

INDEPENDENCE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Understanding the Ambedkar-Gandhi Debate

Rajmohan Gandhi

Preface

I am grateful for this chance to revisit the historic tension between the goals of independence and social justice, a tension that has continuing relevance and current parallels.

In the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, this tension was symbolised by the seemingly clashing views of Gandhi and Ambedkar. It was Arundhati Roy's 'The Doctor and the Saint', published earlier this year, which prodded me to return to the question. Although in this small book I have pointed out what in her text seem to me to be serious omissions and flaws, I should thank her for causing me to address once more a question I have discussed in two of my earlier studies.

Many years ago I briefly considered working on a biography of Dr. Ambedkar. A Dalit leader in Chennai, where I was living at the time, had asked me to attempt it. I was touched by the request, and the subject proposed was compelling, but I was prevented from working on it by circumstances and also by a diffidence connected to my unfortunate limitations with respect to Marathi, the language in which Dr. Ambedkar wrote many of his letters, articles and lectures.

If I now intrude on the public with these comments and reflections on the Ambedkar-Gandhi debate and on Roy's version of it, it is because the subject is important, and also because such studies as I have been able to make of Gandhi and Ambedkar and their times have given me information relevant to the debate. This knowledge is hardly secret, but since it seems to have escaped many, I feel inclined to share it.

That a leading Hyderabad publishing house, which has previously produced Telugu editions of some of my books, is bringing this out gives me joy. Apart from occupying a significant place in any India-wide discussion of ideas, Hyderabad is a city which my brilliant and much-missed brother Ramchandra loved, having lived and taught there for some years.

One of my brother's Hyderabad associates, Professor Raghurama Raju, has very kindly helped with suggestions for the pages that follow. I owe him thanks, but of course only I am responsible for the views expressed and any errors made.

Rajmohan Gandhi, Urbana, Illinois, USA, September 29, 2014

In 1936, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was invited to deliver a lecture in Lahore – then very much part of India – by a Hindu group opposed to untouchability. When the group saw an advance text of the lecture, which was entitled *Annihilation of Caste*, they cancelled the invitation because towards the lecture’s end, the author had declared his intention of leaving the Hindu fold. In a riposte to the cancellation, Dr. Ambedkar published *Annihilation of Caste*. Its contents elicited an immediate comment from Gandhi in his journal, *Harijan*, to which Ambedkar issued a rejoinder.

A major text from India’s recent history, *Annihilation of Caste* has been republished many times and has been translated into several languages, often with the Ambedkar–Gandhi exchange added to the main text. In March 2014, a new edition was published in Delhi by Navayana. In this new edition, *Annihilation of Caste* is preceded by a 153-page text by Arundhati Roy, entitled ‘The Doctor and the Saint’, which is presented as an introduction to Ambedkar’s classic ‘undelivered’ lecture.

This little book is a response to Arundhati Roy’s ‘The Doctor and the Saint’. However, it also bears an indirect connection to the historic debate between Ambedkar and Gandhi, which took place during a period well removed from our times. While Gandhi’s assassination occurred nearly seven decades into the past, Ambedkar died in 1956, almost six decades ago.

The two were involved in a positive, if impersonal, relationship during the 1920s. Though they did not meet each other in this period, Ambedkar appreciated Gandhi’s concern for the plight of Dalits, and he also welcomed the method of satyagraha that Gandhi had introduced. However, the 1930s saw sharp, and from a historian’s standpoint revealing, exchanges between the two.

The exchanges help our understanding not only of two powerful individuals in history, but also of continuing flaws in Indian society and the tension in the first half of the twentieth century between the goals of national independence and social justice.

The first face-to-face meeting between Ambedkar and Gandhi took place in Mumbai in 1931, shortly before their piercing verbal encounters. Begun in the autumn of 1931 in a well-lit London arena (the 1931 Round Table Conference on India’s political future, convened by the British prime minister), these encounters continued in 1932 in a dark Pune prison, where the British had incarcerated Gandhi, and where a successful negotiation resulted. Robust exchanges were, however, resumed before the Indian public in the mid-1930s, mainly via the press.

The Ambedkar–Gandhi debate was interrupted by Gandhi’s frequent imprisonments, resulting from his struggles against British rule. From 1932 to 1934, and again from 1942 to 1944, Gandhi was behind bars. In contrast, Ambedkar, who believed that the battle for social democracy was more important than the fight for national independence, was not only never jailed by the British, he was also included in the Viceroy’s Executive Council from 1942 to 1945.

In the summer of 1945, Ambedkar published *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, a strong attack on Gandhi and on the Congress movement led by him. Absorbed from 1944 in what turned out to be a losing battle to avert partition, Gandhi offered no reply himself to Ambedkar's 1945 charges, but he encouraged *Ambedkar Refuted*, a short tract written by Chakravarti Rajagopalachari.

The period from 1947 to 1948 saw an unexpected – and, from any perspective, remarkable – rapprochement between Gandhi and Ambedkar. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Deputy Premier Vallabhbhai Patel were party to this accord, which resulted in Ambedkar's entry into free India's first cabinet and his leadership of the Constitution-drafting process, culminating in the 1950 Constitution.

However, in 1951 Ambedkar resigned from the cabinet. In the 1952 elections, and again in a by-election in 1954, he opposed the Congress, losing on both occasions. Shortly before his death in 1956, he led lakhs of fellow Dalits out of Hinduism and into an embrace of the faith and vision of the Buddha.

By every standard, the Gandhi–Ambedkar *relationship* is a fascinating story. Many, including this writer, have looked at it (1995; 2006) and many more will in future. The Ambedkar–Gandhi *debate* is a vital part of that relationship and an important subject in itself. It has been, and will continue to be, analysed and discussed.

However, the pages that follow do not seek to analyse or assess the Ambedkar–Gandhi debate, though I hope they might add to our understanding of it. And although these pages will observe the Gandhi–Ambedkar relationship, analysing that relationship is hardly their chief purpose.

Looking ahead at the pages to follow, I disavow any desire to confront either Gandhi or Ambedkar. Not only do these two belong to another league, they belong to another age. However, I confess to the wish – call it temerity – to confront Arundhati Roy.

Many have bought and no doubt read her work, 'The Doctor and the Saint'. Excerpts and quotes from 'The Doctor and the Saint' have been widely published in the print media and on the internet. Roy's lectures on her tract have been well-attended and well-reported.

At first, I was disinclined to read 'The Doctor and the Saint'. The sections that I had come across suggested – to me at any rate – that Roy had created a false, easy-to-ridicule, straw-man Gandhi. Eventually, however, I obtained and read a copy. For one thing, people were likely to ask me what I thought of it. More importantly, it was wrong for me to mentally label a text without reading it in its entirety.

Having read 'The Doctor and the Saint', I must confess that it took me a while to understand its chief purpose. A discussion of the thesis of *Annihilation of Caste* is not her focus. Nor, certainly,

the Gandhi–Ambedkar relationship. Not even the Ambedkar–Gandhi debate. Nor an evocation of the times in which the debate took place. ‘The Doctor and the Saint’ comes across mainly as a fierce indictment of the Mahatma, and there are indications here and there that the demolition of Gandhi is its true aim.

Many Dalits have censured ‘The Doctor and the Saint’, not so much for its disagreements with Ambedkar, but largely, it would seem, because three-fourths of its 153-page text, presented as an ‘Introduction’ to a new edition of *Annihilation of Caste*, is about Gandhi, and only one-fourth about Ambedkar. She has only used Ambedkar to attack Gandhi.

There is nothing necessarily illegitimate with that – except that she should have been frank about her intention.

My response is being offered because of Ms. Roy’s fan following, which is the result not only of her well-earned reputation as a writer; it has to do also with her willingness to take out-of-favour positions. Not everyone agrees with all the unpopular stands Ms. Roy has taken, but many (including this writer) may agree with one or two of them.

Since what Arundhati Roy says carries weight with several good people, I thought it necessary to point out some of the flaws in her attacks on Gandhi. Before doing so, I should, of course, acknowledge that Gandhi merits criticism, including on some of the points underlined by Arundhati Roy.

Though he constantly asked caste Hindus to repent for the great sins of untouchability and caste superiority, he only rarely led or encouraged direct struggles for Dalit rights, whereas he led and triggered a large number of direct battles for Indian independence. During his South African phase, he struggled for Indian rights, not directly for black rights. These are undeniable – if also well-known – truths, and Roy has every right to reiterate them, even if Gandhi had his reasons for choosing certain priorities at different times in his life.

I should freely concede something else. Some of Roy’s unreasonable attacks may have been the result of a lack of knowledge. She has not been a Gandhi scholar for any length of time.

The omissions in ‘The Doctor and the Saint’ constitute the text’s most serious weaknesses. Hindering even a limited knowledge of where Gandhi stood on caste, race and religion, these exclusions also keep readers from understanding the nuances in the Ambedkar–Gandhi debate. More importantly, perhaps, these gaps in ‘The Doctor and the Saint’ prevent its readers from feeling with their mental fingers the true textures of India’s intertwined movements for national freedom and social justice in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s.

The pages that follow will provide some of the material that Roy’s text unfortunately excludes. I believe this left-out material corrects and completes the picture that Roy has painted.

‘Though dead for decades, the Mahatma takes care of himself.’ This is a view I too have held and usually continue to hold.

However, Gandhi stands for a whole set of crucial values that are also under attack today – fairness, concern for the neediest, refusal to bow before the gods of power or money, and goodwill among people of different nations, religions, races, castes and classes, being some of them. Pointing out Gandhi’s failings may, at times, be necessary. As some readers may be aware, it is something I too have attempted – respectfully, I hope, but also frankly.

I say ‘respectfully’ for personal reasons. Others may have broader reasons for wanting to respect Gandhi even while criticising him. Those who wish to be irreverent will not find someone such as me objecting, and I suspect that Gandhi himself might have welcomed such a stance.

Yet, it is altogether another matter when a denigrator is ‘creative’, or conceals what he or she knows to be true. That it might feel ‘safe’ to be irreverent towards Gandhi – whereas caution seems a prerequisite while questioning others – is a poor reason for launching untrue or half-true attacks.

It is hardly a secret that those opposed to an India that exists for everyone – an India where all have equal rights – have been working for decades to destroy the physically dead but still (to them) an obstinate Gandhi who obstructs their path, even as – for identical reasons – the living Gandhi was gunned down in January 1948.

Gandhi’s legacy is a precious ally in many necessary struggles today. When he is misleadingly attacked by a person with a significant platform, these struggles demand that he be defended. Thanks to my having studied, over the course of many years, his life and times, I am perhaps better able than some others to spot falsities in attacks on the Mahatma.

Hence the pages that follow, where I offer reasons for questioning the case that Roy has presented in ‘The Doctor and the Saint’.

I would like to argue that the narration in ‘The Doctor and the Saint’ of the Gandhi–Ambedkar relationship, which saw both conflict and partnership, is seriously flawed. Even if examining it was not the central purpose of Roy’s text, this relationship features in it.

I would also like to show that Roy’s attacks violate the principles of historical debate. These principles require, first, that attacks on a statement that X or Y or even a Mahatma may have made 50 or 100 years ago should provide the context in which the statement was made. Second, the norms require that pertinent information is not scissored out.

DEBATING HISTORY

Consider an allegation such as the following in ‘The Doctor and the Saint’:

[Gandhi’s] duality allowed him to support and be supported by big industry and big dams as well (49).

To this assertion, Roy appends a long endnote, where she claims that ‘Gandhi’s approach to big dams is revealed in a letter (5 April 1924) in which he advised villagers who faced displacement by the Mulshi Dam, then being built by the Tatas to generate electricity, . . . to give up their protest’ (151–152).

What are the facts? Roy omits a salient one, which is that three years earlier, in April 1921, when displaced villagers first started their satyagraha against what was then only a proposed dam, Gandhi had penned a biting, if also courteously worded, challenge to the Tatas in his journal, *Young India*:

I wish the great house of the Tatas, instead of standing on their legal rights, will reason with the people themselves, and do whatever they wish in consultation with them . . .

What is the value of all the boons that the Tata scheme claims to confer on India, if it is to be at the unwilling expense of even one poor man?

I dare say the problem of disease and poverty can be easily solved, and the survivors will live in luxury, if the three-crore half-starved men and women, and lakhs of the decrepit humanity, were shot and their bodies utilized for manure . . . And yet nobody but a lunatic will put up such a suggestion. Is the case any weaker when men and women are not to be shot but compulsorily disposed of their valued lands, [around] which sentiment, romance and all that makes life worth living, have grown up?

I suggest to the custodians of the great name that they would more truly advance India’s interests if they will defer to the wishes of their weak and helpless countrymen (27 April 1921; *CW* 20: 40–41).

The Tatas went ahead nonetheless. In less than a year, Gandhi on his part was sent to prison – not for his views on the Mulshi dam, but for sedition against the King of England. By the time he was released, the dam was half-completed, and as Gandhi put it in the letter that Roy *does* quote in her endnote, ‘the vast majority’ of displaced villagers had accepted compensation. Moreover, the leader of the still-continuing satyagraha was not, in Gandhi’s view, committed to non-violence. Stating all this, Gandhi advised that the satyagraha be dropped.

Whether or not this advice was sufficiently pro-peasant or sufficiently anti-dam is a fair question, which may elicit a variety of answers. (It would also call for genuine research.) Yet, Roy's suppression of Gandhi's remarkably strong and public words to the Tatas regarding the Mulshi dam disqualifies her as a judge, while also obliging us to be hugely sceptical when, elsewhere in the text, Roy suggests that Gandhi was soft with the Tatas.

Perhaps I am mistaken here. Perhaps Roy was ignorant of Gandhi's tough words to the Tatas, even though the words have been available for decades in the public domain. Indeed, blemishes in 'The Doctor and the Saint' frequently make one wonder whether its author has, in fact, studied Gandhi.

As for another famous business house from those and continuing times – the Birlas – Roy has this comment on Ghanshyamdas Birla, who often hosted Gandhi. In 1915, when Gandhi returned from South Africa, says Roy, Birla 'organised a grand reception in Calcutta, . . . became Gandhi's chief patron and paid him a generous monthly retainer . . . Gandhi's arrangement with G.D. Birla lasted for the rest of his days' (88–89). Roy does not provide any sources for this assertion.

Here is another account, that of Ghanshyamdas Birla. When Gandhi arrived in Calcutta in 1915, a 21-year-old Ghanshyamdas and a few others unharnessed the horses in the carriage sent to the railway station to fetch Gandhi and pulled the carriage themselves. Four decades later, after Gandhi's death, Birla recounted this first meeting to a Kolkata gathering, and also referred to a conversation they had had during Gandhi's 1915 visit:

I informed him that I would . . . send him a monthly donation . . . 'Fine,' he replied. Look what I did – it was very silly of me! I said, 'Very good then. I'll expect a monthly letter from you.' He retorted saying, 'Does this mean I have to come to you with a begging bowl every month?' I felt so ashamed.

I asked Gandhiji, 'If I write to you, will you reply?' 'Of course,' he said. Just to test him, I wrote a letter to him four or five days after he'd left. He replied – on a postcard (Birla, n.d.).

Each of us can decide which account – Roy's or Birla's – carries a truer ring. However, it could be that Roy was also unaware of the encounter described by Birla, though it was duly published in Kolkata.

*

Ignorance, however, cannot explain Roy's near-total suppression of Gandhi's comment on the Mahad Satyagraha of 1927. This was conducted in western Maharashtra under Ambedkar's leadership by a large number of Dalits who had been denied access to a tank of water in Mahad.

As part of their satyagraha, they surged forward in unison to the tank and drank from its water. Thereafter, they were attacked with sticks and clubs by infuriated groups of the orthodox class.

Ambedkar, who was present in Mahad, wisely asked his people not to hit back. As Roy concedes (107), Gandhi wrote ‘approvingly of the Untouchables’ composure in the face of the attacks.’ However, Roy does not want her readers to know that Gandhi had said much more than that in the *Young India* article cited by her, and therefore, one assumes, read by her.

Praising the Dalits’ ‘exemplary self-restraint’, Gandhi wrote that, the ‘so-called orthodox party’, not having reason on its side, had used ‘sheer brute force’. ‘*Dr. Ambedkar,*’ Gandhi went on in an article in *Young India* on 28 April 1927, ‘[was] fully justified in putting to the test the resolution of the Bombay Legislative Council and the Mahad Municipality by advising the so-called Untouchables to go to the tank to quench their thirst’ (emphasis added). The Mahatma also urged ‘every Hindu opposed to untouchability’ to publicly defend the courageous Dalits of Mahad ‘even at the risk of getting his head broken’ (*CW* 33: 268).

This, again, is radical stuff. Roy deliberately hides it. Later in the year, in an article published in *Young India* on 20 October 1927, Gandhi wrote that a satyagrahi against untouchability ought not to allow entry to ‘hate, haste, thoughtlessness or exaggeration’. Once impelled to fight, however, the satyagrahi should not retreat (*CW* 35: 100).

In December 1927, Ambedkar and his followers publicly burnt a copy of the Manusmriti in Mahad. I, for one, do not know what Gandhi’s comment on this was. Whether Ambedkar was wise in what he did in December 1927, and whether Gandhi ought to have supported him more actively than he did, are questions on which there may be two or more opinions.

But there can be only one comment on Roy’s suppression of what Gandhi wrote in April 1927 about Ambedkar and the Mahad satyagrahis: it was not an honest thing to do!

These are only a few examples of the numerous concealments in ‘The Doctor and the Saint’ regarding Gandhi and Dalit rights. Here is one more. While Roy concedes (123) that the Indian National Congress’s Karachi resolution of 1931 on equal rights for all – a forerunner of the equality pledged in India’s 1950 Constitution – was a ‘valuable, enlightened document’, she avoids mentioning that Gandhi had played a principal role in its drafting.

Here is another. She names ‘the beloved Bhakti poets . . . of the anticaste tradition’: ‘Cokhamela, Ravidas, Kabir, Tukaram, Mira, Janaba’ (37). (Her spelling of the Mahar poet Chokhamela’s name is incorrect.) But, of course, she will not inform her readers that several of these were among Gandhi’s favourite poets too, or that their songs were frequently sung in his ashrams and prayer meetings. Or maybe she is again not aware.

Here is another omission (out of a number of possible ones). She gathers much amusement (132–33) from a piece by Gandhi called ‘The Ideal Bhangi’, and pokes fun at Gandhi’s concern with sanitation and reproduces many sentences from it. But she carefully omits the sentence that conveys Gandhi’s anger at the way the Bhangi was/is treated, published in *Harijan* on 28 November 1936: ‘But I know this much that by looking down upon the Bhangi, we – Hindus, Mussalmans, Christians and all – have deserved the contempt of the whole world’ (*CW* 64: 86).

Yes, Gandhi was troubled by caste injustices *and* by India’s insanitation *and* by much else.

4

GANDHI, UNTOUCHABILITY AND CASTE

At the time of Gandhi’s death, India remained caste-ridden and continued to ill-treat Dalits. Indian society has not greatly changed in the decades since. Yet, Gandhi’s words and deeds have contributed to whatever change that has occurred.

Roy’s readers should be made aware of the positions he took first in South Africa, where he interpreted the discrimination against Indians as a just reward for untouchability in India, and thereafter, following his return to India.

In 1907, in South Africa, in an article first published in *Indian Opinion* on 11 May that year, Gandhi wrote of ‘the wicked superstitions about untouchability’ and of how ‘in India some of us oppress the *bhangis* and force them to . . . speak in obsequious language’ (*CW* 7: 470). When satyagraha sent many Indians to prison in South Africa, he rebuked those prisoners who refused to eat food touched by Dalits or to sleep near them (*CW* 9: 181).

On 16 February 1916, a year after returning to India, this is what Gandhi said about untouchability in a public speech in Madras:

Every affliction that we labour under in this sacred land is a fit and proper punishment for this great and indelible crime that we are committing (*CW* 13: 232–33).

Orthodoxy attacked him. This is how Gandhi replied in Godhra (Gujarat) in November 1917:

I shall continue to be my own guru . . . It is no good quoting verses from Manusmriti and other scriptures in defence of this orthodoxy. A number of verses . . . are apocryphal, a number of them are quite meaningless (*CW* 14: 73–77)

Reiterating his position that verses quoted from scripture could not override the individual conscience, he added that verses from scripture ‘cannot be above reason and morality’ (*CW* 14: 345).

A year later, in April 1918, in a preface to a book of poems by the Gujarati writer Padhiar, which described the cruel treatment of Dalits, Gandhi asked for the poems to be ‘read out to men and women in their millions, in the same way that works like the Bhagavat are read out to them in every square’ (*CW* 14: 344–5).

Two years later, after the Non-Cooperation Movement was launched, he said through his article in *Young India* in November 1920,

We shall be unfit to gain Swaraj so long as we keep in bondage a fifth of the population
(*CW* 19: 20)

Before the year 1920 ended, Gandhi ensured that the removal of untouchability was, for the first time, made an integral part of the political programme of the Indian National Congress (INC).

In 1920, the Non-cooperation Movement for Swaraj was launched, which, among other things, saw the opening of national schools. Gandhi’s orthodox foes in Gujarat attacked him in violent language because he refused to bar Dalits from these schools. Through the press, in letters and via a whispering campaign, these men warned Gandhi that unless Dalits were excluded, they would support the Raj and kill the swaraj movement. They also alleged that Gandhi’s interest in Dalits was borrowed from Christian friends, in particular from Rev. Charles Andrews.

Gandhi’s response was two-fold. First, in his Gujarati weekly, *Navajivan*, on 5 December 1920, he expressed confidence that ‘God will vouchsafe me the strength to reject the swaraj which may be won by abandoning the Antyajas’ (*CW* 19: 73). (‘Antyaj’, connoting something like ‘the end-person’, was at this time the word that many used for a Dalit.)

Second, writing to Andrews and then in public speeches, he recalled the start of his work against untouchability. To Andrews, in a letter dated 29 January 1921, he said,

I began this work in S.A. – before I ever heard of you and I was conscious of the sin of untouchability before I came under other Christian influences in S.A. The truth came to me when I was yet a child. I used to laugh at my dear mother for making us bathe if we brothers touched any pariah. It was in 1897 that I was prepared in Durban to turn Mrs. Gandhi away from the house because she would not treat on a footing of equality Lawrence who she knew belonged to the pariah class and whom I had invited to stay with me . . . (*CW* 19: 288–90)

Andrews having expressed keenness for Gandhi’s focus against untouchability to remain strong and sustained, Gandhi added the following in the same letter:

You are doing an injustice to me in even allowing yourself to think that for a single moment I may be subordinating the question [of untouchability] to any others . . . *It is a*

bigger problem than that of gaining Indian independence, but I can tackle it better if I gain the latter on the way (CW 19: 288–90; emphasis added).

Three months later, on 13 April 1921, Gandhi addressed a Suppressed Classes Conference in Ahmedabad. He said,

I was hardly yet twelve when this idea had dawned on me. A scavenger named Uka, an ‘untouchable’, used to attend our house for cleaning latrines. Often I would ask my mother . . . why I was forbidden to touch him? If I accidentally touched Uka, I was asked to perform the ablutions, and though I naturally obeyed, it was not without smilingly protesting . . . I often had tussles with [my parents] on this matter. I told my mother that she was entirely wrong in considering physical contact with Uka as sinful (CW 19: 572).

Exactly two years earlier, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre had taken place, under the aegis of Brigadier-General Dyer and Governor O’Dwyer. Gandhi recalled that massacre in this speech to the Suppressed Classes Conference, but added,

What crimes for which we condemn the government as Satanic have not we been guilty of towards our ‘untouchable’ brethren? . . . We make them crawl on their bellies, we have made them rub their noses on the ground; with eyes red with rage we push them out of railway compartments – what more than this has British rule done? What charge that we bring against Dyer and O’Dwyer may not others and even our people lay at our door? (CW 19: 572).

Does Roy allow her readers to know *anything* contained in the preceding dozen or so paragraphs? Not only does she not; she is unwilling to accept Gandhi’s recollections regarding Uka! Disbelievingly she writes, ‘Gandhi later insisted that untouchability troubled him since he was a boy . . . (84). Elsewhere she says, ‘From his childhood he resurrected the memory of Uka . . .’ (105). One can only marvel.

*

Roy’s observation that Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj*, written in 1909, makes ‘no mention’ of untouchability, and that a discussion of ‘caste is absent’ (84) from it, is entirely correct, but hers is not an original discovery. The omission was discussed in a study done by me (1995, 161) and no doubt others too have marked it. In that 1995 study, I also speculated on Gandhi’s likely reasons.

If, as Gandhi recounted (Pyarelal 1932, 303), *Hind Swaraj* was largely a reproduction of a dialogue that he had had earlier in 1909 with a radical friend in England, possibly that friend, Pranjivan Mehta, did not discuss caste or untouchability with Gandhi. Or, Gandhi may have felt

that an admission of untouchability practised over the centuries would hurt *Hind Swaraj*'s picture of the virtues of Indian civilisation.

Though the absence of caste and untouchability from *Hind Swaraj* undoubtedly weakens it, we have seen the clear evidence showing that Gandhi was an unceasing foe of untouchability from much earlier.

It is also a fact, however, and one that Ambedkar would justifiably underline, that the fight against untouchability did not gather adequate momentum in the 1920s. Why did it not? In part because of the rigidity of Indian society, but also because Gandhi and his colleagues had other tough goals as well which they were striving to reach, including swaraj and Hindu–Muslim unity.

*

On 2 August 1931, shortly before he was to go to London for a Round Table Conference (RTC) on India's political future convened by the British prime minister, and around the time when he and Ambedkar, who too was going to the London RTC, had their first meeting (in Mumbai), Gandhi made a significant statement in Ahmedabad:

If we came into power with the stain of untouchability unaffected, I am positive that the 'untouchables' would be worse off under that 'Swaraj' than they are now, for the simple reason that our weaknesses and our failings would then be buttressed by the accession of power. (Pyarelal 1932, 303)

Gandhi was admitting here that swaraj would give India's upper castes political power in addition to the social and economic power they already enjoyed, and thus make Dalits 'worse off'. Since the swaraj goal could not be abandoned, the solution – as Gandhi saw it – was to attack untouchability alongside the struggle for swaraj.

At the London RTC in the autumn of 1931, Gandhi and Ambedkar had their famous clash over separate versus joint electorates. If the Raj could provide separate electorates for Sikhs, Muslims and India's Europeans, why not a separate Dalit electorate? Gandhi answered with a counter-question,

Sikhs may remain as such in perpetuity, so may Mohammedans, so may Europeans. Will untouchables remain untouchables in perpetuity? (*CW* 48: 298)

But there was something more worrying, a hurtful reality. Here is how Gandhi described that reality in London on 31 October 1931 at Friends House, the Quaker centre in Euston:

The 'untouchables' are in the hands of superior classes. They can suppress them completely and wreak vengeance upon the 'untouchables' who are at their mercy. I may be opening out my shame to you. But . . . how can I invite utter destruction for them? I would not be guilty of that crime (*CW* 48: 258).

Gandhi said before the Minorities Committee of the RTC that ‘he would not sell the vital interests of the untouchables even for the sake of winning the freedom of India’. He claimed (on 13 November 1931) that those demanding the separate electorate ‘do not know their India, do not know how Indian society is today constructed’ (*CW* 48: 297–8).

Though Roy devotes several pages to the Gandhi–Ambedkar debate in London in the autumn of 1931, she carefully expunges the sentences I have quoted.

Ambedkar’s demand for a separate Dalit electorate was backed by many RTC delegates in London, most of whom were nominated by the Raj. A separate electorate could be introduced, the Raj indicated. Gandhi declared he would, if need arose, fast unto death against it.

I will return to that story.

5

GANDHI AND SOUTH AFRICA’S BLACKS

A good chunk of ‘The Doctor and the Saint’ is devoted to Gandhi’s oft-discussed and undoubtedly deplorable ignorance and condescension regarding black South Africans during some of his time in South Africa. However, here too Roy is carefully selective. Thus she totally leaves out a notable 1908 speech that Gandhi had made on the subject in Johannesburg during a period when he entertained high hopes from the British Empire:

I have endeavoured to study the question [of Indians in South Africa] as it [also] affects the Africans and the Chinese. It seems to me that both the Africans and the Asiatics have advanced the Empire as a whole; we can hardly think of South Africa without the African races . . . South Africa would probably be a howling wilderness without the African races . . . They (the African races) are still in the history of the world’s learners. Able-bodied and intelligent men as they are, they cannot but be an asset to the Empire . . .

It is well for me to be a loyal subject of the Empire, but not I hope as a member of the subject race . . .

If we look into the future, is it not a heritage we have to leave to posterity, that all the different races commingle and produce a civilisation that perhaps the world has not yet seen? (*CW* 8: 242–46)

This is from a well-known speech given at the YMCA in Johannesburg, reproduced at the time in two issues of *Indian Opinion* (6 and 13 June 1908), included later in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, and discussed in more than one modern study, but Roy is either unaware of it (so much, in that case, for her diligence) or she does not want others to learn of it. Though hardly revolutionary by today’s standards, the speech was ahead of the times in which it was made. Not

many Indians in South Africa or in India spoke in 1908 or later of the ‘commingling’ of ‘all the different races’. In fact, few people anywhere did; not very many will even today.

Gandhi’s prejudices at that time (which almost all his contemporaries shared) should be frankly faced, but why does Roy cover up the more favourable side of the ledger, which was rare for its time?

Predictably, Roy also leaves out Gandhi’s well-documented friendship with John Dube, one of the founders of the African National Congress (ANC), whose centre near Durban was not far from Phoenix, where Gandhi established his first ashram. Like Gandhi, John Dube too hesitated to support the Zulu Rebellion of 1906 and said, in fact, that ‘we should . . . assist the government to suppress the rebellion’ (quoted in Reddy 1995, 21).

Heroic yet also tragic, that rebellion bore similarities with India’s 1857 rising, from which contemporaries such as Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Sayyid Ahmed Khan kept their distance, and which another contemporary – Jyotiba Phule – openly opposed.

Roy also leaves out Gandhi’s praise in *Indian Opinion* (30 December 1905 and 17 March 1906) for the efforts of the African journalist and educator, Tengo Jabavu, in establishing a college for Africans, writing of ‘an awakening people’ and of ‘the great Native races of South Africa’ and adding that ‘British Indians in South Africa have much to learn from [Jabavu’s] example’ (quoted in Reddy 1995).

Roy speaks of Gandhi’s alleged ‘disdain’ for blacks (83), but fails to mention that Gandhi’s offensive remarks were provoked by the shocking conduct witnessed by him of men convicted for serious crimes, with whom he shared his prison cell.

Gandhi’s stance regarding South Africa’s blacks was influenced by the circumstances and prejudices and also the equations of his time. Since blacks lay at the lowest rung of South Africa’s political and social ladder, Gandhi’s fight for Indian equality with whites necessarily, if also regrettably, called for separating Indians from blacks. This angle is of no interest to Roy.

Nelson Mandela, whom Roy professes to admire (87), wrote the following in a 1995 publication:

Gandhi had been initially shocked that Indians were classified with Natives in prison . . . All in all, Gandhi must be forgiven these prejudices in the context of the time and the circumstances (Mandela 1995).

‘The context of the time’ is precisely what Roy cuts away. Thus, she makes much of, and derides, Gandhi’s caution regarding a premature African–Indian alliance (74–75). Yet, her readers should know that in 1913, John Dube, the first ANC president, thought that black resistance along the lines adopted by Indians under Gandhi would fail: he believed that blacks

would lose discipline under provocation, and that white reprisal would be devastating (quoted in Patel 1989, 216–17).

Interviewed in 1976, another founding member of the ANC, Selby Msimang, also thought that the African leadership of Gandhi's time 'would, in any case, have found Indian politics too radical to countenance an alliance' (Swan 1985, 133).

However, such acknowledgments would belie the picture that Roy wishes to present.

Also relevant to an understanding of Gandhi's attitude towards blacks is Gandhi's 1905 comment on American slavery. Summarising the life and times of Abraham Lincoln for readers of the Gujarati edition of *Indian Opinion* on 26 October 1905, here is what Gandhi wrote:

It is believed that the greatest and the noblest man of the last century was Abraham Lincoln . . .

Nobody [then] saw anything wrong in openly selling Negroes and keeping them in slavery. The high and the low, the rich and the poor saw nothing strange in owning slaves . . . Religious minded men, priests and the like, saw nothing amiss and did not protest . . . Some even encouraged [slavery], and all . . . thought that slavery . . . was a divine dispensation and that the Negroes were born to it . . . [E]ven those [who thought that slavery was wrong] . . . preferred to remain silent, being unable to assert themselves . . . Even today our hair stands on end to hear an account of the atrocities inflicted on slaves. They were tied up and beaten; they were forced to work; they were branded and handcuffed . . .

Lincoln alone of all men made, and put into execution, his resolution to change the ideas of men, ideas which [had been] indelibly carved on their minds . . . (*CW* 5: 50–52).

Was the writer of these and similar lines a man who 'disdained' blacks? In Yeravada Jail in Poona, where he had been detained from 1922 to 1924, Gandhi made friends with Adan, a Somali prisoner who had become a warder. An incident involving Adan was observed by Gandhi's prison-mate and occasional critic, Indulal Yagnik, who described it in a 1943 book, *Gandhi As I Knew Him*:

One evening our Negro warder from Somaliland was bitten by a scorpion on his hand. He gave a shout. Mr. Gandhi was quickly on the spot . . . He first asked for a knife to cut the wound and to let out the poison. But he found the knife dirty. So missing no moment he quickly washed the area around the wound and applying his lips to the wound began to suck out the poison. He went on spitting after sucking and eventually stopped when Adan felt relief (Yagnik 1943, 303).

Was this the reaction of one who 'disdained' blacks? Not that Roy would ask such a question, or

even let her readers know that Gandhi reacted thus. Or maybe she was not aware of this incident. She also suppresses or belittles Gandhi's increasing willingness to write openly of black rights.

On 22 July 1926, Gandhi declared in *Young India* that he could not think of 'justice being done to Indians [in South Africa] if none is rendered to the natives of the soil' (CW 31: 181–2). Two years later, when a few Indians in South Africa objected to a plan to send Indian students to Fort Hare College, which had been established for Africans, Gandhi, in an article in *Young India* on 5 April 1928, likened the sentiment to what 'is expressed by the South African whites in respect of ourselves,' and added, 'Indians have too much in common with the Africans to think of isolating themselves from them. They cannot exist in South Africa for any length of time without the active sympathy and friendship of the Africans' (CW 36: 190).

In 1939, he told a visiting black leader from South Africa, Rev. S.S. Tema, that Africans 'are the sons of the soil who are being robbed of their inheritance'; theirs was 'a far bigger issue' than that of South Africa's Indians (*Harijan*, 18 February 1939; CW 68: 272–4). By 1946, Gandhi felt that the time for a common African/Indian front had arrived.

6

AIM OF 'THE DOCTOR AND THE SAINT'

Here I ask myself, why bother to show Roy's unconcern with the real Gandhi? After all, she has hinted at her aim with 'The Doctor and the Saint'. She desires, she says, to 'rearrange the stars in our firmament' (140), not to analyse or understand Gandhi. She wants to shoot Gandhi down from the sky, not get to know him. She wants – in her own words, expressed not in 'The Doctor and the Saint' but at a meeting where she tried to explain her text – to 'move the Gandhi monument out of the way', in order, she says, that Ambedkar may be better understood and honoured (Roy 2014a).

This logic is hard to understand. Our minds can have the space to understand both, and our hearts to honour both, and it is no tribute to Dr. Ambedkar to say that his legacy depends on the destruction of Gandhi's.

However, the trouble I am taking *is* called for. As I have already acknowledged, Roy enjoys a following, which she has won through her writing skill and a willingness to take unpopular positions. My belief is that many of Roy's admirers would welcome a scrutiny such as the one I am offering of her attacks on Gandhi.

I should also ask: what provoked this strong dislike in Roy? Was it Gandhi's lifestyle? Or his oft-expressed belief that despite their conflicts, human beings – and races, castes, classes and nations – should find solutions that allow bitterness to melt? I do not know. Roy's popular novel, *The God of Small Things*, might have supplied a clue or two, but I have not managed to read it.

In any case, ‘The Doctor and the Saint’ makes clear Roy’s total disapproval of what she thinks to be Gandhi’s lifestyle. According to her, Gandhi ‘left his followers with a legacy of a joyless, joke-free world: no desire, no sex, . . . no food, no beads, no nice clothes, no dance, no poetry. And very little music’ (81).

How truthful is this picture? The ‘very little music’ that she reluctantly concedes to the Gandhi legacy was actually a daily affair in his life, morning and evening. True, it was religious or spiritual music, yet Gandhi had an ear for song and, in fact, possessed a decent singing voice, which fellow ashramites and fellow prisoners spoke of.

It is true, too, that the ballroom dancing (and violin) lessons he took in London as a student were later never put into practice, but no one who spoke as often as Gandhi did of ‘dancing with joy’ could have been an enemy of dance. And although Roy may not be aware, Gandhi frequently quoted poetry in his journals – English, Hindi, Bengali, Urdu or Gujarati poetry.

As for his ‘joyless, joke-free’ world, here is what William Shirer, the American author of *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, said, referring to a time that he and a few others had spent with Gandhi:

In no time at all Gandhi had us all laughing and completely at our ease . . . If in this world of varied personalities there is a single man even half as charming as Gandhi, I have not seen him (quoted in Jack 1956, 399).

And he enjoyed others’ jokes. Writing, in 1932, from a Pune prison to Srinivasa Sastri, Gandhi said, ‘Sardar Vallabhbhai is with me. His jokes make me laugh until I can laugh no more, not once but several times a day’ (Parikh 2, 91–92). Everyone who spent more than a few minutes with Gandhi came away with stories of his merry side.

Like some others in history who took on daunting goals, Gandhi had strict views on sex. Many will disagree with those views, but the dreary Gandhi painted by Roy was never encountered by his friends or foes. Such a Gandhi never existed.

7

GANDHI’S AIM

In the course of her pursuit to demolish Gandhi, Roy pauses to describe Gandhi as ‘perhaps the most consummate politician the modern world has ever known’ (58). Since most politicians usually nurse a clear aim, at least at any given time, we may ask, what was the goal towards which Gandhi applied his ‘consummate’ skills?

Roy refrains from providing her own clear views regarding this, though here and there she insinuates that Gandhi was not really pro-poor and that equality was not his real goal. Yet, it is

not enough for a ‘consummate politician’ to know what, allegedly, he does not want. He *must* know what he wants.

At one point, Roy appears to inch towards understanding something about Gandhi’s goal. She writes:

Gandhi returned to India in 1915 after twenty years of political activity in South Africa, and plunged into the national movement. His first concern, as any politician’s would be, was *to stitch together the various constituencies* that would allow the Indian National Congress to claim it was the legitimate and sole representative of the emerging nation (58; emphasis added).

She is hugely condescending here, and in some respects quite incorrect.

Gandhi was not part of the INC when he arrived in India in 1915. But he was perhaps the only Indian at that time with a conscious goal of involving all Indians – caste Hindus, Dalits, Muslims, peasants and industrial labour – in a national movement; the first person striving to enlist people from outside his or her linguistic/cultural region; the first to insist on using local languages to reach the ordinary Indian; perhaps the first person determined to get to know the whole land of India and as many as possible of its people. As for his ‘plunging into the national movement’, it might be fairer to say that in 1919–20 he created a national movement into which he and others plunged headlong.

But the ‘stitching together’ notion *is* apt for Gandhi.

His imperial foes – men such as Churchill, Linlithgow and Wavell – were never in two minds as to Gandhi’s purpose, all of them agreeing that ending British rule was his dominant passion. While Churchill’s antipathy towards Gandhi is well-known, not many may be aware that in 1947, Wavell, the British commander-in-chief during the Quit India Movement and viceroy from 1943 to 1947, called Gandhi ‘an implacable foe of Empire’ and the ‘most formidable’ of the opponents ‘who have detached portions of the British Empire in recent years’ (Moon 1973, 439).

Now, here is the interesting – actually damning – thing about Roy’s text: in this 153-page demolition exercise, Roy mentions the freedom struggle not at all and the ‘national movement’ only once or twice. This Great Context of the debates on caste, class, race and gender that ‘The Doctor and the Saint’ fervently (and selectively) discusses is missing altogether. Was it consciously banished? Or did it never enter the talented author’s mind?

I have no means of knowing the answers to these questions. Yet, the talented author’s admirers ought to be reminded that nothing said by Gandhi or Ambedkar or anyone else in the India of the first half of the twentieth century can be understood without an awareness of the context.

That context meant that Indians pained and shamed not just by Indian injustices but also by alien

rule were obliged to prioritise. Time and again, they had to choose between struggling against an Indian oppression and struggling against European subjugation. Or, they alternated and oscillated between the two.

In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, some persons of conscience in what until then was Britain's American colony had also been forced to prioritise. Should they focus their energies on opposing slavery or on ending British rule? In the end, independence attracted more American energy than opposing slavery, which, in fact, was even subtly codified into the US Constitution;¹ it was only in 1865, shortly before the South surrendered in the Civil War, that slavery was declared illegal.

As for that war, President Abraham Lincoln thought, along with many other Americans, that the Union had to be preserved, and the South's secession ended, *before* slavery could be abolished. Ambedkar, who obtained a PhD at Columbia University in New York, was well aware of this fact (Ambedkar 1945, 271).

The India that Gandhi and his generation faced also presented more than one challenge to people with a conscience. To name three, India was a subject nation ruled by aliens; Indian society practised untouchability; and there was the Hindu–Muslim divide.

Although, as we have seen, Gandhi's imperial foes saw him primarily as an enemy of British rule, all of us know that he also embraced the struggles against untouchability and for Hindu–Muslim friendship. *He was stitching together India's divided constituencies.*

*

Since Roy does not let her readers know of any of Gandhi's passionate statements against untouchability, let me remind – or inform – them of two more. In 1917, only two years after his return from South Africa, Gandhi said,

Ravana was a rakshasa but this rakshasi of untouchability is even more terrible than Ravana . . . Even the slavery of the Negroes is not worse than this. (*CW* 14: 73–7)

In November 1932, he wrote,

Socially [the 'untouchables'] are lepers. Economically they are worse than slaves. Religiously they are denied entrance to places we miscall 'houses of God'. They are denied the use, on the same terms as the caste men, of public roads, public hospitals, public wells, public taps, public parks and the like, and in some cases their approach within a measured distance is a social crime, [or] . . . their very sight is an offence.

¹ See "Constitutional Topic: Slavery." *US Constitution*. http://www.usconstitution.net/consttop_slav.html

They are relegated for their residence to the worst quarters of cities or villages where they practically get no social services. Caste Hindu lawyers and doctors will not serve them . . . Brahmins will not officiate at their religious functions. The wonder is that they are at all able to eke out an existence or that they still remain within the Hindu fold. They are too downtrodden to rise in revolt against their suppressors (*CW* 51: 347).

Despite scores of similar utterances by Gandhi (all censored out by Roy), and despite the struggles he waged for Dalit rights, Roy insists that he was ‘the Saint of the Status Quo’ (40).

8

THE GANDHI–AMBEDKAR RELATIONSHIP

Gandhi was a prisoner of the Empire in Pune’s Yeravada Jail when, in September 1932, he announced his fast of indefinite duration, directed at the separate Dalit electorate as well as at the caste Hindu conscience. Meeting in Bombay a day before the fast was to commence, India’s most influential caste Hindu leaders resolved that ‘one of the earliest Acts of the Swaraj Parliament’ would be to assure to ‘untouchables’ equal access to ‘public wells, public schools, public roads and all other public institutions’ (*CW* 51: 159-60). Pressured by Gandhi’s fast, they signed an historic, if overdue, pledge.

While Ambedkar would note this pledge (Ambedkar 1945, 103), Roy, of course, banishes it from her survey.

Across India, goaded by Gandhi’s fast, temples closed for centuries to the ‘untouchables’ opened their doors. Brahmins invited Dalits to meals in their homes. The empire, on its part, opened the doors of Yeravada prison, and Ambedkar went inside to confer with Gandhi.

A settlement was reached. Gandhi not only agreed to what he had earlier opposed – namely reserved seats for Dalits in legislatures – he also said that Dalits should have seats in proportion to their population. In its scheme of a separate-electorate-cum-reserved Dalit seats, the Raj had prescribed only half that number of seats.

From his side, in order to save Gandhi’s life, Ambedkar agreed to give up his demand for a separate electorate where only Dalits would have voted for or against Dalit candidates.

Finding common ground, the two agreed on their pact. A cable went to London, where his majesty’s government accepted the joint proposal sent from one of its imperial prisons, and Gandhi broke his fast.

The essence of this pact was subsequently enshrined in free India’s Constitution. Every subsequent Indian election in the 82 years since the pact – whether nationwide or in a state, town or village – has been conducted on the basis of that pact, with reserved seats for Dalits but

without a separate electorate. With independence, separate Muslim and Sikh electorates also ended.

Gandhi had claimed during the fast that ‘an increasing army of reformers’ would resist ‘social, civic and political persecution of the Depressed Classes’. The issue was of ‘transcendental value, far surpassing Swaraj’, he added (*CW* 51: 119).

Expressing his ‘Hindu gratitude’ to ‘Dr Ambedkar, Rao Bahadur Srinivasan and . . . Rao Bahadur M. C. Rajah,’ – the Dalit leaders who had conferred with him in Yeravada – Gandhi added:

They could have taken up an uncompromising and defiant attitude by way of punishment to the so-called caste Hindus for the sins of generations.

If they had done so, I at least could not have resented their attitude and my death would have been but a trifling price exacted for the tortures that the outcastes of Hinduism have been going through for unknown generations. But they chose a nobler path and have thus shown that they have followed the precept of forgiveness enjoined by all religions. Let me hope that the caste Hindus will prove themselves worthy of this forgiveness. (*CW* 51: 143–5).

To caste Hindus, he conveyed a warning:

The political part of [the settlement] . . . occupies but a small space in the vast field of reform that has to be tackled by caste Hindus during the coming days, namely, the complete removal of social and religious disabilities under which a large part of the Hindu population has been groaning.

I should be guilty of a breach of trust if I did not warn fellow reformers and caste Hindus in general that the breaking of the fast carried with it a sure promise of a resumption of it if this reform is not relentlessly pursued and achieved within a measurable period (*CW* 51: 143–5).

However, he feared that the caste Hindu change was not going deep enough. To Andrews, he wrote in a letter on 30 September 1932:

I did expect a mighty response from the orthodox, but I was unprepared for the sudden manifestation that took place. But I shall not be deceived. It remains to be seen whether the temples opened remain open and the various other things done persist (*CW* 51:154).

Was reform ‘relentlessly pursued and achieved within a measurable period’? Much was done, but much more remained undone. Did Gandhi then start another fast unto death? No, he did not, though he did fast for 21 days over untouchability in May 1933. Was he, therefore, a hypocrite and a secret foe of the Dalits, as Roy alleges? Or was he an unusual human being fighting, with all his human limitations and the limitations of his people, and yet with all he had in him, for

more than one tough objective?

*

Shortly after signing the pact, Ambedkar said he had been ‘surprised, immensely surprised’ to find ‘so much in common’ between Gandhi and himself. ‘If you devoted yourself entirely to the welfare of the Depressed Classes’, Ambedkar said to Gandhi, ‘you would become our hero’ (Pyarelal 1932, 59).

Gandhi’s close British friend, Charles Andrews – the one who called Gandhi ‘Mohan’ and was called ‘Charlie’ by Gandhi – tendered the same advice. Recalling that Gandhi had ‘again and again’ said that with untouchability, Indians were ‘not fit’ for Swaraj, Andrews asked his friend to focus solely on untouchability and not try ‘to serve two masters’ (Gracie 1989, 155).

Whether or not we agree with Gandhi, we can look at the reasons he gave for declining the earnest advice.

To Andrews, 15 June 1933: My dear Charlie: Now for your important argument about untouchability . . . My life is one indivisible whole. It is not built after the compartmental system. Satyagraha, civil resistance, untouchability, [and] Hindu-Muslim unity . . . are indivisible parts of a whole . . .

You will find at one time in my life an emphasis on one thing, at another time on [an]other. But that is just like a pianist now emphasizing one note and now [an]other. But they are all related to one another . . .

[I]t is utterly impossible for me to say: ‘I have now nothing to do with civil disobedience or Swaraj!’ *Not only so . . . Full and final removal of untouchability . . . is utterly impossible without Swaraj . . .* Love. Mohan (CW 55: 196–9; emphasis added).

*

Though still its prisoner, the empire allowed Gandhi to edit from jail a journal called *Harijan*, through which he hoped to continue his campaign. In its 11 February 1933 edition, he explained his choice of the word ‘Harijan’ and recalled that an ‘untouchable’ reader of *Navajivan* (which the Raj had banned in 1932) had suggested that the name ‘Harijan’ – God’s person – be used to designate a so-called ‘untouchable’.

Since (said Gandhi) God was, above all, the protector of the helpless, and since none were more helpless than the ‘untouchables’, the word ‘Harijan’ seemed appropriate to him. When, Gandhi added, caste Hindus realise their folly and change, they too would be entitled to be called Harijans (CW 53: 266–7).

Gandhi asked caste Hindus to realise that, in effect, many of them ‘despised’ Dalits, whatever they might claim. In his new journal, he wrote on 25 February 1933:

If to relegate a body of people to distant locations, to regard their touch, approach or sight as pollution, to throw at them the leavings of one's food, to deny them the use of public roads and institutions, even the use of public temples, is not to despise them, I do not know what the word 'despise' means (*CW* 53: 405).

*

Roy briefly acknowledges Ambedkar's warmth for Gandhi at the time of the Poona Pact, but immediately adds:

Later, though, having recovered from the trauma, Ambedkar wrote: 'There was nothing noble in the fast. It was a foul and filthy act' (126).

Ambedkar indeed used those severe words. But when? When he recovered from the trauma of Gandhi's fast, says Roy. How many days would it have taken Ambedkar, Gandhi's irreverent adversary, to recover from Gandhi's 'pressure'? Seven days? Seven months? The words that Roy quotes, while suppressing their date, were actually written in the summer of 1945 – *thirteen years* after the fast and the pact – in an impassioned tract that Ambedkar titled, 'What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables'.

In this fiery text, Ambedkar attacks Gandhi's fast, and the working out of the Poona Pact, but – let us clearly mark – *not the terms of that pact*.

In places in his 1945 text, Ambedkar, in fact, claims that the Poona Pact was a victory for him. Thus he writes, 'When the fast failed and Mr. Gandhi was obliged to sign a pact – called the Poona Pact – which conceded the political demands of the Untouchables, he took his revenge by letting the Congress employ foul electioneering tactics to make their political rights of no avail' (Ambedkar 1945, 259).

Roy says that Ambedkar 'didn't stand a chance' (126) when facing a fasting Gandhi. A few pages later, she speaks of 'the debacle of the Poona Pact' (137). Yet, Ambedkar not only refrained, in his tempestuous 1945 text, from criticising the pact's terms, he also did not – then or later – try, as far as I can figure out, to have that pact annulled or replaced. Far from seeing the pact as a 'debacle', he seemed to view it as a compromise that benefited everyone, including the Dalits.

Only two years after writing his 1945 text, he would begin the process of steering the passage of a Constitution that incorporated the pact, which from today's perspective stands out as a statesmanlike settlement.

As for Gandhi's 1932 fast, Ambedkar acknowledged in his 1945 text – even if Roy does not – that conservative Hindus too saw it as pressure on them and resented the pact it produced. While

observing that ‘the Untouchables were sad’ because of the concessions he had made, Ambedkar added:

[T]he caste Hindus very definitely disliked [the Pact], although they had not the courage to reject it (Ambedkar 1945, 90–91).

Orthodox opposition to the pact and to the fast produced two attempts on Gandhi’s life in 1934 – one in Jasidih in Bihar and the other in Pune. However, Gandhi felt that orthodoxy was losing ground. To Nehru, he wrote (15 February 1933),

The fight against sanatanists is becoming more and more interesting if also increasingly difficult . . . The abuses they are hurling at me are wonderfully refreshing. I am all that is bad and corrupt on this earth. But the storm will subside . . . [I]t is the death dance of the moth round a lamp (*CW* 53: 309–10).

No wonder (as ‘The Doctor and the Saint’ would *not* acknowledge), some sanatanists tried to kill Gandhi in 1934.

*

Ambedkar was the clear victor over Gandhi in their 1936 argument over caste, varna and hereditary occupations – an argument triggered by the former’s lecture of that year, *Annihilation of Caste*.

Some months before their 1936 argument, Gandhi had publicly given up defending ‘caste’. ‘CASTE HAS TO GO’ was his heading to a 16 November 1935 article in *Harijan* in which he wrote, ‘The sooner public opinion abolishes [caste], the better’ (*CW* 62: 121–2).

Before 1935, Gandhi had at times claimed that ‘an ideal’ form of caste could be justified, while nearly always adding that ‘the ideal’ *never existed in practice*, and always insisting that any notion of superiority and inferiority was utterly wrong. This seeming ‘defence’ of caste was Gandhi’s way of sugar-coating the bitter pills he was asking caste Hindus to swallow.

In his 1936 debate with Ambedkar, Gandhi reiterated his rejection of caste, said that it was ‘harmful both to spiritual and national growth’, and did what he had thus far hesitated to do: he publicly affirmed his acceptance of inter-dining and inter-marriage (Ambedkar 2014, 326).

However, he claimed that ‘varna’ was different from caste, and tried to justify ‘varna’ by saying that the hereditary occupations for which he claimed ‘varna’ stood could ensure harmony and thrift. He added, however, that restoring a pure varna system was like ‘an ant trying to lift a bag of sugar’ or ‘Dame Parkington pushing back the Atlantic with a mop’. He was saying that the varna system was impossible.

This seeming ‘defence’ of varna was neither easy to comprehend nor convincing, and Ambedkar

easily picked holes in it.

That is how we would judge the debate today. In 1936, what many took from *Annihilation of Caste* was Ambedkar's categorical statement in it to all Hindus: 'I am sorry, I will not be with you... I am go[ing] out of the fold' (Ambedkar 2014, 317). What they also took from the 1936 debate was Gandhi's defence of Hinduism and his regret that Ambedkar had 'transferred' to Hinduism the 'disgust' he justifiably felt against 'a part of its professors' (Ambedkar 2014, 322).

Eight years after Gandhi's death, Nehru would tell the European journalist, Tibor Mende:

I asked [Gandhi] repeatedly: why don't you hit out at the caste system directly? He said, 'I am undermining it completely by tackling untouchability'. . . . [Gandhi's] genius lay in finding the weakest point of the enemy, the breaking of his front (quoted in Mende 1958).

Realising that he would unite pro-orthodox ranks if he started with an attack on caste, Gandhi chose to zero in on an evil none could defend.

9

In the elections of 1937, the bulk of India's Hindus, including a great many Dalits – called Harijans at that time by Gandhi and many Indians, including Dalits – voted for Gandhi's Congress rather than for Ambedkar's party.

As Roy does *not* acknowledge, a Dalit minister was part of almost every provincial cabinet formed by the Congress in 1937. By December 1939, when the Congress quit office (because the war that had begun in Europe in September 1939 had sharpened the Empire–Congress divide), these ministries had accomplished a few things for Dalit rights. In Madras Presidency, for instance, a 1938 law made discrimination against Dalits in jobs, wells, public conveniences, roads, schools and colleges an offence. As a result of another law that protected temple officials willing to open doors, Dalits entered several of the South's great temples for the first time.

What was the context for the fierce language of Ambedkar's 1945 text, which he wrote in New Delhi in his official residence on Prithviraj Road? At this time, he was a Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council. The war was about to end. After three years of detention for Quit India, which had stirred much of India, the Congress leadership was about to be released. The British were on the verge of proposing a new political scheme for India, and new elections were imminent across the country.

The brilliant thinker and Member (minister in effect) writing the 1945 tract was also someone who wished to influence any new British scheme. In addition, he was a political leader unable to forget the results of the 1937 elections, which – because the war had intervened – were the last to have taken place. He hoped to do better in 1945–46. Through this 1945 tract, an Ambedkar still

vexed by the 1937 results presented his case to Britain's leaders and simultaneously to India's voters.

However, the elections of 1945–46 confirmed that the INC attracted the bulk of the Indian electorate, including a good deal of Dalit support. Obtaining caste Hindu as well as Dalit votes, the INC won an even larger proportion of Dalit seats than it had in 1937.

Many Dalit candidates have understandably resented the fact that non-Dalit voters can cause their defeat. Unfortunately, this happened to Ambedkar himself in the 1952 general elections, after he had resigned from the cabinet in disappointment at the Congress's slowness in passing the Hindu Code Bill, and again in 1954, when he contested a by-election.

In a joint electorate, good people of all jaatis, including the Dalits, would at times be defeated by votes from outside their jaati, and at other times be elected, thanks to 'outsider' votes.

Founded on Ambedkar's legacy by Kanshi Ram, the Bahujan Samaj Party has more than once led a government in our largest state, Uttar Pradesh, thanks in part, some might say, to the Poona Pact and the joint electorate.

That pact was hardly the folly that Roy paints it to be, and it would be difficult to make a case that the India of 2014, or the Dalits and Adivasis of 2014, would be better off with separate Dalit and Adivasi electorates.

*

As Gandhi saw it in the 1920s and the 1930s, if Dalits and caste Hindus were locked in a fierce clash in every village and city of British-ruled India, that would constitute an insurmountable barrier to independence, larger even than the barrier created by Hindu–Muslim mistrust. It would also constitute a compelling reason for the empire to deny independence to India, and would have been accepted as such by the world.

Moreover, in the circumstances of the time, when caste Hindus enjoyed an even greater superiority in terms of money and arms than they do today, such a clash, Gandhi thought, would destroy the Dalits. His opposition to a separate Dalit electorate stemmed, he claimed, from his concern for Dalit safety.

In Gandhi's assessment of the real world around him, steering caste Hindus towards national independence, and simultaneously shaming them for the practice of untouchability, was the right strategy for all concerned, Dalits and caste Hindus included. For him, independence from British rule was a pre-requisite for a successful fight against what, to him, was the even greater wrong of untouchability and caste superiority.

Nothing that has happened in the 67 years after independence suggests that this strategy was wrong. Just as, for practical reasons, America needed independence and a Union before it could tackle slavery, India needed independence before it could confidently, safely or adequately tackle caste arrogance, but it had to be an independence that recognised the evil of caste arrogance.

10

As independence seemed closer, Gandhi freed his radical side for tackling India's society. On 1 August 1946 – a year or so before independence – he wrote to Vallabhbhai Patel:

Who are the people who beat up Harijans, murder them, prevent them from using wells, drive them out of schools and refuse them entry into their homes? They are Congressmen. Aren't they? It is very necessary to have a clear picture of this (*CW* 85: 102).

Three months after writing this letter, Gandhi found himself in Noakhali in eastern Bengal, where communal violence had flared up. In January and February 1947, he and a handful of companions walking from village to village halted overnight in 47 east Bengali homes, where their hosts, many of them Dalits, included washermen, fishermen, cobblers and weavers.

In Noakhali, Gandhi told caste Hindu women that if they continued to disown the 'untouchables', more sorrow would be in store. The women of the village of Chandipur were given radical advice:

Invite a Harijan every day to dine with you. Or at least ask the Harijan to touch the food or the water before you consume it. Do penance for your sins (Tendulkar 1951, 7: 350; *CW* 93: 229).

On 24 April 1947, he said in Patna that for some time he had 'made it a rule not to be present or give his blessings for any wedding unless one of the parties was a Harijan' (*CW* 87: 350).

But Roy is not interested in any of this. Or maybe she simply does not know.

In June 1947 – two months or so before independence – Gandhi proposed that 'a Harijan like Chakrayya² or a Harijan girl should be made the nation's first President and Jawaharlal should become the Prime Minister . . . [S]imilar arrangements [can be] made in the provinces too . . . ' (*CW* 95: 217).

A purely symbolic suggestion? Perhaps. However, the symbol would have been powerful. It was one of the several suggestions made by Gandhi that Nehru, Patel, Rajendra Prasad, Rajagoplachari and other INC leaders successfully resisted in the last year of their 'master's' life.

² An Andhra Dalit who had greatly impressed Gandhi in his Sevagram ashram.

On 14 June 1947, by when partition had been accepted and independence was only two months away, Gandhi asked the Congress to frontally address untouchability and caste injustice and also the question of the adivasis:

And what about the ‘untouchables’? . . . If you say that ‘untouchables’ are nothing, the Adivasis are nothing, then you are not going to survive yourselves. But if you do away with the distinction of savarna and avarna, if you treat the Shudras, the ‘untouchables’ and the Adivasis as equals then something good will have come out of a bad thing [partition] . . . (CW 95: 286–7)

The battle for swaraj having been won, the Congress had no excuse now, Gandhi was saying, to delay the battle for social justice.

None of this is of any consequence to Roy, according to whom, ‘There was never much daylight between Gandhi’s views on caste and those of the Hindu right.’ She adds, ‘From a Dalit point of view, Gandhi’s assassination could appear to be more a fratricidal killing than an assassination by an ideological opponent’ (128).

For herself, Roy acknowledges an ideological clash between Gandhi and the Hindu right. Thus, she writes, ‘[The] message of tolerance and inclusiveness between Hindus and Muslims continues to be Gandhi’s real, lasting and most important contribution to the idea of India’ (82). The implication seems to be that while *she* can understand the ideological confrontation, Dalits cannot.

11

There was one Gandhi proposal, initiated in December 1946, which Nehru and Patel did accept (See Gore 1993, 180–81; Ramachandran 1964, 179).³ Dalit literature has recorded Gandhi’s crucial role in the remarkable invitation extended by Nehru and Patel to Ambedkar to join free India’s first cabinet (See Gore 1993, 180–81; Shastri 1975, 32–33) but Roy throws a thick blanket over it. After providing scores of pages of Ambedkar’s sharp criticism of Gandhi and the INC from 1933 to 1947, she merely says:

In a gesture of goodwill, and perhaps because there was no one as equal to the task as he was, the Congress appointed Ambedkar to the Constituent Assembly. In August 1947, Ambedkar was appointed India’s first Law Minister and Chairman of the Drafting Committee for the Constitution (138).

That’s it. Offering no comment on the statesmanship behind the invitation and behind its

³ Particularly, see M.S. Gore’s quotation from C.B. Khairmode’s biography of Ambedkar. According to G. Ramachandran, apparently Gandhi insisted on Ambedkar’s inclusion as an essential part of the ‘atonement’ due to India’s ‘untouchables’.

acceptance, she effectively suppresses a remarkable coming together of bitter adversaries, resulting in Gandhi's partnership with Dr. Ambedkar in the final phase of his life.

Everyone knows of the amazing results of Ambedkar's induction into Constitution-making. A brilliant and passionate human being, who happened also to be an Indian and a Dalit, piloted a Constitution assuring equal rights to all in a society that for centuries had called people like him inferior and untouchable and had treated them harshly, and an elected Constituent Assembly, where a large majority were caste Hindus, welcomed and adopted such a Constitution.

When, two months after Gandhi's death, Ambedkar married Sharada Kabir, a Brahmin doctor,⁴ Vallabhbhai Patel wrote to him, 'I am sure if Bapu were alive he would have given you his blessings.' Ambedkar replied, 'I agree that Bapu, if he had been alive, would have blessed it' (Das 1971, 6: 302).

This sort of exchange would make no impact on Roy. In her stern and pessimistic view, the Constitution that resulted from the Ambedkar–Gandhi rapprochement and from discussions in the Constituent Assembly 'reflected the views of its privileged-caste members more than Ambedkar's' (138). She also seems unhappy that many Ambedkar statues in the country show him holding the Constitution in his hand. She would rather have him hold *Annihilation of Caste* (44).

Nothing wrong with that wish. Yet, for Roy to suppress the partnership forged in 1947 between Gandhi, Ambedkar, Nehru and Patel only strengthens our scepticism over her text.

Roy quotes a characteristic Gandhi statement, made in 1931:

It has been said that Indian swaraj will be the rule of the majority community, i.e. the Hindus. There could not be a greater mistake . . . If it were to be true, I for one would refuse to call it swaraj and fight it with all the strength at my command, for to me Hind Swaraj is the rule of all the people, of justice.

But, adds Roy, 'For Ambedkar, "the people" was not a homogeneous category . . . ' (45).

Nor was it for Gandhi. Both understood the inevitability of struggle between different sections of a diverse and at times sharply separated people – between classes or castes of Indians, between groups formed by language, religion, sect or party.

Both agreed, however, that struggle had to be peaceful – resolute, fearless and passionate, yes, but not violent, for killing usually damaged a struggle's goal. For Ambedkar, and also for Gandhi, Dalit solidarity, Dalit education and the Dalit vote were weapons far superior to the lathi or the gun; when used by a vulnerable Dalit, the latter only played into the hands of the better-

⁴ Ambedkar's first wife, Ramabai, had died in 1935.

armed enemy.

Both realised that the culmination of a struggle for justice was usually negotiation and a settlement rather than surrender by the foe and complete triumph for one's side. Despite harsh experiences, both knew that the adversary in a struggle, the Other, was a human being too, and that justice seldom endured without reconciliation.

The Poona Pact of 1932 and, 15 years later, the Gandhi–Ambedkar partnership at independence, represented victories for India's society and polity, and also for the two individuals concerned. Their agreements with each other may only have been occasional, their arguments more frequent. But the agreements were hugely consequential for India and even beyond.

12

In February 1946, when Indian ratings of the Royal Indian Navy mutinied unsuccessfully in Bombay (not a single Indian officer supported them), Aruna Asaf Ali, whose support the ratings had sought, was involved in an interesting debate with Gandhi.

A hero of the 1942 struggle, Aruna Asaf Ali was, like many others, concerned in 1946 about the Hindu–Muslim divide. Encouraged that the mutineers' ranks included Hindus as well as Muslims, she said she would 'rather unite Hindus and Muslims at the barricade than on the constitutional front.' Replied Gandhi (26 February 1946):

Even in terms of violence, this is a misleading proposition . . . Fighters do not always live at the barricade. They are too wise to commit suicide. The barricade life has always to be followed by the constitutional. That front is not taboo for ever (*CW* 83: 182–3).

My suspicion is that Roy loves the life of the verbal barricade. She loves justice, no doubt, and can vividly describe the torments of the vulnerable. But she does not like settlements. She wants barricade battles to be unending.

I suggest this because I still search for a positive purpose for her writing 'The Doctor and the Saint'. It is by no means clear that she is pushing for India to substitute Ambedkar for Gandhi as India's 'chief hero', even if, for a moment, we imagine that there can be such a thing.

Here and there in 'The Doctor and the Saint', she appears to notice flaws in Ambedkar – his attitude to Adivasis, for instance. She criticises the Indian Left for ignoring caste, but also regrets that Ambedkar did not nurture a steady alliance with the Left.

As already mentioned, Dalits have objected to 'The Doctor and the Saint' for the large space Gandhi occupies in it and the relatively small space given to Ambedkar. We have noted that Roy has only used Ambedkar to attack Gandhi.

She is free to do that. Yet, it is only fair to ask Arundhati Roy, ‘Who is your inspiration, your star, your hope? Who is it that you want Indians unhappy with their land and world to follow or accompany?’

If it is Ambedkar, why doesn’t she say so? If it is someone else, let Roy name her or him, or more than one person. Or she can name a philosophy, an idea, an approach. Or a political party. She can take something from the two fascinating subjects of her text, who knew what they opposed, but also what they wanted.

If Roy knows what she wants for India, she should drop hints for a path to the future while she hops and skips on what she claims is historical ground. Scattering dubious ‘findings’ of failings in founding fathers is simply not good enough.

(end)

Works referred to

- Ambedkar, B. R. 1945. *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*. Bombay: Thackers.
- Ambedkar, B. R. 2014. *Annihilation of Caste*. New Delhi: Navayana.
- Birla, G. D. n.d. *A Talk on Bapu*, Kolkata.
- Durga Das, ed. 1971. *Sardar Patel's Correspondence (10 vols)*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan.
- Gandhi, Mohandas K. *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (100 vols.)*. New Delhi: Publications Division.
- Gandhi, Rajmohan. 1995. *The Good Boatman*. New Delhi: Penguin.
- . 2006. *Mohandas*. New Delhi: Viking.
- Gore, M. S. 1993. *The Social Context of an Ideology: Ambedkar's Political and Social Thought*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Gracie, David M. 1989. *Gandhi & Charlie*. Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley.
- Jack, Homer. 1956. *The Gandhi Reader*. New York: Grove Press.
- Mandela, Nelson. 1995. "Gandhi the Prisoner". In *Mahatma Gandhi: 125 Years*, edited by B. R. Nanda. New Delhi: Indian Council for Cultural Relations.
- Mende, Tibor. 1958. *Conversations with Nehru*. Bombay: Wilco.
- Moon, Penderel, ed. 1973. *Wavell: The Viceroy's Journal*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Parikh, Narhari. 1971. *Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel (2 vols.)*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan.
- Patel, Ravjibhai. 1989. *The Making of the Mahatma*. Ahmedabad.
- Pyarelal. 1932. *Epic Fast*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan.
- Ramachandran, G. 1964. *Thoughts and Talks*. Madurai.
- Reddy, E.S. 1995. *Gandhiji: Vision of a Free South Africa*. New Delhi: Sanchar.
- Roy, Arundhati. 2014a. "Arundhati Roy Replies to Dalit Camera." *Round Table India*. http://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7284:arundhati-roy-replies-to-dalit-camera&catid=119&Itemid=132
- , Arundhati. 2014b. *The Doctor and the Saint*. New Delhi. Navayana
- Shastri, Roshanlal. 1991. *Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar Ke Sampark Me 25 Varsh*. New Delhi: Buddhist Society of India. 3rd edition.
- Swan, Maureen. 1985. *Gandhi: The South African Experience*. Johannesburg: Ravan.
- Tendulkar, D.G. 1951. *Mahatma (8 vols.)*. Mumbai.
- Yagnik, Indulal. 1943. *Gandhi As I Knew Him*. Delhi: Danish Mahal.