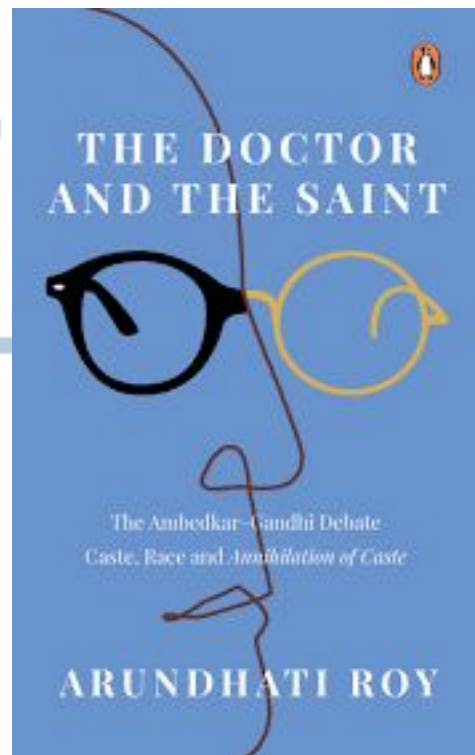


Book Review

The doctor and the saint

Author: Arundhati Roy

Arundhati Roy is the author of a number of books, including *The God of Small Things*, which won the Booker Prize in 1997 and has been translated into more than forty languages. She was born in 1959 in Shillong, India, and studied architecture in Delhi, where she now lives. She has also written several non-fiction books, including *Field Notes on Democracy*, *Walking with the Comrades*, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*, *The End of Imagination*, and most recently *Things That Can and Cannot Be Said*, co-authored with John Cusack. Roy is the recipient of the 2002 Lannan Foundation Cultural Freedom Prize, the 2011 Norman Mailer Prize for Distinguished Writing, and the 2015 Ambedkar Sudar award.



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Reviewed by: Shravya Ramesh

In *The Doctor and the Saint*, Arundhati Roy contends that the ideological clash between Ambedkar and Gandhi is far from a mere theoretical debate, asserting a profound influence on contemporary politics and the enduring structures of inequality in Indian society. The title reflects Roy's intention to highlight the significance of understanding Ambedkar (the Doctor) and Gandhi (the Saint) in relation to one another. Rather than presenting them in isolation, she argues that a comprehensive understanding of their respective legacies emerges from examining their interactions and contrasting views on caste and social justice. Published initially as a preface to an annotated edition of Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* in 2014, this potent work was subsequently released as a standalone volume in 2017. It is a concise yet dense narrative of around 130 pages and stands out as a bold and revolutionary piece in Indian literature, providing a provocative examination of caste, entitlement, and social reform. The prose skilfully weaves historical dialogue with Roy's sharp critique, which is a testament to the author's literary prowess, as evidenced by her 1997 Booker Prize win. This book, though compelling and well-supported, reveals a clear bias towards Ambedkar. The confrontational writing style, while engaging, hinders balanced exploration and risks alienating some readers.

Educated at Princeton on a scholarship, B.R. Ambedkar was an Dalit (untouchable) from the Mahar caste, excluded from the traditional Chaturvarna system. He emerged as Gandhi's most formidable opponent, challenging him "not just politically or intellectually, but also morally." Despite his significant role in advocating for justice, Ambedkar's contributions have often been sidelined in favour of policies that reinforce the status quo, mainly by India's elite, who suppressed challenges to Gandhi's near-divine status. Although Ambedkar is celebrated as the Father of the Indian Constitution, his dissatisfaction with it is less acknowledged. His inclusion among the founding fathers of India reflects an attempt at political correctness through positive discrimination, says Roy. Despite this, his statue holding the Constitution stands as a powerful symbol of Dalit empowerment. Ambedkar, often portrayed as a moderate figure, was in reality a radical revolutionary.

The book explores Ambedkar's radical critique of Hinduism, which he referred to as "a veritable chamber of horrors." This provoked hostility from the Jat-Pat Todak Mandal, a Hindu reformist group that disinvited Ambedkar from addressing its upper-caste members after reading his speech in advance. This event underscores the deep-rooted nature of caste and the resistance to its eradication. Ambedkar went on to publish the speech as text, targeted at Hindu liberals whom he referred to as "the best of Hindus" and not the Hindu extremists, for he

believed it to be impossible to be a moderate and a believer simultaneously. Gandhi's counter-narrative was the "Ideal Bhangi," where he stated, "The Brahmin's duty is to look after the sanitation of the soul; the Bhangi's is that of the body of society." It is exposed as a superficial attempt to address caste while preserving the hierarchical underpinnings of Hindu society.

Roy argues that the evolution of Hindu identity from a caste-based to a political one has merely masked the persistence of caste, now intertwined with capitalism. The Baniyas dominate economically, comprising the wealthiest 1% in India. Ambedkar believed caste to be "division of labourers," not labour, whereas Gandhi, a Baniya (Vaishya), considered caste a fundamental aspect of Indian society. The book also critiques the role of the nation-state in homogenising and reinforcing caste divisions, resulting in the politics of representation. While Gandhi supported the Arya Samaj to integrate untouchables into the Hindu fold, thereby narrowing the focus to untouchability from entitlement that caste privilege provides, Ambedkar, along with contemporaries like Periyar, opposed this assimilation. They saw through the elite's attempts to co-opt reform for broader support while maintaining caste-based hierarchies. Gandhi's reform efforts often appeared performative, failing to dismantle the deep-rooted caste system. The caste system, deeply embedded and less visible than racism, has escaped significant international scrutiny despite its severe impact.

Roy challenges the sanctified image of Mahatma Gandhi, arguing that history has been generous in its portrayal of him. Gandhi's complex persona is marked by contradictions. Celebrated for his anti-colonial activism in South Africa, Gandhi was in fact an imperial collaborator. In 1906, he said, "We are in Natal by virtue of British power. Our very existence depends on it. It is therefore our duty to render whatever help we can." Gandhi's Satyagraha efforts with South African mill workers ironically aimed to expand the business interests of Indian merchants. Despite advocating for Indian rights, Gandhi viewed Africans as inferior and, in 1906, accepted that Indians were beneath whites. Furthermore, Gandhi performed the rituals of poverty while amassing power and wealth, funded by corporate interests. Sarojini Naidu remarked, "If only Bapu [Gandhi] knew the cost of keeping him in poverty!" Despite switching from a suit to Khadi, Gandhi died a wealthy man. In contrast, Ambedkar emerges as a figure of radical authenticity who switched to suit and died in debt. While Gandhi's Salt Satyagraha is widely celebrated, Ambedkar's Mahad Satyagraha—an important rally advocating for Dalits' access to common drinking water—remains lesser known. Between the struggles for salt and water lay a toxic universe of Indian politics.

The two leaders had their first official confrontation at the 1931 Round Table Conference, where Gandhi took issue with Ambedkar's critique of the Indian National Congress, equating

it to an attack on the homeland. Ambedkar famously retorted, "Gandhiji, I have no homeland." Unlike other minorities, Gandhi refused to recognise the untouchables, preferring to see Hinduism collapse rather than allowing them to gain autonomy. When the proposal for a double vote for Dalits and a communal electorate was announced, Gandhi undertook an indefinite hunger strike from prison, pressuring Ambedkar to withdraw the proposal and sign the Poona Pact, 1932. The book highlights that the Poona Pact is often misunderstood and celebrated for the wrong reasons: it did not signify a revolution against caste but instead solidified the impossibility of untouchables nominating their own representatives or forming their own political constituency.

Even in the 21st century, caste continues to predominantly dictate our society. Therefore, the Annihilation of Caste remains as relevant today as it was when first published. The Doctor and the Saint serves as a vital catalyst for critical thinking and action, reminding us that true progress can only be achieved through a deep understanding of our history and a commitment to building a more equitable future. Roy concludes by stressing the urgent need for a radical societal transformation to dismantle this oppressive system. She emphasises, "Not unless we read Babasaheb Ambedkar" can we hope to annihilate caste.

