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Narendra Jadhav's *Ambedkar: Awakening India's Social Conscience* opens with a short prologue titled "The Meeting That Shaped Modern India." This is an account of the first personal meeting between Mahatma Gandhi and Babasaheb Ambedkar at Mani Bhavan, in Mumbai, on 14 August 1931. The meeting went badly, and set the two men on a course of conflict which lasted the remainder of both their lives. Their foundational and permanent disagreement was to be on two questions: "What is the answer to Untouchability?" and: "Who is the rightful spokesperson of India's Untouchables, Gandhi or Ambedkar?"

It is instructive to compare narratives of their first meeting and of their subsequent clashes by D R Nagaraj (1993, 2010), Eleanor Zelliot (2004), Gail Omvedt (2004), Christophe Jaffrelot (2005) and Joseph Lelyveld (2011). All draw on Dhananjay Keer's seminal biography (1954), but the extent to which different authors emphasise psychological, historical, political, inter-personal, emotional, dialogic, ideological and cultural aspects of the Gandhi-Ambedkar encounter and engagement varies widely. Nagaraj's is the most brilliant, Lelyveld's the most incisive and Jadhav's is probably the most neutral of all these accounts. All three are focused on the annihilation of "untouchability," which was, in fact, one of many points of disaffection between the two men, rather than the sole bone of contention.

Gandhi-Ambedkar Entanglement

After the six-page prologue, Jadhav elaborates on the Gandhi-Ambedkar entanglement in greater detail in Chapters 13, 14, 15 and 16. The years from 1930 to 1935 were crucial for this relationship. Three historically significant movements were unfolding simultaneously during this period. First, Gandhi was increasingly evolving from a position of practical leadership to that of moral stewardship in the Congress-led

Ambedkar: Awakening India's Social Conscience

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anti-colonial struggle, and supplementing his target of political independence with social reform. Second, the government was increasingly working out ways to share administration with and devolve power to the Indians, crafting a *via media* of limited self-rule between complete British Raj and *purna swaraj* for its subjects in India. Third, Ambedkar was increasingly disillusioned with *satyagraha* and civil disobedience as means of securing rights and respect for the depressed classes, and therefore, exploring two alternative avenues: separate electorates for "untouchables," and religious conversion out of the Hindu caste system.

The braiding of these three strands was such that Ambedkar as a juridical authority and a legislator became an indispensable part of the self-determination process, which eventually led to his prominent presence in the constituent assembly more than a decade later. On the electoral separation of untouchables from Hindus, he had to bow before Gandhi's unyielding insistence on a united front, a concession cemented in the infamous Poona Pact of 1932. On the question of caste and its place in Hindu society, by October 1935, Ambedkar had washed his hands of Hinduism, and about 20 years later he would take the logical step of converting to another faith, namely, Buddhism. Jadhav is meticulous in documenting the twists and turns of history that eventually produced these outcomes, and in keeping his sights trained on the compulsions that drove Ambedkar to respond to caste Hinduism, to the British government and to Mahatma Gandhi in the ways that he did at various points in time.

In writing his own memoir, titled *Outcaste: A Memoir* (2003) in India (with slightly different title in some international editions as *Outcaste: A Memoir,*

Life and Triumphs of an Untouchable Family) and *Untouchables: My Family's Triumphant Journey Out of the Caste System in Modern India* (2005), Jadhav exhibits a lively writing style, vividly painting portraits of his father and other members of his family, recalling the trials and tribulations of three generations of Dalits in colonial and postcolonial India. He frequently evokes both the pathos and the humour of the struggles of ordinary citizens amidst social transformations of historic proportions. The Hindi version of Jadhav's memoir won the Sahitya Akademi award. Ambedkar is as much a key character in that book as Jadhav's own mother, Sonu, and his father, Damu Mahar, or Damodar Runjaji Jadhav, whose diaries formed the basis of Jadhav's first redaction of his memoir in Marathi, *Aamcha Baap Aan Amhi* (1993).

In writing about Ambedkar in the volume under review, though, Jadhav is more circumspect, and prefers to let his protagonist speak for himself rather than giving him a particular voice which might be Jadhav's own. This restraint imparts to Jadhav's intellectual biography of Ambedkar a solid, sober, reliable sort of quality. But readers familiar with Jadhav's talent as a memoirist cannot help wishing he had taken a risk and painted Ambedkar in more lifelike colours, using both his historical imagination and the historical record to bring Babasaheb alive as one of modern India's most significant thinkers. As it stands, Jadhav's biggest achievement in *Awakening India's Social Conscience* is to transform a range of relatively inanimate textual sources into useful resources for non-specialist readers of Ambedkar. Ambedkar was a meticulous and scholarly writer himself, but his prose was nevertheless filled with what D R Nagaraj used to call "radical energy." By lifting them out of dry tomes and reinserting them into a life-story, Jadhav revitalises Ambedkar's words for a wide audience.

Ideas vs Archives

However, while he does make good use of Ambedkar's writings and speeches, Jadhav does not quite produce an electric portrait of his protagonist. The biographer's reticence in the interpretation

and animation of the personality of Ambedkar lead us to pose a vital question: To whom does the Ambedkar archive belong? Is there some invisible barrier to Jadhav fully owning Ambedkar, making him a character who really speaks, in a baritone imbued with all of the notes of gravitas, anger, determination, irony and tragedy that we know defined the life of this man? Babasaheb Ambedkar was not prone to confessional discourse, unlike his intimate enemy, Mohandas Gandhi, who bared his soul and dissected his own consciousness on a daily basis in full public view. But is that what drops a curtain between a chronicler like Jadhav and his subject—that Ambedkar himself was rather a private sort of man?

There are two possible answers to the question of ownership: One view, increasingly popular among a vocal section of the Dalit intelligentsia, is that the Ambedkar archive belongs to the Dalit community, and exclusively to this community, or to this community in a more authentic and definitive way than to other—non-Dalit—communities of readers. Another view, widely held, is that the Ambedkar archive belongs to everyone who cares about equality and justice—hence potentially to all Dalits, to all Indians, and to all human beings. All those who identify with Ambedkar's social and political beliefs may step up and claim him as their own, regardless of the caste, religious, national, gender, ethnic or any other kind of identity of the claimants themselves. In this view, Ambedkar is a beacon for all oppressed people everywhere.

There is, however, a difference between Ambedkar's ideas—whose ownership may be debated between competing groups—and Ambedkar's archive, in the strict sense of the body of his published and unpublished writings. This archival corpus, like the literary estate of any writer, scholar or leader of historical importance, is the intellectual property of a designated estate-holder. In Ambedkar's case this happens to be the Shahu Chhatrapati, Mahatma Phule and Dr B R Ambedkar Source Materials Publications Committee, an especially constituted body created in 1976, 20 years after Ambedkar's death, that comes under the purview of the Department of

Education, Government of Maharashtra.¹ The committee began its work in 1978 under the leadership of the distinguished scholar Vasant Moon, who was an officer appointed on special duty. He took possession of five iron trunks of Ambedkar's papers with the cooperation of Ambedkar's wife Savita Ambedkar and his grandson Prakash Ambedkar, in 1981. Till today the committee operates out of barracks on Free Press Journal Road at Nariman Point, opposite the Mantralaya in Mumbai.

Copyright of Ambedkar's Works

While the ideas of Ambedkar may be claimed by Dalits exclusively, or by non-Dalits (and we can debate the validity of both sets of claims), there can be no ambiguity that the copyright of Ambedkar's works rests with this committee. The committee may license or authorise scholars, editors, publishers, etc, to reproduce, critically edit or annotate portions of the Ambedkar archive, but anyone wanting to reproduce, edit or annotate any part of this corpus has to approach the committee first in order to obtain permission to do so. Rightly or wrongly, this is a matter of legal ownership and copyright over Ambedkar's writings, not a matter of political identification, intellectual affiliation or ethical claims with regard to Ambedkar's ideas.

The Source Materials Publications Committee (SMPC) has been putting out the series, *Dr B R Ambedkar Writings and Speeches* (DBAWS), of which 22 volumes have been published so far. The committee asserts and exercises its right to either grant or deny permission to external editors, scholars and publishers who may wish to handle Ambedkar's archives. In this it is no different from countless other entities that hold the literary estates of countless other writers. Its decision to grant or withhold the right to edit, annotate and reproduce Ambedkar's writings is legally binding, and any infringement of a denial of permission by this committee constitutes a copyright violation.

As a scholar one may write about Ambedkar all that one wants. One is free to appropriate, expound, refute, communicate or represent his ideas in any way, provided that one's work stands

up to all other standards and protocols of scholarship. People may or may not agree with one, but there is no legal stricture against engaging with Ambedkar in one's own manner. However, should one want to put out a critical edition of any of Ambedkar's writings, one must seek permission from the committee. If the committee grants permission, one can go ahead. If the committee does not grant permission, one cannot go ahead—at least, not legally.

Thus, the legal status of Ambedkar's ideas and the legal status of his archives are two different things. His ideas are not subject to copyright, his archives are.² Some Dalit intellectuals want to claim that they have exclusive rights to his ideas—a claim hotly disputed by others who are equally interested in Ambedkar.³ But no one, Dalit or non-Dalit, can claim to have exclusive rights to his writings, except the Government of Maharashtra, the copyright holder and the SMPC, the licensing authority.⁴

The committee for its part ought to acknowledge that there are several scholars—of different nationalities, and of diverse social backgrounds, many of whom are not Dalits by birth nor Ambedkarites by ideological persuasion—who nevertheless have the requisite capabilities to work on Ambedkar's archive and produce credible critical editions of his texts that can stand up to the minutest scrutiny.

In some cases it appears that workable solutions were indeed found: volumes edited by Valerian Rodrigues (2002), Ramachandra Guha (2010), Aakash Singh Rathore and Ajay Verma (2011), as well as Narendra Jadhav (various), all come to mind. In these cases, either conflicts over copyright did not occur, or were amicably resolved between the committee and the scholars in question. This resolution was reached through processes that are not obvious or explicit to the reading public, but nevertheless must have been effective for these works to have been published without court cases in their wake.

Narendra Jadhav has done a great service to all scholars, activists and lay readers by sorting, selecting, anthologising, introducing and translating Ambedkar's writings and speeches in 10 volumes. He has ventured into Ambedkar's

works in four languages—English, Marathi, Gujarati and Hindi—and put forth a vast archive in an eminently clear and readable format, thematically arranged, for anyone to consult, in English and Marathi (Jadhav 2012; 2013a; 2013b; 2013c and 2013d).

Jadhav has used the DBAWS volumes built up by Vasant Moon and his successors as a base, but added value to them by organising materials into different genres, regrouping them by criteria other than mere chronology, and moreover, glossing various bodies of Ambedkar's writings and speeches with at least a basic historical context in a way that is useful without being intrusive. He also relies on and acknowledges the biographies of Ambedkar, editions of Ambedkar's work, and other analytical books by Dhnanjay Keer, C D Khairmode, B C Kamble, etc,⁵ the Constituent Assembly debates, as well as a variety of additional English and vernacular sources. He creates an excellent critical apparatus including the date, venue, occasion, original language and prior publication details of each item, which is a testimony to his respect for the primary archive.

Is the committee justified in denying permission to potential editors and commentators? Should the purview of ownership over the Ambedkar archive be expanded to be more inclusive, or should it be narrowed down even further? After all, Ambedkar's writings and speeches act as historical sources for scholars and specialists, but as moral resources for a vast reading public, in many languages. It can be argued that if the SMPC is genuinely committed to acknowledging, preserving and promoting the ethical and political importance of Ambedkar, then it ought to be invested in allowing more and more people to have access to him. That would be the best way to recognise and honour Ambedkar's legacy.

At the same time, if the state—represented here by the committee—were to abandon the care and the regulation of the Ambedkar corpus altogether, it could well stand accused of the dereliction of its duty. It is high time we had an open, civil and non-adversarial—debate on this issue, with the equal participation of all stakeholders.

Scholarly Sources, Moral Resources

Ideologues, demagogues, polemicists and propagandists of all shades have long used the words and ideas of Ambedkar—as also of Gandhi, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Maulana Azad, Muhammad Iqbal, Rabindranath Tagore, Jawaharlal Nehru, V D Savarkar, Vivekanand, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and so many others of the founding generations—for whatever purposes. This has gone on since the late 19th century, using the prevalent media and media cultures of various historical periods. Today the writings of major historical figures are not at all hard to find circulating in print, on the internet, and in translation; there has never been any question of restricting such materials to authorised editions only. In the boundless realm of popular circulation, no one has copyright and no one is denied entry. Google, Wikipedia and the blogosphere further disseminate materials and information, some of it authentic, some of it unreliable, and certainly all of it freely available.⁶

But a scholar wanting to work on Gandhi is obliged to use the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* prepared and maintained by the Sabarmati Ashram Preservation and Memorial Trust.⁷ For Nehru, a scholar must go to the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML) and the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund.⁸ Access to certain papers of Nehru is still controlled by the Nehru–Gandhi family. A scholar wanting to work on Rabindranath Tagore must go to the *Online Electronic Varorium Edition* which is made and managed by Jadavpur University together with Visva-Bharati.⁹

Many more modern materials of a historical nature are deposited in the National Archives of India (NAI), the Library of the Parliament of India, the Indian Institute of Advanced Study in Shimla, state-level archives, the National Library in Kolkata, the Asiatic Society of Bombay in Mumbai, and various other public institutions, depending on the provenance of the texts in question. Bodies like these exist to provide stability, accessibility and authentication to vast and complex collections of material. For popular versions, there is a wide world of freely circulating texts. For authoritative recensions, scholars must use the archives where they are housed and preserved.

In the matter of archival status, Ambedkar is no different from say Gandhi, Nehru or Tagore. His papers and materials connected to him are to be found scattered over the NMML, the NAI and the Maharashtra State Archives, but the majority of what is available in published form issues from the SMPC, and is sold by the Department of Education of the Government of Maharashtra. The family of Ambedkar has handed over charge of managing his literary estates to the SMPC. A popular writer or pamphleteer, a politician or an educationist may choose to disregard this institutional body and these authorised works. For a scholar, however, there is no choice but to depend on the committee to ensure that the Ambedkar sources are standardised, preserved and disseminated as they were written, and treated with the respect and seriousness that they deserve.

Not only do we have to take the committee seriously because it helps our scholarship to have the Ambedkar archive be maintained and made available in a reliable and stable form, but also because we are legally bound to do so. Nothing stops anyone from using the Ambedkar texts that are out there circulating unchecked, but if we want the authoritative version, then the SMPC is the state-authorised body and the fountainhead of all the Ambedkar materials. We ignore or bypass it at our own peril, and to the detriment of all our colleagues and students in the field of Ambedkar studies.

Legal experts know well that copyright law in India is not particularly clear or robust, and the world over, copyright regulations and intellectual property law are struggling to keep up with the proliferation of new media and new technologies. For now, copyright in India expires 60 years after the death of an author. In Ambedkar's case, this takes us to 2016 (he died in December 1956). Until that limit, we have to find ways to work with the SMPC, which on its part should make its criteria for permission and access much more transparent than they are at the moment.¹⁰

Future of Ambedkar Studies

Identity politics, legal ambiguity and political correctness have brought both scholarly and activist work around

Ambedkar to a near standstill in India. It might still be possible for academics to write on Ambedkar in foreign universities, but venturing anywhere close to him in this country is a task so fraught that hardly anyone wants to undertake it. Too many important aspects of Ambedkar's biography are off-limits: his equation with Gandhi, his views on Muslims and Islam, his personal life and relationships, his conservatism in some regards, his iconoclasm in other respects, his Buddhism, his liberalism—these issues are not properly understood, because they are not allowed to be handled critically or completely. Even India's most prominent scholars, whether they are historians or social scientists, Dalits or Brahmins, men or women, are hampered from speaking their minds freely when it comes to Ambedkar. A hermeneutics of suspicion applies at all times—not to the archive itself, but rather to its interpreters!

Narendra Jadhav has thus far put out a lot of material by and about Ambedkar, and yet he has somehow managed to avoid courting controversy. He has shown his considerable novelistic talents in writing his personal memoir and family history. Jadhav has demonstrated his disciplinary competence in his own fields—economics, finance and education—through a stellar career in the government, and in policy and planning at the highest levels. Now he uses the rubric of the intellectual biography, in English and Marathi, to weave a selection of Ambedkar's most significant writings and speeches into the story of his life, together with a narrative of historical events unfolding in Indian politics in the same period.

Jadhav quotes extensively from Ambedkar, with minimal connecting prose of his own, but in many ways such minimalism is valuable, because any reader is then free to make second-order judgments without being coerced into agreeing with or disagreeing with Jadhav's position. His touch is light. In a field overburdened with ideology, rife with conflict and almost moribund with suspicion, this is a blessing in disguise.

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NOTES

- 1 After Babasaheb's death in New Delhi in 1956, the custodian of the Delhi High Court held his papers for a few years. Ashis Nandy has told me several times that for a while in the mid-late 1960s the papers were sitting in the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) building, and that Savita Ambedkar would drop by from time to time to chat with him, with Rajni Kothari and with other CSDS faculty about what might be done with the corpus. Ambedkar's last residence, 26, Alipur Road in Civil Lines is about a 15 minute walk from CSDS which is on 29 Rajpur Road, New Delhi.
- 2 In legal parlance, ideas are covered by patent and texts by copyright. But this makes much more sense for scientific and technological ideas: it would be ridiculous to claim that anyone could "patent" Ambedkar's ideas!
- 3 A recent articulation of this debate is Drishadwati Bargi, "Creation of an Ambedkarite Public/Dalitisation of Civil Society" in *Kindle Magazine*, 13 September 2014: <http://kindlemag.in/creation-ambedkarite-public-dalitisation-civil-society/> but numerous other examples could also be cited.
- 4 A Delhi-based imprint by the name of Critical Quest that describes itself as a "mini publication venture" in the social sciences has published a whole series of Ambedkar's writings and speeches as small, cheaply-priced pamphlets (Rs 25/\$4). On the back-cover of each one it says: "Ambedkar's writings and speeches have been edited by late Vasant Moon and published by the Government of Maharashtra."
- 5 Dhananjay Keer's *Dr B R Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, published in 1954 by Popular Prakashan, Bombay; B C Kamble's *Samagra Ambedkar Charita*, Volume 1–24 in Marathi, published by Sugava Prakashan (reprints) and C B Khairmode's *Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar Charutra Granth*, Volume 1–12, published by Sugava Prakashan, Pune (reprints).
- 6 See, for example, a site maintained by Columbia University, with a wealth of Ambedkar materials easily accessed for study and download: <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/ooambedkar/>. See also: <http://www.ambedkar.org/> and <http://ambedkarism.wordpress.com/>
- 7 See: <https://www.gandhiheritageportal.org/mahatma-gandhi-books>. See also: <http://gandhiashramsabarmati.org/en/>. See also: <http://www.gandhiserve.org/e/cwmg/cwmg.htm>
- 8 To quote more than a few words from even such a massively disseminated book as Nehru's *Discovery of India*, which has been in print continually for decades and is widely used for school and college teaching, one must write to the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, which expects a hefty copyright fee that no Indian author or publisher would be in a position to pay. Separate fees are demanded for the reproduction of Nehru's words in books, in electronic media and on the internet. This policy is completely against the principle of both fair and open scholarship as well as the educational and broader social-pedagogical uses of a modern Indian political canon (which includes both Nehru and Ambedkar). However, it indicates the extent to which copyright over Nehru's works continues to be a lucrative source of income for the Nehru–Gandhi family and entities controlled by them. Where money is involved, these matters are taken very seriously indeed.
- 9 See Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, "Collected Works of Rabindranath Tagore: Note on a New Edition", wherein he writes: "In 2001 the copyright [extended to 60 years after Rabindranath's death in 1941] expired, and thereafter it is now open to any

roadside shop to publish Tagore's writings in any form, abridged or altered or vandalized, without regard to the authentic version approved by the author. In that context, it is heartening to see an effort to put out the collected writings, authorised by Tagore, accompanied by bibliographic research in recent times. That is why the Bangla Akademi edition of his collected works is welcome and it is to be hoped that great authors in other languages of India would be presented to their readers with comparable or superior intellectual engagement in new editions of their works (emphasis mine). Or else their works will turn to dust under the wheels of time." The Book Review, August 2014, p 5. *Review of Rabindra Rachanabali*, 7 volumes, Bangla Akademi, Kolkata (2011–14).

- 10 Rajshree Chandra sets out to provide what she describes as a "dispassionate perspective" in a recent blog-post here: <http://kafila.org/2014/10/19/un-owning-archives-in-general-ambedkar-in-particular-rajshree-chandra/> However, her argument is partisan, in that she seems to advocate "un-owning" Ambedkar, i.e., freeing Ambedkar's works of all copyright restrictions, which implies superseding the legal claims of the SMPCC on what are putatively "normative" grounds. Chandra asserts that "the question of legitimacy often needs to be freed from the question of legality." But her convoluted and sometimes equivocating account of how the works of both Ambedkar and Periyar (E V Ramasamy Naicker) have fared thus far in their respective histories of publication, appropriation and contestation, including in Indian courts, only leaves the reader more confused about who owns Ambedkar's texts within the strict framework of the law.

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