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Dalit Panthers: Beyond the Battle of the Founders

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Arjun Dangle's memoir of the Dalit Panthers attributes their decline to personality clashes b/w founders. But the deeper crisis was structural: an inherited political culture of personalised authority, doctrinal Ambedkarism, and weak democratic structures that equality movements struggle to overcome

Half a century after its brief but incandescent existence, the Dalit Panthers continue to exercise an extraordinary hold over the political imagination of Dalits, particularly the young. Its very name evokes militancy, defiance, cultural rebellion and the promise of a radically different politics. Few organisations in independent India survived for barely two years and yet acquired such enduring symbolic power. The Panthers remain less an organisation remembered than a possibility repeatedly revisited.

> For readers unfamiliar with the period, it offers an invaluable introduction to one of the most remarkable episodes in post-Ambedkar politics; for those who lived through those years, it revives memories of an extraordinary political moment.

Arjun Dangle's book is an important intervention in the history of that possibility. Dangle, one of the movement's founders and among the foremost Dalit writers in Marathi, sets out to narrate the birth, rise, and collapse of the Panthers from the standpoint of an insider.

The immediate provocation is unmistakable: the book is, in large measure, a response to J.V. Pawar-another founding member-whose multi-volume history of the post-Ambedkar Dalit movement had staked a competing claim over the organisation's legacy. Dangle seeks to correct what he regards as factual distortions and reclaim the record. With both accounts now available in English, a debate once confined to Marathi readers has become accessible to a far wider audience.

The book succeeds admirably as memoir and documentary history. Rich in detail, it reconstructs personalities, debates, organisational decisions, and rivalries with the authority of a participant. For readers unfamiliar with the period, it offers an invaluable introduction to one of the most remarkable episodes in post-Ambedkar politics; for those who lived through those years, it revives memories of an extraordinary political moment.

The significance of that moment deserves emphasis. The Dalit Panthers emerged in Maharashtra in 1972 amidst the political disillusionment that followed B.R. Ambedkar's death and the fragmentation of the Republican Party of India, established in 1957 in accordance with his wishes. Its rise also coincided with a remarkable cultural awakening brought about by modern Dalit literature. Inspired by Ambedkar's emancipatory thought and influenced by the Black literary movement in the United States, a new generation of Dalit writers rejected the reformist idiom of earlier writing in favour of an uncompromising literature rooted in lived experience and animated by the language of resistance.

Appropriately, the movement drew its name and much of its militant symbolism from the Black Panther Party in the US. Although the historical contexts of race in America and caste in India differed fundamentally, both movements articulated a politics of militant resistance, cultural self-assertion and the empowerment of historically oppressed communities.

The Dalit Panthers quickly became far more than another political organisation. It restored confidence to a generation of Dalit youth, revitalised Dalit literary and cultural activism, and transformed the idiom of Dalit politics from one of petition to one of resistance. Its organisational life was brief, but its political and cultural legacy has proved remarkably enduring.

It is precisely because the Panthers came to occupy such an iconic place in the Ambedkarite imagination that the questions raised by Dangle's book assume significance beyond the reconstruction of historical events. The book leaves the reader with a question larger than anything it explicitly sets out to answer: can the history of a political movement be adequately explained through the personalities of its leaders?

> Personal rivalries undoubtedly mattered. But they do not adequately explain either the rise or the fall of the Panthers.

Throughout the narrative, the Panthers' meteoric rise and rapid disintegration are attributed largely to those who led them-charismatic young men who came together, electrified Maharashtra, fell victim to mutual suspicion, and eventually took the organisation down with them.

Personal rivalries undoubtedly mattered. But they do not adequately explain either the rise or the fall of the Panthers. The movement inherited unresolved theoretical and organisational contradictions from post-Ambedkar politics that no amount of charisma could overcome. Dangle's book is therefore important not only for what it tells us, but also for the deeper questions it inadvertently compels us to ask.

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My interest is not merely academic. Living in Siddharth Vihar-the hub of the Panthers-in those days, I witnessed at close quarters the excitement the Panthers generated and had passing acquaintance with many who figure in this narrative. Ironically, those encounters discouraged me from joining the organisation, though I continued to support it financially until I left Maharashtra for the Barauni Oil Refinery in Bihar.

Even afterwards I followed its trajectory closely, watching with growing disappointment as internal discord gave way to schism and then to the familiar fragmentation that has haunted Ambedkarite organisations ever since. Somewhat cynically, I had dismissed the Panthers as a short-lived episode, calling it a "flash in pan" that illuminated the political landscape before disappearing. History, however, judged them very differently.

The Dalit Panthers emerged from a profound historical conjuncture. The fragmentation of the Republican Party of India after Ambedkar's death had created a deep crisis of Ambedkarite leadership. The organisation that was supposed to carry forward his political legacy had instead collapsed into feuding factions, parliamentary opportunism, and gradual irrelevance.

An expanding generation of educated Dalit youth found itself politically homeless. Caste atrocities continued unabated despite constitutional guarantees. Across the world, anti-colonial struggles, Black Power, and the radical movements of the late 1960s had transformed the language of political protest. The Panthers were the product of these historical forces, not merely of the men who founded them.

Understanding their significance requires looking back still further. Towards the end of his life, Ambedkar recognised with increasing clarity that the constitutional safeguards he had fought to secure would primarily benefit a relatively small stratum of educated urban Dalits. The overwhelming majority remained in villages as landless agricultural labourers trapped in relationships of economic dependence that constitutional equality alone could not dissolve. It was this recognition that led him to contemplate a struggle for land-a shift from the politics of representation to the politics of material transformation.

> Their language was confrontation rather than petition, resistance rather than supplication.

The land agitations that followed traced this shift. The struggle at Marathwada in 1953 came at Ambedkar's own instigation. After his death in 1956, Dadasaheb Gaikwad carried the struggle forward. Despite persistent attempts to brand him a communist sympathiser-a charge that would later be levelled against Namdeo Dhasal with equal predictability-Gaikwad launched the historic land satyagraha of 1959 in alliance with the communists and compelled the government to concede important demands.

When implementation faltered, the movement expanded into the nationwide satyagraha of 1964-65, which demonstrated the immense mobilisational potential of a Dalit politics rooted in material demands rather than merely constitutional claims. It scared the Congress, which responded with its co-optation strategy-gradually absorbing, weakening, and eventually dismantling the institutional foundations of independent Dalit politics.

These struggles matter because they illuminate a tension that has shaped Ambedkarite politics ever since. Whenever Dalit mobilisation moved towards questions of land, labour and economic redistribution, it acquired an expansive social character capable of forging wider alliances among the oppressed. Yet such economic struggles were routinely viewed with suspicion within Ambedkarite circles-communist terrain, not Dalit terrain-and the politics of dignity increasingly overshadowed the politics of material transformation.

The book's citation of Rahul Kosambi (p. 231) is especially revealing in this regard. Kosambi observes that the Black Panther Party lost much of its effectiveness within a decade following Stokely Carmichael's ascendancy. Whether or not one accepts the comparison

in its entirety, it serves as a reminder that radical movements can dissipate their transformative potential when sectarianism and ideological dogmatism overwhelm organisational purpose.

The Panthers represented the most powerful attempt to break out of this constriction. They did not merely speak of humiliation and dignity; they spoke of exploitation and power, of social transformation rather than constitutional accommodation. Their language was confrontation rather than petition, resistance rather than supplication.

For a brief moment, Dalit politics appeared capable of escaping the narrow confines into which it had been pushed after Ambedkar's death. The Panther manifesto was intellectually bold: it expanded the category "Dalit" to encompass all oppressed and exploited people, drawing simultaneously on Ambedkar, Marxism, anti-caste radicalism, and Third World liberation struggles. It sought to transcend the limitations of conventional Ambedkarite politics without abandoning its emancipatory core. It was the first serious attempt to rethink Dalit politics for a new historical moment.

That this project faltered is the central fact. Explaining why requires going beyond personalities.

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Dangle's account of the disintegration focuses on the egotism, mutual distrust and autocratic tendencies of Raja Dhale and Namdeo Dhasal. There is truth in this.

Dhale burst into national prominence through his incendiary essay in Sadhana, exposing a society more outraged by the alleged desecration of the national flag than by the routine violation of Dalit women's dignity. Dhasal, a prototype of the proletarian Dalit, had already transformed Marathi literature through *Golpitha*, whose raw, unsparing portrayal of Mumbai's underworld announced one of the most original poetic voices of modern India. Fame came suddenly to both. It would hardly be surprising if such rapid recognition fostered an exaggerated sense of self-importance.

But this explanation only pushes the question one step further. Why do personality conflicts so reliably destroy organisations committed to equality and emancipation? Why do movements founded to challenge hierarchy so consistently reproduce hierarchy within themselves?

> Leaders come to regard themselves not as representatives of a collective but as its embodiment.

The answer lies not in individual psychology but in political culture. Indian society carries a deep historical inheritance of personalised authority-centuries of social organisation in which command flowed from above and obedience from below. Democratic institutions altered constitutional arrangements without eradicating the habits of deference cultivated over generations. Democratic citizenship remains superimposed upon an older social psychology in which authority is personalised rather than institutionalised.

The result is what might be called the Raja-Praja syndrome. Leaders come to regard themselves not as representatives of a collective but as its embodiment. Followers become loyal adherents rather than autonomous political actors whose primary obligation is to strengthen the organisation. Public adulation nourishes the leader's sense of exceptionalism. The assertion of exceptional authority deepens the followers' dependence. Organisations become progressively identified with individuals; criticism of the leader is experienced as betrayal of the cause.

This pattern pervades Indian politics across ideological boundaries-nationalist parties, socialist organisations, communist groups and regional movements have all repeatedly succumbed to it. But its consequences are profoundly different for emancipatory movements than for organisations representing dominant classes.

The latter possess an inherent cohesive force: a shared material interest in preserving the existing social order. Patronage, state power, and entrenched networks of privilege provide a powerful adhesive even when internal rivalries are intense. Leadership disputes seldom threaten the organisation itself because deeper shared interests hold it together.

Movements of the oppressed possess no such adhesive. Their cohesion must be consciously constructed through democratic structures, ideological clarity, and shared strategic purpose. Where these are weak or underdeveloped, personal rivalries quickly acquire organisational significance, leadership becomes personalised, factionalism proliferates, and fragmentation follows almost as a structural tendency rather than an accidental outcome.

Seen in this light, the crisis of the Dalit Panthers was not fundamentally about Dhale or Dhasal. They occupied the stage on which a deeper structural drama was unfolding-one that no exceptional individuals, however talented, could have resolved on their own.

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That drama had a second act, equally important, that the book raises without confronting directly: the peculiar place of Ambedkar in post-Ambedkar politics.

Nearly every significant rupture within the Ambedkarite movement has been justified in the name of fidelity to Ambedkar. The conflict between B.C. Kamble and Dadasaheb Gaikwad was framed as a defence of Ambedkar's legacy against communist contamination. Dhale's conflict with Dhasal was framed in identical terms a generation later.

The pattern repeats with remarkable regularity: every factional dispute eventually becomes a theological controversy over who is the true inheritor of Ambedkar's thought. The substantive political question that provoked the dispute is gradually displaced by competing claims of doctrinal authenticity. It is extraordinary-and profoundly ironic-that two traditions-Ambedkarite and Marxist-committed to the emancipation of the oppressed are persistently made antagonists in this way, when their objectives are so evidently complementary and their common adversary so clearly identifiable.

> Deeply influenced by John Dewey's pragmatism, Ambedkar rejected grand theories of history and a priori truths claiming to reveal the inevitable direction of social development.

The deeper problem is the attempt to convert Ambedkar's intellectual legacy into a closed ideological system. Ambedkar did not leave behind a finished doctrine. His thought evolved continuously in response to changing historical circumstances-scholars have variously located him within liberalism, Fabian socialism, constitutionalism, Buddhism and pragmatism, and none of these labels adequately captures the breadth of his intellectual project. What connected his work was not doctrinal consistency but critical inquiry.

Deeply influenced by John Dewey's pragmatism, Ambedkar rejected grand theories of history and a priori truths claiming to reveal the inevitable direction of social development. He judged ideas by their practical consequences and remained willing to revise institutional arrangements in the light of experience. Liberty, equality, and fraternity were enduring moral commitments; the institutional means of realising them remained always open to revision and experimentation. What Ambedkar bequeathed was a method of inquiry, a democratic sensibility, and a moral orientation-not a manifesto to be applied mechanically to circumstances he never confronted.

Ambedkar himself anticipated the danger of treating his legacy as scripture. In *Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah* he warned explicitly against hero-worship, arguing that following a great thinker does not mean accepting every conclusion as eternally valid. Each generation inherits the achievements of its predecessors in order to move beyond them, not to freeze them into sacred authority.

> Many who proclaim absolute fidelity to Ambedkar practise precisely the hero-worship he regarded as incompatible with democracy and anathema to him.

His famous call to Educate, Agitate, Organise-a Fabián slogan-presupposed precisely such intellectual independence. Education meant cultivating critical reason rather than faithful discipleship; agitation meant questioning injustice rather than repeating inherited formulas; organisation meant collective action by enlightened citizens, not obedience to charismatic authority.

The paradox could scarcely be sharper. Many who proclaim absolute fidelity to Ambedkar practise precisely the hero-worship he regarded as incompatible with democracy and anathema to him. When Ambedkar becomes the final reference point for every contemporary question, political debate is displaced by exegetical debate.

Instead of asking what present conditions demand, organisations ask what Ambedkar would have said about problems that emerged decades after his death. Contemporary political judgement becomes hostage to retrospective textual interpretation. The exercise of independent critical reason-which Ambedkar not only practised but demanded of his followers-is gradually displaced by competitive claims over doctrinal authenticity.

For Dalit politics to recover its transformative potential, it must liberate itself from the self-imposed chains of doctrinal Ambedkarism. The greatest tribute to Ambedkar is not to repeat his conclusions but to emulate his method-to think fearlessly, question relentlessly and act creatively in response to the challenges of one's own age.

The world confronting Dalit politics today differs profoundly from the one Ambedkar inhabited. Globalised capitalism, digital surveillance, artificial intelligence and automation, ecological crisis, and the new configurations of caste within the neoliberal economy have transformed the terrain of democratic struggle in ways that no political thinker of the 1950s could have fully anticipated.

The enduring relevance of Ambedkar lies not in providing ready-made answers to these realities but in demonstrating how they should be confronted: with intellectual courage, empirical inquiry and democratic imagination. Remaining faithful to Ambedkar therefore requires the willingness to move beyond doctrinal Ambedkarism. The greatest tribute to him is not to repeat his conclusions but to emulate his method-to think fearlessly, question relentlessly, and act creatively in response to the challenges of one's own age.

Seen from this perspective, the recurring fragmentation of post-Ambedkar organisations becomes more intelligible. Personal rivalries matter and must be acknowledged. However, they assume destructive force because those organisations lack sufficiently developed democratic structures, because ideological debate is repeatedly transformed into disputes over orthodoxy, and because political legitimacy comes to rest upon proximity to Ambedkar's authority rather than upon the capacity to analyse and respond to contemporary reality.

The crisis is not fundamentally one of personalities. It is a crisis of political theory, organisational design and democratic culture-one that the Panthers inherited rather than created, and that they were unable, despite their extraordinary energy and imagination, to overcome.

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The tragedy of the Dalit Panthers appears in its proper proportions only from this vantage point. The movement did not fail because a handful of gifted individuals quarrelled among themselves. It faltered because it attempted to build a revolutionary politics without fully resolving the theoretical and organisational dilemmas it had inherited.

Its manifesto was among the boldest attempts to rethink Dalit politics after Ambedkar, but conceptual ambition requires organisational embodiment. Charisma ignites rebellion; it cannot substitute for democratic institutions. Anger mobilises the oppressed; it cannot by itself sustain a political project.

The Panthers posed exactly the right questions-how to articulate caste and class without subordinating one to the other, how to combine militant struggle with democratic organisation, how to become the nucleus of a broader emancipatory politics without dissolving the specificity of caste oppression, how to forge alliances without losing political independence-but they did not resolve them. Nor have those questions been resolved since. They haunt every serious attempt to build democratic movements among the oppressed in contemporary India.

> By reopening old controversies, it inadvertently reopens far more important questions that have been neglected for half a century.

Where Dangle's book is least satisfying is precisely here. The explanation remains centred on individuals when the problem was fundamentally structural. Personal rivalries accelerated the collapse, but the conditions that made collapse so likely were embedded in post-Ambedkar politics long before Dhale and Dhasal met. A fuller reckoning would require moving beyond biography to political theory, beyond the psychology of leaders to the sociology of movements, beyond organisational history to the unresolved dilemmas of the tradition itself.

Paradoxically, this is precisely where the book acquires its greatest value. By reopening old controversies, it inadvertently reopens far more important questions that have been neglected for half a century.

Why has post-Ambedkar politics repeatedly failed to build durable democratic organisations? Why have ideological disagreements so reliably ended in organisational disintegration? Why has the language of fidelity to Ambedkar so frequently replaced the exercise of critical reason that Ambedkar himself exemplified? And how might Dalit politics recover the intellectual openness, organisational creativity, and transformative ambition that briefly made the Panthers appear to herald a new historical beginning?

These questions remain not merely unanswered but also largely unasked. So too does the Panther project remain, in its deepest sense, unfinished.

The enduring legacy of the Dalit Panthers lies neither in the brevity of its organisational life nor in the continuing disputes among its founders. It lies in the horizon it briefly revealed-a politics that sought to unite dignity with material emancipation, caste annihilation with broader social transformation, and Ambedkar's democratic radicalism with the struggles of all the oppressed.

That horizon has not been reached. If Dangle's book encourages a new generation to revisit not merely the history of the Panthers but also the unfinished theoretical and organisational questions they bequeathed, it will have rendered a service far greater than resolving the battle of the founders.

The most important history is not the history that has already been written. It is the history that still remains to be made.

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