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Annotated Critical Deliberation on the ‘Annihilation of Caste’

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Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition, by B R Ambedkar, edited and annotated by S Anand, Navayana, 2014; pp 415, Rs 525.

Introduced with the essay ‘The Doctor and the Saint’ by Arundati Roy

‘Annihilation of Caste’, is one of the most recognized, debated and celebrated treatise on the questions of ‘persistence of caste and modes of annihilating it’, penned by B R Ambedkar, one of the towering personalities in the modern democratic India.¹ The prime original version of this treatise was first published in May, 1936 and subsequent reprints rolled-out in 1937 and 1944 during Ambedkar’s lifetime itself. Ambedkar conceptualized this work as a means of dealing with the caste questions from; historical, literary, cultural, political, economic, etc perspectives and observed how caste as an institution is an anti-human, undemocratic, exploitative and stumbling-bloc to the human creativity and thus espoused creative means and ways of dealing with its annihilation. This work is widely circulated, printed and reprinted many a times in India by various publishing houses on behalf of various organizations, individuals, etc, mostly in vernacular modes. Mostly, this work is well celebrated, propagated and promoted by Ambedkarities in India. Ambedkarites here primarily refers to the Scheduled Castes. Though, this work is widely available in India in various vernacular modes; the present work attempts to critically engage by providing critical annotations to this celebrated treatise. This is the primary recognizable contribution to this treatise by the editor S Anand.

This volume notifies copyrights in favour of various persons like; Arundhati Roy for her introduction; S Anand for his annotations; and finally this whole edition’s copyright rests with Navayana Publishers. The research assistance of Julia Perczel is also prominently acknowledged. The editor Anand acknowledged peer review contribution to this work by Christophe Jaffrelot, Thomas Blom Hansen, Ayyathurai Gajendran, Anand Teltumbde, Satish Deshpande and Uma Chakravarti, in his preface titled as ‘editor’s note’. Thus, all this proves that this is a collaborative engaged exercise involving distinguished academicians as peer reviewers. The peer reviewers’ appreciation entitled as ‘praise for the book’ was also prominently included at the very starting of the book.

The present volume primarily consists of three sections. They can be identified as; first, Introduction by Arundati Roy entitled as ‘The Doctor and the Saint’; second, critical annotations by editor Anand to the ‘Annihilation of Caste’; three, ‘the Ambedkar-Gandhi debate’. There is also another last section in a precise manner by editor titled as ‘A Note on the Poona Pact’.

I

The first section at the initial stage is an introduction by Arundhati Roy, one of the well recognized Indian English writers. Arundhati’s introduction was titled as ‘The Doctor and the Saint’. In this introduction she proceeded to compare Ambedkar and Gandhi, by recognizing them in the form of ‘Doctor and Saint’, respectively. Some of the observations, analysis brought out in this introduction are of well researched in nature, especially in relation to Gandhi.

Since, Gandhi at some point of time dealt with this Annihilation of Caste text in his journal ‘Harijan’ and a critical exchange took between Ambedkar and Gandhi about this aspect of ‘annihilation of caste’, this introduction gains significance. But, Arundhati failed to convey her view in a lucid and precise manner. At length observations, facts, analysis of Gandhi - his nature, his double standards at times in relation to caste and untouchables, etc are dealt in an interesting manner in the pages of her introduction. The literary writing style of Arundhati is interesting; but, she lacked coherence and authority on dealing with the ‘annihilation of caste’ as a theme of direct deliberation. She mostly devoted and struck about Gandhi and his varied shades as a projected and promoted Saint. On the whole, Arundhati failed to directly relate her introduction to the original ‘annihilation of caste’ penned by Ambedkar. One can clearly observe wide mismatch in Arundhati’s introduction, which failed to systematically and analytically interlink to the prime context of the volume. At another level, Arundati Roy also failed to critically engage and take forward in a systematic manner the debate between Gandhi and Ambedkar over ‘Annihilation of Caste’. Thus, Arundati Roy’s introduction, though interesting at certain level, is not, in any sense directly relevant to the present prime focus of this volume’s deliberation.

II

The primary interesting contribution of this edition lies at looking at critical annotations provided by the editor of this volume Anand to the ‘Annihilation of Caste’ in the second section. Anand posed a few questions in the preface of this edition in the form of ‘editor’s note’, with keen and sustained enthusiasm and showed how he addressed such questions with his best research inputs and incorporated all those inputs in the form of critical annotations. The readers can well benefit from these critical annotations. Since, this treatise was primarily prepared as a lecture to be delivered by Ambedkar at a public event; Ambedkar ignored incorporating references, footnotes, etc. The annotations of Anand fulfill this gap and carry forward readers with interesting flow to read more and know further about a few facts, interpretations, analysis, etc. For instance, Anand took the help of scholar Bibek Debroy to find out the various sources of Sanskrit couplets used by Ambedkar in this work, which were left-out without any quotations and references. Anand

made excellent efforts in order to trace and project; the history and background of Jat-Pak Todak Mandalⁱⁱ organization and its members, influence of John Dewy on Ambedkar and his writings, especially in relation to the present treatise; further details about various historical events also encapsulates the attention of the readers. A total of 170 critical annotations were provided by the editor in this section.

III

The third section concentrated upon by incorporating the debate between Gandhi and Ambedkar in relation to this 'Annihilation of Caste'. Gandhi opened this debate in this 'Harijan'.. Gandhi faulted Ambedkar's chosen and quoted Sanskrit text's authenticity and made observation that only high level saints would be suitable persons to unpack the deep hidden meanings of such texts. The next response was, on behalf of the Jat-Pak Todak Mandal; Sant Ram also intervened and critiqued Gandhi's mode of line of argument as inaccurate in relation to Gandhi's observation and equation of caste and varna. At the final stage, Ambedkar's response can be seen as a sequential reply to Gandhi's mode of argument. Ambedkar clarifies from which source he chose the Sanskrit text and how Gandhi cannot dispute the authenticity of the quoted Sanskrit versus. Ambedkar clarified that his chosen Sanskrit texts were from Bal Gangadhar Tilak's works; hence Gandhi need not worry about their authenticity!! And, Ambedkar went-on to expose Gandhi's double standards in his personal and public life. In this way, Ambedkar concluded the debate. A total 29 critical annotations were by incorporated by the editor.

The final short section on 'A Note on the Poona Pact', by the editor Anand continued with a sympathy and understanding tone over the efforts of Ambedkar in attempting to bring about 'separate electorates to the untouchables'. Anand, attempts to encapsulate how separate electorate would have been a better visionary step in form of better representation to the untouchables, by taking into comparison various distinct cases.

On the whole, this work would be interesting, primarily to those attempting to specialize on caste, Ambedkar and Gandhian studies and debates.