

The Modern Man

Review by Anisha Debbarman

On December 19th, 2024, the Rajya Sabha (Upper House) of the Indian State Assembly began a highly divisive discussion on Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar (endearingly known as Dr B.R. Ambedkar or Babasaheb) and his legacy in the country. Questions were raised about the legitimacy of Dr Ambedkar as an eminent political figure. These political discussions raised among several contemporary intelligentsia centered mainly on the question: *“Where is Ambedkar today?”*

Beyond the rhetoric and public outcry associated with his image, there is a growing impatience among people to understand Ambedkar’s significance. While he is etched in the collective memories of several young Indians as a crusader of justice, dedicating his life towards uplifting the lives of Dalits (ex-Untouchables), women, and other minorities, there are instances of public derision associated with his public image in India. As recently as January 28th, a statue of Dr Ambedkar was vandalized. Within the confines of these recent events, an argument could be raised again, challenging the contemporary rhetoric: *“Where is Ambedkar today and why should you take the time to understand his journey?”*

The Modern Man is a theatre play-in-the-making by Raminder Kaur, enacted by a talented cast and produced by Sohaya Visions. It is a timely remembrance of an eminent Indian public figure, whose posthumous presence in history continues to inspire a growing generation of young public reformers, educators and academics. Recognized by his iconic glasses and signature blue blazer and red tie, several iconographies of Dr Ambedkar are embedded in crucial discussions surrounding caste politics and identity in

India.¹ Whether it be caste, tribal, workers' or women's rights, it would be difficult to understand equality in India without emphasizing Ambedkar's vision and writings. Thus, it can be an incredibly challenging task to recast a visionary figure in the eyes of the public. To many, he is an icon whose drive for social reform and this lifelong dedication for change often overshadowed his own personal life as an economist, jurist, politician, husband, and father.

Through this play, we are introduced to Ambedkar's life in the UK before returning to India -- his friends, family, and political relationships with key Indian leaders especially Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. While Ambedkar undertook the Herculean task of being the main person to author the Indian Constitution, he was also challenged with overcoming health issues and dealing with personal losses. Such instances of Dr Ambedkar's life can only be revisited through the people who truly knew him rather than political historians - which *The Modern Man* does a remarkable job at conveying through an emotionally engaging, sometimes funny, and richly informing play.

Personally, as a tribal researcher with a deep drive to understand the complexities of representation in India, attending the R&D staging of *The Modern Man* was an incredibly nuanced opportunity to witness the life of a justice crusader, whose journey as an enigmatic man, a loving husband and a caring friend, can only be understood and narrated by the people who truly believe in Ambedkar's vision for an equitable future.

“Educate! Agitate! Organize!”

Jai Bhim!

¹ <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/vSI3JCDhYrnoBObUCN6h1M/Why-is-blue-the-colour-of-Dalit-resistance.html>