

Conceptualizing the Ambedkarian Ethic of Care: Pandemic, Prejudice and Otherness

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Abstract

The eruption of the current pandemic (Covid-19) has propelled us to reflect on our socio-cultural and economic values and structures. This critical phase has not just debunked the myth of development; it has also tested our civilizational ethos. History bears testimony to the fact that such crises have often befallen us. Human societies responded to these crises according to their cultures of care. The global pandemic has exposed the deeply entrenched hierarchies, prejudice and precarity in the Indian society. Globally, it has been noticed that the marginal subject has been labelled as the 'abominable Other'. In the Indian context, the Bahujan intellectuals reflected on the care of self and produced a new ethic of care. By deriving cues from the Foucauldian, Heideggerian and Levinasian ethic and care of self, the paper proposes to explore and theorize the Ambedkarian ethic of care.

Keywords: pandemic, ethic, care, abominable other, Ambedkarian, crisis

The Ambedkarian discourse shows deep scepticism towards terms like social distancing, self-quarantine and hygiene. After the outbreak of the contagion (Covid-19), the ruling classes tried to legitimize the inhuman practice of untouchability by invoking scientificity behind social distancing. The word 'social distancing' may be unwittingly used to justify the tradition-based discriminatory practices. As a matter of fact, in a civilization marked by the history of prejudice against caste subalterns, social discrimination can camouflage itself as social distancing. To perpetually keep a distance from the Dalits (ex-untouchables), the Brahmanical discourse interpellated the untouchable as the abominable

other. It engineered an eternal hierarchy of beings. Ambedkar (2014) describes this gradation as 'untouchable', 'unapproachable' and 'unseeable' (p. 239). Further, in his article tract 'Annihilation of Caste' he talks about the Peshwa rule to explain how the notion of distance was used to create and reproduce the idea of purity and pollution.

Actually, language possesses enormous potential to shape our attitude and behaviour. It is quite likely that we may unconsciously sanction traditional prejudices and stereotypes. Ambedkar's rebuttal of eugenic, biological and sociological theories which validate the caste system should propel us to critically view some terms like 'social distancing' because language structures our culture and thoughts. He argues that caste determines everything in India. It decides ethics and the axis of knowledge and power. It produces an anti-social spirit; it deters common activity and by "preventing common activity it has prevented the Hindus from becoming a society with a unified life and a consciousness of its own being" (Ambedkar, Vol. 5, p. 51). Caste is detrimental to the ethic of care because it divests the Hindu of compassion, kindness and love for others. Ambedkar's revolutionary endeavour was geared towards conceptualizing a culture of care, compassion and solidarity.

In the wake of the coronavirus contagion, many guidelines were circulated officially for the citizens to maintain social distancing and to opt for self-quarantine in case of being infected. But the questions arise: how can the poor, who live in small shanties, afford to quarantine themselves? Where is the possibility of maintaining hygiene for the subalterns who are engaged in scavenging and other menial jobs? The bourgeois-savarna obsession with notions such as social distancing, self-quarantine and hygiene carry different implications for the poor, Dalits and other marginalized groups. During the current pandemic, an attempt was made by the ruling forces to construct an abominable Other. For instance, the case of Tablighi Jamaatis was deployed to demonize the entire Muslim community. It hints at the functioning of the bio-politics of the Brahmanical power in which the population is scrutinized and surveilled through the lens of caste and religion. Moreover, people from the north-east faced racial slurs and violence in the mainland India due to their Mongoloid features. Actually, in such critical times, majoritarian sentiments are mobilized against the religious and racial Other. The deep-rooted bias against Dalits and the other vulnerable groups became manifested in its virulent form during this pandemic.

The othering of subaltern subjects in today's difficult times underlines the significance and relevance of the Ambedkarian ethic of care. This paper seeks to explore and develop philosophically the Ambedkarian hermeneutic of care by taking a cue from the Indian Dalit-Bahujan intellectual tradition. The Ambedkarian discourse stresses the culture of care, compassion, empathy and solidarity. To theoretically establish the Ambedkarian idea of care, it is important to discuss first the Foucauldian, Heideggerian and Levinasian concepts of care. Michel Foucault (2000) refers to the Greco-Roman philosophers to elaborate the ethic of care. He informs us that the ancient philosophers construed care of self as the foundation of moral rationality. And today, care of self lacks a moral basis. The ancients regarded it as a precept of living. We should have enough strength not to be overpowered by emotions. For the ancients, the care of self did not mean showing concern for oneself but caring for others. Foucault connects the care of self with politics, pedagogy and self-knowledge. He mentions that Socrates defined the care of self as caring for one's own soul and that of others by scrutinizing one's own behaviour and also that of others.

Foucault opines that care of the self calls for ethical transformation of the self in the light of truth. It indicates a spiritual exercise which is marked by self-reflection, discipline, meditation and examination of one's conduct. He dwells upon the notion of *parrhesia* (to speak or tell the whole truth) as postulated by the ancients with respect to care of the self (Foucault 1997, as cited in Iftode, 2013, pp. 76-85). Franek (2006) maintains that *parrhesia* requires courage to speak the truth to power and therefore, it is the opposite of rhetoric. Elaborating the connection between self and truth, Foucault (2000) notes that it does not aim at excavating some hidden truth rather the purpose is to endow the subject with truth and bring it into practice. In other words, it is a conscious practice of freedom.

He further remarks, "freedom is the ontological condition of ethics" (Foucault, 2000, p. 284). The idea of care of self is rooted in moral reflection. The ancients did not dismiss care of self as self-love or as an act of selfishness. It originated with Christianity as it emphasizes that salvation can be attained only by renouncing the self. But the Greek and Roman philosophers perceived care of self as essential for the practice of freedom. For instance, knowing and mastering oneself is intertwined with care of the self. Foucault (2000) posits that the idea

of ethic as conscious practice of freedom hinges on the dictum "Take care of yourself" (p. 285). Ethics in the Foucauldian framework stands for a mode of being and conduct. So, for Foucault, a slave has no ethics because she/he is unfree. Care of the self is an ethical exercise; it entails complex relationships with others as the essence of freedom is anchored in caring for other human beings.

Martin Heidegger has also made a phenomenal contribution to the theorization of the ideas of being and care. McNicolls (1998) mentions that for Heidegger the meaning of being is reflected in human actions. Like Foucault, Heidegger also defines care of the self as a mode of being. It means that one is free to comprehend oneself in a particular way, but it requires one to engage with others. In other words, one exists inter-subjectively in relation to others. Our ontological understanding is predicated on the idea of being and it is manifested ethically in our actions. The idea of authentic being hinges on our care for others and on our interaction with them. The experience of human finitude is central to Heidegger's idea of being. Our experience of finitude fosters a sense of humility in us and enables us to care for others. Mulhall (2005) observes that the being of 'Dasein' as 'Being- in-the world' is based on the notion of care.

Emmanuel Levinas also has engaged himself with the concept of the ethic of care. He articulates, "Caring seems to involve taking concerns and need of the other as the basis for action... what is definitive about care...seems to be a perspective of taking the other's needs as the starting point for what must be done" (Levinas,1969 as cited in Tronto 1994, p. 105). Levinas questions the totalizing frame of the Western epistemology which treats the other as an object of reflection. His ethic of care challenges the Darwinistic rule of being and foregrounds that we exist in relation to others. Levinas (1969) claims that we collectively live in this world with others; we may be familiar with everybody, but we are ethically obliged to others. He explains further that ethically we acquire relevance in relation to others. Our ethical engagement with others keeps us free from the prison of egoism. According to the Levinasian ethic of care, liberation of an individual cannot take place in isolation from others.

The concept of care of self has become more important in the times of the coronavirus pandemic. The Ambedkarian ethic of care comprises of care of the self and culture of care. The Ambedkarian care of the

self can be construed as fashioning of the self more freely in relation to truth and ethics. It is predicated on self-reflexivity and a realistic understanding of the world. Care of the self happens at three levels—physical, mental and spiritual. The Ambedkarian ethic of care can be discerned in the Dalit-Bahujan tradition comprising of Buddha, Kabir, Ravidas, Chokhamela, Jotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, Periyar, Ayyankali, Narayan Guru, Iyothee Thass and B.R. Ambedkar. The Ambedkarian care of the self dwells upon different technologies of the self employed by the Dalit-Bahujan subject, for instance, the subject's deep respect for truth, his/her exemplary courage to dissent against authority, to care not just for oneself but for all, to examine one's thoughts and behaviour, to scrutinize one's conscience and engage in self-reflection and undergo spiritual exercises for the ethical regeneration of the self.

The Dalit-Bahujan thinkers, intellectuals, poets and writers have made a monumental contribution to the Indian intellectual tradition. Gautam Buddha in the sixth century BC challenged the oppressive culture and the unethical-casteist epistemology. The humanistic notions like *karuna* and *maitri* underpin the Buddhist thought. *Karuna* can be understood as compassion; *maitri* can be translated as kindness and good will. The Buddhist meditation seeks to cultivate benevolence. Buddha taught his disciples to uncouple truth from untruth. Ambedkarian discourse as a philosophical practice determines and enables access to truth. B.R Ambedkar (2014) quoted Buddha while delivering a speech at the Mahar Conference held on May 31, 1936. He advised, "Be your own guide. Take refuge in reason... take refuge in truth, never surrender to anybody" (Ambedkar, 2014, Vol. 17, Part Three, p. 147). Siddarth Gautam was hailed as "Buddha" after he decoded the ultimate truth and proposed four noble truths. Buddha's final words to mentees illustrate how the care of self is related to one's relationship with truth. He expressed, "Ananda, you must be your own lamp, be your own refugee... Hold firm to truth as a lamp, do not look for refuge to anything but yourself... All complex phenomena are transitory. Strive with diligence" (as cited in Omvedt, 2013, p. 23). The ethic of care that we spot here is predicated upon reason, truth and kindness.

In the medieval age, the subaltern poets like Kabir and Guru Ravidas articulate new ethics. Kabir interrogated hierarchies and the culture of prejudice. He discursively blasts all canons which divided humanity. The quintessential truth of love and compassion reverberates through

his poems. Kabir debunked the logic of untouchability and caste. He produces a powerful human sentiment which binds people into a collectivity. His famous doha (couplet), "*Kabira khada bazar mein, sabki mange khair, na kahe se dosti, na kahe se bair*". (Stood in a market place, Kabira wishes all well. Looking neither for a friend, nor for an enemy). Tagore & Underhill (1915, p. 15) spoke of the unity and welfare of all human beings.

Similarly, Guru Ravidas does not mince words while lashing at the hypocrisy of the ruling classes. He imbues his poetry with humanistic ideals, and because of this massive investment in humanitarian concerns, his couplets found space in the Guru Granth Sahib. His poetry also foregrounds the message of kindness, love and egalitarianism. He expressed, "*Aisa chahaun raj mein, jahan mile sabko mile ann, chhota bado sab sam base, Ravidas rahe prasanna*" (I want a socio-political order where everybody gets food and no discrimination is practised against any individual) (Trans. Bairva, Madhopuri, 2019, para. 9). Ravidas envisages a *begumpura* (A city without sorrow) in which everybody is happy and living in harmony and peace. He postulates the idea of a utopian space - a world free from caste, class and patriarchal oppression. He tries to create moral outrage against the caste system by highlighting how caste divides humanity. He writes, "*Jaat-paat ke pher mah urjhai rahe sab log/ Mannukhta ku khat hai Ravidas jaat ka rog*" (everybody is gripped by the disease called caste, it is eroding the idea of humanity itself) (Trans. Bairva. Madhopuri, 2019, para. 5).

In the colonial times, the revolutionary work done by Jotirao Phule and Savitri Phule can also be viewed in the context of the Ambedkarian ethic of care. Jotirao's unflinching commitment to truth is reflected in his endless battle against Brahmanical dominance. He decoded the nexus of power and discourse in his book *Gulamgiri* (1873) (*Slavery*) much before Michel Foucault theorized about it. Jotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule founded the first school for girls and untouchables in 1849 and 1851 (Omvedt, 2008, p. 160). Savitribai and her son Yashwant set up a clinic in 1897 to treat the people infected by plague. She was also afflicted by the deadly contagion while curing people. Their ethic of care was manifested in their compassion and sympathy for the poor, excluded and the helpless people. He formed the Satyasodhak Samaj (Truthseekers' Society) in 1873. He deployed it as a weapon to combat

Brahmanical hegemony (Omvedt, 2008, p. 161). His love for truth places him in the category of Bahujan *parrhesiastes*.

In the southern region, Sree Narayan Guru (1856-1958) vocalized the subaltern discourse in the Malayalam public sphere. He belonged to the Ezhava caste of Kerala. He accorded immense importance to cleanliness, social harmony, fraternity, equality, rationality and education. Pandey (2020) articulates that Narayan Guru's deep concern for social solidarity was evident in his attempt to use his knowledge of religion to bring the fragments of the society into a cohesive whole. To free the society from the contagion of caste, he led an intense struggle. He practised meditation and yoga for the spiritual transformation of his self. We can understand his ethic of care in his contribution to uplifting the downtrodden section. He started a school for untouchable children and offered them free education. He opened a Sanskrit school in his Advaitashram in Aluva, where children from Dalit, Muslim and Christian communities were also admitted. He foregrounds the importance of self-empowerment for transformation. Moreover, in Ravi's (2019) view, Narayan Guru attaches priority to individual virtue and the quest of people to fashion their self beyond the limitations of religion. He lays emphasis on compassion and religious tolerance. In his poem "Anukampadsakam", he eulogizes religious figures from various religions.

Furthermore, Ayyankali (1863-1941) also made commendable efforts to lodge Dalits in the public discourse of Kerala. Being a member of the Pulaya community (an untouchable caste in Kerala), he spoke the truth to power and challenged the deeply entrenched caste codes which restricted Dalits' access to public space, education and wealth. He broaches the notion of counter-physicality in the discourse of Dalit self-fashioning. In order to resist the violence of caste imposition, he foregrounds the idea of a strong Dalit body. His own persona with thick moustache signifies the masculine Dalit body. Apart from the spiritual transformation of mind, his care of the self underscores physical exercise and training of the body in various martial arts. For the intellectual growth of the Dalit mind, he stresses education. He opened a school for Dalit children and faced a backlash from the caste Hindus. However, he resisted all kinds of onslaughts and continued to educate Dalits so that they could emerge from the clutches of caste oligarchs. Like Sree Narayan Guru, Ayyankali also regards self-empowerment as a key for

Dalit emancipation, which propelled him to provide education to Dalit children despite violent confrontation with caste Hindus.

In the nineteenth century, Iyothee Thass (1845-1914) reconstructed the Tamil identity. He vehemently opposed the caste system and rewrote the history of India from the Buddhist perspective. He deconstructs the Brahmanical inscription of the Dalit self as non-essential other and redefines the Dalit self by highlighting the role of deeds rather than birth in determining one's identity. He argues that Dalits were originally Buddhists from the times of King Ashoka, who were persecuted and forced into slavery due to their unflinching faith in Buddhism. Further, he maintains that the original inhabitants of India were Buddhists, and the Vedas contained the rules of moral conduct. Their learned and wise men were addressed as Brahman. However, the invaders cunningly appropriated this appellation for themselves and grabbed the Vedas as their holy books. (Omvedt, 2008, p. 193). He asserts that the identity of a community is not constituted through the circumstances of birth but it is consciously constructed through one's free choice and commitment to moral values. Like other Bahujan thinkers, he focuses on education and reason as well. For him, care of the self was concerned with the ethical moulding of one's self. So, the self-fashioning by the subaltern groups is about moral choices (Aloysius, 2010, p. 31).

In the twentieth century Tamil Nadu, Periyar E.V. Ramasamy emerged as a powerful icon who challenged Brahmanical hegemony in every sphere. As a Bahujan *perrhesiate*, he bravely asserted his radical ideas which were extremely disquieting for the caste Hindus. His notion of care of the self accords primacy to the enunciation of truth to dismantle the Brahmanical regime of untruth. His ethic of self is highly inclusive. He waged a battle for women's rights and dignity in marriage. He protested against the caste system for Dalit rights and led an agitation for Dalits' entry into Hindu temples. Tamil Nadu turned out to be the first state to enact the law which allowed people of all castes to become temple priests. Rangraj states that Periyar (2020) fought for fifty per cent reservation for non-Brahman castes in public-funded educational institutions and government jobs. Tamil Nadu began to offer reservation to the non-Brahman castes in jobs from 1927-28. So, Periyar's concern for all the oppressed groups is a reflection of the Bahujan hermeneutic of care.

In modern India, B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) made a monumental

contribution towards transforming life of the subaltern classes. Continuing the legacy of Ravidas' 'Begumpura', Ambedkar imagined a new India which he called 'Prabuddh Bharat'. He incessantly worked to empower peasants, Dalits, landless labourers, workers and women. He struggled to revoke the khoti system. On September 17, 1937, he introduced a bill to abolish the exploitative land tenure system (Keer, 2011, p. 296). He became the first leader to broach the bill to end the slavery of the agricultural tenants. Furthermore, he fought and put forth a bill to abolish Mahar Vatan. When he joined the Viceroy's Executive Council, he tirelessly worked to protect the interests of the working class. His main intervention was that he pressurized the colonial government to decrease the working hours from 14 to 8. On November 8, 1943, he floated the Indian Trade Union (Amendment Bill) to force the employers to recognize trade unions. He was aware of the fact that trade unions were crucial for the dignified existence of the working class. His ethic of care was a manifestation of his democratic and revolutionary imagination. His special care for promoting the interests of women workers needs to be appreciated. Atree (2015) informs us that Ambedkar formulated laws such as Mines Maternity Benefit Act, Women's Labour Welfare Fund, Women and Child Labour Protection Act, Maternity Benefit for Women, and Restoration of Ban on Employment of Women on Underground Work in Coal Mines. His other contributions entail Health Insurance Scheme, Provident Fund Act and Minimum Wages Act. Ambedkar's proposal of the Hindu Code Bill was a revolutionary act. He intended to empower Hindu women through this important bill so that they would be treated as equal human beings. His words pertaining to the criticality of the Hindu Code Bill still hold relevance:

To leave inequality between class and class, between sex and sex, which is the soul of Hindu society, untouched and go on passing legislation relating to economic problems is to make a farce of our constitution and to build a palace on a dung heap. This is the significance I attach to the Hindu Code Bill (Ambedkar, Vol. 14, Part Two, p. 1326).

The Hindu Code Bill aimed to accord equality to Hindu women by framing new laws on succession, maintenance, marriage, property, inter-caste marriage, divorce, adoption, minority and guardianship (Ambedkar, 2014, Vol. 14, Part One, pp. 5-11).

For Ambedkar, social democracy entails culture of care. Without the notion of compassion and care for one another, a democracy has no meaning. Ambedkar interprets the caste system as social division of

people who belong to the same race. By bringing this new hermeneutic, first, he shows his concern for social harmony. Second, he wants to engineer ethical critique of caste. In other words, he intended to create moral guilt in the upper caste subject. His concern for all classes constitutes his ethic of care. Moreover, he introduces a new aesthetic for the formation of Dalit self. This new technology of self was related to his dress code. His conscious decision of wearing a three-piece suit was a political statement which challenged the socio-cultural restrictions placed on Dalits. It dented the laws of Manu which had forced Dalits to wear only dirty and ragged clothes. Ambedkar's specific dress code was a part of his care of self. Ambedkar sets out to dismantle the symbols of untouchability on the Dalit body. So, Gandhi's move to remain semi-clad was not revolutionary but Ambedkar's conscious creation of a new self was indeed a radical step. For all the Dalit-Bahujan thinkers, care of the self was not just associated with the spiritual and ethical transformation of self but it also meant the regeneration of self in relation to truth, compassion and love for others. So, the history of Dalit-Bahujan thought reveals the underlying presence of a subaltern ethic of care which can be categorized as Ambedkarian ethic of care.

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