

## Retelling of Folk Narratives in Creating a Dalit Public Sphere: Swami

### Achhutanand's *Ramrajya Nyaya*

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#### Abstract

The Adi Hindu movement was founded by Swami Achhutanand as an anti-caste non-Brahmin movement in the 1920s. The movement created a public discursive space that challenged the dominant Brahmanical Hindi public sphere and helped shape the colonial government's policy vis-a-vis the Dalits.

Swami Achhutanand's writings are situated in the transformational period in the social and political history of India that saw the emergence of Hindi Dalit Writing. Drawing from the oral folk narratives of Ramayana, his *Ramrajya Nyaya* and *Mayanand Balidan*, are a subaltern reading of the popular Hindu myths. For instance, in *Ramrajya Nyaya* he not only questions Ram's blind obedience to the varnashram dharma in the killing of Shambuka, the dalit ascetic, but also demystifies and debunks the *ramrajya* that Gandhi was propagating as the ideal society. His use of the performative aspect of theatre in disseminating the Adi-Hindu ideology is an essential part of what contributes to the making of the dalit public sphere. Through poems that he recited in public gatherings, songs that were sung during satsangs, and theatre performances, Swami Achhutanand created a Dalit discourse that became part of a larger Dalit counter-public.

The article will examine how Swami Achhutanand drew on the popular Brahmanic folklore of Ramrajya in contrast to other subaltern intellectuals who drew on non-Brahmanic traditions to envision an earthly utopia in such works as Ravidas's *Begumpura*, Tukaram's *Pandharpur*, Kabir's *Amrapur* and *Premnagar*, Periyar's *Dravidasthan*, Phule's *Bali Rajya*, and Ambedkar's *Navayana Buddhism*. This dalit public sphere was in constant conflict with the dominant Brahmanic public sphere and presented alternate and oppositional ideas about its own identity, interests and needs.

#### Keywords:

Dalit Public Sphere; Achhutanand; Ramayana; Retelling; Folk Narratives

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The Adi Hindu movement founded in the 1920s by Swami Achhutanand was an anti-caste non-Brahman movement. Through this movement Swami Achhutanand created an alternative dalit narrative to counter the brahmanical hindu hegemony. There have been various movements that challenged the Brahmanical order of *varnashram dharma* from time to time: from Lokayata, Jainism and Buddhism in the sixth century BCE to the Bhakti movement from the eighth to the eighteenth-century CE and the 'Non-Brahman Movement' of Jotibarao Phule, Periyar, Narayan Guru, and Ambedkar in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Mani 2005, Omvedt 2011, Raj Kumar 2019). These subaltern intellectual activists and leaders drew on non-Brahmanic traditions to envision an earthly utopia, a place with no exploitation, no hierarchy, and freedom for all: *Begumpura* for Ravidas, *Pandharpur* for Tukaram, *Amrapur* and *Premnagar* for Kabir, *Dravidasthan* for Periyar, *Bali Rajya* for Phule and *Navayana Buddhism* for Ambedkar. All these anti-caste intellectuals and leaders, through their writings, contributed to the creation of a Dalit discourse that became part of a larger Dalit public sphere. This dalit public sphere was in constant conflict with and competed against the dominant Brahmanic public sphere and presented alternate and oppositional ideas about its own identity, interests, and needs.

Many dalit-bahujan intellectuals, from Namdev, Kabir, Ravidas and Tukaram through Phule, and Ambedkar have envisioned a utopia - an ideal society that is casteless, classless, prosperous. Ravidas's Begumpura is one such city - "a city without sorrow, with no taxes or toil, no exploitation, no hierarchy, and freedom for all to walk anywhere... there is no king or temple" (Omvedt 268). Ravidas chose a Persian name for his utopia - Begampura - a city without sorrow. Similarly, other Bhakti poets chose non-Brahmanic symbols - Pandhari over Vaikuntha, the goodness of Bali Raja over Vamana. Kabir combined Ram and Allah in many couplets making it clear that his Ram is not the Vishnu avatar Ramchandra.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw the emergence of a number of social reform movements in India such as Brahmo Samaj (1828) by Raja Rammohan Roy, Arya Samaj (1857) by Dayanand Saraswati, anti-untouchability movements by Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Swami Vivekananda, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, and M.K. Gandhi (Raj Kumar 2019). These movements, mostly led by Brahmins, aimed at taking

Hinduism back to the glorious Vedic period of *varnashram dharma*. The social reform movements, though talking about widow-remarriage and abolition of sati, inter-dining and temple entry for lower castes, did not address the issue of abolition of caste. The need for another approach to annihilate caste was felt by the leaders of the anti-caste movements– not a “reform in the present structure... but a total smashing up of the entire oppressive structure, ideological and material” (Deshpande 20-1). To smash the ideological structure, it was crucial to create a counter mythology, a counter narrative that took away the inevitability of the social division of society along caste lines. Manu had made varnashram a God given system that could not be subverted. Anyone who crossed the line had to be punished - this was Dharma. The anti-caste intellectuals understood the significance of creating a counter history and a separate knowledge system to understand the past. That alone could have challenged the brahmanical stronghold over the popular imaginary of the common man. Instead of following the reformist approach they advocated the reconstruction of the entire socio religious system that propagated injustice and discrimination.

Jotiba Phule (1827-90) created a Dalit counter mythology in *Gulamgiri* with the basic contention that ‘just as India went through a phase of British colonisation, it had previously passed, at various stages of its history, through brahmanical colonialism’ (Mani 298).) He linked the oppressive present with the historical past and created a “counter myth, an egalitarian golden past of [their] own, anchored in the Indus Valley civilization, to debunk the myth of the Vedic golden age” (Mani 330). Swami Achhutanand, called the “ascetic reformer” by R. S. Khare in *The Untouchable as himself*, also “advocated a profound reform of the entire cultural order that bred social discrimination” (82). Through the Adi-Hindu movement he made attempts at creating a new socio-religious and political identity for the dalits. He revived the radical traditions of Kabir and Ravidas, and asserted an autochthonous identity of a pre-Vedic egalitarian religion of the original inhabitants whom he called Adi Hindus, the ancestors of Dalits. He claimed that the Aryans conquered the Adi Hindus by deceit and reduced them to slavery. “Those who believed in equality were ranked lowest. The

Hindus and untouchables have since always remained poles apart" (Khare 1984, 85). He popularised this sentiment in a poem:

'An Open Rebuke' ('Khari Fatkaar')

I have understood what we are to each other

You are my old foe and you keep playing out your animosity

From North Pole, via Tibet, you barged into India

Usurped everything with deceit and force,

You rained your wrongs upon me.

I wandered homeless in the wilderness,

And when I came back you cruelly shooed me away, calling me untouchable.

Your stringent laws made me an outcaste

And banished me to a dwelling outside the village (Khari 127).

R. S. Khare sums up Swami Achhutanand's ideology in *The Untouchable as Himself: Identity, Ideology, and Pragmatism Among the Lucknow Chamars*:

The cobweb of Hindu scriptures, deities, incarnations, temples and Brahman priests is so intricate and pervasive that it has imprisoned the Hindu within his family and jatis, and consigned the Untouchable to the bottom. Since there have been no truths in this cobweb – from Manu down to Gandhi, the Untouchable has to take the lead on his own. The Hindus have suppressed and destroyed all critical literature produced by the Untouchable intellectuals from ancient times until recently. Hence, the Untouchable must start rebuilding his knowledge, moving carefully from the recent to the remote past (85).

This anti-caste sentiment soon became a movement that spread across the state. By 1924 Adi-Hindu Sabhas had been established in Kanpur, Lucknow, Benaras, and

Allahabad with an aim to propagate Adi-Hindu religion. Every Sabha had preachers and teachers in much the same way as Christian missionaries and Arya Samajis had. These preachers regularly visited the villages of the Untouchables and preached about Adi-Hindu religion. Nandini Guptoo (2006) has quoted the 'police Abstracts of Intelligence' to show that huge meetings of Adi-Hindu movement were held at Kanpur in 1925, at Allahabad in 1926, and at Lucknow in April 1927. All these meetings were presided over by Swami Achhutanand and were attended by the Untouchables in large numbers.

Born in 1879 in a village called Umri in Mainpuri district, Uttar Pradesh, in a chamar family, Achhutanand was given the name Hiralal. He received his early education in a military cantonment and by the age of fourteen he had learned to read and write in Urdu and English. He became a Kabirpanthi and a wandering ascetic and during his travels he learnt several languages (Sanskrit, Bengali, Gujarati, and Marathi) and gathered wide ranging experiences. He was attracted towards Arya Samaj and became an active member of the Samaj. As an Arya Samaji *pracharak* he came to be known as Hariharanand. But soon he left the Samaj (Jigyasu). At a large gathering of Dalits in Meerut in 1917 he said, "Till now I believed that the Arya Samaj was without social discrimination and that is why I served it with all my energy. But I was in the dark for so many years. Now I know that it is a deception. Its aim is to make all Hindus slaves of the Vedas and the Brahmins" (Raj 19). He argued that the Samaj did not aim to abolish untouchability and that *shuddhi* was a cunning ploy to perpetuate the hold of the higher castes over the untouchables. "Its professions of purification", declared Achhutanand, "are a clever fraud and a clever verbal gimmick of the varna system" (Gooptu 1993).

Swami Achhutanand set up the Adi-Hindu Press in Kanpur in 1925. He is considered the founding father of Hindi Dalit literature and journalism. He published the *Pracheen Hindu* magazine (1922-23) and brought out the *Adihindu* magazine from Kanpur (1924 to 1932). Through his writings he created a public arena that allowed his dalit audience to reflect on their own subjectivity and to discuss issues important to

them. In 'Adi vansha ka danka' he gives a call to the dalits to remember their lost glory and to reclaim their rightful place as the masters of this land:

'Call for Adi-Vansha' ('Adi-vansha ka danka')

Sound the call for Adi-Vansha,

Wake the people from their slumber.

We are the original inhabitants of the land of Hind.

We are free and we are wise

And keenly aware of our rights.

Strengthen the organisation of the community

Sound the clarion call for Adi-Vansha.

Be wary of the trap of these looters,

It's a fight for our rights, be courageous.

Tighten your girdle and stand your ground,

Set right all the wrongs and carry on.

Wake the people from their slumber (Adi vansha<sup>123</sup>).

Thus, Achhutanand's Adi-Hindu movement presented a counter narrative to the Caste-Hindu reform movements that were prevalent at the turn of the century. Through his monthly magazine, poems, and folk theatre he created a popular Dalit discourse that challenged the dominant Vedic Hindu narrative. Even his name, Achhutanand, 'the one who is blissful in being untouchable', is a symbol of resistance to the semantics of untouchability.

Swami Achhutanand mobilised dalits through public meetings, songs, plays, and writings. There is a strong performative aspect to his movement. Kanwal Bharti credits Swami Achhutanand with the writing of the first plays in Hindi Dalit literature

(2019). In his plays, *Ramrajya Nyaya* and *Mayanand Balidan* he does a subaltern reading of the popular Hindu myths. For instance, in *Ramrajya Nyaya* he not only questions Rama's blind obedience to the varnashram dharma in the killing of Shambuka, the dalit ascetic, but also demystifies and debunks the *ramrajya* that Gandhi was propagating as the ideal society. For Achhutanand the stability, harmony, and idealised hierarchy that it symbolised was just a mask for exploitation of the shudras and atishudras. His use of the performative aspect of theatre in disseminating the Adi-Hindu ideology is an essential part of what contributes to the making of a public sphere. He retells folktales and mythologies using popular genres of natak, qawwali, bhajan, ghazal, doha, sawaiya, lavani, marsiya.

*Ram Rajya Nyaya or Shambuka Shudra-muni Balidan* by Achhutanand is a retelling of the popular story of the killing of Shambuka as narrated in the Valmiki Ramayana, Book 7, the 'Uttarkanda', sargas 73-76. It would be useful to look at the original text that presents the story of Shambuka muni. Three sargas that set the scene for Shambuka vadh are paraphrased, and the key sarga is presented in full:

(73) During the reign of Rama, an old Brahman comes to him with his dead son in his arms. The Brahman mourns and accuses him of having committed some sin due to which his son has died. (74) When Rama calls a meeting of sages for advice, sage Narada tells him that the cause of the untimely death of the Brahman's son is a shudra violating the varnashrama dharma. (75) The king decides to look for the culprit and undertakes a tour and finds an ascetic in meditation and asks who he is.

(76) Hearing the [inquiring] words of Rama of imperishable exploits, that ascetic, his head still hanging downwards [as part of his austerities] answered:— 'O Rama, I was born of a Shudra alliance and I am performing this rigorous penance in order to acquire the status of a God in this body. I am not telling a lie, O Rama, I wish to attain the Celestial Region. Know that I am a Shudra and my name is Shambuka.' As he was yet speaking, Raghava [Rama], drawing his brilliant and stainless sword from its scabbard, cut off his head. The Shudra

being slain, all the Gods and their leaders with Agni's followers, cried out, 'Well done! Well done!' overwhelming Rama with praise, and a rain of celestial flowers of divine fragrance fell on all sides, scattered by Vayu. In their supreme satisfaction, the Gods said to that hero, Rama: — 'Thou hast protected the interests of the Gods, O Highly Intelligent Prince, now ask a boon, O beloved Offspring of Raghu, Destroyer of Thy Foes. By thy grace, this Shudra will not be able to attain heaven!' (Shastri 583-84)

Achhutanand's play focuses on the idea of Nyaya (justice) as understood in Ram Rajya. In the retelling, the play, at first, establishes the long history of the story of Shambuka as narrated in the mainstream folkloric tradition. Having established itself as part of the well-established tradition, the play then goes on to question and subvert the celebrated idea of Nyaya in Ram Rajya. In the Avtaranika (Prologue) the dialogue between the Sutradhar and Nati goes as such:

SUTRADHAR. I present to you today a play that Maharshi Valmiki has written about in the Uttarkand of his *Ramayana*, that Mahakavi Bhavbhuti has narrated in his epic *Uttar Ramcharit*, and which has also been mentioned in Bengal and Dravid *Ramayana*. That same ancient story is now presented as a play written by the founder of the Adi Hindu Movement Swami Achutananda 'Harihar'. By presenting this historic play today we will expose the discriminatory nature of Ramrajya nyaya.

NATI. Yes, let's present the very same play. This performance will have an impact on the audience when they learn of the dark laws of the Aryas that brought about the downfall of the Adi Hindu community. I will help you with this presentation. I think it will be good if, before the play is presented, you give a brief history of the theme to the audience.

SUTRADHAR. Very good, dear, you are very accomplished. I take your advice and present a summary of the play in the form of a song.

Ascetic Shudramani Shambuka did undertake so grand a deed



To ascend into heaven in his bodily state indeed  
The enraged brahman perceived the danger in this very act  
The shudra's success would bring misfortune and shame for a fact  
They plotted to bring an end to this endeavour so evil  
He deserved to lose his life for his intention so ill  
No shudra dare try again what's just meant for the ascetic holy  
Only serve us here forever for that is heaven for the lowly  
This injustice will this play demonstrate here for all  
The plot to make our people fall is here to see for all  
...  
See how they gather force anew to bring Ramrajya again  
To enforce through deceitful force Manu's dark laws again  
But people's will and rule for all is just what now we need  
We must make all people see Ram's discriminating unjust deed.  
(Ramrajya 82, 83)

In Act 1 of the play, we see Rishi Vashishtha, the Rajpurohit (court priest) of Rama's court, telling the king to punish Shambuka:

RISHI VASHISHTHA. Listen Rama, on the banks of river Godavari, a shudra by the name of Shambuka is performing the tasks assigned to Brahmins and not doing his designated tasks. He is doing penance and attempting to go to

heaven. He has broken the hierarchy of the ordained social order and is preaching to the lower castes about their Adi dharma. Rama, you have to punish this varnashrama-dharma-opposing sinner by beheading him! The brahman's son will come back to life the moment Shambuka is punished (89).

The play is not only about the injustice that was meted out to Shambuka but also establishes a distinct Adi Hindu identity and its antiquity before the advent of the Aryas. When Shambuka's wife, Tungabhadra, addresses him as Aryaputra, just as Brahman women would address their husbands, Shambuka tells her, "I am not an Aryaputra but am an indigenous inhabitant of Bharata". He goes on to assert, "I do not wish to identify myself as an Arya Brahman and thus extinguish my Adi lineage and Adi dharma". He further states "The truth is that Adivanshi people are the gurus of the Aryas" (94, 95).

When his wife asks him, "Why have you vowed to disseminate knowledge against the Manu dharma?"

SHAMBUKA. "I do not consider the authority of any scripture that has been composed without consultations with us of the adi lineage. This Manusmriti is beneficial only for the Brahman, Kshatriya and Vaishya. It has reduced us Adivanshis to Shudra, Antajya and has imposed inhuman laws upon us. It has deprived us of all human rights and compels us to lead a life worse than that of animals. I do not consider such texts as texts of dharma but rather call them adharmic texts and sinful texts" (p 96).

He then sings a Qawwali - 'Manusmriti burns and consumes us' that captures the exploitative nature of the *varnashram dharma* as encoded in *Manusmriti*:

*'Manusmriti Sears and Consumes Us' ('Manusmriti humko jala rahi hai')*

*Night and day this Manusmriti sears and consumes us,*

*Does not let us rise, pushes us down.*

*It makes the brahmans and the Kshatriyas lord over us,*

*And instructs us to wear only 'hand me downs'.*

*Doesn't allow us to gather wealth, and snatches away whatever little we have,*

*Then hurts us with names that belittle us.*

*Treats us worse than dogs, and cats, and flies,*

*Alas! It then banishes us outside the village.*

*Without wages it yokes us with the oxen,*

*And adds insults and beatings to our lot.*

*Forces unpaid labour and keeps us barely fed,*

*Our children go hungry, what atrocity is this.*

*I will say this to Rama, no good will come to you,*

*Says Harihar, if the hapless you oppress. (Manusmriti 97)*

In questioning the scriptural authority, Shambuka also constantly points out the deeds and actions of Rama to show the inaccuracies and inconsistencies of his concept of nyaya. The questioning of nyaya is in itself the questioning of the very foundation of Ramrajya.

RAMA. O sage Shambuka, you must have realised who I am and the purpose of my visit. I am Rama, the invincible Arya king. You are a shudra and yet you have gone against varnashrama dharma to do austerities and meditation. You have violated the decorum of Arya dharma and this act has caused affliction to the Brahmans. On the order of Maharishi Vashistha I have come to give you the death penalty. Prepare to die.

SHAMBUKA. Death sentence! Lord, what have I done to deserve the death sentence? I have not indulged in any violence, have not killed anybody, haven't stolen, haven't committed adultery, haven't robbed or kidnapped anyone, haven't oppressed anyone. I'm only working on improving myself and helping my brothers find a path out of their misery (99-100).

Referring to the accusation that by setting himself up for meditation despite being a shudra Shambuka has violated the Arya code which has resulted in the death of the son of a brahman, Shambuka asks King Rama, "Do you really believe that because of me there is a famine in the land and because of my penance a brahman's young son has died? O Rama, such irrational statements do not sit well with you... and what kind of nyaya is it in which the accused is not given a warning nor is he given an opportunity to defend himself but is rather given the death sentence? Never has such a nyaya been witnessed in any kingdom. It is indeed a unique nyaya!" (100).

Tungabhadra accuses Rama, "I had hoped that you would deliver justice to the needy but your unprecedented act of injustice leaves me dumbfounded" (101).

What Shambuka finally says before his death could well be the gist of Swami Achhutananda's Adi dharma movement:

I have done no wrong. All I have done is to educate my people about their indigenous lineage, knowledge, and the upholding of their rights. I have only restored to them the rights that were inhumanly snatched from them by the brahmans. I have disregarded the selfish principles of the Manu texts and have emphasised on the truthful principles of Nature. Raghunath, if you wish to give me the death penalty then do so. I am ready to sacrifice myself for dharma (102).

*Ramrajya Nyaya* was also given the alternative title *Sacrifice of Shambuka (Shudra Muni)*. Rather than narrating the killing of Shambuka by Rama, the play sets itself up to portray a more voluntary acceptance of death by Shambuka in a self-sacrificial spirit for the defence of Adi Dharma. Shambuka is devoid of fear when Rama announces that he has come to impose the death- penalty on Shambuka for having defied brahmanical religious laws. He calmly defends his actions and says he is willing

to embrace death rather than renege on his Adi dharma. Just before he is beheaded by Rama, Shambuka sings:

What is it to be a martyr for the cause of Dharma, come learn from me

What is it to give up one's own life so painfully, come learn from me  
(*Ramrajya* 102).

When Rama asks Shambuka whether he intends to physically defend himself against the sentence that Rama is about to execute, Shambuka calmly and quite satirically replies: "Why call me for a fight when you come with the intention of punishing me? Shed the blood of a harmless ascetic and redeem the religion of the Aryas!" (101).

By narrating the story as the sacrifice of Shambuka and not as that of his killing, Achhutanand bestows the character with an agency to determine his own fate. Shambuka is no longer just an offender who is killed as punishment, but is a martyr unafraid of death and ready to defy the injustice of the Arya dharma that King Rama is made to illogically defend in the play. Through the character of Shambuka Achhutanand inspires the dalits to rise above the experience of having been crushed for centuries and find their own voice.

In folkloric traditions the spectator is not merely an onlooker but someone who is a part of the performance. In *Ramrajya Nyaya* the performative aspect of folk tradition is preserved - the spectators are encouraged to join in the singing at various points during the performance. The concluding Kaumi Marsiya is recited by everyone as they exit:

Kaumi Marsiya (National Dirge)

Suffer not such oppression my friends

Lay down your life for the jaati.

The upper castes are your real tormentors, for centuries now they have oppressed us,

A state worse than that of the animals, to which they have completely reduced us.

When it's time for counting they always say, we are none but one and are one nation,

To keep their own numbers high and intact, what brilliant policy and solution.

We who are the makers of god's temples, they make us create their god's images,

But we are not allowed in the temples, their gods so abhor us in those places.

Crush their pride come throw it down the pit,

Lay down your life for the jaati (Kaumi 108).

*Ramrajya Nyaya* elucidates the tensions of a critically transformational period in the social and political history of India. Achhutanand's retelling uses the oral tradition to create a narrative to support his socio-political vision that stood at a critical place to negotiate between the anti-caste movement and the overarching nationalist movement which was largely seen as perpetuating upper caste hold on society. G Aloysius, in *Nationalism without a Nation in India*, points out that the nationalist leaders aimed for 'cultural nationalism' that implied a change of power without changing the basic structure of society. The anti-caste intellectuals, on the other hand, sought a 'political nationalism' that laid emphasis on equality. Through a subaltern reading of the Shambuka episode in the Valmiki *Ramayana* he not only questions Rama's blind obedience to the varnashrama dharma in the killing of Shambuka but also demystifies and debunks the *ramrajya* that Gandhi was propagating as the ideal society in the 20th century. Through this retelling Achhutanand transforms a popular religious text into a public assertion and a call for action.

## Conclusions

The retelling of folk narratives plays a crucial role in shaping Dalit identity by reclaiming historical agency, contesting hegemonic discourses, and asserting cultural autonomy. These narratives function as counter-histories, challenging dominant caste representations and offering alternative frameworks for self-identification. Through reinterpretation, Dalit communities not only preserve their lived experiences but also

subvert the ideological constructs imposed upon them by the upper-caste literary and historical traditions.

Furthermore, the act of retelling folk narratives fosters a dynamic public sphere where marginalized voices find expression, solidarity, and resistance. The intersectionality of caste, class, and oral traditions reinforces the need for a decolonized epistemology in literary and cultural studies. The engagement with folklore allows Dalit writers and activists to inscribe their histories into mainstream discourse, ensuring that their struggles and aspirations are neither erased nor co-opted.

Ultimately, the reconstruction of Dalit identity through folk narratives is an act of socio-political defiance and empowerment. By reinterpreting these stories, Dalits not only reclaim their past but also reshape their present and future. This continuous dialogue between folklore and identity formation highlights the transformative potential of literature in dismantling entrenched social hierarchies and fostering an inclusive, egalitarian society.

Note: All translations from Hindi, unless mentioned otherwise, are done by me.

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