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"Let Poetry Be a Sword!": How DR Nagaraj changed the way we read Gandhi and Ambedkar

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BOOKS

“Let Poetry be a Sword!”

ANANYA VAJPEYI

HOW DR NAGARAJ CHANGED THE WAY WE READ
GANDHI AND AMBEDKAR



DR Nagaraj
The Flaming Feet
and Other Essays:
The Dalit Movement in India

EDITED BY PRITHVI DATTA
CHANDRA SHOBHI
PERMANENT BLACK,
254 PAGES, Rs 595

IT WAS BEFORE DAWN on the morning of 12 August 1998. I sat up, confused by an unexpected sound. My first cellphone, a large, unwieldy purple-coloured Nokia, was ringing away on a table across the room. I struggled to get out from under the mosquito net tied to the ancient, uncomfortable four-poster bed I was sleeping on, in a draughty inhospitable bungalow belonging to a Parsi family in the Pune Cantonment. Rules about noise, sleeping, waking, phoning and such matters were pretty strict, even for a guest like me. My caller, a grown man, was crying. DR Nagaraj, thinker, friend, teacher, and possibly one of post-colonial India's five greatest intellectuals, had died late that night of a heart attack, at his home in south Bangalore. He had been up past midnight, drinking with his friends, eating rich food that was specifically disallowed to him. He had been in great spirits. He was 44.

That awful morning, I stood in the darkness, thinking I was having a nightmare, and if I only waited a few moments, I would wake up from it. The Parsi family forgot their rules about disturbance and gathered round, trying to console me. More than 12 years have passed, and like all those who knew and cared about DR, I am still inconsolable. When I now read the last sentence of his essay, 'The Lie of a Youth and the Truth of an Anthropologist,' it seems to me cutting, unfair, breaking the bounds of irony and bordering on tragedy: "Politics teaches us to live, not die," he wrote. So why

did he have to die?

The answer might lie in the slogan that DR gave to the new Dalit and Shudra literary movement in Karnataka in the 1970s: "Let poetry be a sword!" Prithvi Datta Chandra Shobhi, a former student of DR and editor of this new volume of his published and unpublished work, spells out the unusual manifesto in its entirety: *Khadgavagali kavya, janara novige midiva pranamitra!* Poetry, or literature, in this conception, was to be both a dear friend and a protector of the people. When I try to rationalise his death, I tell myself perhaps it was inevitable that someone who based his politics on the power of poetic language would not live very long on this earth.

// He landed like a missile on the Hyde Park campus, in the freezing spring quarter of 1997. The university was no stranger to Kannada culture. But even that long institutional relationship with Karnataka had not prepared us for the brilliance, the irreverence, the eccentricity, the charisma and the originality of DR Nagaraj. //

Chandra Shobhi, I and a handful of others were DR's graduate students at the University of Chicago, just before his untimely death. He landed like a missile on the Hyde Park campus, in the freezing spring quarter of 1997, exploding our usual methods of Indology and philology, anthropology and literary criticism, area studies and political theory. The university was no stranger to Kannada culture: AK Ramanujan, UR Ananthamurthy and Girish Karnad had all been in and out of Foster Hall from the 1980s on-

wards. But even that long institutional relationship with Karnataka had not prepared us for the brilliance, the irreverence, the eccentricity, the charisma and the originality of DR Nagaraj.

We studied Gandhi with Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph, caste with Ronald Inden, colonialism with Bernard Cohn, religion with Wendy Doniger, Sanskrit with Sheldon Pollock, modernity with Arjun Appadurai, and historiography with Dipesh Chakrabarty, for starters. As overworked, overwrought, ambitious, arrogant, multilingual and slightly unhinged Chicago South Asianists, we thought we had it all. Little did we know, signing up for DR's new course on Dalit Literature, that our bearded, bespectacled, maverick visiting professor—with a grand reputation and no publications, with his bizarre English and his disarming friendliness outside the classroom—was about to sweep away all our assumptions and certainties as an irresistible current might so many mud embankments.

Ashis Nandy, Chandra Shobhi and Rukun Advani have done a great service to the ongoing study of social change and cultural politics in India by bringing out this volume of DR's writings and talks. Both Nandy in his preface and Chandra Shobhi in his introduction remind readers of what we all knew about DR: he was as disorganised as he was brilliant, as lazy as he was insightful. The task of finding, completing, systematising and publishing his work after his sudden death was never going to be easy. Indeed, it took a dozen years, even with Nandy's deep personal regard for and dedication to the memory of DR, along with Chandra Shobhi's unparalleled native knowledge of Kannadiga history and society, not to mention his closeness to DR. The project has also received support from DR's wife, Girija Nagaraj, his mentor UR Ananthamurthy, his former colleague and friend Sheldon Pollock, and Ramachandra Guha, who must have felt Bangalore's intellectual life irreparably impoverished by DR's passing.

In his home state, DR had been recognised from his early days as a student activist and a literary *agent provocateur*. At the time of his fatal cardiac arrest, he was juggling at least three positions: at Bangalore University, at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi and at the University of Chicago. DR, himself born into an extremely impoverished and backward weaver caste, gave a new kind of voice to Dalit and Shudra identity struggles: compassionate, confident, comfortably learned, and equally critical of both upper-caste humbug and Dalit self-pity.

BUT HOWEVER SIGNIFICANT HIS ROLE in the Dalit Movement in Karnataka and outside, his most lasting legacy will prove to be his utterly original reading of Gandhi, Ambedkar and the complex relationship be-



COURTESY OF AMULYA NAGARAJ

DR Nagaraj, possibly one of post-colonial India's five greatest intellectuals.

tween these two founders of modern India in the early part of the 20th century, especially as regards their—apparently—conflicting views on the caste system and on the problem of untouchability. DR's seminal essay, 'Self-Purification versus Self-Respect,' first published in *The Flaming Feet* in 1993, cannot but alter any reader's understanding of Gandhian and Ambedkarite positions on the untouchable and on the meanings of caste in Indian modernity. If DR had written nothing else besides this piece, it would not have lessened his intellectual and ethical contribution—I suspect that at some level, he knew this.

This essay—echoed in a few related pieces that also appear in the new volume—describes how Gandhi and Ambedkar changed one another through their long and intense engagement, and their "intimate enmity"—an idea that DR, like everyone else in Indian social science, learned from Ashis Nandy. DR examines Ambedkar's efforts towards having the British create separate electorates for untouchables, and Gandhi's fast against this eventuality, culminating in their notorious Poona Pact of 1932; their respective tank and temple *satyagraha* mobilisations, aimed at securing access to public goods like drinking water and entry into places of caste Hindu worship for untouchables; and their shared desire to produce a change in upper-caste consciousness so as to end the centuries-long oppression of the untouchables.

DR's stroke of genius is to see that the 'self' in Gandhi's project of 'self-purification' is the upper-caste self; the 'self' in Ambedkar's project of 'self-respect' is the lower-caste and untouchable self. The two political projects, thus, un-

// DR knew how to index his appropriation, equally, of Gandhian and Ambedkarite politics, and he forced us to think: Why not? Why should we not learn from our two greatest modern thinkers how to make sense of caste and how best to critique it? Why should the Dalit Movement eschew the Mahatma's legacy? //

fold upon different subjects, even as they appear to both address one and the same social evil, namely, untouchability. For Gandhi, it is the upper-caste person who must purify his being of the 'sin' of untouchability through a variety of spiritual practices; for Ambedkar, it is the untouchable who must reject the entire history of his humiliation at the hands of caste society and embrace equal citizenship. Gandhi's motivation is his deep religiosity; Ambedkar's is his thoroughly political understanding of human life and human dignity. Gandhi comes to the problem of untouchability from the side of tradition; Ambedkar's approach is radically modern.

The very terms 'Dalit' and 'Harijan' which ultimately come to be associated—in Ambedkar's case, retrospectively, after his death in 1956—with the two critiques of untouchability, capture the separate and to some extent even opposed types of affect that are associated with Gandhian and Ambedkarite politics. 'Dalit' (crushed) evokes the unrelenting structural violence against the untouchable in caste society, and consequently elicits a reaction of righteous anger. 'Harijan' (God's creature) suggests not concrete social equality but a sort of vague existential parity in the eyes of the Maker—bestowing an inherent and inalienable value to the life of the untouchable that it is left up to the upper caste person to acknowledge.

One category allows for a politics of anger and resistance; the other depoliticises even its beneficiaries into mere 'Congress Harijans' who quickly, within Gandhi's lifetime, lose the respect of the very communities they are supposed to represent, and cease to provide the leadership that the Dalit Movement evolves for itself over the course of the 20th century. Like their unfortunate brethren, the 'Congress Muslims,' Harijan leaders are domesticated—and effectively defanged—by the mainstream, liberal, secular and self-congratulatory pieties of the post-colonial caste Hindu ruling classes. In a story DR tells repeatedly, a Harijan boy

has to be reborn as a Dalit youth: a kind of fast-track political education that tellingly comes out of his transformative encounter with Gandhi (and not Ambedkar), an outcome that even the Mahatma himself did not correctly predict. As I revisit DR's writings, I remember well this anecdote, of the untouchable boy who did not turn up with the requisite orange to break Gandhi's fast at the appointed time. DR's gift for storytelling was an inseparable part of his pedagogic method. He had perfected the art of finding the right parable to illustrate every social scientific or historical claim that he made. Those are the sorts of lessons that one never forgets.

DR CALLED GANDHI AND AMBEDKAR 'Bapu' and 'Babasaheb,' respectively—appellations that were part of his special genius. He had, in some fundamental sense, embraced both these figures, come to think of them as his own, as beloved, in the way that their followers had done when both were alive. DR knew how to index his appropriation, equally, of Gandhian and Ambedkarite politics, and he forced us to think: Why not? Why should we not learn from our two greatest modern thinkers how to make sense of caste and how best to critique it? Why should the Dalit Movement eschew the Mahatma's legacy, which is India's most potent ethical inheritance from the freedom struggle? Is it really worthwhile to ridicule and denigrate Gandhi's sincere—and in its own way, successful—war on untouchability, just to assert Dalit pride? If you have to lose *ahimsa* in order to reject the category 'Harijan,' then that is just throwing the baby out with the bathwater. DR astutely used the language of intimacy, familiarity—and love—to show up the poverty of identity politics in Dalit discourse. He always said/wrote 'Gandhiji,' 'Bapu' and 'Babasaheb,' as a reversal of the unthinking, self-defeating patricide that has marred and embittered so much of post-colonial India's ideological life.

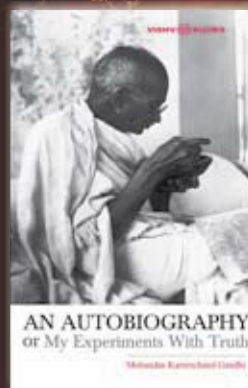
However, DR saw even further than we guessed, in his truncated career as a political thinker and social theorist. For he argued that in trying to see the good in the caste system and salvage some of its communitarian and organic aspects, Gandhi was really trying to preserve and strengthen the village, with its mosaic of interdependent upper and lower castes, symbiotically related caste society and untouchable groups. Gandhi foresaw, far ahead of his time, that violence against Dalits, 'the disappearance of the village,' the eradication of artisanal communities or 'technocide' and the assault on traditional modes of social organisation would ultimately leave India utterly vulnerable to the incursions of global capital. In this sense, Gandhi's campaigns around the *charkha*, *khadi*, village industries, non-violence, untouchability and organic communities

all have to be seen as part of a single cohesive politics that sought to strengthen India against the depredations of Western civilisation and technological modernity. In DR's words, "In this modern nation, Muslims, Harijans, tribals, and the poor will all be decimated. They will be crushed to pulp [n.b. the literal meaning of the word 'Dalit'] under the wheel of desire and machines" (p88). In this vision, articulated most clearly in his manifesto *Hind Swaraj* (1909), Gandhi provided the only alternative to the hegemony of capitalism, the sole hope of surviving its pervasive and endemic violence.

DR was able to interpret Gandhi in this way because of his own complex and multifarious engagement with Lohia's followers, Left-Gandhians, and Marxists, besides Dalit intellectuals of various stripes. I think had he lived, he would have produced a totally revolutionary reading of *Hind Swaraj*, synthesising Gandhi's numerous and apparently disparate ideas into a magnificent edifice of political thought unmatched by any of the other makers of modern India, including Ambedkar. In fact, in my view, DR was beginning to appreciate that Ambedkar's own turn towards Buddhism at the end of his life was an effect of Ambedkar's dissatisfaction with a purely political, constitutional and materialist solution to the inequity and injustice of the caste system, and also of Ambedkar's realisation, after Gandhi's death, that his greatest adversary had, in many crucial ways, been right. To forget and deny caste altogether would mean, for Dalits, to cut themselves off from their communities, unmoor themselves from their histories, and become mired in self-loathing. Ambedkar came to recognise that these costs were too high a price to pay for the emancipation of the low caste subject.

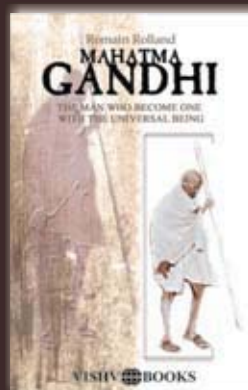
Untouchability for both Gandhi and Ambedkar, at the far side of their decades-long wrangling with one another as intimate enemies, converged as a problem that was not primarily one with material dimensions—land, agrarian relations, poverty and so on—but as a problem of value structure, having to do with the very soul, the psyche, the spirit, as it were, of Indian civilisation. At the end, Ambedkar left Marx and went to the Buddha; Gandhi began in Manuvada and came closer to the *Bhagavad Gita*. Bapu and Babasaheb, one a *Bania*, the other a *Mahar*, had changed one another irrevocably. To use DR's words, "the beauty and the horror" of their respective positions on caste had been reconciled, synthesised, interchanged and brought into a truly dialectical relationship: beauty, from the idea of equal citizenship and the revolt against traditional inequality, and horror, from the nitty-gritty of positive discrimination and compensatory justice. As a matter of fact, Indian society could not progress without both the idealist and the materialist aspects of the struggle to undo the damage of

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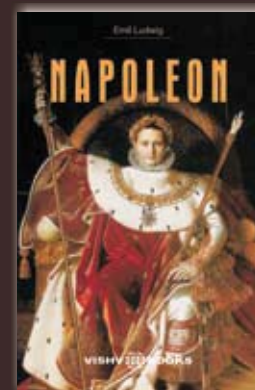
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Born into an impoverished and backward weaver caste, DR gave a new voice to Dalit and Shudra identity struggles.

caste. We needed as much the spiritual exercises, the disciplines of self, advocated by the Mahatma, as we needed the affirmative action of the new Constitution, drafted under Ambedkar's supervision.

DR's scintillating piece, 'Two Imaginary Soliloquies,' in which the deceased Ambedkar and Gandhi both reflect on various issues on 15 August 1997, at the 50th year of India's independence, shows that he really had, in his mind, gone past every post set by Indian social science, and was on the verge of a genuinely momentous breakthrough. Ashis Nandy recalls that DR told him, a few weeks before his death, that he had almost completed a manuscript on which he had been working for the previous two years (that is, at the University of Chicago). No such manuscript was ever found in his Chicago, Delhi or Bangalore computers, Nandy writes, full of regret. Shobhi recounts—and I know, personally, having been a hapless witness to the entire process—how much trouble he had reconstructing a literary history of Kannada for Pollock's massive edited volume, *Literary Cultures in History* (2003), in which DR was to have had the chapter on Karnataka. But looking now at the work that DR did write down, type up, publish or deliver as talks, it's clear that the missing manuscript was, in some non-literal sense, ready—it was, in this way, there.

THE FASCINATION WITH BUDDHISM was, in truth, as much DR's own as it was Ambedkar's. In keeping with his preferred address of intimate familiarity, he referred to the Buddha as *Tathagata*. He constantly invoked the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna, and recast modern arguments in terms of archaic modes of argumentation, rhetorical tropes and semantic strategies employed by the ancient Buddhists in their intellectual contestations

with the Brahminic traditions. DR could teach us about Gandhi, Ambedkar and Nehru, in many ways India's archetypal modernists, all the while speaking in a style that suggested that even today, the Buddha was delivering sermons in Sarnath, and the classical doctrines of Nayyayikas and Buddhists, Mimamsakas and Advaitins, Carvakas and Jainas, Sufis and Sikhs, were creating the pleasant hum and hubbub of an Indic intellectual world. My hunch is that DR identified, in a personal way, with the protagonists he constantly returned to: the Buddha, who walked away from worldly attachments, only to find it supremely difficult to actually detach himself; Nagarjuna, a Brahmin who turned Buddhist, the South Indian from Andhra whose texts brought Buddhism to Tibet and China; Ambedkar, the modernist obsessed with premodernity; Gandhi, who had to wrestle as hard with his own indefatigable appetites as he did with the mighty British Empire.

DR's catholicity, his capacious hunger to master Pali and Sanskrit, old Kannada and classical Tamil, Continental philosophy and postmodern literary theory, challenged every stereotype about radical intellectual politics, whether coming from patronising upper castes or contrarian Dalits, fat-cat cosmopolitans or mealy-mouthed vernaculars. "Ananya," he said to me one time, "you must learn to be comfortable in many different discourses." He joined his hands together and wove them through the cold Chicago air. "Swim in many different discourses," he said to me, "like a fish in water." He took his palms apart, and held both my hands tight. "There is nothing in the world of human knowledge that is not ours," he intoned, slowly, looking straight in my eyes, as though burning into my memory something of great importance. It was, though I didn't know it then.

Karnataka, DR's cultural and linguistic home, has an active literary tradition that is highly self-aware in the sense of recognising its own history, taking cognisance of caste politics as an essential element in the use of language and the production of literature, and being actively engaged with issues of social, political and economic significance to the reading public. Kannada literature is an example of literature at its best. DR did much to bring Dalit-Shudra literature into the mainstream of Kannada literary culture, and to challenge its upper-caste construction both from the evidence of history as well as from the politics of the present. His essays and interventions on Kannadiga Dalit-Shudra writers, both historical and contemporary, forced everyone—in Karnataka, at least—to widen their understandings of genre, linguistic register, metaphor and historicity. The original *Flaming Feet* was dedicated to Devanoor Mahadeva and Dr Siddalingaiah, whom DR called "founders of the Dalit Movement in Karnataka." He taught works by both these men to his students in Chicago.

DR asked the public to acknowledge that not only were Dalit-Shudra writers—novelists, poets, playwrights, short-story writers, journalists—experimenting with form from the 1970s onwards, but that many of the Deccan's important literary artefacts in fact came down through non-Brahmin and ascetic/renunciant (*shramana*) traditions, like the Virashaiva and Jaina literatures of premodern Karnataka, and devotional (*bhakti*) traditions more generally of premodern India. DR gave a history lesson as much to modern Brahmin litterateurs as to Dalit-Shudra practitioners of the craft of literature. This was why he was critical of, say, Kancha Ilaiah, the Telugu polemicist against Brahminism: only rejecting upper-caste histories, without simultaneously embracing lower-caste and outcaste histories, was a limited and negative project that did not interest DR. He insisted that the history of literature was far more complicated than any simple upper-caste versus lower-caste antagonism could ever begin to capture.

The Dalit politician and current Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Kumari Mayawati, has built in the capital of UP, Lucknow, a grand theme park, along the banks of the river Gomti, in honour of Dr Ambedkar. One element of this enormous space, full of *stupas*, pillars, gates, gigantic carved elephants, paved courtyards and avenues, is a row of larger-than-life statues of Dalit-Shudra historical figures, sculpted in white marble and standing under individual canopies of red sandstone. The series begins with the Buddha and ends with Mayawati herself, and her mentor, the late Dalit leader Kanshi Ram (1934-2006), founder of the Bahujan Samaj Party. It includes Kabir, Ravidas, Sri Narayana Guru, Jotiba Phule, Birsa Munda and Ambedkar, in a total of 11 statues. Mayawati's is a brilliant attempt to literally construct a Dalit-Shudra canon: she begins 2,500 years ago with Siddhartha Gautama, and archly stops at herself. DR's imagination was equally ambitious: he was able to find ancestors and kindred spirits, men and women, across religious traditions, across the subcontinent and across historical time. He never went so far as to say this in as many words, but he succeeded in demonstrating that the Dalit-Shudra tradition is one of the great traditions of Indian civilisation, like the Buddhist, the Brahminical and the Indo-Islamic strands. Ambedkar, DR and now, somewhat surprisingly, Mayawati, all have had a role in positing the Dalit-Shudra canon afresh.

Between 1998 and 2004, I spent my youth researching Ambedkar, writing a dissertation on the category of Shudra in Maharashtra, travelling all over the Deccan, seeking my dead teacher in the eyes of his friends, family, students and admirers. I sat innumerable hours at Koshy's with Karnataka's eclectic literati, who would laugh and cry as they got drunk, telling outrageous DR stories. I

went to Heggodu, to attend an annual theatre festival that hadn't quite recovered from earlier visits by DR. I went to Udupi, to the home of the late N Murari Ballal, where Ashis Nandy, UR Ananthamurthy, Vandana Shiva, Medha Patkar and Sunil Sahasrabudhey, among others, came in DR's wake. I studied in Mysore, did years of fieldwork in Pune, taught in Bangalore, and nowhere did I ever talk to anyone about caste, Dalit politics, Kannada literary history or Ambedkarite Buddhism without DR's name entering the conversation. From Rajni Kothari and DL Sheth to Ramchandra Gandhi and Arindam Chakrabarti, everyone had to take DR seriously as an interlocutor, in death as in life. In probably no more than 15 years, he had arced across India's intellectual horizon like a shooting star, and people were still awe-struck.

Peruse a few pages of DR's writing, and you will find yourself dizzied by the range of his references: from Lohia to Vargas Llosa, Freud to St Francis of Assisi, Heidegger to the *Mahabharata*, Matilal to Basava, Wittgenstein to Allama Prabhu, up, down and around goes DR's roller-coaster, and we in it, our hair flying, hearts pumping. Sometimes I thought him dazzling, other times distracted. Sometimes I felt he was irrepressibly creative, other times he seemed to have Attention Deficit Disorder. Hannah Arendt once famously characterised Walter Benjamin's intellectual personality as being that of a 'pearl diver.' DR correctly identified his own intellectual personality as being that of 'the bee.' He explains himself, laying out the philosophy behind the madness, which is to apply an essentially literary way of thinking to the task of social analysis, using metaphoric language and imaginative leaps. "The method of the social science[s] is like working the earth: painstaking preparation of the earth for the farmer. Well, the bee is a different species altogether." (p52). All the properties of his discursive style are encapsulated—again!—in this powerful image: the flash of pure gold, the sweetness, the sting, the vivacity, the thirst for the truth. A brief, heady, fragrant springtime, and then he left our garden.

One of my most vivid memories of DR is one day in Chicago, when he, I and a classmate of mine left the department together. We walked on either side of him. As we descended the steps of Foster Hall, he affectionately put his hands on our shoulders. Then he laughed in his Dalai Lama sort of way, a blameless child piping up in the cage of a man's body. "I feel like Bapu," he said, referring to Gandhi's last short walk towards his assassin on 30 January 1948 at the Birla House in Delhi, his hands resting on the shoulders of his nieces, Abha and Manu. We walked into the quads, the three of us, talking and joking, with nothing but his cavalier premonition to warn us of the terrible sundering that lay ahead. ■