in periods of turmoil. For example, he showed humility and gratitude towards the ruler of Baroda, Sayajirao Gaekwad, for his help in sponsoring his education, even though officers of the Baroda court harassed and discriminated against him on



several occasions.

As early as in the 1930s, Ambedkar realised that he would be playing a significant role in national politics and would be bearing great responsibilities bestowed upon him by his community. This acknowledgment must have had a part in making him a serious man, even if one was both burdened and inspired by his role. The recommendation letters of Edwin Seligman, an influential professor in Ambedkar's life, presented him as "not only a very able, but an exceedingly pleasant fellow".

"While acknowledging the rift between herself and many of Ambedkar's followers, Savita's memoir offers an intimate portrayal of her and Ambedkar's partnership, as well as his health and emotional life in his final years."

Particularly in Savita Ambedkar's memoir, we see Ambedkar as more than a giant national and global figure, a messiah of the untouchables. His letters to her offer a distinct glimpse of his humble personality and emotional temper. She reveals that he had fine bourgeois tastes - he was fond of Western dress, English oratory and modern education - and would sometimes showcase a soft, romantic heart despite his traumatised and often tortured self. In one of their early exchanges, Ambedkar writes, "If you have wept believe me I too have wept probably for a different reason - namely the realization of a dream - of finding a woman possessed both of virtue and intellect to be my wife—and the joy [that] has come in its wake. Let us make a determination to make each other happy."

In multiple letters to his colleagues and followers in this time, Ambedkar often mentioned his own health. Savita, a qualified doctor, reveals that he was suffering from numerous chronic maladies, including diabetes. She suspects that the bitter experiences of caste discrimination and harassment also affected his health. Savita writes:

There were many such episodes that Doctor Saheb had to suffer during his childhood. Whenever he narrated this heart-rending episode, Doctor Saheb would become overwrought. His voice would quaver, and tears would run down his cheeks. On every step of the way, Bhima was made to suffer the hot, branding scars of humiliation and disgrace administered by the inhuman behaviour of these so-called upper caste 'savarna' Hindus.

She also recalls that the deaths of his near ones - his father, first wife and four of his children - jolted him deeply, and that he would recall those memories with a painful heart. After the death of his first wife, Ramabai, he lived alone and in much distress, and Savita believes this distress must have contributed to making him fall ill every now and then.

However, Ambedkar never surrendered to his personal anxieties and psychological troubles. Instead, until the end, he was much more worried about the fate and prospects of the untouchables in the future India, and he carried his work on relentlessly to make India a liberal, democratic nation state. "Dr Ambedkar didn't merely flash like lightning shining through pitch-black clouds," Savita writes, "he carried on blazing away forever like the sun."

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Gopal demonstrates that as the chairman of the drafting committee of the Constituent Assembly, which gave independent India its constitution by 1950, Ambedkar was burdened but worked tirelessly. He refers to some of Rathore's earlier work to show Ambedkar's contribution in inserting

“fraternity” into the document’s Preamble, which expands on the term by promising “the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation” – and, possibly, in drafting the whole of the Preamble, which Rathore has described as a “truly wondrous and historic set of eighty-one words.”

## **The political economy of Ambedkar biographies**

Ambedkar expressed an intention of writing his autobiography, and this drive is visible in his multiple autobiographical notes. However, due to pressing personal and political issues, this project remained incomplete, like many of his other writing projects. In his final years, Ambedkar worked on several books, and a selection of them was eventually published as *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, *Buddha or Karl Marx, Who Were the Shudras?*, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India* and *Riddles in Hinduism*. Savita Ambedkar refers to several other works that were in various stages of progress, including books about Jotirao Phule and Gandhi: “He would often say, ‘I alone understand Gandhi well’.”

The numerous English-language biographies of Ambedkar that have appeared, including the recent ones, are sincere attempts to appreciate and examine the charismatic person and extraordinary work of their subject. But still, they appear as largely superficial or forced attempts to repaint the existing, grand statue of his life.

“The rich collection of new works has contributed handsomely to reappraising Ambedkar and his phenomenal intellect, and should motivate a new generation to engage both with him and with social-justice discourse.”

Ambedkar is in vogue today, influencing diverse academic minds and political ideas, after decades of being relegated from mainstream intellectual streams. The rich collection of new works has contributed handsomely to reappraising Ambedkar and his phenomenal intellect, and should motivate a new generation to engage both with him and with social-justice discourse. This literature is brimming in particular with the possibility of a new trend that approaches Ambedkar as a global philosopher and ideologue of justice, and also a universal symbol of assertion for the oppressed. It would also have been fruitful, though, if the authors had reflected upon how to apply these philosophical texts and new biographical perspectives to strengthening the battles against the social injustices and caste-based inequalities that continue to plague India today.

Despite all the details in these works, there are certain links, ideas and still-obscure events crucial to understanding the revolutionary legacy of Ambedkar that, due to the authors’ preoccupations with certain fixed ideas and directions, remain ignored. Even in Gopal’s long and prolific biography, we miss a qualified discussion of the early Mahar movement that, even before Ambedkar’s time, established a roadmap for his future struggles, and went on to inspire his activism. In Rathore’s book, after his emphasis on examining Ambedkar’s personal history, we find only cursory mention of his first wife, Ramabai, which only further showcases the lack of a good review of their relationship anywhere in the literature to date. In Scott’s intellectual biography, we find multiple mentions of Plato to help us understand Ambedkar’s thoughts, but Phule’s influence on him is neglected.

These books, though important, also show that there is a structural gulf between the Dalit-Bahujan and the anglophone writings on Ambedkar and his movement. Dalit-Bahujan scholarship has already been engaged with diverse subjects and research areas, and even a cursory look at the intellectual contributions of Marathi-language Dalit scholars would prove its rigour and intellectual depth. Consider the path-breaking autobiographies from Baburao Bagul, Narendra Jadhav and Urmila Pawar; the commentaries on social-justice movements and constitutional rights by Sukhadeo Thorat, Anand Teltumbde and Suryakant Waghmore; philosophical essays on key concepts like equality, humiliation and identity politics by Gopal Guru, Aniket Jaaware and Shailaja Paik, and also on

religious philosophy and history by Raosaheb Kasbe, Surendra Jondhale and Pradeep Gaikwad. However, these works are often sidelined as merely derivative, whereas the explicitly academic writings of socially elite, anglophones authors are admired as “original” contributions.

Of the current deluge of biographical and philosophical writings on Ambedkar, released in English by reputed international publications, not one volume is authored by a Dalit-Bahujan intellectual. It is clear that the study of Ambedkar’s life and intellectual oeuvre has emerged as a popular academic discipline, and it is overtly dominated and curated by non-Dalit, non-Bahujan scholars and intellectuals, most of them men. Here, Dalit-Bahujan scholarship is appropriated as raw material or as a knowledge field for methodological exploration by privileged minds. Dalit-Bahujan scholars find limited opportunities to perform similar academic exercises and are often marginalised as just reviewers or commentators of the resulting works. Worse still, Dalit-Bahujan writings on Ambedkar are often bracketed as unreliably emotional or distant from advanced practices of knowledge-production.

The new biographical books reinforce this as they build curated pictures of Ambedkar’s life and mind for a new global audience. Ambedkar in this new attire surely appears more authentic, intellectual, and closer to the philosophical values appreciated by the ruling classes. But this pushes Ambedkar away from the “vernacular” Dalit-Bahujan minds that not only admire him as a philosopher but also derive inspiration from his legend to carry forward the struggles for social justice and emancipation.

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