

Foreword

Something singular, irreversible and poetic—an event—occurs when an entire tradition of thinking about politics encounters for the first time the figure of B.R. Ambedkar in New York City in 1916. Not the historical person and body of the twenty-five-year-old prodigy who reads his groundbreaking seminar paper *Castes in India* for his Master's degree; rather the *figure* and *name* of analytic courage as such, which we have come to identify as “Ambedkar” appears in that city, before he incandescently proclaims his “faith in equality” a decade later in the Bombay Presidency. Together these appearances constitute an event *in thought*, a tectonic shift in the very art and activity of thinking, which soon give form to the contours of a new axiomatics of equality on the firmament of twentieth century democratic and constitutional theory.

Unconstrained by the time, space or pace of modern India, as Soumyabrata Choudhury reminds us in this work of dazzling brilliance, Ambedkar's affair with language passes through the thinking of those often far away from

him in time and place. It threads through the thinking of those who think about equality sometimes in the throes of revolutionary passion, sometimes in the midst of fratricidal stasis, sometimes in the midst of the most intense experience of inequality, yet all of whom, in doing so, *become* equal to the task of thinking equality as equals. In *Ambedkar and Other Immortals*, Choudhury probes these immortal extremities of equality (points of force and fragility, where equality comes the closest to inequality itself), offering a profound meditation on the encounter between Ambedkar and the craft of thinking as such, at once extracting him from the disciplinary trappings of (brahminic) context and rehabilitating him in a philosophy of heretical encounters.

In Ambedkar, one confronts a thinker whose encounters do not add up to the immeasurable singularity of his thought. Even heresy, when it encounters him, is subject to labyrinthine displacements, and heterodoxy exposed to blinding bends. Not for nothing did one of Ambedkar's readers, upon seeing a copy of *Annihilation of Caste* in 1936, unwittingly sigh, "Thank God...he is singularly alone." Choudhury grapples with Ambedkar's singularity—and his fearless solitude—with unrivalled audacity, as he pauses painstakingly on syntaxes, words, sentences, and names: those elements of Ambedkar's language whose depths have barely been skimmed, whose heights barely comprehended, and whose dots barely triangulated. When Choudhury approaches these triangles of words and names, he draws us not merely to their logical structure but also to the geological force with which Ambedkar assails them, at once

disassembling and reassembling his earthy system. The materials may speak in deceptively ordinary language, as Ambedkar often does. But the task to retrieve Ambedkar's *axiomatics* of equality, without, at the same time, being constrained by equality's *generic* ubiquity is anything but ordinary.

Not many before Choudhury have been able to—and few after him might—defy so many laws of genre that prohibit us from touching Ambedkar the thinker even today. To glow in the aura of this ineluctable constitutionalist is one thing, to crack open a place in time where Ambedkar speaks to Pericles—in the manner that Ambedkar lets Siddharth speak to Marx—another. To tirelessly invoke the Constitutional Assembly Debates is one thing, to render Ambedkar's interventions in Delhi inseparable from the theatre of his speech in Mahad another. To liberally cite Ambedkar on everything today is one thing, to make *Castes in India* militantly teachable another. Choudhury twists himself free from the formidable logic and history of condescension—which is to also say, sovereignty—that scaffolds historicism's hierarchies, and assembles a new archive for Ambedkar. His originality lies not only in making comparable what is incomparable, or in making commensurable what is incommensurable. Rather, it lies in unapologetically embracing the mutinies of imagination that lie behind every thinking of the incommensurable as such, and to do so only on Ambedkar's own terms, inscribing incomparable events at the heart at once of universal history and of specific modalities of material violence. To read *Ambedkar and Other*

Immortals is to not just get a lesson in Ambedkar's politics, it is to come home to the mutating shapes and curves of human inequality, and to do so in ways institutions remorselessly deny.

The consequences of this homecoming—or better, this search for a refuge where the thought and disposition of equality might be freely shared—are monumental. Choudhury's inexhaustible reserve toward Ambedkar's texts, his commitment sometimes to the sheer physicality and *physics* of books such as *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, give us not only, as he modestly puts it, a “speculative philology.” It gives us a bracing philosophy of reading, one whose sense of freedom is heightened further by the fact that it is at the same time—and in equal measure—a scrupulous reading of philosophy. A reading that shrinks the dark shadow of academic brahminism which still obscures the unconditional passion and dissident joy of Ambedkar's political and social imagination, his indomitable humour, his theoretical exactitude, his stunning epigraphs that pierce in sentence-length arrows the zealously guarded borders of entire traditions. There is, we are told, Ambedkar the constitutionalist, don't you remember? Yet, what of Ambedkar the ironist? Where is Ambedkar the craftsman, wordsmith, democrat, each unthinkable without the other? Where is Ambedkar—to recall the names he gives to his travels in force himself—the archaeologist, palaeontologist, and painter, each exactingly woven with the other?

Turning the tables on those who denounce Ambedkar as too Western but offer nothing besides civilizational

doxa couched in postcolonial tongues, Choudhury stages a masterly reversal as he meticulously, and yet, urgently, presents Ambedkar as India's first Europeanist. It might take us some time to come to terms with the sheer immensity and originality of this gesture. Fearlessly factional yet unapologetically universalist, methodologically separatist yet rigorously faithful to the idea of a community of equals, Ambedkar—and *Ambedkar and Other Immortals*—forces a turn in the vision and rigour of two thousand years of democratic thought. But it is in Mahad that the event shatters the silence. In returning us to those early moments of appearance of dalit rigour, Choudhury has pressed upon us a series of questions unprecedented in political philosophy, cutting to the heart of India's institutional prejudice and searing violence.

What is dalit rigour? What would an event worthy of this rigour look like? How rigorously must such an event be rethought and reclaimed today, beyond the crippling shadows of disciplinary orthodoxy and majoritarian mediocrity? Above all, who thinks of this rigour most unapologetically, most immortally, and yet, always as an equal, beyond liturgical—and curricular—prohibitions, unconstrained by the injunctions of nation-state sovereignty, among a fraternity of strangers? In retracing the probing diagonals and analytical arrows of Ambedkar's insurrections, *Ambedkar and Other Immortals* has achieved what few before it have. It has rendered our conception of the event—any event that is still to come—inseparable from the rigour of Ambedkar's experiments in equality.

Make no mistake about Choudhury's "untouchable

research program.” There is hardly a thinker so sophisticated and powerful in our time who has dared to both begin and end a work of such sweeping consequence with that singularity we now know as Mahad, the town where Ambedkar, by a lake, at an immortal moment in 1927, announces the establishment of the “norm of equality” for India. With *Ambedkar and Other Immortals*, Soumyabrata Choudhury has ensured that this expression will never be the same again. Nor will the figure and spirit of the student, whom Choudhury inscribes everywhere in his book, who alone can truly give back Ambedkar the gift of time that he continues to give them.

Aishwary Kumar
Stanford University
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