

The Internationalism of the Dalit Panthers Manifesto

Written by Ankit Kawade

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ANKIT KAWADE, JUL 20 2022

2022 marks the completion of 50 years since the founding of the Dalit Panthers in Mumbai, India in 1972. While this political organisation split into factions some two years later in 1974 and was officially disbanded in 1988, what perhaps provides a certain unity of perspective to its political vision, is its manifesto which was written and published in 1973. A question of classification immediately arises when one considers a text like the Dalit Panthers Manifesto. A text is potentially classifiable into multiple categories depending upon the genealogies of ideational currents that it presents to the world. And the world of the Dalit Panthers was certainly one where its most organic and intimate intellectual and political inspiration—the social, moral, and political thought of B R Ambedkar—productively encountered and enriched revolutionary strands of other world-historical traditions like Marxism and the Black Power Movement in the tumultuous period of global youth uprisings of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

This article is an attempt to analyse and reflect upon the internationalist themes extant within the Dalit Panthers Manifesto. In analysing the internationalist themes of this text, this article does not attempt to reduce Ambedkar's thought to a 'vernacular' or 'native' philosophy as hermetically separate from other more 'cosmopolitan' and 'global' traditions of thinking. Arguably, such a reading suffers from a deep sense of methodological nationalism, from whose ideological horizons it ultimately derives its definitions of what constitutes 'vernacular' and 'cosmopolitan' in the first place. I argue here that the Dalit Panthers Manifesto, as a text, constituted an extremely novel way to amplify the internationalism inherent in the social and political thought of Ambedkar.

Before analysing the internationalist themes of this manifesto, it is important to describe the topology of the historical layers that manifest themselves upon the ground of this text itself. One historic achievement of the larger social, literary, and intellectual movement accompanying the Dalit Panthers in the decade of the 1970s was the rejection of the name 'Harijan' (M K Gandhi's coinage meaning 'God's children' or 'God's people') to refer to the untouchables of the Hindu caste order. The Dalit Panthers Manifesto, crucially, avoids the usage of the name 'untouchable' even as it posits the problem of untouchability on the stage of world-history: 'Untouchability is the most violent form of exploitation on the surface of the earth, which survives the ever-changing forms of the power structure.'

There is a comparative as well as an incommensurable logic in this particular formulation of the problem of untouchability as given in the Dalit Panthers Manifesto. And here lies one of the crucial subtexts of the peculiar form of internationalism that is current in this text. For even if untouchability is a problem that afflicts a vast swathe of human beings in the Indian subcontinent, it cannot merely be reduced or dismissed as a problem of singular nation-states alone. The sheer magnitude of exploitation and suffering that this supposedly 'local' practice that is 'internal' to the Indian subcontinent embodies makes it a uniquely world-historical phenomenon, whose violence is revealed in asymmetric comparisons with other world-historical forms of exploitation and suffering extant in the world.

It is precisely this world-historical outlook that constituted the formative context of the emergence of the Dalit Panthers. Despite their recognised inspiration from the nomenclature of the Black Panther Party in the United States, no sociological equivalences between the problems of untouchability and slavery or between caste and race exist within this text. On the contrary, what is evident is a definite move towards rendering the problem of untouchability as the most intense one in the litany of modes of exploitation and suffering that manifestly occur upon the temporal and spatial surface of world-history.

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In other words, the Dalit Panthers Manifesto does not make an argument about the seriousness of the problem of untouchability based on its purported similarities with the problem of slavery. Such a usage keeps the irreducible element of difference radically open in the gesture of historical comparison or inspiration, where untouchability occurs as a nominally and historically non-replaceable form that is not reducible to other forms of exploitation and suffering in the world.

Thus, even as the Dalit Panthers Manifesto attempts to carve out a place for untouchability as a form of exploitation that should come under the consideration of revolutionary traditions of thought all over the world, it takes ample care to not fossilize the meaning and implications of untouchability in modern South Asia itself. It emphasises that the problem of untouchability must be understood beyond its mere scriptural and ritualistic connotations. A dominant understanding of untouchability sought to resolve this problem through piecemeal religious reform (temple-entry), social upliftment (affirmative action), or legislative/legalistic changes (constitutional abolition). Expressing a deep scepticism towards such approaches, the Dalit Panthers Manifesto indicated that this view intentionally excludes such modern state apparatuses which have allied with the traditional scriptural and ritual bases of the Brahmanic religion in extending the dominance of caste-Hindus over Dalits in contemporary India. Hence, in a highly bold formulation, the manifesto claims that '[t]he framework of untouchability is simply widening with the help of the army, the prisons, the legal system and the bureaucracy'.

Despite its ancient antecedents, the apparatuses of untouchability (the most elementary apparatus of untouchability being the caste-Hindu body) have become integrated with newer apparatuses of repression found in colonial and postcolonial India. Since such repressive integration is hard to disentangle, the problem of untouchability can no longer be politically separated from the problems of existing repressive state apparatuses—even as one makes the case for untouchability to be considered as a separate but most violent form of domination found in world history. Far from making the deceptive claim that untouchability as a social practice is weakening due to technological and institutional advances, the Dalit Panthers Manifesto asserts that the institutions of the modern state—along with the forces of feudalism and capitalism—are deeply complicit in the perpetuation of caste-based domination in India.

The Dalit Panthers Manifesto also marks out the 'high-flown philosophy' of Brahmanic Hinduism as a duplicitous appendage of these repressive apparatuses that have together 'deprived Dalits of earthly happiness' and reduced them to a community of suffering. This criticism of suffering, however, was tied to an orientation that looked at the problem of caste from the perspective of a revolutionary praxis rather than a reformist moralism. And it is owing to this revolutionary outlook of the Dalit Panthers, that their internationalism itself had varying ideational roots—from Communist internationalism to the anti-imperialist resistances in Africa, Cambodia and Vietnam; to the emergence of 'Black Power' in the United States and, perhaps most crucially, the emergence of Ambedkarite politics in post-independent India.

The kind of awareness and kinship that the Dalit Panthers exhibited through their manifesto with these international events and movements signified a markedly different trajectory from other kinds of internationalisms persistent in twentieth century India. For example, Partha Chatterjee's essay titled 'Nationalism, Internationalism, and Cosmopolitanism: Some Observations from Modern Indian History' (2016) elaborately discusses significant internationalist and cosmopolitan currents from twentieth century Indian history. Chatterjee mainly discusses the internationalist inspirations that were current in the political thought and action of armed militant nationalists and Communists from early twentieth century, then moving on to the internationalism of the non-aligned movement in the period of the Cold War after India's independence.

What is left out in Chatterjee's impeccable but inadequate account is the internationalist inspirations and currents of the anti-caste movement led by Ambedkar as well as the politics of an organisation like the Dalit Panthers in the latter half of the twentieth century. Chatterjee's essay is a good example of how even analyses of internationalism and cosmopolitanism in modern Indian history suffer from an analytic blind spot regarding the problem of caste whereby methodologically salient accounts of anti-caste thought and politics are left unanalysed and unaddressed. Caste is seen as not having any bearing on the formative processes of nationalism and internationalism in modern India.

Moreover, caste is ascribed a definite 'foreignness' when questions of international affairs are brought up, and

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paradoxically, such an ascription operates by placing caste firmly within the borders of the 'domestic', even as caste could be observed as impacting the conduct of international affairs. For example, two recent cases of caste discrimination that happened in the United States (US) demonstrate how the remit of the caste system extends beyond India's national borders. The first case refers to the discrimination faced by an employee of Cisco by their Savarna colleagues at Silicon Valley, a litigation of which is pending before the California court. The second case was about the human trafficking and exploitation of Dalit and other oppressed caste artisans and workers by the Hindu organisation named Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) in New Jersey. Nominally speaking, the artisans and workers found to be trafficked to the US for constructing a Hindu temple were all Indian citizens or of Indian origin, and yet the Government of India, especially the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, took no notice of this brazen violation of the fundamental and human rights of Indians in the US. Curiously enough, the Minister of Foreign Affairs pledged in the Indian Parliament to take an active interest in the case of an Indian student who allegedly faced racist bullying due to her religious identity at Oxford University.

The starkness with which caste continues to play a discriminating role for Savarnas and Dalits situated outside the borders of India and the corresponding care and negligence with which the Government of India, especially the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, have dealt with this problem demonstrates how caste can no longer be considered as an 'internal' or 'domestic' problem of the Indian nation-state. This is especially when India's postcolonial intellectual and diplomatic elites display an active neglect about the occurrences of caste discrimination outside the borders of India.

Such a view of caste also implicates our understanding of historical and contemporary anti-caste philosophy, which has had a resolutely internationalist outlook in the realm of its political imagination. In this context, an intellectual attention to the Dalit Panthers Manifesto articulates what an internationalism inspired by the thought of Ambedkar might look like — an internationalism that is politically attentive to the problems of American imperialism, antiblack racism, global capitalism, and various forms of repressive state apparatuses — not to forget the persistently violent problems of caste and untouchability that often disregard the nominal borders of modern nation-states. This would also call for reinvestigating the ideational genealogies of anti-caste political thought in modern India, whose intellectual provenances and critical concerns are woefully missing from the annals and archives of colonial / postcolonial Indian history as well as global / third worldist / international political thought.

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