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Aishwary Kumar. *Radical Equality: Ambedkar, Gandhi, and the Risk of Democracy.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015. 416 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-9195-3.

Reviewed by Shailaja Paik (University of Cincinnati)
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Paik on Kumar, *Radical Equality*

In the last decade, scholars have sought to tackle the political and philosophical foundations of modern Indian thought and the intellectual roots of Indian democracy. But only very recently have scholars begun to devote book-length works to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's thought, who alongside Gandhi might be considered one of India's most important intellectuals of the twentieth century. Aishwary Kumar's *Radical Equality: Ambedkar, Gandhi, and the Risk of Democracy* traces the contours of the hitherto neglected nuances of Ambedkar's political philosophy, contributions to anticolonial thought, and moral psychology. Kumar investigates the interconnected intellectual history of the encounter between Ambedkar and Gandhi, and seeks to demonstrate the broader–global–significance of that encounter. He traces conceptual innovations and linguistic choices to examine the junctures and disjunctures between European and anticolonial formulations of the political as well as the fraught relationship between Ambedkar and Gandhi. He traces the genealogy of what he terms "the Indian political" and investigates the tension between popular sovereignty and civic virtue and the two visions of democracy they embody. At the same time, he is concerned about mapping both the expansion and limits of European thought. Kumar explores "the tenuous distinction between the social and political, between aspiration and action, which sustains the internal exclusions of anticolonial moral and political culture" as well as the abstract and violent aspects of European concepts (p. 24).

Kumar's first aim, then, is to trace the political and philosophical conditions of Gandhi's and Ambedkar's thought, namely the complex set of moral, theological, and republican attitudes circulating in the interwar period. The second aim is to demonstrate the ways in which the ideas of the two leaders interacted, challenged and underscored each other, and extended the meaning of indigenous and European concepts. More so than the discontinuities between the texts and their authors, Kumar is interested in practices of reading, conceptuality, and reception. He explores the multiple meanings of concepts such as incommensurability, singularity, and sacrifice as they are mobilized and even renounced in Ambedkar's and Gandhi's thinking.

The focus on the leaders' distinctive practices of writing and translation, limitations of language and linguistics, tensions in translations from the vernacular to English, and transliteration can actually open up productive philological spaces for intellectual history. To trace a "philosophical history of the political" the chapters provide a conversation between Ambedkar and Gandhi and an intellectual and literary exegesis of key concepts such as force (chapters 2 and 3), *satyagraha* (chapter 2), Gandhi's idea of renaming former untouchables *harijan* (chapter 4), Ambedkar's "annihilation" of caste (chapter 5), and religious politics (chapters 6 and 7). Kumar attempts a conversation between Gandhi's popular writings in *Hind Swaraj* (1909) and Ambedkar's undelivered speech "The Annihilation of Caste" (1936). He dwells on Ambedkar's and Gandhi's shared moral psychology, construction of resistance, "reformulation of means and force proper to justice" (p. 6), and sustained engagement with vernacular literature and epistemologies. To this end, he interprets some critical concepts in this frame: sacrifice, *satya* (truth), *agraha* (force), *ahimsa* (literally, nonviolence), *samata* (equality), *swaraj* (self-rule), *ucched* (annihilation), *maitri* (friendship), and *shunyata* (literally, zeroness and the Buddhist emptiness). This is an ambitious and exciting agenda. Yet, this higher aim is hard to fulfill given that Kumar seems to be relying on traditional English sources and translations to the complete neglect of vernacular materials. In other words, though

Kumar seeks to analyze the leader's mobilization of vernacular concepts in order to construct their rhetoric and conceptual discourse, his philological exercise seems limited by the fact that he privileges English-language materials in his analysis rather than Gandhi's writings in the Gujarati or Ambedkar's in Marathi. This is unfortunate, since we know that the translations from the vernacular to English were certainly challenging even for the leaders themselves, and would have been a wonderful point of discussion and departure.

In this vein, we may note the different ways through which scholars of Gandhi have dealt with Gandhi's concept of *ahimsa*. Kumar seeks to complicate Gandhi's ahimsa as "nonindifference" (p. 187). Here he echoes the historian Ajay Skaria's interpretation of ahimsa as "neighborliness," and notes that ahimsa is an "ethics of compassion acutely aware of, even vested in, difference and distance" (p. 45). Unlike Kumar, however, Skaria marshals evidence from both the Gujarati and English sources to explain "neighborliness" and to argue that these "practices of neighborliness differed on the kind of absolute difference being addressed ... and sought to sustain friendship with the world based on distinctive Gandhian notions of equality and justice."[1] Thus, ahimsa was a kind of politics to be deployed to produce neighborliness.

Ambedkar agrees with Gandhi on the "neighbor." To Ambedkar there was no equality without the sharing of freedom and "communicated experience." To him the social exists "by communication, indeed in communication," and one's failure is considered as justly sharable with others as one's success (p. 138). To Ambedkar, in a true democracy, the sovereignty of the self is always mediated by one's "reverence" towards the neighbor (quoted, p. 138). Perhaps this is the neighborliness that Skaria was alluding to in the earlier paragraph.

Gandhi cites that (the deity Ram's warrior-brother) Lakshaman's *harijan* is not an agent wielding arms but instead a figure that demands restraint and limit (p. 182). Ambedkar critiques Gandhi's gesture that "Harijan is indicative of pity ... pointing out their helplessness and dependent condition" (p. 234) and abhors the term. Most importantly, Gandhi excluded the unprepared Untouchables from practicing *satyagraha*. Unlike him however, Ambedkar forced open the doors of this spiritual rigor to the millions of Untouchables who performed degrading and polluting work with their hands. His *satyagraha* was for regaining human rights and here is the democratization of the will to speak the truth forcefully and with civility.

Ambedkar, like Gandhi, underscored that everyone must be a soldier and engage in war; Ambedkar however also notes that the caste structure prevents such a general mobilization because only the warrior castes are supposed to fight. Ambedkar is more inclusive and dwells on the building of social bonds of activities of everyday life which would lead to the love of truth. Ambedkar bitterly criticizes Gandhi's and *advaita* (monist) Hinduism's mantra of "the secret of living by dying" (p. 293). He instead underscores the equality of freedom and practice of *maitri*, fraternity or fellowship that "lies in sharing the vital processes of life: joys, sorrows, death, marriage, and food" (p. 294). It is the cords of such a fraternity that the traditional caste system cunningly cuts.

Historically, there is a circulatory logic between the theologico-political practices adopted by Gandhi and Ambedkar: Gandhi begins with religion and deploys it for political aims, and Ambedkar works from within state-centered politics, moving towards faith, belief, and reason of Buddhism. However, Kumar does not mention these historical shifts even in a cursory way. He instead dwells on the "theologico-political" dilemmas of Ambedkar by illuminating the interconnectedness of caste identities, religious belief, and the emerging languages of rights-based politics. He seeks to construct a hybrid Ambedkar who draws upon and at times departs from Western thinkers like John Dewey, Emile Durkheim, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Henri Bergson, Karl Marx, and so on. Again, noticing this feature of Ambedkar's thought is not very new. While Gandhi would insist that there was "no politics without religion" Ambedkar would investigate whether religion had not always been "an instrument of the founding exclusions of politics" (p. 116).

Despite the novelty and ambition of Kumar's analysis, some key questions remain about how to understand this book as project of intellectual history. Firstly, Kumar chooses to follow a textual and philological mode of interpretation that makes gestures to European and Indian philosophical concepts and traditions, but he does not situate Ambedkar and Gandhi in a local intellectual context. But Gandhi and Ambedkar were not intellectuals and philosophers in any ordinary sense–they were more importantly political leaders, and in particular leaders of distinct social and political movements. Kumar's analyses gives the impression that these leaders were functioning in a vacuum and in isolation. There is no mention of the role of associates or even "followers" in the framing of vernacular epistemologies. Kumar does mention Gandhi's constructed dialogue with his reader at one point (on p. 11); however, there is a lack of such treat-

ment for Ambedkar.

Secondly, though Kumar is innovative in reading Indian thought alongside Western philosophies, many a time he seems to overreach in these comparisons, and arguably reads too much into Ambedkar and Gandhi. For example, Kumar notes Ambedkar's political and ethical conception of citizenship: "a citizen who might be governed but not mastered" (p. 225). It is important to note that this is not Ambedkar's explanation of citizenship, but Kumar's reading from Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner's edited book *Republicanism and Constitutionalism in Early Modern Europe* that he applies to Ambedkar.[2] Kumar does not dwell on this important concept, and immediately moves on to the next idea. In the process, he fails to tell us the true nature of citizenship or *svaraj* for Ambedkar. Was it the same as Gandhi's? Moreover, how were the excluded and boycotted Untouchables to actually become citizens? What did freedom actually mean to them and how did they articulate it in their own everyday vernacular Marathi, Hindi, or Gujarati languages? When and why were the categories of force, *maitri* (friendship), and *shunyata* (emptiness) so important to Ambedkar? Most significantly, how and why did the understanding of the terms change for Ambedkar? How are they important to global democracy, which is at the center of Kumar's inquiry?

Kumar makes judgements, claims, and certain heuristic conceptions and interpretations regarding some categories. At times, Kumar thinks for the leaders even if they left their thoughts suspended so that it becomes mere speculation. For example, to grasp Ambedkar's republicanism and to understand the risks inherent in republicanism, Kumar invokes Machiavelli. Scholars are in disagreement and have no direct evidence of whether Ambedkar actually read Machiavelli. How fair is it then for intellectual historians to make these big leaps? Kumar also deploys "touchability as the most intimate rendering of maryada" (p. 191), a term Gandhi barely used in his writings. Kumar engages in a philological exercise and translates touchability as *sparshyata* (p. 192). He not only constructs the term *sparshyata* but goes on to and explain its ontological axes, and even misspells the actual Marathi terms *sprushyata* and *asprushyata* (untouchability).

Furthermore, due to his central focus on leaders, Kumar fails to contextualize their writings in relationship to evolving historical and political situations that actually called for varying reactions. Clearly, the thoughts of the two political leaders and thinkers evolved and changed considerably over time. In addition, there is no mention of vernacular public spheres where these intellectual exercises actually flourished. Intellectual historians need to critically engage with the discourse in the vernacular, even if in translations. This is important, because it was here that contradictions, frustrations, language of rights, discussions, debates, and novel questions and answers emerged on the issues of social and civic rights, citizenship, self-rule, education, equality, and democracy. This is the perfect opportunity to connect intellectual and social history because ideas are constructed in specific social and political conjunctures and cannot be divorced from them. Nonetheless, this book is a significant contribution to anticolonial Indian political thought and the intertwined ethics of justice, equality, liberalism, and exclusion that have shaped the global life of democracy.

Notes

[1]. Ajay Skaria, "Gandhi's Politics: Liberalism and the Question of the Ashram," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (2002): 957.

[2]. Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner, eds., *Republicanism and Constitutionalism in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 370n10.