



Ambedkar's Controversial Views on Indigenous Peoples: A Discussion

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Abstract. *Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar is a luminary who requires no introduction today, for his enduring legacy, ideology and significant relevance continue to inspire not only the Dalit community but also those outside of it. His thoughts resonate widely, transcending the borders of India. Among the numerous facets of Ambedkar recognized by many, his thoughts and position regarding Indigenous Peoples remain largely unrecognized and undiscussed, and I have never come across this discussion in Nepal. Indeed, both Ambedkar and Indigenous Peoples voice common perspectives: de-Brahmanize, de-colonize, de-construct, re-right and re-write. However, despite this shared understanding, there are specific issues with how Ambedkar perceives and describes Indigenous People, as his choice of words are seen as problematic, derogatory and unacceptable. Furthermore, it cannot be justified by merely subscribing to those defensible opinions, arguing that Ambedkar should be understood within his time and context. This critical essay broaches a discussion regarding this particular line of reasoning, evaluating both Ambedkar and his followers, while simultaneously challenging the perception of who is savage and who is civilized*

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Introduction

This critical discussion is based on a lecture I delivered at Banaras Hindu University (BHU) in Varanasi, India. This event was organized by the “Dr. Ambedkar Chair of the Faculty of Social Sciences” at BHU on April 18, 2018. Considering Ambedkar's controversial views on Indigenous Peoples (IPs), I felt compelled to share my BHU lecture with a broader audience to foster further critical discussions surrounding Ambedkar's thought on IPs. In the process, I revised my lecture to suit publication as a journal article, incorporating some of the comments and suggestions from the peer reviewers.

Ambedkar's ideology and views inspire not only Dalits but also many, including IPs. He firmly believed that the annihilation of caste is inevitable and that a meaningful democracy, based on interconnected equality, liberty, and fraternity, can be achieved through peaceful means. He argued that the emancipation of discriminated, excluded, disadvantaged, marginalized, subjugated, oppressed, and exploited groups is possible by adopting a strategy to—educate organize, and agitate. He advised Dalits to give up Marxism and the Hindu religion for their emancipation.

It is said that he contributed to securing the rights of IPs by including scheduled tribes in the Indian Constitution. However, his contributions and specific outlook on IPs are rarely discussed in Nepalese intellectual circles. Interestingly, both IPs and Ambedkar share common perspectives: de-Brahminize, de-colonize, de-construct, re-right, and re-write. Nevertheless, IPs differ from Dalits and other groups, as they possess a unique worldview, a sense of harmony, a collective way of life, and emphasize self-determination, autonomy, self-rule, customary laws, and Indigenous knowledge (For details about the concept of IPs and their rights to self-determination, see Anaya, 2004; Bhattachan, 2012; Danspeckgruber, 2002; Hannum, 1990; Tebtebba, 2010; for the rights of IPs, including Indigenous Women, see ILO 1989; UN, 2007; CEDAW, 2022).

I have divided this essay into two parts: the first, focusing on IPs serious objections to Ambedkar's choice of words in representing them, and the second, analyzing Ambedkar's questionable role in shaping the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian Constitution. I will first critically examine Ambedkar's description of IPs as "primitive," "uncivilized," "savage," "hereditary criminal," and "potential danger" in his undelivered speech, later published in 1936 under the title *Annihilation of Caste*. Ambedkar's attitude toward IPs in this speech has sparked significant concern and opposition from Indigenous leaders and scholars. Therefore, it requires careful analysis by academics and activists associated with Dalit and IPs of Nepal to enhance understanding, clarity, and acknowledgment both historically and in contemporary discussions, considering Ambedkar's views or remarks on IPs.

Anthropology as a discipline, once used—and still used by many—as a colonization tool against IPs, has frequently employed derogatory language toward them. However, the International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), based in Copenhagen, has promoted a transformative approach that honors and respects IPs, rejecting such harmful terminology. Anthropologists are divided into two camps: one, consisting of a few colonizers, and the other, comprised of many decolonizers. One might wonder where Ambedkar stands, given that he was not an anthropologist by training. The classification of society into "savagery," "barbarism," and "civilization" was developed by colonial anthropologists as part of the effort to colonize lands, territories, and resources.

In stark contrast, anthropologists affiliated with IWGIA have rejected such derogatory labels, recognizing IPs as IPs—respecting their distinct collective identities and rights, including self-determination, autonomy, self-rule, and guardianship of lands, territories, and resources; nothing more, nothing less. Additionally, I discuss Ambedkar’s role in the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian Constitution, particularly concerning the Tribals (for IPs) and analyze the relevance of his views on IP both within the Indian and Nepali context.

The core of this article is twofold. First, it argues that Ambedkar erred by uncritically following colonial anthropologists in his depiction of IPs, choosing offensive terms without recognizing their true identities. It urges his followers, supporters, and future generations to correct this mistake and uphold the rights of IPs as outlined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Second, it was Shri Jaipal Singh Munda, not Ambedkar, who played a key role in drafting and including the Fifth and Sixth Schedules in the Indian Constitution. Still, I will demonstrate that Ambedkar’s perspectives on IP, along with his efforts to educate, mobilize, and organize, remain relevant to IPs of South Asia, especially in Nepal, and beyond.

Ambedkar’s Use of Offensive Words Depicting IPs

In this section, I will first discuss Ambedkar’s stance on the representation of IPs, followed by the question of who qualifies as “civilized”. Ambedkar has not written extensively on the Adivasi, Janajati, Tribal, or Aborigine groups, which collectively encompasses the 705 IPs of India. Some scholars contend that Ambedkar held biases against the tribe referencing his 1928 *Simon Commission Report*, his book *Annihilation of Caste*, and his speech entitled “Communal Deadlock and a Way to Solve It” (see Kolge, 2021, p. 80).

The IP pinpointed the most provocative remark in Ambedkar’s speech, *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), where Ambedkar writes,

The recent discussion about the excluded and partially included areas has served to draw attention to the position of what are called the aboriginal tribes in India. They number about 13 millions, if not more. Apart from the questions of whether their exclusion from the new Constitution is proper or improper, the fact still remains that these aborigines have remained in their primitive, uncivilized State in a land which boasts of a civilization thousands of years old. Not only are they not civilized but some of them follow pursuits which have led to their being classified as criminals. Thirteen millions people living in the midst of civilization are still in a savage state, and are leading the life of hereditary criminals! But the Hindus have never felt ashamed of it. This is a phenomenon which, in my view, is quite unparalleled. What is the cause of this shameful state of affairs? Why has no attempt been made to civilize these aborigines and to lead them to take to a more honourable way of making a living? The Hindus will probably seek to account for this savage state of the aborigines by attributing to them congenital stupidity. They will probably not admit that the aborigines have remained savages

because they had made no effort to civilize them, to give them medical aid, to reform them, to make them good citizens. But supposing a Hindu wished to do what the Christian missionary is doing for these aborigines, could he have done it? I submit not. Civilizing the aborigines means adopting them as your own, living in their midst, and cultivating fellow-feeling, in short, loving them. How is it possible for a Hindu to do this? His whole life is one anxious effort to preserve his caste. Caste is his precious possession which he must save at any cost. He cannot consent to lose it by establishing contact with the aborigines, the remnants of the hateful Anaryas of the Vedic days. Not that a Hindu could not be taught the sense of duties to fallen humanity, but the trouble is that no amount of sense of duty can enable him to overcome his duties to preserve his caste. Caste is, therefore, the real explanation as to why the Hindu has let the savage remain a savage in the midst of his civilization without blushing or without feeling any sense of remorse or repentance. The Hindu has not realized that these aborigines are a source of potential danger. If these savages, remain savages they may not do any harm to the Hindus. But if they are reclaimed by non-Hindus and converted to their faiths, they will swell the ranks of the enemies of the Hindus. If this happens, the Hindu will have to thank himself and his Caste System. (Ambedkar, 1936, pp, 99-100, emphasis added)

Ambedkar's use of terms like "aboriginal tribals" and "aborigines" should not be problematic as long as it signifies their sovereignty with collective ownership over lands, territories, and resources in their ancestral lands, their autonomy, and customary self-government systems and laws. His objection to the binary division between caste Hindus and Aboriginal Tribals is valid, but his suggestion that if caste Hindus fail to "civilize" them—implying caste Hindus as "civilized" and denigrating the tribals (IPs) as "savages"—is highly problematic. As Ambedkar notes, the justification for this division is that "Caste is his precious possession which he must save at any cost" (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 99). One could argue that he intends to highlight this problematic narrative propagated by caste Hindus against IPs. However, his statement, "Not only are they... life of hereditary criminals!" (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 99) is, in itself, offensive, contentious, and incites hatred and animosity. The most problematic and widely criticized aspect of Ambedkar's thought is his use of wrong choice of words like "primitive," "uncivilized," "savage," "hereditary criminal," and "potential danger" to describe the "Aboriginal Tribals" and "Aborigines."

Additionally, his portrayal of Hindu "Civilization" and his proposal for a melting pot, in contrast to a diverse or rainbow society, have also sparked controversy. His remarks on the Tribals have been criticized by scholars and Indigenous political leaders as racist, colonialist, prejudiced, offensive, unjust, and highly problematic. For example, Nayak (2015) has criticized Ambedkar's perception of tribals as being rooted in racism and prejudice, and similarly connected the foundation of his ideas of emancipation with Victorian morality and its attainment. Likewise, Nayak has noted that Ambedkar preferred selecting

such perceptions due to the influence of Western standards of rationality and reason. By viewing the tribals in this light, he overlooked the tribal existence that harmonizes with nature. He evaluated tribal reality with his prejudiced judgments.

Anand, the editor of the book *Annihilation of Caste*, which includes annotations and comments on Ambedkar's statement, asserts that Ambedkar's views on Adivasi—officially classified as Scheduled Tribes—are problematic. Although he appears protective and advocates for “civilizing the savages”, describing them as living like “hereditary animals,” he cautions the “Hindus” that the “aborigines are a source of potential danger” (Anand, 2014, p. 248).

Surprisingly, in Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste*, reprinted in the book *Annihilation of Caste (The Annotated Critical Edition)* by B. R. Ambedkar (Ananda, 2014), which features an extensive introduction by Arundhati Roy (2014), there is a conspicuous absence of her criticism or objection to Ambedkar's portrayal of IPs as “savages” and “uncivilized.” This omission speaks volumes about the prevailing mindset of many non-Indigenous academics, intellectuals, and public figures, including both Ambedkar and Arundhati, towards IPs. Scholars and activists who admire and follow Ambedkar might argue that his statements should not be considered problematic but understood within their historical context.

It is no surprise that Western colonizers—whether social scientists like anthropologists, White rulers, Brahmanists,¹ or racist ordinary people—believed they were “civilized” and that IPs were “savages.” So, the question arises today: how could a man who dedicated his life to advocating for marginalized communities hold such views of IPs? How is it possible that someone who openly opposed British colonialism would ultimately support imperial labeling? Who are truly civilized?

These questions reflect the dynamics of politics and the hierarchy of power, intertwined with the mission of colonization, the colonized, the alleged savages, and the so-called civilized. Today, when IPs encounter those derogatory images, such as savages and uncivilized, they ponder the true essence of civilization. In this context, the following are the core illustrations of the categorical constructs that were integral to the civilizing mission directed towards IPs, alluding to the debate I critically challenged in 2009 in one of my publications (see Bhattachan, 2009).

- How can the colonizers who looted IPs, lands, territories, and resources by applying the theories of Terra Nullius, the Regalian doctrine, and Eminent Domain, and by using guns, treaties, and religious texts such as the Bible and Manusmriti, be considered “civilized” or themselves

1 Those who align and advocate for Brahmin ideals.

“savages”? But IPs who are living on their own lands and territories without looting anyone are called “uncivilized” or “savage”?

- How can the colonizers, capitalists, industrialists, and imperialists who destroy the lands, territories, and resources of IPs be considered “civilized” rather than “savage”? Yet, the IPs who safeguard these very lands are labeled as “uncivilized” or “savage”?
- How can IPs who have a cosmovision that all living and nonliving things alike, along with the environment and great spirits, have an equal place and rights to existence in this world be “uncivilized” or “savages”? But, are those who destroy all these “civilized” or not “savage”?
- How can IPs who say we should take from Mother Earth only what we need be called “uncivilized” or “savages”? But, are those with so much greed and unnecessary needs “civilized” and not “savage”?
- How can IPs who want to pass down lands, territories, resources, language, culture, Indigenous knowledge, and their collective way of life as they received from past generations be considered “uncivilized” or “savages”? Yet, others who do not pass on these things are admired as “civilized” and not “savage”?
- How can IPs who preserve and protect forests, water, pasture, mines, biodiversity, and the environment be described as “uncivilized” or “savage”? But those who ravage these precious resources are regarded “civilized” and “not savage”?
- How can IPs who have spiritual relations with nature be “uncivilized” or “savage”? But are those with predatory relations “civilized” and “not savage”?
- How can IPs who are self-reliant be considered “uncivilized” or “savages”? Furthermore, are those who depend on others regarded as “civilized” and “not savage”?
- Are IPs who rely on “self-determined development” considered “uncivilized” or “savage”? But are those pursuing aggressive development “civilized” and “not savage”?
- How can IPs with an egalitarian society be considered “uncivilized” or “savage”? However, are those societies with a hierarchical and graded structure considered “civilized” or “not savage”?
- How can IPs who are gender-sensitive and deeply respect women and two-spirit individuals (sexual minorities) be called “uncivilized” or “savage”? But those societies where patriarchy and violence against women are widespread are considered “civilized” and “not savage”?

- How can IPs, who bear no responsibility for global warming and climate change, be regarded as “uncivilized” or “savage”? Contrarily, how can those who are culpable for these problems be classified as “civilized” and “not savage”?

These questions clearly show that if there should be any definition of “civilized” or “uncivilized” human society, it should be based on respect for Mother Earth and nature, the common well-being, sustainable use of lands and resources, democratic and meaningful collective participation, and representation in collective decision making, restitutive justice, sharing, solidarity, climate justice, and intergenerational transfer of knowledge. It should not be based on colonization, land grabbing, the extraction of minerals, money, profit, and climate injustice.

In a similar vein, one must ponder the extent to which it is justifiable to embrace an overly simplistic and judgmental viewpoint that looms large in our imagination regarding to the “context or time,” as advocated by Ambedkar’s followers, which calls for a thorough critical examination. The answers to this enquiry are likely to polarize individuals, scholars, activists, and policymakers, creating factions in favor of and against Ambedkar and his thoughts on the civilized versus the savage. One may wonder why Ambedkar, a highly perceptive and visionary thinker who lived far ahead of his time, employed derogatory images to describe IPs, and Kogle’s efforts to justify Ambedkar’s unfavorable thoughts on IPs by contending that,

... Ambedkar is not expressing his prejudice against tribes, rather he is stating the existing condition of the aboriginal tribes, criminal tribes and the Untouchables, holding the caste system responsible for their pathetic state... and Ambedkar is not expressing his prejudice against tribes, rather he is stating the existing condition of the aboriginal tribes, criminal tribes and the Untouchables, holding the caste system responsible for their pathetic state. (Kolge, 2021, pp. 82-83)

Attempting to rationalize erroneous thoughts that are bound by their time and context is inherently absurd. Consider, would one seek to justify the actions of Adolf Hitler or other contemporary fundamentalist leaders influenced by their circumstances? Regardless of the time or context, it remains fundamentally misled to defend flawed inspirations. Highlighting the problematic and disparaging position of Ambedkar regarding IP, Sumit (2023), remarks,

There are four flaws identified by [Sashi] Tharoor in Ambedkar’s life. The first one is related to the Adivasis. Tharoor writes that Ambedkar considered Adivasis “savages” who needed “civilising.” He writes, “It demeans Ambedkar to have spoken with language bordering on prejudice and racism about the Adivasi people” ... While arguing so, it seems that Tharoor overlooked the Constituent Assembly debates and even the Constitution, in which Ambedkar included articles to protect the rights of the Adivasis and ensure their representation in the State.

Hence, there was no attempt to understand the development of Ambedkar's thinking on Adivasis. (Sumit, 2023)

Although, understandably, Ambedkar lived during a time when IP issues and movements were inactive worldwide, it is still hard to understand why Ambedkar's view of IPs was so biased, prejudiced, and negative, aligning with Western, White colonizers. We know that anthropology as a discipline was corrupted as an ally of colonizers, as their studies supported the colonizers in claiming ancestral lands, territories, and resources. I can easily imagine that if Ambedkar had lived today and written about IPs, he would not have used the words he preferred to choose then in his *The Annihilation of Caste*.

Ambedkar's Controversial Role in Designing the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian Constitution

Ambedkar's direct role in securing IPs' rights through constitutional provisions in the Fifth and Sixth Schedules is also debated. The Fifth Schedule [Article 24D] includes provisions for managing and controlling Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes, in addition to those covered by the Sixth Schedule. Major elements of the Fifth Schedule for protecting IPs' rights include restrictions on transferring tribal lands to non-tribals and the establishment of Tribal Advisory Councils (TAC) (MoEA, n. d.). The Sixth Schedule relates to the separate administration of tribal regions in the North-East frontier—namely, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram. Its key provisions include the creation of Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) with legislative, executive, judicial, and financial powers, as well as safeguards for tribal lands and resources (MoEA, n. d.).

Highlighting Ambedkar's instrumental role in drafting the Fifth and Sixth schedules, Harshabhardhan writes,

Ambedkar drafted 5th Schedule for the provisions related to the administration and control of Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes and 6th Schedule to deal with the administration of tribal areas in the four northeastern states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram. (Harshabhardhan, 2017, p. 295)

However, Ambedkar's instrumental role in drafting and incorporating these two schedules is highly contested. Jadav (2016), citing M. L. Garasiya, writes that Ambedkar was a Jadhav, belonging to the Hindu Dalit caste, and so, he did not play any active role in these schedules. He pointed out that it was Shri Jaipal Singh Munda, an indigenous leader from Jharkhand, who was instrumental in the drafting of both the Fifth and Sixth Schedules. Garasiya has mentioned that Ambedkar refused to include "Adivasi" in the Constitution due to his fear that IPs may overtake the Dalits. He writes,

While ...Ambedkar didn't utter a single word for the Adivasis in the Constituent Assembly, it was the honourable late Shri Jaipal Singh Munda who, as a leader of Adivasis, put forth the concerns of Adivasis with much force. Respectable

Shri Jaipal Singh Munda was an Adivasi from Jharkhand, ... it was Shri Jaipal Singh who played the most active role for the fifth and sixth schedules, and not Ambedkar. And he had expressed the following in the constituent assembly with much rage: "My Adivasi people have been ignored and suppressed for 6000 years. My people have been forced to live a life of humiliation and discrimination. My Adivasi community has been ill-treated and exploited by the non-Adivasis for centuries. The non-Adivasis have forced the Adivasis to live a banished life since ancient times." Shri Jaipal Singh Munda had put forth the demand to Ambedkar, to include the word "Adivasis" in the constitution, but Ambedkar refused this demand out of the fear that it might lessen the importance of Mahars and Dalits vis a vis the Adivasis. If today as the Adivasis of India we have been isolated in the Constitution of India, it is only because of Ambedkar. (Quoted by Jadhav, 2016)²

Ambedkar failed to recognize tribals as IPs as demanded. A year after Ambedkar's death, India ratified the Convention Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Populations (Convention No. 107) of 1957. However, India did not ratify its more advanced version, the ILO Convention Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries (ILO Convention No. 169) (ILO, 1989). Had Ambedkar recognized Adivasi, rather than Tribals, in the Fifth and the Sixth Schedules, it is possible that the Indian state would have ratified ILO Convention No. 169; however the approaches in C. 107 and C. 169 are fundamentally different. The former considers IPs as populations or, at most, as individuals, suggesting individual rights but failing to recognize them as peoples with collective rights, thereby aiming to assimilate them into non-Indigenous society and culture. In contrast, the latter acknowledges IPs as distinct peoples with collective rights.

The troubling part is that the Indian Government's position at the UN Working Group on Indigenous Peoples (UNWGIP) has been that the Scheduled Tribes (STs) are not IPs and that "the entire population of India ... [is] indigenous to the country," and the use of the term "self-determination" including secessions as IPs' rights raise eyebrows of the Indian Government (Bhengra et al., 1999, p. 4).

Alan Phillips writes, "The Indian government, however, despite having ratified the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 107 on Indigenous and Other Tribal and Semi-Tribal Populations, denies the STs recognition as IPs, insisting that the entire population of India is indigenous" (Phillips, 1999, p. 3). Bhengra et al. believed that "the Adivasis were already present in the Indian subcontinent at the time of the Aryan invasion" and that the "Aryans conquered some Adivasis and made them slaves" (p. 4). They further noted that the IPs of the Northeast region were unaffected by

2 This text in Jadav's article is italicised as a translation from Garsiya's original write-up in the Hindi language.

such invasion and were able to maintain their distinct collective identity and customary practices. They criticize Hindu fundamentalists' claim that the Adivasis of India are Hindus and that the tribals or IPs are the "Vanvasi," i.e., forest dwellers, implying they are not IPs (Bhengra et al., 1999, p. 4).

The scholars, followers, and well-wishers should acknowledge the vital role of Shri Jaipal Singh Munda, an Indigenous leader from Jharkhand, in drafting the Fifth and Sixth Schedules. Indigenous leaders and scholars should also credit Ambedkar, as the Chair of the Constitution Drafting Committee, for including these schedules in the Constitution enacted in 1950.

Considering Ambedkar's work for the welfare of IPs, Harshavardhan (2017) believes that Ambedkar viewed the socio-economic and political statuses of both STs and Scheduled Castes as identical, as both groups needed constitutional and legal security to address their issues. He notes that Article 164 concerns the appointment of a Minister-in-charge for Tribal welfare, Article 244 relates to the administration of scheduled and tribal areas, Article 275 pertains to the Union Government's grants to the states for their welfare, and Article 335 focuses on the protection and promotion of their access to services and posts. These provisions were made to secure the rights of Tribals, for better access to resources and opportunities, effectively supporting their autonomy.

In 2007, the UNDRIP, adopted by the UN General Assembly, recognized a distinct identity, collective way of life, and collective rights, including self-determination, autonomy, self-governance, ownership and control over lands, territories, and resources, free prior and informed consent, customary laws, mother tongues, indigenous knowledge, and more (UN, 2007). Although the constitutional provisions for IPs made by Ambedkar seem satisfactory, they are not enough.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that a significant problem lies in Ambedkar's description of IPs as "savages," "hereditary criminals," and "uncivilized," which he cannot correct with an apology due to his physical absence. Visionary collective and individual change makers, leaders, statesmen, creative writers, and pathfinders who look back and look forward for the common well-being, respecting the existence and dignity of all, both living and nonliving beings do not follow the crowd, racists, colonizers, patriarchs, dictators, or the Brahminists no matter what, and how much it may cost in doing so.

In the case of depiction of IPs, Ambedkar failed to recognize the dignity of IP, and it has become part of history and collective memory. However, all of Ambedkar's living followers should work to correct his mistake by supporting and advocating for IPs' rights as outlined in the UNDRIP. This

includes recognizing their distinct collective identity and way of life, self-determination, autonomy, customary self-governance, laws, ownership, and control over lands, territories, and resources, as well as promoting Indigenous feminism and protecting Indigenous knowledge. While the core ideas of Ambedkar should stay intact, any anomalies, contradictions, or errors—such as his problematic views on IPs—must be addressed as they arise. Dalits, IPs, and other marginalized or excluded groups should unite and work together to end Brahmanism, Hindu hegemony, and Marxism in the pursuit of dignity and social justice for all. I aspire that this discussion will encourage additional dialogue regarding the perspectives on IPs in both India and Nepal.

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Author's Bio

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