

Centre for Jawaharlal Nehru Studies

Extension lecture Series

What is Ritual Citizenship? A Question of Performance and Identity

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21st March, 2017, Tuesday, 2.30 pm

Venue:

CJNS Committee Room, Noam Chomsky Complex

Abstract: In the 1927 Mahad Satyagraha B.R. Ambedkar said that it was not as if drinking from the forbidden tank of Chavadar in Mahad was going to make the Mahars “immortal”. The extension of ritual prohibition to the greater social space so as to impose Brahmanical Law on ‘life’ *and its transgression* was not, according to Ambedkar, the main focus of Mahad. It was to set up the “norm of equality”, an unprecedented *intervention* in Indian history. It is noteworthy that he used Gandhi’s epochal word “Satyagraha” in 1927 – he had also used it earlier in Nipani in 1926 – to signify the affirmation of a “new truth”, the unprecedented truth of equality.

In the decade following, with the Round Table Conference, the Poona Pact and the publication of *Annihilation of Caste* in 1936, the Gandhi-Ambedkar debate was, as if, *staged* in history. The Mahatma’s small, strong voice urged for an *immemorial truth* which supports the philosophy of (Indian) history as (ritual) theatre and, for the sake of its *purification* from untouchability, indeed demands transgression of certain caste-laws. Ambedkar is sceptical of Gandhi, the transgressor as purifier, because he desires to *exit* from the immemorial truth which, in Gandhi’s purified vocabulary, retains the name “Hindu”. Such exit must be ontological and its point of arrival must be the historical declaration of a “new truth”, an unprecedented and *new satyagraha*. The paper will make some notes oriented to these issues in relation to D.R. Nagraj’s hermeneutic of the Gandhi-Ambedkar debate and the recent personifications of history, the ‘virtuoso’ of truth (Gandhi) and the ‘pathologist’ of lies (Ambedkar) by Arundhati Roy.

Soumyabrata Choudhury is Associate Professor at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU. He has authored *Theatre, Number, Event: Three studies on the relationship of sovereignty, power and truth* and articles on ancient Greek liturgy, the staging of Ibsen, Nietzsche, Schiller and Hegel. He’s directed and acted in theatre productions based on the works of Dostoevsky, Shakespeare, Premchand, Mudraraksha, Artaud, Buchner, Kafka and Prakash. His current research involves a detailed reading of B.R. Ambedkar’s works in the light of their political and philosophical implications.

All are welcome