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‘Spiritual Fascism’ and the Metaphysics of Dalit Oppression in India: A Study of Kancha Ilaiah’s *Buffalo Nationalism*

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Abstract:

The discourse of Indian nationalism as taken up by Kancha Ilaiah, a social thinker of much repute and controversy as well, in his *Buffalo Nationalism* essentially engages the question of caste that always has deliberately been relegated unresolved to the back since the anti-colonial struggle in India. This paper proffers a study of the notion of ‘spiritual fascism’ which according to Ilaiah is pivotal to the exclusion of Dalit-bahujans from the context of Indian nationalism.

Keywords: caste, anti-colonial, spiritual fascism, Dalit-bahujan, nationalism

Kancha Ilaiah’s book *Buffalo Nationalism: A Critique of Spiritual Fascism* is an assemblage of his selective columns published in popular newspapers and journals and is dedicated to all those ‘who have suffered apartheid, untouchability, casteism, patriarchy, and brutal atrocities because of (and it is significant) spiritual fascism’. Over the years socio-political thinkers have been identifying various roots as well as routes of sufferings of the Dalit-bahujans, the ‘oppressed majority’ of this country and in this perspective Ilaiah is found to have grounded the diverge reasons of dalit oppression in the hegemonic socio-spiritual system which has been governing India since the advent of Aryan civilisation.

With the BJP emerging as the single major political party in the last general election and thereby ascending the throne of Indian democracy, the embedded agenda to create a Hinduistic nationalism through subtler means has, not quite unexpectedly, attained a new verve. The debate put forward on part of the ruling party to declare *Bhagwat Gita* as National book or the enthusiastic celebration of Yoga which, though prima facie may appear to be a naive physical exercise, forms a scripted part in Hindu culture are some of the manifestations of this embedded agenda. In this context Ilaiah’s concept of Spiritual Fascism is worthy of being reckoned afresh. After all a Nation besides having political, economic, civilisational and cultural entities does have a spiritual entity and Ilaiah argues ‘Spiritual unity is the anchor around which the other forms of unity are synthesized. India as a nation lost that scope because of brahminism which is at the core of Hinduism’. (Ilaiah, p-18)

A comparative study of the four socio-spiritual systems offered by four major religions that the world hitherto has witnessed viz. Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism enables Ilaiah to find Hinduism as the sole religion which is spiritually undemocratic since ‘Hinduism was born out of a brahminic philosophy that stated that God created human beings unequal.’ (Ilaiah, p-18) ‘The first evidence of ‘verna’(colour)division is to be found in Rig Veda itself.’ (Ilaiah, p-27) The concept of spiritual fascism refers to this historical essence of the Hindu religion that is basically fascist. Though there are many versions as to the prevalence of caste system in India, Ilaiah finds ‘Spiritual Fascism’ to be the root cause of it.

God is created in the image of man and Hindu Gods are created, in Ilaiah’s view, in the image of the brahminical men. Though Bible and Quran are accused of having advocated the inequality of men and women, they never approved of caste and colour difference and

inequalities; so they may be indicted as patriarchal but not racist and casteist. Hindu scriptures and literature have since the time immemorial systematically established and institutionalised the notion of human inequality. This utterly undemocratic construction of Hinduistic spiritual realm is sole responsible for thwarting the feasibility of Indian nationalism, development and democracy.

Ilaiah's focus on the symbols devised by the Hindu religion as against the symbols of other three major religions like 'dharmachakra' in Buddhism which is a symbol inherently peace and democracy-centred, Cross in Christianity, which is a symbol of sacrifice and the crescent Moon in Islam which too is a symbol of a positive direction, is of special significance. The plethora of symbols that feature in Hindu religion such as Swastika (four pronged trident), trishul (trident), chakra (sharp edged discus) and bow and arrow essentially negate productivity and focus on war and violence as the core of spirituality. Therefore Ilaiah remarks "violence centred spirituality has set the Indian system backward." (Ilaiah, p-24) He advocates 'buffalo nationalism' against the 'cow nationalism' as projected by the Hindu brahminism. Despite providing 75% of Indian milk in addition to serving manifold domestic purposes buffalo cannot become Hindu spiritual animal simply because of its complexion. 'Just as the Dravidian, a black people, were never granted any spiritual status the buffalo as a black animal was allowed none.' (Ilaiah, p-26) The Anti-cow slaughter Bill which is a manifestation of the attempt to establish cow as a nationalist animal only exposes the irony of Hinduism as an animal-friendly religion since the Aryan Brahmins used to kill thousands of cows and bulls in the name of sacrifice and the Bill does not incorporate the protection of buffalo.

'Cow nationalism is a dangerous anti-Dravidian and anti-Dalit-bahujan ideology. It delegitimized Dravidian Black beauty and plurality of food culture.' (Ilaiah, p-29)

Ilaiah emphasises the need to change the entire philosophy of caste, colour, language, land, animals, birds, food and so on. Why Buffalo nationalism is important for the establishment of an inclusive nationalism has significantly been encapsulated in his opinion-

'The buffalo here represents the whole Dravidian now Dalit-bahujan culture. It represents the notion that black is beautiful. It represents the equality of colour, end of racism, an egalitarian and productive nationalism. It allows enormous scope for expanding the nationalist horizon of minority religions. It generates an entirely indigenous discourse of education and knowledge and has the potential to generate a new discourse on Indian Nationalism.' (Ilaiah, p-31)

However Ilaiah acknowledges Ambedkar to be the ancestor of his notion of this 'Spiritual Fascism' and he breathes new life into Ambedkar's scepticism when in his essay *The Buffalo's Unholy Milk* he questions 'Whose India is it? Who constructed India as a modern nation and who controls its essence?' On being asked by Gandhi in 1931 about his sharp criticism of the Congress (which it was assumed was tantamount to criticising the struggle for the Homeland) Ambedkar famously replied 'Gandhiji, I have no Homeland. No untouchable worth the name will be proud of this land'. Pertinent to point out here is that M.K Gandhi who has traditionally been hailed as the 'father of the nation' harboured contradictory views on caste system and for this reason Ambedkar suggested more than once that Gandhi 'deceived' people and that his writings in English and Gujrati could be productively compared. Gandhi's overt endorsement of the caste-system in 1921 in *Navajivan* translated from Gujrati by Ambedkar is quite striking-

‘Caste is another name for control. Caste puts limit on enjoyment. Caste does not allow a person to transgress caste limits in pursuit of his enjoyment...These being my views I am opposed to all those who are out to destroy the Caste System.’

In his first public confrontation with Ambedkar over Ambedkar’s proposal for a separate electorate for Untouchables Gandhi felt able to say ‘I claim myself in my own person to represent the vast man of Untouchables’. Arundhati Roy in her introduction to *Annihilation of Caste* titled as “*The Doctor and the Saint*” addressed Gandhi as ‘the Saint of the status quo’ and said that ‘The trouble is that Gandhi actually said everything and its opposite. From believing in the caste system in all its minutiae he moved to saying that the four thousand separate caste should fuse themselves into the four vernas(what Ambedkar called the parent of the caste system).Gandhi towards the end of his life claimed he no longer objected to inter-dining and inter-marriage between caste. Sometimes he believed in the verna system, a person’s verna ought to be decided by their worth and not their birth’. Ambedkar however expounded the absurdity of his this last view and he rather voiced powerfully in favour of the renunciation of Hinduism as its practice of caste is sanctioned in its foundational texts almost with an aura of divine ordination-

‘You must have the courage to tell the Hindus that what is wrong with them is their religion-the religion which has produced in them this notion of the sacredness of caste.’

Arun Shourie’s book “*The Worshipping of False Gods*” which is sharply written against the idolization of Ambedkar in India is dealt with significantly at length in Ilaiah’s essay under the title ‘*Attacks on Ambedkar*’. Ilaiah recognizes Shourie to be a part of that Hindutva force which wants to set in motion a social polarization of Gandhian Hinduism and Ambedkarite Buddhism and does not want to treat Buddhism as part of nationalist Hinduism.Educated Dalits are thus being forced to consolidate on religious lines. These things lead to Ilaiah augur a perilous future for this country-

‘If (this) expansion of Ambedkar is communalized, India will enter a new phase of communal clashes between the brahminical Hindus and the Ambedkarite Buddhists. Hindutva intellectuals like Mr.Shourie do not realise that what they are doing may also lead to a civil war like the one that took place over the issue of slavery in America during Abraham Lincoln’s time.’

As of now Ambedkar’s 125th birth-anniversary is witnessing a nation-wide furore hitherto unseen among major political parties in India. All seem to have been attempting to adopt Ambedkar but not without getting his views tactfully twisted to conform to their respective political ethos. On the other hand Ilaiah, an heir to Babasaheb’s theoretical agenda (Ilaiah says at the very outset of his book ‘I am indebted to Ambedkar for my understanding of the caste question’, p-28) is likely to face a police interrogation or even arrest for a complaint lodged against him at the Sultanbazar Police station in Hyderabad because of one of his ‘untoward’ article ‘Devudu Prajasaya Vada Kada?’(Is God a democrat?) published in a Telegu newspaper *Andhra Jyothi* wherein he shares a thought which is basically identical with that of Ambedkar’s and which we would have heard from Ambedkar himself had he been alive today. Here lies the irony with India.

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