

SOUL SEARCH OF A DALIT SOCIAL ACTIVIST

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Abstract

The paper is drafted based on the autobiographical work of a Dalit social activist from Rajasthan, India. The work addresses how a Dalit sojourned with the most popular cultural movement in India, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and how he realised his caste status within the movement and in the broader context of Indian politics. This personal anecdote is compelling in unveiling the gravity of untouchability that persists in India. The article covers the thought and autobiographical account of Bhanwar Meghwanshi, who later became an Abedkarist. Indian public sphere is primarily loomed with caste and notions of untouchability. The constitution of India is the protector of the meek in this land. At the same time, the public sphere bears the curse of untouchability. The article offers a panacea for the oppressed to the subjugated that it is nothing but the assertion of "Dalithood". A three-fold strategy of Dalit liberation presented by Bhawar encapsulated in the article as self-realisation, recaptures the Dalit experience and the creation of Dalit ideological resources.

Keywords: Dalit, Brahmin, Swayamsevak, Hindu, Pracharak, Identity, Hegemony

INTRODUCTION

Every struggle for human dignity is a political and spiritual revolution. While we go through the lines of "I Could Not be Hindu" by Bhanwar Meghwanshi, we will wonder who a Hindu could be. The identity of Hindu is widely problematised in the autobiography of Bhanwar Meghwanshi. His story narrates that Hindu is not a majority but a minuscule minority and that the Brahmin-Bania nexus pretends as the majority, projecting their cultural image as Indian culture. This book clearly illustrates how Hindutva's ideological frontal institution, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has nurtured the ideology of Hinduism and penetrated the social fabric of Indian society. The author presents his views as an insider at the outset and reflects his ideological mooring as an opponent of Hindutva philosophy.

This book pierces deep into the puzzle of Dalit identity in the Indian social context--how could a Dalit define oneself? The same question was raised many times by Baba Sahib Ambedkar. Ambedkar said, "Though, I was born a Hindu, I solemnly assure you that I will not die as a Hindu"¹. To live as a Hindu is the total denial of self-respect and human dignity for Dalits. The author says, "Dalits attempt to prove themselves pure Hindus by taking a leading part in riots and violence against ...their own community" (p.178). These lines clearly show us the loyalty of Hanuman-ji to lord Rama. Hanumanji proved his loyalty and purity by tearing out his heart from the hyde. Dalits attack their own flesh and shed the blood of their own brothers and sisters. The context and course of the Gujarat massacre compelled the author to say, "I went on to say that no time had Hinduism has ever been tolerant, egalitarian and non-violent, especially as far as Dalits and Shudras were concerned" (p.179).

The reality of Dalit identity mystified under the garments of caste and mythology is illustrated well in the book. The author's experience within the RSS enabled him to pose specific questions to his Hindu identity. As a Swayamsevak, he was accommodated at the lower strata of the RSS and became a *pracharak*. However, he was an outer being. Casteism was the undercurrent of the RSS- he gradually realised

this truth and saved himself. On the one side, the RSS caters for Dalits as a part of its wider Hindu frame, even though they have reproduced the Brahmanical order and defamed Dalit identity. An incident illustrated in the book depicts the pain of his realisation. He had provided food from his home to the Swayamsevaks, who threw it out because of caste illusions. A person providing food to the other is not an outside thing from his 'self'. It is the result of his labour and self. The denial of food is the denial of the person who provided the food. Sharing food is a symbolic act of sharing life and spirituality. This becomes the turning point in his life. This experience compelled Bhanwar to learn that the outspoken Hindu solidarity is a myth. The RSS conceived the position of Bhanwar as a *pracharak*. They were not willing to cater for *Vicharak*. Freedom of thought is muted forever in the RSS as illustrated in the chapter titled "we want Pracharakas, not Vicharaks". While we go through the book's passages, they reveal the author's transformation from an obedient Swayamsevak to a revolutionary leader, from a Pracharak to a Vicharak of the Dalit political destiny.

Bhanwar cracked out from the shell of the RSS as a revolutionary. The RSS and its organizations were only concerned with the priorities of Brahminism. Their ideology was critical to Phule, Kabir, Periyar and Ambedkar. RSS used Dalits as a shield to protect hindutva ideology. They are totally against Dalits and Dalit politics. They stand against "SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act", Reservation Policies, and Dalits' right to temple entry.

The story of the Suliya temple entry narrated in the book (pp.207-216) unveils another story of the age-old struggle of the Dalits for dignity and equality. It was a worshipping place of the Dalits, and the Dalit priests were later cunningly pulled out by the Gujar priests who further grabbed the rights and properties of the temple. The story of Suliya tells us the Indian saga that, the post-independent decades of India witnessed Savarna occupation of temples. The story is not only limited to the boundary of Rajasthan, but it is the history of every state in India. This chapter places a pertinent question before the reader. Temples are the seedbed of untouchability, if so, why should the Dalits claim the right to temple entry? This part of the book provides an answer to the question and marked the path of Dalit struggles. It is not because of the sanctity of the temple, it is not for the restoration of Dharma, but it is for the liberation of the oppressed by upholding the sanctity of the Constitution. We believe and follow the principles enlisted in the constitution, which is the manifestation of equality and dignity of every human. The right to temple entry is not the question of customs and traditions but the question of democracy and freedom of religion.

Engaging with the history, we can find that all the narratives of the history of local tribes and castes are penned by the upper caste. Bhanwar Meghwanshi briefed that the RSS takes such tasks with their own political motives. The beloved writer of RSS, Vijay Sonkar Shastri's write-up on leather workers, butchers and cleaners narrated within the prefix of "Hindu" places them within the caste structure. Such propagandist history put forward an ideological challenge before the historians. Cooking up history is a routine practice of RSS (p.225). We have noted that the RSS published a notable Ambedkar booklet titled '*Ambedkar: The Beloved Son of Bharatmatha*'. They have saffronized Ambedkar, Periyar, Ayyankali, Phule. The ideological struggle against RSS is more pertinent than the political struggle. The book provides a detailed description of the personal struggle of Bhanwar and how he had encountered the RSS. The final chapter illustrates how BJP and RSS try to purchase their opponents.

RSS started discussions to tame opposing leaders by rewarding positions. Such a lofty option was presented before Bhanwar by the RSS leadership. He took a firm decision on 14 April 2013. He declared, “I am not entering politics or contesting elections. There is no question of my ever joining a communal organisation. I will always work towards transforming society, not government”. It is a promising pledge in the contemporary political context. Let me repeat the words of Bhanwar, “This is the time when our beliefs and our behaviour will be severely tested, and if we do not emerge as true and steadfast, history will never forgive us.”

The Myth of Hindu

Bhanwar Megwanshi’s autobiography unravels the myth of “the Hindu”. Hinduism is not an all-embracing religious culture, but it is a philosophy of social segregation and political application of Brahminism. Brahmin-Baniya culture is embellished as Hindu culture in India today. The concept of Hindu created a huge fulcrum of outsiders. The untouchables are not Hindus. The Savarkar’s disciples have not loomed any space for minorities in Hindustan. *Vicharadhara* illustrated his concept of Hindu Rashtra.

Bhanwar encapsulates his critique of Brahmin-Bania Hinduism, which is never tolerant, egalitarian, and non-violent.

“Legends and stories from the Puranas testify to the deep-rooted and ancient violence in Hindu society towards Dalits, Shudras, Adivasis and women—from the killing of the Shudra sage Shambuka to the brilliant student Ekalavya being tricked into offering his thumb as a gift to his teacher to the rape of countless women by the devas, gods. The Hindutva heroes of today are merely following in these footsteps” (p.179). He equated casteist Hindus as the Taliban.

Dalits are forced to prove themselves as pure Hindus by taking a leadership role in riots and violence. Bhanwar realized that the Dalits attack their blood; they shed and kill their brothers who converted to Islam. The majority who gets killed in Ayodhya are Dalits. The fragmented Hindu society never realizes the hegemonic brahmin forces enslaving the Dalits through religious ideology. They are the preachers and prophets of Hinduism who have no percept of justice, equality, and fraternity. The shared experience of Bhanwar within RSS unveiled the myth of the “philosophy of Hindu tolerance”.

Assertion of Dalithood is a form of Resistance

Bhanwar attributed that the RSS forces have deep-rooted fear in Dalit ideology. They are keeping the RSS followers away from Ambedkarism. From the very early days of his sojourn with the RSS, Bhanwar realized that this fear was built in him unconsciously. During his journey with RSS, he often felt such a deep-rooted fear.

He noted,

“In Bhilwara town, I stayed in the Ambedkar Hostel run by the social welfare department for students...I was then 16 years old, studying in class eleven. Around this time, the *Pracharak* of Bhilwara town visited our hostel. I could hardly believe it, but he did come. Having made his assessment of the students there, he took me aside and said, “You shouldn’t be staying here. This Ambedkar Hostel will corrupt your ideology”.

Bhanwar said, by mocking himself, “To protect my ideology, I left Ambedkar Hostel”. Sangh was never tolerant towards Ambedkarism, and never committed to Dalits.”

The paradoxes of the RSS firmly revealed in their approach to Ambedkar and Ambedkarism are pertinent to recount in the backdrop of the above-said discourse. The RSS incorporated Ambedkar as an icon and produced a bunch of literature to promote the nationalist ideology of Ambedkar. The presence of Dattopant Thengadi is the primary reason for the development of Ambedkar discourse within RSS. Thengadi was the founder of Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) and the Swadeshi Jagran Manch (SJM). However, RSS could not acknowledge his contributions properly. Thengadi wrote a book on his association with Ambedkar and RSS titled, "*Dr Ambedkar Aur Samajik Kranti ki Yatra*". The book reveals that there is ambiguity existing among the backward communities to realize their real political affiliation. Thengadi wrote, Ambedkar had noted in a conversation that the backward communities might be the fodder to communism in future. Thengadi realized that Ambedkar is a way to overcome the ideological tussle of the backward communities. The wider caste politics of RSS is incapable to absorb Ambedkarism, but they tactically consumed the icon of Ambedkar to grab backward communities to the fold of RSS. RSS as a political movement placed Ambedkar without Ambedkarism in the forefront of its activism. That is why the Pracharak warned Bhanwar that the Ambedkar hostel will "pollute your ideology". This discussion is essential to critically engage with the politics of Ambedkar during the early decades of India's independence. Dr B.R. Ambedkar was a firm nationalist, modernist, anti-castist, humanist and many. He deeply criticized Hindutva and Brahminism. The RSS projected Ambedkar's nationalist position, which is parochial and against the will of Ambedkar. There was no ambiguity in Ambedkar to oust casteist Hindutva ideology. Bhanwar experienced casteism within the RSS and stated clearly that the RSS was committed only to the supremacy of Brahminism. This throws light into the double stands of the RSS on Ambedkar and Ambedkarism.

Assertion of Dalithood is an alternative form of politics, which Ambedkar postulated. He was neither in the camp of Congress nor in the camp of the RSS. The RSS literature strives hard to establish Ambedkar's affiliations with the RSS. RSS supported Ambedkar during his election campaigns, it was not due to his affiliation with the RSS but the RSS's discontentment with Congress. Ambedkar firmly demanded an anti-caste platform. For such a lofty aim he conversed with many, and debated, and contested with political factions. The RSS is one among such debating spaces. Anupama Rao well depicted the core political questions raised by Ambedkar in the book titled, "*The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*". Anupama observed, problematizing caste is a criticism of the Hindu order, and it is a more secularized notion than a religious one but demanded a new approach to address the caste question. Encountering caste is a counter political terrain. B. R. Ambedkar placed his politics at this juncture. That not only disturbed the Congress, the Jan Sangh and radical Hindutva forces. The founding of the Republican party by Ambedkar is also an attempt to address the secularized caste structures. Bhanwar unmasked the caste driven nationalist politics of the RSS by revealing the fear of RSS towards Ambedkarism.

Dejection and humiliation of Dalits is a continuing story within RSS. There is another incident that explains the "Swayam Sevaks burden", that is to make an untouchable to a brahmin. The story narrates the context of a dinner with a Rajasthani Brahmin family. The host queried about the caste of Bhanwar. The *Pracharak*, a friend of Bhanwar, said that he is a Kshatriya Brahmin. After the dinner, there was a heated conversation. At the end of the debate, the *Pracharak* stated that "Here I am, trying to

make you a Brahmin... and you prefer to crawl about in that dirty gutter". Bhanwar very critically notes that the *Prachark* tries to plant Brahminical values among the untouchables, which make them more submissive. Bhanwar said, "I could not become Brahmin and he was not willing to become human". Humanization of politics is inevitable. Ambedkar stands for the humanization of politics. Assertion of Dalit identity in politics is essential to build an alternative political platform in India. It is well depicted in this narrative. Bhanwar believes that a return to Phule, Kabir and Ambedkar could present an alternative model of Politics.

Politics of Emancipation

While going through the narratives of Bhanwar, we could realise that the political emancipation of the Dalit community must evolve from its inner urge. His call for the realisation of self, politicisation of the self-other dichotomy, and forging new political tools to counter castist hegemonic politics from the very root of the Dalit community is profound. Bhanwar realised that none other than self-dignity is the bedrock of Dalit emancipatory politics. Wherever or whenever his dignity was questioned, he realized the plot of Hindutva politics, the RSS producing and reproducing Brahminical values. Their nationalism is a camouflaged Brahmanism. Sangh and Sakha continuously worked to maintain Brahmin hegemony in politics. Bhanwar realised that RSS is an organisation without a constitution and a movement without democratic values. The movement has no faith in plurality. Dalits firmly believe in plurality, adhere to their tradition, stand for justice, and they do not need Brahminism to govern them. The RSS is doing the mission of Brahminization. This realisation is the motivational spirit of Bhanwar's mission to create an alternative political platform.

It is remarkable to note that our veteran scholars, Prof. Gopal Guru, Valerian Rodrigues, Rajive Bhargava et.al., very keenly and precisely observed that the Indian public sphere is a twice-born public sphere. It is a Brahminical public sphere, Dalit bodies are treated like filth. The painstaking story of Bhanwar restates their observations. Moving out of the hegemonic Brahminical political structure is the pertinent question placed before the dalits through this personal narrative. In this inquiry, Bhanwar presented a threefold resistance strategy: Self-realization, recapturing personal, and creating Dalit ideological resources.

1. Self-realization

The Sangh instructed us to be proud of Manusmriti, but it never told us about the Indian Constitution. Bhanwar realised that it was the plot of Hindutva to present a selective history of the nation. He said, "I sang the praises of Maharana Pratap but had never heard of Bhilu Rana Punj. I knew the songs of Mira but was not acquainted with Sant Ravidas". Total obliteration of the Dalit culture and history is the fundamental feature of Sangh. Bhanwar's journey towards self-realisation unearthed the history of the Dalit community. Knowing and making others know the history of the community is the beginning of a transformation. That process made a different personality in Bhanwar. Self-realisation is the beginning of a new political revolution.

2. Recapturing personal experiences

Bhanwar perfectly observed that the everyday experience of the Dalit is a mine of resources to challenge the hegemonic structures of caste. He recaptured his experiences within the Sangh during his struggle to challenge the caste system. While he was a sojourner of the Sangh, they had separated him from his community,

obliterated his history and finally veiled his identity within the Sangh. Sangh makes Dalits an appendage. This realisation opened new political avenues for Bhanwar, enabling him to create a non-parliamentary political intervention.

3. Create Dalit ideological resources

Bhanwar realised that a Dalit political platform based on Dalit ideology is inevitable to create alternative politics to counter fascism in India. Dalit ideological resources are essential to be pooled and used for the upward movement of the community. Self-realisation, the politicisation of personal experience and the affirmation of Dalit's historical engagement are the foundation of creating Dalit ideological resources by Bhanwar.

The book "I could not be a Hindu" harbingers a new political revolution for a pluralist, democratic India.

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