Article

Reconsidering the Everyday Ambedkar: Notes towards an Alternative Hero Worship

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Abstract

The main concern in the present article is to bring out the heroic portrait and life-world of Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar as witnessed by followers living around/with him from the 'mundaneness' of every day. By taking recourse into the autobiographical evidences produced by his followers, the article attempts to investigate how the heroic capital of Ambedkar is continuously (re)produced, (re)imagined and disseminated in the contemporary Dalit life/thought. It is my contention that in the post-independent India, the problematic of hero worship has become an important signpost for floating the questions of representation, identity, self-respect, power and historicity which eventually metamorphoses the upholder/beholder of these qualities (Dr Ambedkar in the present case) to that of a God. In academe, we have models to study such transitions. However, in the present context, the hero worship around Ambedkar is that of an alternative kind, channelized through 'human concerns and impressions'. Instead of transforming him into a God, the followers here attempt to humanize Dr Ambedkar. The humanization of Ambedkar is extracted by plunging into his household, conjugality, paternal instincts, food, clothes and passion for entertainment, among others, categorized usually within the mundaneness of everyday. The article further attempts to argue that the concerns from everyday offer a contest to bring forth the contested stories; that attempt to (re)interpret as well as (re)count the asymmetry and discrimination of caste dynamics in India's cultural life and Ambedkar's subsequent combative response to them. The discussion concludes by formulating that these concerns and anecdotes from everyday also give an alternative twist to the process and context of hero worship itself.

Keywords

Alternative hero worship, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, everyday identity politics

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Introduction

The scholarship around hero and hero worship has remained in a state of flux. In other words, the episteme of hero and hero worship needs to be understood through its evolving and contested terrains. I use the word contested for there has been no consensus regarding monolithic and uniformly acceptable characteristics of a hero and the qualities that define his heroism. Theoretically too, such a consensus becomes impossible in our post-modern (historical) condition where uniformity and the idea of absolutism are not only strongly questioned but vehemently set aside. Notwithstanding the contest, the search for (ideal) hero persists, for both the philosopher/intellectual and masses alike. The continuous 'search' has also ensured that the image of (the) hero could never become fixed or static. In fact, the same continuous search is instrumental in improvising and evolving not only the image of the hero but also the heroic requirements that provide fluidity to the whole process of 'hero manufacturing'.

In the same vein, both philosophers and masses have attempted to visualize the act of hero manufacturing according to their own kind. Whether it was the Aristotelian concept of magnanimous man, Friedrich Nietzsche's idea of a superman or the great man theory, popularized immensely by Thomas Carlyle in the Victorian era, the underlying requirement for the philosophers was to conceptualize and popularize a kind of hero who could be of utilitarian value to the society. Carlyle even goes to the extent where he declares that history is nothing but the biography of great men; claiming also that history lies in the actions of these heroes.

However, there have been parallel instances where rather than banking entirely upon the philosopher/intellectual, people, especially those from the margins, by personalized accounts and actions, have chosen and popularized their own heroes. By excavating highest possible qualities from their hero's persona, they endeavour to justify the hero worship. Usually, at such junctures, the efforts are directed in retrospective mode mainly to popularize and disseminate the heroic capital of the hero, mostly after his demise from the heroic scene. However, this is not to say that the attempts of hero manufacturing have never been undertaken during a hero's lifetime. But posthumous reminiscence of the leader's heroism, so undertaken, creates an open-ended 'memory box' in which the follower/worshiper can add their bits without being censored or authenticated. However, such an excavation of the heroic leader and his capital may not be suddenly propounded in a moment's fury but channelized collectively both as a historical necessity and trying to find a way to engage with the identified hero itself.

Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, popularly known as Babasaheb Ambedkar or Babasaheb or simply Ambedkar (I use all these salutations according to the convenience of my narrative for this is also the strategy used by his followers on whom I base my narrative), is one such hero to have emerged in contemporary India. In comparison with India's other modern leaders say Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Abdul Kalam Azad, Subhash Chandra Bose and Muhammad Ali Jinnah (who later credited to have formed Pakistan and shifted his base), the appearance of B. R. Ambedkar in India's mainstream public sphere is rather late. In fact, he can be termed a late 'discovery' or one might say 'recovery' even in the realms of Indian academe. As a matter of fact, this discovery primarily begins with the multi-volume publication venture titled *Writings and Speeches of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar* by Government of Maharashtra in the 1990s. Prior to it, the rise of social organizations such as *Dalit Panthers* and politically ferment issues such as the renaming of Marathwada University after Babasaheb Ambedkar played their parts in his iconization. Further, the academic explorations of Dr Ambedkar's ideas reached at its zenith in the aftermath of Mandal Commission's implementation. As fresh recipients of positive discrimination, the Other Backward Classes, now, along with the Schedule Castes, Schedule Tribes and minorities, started to take keen interest in his ideas and philosophy.

Nonetheless, Dr Ambedkar's prolonged absence from India's mainstream public sphere in no way could deter his continuous hyper-visibility in the subaltern public sphere, mainly the Dalit public sphere. At the same time, the Dalit counterpublics has remained conscious regarding the omission of its leader from the mainstream reckoning. Bhagwan Das, who worked with Ambedkar as a research assistant in his later years, recounts Babasaheb's omission thus:

> The newspapers used to publish a lot of things about Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Abdul Kalam Azad, Subhash Chandra Bose and Mohammed Ali Jinnah but hardly a thing about minority and untouchable communities. We knew these leaders belonged to the upper castes, but, being an untouchable I used to wonder, 'Who is our leader?' I asked Abba this, and he replied, 'Ummeedkar, the one who brings hope', which is how Abba saw Babasaheb Ambedkar. (Das, 2004, p. 20)

As a matter of fact, even before the academic upsurge that happened around Ambedkar in the 1990s and after, India's Dalits not only managed to keep him 'alive' but incessantly infused new life and blood through their performative acts such as the annual celebration of his birthday, remembering the 'treachery' of Poona Pact, his stewardship of India's constitution and so on. These acts are further supplemented by circulating his important writings such as *Annihilation of caste* (1936) and *Buddha and His Dhamma* (1957), *Waiting for Visa* (1935–36/1993) at a very affordable price. In fact, almost in all Indian languages, these writings are available in translation, largely due to the passionate efforts of Dalits. Since the 1990s, a host of booklets, little magazines, souvenirs, calendars, magazines and pamphlets have been in continuous circulation. In the contemporary times, the rise of social media has taken this circulation to a different level altogether. However, contemporary trends in social media with regards to Ambedkar's heroism and fandom require a separate full-length study. It is beyond the purview of this article. What the article seeks to explore is to comprehend the individual efforts among the Dalits and others subaltern groups to remember and transform Babasaheb as a heroic phenomenon both during his lifetime and beyond. As mentioned already, the material taken for analysis pertains to the personal experiences of his followers thereby bridging the gap between the personal and the political. Efforts would be made to account and decode the modus operandi by which Babasaheb is visualized as an undisputed hero of Dalits.

Formulated thus, the article sets out to work its way through two channels. Firstly we are aware that several Dalit memoirs/autobiographies from Marathi and other bhasha languages have been translated into English in recent times and are available in the public domain. The excerpts from these narratives are hand-picked and analyzed in order to reveal different images of Dr Ambedkar. The second channel of our narrative attempts to answer, within its limitations, the Ambedkar of flesh, blood and bones. How much do we know about Ambedkar, the human? What about the human Ambedkar that is not part of history and its headlines? What about his human frailties? Unfortunately, and surprisingly, we know very little about the everyday Ambedkar, for most of the academic energy so far has been devoted to understanding his ideas, influences, politics and so on.

But there is a loosely fragmented group of people who could help us in filling this serious gap within Ambedkar scholarship. During Babasaheb's lifetime, many people worked with him in different capacities. Some of them managed to write their memoirs, autobiographies, biographies and occasional character sketches keeping Ambedkar at the centre. Of late, there have been attempts not only at translating these writing in different Indian languages but also putting them together as a single entity (Yusufji, 2017).

However fragmentary, these writings throw an alternative light on Ambedkar's personality and recover hitherto hidden facets of his life. By doing so, they compensate the unavailability of his autobiography. Through these reminiscences, they construct a very different brand of hero worship. A hero worship sans crowd, slow but passionate, remarkable yet not in the sense of blindfolded devotion, respectful but not without questioning. Speaking differently, an alternative hero worship whose

springboard is an engagement with those aspects of Ambedkar's life that are relegated to the mundaneness of everyday.

Dr B. R. Ambedkar: The (Heroic) Legacy

By his accidental birth in so-called untouchable Mahar caste, Ambedkar was subjected to lifelong humiliation and discrimination. He was both a subject of physical and mental untouchability at the hands of caste-ridden Hindu society. However, the caste Hindus' hyper-obsession with purity and pollution could not dissuade Ambedkar from pursuing the highest possible academic qualifications and that too from the prestigious institutions located around the world. Conversely, it is important to mention at this juncture that within the caste Hindus there existed a liberal-progressive line of thinking that was, within its own limitations, trying to create a space for the untouchables. The state funding granted for Ambedkar's education both by Sayajirao Gaekwad (the ruler of princely state of Baroda) as well as by Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj (the ruler of Kolhapur) are examples of that liberal-progressive stance.

Ambedkar's own education was, and even now, in my view, the first brick of his heroic status and a sort of historical moment in the gambit of Dalit politics. Like all other societies, Indian cultural ethos reserves its highest respect for the learned. Ambedkar's formal academic learning was no less than a miracle, at least, for the people of his own community and other untouchables. Similar sentiments are displayed through the memory of Baby Kamble's *Jina Amucha* (The Prisons We Broke, 2009):

> Dr. Ambedkar was the topic of discussion among them all. 'Hey, have you heard? […] You know, they say this boy Ambedkar belongs to our Mahar community; but he has been educated at a place beyond the seven seas. Such great education he has had, you know. Imagine, he returned to Mumbai in a ship! And he can actually speak in the white sahib's own tongue and hold his own'. This would be enough of an invitation for yet another to chip in, 'This man is nothing less than a miracle of god. That's why he's been able to cross the seven seas, you know!' (Kamble, 2009, p. 63)

There is another instance where the echoes of Ambedkar's learned stature reverberate through the metaphor of a pen:

One who says Jai Bhim
Knows the value of Jai Bhim
He knows that Baba's constitution
is the real pride of India,
Why sing the false praise of the Yogi?
India is a great nation
Because it is here that Phule and Ambedkar were born…
The Great Yogis went just the way they came
all shattered to pieces.
Who says our nation stands on the rupee note
You must say only that which is true
My Bhima lifted the nation
Just on the nib of a pen. (Rege, 2013, pp. 191–192)

However, irrespective of his learned stature, Dr Ambedkar's followers have been conscious of the bitter political opposition he faced all his life. By referring to the word 'Yogi' the song alludes to Ambedkar's equation with Gandhi. It is a known fact that on many issues Ambedkar and Gandhi had massive political

and personal differences. Having no ancestral fortune or privileged caste status, bereft of any political backing and mentoring, Ambedkar still rose to the pinnacle of success, name, fame and national reckoning thereby becoming a befitting hero of his community and other downtrodden. Being the chief architect of India's constitution, which the above-quoted song seems to be reminding, he promised a life of equality, fraternity and liberty to his community in particular and countrymen in general.

Coming out of the ordinary, Dr Ambedkar experienced what it means to be an untouchable in India and questioned the theoretical base of (some) Indians despising the touch of others. He was the first to do so among Dalits. Ambedkar managed to strike a chord with the common Dalit because of his life that had parallels as well differences from the lives of other Dalits. These differences and his breakaways from the ordinary Dalit life has been a key factor in him developing heroic status. Being routinely discriminated like any other Dalit, at school, in the workplace at Baroda after returning from Europe with truckloads of degrees, open opposition of Congress against his political stands where he was even declared as an agent of the British, Ambedkar continued to struggle all his life for an equal and just society.

Battling heavy odds, Ambedkar not only drafted India's constitution but was also invited to become its first law minister. On the one hand, his life depicts the aspirations, achievements, dreams and ideals for the subjugated castes of India and on the other, the experiences and humiliations identical to him continue to concern and haunt a majority of Dalits of India, even today. However, as a mass leader of subjugated communities, Ambedkar comes as a saviour. To foreground Dhananjay Keer's observation: 'No man in this country or perhaps in any other country, could equal Ambedkar in his career…' (Keer, 1954, p. 519). And further he notes,

> He displayed the wisdom of a statesman, the qualities of a leader, the courage of a hero, the endurance of a martyr and the erudition of a savant …that in such a span of life the son of an untouchable could crowd such varied interests, distinctions, and scholarship is an unparalleled achievement in the modern world. (Keer, 1954, pp. 520–521)

Furthermore, in the concluding part of Dr Ambedkar's biography, Keer observes Babasaheb's importance when he notes,

> The unique life of Ambedkar has become a new source of learning and a new source of inspiration for devotees. From it has emerged a new deity and the lamp that will be burning in its temple in this land of temples. A new academy of knowledge, a new inspiration for poetry, a new place of pilgrimage and a new opportunity for literature have sprung! (Keer, 1954, p. 521)

Ambedkar has inspired almost everything that Keer had envisioned in the final remarks of his biography. Ambedkar's philosophy and message continue to create ripples in every election season of India. The attempt to co-opt Ambedkar by India's mainstream political establishments such as the ruling BJP as well as the Congress in recent times is a trend that must be studied in detail. It is ironic that the same political thoughts and establishments sidelined him as a representative of 'separatist' and 'divisive' politics during his lifetime are now trying to own him as one of their own. For instance, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's (RSS) mouthpiece *Panchjanya* brought out a special issue on Ambedkar in 2015 and commemorated him as the defender of Hindu scriptures.

Ambedkar's Life: *Waiting for Visa*

It is strange that unlike his contemporaries, Dr B. R. Ambedkar did not write his autobiography. However, he did wish to write one in English. But postponing it to the dead end of his life and finally not able to

do it suggests that it wasn't on his priority list. The deferring of his autobiography also suggests that perhaps he did not make any distinction between his personal and public life. Kartar Singh 'Polonius' remembers Ambedkar's views on his own life that 'In public life I will not do a thing which I cannot defend publicly' (Yusufji, 2017, p. 102). Most of Ambedkar's associates through their reminiscences make this statement time and again that his personal life became a mere extension of his public life and not the other way round. There is another instance that testifies to our observation. In February 1948, he writes a letter to his fiancée Sharda Kabir, a doctor by profession, asking in a playful tune: 'You have not cared to enquire into my past' and then answers himself 'But it will be available to you at any time in the pages of many Marathi magazines' (Yusufji, 2017, p. 13). The statement clearly suggests that he saw his life as a fusion of the private and the public. In volume three of *Writings and Speeches of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar*, the editors recount his desire of writing an account of himself thus: 'He had also expressed his intention to write his autobiography, the life of Mahatma Phule and the History of the Indian Army but left no record of any research on these subjects' (Yusufji, 2017, p. 153). However, his followers started to write about him when he was still alive. One of these biographers, Shankarrao Kharat, even claimed that three different notebooks pertaining to three parts of the proposed autobiography were actually found in Babasaheb's study room after his demise (Kharat, 2001, p. 3). It remains unclear to suggest whether the lack of Ambedkar's autobiography has deprived us from nuanced and specific understanding of the history of his times. But the lack also paved the way for his followers to come up with voluminous and multiple biographies and musical compositions commenting and celebrating his personal, political and public life. We shall return to some of these resources in the next segment.

Waiting for Visa, till date, remains the only authentic autobiographical notes that Babasaheb has left behind. The six autobiographical episodes accounted in *Waiting* give a speculative glimpse about his proposed autobiography in case he would have ever written it. Apart from an intriguing title (for most of the other writings of Ambedkar have very clear, lucid and non-ambiguous titles), he contemplates on the mode of his narrative—making a distinction between (mere) general descriptions of untouchability on the one hand and the authentic case studies/illustrations on the other. Finally, he settles for the latter in which he draws from his own experiences as well as from the experiences of others.

In this way, the structure of *Waiting* is more of a history of the community than the history of the individual. Or in other words, history of the community is the history of the individual. Through these accounts in *Waiting*, Ambedkar's focus shifts more on the process and structure of experiences rather than on the experiences themselves. For example, the first illustration in this document describes the nine year old Ambedkar's first real encounter with untouchability while inbound to Koregaon:

> This incident [of untouchability] has a very important place in my life. I was a boy of nine when it happened. But it has left an indelible impression on my mind. Before this incident occurred, I knew that I was an untouchable, and untouchables were subjected to certain indignities and discriminations. For instance, I knew that in the school I could not sit in the midst of my classmates according to my rank, but that I was to sit in a corner by myself. […] If the peon was not available, I had to go without water. The situation can be summed up in the statement –no peon, no water. […] The work of shaving and hair cutting was done by my sister because we were untouchables and no barber would consent to shave an untouchable.
>
> All this I knew. But this incident gave me a shock such as I had never received before, and it made me think about untouchability –which, before this incident happened, was with me a matter of course, as it is with many touchables as well as untouchables. (Yusufji, 2017, pp. 165–166) [parenthesis added]

In the same vein, he theorizes his experience of being thrown out of the Parsi inn while working for the Maharaja of Baroda:

> The scene of a dozen Parsis armed with sticks lined before me in a menacing mood, and myself standing before them with a terrified look imploring for mercy, is one which so long a period as eighteen years has not succeeded in fading away. I can even now vividly recall it –and never recall it without tears in my eyes. It was then for the first time that I learnt that a person who is an untouchable to a Hindu is also an untouchable to a Parsi. (Yusufji, 2017, p. 174)

He takes his case further by reliving the incident of being tossed off from a Tonga while going to Chalisgaon. The local Tonga drivers had refused to accommodate an untouchable in their carts. As a result, the organizers had to arrange an amateur amongst themselves, who in the end became responsible for the fatal accident and Babasaheb merely escaped. Furthermore, Dr Ambedkar accounts for the experiences of nameless people who are subjected to similar humiliation and atrocities at the hands of caste-ridden society. In these incidents, he discusses the experience of a 'bhangi boy' turning up as a revenue officer in rural Gujarat, and the fatal experience of a Dalit couple losing their child because the caste Hindu doctor refuses to touch the untouchable patients. Coupling his own experiences with those of others, Ambedkar seems to circulate a far-reaching message that he is no different from the members of his community that in turn struck an instant chord with the community. In other words, Ambedkar was aware of a certain history which was being constructed through the episodes of his life.

There Was One Name on Every Tongue: Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar

In all their writings and experiences, the followers of Ambedkar have been extremely conscious about his contribution to the Dalit cause. Hence, it is no wonder that his followers, especially the Dalits, credit him as a true social democrat and harbinger of social and political justice. His slogan—educate, agitate and organize—is well known but what is lesser known is that even during the rare moments of leisure, the welfare of Dalits haunted his mind. While going to attend the First Round Table Conference in November 1930, Babasaheb writes a letter to Dadasaheb Baburao Gaikwad explaining the journey: '[It] has been pleasant. I am writing these few lines to tell you this. The sea has been calm'. In the letter, adopting a literary taste, he compares the movement of the ship to that of the moves of a peacock. But while enjoying the pleasures of the sea voyage, he does not forget to add, 'People are sympathetic towards me. I am happy to say that they too are inclined to favour the demands of the untouchables' (Yusufji, 2017, p. 9).

This deeply private moment of appreciating the aesthetics of nature and beauty of sea voyage ceases to be private when one reads the last line. Grappling with the broader contours of identity and social justice, the hero (Ambedkar), attempts to reframe the social through personal. By talking about the demands of untouchables in these private moments, he converts the private truth of him(self) into the emotional and social truth of the Dalit community. At the same time, this remarkable shift in the narrative that culminates into the dissolution of the Ambedkar self, refashions him as a sacrificial figure willing to relinquish his comforts for the greater good of the Dalit community. The image of a sacrificial figure not only ensures Ambedkar's candidature as an important part of his people but, to borrow Akshaya Kumar's term 'an exemplary constituent' (Kumar, 2014, p. 243). Being an exemplary constituent of his people, it is my contention that Ambedkar is able to generate a continuous 'heroic capital', which ensures an unceasing supply of followers in return.

Baby Kamble makes a note of Ambedkar's heroic capital in *Jina Amucha.* She recounts the impact of one of his speeches, delivered against superstition. She remembers Babasaheb saying,

> You must educate your children. Divorce your children from God. Teach them good things. Send them to schools. The result will be there for you to see. When your children begin to be educated, your condition will start improving. Your family, your life will improve. (Kamble, 2009, p. 64)

Utilizing his superordinate position, Babasaheb's emphasis on education is quite significant. M. S. S. Pandian in his book *The Image Trap: M. G. Ramachandran in Film and Politics* (1992) shows us how the screen persona of MGR uses education/literacy as a weapon to address the issues of oppression and backwardness of his followers. In our case too, using education as a trope of liberation, the hero (Ambedkar) appropriates it in such a way that it ceases to be a monopoly of the caste Hindus/priestly class/rich (Pandian, 1992, p. 48).

By Kamble's account, Babasaheb seems to be the only literate in that gathering. He is the first doctorate from the Dalit community. Unlike some of his contemporaries, education has not come to him easily. Through his struggles he has paid heavy price for it. However, its dividends are for everyone to see and imitate when she says, 'Babasaheb's sturdy physique, his glowing youth, his fair complexion, his high forehead, and his European attire, his suit and boots, all of these impressed people to no end. They basked in the warmth and glory of his words; words that were like elixir to them. It was as if all their suffering had finally earned them a *glorious reward*' (Kamble, 2009, p. 64 [emphasis added]). The defiant spirit of Ambedkar compels his followers to take stock of the situation and initiate the first step for liberation: education. Ambedkar is also being referred to as the glorious reward of that education. It is only through education that their aspirations and dreams would take a real form.

Pandian sees a contradiction in this kind of modus operandi because the hero uses the same instrument (literacy) for liberation that has been hitherto used by oppressors for subjugating the subalterns (Pandian, 1992, p. 48). But this role reversal 'delinks education from authority and knowledge from power' (Pandian, 1992, p. 48). This reversal is extremely significant because for centuries together literacy/education was forbidden to the members of Dalit community. Ambedkar questions the common sense of this denial for Dalits. In other words, the hitherto denied privilege of literacy becomes a weapon of subversion in the hands of Ambedkar and Ambedkar's challenge for his followers to get educated, to use Pandian's phrase, is a sign of (heroic) authority (Pandian, 1992, p. 48).

At this juncture, it is safe to infer that Ambedkar uses his heroic capital and authority to repudiate the marginality of his followers. Even his followers, eventually, are able to see education as the political tool for their liberation. In Kamble's reporting, we are able to smell that change:

> Gradually, the wind of Ambedkar's thoughts turned into a whirlwind. Everybody began to *understand, argue and consider*. The dead cells in their blood were charged with a new life. Blood began to flow through their veins with new vigour. People got charged with the spirit of revolution. There was one name on very tongue –Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar. (Kamble, 2009, p. 69 [emphasis added])

It would be futile now to describe the kind of impact Babasaheb had on his followers. The incident quoted above is self-explanatory. The words: understand, argue and consider—normative offshoots of a literate mind—are certainly not incidental. In the sections to follow, we shall further see how a 'new' Ambedkar hero emerges from the diverse locations of everyday.

Ambedkarancha Sansar (The Household of Ambedkar): Conjugality and Paternity

Sharmila Rege in her book *Against the Madness of Manu* (2013) has attempted an overview of Ambedkar household. Recovering original photographs from the archives related with Ambedkar's life, she has attempted to 'provide insights into Ambedkar's family milieu outside of his remarkable politics and feats' (Rege, 2013, p. 30). In one of these photos, Ramabai is seen seated in the middle flanked by

Dr Ambedkar on her left along with the other family members. Ambedkar's pet dog is seen seating at Ramabai's feet. In a different context, through calendars and posters, Ambedkar's wedding with Ramabai is celebrated with Lord Buddha's blessing in the middle (Rege, 2013, pp. 30–32). Images like these enable the followers to establish a personal connect with the Ambedkars and their household. The continuous circulation of these photographs is enough to prove that however great and extraordinary mind Babasaheb possessed, he still had to endure the hardships and tribulations of a married life. This association gets further strengthened when one accounts for the death of Babasaheb's son Rajratna in 1926. Dhananjay Keer cites Dr Ambedkar's letter to Dattoba Pawar, explaining his grief:

> We have in all buried four precious children, three sons and a daughter, all sprightly, auspicious and handsome children. The thought of this is sufficiently crushing, let alone the future which would have been theirs if they had lived. My last boy was a wonderful boy the like of whom I have seldom seen. With his passing away life to me is a garden full of weeds. (Rege, 2013, p. 32)

Drawing further from Ambedkar's domestic life, Rege mentions the dent caused to the monthly household budget due to Babasaheb's love for books. In one such incident, after being reprimanded by his people for overspending on books, Ambedkar goes to the market and brings huge quantities of vegetables and fishes! (Rege, 2013, p. 30). In his 12-volume Marathi biography of Ambedkar, C. B. Khairmode mentions Ambedkar's displeasure and anger over Ramabai's reluctance to educate herself. He is further disturbed by her religious orientation and constant demands of an annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur (Rege, 2013, p. 32). In the same biography, Khairmode gives a detailed account of Ambedkar's grief and pain after the untimely demise of his wife Ramabai. The contemporary Dalit counter-public has produced enough material to foreground Ramabai's contribution in the making of Ambedkar. This in itself is a long story and demands a separate discussion. However, what strikes us here is that Ambedkar's followers have been very keen to bring to life, the hitherto neglected life history of Ramabai. Such a recovery also 'problematizes' Ambedkar's own heroism in the sense that with Ramabai's appearance in the scheme of things, he is no longer the godly messiah fighting for his people but another 'common' man of his community, dependent on conjugal alliance and to the partnership of his wife. Ambedkar himself seems to advertise it while writing the dedication for Ramabai in his book *Pakistan or the Partition of India* (1945):

> As a token of my appreciation of her goodness of heart, her nobility of mind and her purity of character and also for the cool fortitude and readiness to suffer along with me which she showed in those friendless days of want and worries which fell to our lot. (Rege, 2013, p. 39)

However, the imagination of Ambedkar in [t]his household is not without contradictions. Let us exemplify it with two separate but mutually connected utterances:

My father called him father,
my mother calls him father,
I call him father,
my son too calls him father.
Try searching in the world
one such relation.
Does anyone share this kind of relation,
like the one we share with my Bhima?
Sadhus and saints have come and gone,

my vows and prayers to none bore fruit.
Where were you yesterday?
Today you have come so far.
In your hands smeared with cow-dung
He placed a pen! (Rege, 2013, pp. 41–42)

The composer of the above song is a Dalit woman named Zhingubai. Here, she clearly claims Babasaheb as the father/in charge of (all) Dalit households. In the song, he is addressed as father/protector to everyone. However, it is not difficult to ascertain that the composer does not want to exalt Babasaheb's existence to the mythical realms. On the contrary, an attempt is made, especially with the physical metaphor of pen (a symbol of liberation) to bind Babasaheb to the material and the paternal world. In this sense, Babasaheb is distinct from his religious master lord Buddha who abandoned his wife and child to attain the special path of enlightenment. Being called father by everyone, the song also blurs a conclusive reading of Ambedkar's personal position in this household.

In our discussion so far, we have seen two strands of Ambedkar's life: The way he thinks about himself—the struggles of a common man in a caste obsessed society. In the second strand, he is imagined within the paternal and conjugal boundaries by his followers. However, among these strands, there is a distinct class of Ambedkarite followers which have existed from the time he was alive. These followers are introduced to us in different capacities. In the first place, we have a group of distant followers who met him occasionally as listeners to his speeches, collaborators in public spaces, as members of different committees that Babasaheb headed and so on. In the second set, we have members of Babasaheb's support staff. Their job was to attend to his everyday needs, be it finding books from his library, looking after his kitchen, typing his writings, looking after his plants and garden and so on. As his attendants, these people from the support staff had the privilege to observe him closely. For them, Babasaheb was no myth, no god but a normal human being with flesh and blood. Through their conversations and observations, the Babasaheb that emerges is different from the one that exists in Marathi magazines or known normatively. Let us now plunge into those accounts, one by one.

The Everyday Ambedkar: Recovering the Human Side

Babasaheb Ambedkar's followers vividly call his varied interests and facts of daily routine hitherto unknown in public life. The first among these is his obsession for books. D. J. Jadhav recalls how Ambedkar would suggest everyone to invest 10% of one's income into purchasing books (Yusufji, 2017, p. 95). Books, both in terms of reading and writing, became a hallmark of Dr Ambedkar's daily routine. By different accounts available on him, one thing clearly comes out undisputed that he had the richest and finest personal library in the country. His hunger for reading and writing was second to none. Babasaheb's attendant Devi Dyal who looked after his library mentions the task of retrieving books from Ambedkar's toilet. Ambedkar had the habit of readings books even in the toilet (Yusufji, 2017, p. 138). For him relaxing meant switching from one topic of reading to another (Yusufji, 2017, p. 113). Being a regular reader of books, he developed a natural knack of getting through the arguments without being swayed by embellishments. Being a celebrated writer, Babasaheb used to get handsome royalties for his books. But he always appropriated his royalties in getting books for his own personalized library (Yusufji, 2017, p. 77–78). Being a law minister, he used to get ₹500 as entertainment budget so as to provide refreshments to the visitors coming to his home. Nimgade states that refreshment for most of his visitors was given in the form of water because he even diverted that money into expanding his library (Yusufji,

2017, p. 115). Three books, namely, *Life of Tolstoy*, *Les Misérables*, and *Far from the Madding Crowd* made him weep, so told Ambedkar to his followers, once (Yusufji, 2017, p. 100).

Among his other interests, he loved to cook food occasionally. His breakfast did not change even after his arrival from Europe. He would usually prefer toast, egg and tea in the morning. Sohanlal Shastri describes how much Ambedkar loved to eat radish and mustard leaves. He would himself fry them in a generous quantity of Ghee, imitating the Punjabi style. He was a teetotaller and the extravagant parties thrown by the public figures such as Jawaharlal Nehru and Lord Mountbatten could not impress him for an attendance (Yusufji, 2017, p. 105).

Babasaheb Ambedkar had a huge fascination for good clothes. He always appeared well dressed in public meetings. His aesthetic sense was highly fine-tuned. Apart from his liking for the European clothes, he would also dress himself according to the weather conditions of India. Professor Helekar gives a visual: 'At about 8 AM, I found a strong well-built man with a lungi, dressed in Madrasi fashion, wearing a shirt, chappals on his feet, looking like a gymnast, entering the school' (Yusufji, 2017, p. 86). Devi Dayal also has some observations on Ambedkar's wardrobe:

> At home he wore simple clothes. During the summer he wore chappals, loincloth, kurta and cap. […] He loved the kachcchha which opened like pants. He said, 'This dress is very inexpensive and comfortable. I will advise the poor people to adopt it as their general uniform'. (Yusufji, 2017, pp. 139–140)

He carried this aesthetic taste even outside his personal physical self too. His garden in Delhi was one of the best and well maintained. So much so that London's *Daily Mail* had a report over it (Yusufji, 2017, p. 100). He would engage in horticulture experiments in his garden. According to Namdeo Nimgade's account, he knew the Latin botanical names of all his crops and plants (Yusufji, 2017, p. 112). Dr Ambedkar loved animals. He always had dogs and cats in his home. On one occasion, he cried like a child on the death of his pet dog. According to his followers, he loved dogs for their loyalty and commitment. Alongside books, he loved accumulating an exclusive collection of fountain pens. He loved to play on violin and according to the available records, took formal training from Sathe brothers in Bombay (Yusufji, 2017, p. 151).

Looking closely, again, one finds that the everyday Ambedkar, with his choices and passions, attempts to regulate and subvert the hitherto understood privileges of elitist/upper caste society. His obsession for knowledge, discussed here with the metaphor of books was a taboo for his followers. With his own example, he attempts to convert this taboo into a possible instrument of liberation for those at the margins. This could also be the reason that Ambedkar's own community, the Mahars, is the most educated community among Dalits today.

Similarly, Ambedkar's access to good and healthy food can be read as a major psychological and physical leap for his followers. One is immediately reminded of Vijay Tendulkar's Arun Athavale in *Kanyadaan* (2005). I have argued elsewhere that Arun's character presents to us a certain historiography of caste through his consciousness (Kumar, 2014, pp. 189–190). His experience, in fact, becomes the microcosm of the Dalit experience. Here he tells his would-be-wife Jyoti about the lived realities of a Dalit life:

> Generation after generation, their stomachs used to stale, stinking bread they have begged! Our tongues always tasting flesh of dead animals, and with relish! Surely we can't fit into your unwrinkled Tinopal world. How can there be any give and take between our ways and your fragrant, ghee spread, wheat bread culture? … Will you marry me and eat stinking bread with spoilt dal in my father's hut? Without vomiting? (Tendulkar, 2005, pp. 17–18)

Similar memories of food, hunger and humiliation in Dalit world find their ample representation in many of the autobiographies that have come in the recent past (Rege, 2006, p.77). However, Ambedkar's access to good quality food not only symbolically reverses the painful memories of the past but is also rejuvenating for his followers. The metaphor of ghee and its travelling to Ambedkar's food plate is nothing sort of a psychological liberation for the Dalits. Similar is the case with his choice of cloths. Adjusting different clothes for different occasions is an indication of Ambedkar's growing status. Along with the three-piece western attire, Babasaheb's advocacy for chappals, loincloth, kurta and cap is strongly rooted in his concern for the poor. One sees that this everyday Ambedkar with his humanized requirements of food, clothes, books, entertainment and so on produces a distinct personal domain—a personalized arena of enthusiasm for his followers. Such an enthusiasm adds to the heroic capital of Ambedkar.

However, it must also be argued that the heroic capital and authority of Babasaheb over his followers by no means—absolute. He himself was not above scrutiny and debate, justice and truth—ideals that he always advocated and nurtured—and on occasions these things also got percolated in the actions of his followers. For instance, there were times when he was confronted by his followers, questioned and corrected by his attendants. A few episodes shall throw more light on this aspect of his everyday life.

The Courage to Differ/Interrupt Babasaheb Ambedkar: Listening to the Other Side

While describing the spell of revolution casted by Ambedkar on his followers, Baby Kamble also discusses the opposition faced by him from the members of his community. These members were suspicious of his actions of reformation and resisted openly by calling him an agent of the Christians, 'He has lived among foreigners. Then isn't he *polluted*? Probably he has become a Christian, that's why he preaches this padri knowledge' (Kamble, 2009, p. 67, [emphasis added]). It is interesting to note that the 'padri' knowledge of Ambedkar had nothing to do with Christianity. Its basic premise was to develop the courage to say no to false gods, getting the children educated, giving up the chain of superstitions, to stop eating carcasses, refusal to clean the filth of the village and so on. However, the Mahar followers are resisting the change for this would pollute the idea of 'true (pure) Mahars' and even do not hesitate to call Dr Ambedkar a stupid man (Kamble, 2009, pp. 66-67). It is paradoxical to observe that being themselves historical victims of purity/pollution, the Dalits deeply believe in this binary. And when Ambedkar wants to break this binary, he too was made a repository of it by his community who feels that by coming into contact with the Christian culture he has become polluted. Ambedkar's position in the above episode clarifies the fact that 'change' is a process and not a 'sudden revelation'. The hero Ambedkar had no magic wand to spell over his followers. The transition was a painful process for him, for he was no mystic. The flak that he received from his own followers in public life not only testifies to his vulnerability as a hero but also a strong resolve to overcome it through humanly means of negotiations and interactions.

The case was no different in Ambedkar's personal life as well. I shall briefly mention a few of these episodes so as to evaluate them together, at the end of this section.

U. R. Rao while mentioning his experiences with Dr Ambedkar discusses the instance of his disagreement with the blurb of his book titled *Thoughts on Pakistan*. As in-charge, publication Department at Thacker & Co. Ltd., he redrafted the blurb of the book. The manager approved the change with the remark if Dr Ambedkar agrees with the change. Rao writes his experience thus: 'I saw the Doctor's genial face scowling, looking somewhat serious'. 'You did this, Rao?' he asked me. 'Yes, Doctor', I said,

almost in a whisper. 'Why did you think it necessary to change it?' (Yusufji, 2017, p. 70). In the next segment of the narrative, we find that Rao attempts to give a logical explanation as to why it was necessary to alter the blurb. More importantly, Rao got Babasaheb saw things the way he wanted. According to him, 'really, it was an indication of the Doctor's readiness to see the other point of view' (Yusufji, 2017, p. 70).

In another incident, Bhagwan Das too recounts his moment of disagreement with Dr Ambedkar. Once, Mr Das was reading a copy of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. Dr Ambedkar, while observing claimed that 'Darwin came up with the theory of the survival of the fittest, but I don't agree with it' (Yusufji, 2017, pp. 63–64). At that moment, Bhagwan Das disagrees with Dr Ambedkar's observation and claims that Darwin never revealed any theory of the survival of the fittest. Instead, his claim was: 'Species that don't adapt themselves according to the changing environment become extinct, gradually'. On hearing Das' response, Babasaheb asked him if he has done an M.A. in Anthropology? On getting a negative answer from Das, he remarked, 'It does not matter. I have got bundles of degrees; what matters is the knowledge one has and the ability to use it' (Yusufji, 2017, pp. 63–64).

M.O. Mathai mentions a different, yet similar anecdote. He had told a certain Mr Panikkar regarding his admiration for Dr Ambedkar but with a disclaimer that he just fell short of being a great man by inches because he could not wholly rise above bitterness (Yusufji, 2017, p. 107). On knowing that, Ambedkar told him in a humorous way, 'So you have found fault with me, but I am prepared to accept your criticism' (Yusufji, 2017, p. 107).

One thing which can be significantly inferred from these personal episodes is Ambedkar's willingness to accept criticism. In the first instance, he immediately realizes the hurriedness through which one can make conclusions, as happened while discussing Darwin. He realizes that the so-called theory of Darwin was actually the inference that readers have drawn from his book. He immediately stands corrected after a careful thought. In the latter episode, maybe he agrees with the 'bitterness' charge hurled against him by Mathai. Consequently, he finds it befitting to explain the grounds of his so-called bitterness in a one-to-one conversation with Mr Mathai. Dr Ambedkar's willingness to accept mistakes and misunderstandings carved out a distinct sense of respect and belonging among his followers and acquaintances.

Ambedkar's House of Justice: For the Sleeping Oppressed

The question of justice remained central to Ambedkar's life and thought. After discussing some sample episodes centred on the quest for justice briefly, we shall, then, attempt to decode the channels through which Babasaheb achieves it. Polonius recalls how during his stay in New Delhi, 'his bungalow used to be the daily visiting place of scores of inferior government servants, menials, labourers and others whose grievances he heard in rapt attention, and redressed them' (Yusufji, 2017, p. 99). The lifelong commitment of ensuring justice to the poor, marginalized and neglected earned Babasaheb's home the nickname *Insaf Ki Kothi* (the house of justice). Namdeo Nimgade tells us an interesting story about a certain Mr Sudama who worked as personal assistant to Babasaheb for a long time. Remembering Sudama's story, he recalls, 'As a child Sudama was abandoned by his father at Dr Ambedkar's bungalow in Bombay with these words: "Sir, you are our leader. I am desperately poor and will leave my child in your care" (Yusufji, 2017, p. 114). It is further narrated to us how Sudama grew up in Babasaheb's care and became a part of his family. Even outside the domestic sphere of his home, Babasaheb would always be concerned about his people and their plights. Nimgade reveals another interesting episode though in a different context:

> Once, some American reporters asked him when would it be convenient to visit him, and he told them to come whenever they pleased. They visited him at midnight and found him still working in his study. Astonished, they asked him, 'We approached Nehru and Gandhi, but they were asleep; why are you still working so late?'
>
> 'They are lucky leaders because their followers are awake', Dr Ambedkar replied, 'I have to keep awake, because my oppressed people are still sleeping'. (Yusufji, 2017, p. 118)

In another incident, Polonius talks about Babasaheb's empathy towards the frail and the weak. In this incident, when Ambedkar sees an old man clad in rags and in groaning pain, he gets so much moved by his condition that he brings him home. There he gives him clothes, shelter, food and even employment in his own household till the man gets medically recovered (Yusufji, 2017, p. 98). Ambedkar was hugely inspired by the life of Lord Buddha. Among many things that Buddhism offered to him, its concern for 'human suffering' or *dukkh* was something that Babasaheb could immediately relate to. It is only through the realization of suffering that one can think of ensuring justice.

In the episodes mentioned above, what is central to Ambedkar's idea of justice is an inherent conflict as well as contradiction between the conditions of Dalits and that of Ambedkar. Ironically enough, it is this conflict and contradiction, visible primarily through Ambedkar that provides the resolution. By siding with those in need, Ambedkar proves himself as one among many struggling Dalits but at the same time marks himself off from his own people by appropriating the right to bestow justice on his followers. Like Pandian's MGR, Ambedkar too, appropriates several signs of symbols of authority and elitism which in the present case are *kothi* (bungalow), *insaf* (justice), *gaud* (adoption), awakening in the night (a metaphor of vigil to ensure justice), proper clothes, medicine, shelter and so on. As one can discern, crucial to this interaction is the 'lack' of resources among/in Dalits and that of 'surplus' of/in Ambedkar.

The narratives above provide enough hints to formulate that Ambedkar's house of justice was built on the pillars and bricks of empathy, kindness that combined serious willingness to surrender one's own surplus first. On the other hand, Ambedkar fights the prevailing injustice towards his community on his own. His followers are not hesitant to draw the inference that ordinary leaders cannot imitate Babasaheb's acts of justice. He not only provides the damage control to the 'prevailing lacks' of his followers but also constructs his own house of justice. Thus, Ambedkar's authority to dispense justice invites reverence from his followers.

Another instance of this reverence for Ambedkarite justice is evoked, especially, in oral culture by referring to his second marriage with Dr Sharda Kabir (who after marriage adopted the name of Savita). Savita was an upper caste brahman woman and her marriage with Ambedkar was not without controversy. As a result, even today, she remains a polarizing figure among Dalits, especially in Maharashtra. However, it is important for us to note that Babasaheb's marriage to Savita also becomes a trope of justice at two levels. First, the inter-caste nature of marriage makes a rebuttal of societal norms of marrying within one's own caste. Ambedkar himself saw inter-caste marriages as a possible solution for annihilation of caste. On the other hand, the popular belief earmarks Ambedkar as a staunch advocate of women's liberation, their rights and choices, thereby increasing his catchment area of justice to the other half of society's population as well. Ambedkar's advocacy of The Hindu Code Bill is often cited by his followers as an important example of his intent to provide justice to women.

Adopting Pandian's analogy again, Ambedkar, by marrying an upper class/caste woman, 'seems to grant women the 'freedom' to fall in love and get married as they please, in spite of class/caste differences and parental opposition' (Pandian, 1992, p. 52). It may further be argued that Babasaheb's conjugal choice not only sets right the wrong prevalent in the society, another mandate of/for justice, but also asserts the sexual potency of men coming from the margins.

Conclusion: Towards a Hero Worship of Alternative Engagement

The experiences cited above and in the rest of the article produce an alternative kind of hero worship around the figure of Ambedkar. This sort of hero worship has a typical 'silence' attached to it for it is in contrast to the 'loud-mouth, street struck hypermasculine' representation of Ambedkar as a hero and phenomenon by his followers. Ambedkar himself had a distaste for blind hero worship of this kind. According to him, people may remain grateful to leaders who have worked for them and the general welfare of the nation. But the gratefulness should not be limitless. In his opinion, bhakti and worship in religion may lead to salvation, but, in politics, bhakti and worship is a sure path to degradation and eventual dictatorship. It is not hard to realize that the dangers of hero worship that Ambedkar envisioned have come out quite true in the Indian scenario. Hero worship in contemporary India remains one of the issues that incites public violence quite often. Such a public display of the hero and his heroism also showcases the unfinished desires, aspirations and demands of his followers that they attempt to unleash through the persona of the hero. In such a scenario, the sovereignty of the individual is transferred into the image of the hero and the demand of the followers actually becomes the demand of the hero. Further, the hypermasculine character of the followers ensures that there is always a danger of violence embedded if the demands are not met. This is the usual trajectory of hero worship in the contemporary public domain.

On the contrary, the examples discussed in the present article have been predominantly individualized instances of hero worship taken up by the select Ambedkar followers. These instances also puncture the normative routine and mannerisms of hero worship. By opening the concept of hero worship to 'everyday' or to the 'mundane', Babasaheb's followers bring the concept of hero and his heroism out of its closet. The followers we have encountered above seem to resist the 'popular ritualization' of Ambedkar and suggest a sort of intellectualization of his prowess.

Most of these writings are autobiographical experiences of individuals who either lived or saw Babasaheb from close quarters. Autobiographical experiences have an appeal as they also attempt to bridge the gap between personal narratives and objective truth. In relating the personal to the political context of Babasaheb's heroism, these life narratives are attempts to legitimize the self. Beginning with the notion of legitimizing the self through Babasaheb, they highlight the political space that self-narratives occupy, narrating everyday histories, mostly invisible otherwise. One might like to debate here the moment of departure from the enlightenment notion of the self and individual, for the narrators here negotiate a social framework where the heroism of Babasaheb is equally important as the individual.

The personalized experiences of individuals with Babasaheb are thus, in a way, collective history of cumulative memories as much as they are personal accounts that anchor the leader's individualism and consciousness. The personal accounts are culture and language-specific here and the disclosure of Babasaheb's persona remains suppressed and subjected to certain themes, times, manners and values. Through dual subjectivity, as that of the narrator of an individual self and as the follower/worshiper of Ambedkar, the voice, in these accounts, seeks to address both Babasaheb's heroism as well as the resultant transition that happens in the narrator. All the same, the recovery of these self-narratives vis-à-vis Babasaheb Ambedkar makes a strong case for taking up questions of identity and integrity of marginalized selves in the periphery of the nation. Whatever we name these narratives, as memoirs, testimonies, defences or social documents, they participate, along with Ambedkar, in a dynamic dialogue foregrounding the representations of Dalits in contemporary India.

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