

India: Fixing The Gaze

The Madam Chief Minister Poster And The Genealogy Of A New Dalit Assertion

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The month of January is marked by the birth and death anniversaries of Rohith Vemula. Five years ago, after he was pushed to take his own life at the University of Hyderabad—in what Dalits aptly described as an institutional murder—I reported on the defiant politics of Vemula and the Ambedkar Students' Association that he was part of, and how they were trying to create a “universal language of discrimination” for the country's marginalised.

Early this January, the Bollywood actor Richa Chadha shared on Twitter a poster of her upcoming film, Madam Chief Minister. The film's title character, played by Chadha, is based on Mayawati, the former chief minister of Uttar Pradesh and the first leader from a Dalit party to hold such a post in the country's history. The poster showed Chadha holding a broom, dressed in a worn-out T-shirt and with dirt marks on her face. A tagline at the bottom read, “Untouchable, Unstoppable.”

This portrayal of a Dalit leader naturally ignited a controversy. At the fore were young Ambedkarites on social media—often pejoratively called “digital Dalits,” as if it is hard to imagine Dalits being tech-savvy—brimming with sharp insights that cut through the consensus of the Savarnas.

The criticism revolved around the ethics of representation. “When did Mayawati wear torn clothes or carry a broom?” the student activist Sankul Sonawane asked on Twitter. “You use the word ‘untouchable’, but the film's cast is Chadha, Shukla, Kaul & Oberoi”—all Savarna castes. “This is like making a film about slavery and only feature whites. Why can't you reach out to Dalits regarding how we are portrayed? Shameful!”

“Why do African-Americans and Chinese and Japanese and Indians and Arabs need representation in the US?” Siddhesh Gautam, a designer who goes by the handle Bakery Prasad, asked on Instagram. “Is it because they look different from whites? Or is it because their culture is either misrepresented or not represented at all? ... Dalit representation in cinema is important, because savarnas have been appropriating Dalit culture for almost a century through films made with unapologetic savarna gaze.”

“Semiotically, even if unintended, it sends [a] deeply problematic message,” another Instagram user, Buffalo Intellectual, wrote. A teacher at a private university who identifies as a Shudra, Buffalo Intellectual chooses to remain anonymous since his employers frown on such activism. “How does something like this get approved? Was there NO ONE in the whole team who figured out caste sensibilities of such a representation? Why make a film like this then? ... Is there no sense of artistic responsibility in representation?” Buffalo Intellectual added, “It's urban rich UCs”—upper castes—“who have run a spiteful campaign over decades to discredit her & Bahujan movement. Plz make a film on UC elites & how they pettily hated her. Make their bigotry the focus.”

The mainstream media, dominated by the Savarna castes, has never been kind to Mayawati. The Savarna view of her has been steeped in crude casteism and has often fixated on things that Savarnas felt did not befit her or she did not deserve—such as her handbags. “Why does Mayawati

bug us so much??" Shobhaa De once wrote in her column. "Is it her appearance? Come on, there are worse looking women in politics. Is it her coarse tongue? Her crude language? Or is it something else? Something entirely silly and superficial? Do we despise her because Mayawati is a social embarrassment?" Around the same time, when the frenzy over Mayawati's handbags was at a peak, the columnist Manas Chakravarty wrote in a satirical vein, "Ask any maidservant or a woman working in the fields what she covets most and the answer would be unequivocal—she wants to carry a handbag, just like any middle-class lady. Most importantly, it's an aspirational symbol."

De and Chakravarty wrote these words in 2009, when social media was nowhere near as big and such humiliation of a Dalit leader by Savarna journalists went unchallenged. But things were different this January. In the interim, and especially since the death of Rohith Vemula and the massive protests it spawned, Dalit-Bahujans have increasingly pushed back against such affronts. Their interventions are choking off the void of prejudice, where the stereotypes of the Savarna imagination have long thrived. With them as the keepers of Vemula's spirit, his ideas are seeping into the cultural and intellectual life of the country.

Chadha, part of Bollywood's small liberal cabal, apologised for the poster on behalf of herself and the makers of Madam Chief Minister, and said it had been withdrawn. But she did not delete the poster from her Twitter page—and, instead of listening to the criticism, she made numerous counter-allegations. "They are simply reducing me to my caste," she told one interviewer. "If you are not willing to look at me as an actor and willing to reduce my identity to my caste then how are you different from the ones you are opposing?" She said she understood the debate over the representation of African Americans and Asian Americans in Hollywood, but asserted that, somehow, the same debate does not apply in the Indian context. Chadha also charged her critics of being sexist and ignorant of the film business. Many of her fans rallied behind her, and equated her Dalit-Bahujan critics with dominant-caste vigilante groups such as Rajasthan's notorious Karni Sena.

"I refuse to be gaslighted into thinking we Bahujans have 'overreacted,'" Buffalo Intellectual wrote. Others labelled Chadha's reaction an example of Savarna fragility, along the lines of white fragility—described by Robin DiAngelo, the white American writer who coined the term, as "the defensive reactions so many white people have when our racial worldviews, positions, or advantages are questioned or challenged."

Nothing about the way the argument played out was new to Dalit-Bahujans. A liberal person who considers herself to be anti-caste is charged with casteism by those at the receiving end of the caste hierarchy. The person counters by alleging that those attacking her are guilty of the same charges levelled against her. Her peers and admirers, also Savarna liberals, rally behind her and amplify the gaslighting, deploying barbed epithets against her accusers—"social-justice warriors," "Dalit radicals," "internet Dalits" and so on.

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Another high-profile re-run of this scene had come in 2014, when Arundhati Roy wrote an introductory essay to an annotated edition of BR Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* for the publishing house Navayana, headed by S Anand. The essay, an excerpt of which was carried in *The Caravan*, considered Ambedkar's ideas in *Annihilation of Caste* and his legacy largely in contrast to the ideas and legacy of MK Gandhi. Roy was charged with appropriation and misrepresentation of Ambedkarite discourse, and the Ambedkarite outlet Round Table India put out an open letter with a dozen questions for her. One question asked if Roy shared the view "that Dalit activists and scholars

are better qualified to introduce Annihilation of Caste both in terms of their engagement with Ambedkar and their life experience?" Another read, "Are you aware that the paradigm of representing Ambedkar along with Gandhi is a reading strategy of the elite and upper castes? ... Why can't we read Ambedkar on his own terms?"

Roy, more intellectually confident and sophisticated than Chadha, responded, "If it is your case that only Dalits can write an introduction about Ambedkar, then I must disagree with you. What if tomorrow Gujarati banias say only they can write about Gandhi? Or Mahars say that their understanding of Ambedkar is more authentic and more radical than that of other Dalits?" She added, "I am sure there are several scholars, both Dalit and non-Dalit, who are better placed to write an introduction to Annihilation of Caste far more knowledgeable than mine. They should go ahead and do so."

"If it is your argument that through my introduction, I am somehow actually perpetuating caste, please tell me how that is so," Roy shot back at her critics, who accused her of exercising caste privilege and not acknowledging it. To deflect questions over her caste privilege, Roy quoted Ambedkar's formulation of caste as a system of graded inequality: "Even the low is privileged as compared with the lower."

Roy's admirers were even more offended: How could Roy be accused of such things? Ironically, Roy had summed things up in the essay herself when she wrote, "Dalit aspirations are a breach of peace."

It was left to a Savarna writer, G Sampath, to point out that, "if we acknowledge that Dalits do not enjoy the kind of opportunities for exercise of knowledge capital that members of the privileged caste such as Anand and Roy do, Roy's writing of the introduction and Anand's annotations are an exercise of exactly the same privilege that is being denied to Dalits day in and day out on some ground or the other. That is why Dalits find it offensive."

Beyond this, there was disappointment that Roy, as a Savarna intellectual, had failed to grasp the essence of Ambedkar's text. "The focus on Gandhi prevents her from dealing with the issues raised in Annihilation of Caste," the sociologist Gail Omvedt wrote in a review. "The larger failure is a lack of vision, of not seeing the importance of the central theme which she is supposed to be introducing—the annihilation of caste."

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Roy, in response to the Round Table India questions, wrote that she was "fully aware of the fact that there are sections of Dalit intellectuals who object to Gandhi even being mentioned when we speak of Ambedkar," but felt she was justified in her approach because it was "Ambedkar's debate with Gandhi over the Annihilation of Caste and Ambedkar's own voluminous writings on Gandhi that led me to look at Gandhi in a completely different way from the one we have been brainwashed into." This missed the point that Ambedkar is constantly diluted by placing him alongside the inflated Gandhi. Roy fell into the same trap when, for instance, she drew a false equivalence in the essay between Ambedkar's views on Adivasis in Annihilation of Caste, criticised by some as paternalistic, and Gandhi's prejudiced views on untouchables—something Omvedt identified as a gross exaggeration. Roy acknowledged the evolution of Gandhi's understanding of caste, but did not make the effort to look at Ambedkar's views on Adivasis through his oeuvre.

Roy committed other slips, too. At one point in the essay, she rebuked Ambedkar for "using the

language of eugenics, a subject that was popular with European fascists.” Yet Ambedkar clearly states in *Annihilation of Caste* that an “immense lot of nonsense is talked about heredity and eugenics in defence of the caste system,” and the edition’s own annotation to the part of Ambedkar’s text referenced by Roy noted that “Ambedkar is using this premise to dismiss the ‘biological’ defence of the caste system.”

Rewinding further, to 2012, there was another instructive forerunner to the latest controversy. A government-prescribed school textbook carried a cartoon showing Ambedkar atop a snail meant to represent the Constitution—a document that he had the single largest role in drafting. Jawaharlal Nehru, the prime minister at the time of the Constitution’s creation, was portrayed standing to one side, ready to bring down a whip held high in one hand. Dalits were offended, Dalit parties and politicians protested against the cartoon in parliament, and the Congress-led government of the day appointed a committee to review textbooks.

The committee responsible for the textbook was headed by Yogendra Yadav and Suhas Palshikar, two intellectuals with solid liberal credentials. Yadav and Palshikar maintained that the cartoon did not denigrate Ambedkar and resigned, citing a “duty to dissent.” Prominent liberals and leftists, including many academics, protested the government’s response as an attack on academic freedom, and some even labeled Dalits who had raised objections as fascists. The scholar K Satyanarayana noted to Round Table India that, since the massive protests in the early 1990s against the recommendations of the Mandal commission, “I think this is the first time that left-liberals and Gandhians and Marxists to other [Marxist-Leninist] groups came together unanimously in response to Dalit protests to say that these textbooks are good and revolutionary and there is nothing wrong in them.” (The researcher Unnamati Syama Sundar later published a book compiling 122 cartoons of Ambedkar from between 1932 and 1956, including the one with the snail, to expose the deep prejudice underlying Savarna portrayals of him.)

The political theorist Gopal Guru spoke at a meeting organised by the Jawaharlal Nehru University Teachers’ Association against the textbook review. In his remarks, as summarised by the academics Partha Pratim Shil and Ankita Pandey, Guru noted “that in a Brahmanical political order the Dalit community is ‘pathologically condemned to being emotional’ ... They are denied the privilege of being equal partners in any deliberative process. They cannot be considered capable of rational debate. They seem to only have emotions and sentiments.” This too is a theme that runs through the controversies over Roy’s essay and the Madam Chief Minister poster.

“Modern-day caste protocols are less often about overt attacks or conscious hostility and can be dispiritingly hard to fight,” the African-American writer Isabel Wilkerson notes in *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, her recent study of the race-based social pyramid in the United States, caste in India and antisemitism in Nazi Germany. “They are like the wind, powerful enough to knock you down but invisible as they go about their work.” Too often, as in these controversies, these protocols are practiced by privileged individuals who are urban, liberal and educated, who believe themselves to be modern and even anti-caste. When called out, they consistently fail to see that, if they wish to be allies in the anti-caste movement, they bear a unique burden of self-examination.

In this scenario, the national conversation on caste—or the lack of it—is informed by Savarna subjectivity. When Native Americans put out a report, *Reclaiming Native Truth*, in 2018, one of its prime observations was that, “Across the education curriculum, pop culture entertainment, news media, social media and the judicial system, the voices and stories of contemporary Native peoples are missing. Into this void springs an antiquated or romanticized narrative, ripe with myths and misperceptions.” Wilkerson makes a related observation: “Individuality is the first distinction lost to the stigmatised.” In India, the Dalit-Bahujans are an invisible people, a faceless mass. When Savarnas, of any shade or conviction, see Dalits, they see them not as they are, but as figments of

their own imagination.

“Public discussion, and ire, have tended to centre less on the contingent lives of Dalits and more on the predominance of caste in public life: the issue of positive discrimination in education and employment,” the historian Dilip Menon writes in *The Blindness of Insight*. “A modern discourse of equal citizenship is popularly seen as being sullied by the shrill persistence of ‘primordial’ identities.”

No national conversation on caste has been possible because this attitude is all-pervasive. Liberal academics, for example, have singularly failed to start a discussion on caste from a non-Savarna point of view. The country’s most prominent sociologists “were vocal in their support for the anti-Mandal position which dominated urban middle-class perceptions of this issue and received wide and strongly sympathetic coverage in the metropolitan media,” the sociologist Satish Deshpande notes in *Contemporary India: A Sociological View*. These sociologists “were no different from the journalists, politicians, administrators, other academics or legions of self-proclaimed pundits commenting on the subject.”

The conversation on race has made huge strides in the United States. Wilkerson, in *Caste*, talks about such things as how higher economic status is no guarantee of happiness or quality of life for African-Americans, Mexicans and other vulnerable communities, and can actually have the opposite effect. “Socioeconomic status and the presumed privilege that comes with it do not protect the health of well-to-do African-Americans,” Wilkerson writes, backed by sociological studies and research. “The stigma and stereotypes they labour under expose them to higher levels of stress-inducing discrimination in spite of, or perhaps because of, their perceived educational or material advantages ... People of colour with the most education, who compete in fields where they are not expected to be, continually press against the boundaries of caste and experience a lower life expectancy as a result.” In India, the mainstream discussion on caste is still stuck on a constant refrain about how well-to-do Dalits should not get any reservations in education or employment, and how economically disadvantaged Savarnas deserve them more.

It is only natural that every vulnerable community wants to control how they are portrayed and how their stories are told, because in those acts lie their only opportunities to be seen, and to be seen as equals. This is true of Dalits, too. But, as the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama writes in *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition*, “The contemporary liberal democracies have not fully solved the problem of thymos. Thymos is the part of the soul that craves recognition of dignity; isothymia is the demand to be respected on an equal basis with other people.” Though liberal democracies such as India promise equality in theory—through such things as the rule of law and democratic accountability—they do not guarantee equality in practice. In this gap, Fukuyama argues, “The modern sense of identity evolves into identity politics, in which individuals demand public recognition of their worth.”

Liberals in India, and intellectuals at large, are usually quick to condemn identity politics, especially if there is any hint of Dalit-Bahujan assertion. Simultaneously, liberals dream of a Dalit-Muslim solidarity that they hope can be a counter to the politics of Hindutva.

Liberals in India, and intellectuals at large, are usually quick to condemn identity politics, especially if there is any hint of Dalit-Bahujan assertion. Simultaneously, liberals dream of a Dalit-Muslim solidarity that they hope can be a counter to the politics of Hindutva. But the conversation among Dalit thinkers has gone beyond this simplistic view, shaped by the crude homogenisation of the Savarna gaze, to an understanding of how concerted anti-caste action is essential to that goal—for instance, through the extension of solidarity to oppressed castes within the Muslim fold. “A caste has no feeling that it is affiliated to other castes,” Ambedkar pointed out in *Annihilation of Caste*, “except

when there is a Hindu-Moslem riot.” The corollary to this, in the words of the writers of the January cover story in this magazine, is that “real secularism in the Indian context”—the ultimate poison to the Hindutva dream—“will be the annihilation of caste.” Dalit voices on social media, and not the liberal champions of secularism in academia and the media, show this understanding.

As Martin Luther King Jr observed, “Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will.” This is why young Ambedkarites, who expect no understanding from Hindutva’s acolytes, pay such close attention to liberals who position themselves as allies but show no understanding, and not even a willingness to take the first step to understanding by listening. No wonder that despite the enthusiasm for Black Lives Matter in Indian social-media circles, there is no corresponding interest in Dalit-Bahujan lives. This is the conversation among young Ambedkarites online—true successors of Ambedkar, awakened by Rohith Vemula. This is what liberals need to hear.

In the words of the African-American scholar Ibram X Kendi, “denial of racism is the heartbeat of racism” in the United States. So it is with India, living in denial about caste, its most terrible fault line.

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