

Dalit Issues: Appropriating Ambedkar

Saturday 16 May 2009, by [KRISHNAN Kavita](#) (Date first published: 2 May 2009).

Around 14 April, the 118th Birth Anniversary of Babasaheb Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP)'s Prime Ministerial candidate L K Advani accused the Congress of having mistreated Dr. Ambedkar, referring among other things to his resignation from the Congress Cabinet in 1951, and said it was the BJP-backed V P Singh government which bestowed the Bharat Ratna on him in 1990 and not a Congress Government.

Once again, the BJP and Advani have made a bid to appropriate Ambedkar – based, as usual, on deliberate distortion and suppression of facts and shameless duplicity. Ambedkar did indeed resign from the Congress cabinet in 1951 in protest over the dilution of the Hindu Code Bill – a legislation intended to do away with gender discrimination in Hindu marriage and property laws. It is also perfectly true that the legislation was opposed by a powerful conservative section within the Congress itself, including leaders of the stature of Dr. Rajendra Prasad. But the opposition to the Hindu Code Bill was undoubtedly led by Shyama Prasad Mookerjee – founder of the Bharatiya Jan Sangh, and Advani's hero. Mookerjee said the Bill would “shatter the magnificent structure of Hindu culture”, as Dhananjay Keer recorded in his book *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission* (1962, page 429, cited by A G Noorani in 'Power Drive', *Frontline* Volume 26 - Issue 08: Apr. 11-24, 2009). Advani's mentor Guru Golwalkar also led the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (of which Advani is a proud member) in opposing the Hindu Code Bill, claiming that granting of rights to women would “cause great psychological upheaval” to men and “lead to mental disease and distress.” (Paula Bacchetta, *Gender in the Hindu Nation: RSS Women as Ideologues*, p.124). Ambedkar drafted the Constitution, while Golwalkar suggested that the Manusmriti, which is abhorrent and discriminatory towards women and deprived castes, should be the Constitution of Independent India, declaring that Manu was the “first and greatest lawgiver of the world.” Clearly, for Mookerjee, as for the BJP-Sangh Parivar-Ram Sene etc...today the subordination of women (and preservation of caste hierarchy) is essential to maintain what they proclaim is the ‘magnificent structure of Hindu culture’ – while for Ambedkar, caste and gender discrimination were abhorrent and had no place in a democratic India.

Advani's brethren in the Sangh Parivar recently launched a campaign of massacre, rape and arson in Kandhamal – targeting Dalits who had converted to Christianity. It is well known that Ambedkar had seen conversion as a gesture of ‘opting out’, in protest, of the caste order justified by Hindu religion. Advani is a man of great gumption to attempt to appropriate Ambedkar, after endorsing such murderous assaults on poor Dalits for the ‘crime’ of conversion.

Ambedkar has faced the maximum vilification and distortion at the hands of BJP ideologue Arun Shourie (*Worshipping False Gods*, 1997). At the time, Advani spoke not a word in condemnation of this vicious and slanderous attack, and Shourie continues to be an apologist for the BJP. It is interesting that neither Manmohan nor Mayawati nor any of the self-proclaimed ‘social justice’ leaders challenged Advani's claims with any of the above facts.

The BJP is undoubtedly the party that is most fundamentally opposed – both in self-avowed programme as well as practice – to Ambedkar's social vision. But what of the Congress? And of parties like the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) which claim to espouse Ambedkar's agenda and reverse Ambedkar? Of course, the first thing that strikes one is that anti-Dalit atrocities like Khairlanji and

the assault on Bant Singh occur in Congress-ruled states of Maharashtra and Punjab. And it is a BSP candidate who is responsible for the heinous murder of a Dalit candidate Vijay Bahadur Sonkar in Mayawati-ruled Uttar Pradesh.

But these parties have an even more fundamental discomfort with Ambedkar's socio-economic vision. Ambedkar championed social dignity for dalits – but he believed that such dignity did not fall from the sky when written into the Constitution, but rather must be underwritten and set into motion by economic rights generated by a radical programme for economic democracy.

Ambedkar's anti-feudal vision led him to propose nationalization of land. Ambedkar had actively backed the Mumbai textile workers' strike in protest against the British Government's draconian Bill against workers' strikes, asserting that the right to strike was "simply another name for the right to freedom."

Ambedkar held that the State's role is to protect workers' rights, not privileges of private capital, "Anyone who studies the working of the system of social economy based on private enterprise and pursuit of personal gain will realize how it undermines, if it does not actually violate, the last two premises on which democracy rests...Ask those who are unemployed whether what are called Fundamental Rights are of any value to them. If a person who is unemployed is offered a choice between a job of some sort, with some sort of wages, with no fixed hours of labour and with an indirect restriction on joining a union and the exercise of his right to freedom of speech, association, religion etc can there be any doubt as to what his choice will be? How can it be otherwise? ...What about those who are employed? Constitutional lawyers assume that the enactment of Fundamental Rights is enough to safeguard their liberty, and that nothing more is called for. They argue that where the state refrains from intervention in private affairs, economic and social, the residue is liberty. What is necessary is to make the residue as large as possible and state intervention as small as possible. It is true that that where the state refrains from intervention what remains is liberty. ...To whom and for whom is this liberty? Obviously, this liberty is liberty to the landlords to increase rents, to the capitalists to increase the hours of work and reduce the rate of wages. ... Liberty from the control of the state is another name for the dictatorship of the private employer." What a contrast these words are to the programmes of liberalization-privatization-globalisation espoused overtly by the Congress and covertly by the BSP!

To quote Comrade Vinod Mishra, from the 6th Party Congress Document of the CPI(ML), "A calculated move has been witnessed in recent times to denigrate Ambedkar and project him as having been opposed to Indian freedom....Meanwhile the BJP is seeking to appropriate Ambedkar for its communal ends. We must oppose these moves. In socio-economic terms, Ambedkar was much more radical than Gandhi, and even Nehru. Politically too, he was more conscious of the complexities of nation-building in India. Rather than trying to project himself as a national leader at the expense of everything else, he made a strong plea for making dalit emancipation an integral part of the freedom movement. And this is a question which India is struggling with even fifty years after independence."

P.S.

* From ML International Newsletter, May-June 2009.