



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

## Interpreting Kancha Ilaiah's Buffalo Nationalism

**Khushee Saroha**

Assistant Professor, Shyama Prasad Mukherji College, Delhi, India

### **Abstract:**

*This paper is an attempt to understand the discourse of Buffalo Nationalism, as instituted by a very noted Dalit-bahujan activist Kancha Ilaiah who equates Hinduism with spiritual fascism. This requires an in-depth study of his book Buffalo Nationalism: A Critique of Spiritual Fascism wherein through an analogue of his articles published in various newspapers and journals, I have attempted to analyze his views on the situation of Dalits in India and how a change could be brought into the same.*

**Key words:** Buffalo nationalism, dalit-bahujan, Ambedkarite, Hindutva

Dr Kancha Ilaiah is one of the key figures in the international movement for Dalit emancipation from caste oppression that is often described as a 'hidden apartheid' in India. The oppression of Dalits is wide-ranging, and well-documented. Dalits are compelled to perform the most menial and hazardous tasks, many Dalit women are sold into prostitution, and the use of Dalit child labour is widespread. Atrocities against Dalits are being reported on an almost daily basis. Here is a writer who pushes us into taking note of his perspective on what has gone into making India an unjust nation for the Dalit-Bahujans.

In his book *Why I am not a Hindu*, he argues that Hinduism, with its focus on upper caste gods, values, and culture, is a patriarchal and fascist religion and worldview. Furthermore, Hinduism should be considered the sole preserve of the upper castes - despite efforts by the Hindu Right to draw the Dalit-Bahujan masses into the Hindu fold, though in a subservient position to increase their numbers and gain unity and strength in the fight against Muslims and Christians. Ilaiah explains that if India today is in a sad state it is owing to Hinduism and Hindus - meaning, again, the upper castes - which are still the ruling elites in India.

After the publication of this national best-seller, Ilaiah came up with *Buffalo Nationalism: A Critique of Spiritual Fascism* which is yet another ferocious indictment of Hindu Brahminism by this Dalit-Bahujan activist. This book is a collection of articles published in newspapers like *The Hindu*, the *Deccan Herald*, the *Deccan Chronicle*, the *Hindustan Times*, and journals like *Mainstream* and the *Economic and Political Weekly*. The major difference between his discourse in *Why I am not a Hindu* and *Buffalo Nationalism* is; that in the latter, Ilaiah carries out an internationalization of caste. He reads caste in the same tone as he does racism with an aim to draw international attention and with a hope to earn international allies.

In this fight, he takes on the dominant dogmatic discourse of the power elite, the upper-caste hegemonists, the Hindutva cow nationalists and the communist brahmins. And for these means he aligns with what he calls 'Buffalo Nationalism', which according to him, has been superseded by 'Cow Nationalism'. It becomes important to note here that his fight is not against nationalism but a particular brand of nationalism dominated by the figure of cow, which in his mind symbolizes the upper castes. He wrote in an article "The Buffalo's Unholy Milk" in 2001: "The situation of the Dalit-Bahujan masses is similar to that of a black and beautiful buffalo that gives more milk—white milk at that—than the cows of India, but has no sacred status in civil society and no legal protection in the Constitution. Such a situation forces us to ask, whose India is it anyway?"<sup>i</sup>

He dwells on the two possible definitions of India in his following speech: "If India is defined as a nation of productive skills—of tilling land, of cutting crops...its symbols of civilisation such as the pot, wheel, shoe, sculpture and so on—it belongs to the Adivasis, Dalits and OBCs. If India is defined as a nation of books (from the Rig Veda to the Bhagvad Gita to M.S. Golwalkar's *Bunch of Thoughts*), big temples and theoretical ownership of them—it belongs to the Brahmins. If that definition includes owning of wealth...it belongs to the upper castes."<sup>ii</sup> He laments about India being a caste society and not a class one wherein an upward mobility could have been possible; and expresses his discontent at the hesitation felt by the intellectual Indians in discussing the question of caste at the UN forum.

He exposes what he calls Indian hypocrisy in his article "Durban, Caste and Indian Democracy" which he wrote right before the United Nations World Conference on Racism that was to be held in Durban in 2001. Ilaiah brings to the fore that the Union Government does not wish the UN to interfere in India's internal affairs because; firstly, India is apparently self-sufficient to fight this

menace on her own; and secondly, UN should not be diverting its attention from the question of race, which is something India is deeply concerned about. He finds these arguments hypocritical because the upper-caste leaders who had been racially discriminated upon and therefore had advocated the case of pushing racism onto the UN agenda fail to realize that “more horrendous intolerance was practiced in India in the name of caste”.<sup>iii</sup> He fears that the day the Dalit-Bahujans will lose faith in Indian Democracy because they are not given a voice, it will begin to crack. The solution then will be to formulate a Buffalo Nationalism.

In the Introduction to his book *Buffalo Nationalism: A Critique of Spiritual Fascism*, Ilaiah explains what he means by the title term. He begins by listing all the animate and inanimate symbols that Hindu religion has constructed over the ages. He starts with enumerating two central inanimate symbols, namely, the *swastika* and the *trishul* or the trident. While he equates the former with the German symbol of fascism, the second he brands as the ultimate symbol of violence which is now being used by Hinduism to establish hegemony over the other religions; concluding therefore that Hinduism has never tried to incorporate any productive symbols into its spiritual life. He places these Brahminic symbols as against the productive and organic symbols of the Dalit-Bahujans like the Buddhist wheel symbolizing the productive and transformative processes then at work in Indian society.

When he comes around the animate symbols he mentions nothing beyond the divine status attributed to the cow, an animal which is not even originally Indian but was brought in by the Aryans who established themselves as Brahmins and ruled over the indigenous Dravidian cultures. The cow, not the buffalo, Ilaiah argues, is worshipped because, though both give milk, the cow is white, as were the Aryans. And buffalo being black, represented the Dravidians who now form the Dalit-Bahujan culture. So, it made sense for the Aryans to spin a philosophy around ‘white being good’, and black, the colour of the Dravidians or the low castes, being bad.

The discourse in Buffalo Nationalism attempts to reverse this philosophy. Kancha Ilaiah charts out a trajectory as follows: “We need to change the philosophy of caste, colour, language, land, animals, birds, food and so on. We must deploy symbols that have opposite and corrective meanings, ideology and philosophy to that of Hindu Brahminism. That’s where the survival of the nation lies.”<sup>iv</sup> Ilaiah believes that once black starts getting accepted as a beautiful colour and buffalo starts getting accepted as a nationalist animal, the exclusivist and iniquitous sanctity of the Vedas will begin to die. Hence, the case for Buffalo Nationalism.

To advocate this case for buffalo nationalism Ilaiah launches a tirade against the forces that had begun to formulate a denigration of Ambedkar and the dismantling of his Constitution during the turn of the century. In his 2003 article “A Paradigm Shift” he clearly exposes his fear when he states that “Dismantling of Ambedkar’s Indian Constitution is a sure way to bring back Manu’s dispensation. The biggest losers in that case will be the OBCs.”<sup>v</sup>

He had earlier attributed this change of attitude of Indian society towards Ambedkar to the Indian journalist, author and politician Arun Shourie who in his book *Worshipping False Gods* attempts to castigate the aura and legend that is usually associated with Ambedkar and oppose it with Gandhi. Shourie in his book claims that statues of Ambedkar in his suit with a copy of the Constitution in one hand and with his other hand raised as if to proclaim and order something are so common that it would be fair estimation to say that they far outnumber the statues of Gandhi and Nehru put together. Yet, according to Shourie this same man who currently enjoys a demigod status in India was in fact a non-entity in Nehru’s idea of India.

Shourie’s allegations against Ambedkar are; that he staunchly opposed Congress till as late as 1946; that he was a willing stooge of the British Government; and, that he was not the Father of the Constitution as it is commonly claimed though nevertheless his contribution was substantial. Shourie emphatically proves each one of these allegations and relies on published records of Ambedkar’s and the Viceroy’s speeches, correspondences etc. and the events per se. He seems to imply that it is Mahatma Gandhi who is a true God of Hindu conception and not Ambedkar and in worshipping Ambedkar we are worshipping a false God.<sup>vi</sup> Kancha Ilaiah rebuttals by saying that “Mr.Shourie’s real objective is to give new life to Hindutva, which received a major bashing after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992” and concludes that “Gandhi and Ambedkar are two different sides of Indian nationalism” and that “one cannot be set against the other.”<sup>vii</sup>

Infact, Ilaiah blames the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) for constructing a controversy against Dalit-Bahujans. He notes in his article “Spiritual Fascism and Civil Society” that while Ambedkar could not accept the Gandhian ideology; Gandhi too saw a danger to Hindu unity in Ambedkar’s plea for separate electorates. What ensued was a pact between the two that insured reservation of general electorate seats in provincial legislatures for the “Depressed Classes”- the Poona Pact. However, this agreement between Gandhi and Ambedkar was not approved by the Brahmins within the RSS fold because they were against the very possibility of emancipation of Dalits. This revolutionary step by Gandhi cost him his life. He was assassinated by a caste Hindu by the name of Nathuram Godse who was one of those Brahmins who felt threatened by this kind of mobilization of the Dalits, as has been researched upon by Christopher Jaffrelot in his book *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics*. However, Ilaiah feels that even after the signing of this Pact, Dalits did not have a reason to celebrate because they sensed the power being handed back to the very brahminical forces that had rendered the Dalits untouchable.<sup>viii</sup>

This anger, Ilaiah notes is also manifested in the thoughts of another Dalit-Bahujan activist- Gummadi Vittal Rao, popularly called Gaddar, about whom he writes in another article by the name “The Bard Whose Song is His Weapon”. Gaddar gives literary expression to the lives of Dalit-Bahujans through the Telugu songs he sings and performs. Through his songs he attacks the caste system and argues that Dalit lives are bonded lives too, and not only the lives that live in soil. Kancha Ilaiah is all praise for such endeavors and hopes that more and more people would come in myriad ways to express their anguish over this injustice.

Ilaiah again critiques the Hindutva forces in his 1999 article “Hinduism and the Right to Religion”. He reproaches them for creating a controversy when Vajpayee, the then Prime Minister called for a debate on the conversions of the tribes of Gujarat to Christianity. He states that Dalits have every right to embrace any religion that gives them equal rights with full respect to their present culture and they cannot be bulldozed into doing something against their will. A controversy over conversion was again created in 2001 when Udit

Raj implemented his Embrace Buddhism Movement, an event Ilaiah has dwelled on in his Hindustan Times article "Reject the Oppressor". Owing to the continued protests by organizations like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the permission for the meeting of Dalits embracing Buddhism at the Ramlila grounds was cancelled. Ilaiah ferociously asks these organizations as to what right they have "to claim Dalits as Hindus when they are not given the right to religion, priesthood and food culture within the temple and other religious institutions".<sup>ix</sup> The communalisation of Dalit-Bahujans carried out by the RSS by constructing an image of Muslims and Christians as their enemy did not make the Dalits Hindus with all the religious rights that other universal religions offer ("Religion and Democracy" p. 110). Ilaiah emphatically adds that the choice of a religious profession is a basic civil societal right, the absence of which might have negative implications for democracy. He argues that either Hindutva forces should fight for reforms within Hinduism or they should allow the masses to look for other alternatives, or "Indian democracy will collapse more irretrievably than that of Pakistan".<sup>x</sup>

Kancha Ilaiah in his book *Buffalo Nationalism* commingles Phule's discourse and the Ambedkarite discourse to form his own tradition. He seems to suggest that from the feudal oppression of the past to post-modernity's deplorable cruelties, those who were eternally denied their residence on earth, they will have to rebel and to redefine the structures of their untouchability. He enumerates a number of ways one can bring about reform in his Deccan Chronicle article "Where Should the Reform Begin?" He advocates for English being taught in Government schools to children of both Brahmins and Dalits without any discrimination. He links the rooting out of untouchability to the question of popular priesthood and claims that untouchables should now be appointed in temples as ritual priests. He attacks the practice of worship in Sanskrit to be a political construction made to retain the hegemony of the priestly class. He asks for the prayers to be translated into all languages. And most important of all, he claims: "The SCs must be given a ceremonial apology in all the temples of India for having been treated as untouchables for so many centuries".<sup>xi</sup> Whether all these measures can ever materialize is something one might not hope to see in near future.

I would like to conclude with an observation as to how academics often choose to misunderstand Kancha Ilaiah. And this is because Ilaiah avoids the high moral ground of the typical 'westernised' intellectual. He comes straight to the point and is almost always provocative, going against the current. The fact is that he is too original a thinker to be reduced to a stereotype. And if we add to this the edge of a die-hard Dalit-Bahujan activist and intellectual-dissident, who is ready to take on the 'cow nationalism' of Brahmins with ferocity unseen before, then it's clear that it's impossible to ignore Kancha Ilaiah and his concept of Buffalo nationalism, even if one hates his guts.

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