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The Machinery of Democracy: Constitution, Representation, Literature

by

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Books were central to Ambedkar's life. Even a casual student of his writing will be impressed by his prodigious reading; a serious one is awed by the depth and engagement of his scholarship. I have not been able to locate a catalogue of the books in his personal library, but judging from biographies, the collection was substantial.

What is surprising, however, is that there appears to be no record of his ever having read a literary work, or spoken about the arts. The only two exceptions I found are 1) a comment by him on the power of the Jalsas that gave popular reach to his ideas. About them he is reported to have said "one of these is more effective than a thousand of my speeches," and 2) a story he recounts from one of the Buddha's sermons.

Yet, I would argue that, Ambedkar's engagement in political life, his thinking and writing on the idea of the depressed classes and on issues of minority from the early 1930s right until 1956 is of structural significance to the wave of upsurge of dalit literature that begins in Marathi in the late 1960s, shortly after that in the mid-70s in Kannada, in Telugu and Tamil in the 1980s and 90s and in Malayalam in the 1990s. I do not have in depth knowledge of the work in other languages, but there is clearly important literature in Hindi and Gujarati. Elsewhere I have described this new dalit writing as raising questions about the faculty of art and the right to the aesthetic. Lest I be misunderstood I should clarify that I am NOT simply saying that the new literature is Ambedkarite (as against Christian or Buddhist, or Marxist). I am also NOT just saying that the writers were influenced by Ambedkar's ideas and his person —although there is no doubt that many of them are.

The link that I want to explore lies in the nature and form of representation-- political representation as well as cultural representation—and the kind of work or labour involved in them. To pursue the distinction between these it may be useful to begin with Marx, who in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, makes the remark, rendered infamous by Edward Said: "the peasants cannot represent themselves, they must be represented." Commentators have pointed out that in the original German text Marx uses TWO terms and the distinction he makes there is obscured in the English translation which uses the same term. The first time it appears in his sentence (as in the peasants cannot represent themselves) the word he uses is *Darstellung* (which is cultural representation, as in a picture, image, discourse or artwork) and the second time, as in 'they must be represented' it is *Vertretung*, (the selection/sending of a political representative or *envoi*). Marx's argument is that in certain historical circumstances a group might lack a clear sense of itself as a class (and the strict technical import of that statement in his scheme of things is that this group does not have an adequate picture of its position in the system

of relations of production). It is therefore not able to recognize its own real interests as a class. He stresses this when he writes: “this point should be clearly understood: the Bonaparte dynasty represents [stands for] the conservative not the revolutionary peasant, the peasant who wants to consolidate the condition of his social existence (his small holding) not the peasant who wants to strike beyond it.”

A whole lineage of thinking that followed this analysis of popular leadership beginning in the 1920s with Gramsci, and working its way through many of the great thinkers of the twentieth century, stresses the primacy of the picture, or of cultural representation. Supremacy in culture they emphasize, PRECEDES, drives and determines political representation. What is more, cultural authority has a peculiar strength, an ability to endure beyond the changing of heads in the domain of the state. Different, and now well-known, concepts have been proposed to understand it—hegemony, civil society, ideological state apparatuses, power-knowledge formations, governmentality and so on. Culture, it would seem is the terrain which governs political representation. More significantly for our argument here, it is the ground on which political transformation must begin and occur.

Although he tends to use the terms social and religious to describe this form of authority, for Ambedkar too the cultural and religious dimension of power is of key importance, for the simple reason that this is the terrain in which “caste” and untouchability operate to ensure the prestige and supremacy of the governing group. But there is also a sense in which the fact that this governing group is not a changeable political majority, but a “permanent” and communal, majority—a “majority that is born, not made” I,376—critically inflects the nature of political representation for minorities.

Historically in our country the political struggle to wrestle with and limit the power of this majority, describe and analyse its specificity as a communal majority as against a political majority, explore the implications of this difference and propose ways to render it accountable, actually first takes place in the domain of the state—not in culture or in civil society. Ambedkar is a key actor here.

From the 1930s onwards Ambedkar’s attention is focused on crafting—this is a term he uses himself-- a system of political representation and constitutional safeguards that will ensure the freedom and protection of the untouchables. The rights to liberty, equality, and fraternity that he is concerned about, are universal. But the issues that emerge in our context when these rights have to be ensured for the depressed classes, their life, liberty and property secured, are specific and require that each dimension of this task requires special alertness, demand fresh and creative attention.

The story of the many initiatives and discussions to ensure adequate and effective political representation is relatively well known. Both qualifiers situate us in an economy of justice, of fine tuning, and of complexly layered dialogue and judgment, of imaginative leaps— as against

that of fixed givens, such objectivity, method or law. What I am pointing to here are the intangibles that belong to the dimension of judgment, working with incommensurable variables, working something out in dialogue, in brief, “practice.”

If I point here again to some of the principal staging points (the ideas more than the events) it is only to recall the scale and the scope of the effort which involved (a) introducing several disagreements into the commonsense of the time, b) shaping making a claim on the form of the new state.

For example,

- (i) Insisting on universal suffrage and working to ensure it at a time when many senior Congressmen were arguing that India’s illiterate masses not ready for it; when in some European countries women were still to get the vote.
- (ii) Holding on to an “all-India” category which he variously referred to as Depressed Classes (an early Marathi translation of which, I learnt, is the term ‘dalit’)/ Untouchables/Scheduled Castes.
- (iii) Using the term ‘untouchable’ to foreground the question of suffering, ethics—and of course politics--while balancing it with the other statutory terms. We must remember that he was doing this in the face of efforts to disperse that entity by showing that actual practices varied from place to place. Ambedkar turns the mirror onto the perpetrator insisting that untouchability be defined not by the outward forms of the practice, but the inward feeling of “defilement, odium, aversion and contempt” that the upper castes felt towards them, and which untouchables across the country had to deal with.
- (iv) Arguing that the form of electoral representation and constitutional safeguards must work from principles, and not follow mechanically from methods or rules. Making several imaginative suggestions about how to manage relative weightages, balance the majority and different minorities, design constituencies, ensure meaningful (as against mischievous) representation, work out actual numbers and processes questions of representation.
- (v) Placing the idea of political capability in the forefront of the minority issue. Raising the issue of “real” representation and adequate proportion of seats and votes. Developing the idea of minority in a manner that was answerable to the heterogeneity as well as the peculiar nature of “majority supremacy” in this country.
- (vi) Emphasizing equality and fraternity in addition to the liberty (where mainstream nationalism—and indeed parliamentary democracy often remained stuck).
- (vii) Recognizing the importance of the courts (ie of principle) and of rights as safeguard for minorities (for whom the legislature presents some hazards (majority dominance).
- (viii) Pointing out that the real role of the superintendent of minority affairs, was not that of a watchdog. S/he is an institution that will keep alive public discussion—public discussion being the best safeguard for minorities.

Most importantly, asserting that the rights, remedies, protection and safeguards for untouchables were a litmus of the ethical standing of the new state. If the untouchables were “a part apart” of Hinduism, in the newly configured political community their position was to be symptomatic of the robustness and health of the new formation.

It should be clear by now that a newly configured and many layered NEW category is being thought, felt, differentiated, repositioned, argued over, tested out, shaped and wrestled into place through these arguments, proposals, battles and discussions.

Most importantly, what is being maneuvered into place is a new subject that is charged, given its new political capacity, with speaking for its interests at the same time as it speaks for the ethical interests of the whole democratic community.

And finally, Justice as understood in relation to the untouchables is symptomatic of the whole that is this free country. It is not simply an arithmetical addition.

To summarize very briefly: a clutch of uneven issues are held in balance in the unprecedented entity—call it an art work if you like, call it the category called Scheduled Castes if you like—that appears in the new Constitution.

Section II

I need to switch gears here to proceed with the second and third parts of my presentation and move into terrain that we recognize more easily as that of the arts broadly, the terrain in other words, of aesthetics. The European Renaissance and more so the revolutions of the 17th and 18th centuries, we all know, gave rise to a whole new literature. It is a commonplace that at its centre was a new figure (a new fiction let us note) that of the common man. A common man in a world that now and for the first time, belonged to him and took shape around him. The literature investigated that figure, elaborated it, gave him flesh and feeling; set up values around him and gave him a past and a future.

What is not so often talked about is that alongside those ideas of liberty and equality there emerged not just a new *literature* but also a new idea of the arts that provided the aesthetic domain with a new meaning and a function. We do not often pause to take in the fact, but both as concept and institution, aesthetics is a very recent arrival on the scene. Kant’s 1790 *Critique of Judgement* is one of the key inaugural events. But what we are looking at is something larger—a conceptual field and an institutional formation put into place in Europe in the half century between 1780s and the 1820s. This is the period in which the famous Romantic poems were written (which for every Indian college-goer and maybe even schoolchild defines both the idea of *great* and of *poetry*). It is the period in which the narrative technologies, the ideas of space and time associated with the novel are designed and fabricated. It was also the period in which Britain’s best selling and most prescribed novelist Jane Austen published her amazing political and philosophical novels.

As a framework for thinking about beauty and art the *Critique* marks a break from the logic of earlier configurations such as “belles lettres” and “fine or decorative arts,” “religious art,” as well as from the ancient Greek focus on mimesis and representation--*icon, copy, model* and so on. *Beauty in this new sense—the harmony and sensuous richness of natural as well as artistic objects—becomes a full-blown concept only alongside the ideas of freedom, the authority of subjective knowledge, the new ideas of Virtue and the State that emerged in the events of the time, and all of which were thematic for Kant.* Ancient Greece (and indeed ancient Egypt) are reference points, and Platonic and Aristotelian interest in *imitation* or images often discussed, but what is configured as **the aesthetic** in say Schiller, or Kant, or Hegel, is quite distinct. Kant is undoubtedly the principal theorizer of this level or terrain.

Extending this observation, one can see that what is generally discussed under the rubric Indian Aesthetics is not in this careful sense of the term, *aesthetics*. The theory of *rasas*, associated with the finely balanced, brimming but not over-flowing, brink-point of sensory and other pleasures, are part of a courtly ensemble of appreciation and enjoyment by prince, scholar and priest. The artisans involved, however skilled, and however amazing their work may seem to us when with look with the eyes of the aesthetic, were not creating ART in the Romantic sense and were therefore invested in the aesthetic. The enjoyment of beauty, the development of taste and delight (in Malayalam the word is madness) in Sringara rasa is quite different from the appreciation of beauty as an aesthetic.

Kant’s ambitious and forbiddingly technical 1790 *Critique of Judgment* is the root or ur-text for this field. This book complements his earlier *Critiques* (one dealing with Truth after dogma and the other with Virtue or morality, “after” religion). While his contemporaries (Schiller, Burke) had discussed the question of beauty in isolation, in the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant creates a conceptual architecture that places aesthetics alongside epistemology (the domain of Truth) and moral philosophy (that of Virtue). In other words, he provides aesthetics with the status of a domain of the new state and as umbilically connected to freedom, truth and morality.

What is more, he privileges this terrain by suggesting that the experience of beauty and the faculty of discrimination (he called it taste) provides *the unifying ground that connects the true and the good*. In other words because of the spontaneous and convincing pleasure we derive from it, because it involves a dynamic attunement of the imagination and understanding, and because all this ‘naturally’ happens in just measure, beauty can be guarantor/judge of the true and the good. There are two further dimensions to the Kantian thesis that are of key importance to our argument here.

- 1) In contrast to judgments of truth where the role of cognition is to synthesize the data of the senses and the imagination and subsume it under a concept, in aesthetic judgment the sensual data is maintained, open available, just short of subsumption under a concept. In other words, it gives one access to the physical, sensory, passionate material and the

subject of that experience, that underwrites conceptual thinking, holding on to that substratum.

- 2) An object is beautiful, it is an *aesthetic* object as against some other kind of object, when all this happens in just measure, and when it achieves the *form* of purposiveness without being purposive. We will see in a Siddalingaiah poem that I will analyse how this happens.

The aesthetic as conceptualized here—and as it would gradually be institutionalized—is an integral aspect of the new political formation, the new free subject, which has been put into place. Without it, neither Truth nor Virtue, in other words, neither Reason or Ethics, can stand. To put it another way, the political formation calls out to be supplemented by the aesthetic.

Section III

Would be too much to suggest that it is this entity, this new constitutional formation, with the marks of contestation, discussion, argument, battle still fresh on its body; this new formation that is part of a new form of political community, actually needed, or to put it more strongly, called for an aesthetics to elaborate and firm it up? I believe Ambedkar also had a strong sense of the necessity of such a supplement—and we see it best in his turn to Buddhism. But to my mind, the most powerful, the more elaborate, detailed and effective supplement appears in the literary movements that follow. Since I know more about the South, I list the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra, the Dalita Sangarsha Samiti in Karnataka, the poets, painters and story writers that grew out of and around different movements and politico-literary initiatives in Tamil Nadu, out of the Dalit Maha Sabha and Virasam in Andhra Pradesh, and the Dalit Women's Society, SEEDIAN and other initiatives in Kerala.

As this audience would well know, Marathi literature had never heard anything like the voices of the Panthers produced in the early 1970s. The world had never been seen through these, now human, eyes. When Baburao Bagul writes, "Dalit literature is but human literature" he is making a claim about that literature, but more importantly he is rewriting the term "human." When B.M. Puttiah asks in a rich and complex essay "Does Dalit Literature Need Poetics?" he is saying two things: a) dalit literature can well do without the costumery of existing poetics, and b) the poetics of dalit literature is in the new voices it authorizes, the new paradoxes and complexities that force open the tired certainties of the public sphere and renew the life of democracy, not in dead forms.

I have wandered with you into a huge territory—a portion of which has occupied my working and thinking life for the past five or six years and which my collaborator and colleague K Satyanarayana and I are still coming to grips with in our different ways. But I will bring this talk to a close by sharing with you two poems, the first a lyric that was composed and sung in the midst of the turbulence that arose in the momentous Boosa agitation of the mid 70s in Karnataka. The whole affair was precipitated by a comment made by Basavalingappa, a dalit who was then

Minister of Town Planning, that went something like this (there is much controversy about exactly what he said!) “There is a great deal of *Boosa* in Kannada literature.” The upper caste protested violently. If you want to know more you can read our book.

For now I want to focus on the fact that the dalit repose, and the organization that grew out of it was principally one of writers and poets. And let us look at one of the most controversial of those poems: According to NK Hanumanthiah: “The new movement questioned the idea of beauty devoid of social concern and demanded a new aesthetics that was close to the realities of life. There was a transformation in the way literature was perceived.... Images suggestive of blood, blackness and violence began replacing the traditional literary landscape.... There dawned awareness that along with a commitment to the true life of people, literature should gain in strength with the ideas of Buddha, Basava and Ambedkar.” Feminists in the audience might associate these developments with what was taking place in their own seventies and eighties.

A node of heated controversy was the iconic Siddalingaiah poem that was simply titled: Song. Set to music and sung by Janardhan, it became one of the anthems for the movement as did his ‘Thousands of Rivers.’ It began: “Ikrala, Vardila...” (Bash them, kick them, skin the bastards alive!). The Kannadiga intellectual, Madhava Prasad, who is also a child of the mid 50s, often tells the story of that gentleman doyen of Kannada realism, Masti Venkatesh Iyengar, who was presiding over a poet’s meet at which Siddalingaiah recited this poem. Iyengar blanch before he gently (and of course with great authority) inquired: “Is *this* poetry?” Many of you also probably have the question on the tip of your tongue. And you are right. It is not—and is, poetry.

We might look to the Hampi University dalit theorist, BM Puttiah for a discussion—and after that, in the section that follows—to the C 18 philosopher Immanuel Kant. Puttiah asks in a paper on dalit poetics: “If this is not poetry (with its endorsement of myself, my body, my here, my now, the urgency of my battle, the people gathered together in my address) what is poetry?” He continues: “This poem inspired (lit: put life and breath into) nearly two hundred other poets, some of them in remote parts of the State, who composed songs that are, even thirty years later, sung across the Kannada-speaking regions and beyond.”

Make no mistake, whatever the words denote, Siddalingaiah’s poem is not an incitement to fight. **It is the fight itself.** Here as the sensuous speaking body and self of the opening incitement, is an emerging subject. Here is the thrill of a body that would earlier have cowered and slunk away, hoping not to be noticed, turning back to fight. Here the thrill of the here and the now, of my places and my time as the space of art; of my mother tongue as the medium for the most valued forms of expression, of my people as a community of address and the community of the real battle for national life.

One more example—of an entirely different kind of work—before I close. This is by a much younger poet, S. Joseph, writing in Malayalam. It reads:

Identity Card by S. Joseph

In my student days
a girl came laughing.
Our hands met mixing
her rice and fish curry.
On a bench we became
a Hindu-Christian family.
I whiled away my time
reading Neruda's poetry;
and meanwhile I misplaced
my Identity Card.
She said,
returning my card:
'the account of your stipend
is entered there in red.'
These days I never look at
a boy and a girl lost in themselves.
They will depart after a while.
I won't be surprised even if they unite.
Their Identity Cards
will have no markings in red.

Backdrop: daily life in a college in Kerala—a state renowned for its achievements in education, its development model and a score on the quality of life index which matches that of many countries in the West. Bubbling through the restrained reportage is the headiness of youth, of college life and its promises of freedom and equality: a girl's inviting laughter, a bench on the grounds, the intimacy of shared food, the thrill of touch. Poetry. Revolution. A world opening up. In the happy, secular lighting of this theatre the dark age of religious difference has long been left behind. Enter accidentally: an identity card bearing official record of his Scheduled Caste stipend. She must leave, and does so feeling deceived. He remains—numbed, holding what he now knows as the dark secret of his modernity and the beginnings of a dalit sensibility that actually enables this dalit poem.

For the one who assumes that a secular modernity may be taken at its face value, that he can be a world citizen, aspire to poetry and to love, the real betrayal is not singular or by an individual; it is a many-layered betrayal by a politics, a government, an era. What he encounters is not a traditional taboo, but a modern stigma. It is assigned by modern means in a modern institution. Ironically, it is precisely that which offers possibility of escape—a state stipend, higher education, reservations—that also stigmatizes him, mocks at his aspirations, returns him to his place, exposed, humiliated, externed from the world of those 'normal' others who can love and unite. For the other, whose liberation appears total—she came laughing, shares a bench and lunch box, brushes aside belief—caste turns out to be the line that cannot be spoken or crossed. The account of their parting cited in the poem is hers. It is the uppercaste story. She speaks; her

point of view has public legitimacy. She leaves, returning to her kind. A readymade sensibility allows the common reader to consider her action ‘only natural, understandable’. He remains silent, immobilized, alone.

So much for the story. We turn now to the poem. The point of view and the experience that it reframes directs us to the *two* stories that comprise the poem. One is relatively familiar and focused on love in the localities of caste and the pain of parting. The other records the modern protagonist’s journey from innocence into [a dalit] maturity, from a desire limited to individual fulfilment, into a desire that involves a painful turn away from that scheme, towards his communal identity—and, equally significantly here, towards poetry. The first story constitutes the plot—it tells us what happened. The second directs us to the poem itself as a happening, a critical event. It is the poem that directs our attention to the setting, to the silencing and to the turning away from the bright air of the campus to a darker region in which the poet must encounter his difference and explore its meaning for himself.

Subtle shifts enable a reader to first notice the poetic persona; then slowly to see his silence, to acknowledge a disagreement that deserves full hearing; and finally, to endorse the human right, not simply to recompense or welfare, but to love. In the process it is not only her story that is reframed, but also older ethnological-humanist formulations of the untouchability question as well as the statist mode in which ‘historical wrong’ and official remedy have been configured in modern Indian history.

To conclude: I have been trying to argue here that the dalit literary renaissance that came in the decades after Ambedkar is a necessary supplement to the work of political representation that he and his associates initiated. This literature puts into place new arrangements that enable the coming into being of a dalit subject as modern, and as an agent of history. I have also been arguing for a deeper and more serious engagement with the aesthetic and role it plays in the making of what one might call of political capacity.