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**Asia in 2025:
Great power rivalry, contested politics,
and global disorder**

viella



CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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A PART APART YET IN THE CENTRE: AMBEDKAR'S THOUGHT IN THE TIMES
OF DEMOCRATIC PRECARIETY

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Ashok Gopal, *A part apart: The life and thought of B.R. Ambedkar*. Navayana Publishing, 2023, 731 pp. (ISBN: 978-81-95838-51-6).

Almost 70 pages into an unceasing focus, I found that the author has “dared to write” as a non-Dalit on the most iconic Dalit figure in history (p 53). *A Part Apart* is a detailed work that reads not only as a biography of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar but also as a tribute, a sourcebook, and a unique historiographical contribution to understanding caste and modern India. While it celebrates Ambedkar, it does not reduce him to a myth. Instead, it animates him in full character via his anxieties and realities throughout his journey. It is felt by the reader, with his pragmatism and evolution. In this way, the book is much more than a mere account of a national figure's life. It becomes a source of its own, an archive for future historians and Ambedkarites to return to. In a world where Ambedkar's voice is routinely scattered across several volumes and distorted by political rhetoric, Ashok Gopal has edited, thought about, and placed his own argument pieces with rare integrity and positionality. The book relies on Ambedkar's own writings from his earliest works in *Mook-nayak* to his most influential speeches and critical pieces, uniquely not only focusing on his English writings but also on Marathi texts. Indeed, even its title is a quotation from one of Ambedkar's own speeches (p.41).

The book is a journey, charting Ambedkar's path from a Dalit boy with an irrepressible love of knowledge to a philosopher, economist, lawyer, feminist, and ultimately, the architect of the most comprehensive written constitution in the world, whose emancipatory vision continues to shape India's conscience. His life is presented as a dynamic inquiry into the realities of caste, social justice, anti-colonial movement and democracy. The author avoids transforming Ambedkar into a static icon; instead, he emerges as a changing, learning, suffering, and ever-questioning figure. The reader encounters not merely Ambedkar's conclusions on social issues, but the debates, reflections, and even the anguish that led to those positions. This is particularly evident in the book's discussion of Ambedkar's shifting stances on caste, land reform, and political representation (p. 316, 329, 340).

Historians in general, and caste scholars specifically, will find the book rewarding both in terms of content material and methodology. It points to

the lacunae in Indian historiography and signals how much remains to be unearthed, above all from the vantage point of those traditionally excluded from the archive (p. 245, 334). By tracing the evolution of Ambedkar's writing, the book documents his intellectual development, showing how his initial thoughts matured into robust structures in his later work. For instance, where earlier works speak of the evils of caste as a system of social stratification, later works sharpen the critique, recasting caste as an anti-democratic system that must be structurally dismantled. As the author notes, caste, for Ambedkar, was a vehicle of permanent inequality, captured in the metaphor of a "tower without a staircase" (p. 194). Ambedkar, thus, argues that caste classification is contrary to the principles of modern democracy and inimical to social harmony. A number of intriguing episodes surface across the varied writings collected in this volume.

Gopal compares Ambedkar with Edmund Burke and argues that Burke used to write formal speeches to achieve political success, a strategy later adapted by Ambedkar. *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) is his most famous and reproduced work, originally written as a speech, which he never got to deliver. He also drew on other sources during his time at Columbia University. He adopted James Harvey Robinson's focus on connecting history to the lives of ordinary people, a break from a traditional Indian historiography that idealized the past. Instead, Ambedkar examined the roots of present social issues. His concept of an 'intellectual class' reflects Robinson's influence. James Shotwell's evolving view of religion also shaped Ambedkar's critique of Hinduism, as seen in his essays *Philosophy of Hinduism* and *Riddles in Hinduism*. John Dewey's ideas on democracy deeply influenced Ambedkar's thought. The philosophical dimensions of Ambedkar's thought are neither diluted nor decontextualized. The book distills key positions of the anti-caste critique with precision: caste as a globally unique, anti-democratic system that sustains inequality and erodes solidarity. Here, Gopal brings clarity to the dispersed and often misread body of Ambedkar's writings, constructing a coherent Ambedkarite philosophy from fragments that would otherwise lie scattered.

Several interesting themes emerge. Beyond politics and scholarship, the book reveals the emotional truths of Ambedkar's life. It recounts the financial difficulties that dogged his journalistic ventures – *Mooknayak* and other short-lived periodicals that folded under unpaid printing bills (p. 161). It sheds light on personal tragedies, among them the devastating death of his fourth child. These episodes are not merely sentimental; they are key to understanding Ambedkar as a man who bore the burden of exclusion and isolation – not just intellectually or politically, but personally and emotionally. The book offers a powerful image of Ambedkar as a «man of many roles»: a son, a father, a husband, a student, a lawyer, a creator (the constitution of independent India), a littérateur, and a champion of human rights (p. 239). This multiplicity enriches our understanding of how caste

oppression must be tackled not only from the political podium but in every role one inhabits.

Another strength of the book is its account of the major figures who influenced Ambedkar or crossed paths with him – his teachers abroad, political contemporaries, and philosophical interlocutors. Lesser-known figures such as Thakkar Bapa, Dadasaheb Gaikwad, B.D. Khobragade and other allies come alive not as marginal players but as co-actors in a struggle much larger than themselves. In recovering these lives, the book tells a parallel story of Indian history, one that remains invisible in mainstream accounts and even in the curricula of the Indian education system to this day. Here, Ambedkar is not an anomaly or a footnote in Gandhi and Nehru's India; he is central, elemental, and radically transformative. The discussion of feminist politics (pp. 287, 543, 692) and Ambedkar's readiness to criticize British colonial rule (p. 298) add layers to his persona, showing him as someone deeply committed to justice in all its forms and unafraid to name power for what it was – oppressive, whether foreign or indigenous.

The book has many moving sections. One reflects how, after Ambedkar's death, his workspace, writings, and unfinished projects were insensitively and indecently handled. In 1967, a group of men forcibly entered the premises where Ambedkar's wife was living, seized the key from her servant, and emptied the rooms. They dumped his belongings – countless precious documents and manuscripts – into an open yard. That night, a heavy rainstorm soaked the exposed pile of papers, irreparably damaging many. Gopal attempts to document Ambedkar's life, yet to complete that record – or even to trace the contours of what remains untraceable – is an impossible task. And yet this is a political and scholarly gesture. Rather than imposing closure, it invites the reader, especially Ambedkarite intellectuals and activists, to pick up the threads and carry them forward. It is also here that the book turns towards present-day concerns. On questions such as land reform (p. 306), it places Ambedkar not as a thinker of the past but as a citizen of the present, well ahead of his time, anticipating debates that India is today grappling with.

Ambedkar's passionate engagement with Buddhism, especially towards the later part of his life, has remained under-explored in academic literature. Gopal fills this gap by engaging at length with specific Buddhist texts and traditions that shaped Ambedkar's final shift in ideology. By documenting and analysing Ambedkar's careful study of Buddhist literature, such as the *Dhammapada*, and his interaction with global Buddhist movements (p.715), Gopal reveals the intellectual gravitas behind Ambedkar's conversion and his creation of Navayāna Buddhism.

The presentation of Ambedkar's anti-caste movement codes in relation to the Mahad Satyagrah of 1927, as symbolic power, reverberates right through the final chapters, keeping the reader in a state of awe and realising the urgency for more such changes in society. It recounts Ambedkar's life not

to canonise him but to empower readers to understand, extend, and apply his vision. Specifically, the book directs readers to Ambedkar's own writings, such as *Untouchables or The Children of India's Ghetto* (an unpublished essay), *Waiting for a Visa* (1934-35), *Pakistan or Partition of India* (1945), so that they can build on both his knowledge and carry forward what the book begins. Finally, it imparts a sense of timelessness to the philosophy of Ambedkar, which remains as relevant today as it was nearly a century ago. And perhaps most importantly, it asserts that although Ambedkar's enterprise is unfinished, his thought continues to light the long road toward emancipation.