
Mapping Plights, Struggles and Thoughts of a Bahujan Intellectual: A Study of Kancha Ilaiah's Memoirs

Ghanshyam Kumar

Assistant Professor

Department of English

KSDSU, Darbhanga (Bihar)

Article Received: 05/04/2026**Article Accepted:**08/05/2026**Published Online:**10/05/2026**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.05.31

Abstract

Kancha Ilaiah is not a new name to the academia and intelligentsia in India and abroad. A radically acclaimed socio-political thinker, Ilaiah has gathered a mountain of criticism and controversy just because of his clarity of expression and logicity of thought. A prolific writer popularly known for his catchy titles, he came to limelight with the publication of his oft-discussed book 'Why I am not a Hindu'. This very book happens to have brought him international recognition. His 'Post-Hindu India' also became controversial just because of one of the chapters it contains: Social Smugglers. To Ilaiah, 'Social Smuggling' and "Spiritual Fascism' are de facto big threats to Indian nationalism.

His recently launched book titled 'From a Shepherd Boy to an Intellectual', probably the only autobiographical endeavour, originally written in English with a Bahujan perspective. The paper in question based on the reading of Kancha Ilaiah's memoirs is a sincere attempt to basically bring into focus his thoughtful thoughts that are the essences for the essential socio-political identity of the great Indian masses with a view to rebuilding India anew.

Keywords: Bahujan, Untouchability, Social Smuggling, Spiritual Fascism, Brahminism

Introduction

Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd is a much-discussed Indian thinker who is popularly known for his firebrand writing. It is not exaggeration if he is called a socio-political crusader who seems to have been adamant in socio-political transformation that is the call of the hour. He is a social activist, prolific writer, and radical voice against the exploitative

system that has been hegemonised by nonproductive parasitic forces: brahmins and banyas. Ilaiah is much more critical of the Brahmin-Baniya nexus that is supposed to be the major threat to Hinduism itself. Ilaiah comes from an OBC shepherding background. He is the first person from his community in Telangana, who not only received up to the university-level degrees but served the higher academic institution as a professor, and later director. Although he procured an MA certificate in political science and wanted to crack the IAS examination, in course of time he, realising to do something concrete and creative in his life, changed his idea to be a university teacher. He had passion for English and acquired erudition in writing and eloquence in both of languages: English and Telugu, his mother tongue. He recalled how the uppercaste university teachers could not articulate flawless English. A regular columnist, he gained fame across the world by virtue of his matchless penmanship. For his genuine socio-political concerns, he received much less bouquets than brickbats. He with indomitable grit confronted a number of FIRs from the right wing political supporters. It was during the present encumbency Gauri Lankesh, an editor and journalist, was put to death, Rohith Vemula, a dalit Osmania University research scholar, was driven to commit suicide and above all Kancha Ilaiah was driven to stay under self-imposed house arrest. But he withstood every untoward situation with conviction and strong will. Needless to describe many scholars, journalists, writers, social activists at el who raised their voice against injustice, anti-democratic and anti-constitutional policies of the government were put behind the bars labelling false charges against and illegally declaring them to be urban-Naxalites. Kancha Ilaiah has been dead against the existing parasitic Brahminic baniya culture prevalent in Indian society. Caste order that is out and out an Indian phenomenon has been under the control of vulture culture prompted by Brahminism and legitimized by the whole inhuman mechanation. To Ilaiah, caste is a birth based discrimination, escape from which is next to impossible in the Indian subcontinent.

Caste: Discrimination Based on Birth.

Caste in India is an absolute sanction—of the dominant over the dominated. Its strict division into five categorical instances organized in horizontal capacities is an archetype of legitimized apartheid. —Suraj Yengde, Caste Matters

India has been a land of castes galore. Caste has been a longstanding discursive issue in India. Casteism is the identity of India and Indians. The Indian bearing no specific caste-tag is to be found nowhere. The head born caste has been ruling the roost in the socio-religio-political domain of India. Broadly speaking the not only uppercaste intellectuals and political leaders but also uppercaste religious gurus, uppercaste scholars and writers, sadhus and sanyasis, academicians, social activists, and nationalists and

uppercaste freedom fighters and patriots could never shun the thought of casteism and did almost nothing significant across the caste feelings. Even Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Raja Rammohan Roy were devout casteists. Ilaiyah rightly observes, "Even persons like Raja Rammohan Roy were casteists. Roy thought of reforming the Brahmin women's life but never took any initiative for educating the lower caste." (219)

Only due to his bearing a lower caste tag, his appointment on a professional position in the university was denied. Ultimately he got the opportunity to serve his dream university. Ironically he recalls, "Is it not interesting that even though I applied for a professional position in Hyderabad Central University I was not allowed to get in but as a doctorecutor-cum-professor and I worked there for more than six years till I retired at my 65 years." (188) Over caste system the thoughts of Gandhi and Ambedkar are poles apart.

"Gandhi was not against the caste system. He believed that caste system has the sanction of the Hindu shastras; therefore he thought it should not be annihilated as Ambedkar wished." (291). Caste is birth-based discrimination that is a menace to the society we live in. And fight against is really a complicated affair. It is more dangerous than slavery and apartheid. Even Arundhati Roy, a renowned Indian novelist, rightly observes, "A caste-ridden society is worse than a society of slavery, worse than a society of apartheid. A society that claims this hierarchy of injustice is institutionalised in its scriptures. So how do you possibly fight that?" (Roy, 119)

It appears that the dominant castes who have access to caste networks and social capital use them to loot the country without any accountability. The Investive agencies, political class and bureaucracy that compete the nexus work to conveniently let them off the hook. (Ritu Sarin , Indian Express)

Hegemony of Brahminism-Baniyaism

A Brahmin calls his reservation the religion named Sanatan Dharma. Affiliating religion to faith and belief, he generates superstition. That is why there is no discussion over his reservation, nor is it treated as a major issue. The reservation to Brahmins that appears in the garb of religion is fully safeguarded.

–Anonymous

Veds and Purans are also the Brahmn scriptures. They themselves do not depict the the whole Indian culture. Rigvedic assignment is nothing but Brahmin assignment.(133) Vedic culture did not represent the whole Indian life. (149) In other words, we can say the books written by the uppercaste historians were only about themselves. They used the written texts like Rigveda, even Bhagvad Gita to protect the socio-economic interests of the Brahmins first and subsequently the banyas also got into that protective mechanism by

assigning only business work for themselves. (139)

But now, as does Ilaiah appear to be keenly curious for the whole social order in the reverse gear. “The Dalitbahujan should write their spiritual book which says they themselves were created from his feet and assign the tasks that they assigned to brahmins what they did in their books.” (133)

Brahminism and Marxism

Brahmins have been the most inveterate enemy of the servile classes (shudras and the Untouchables) who together constitute about 80 percent of the total Hindu population. If the common man belonging to the servile classes in India is today so fallen, so degraded, so devoid of hope and ambition, it is entirely due to the brahmins and their philosophy.

—Ambedkar, What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables.

Ilaiah is of the opinion that Brahminism in the Marxist garb is more dangerous than Brahminism in the RSS and Hindutva forces. Labelling the scathing remarks over manipulating nature of Brahminism and Marxism, he clarifies candidly, "Brahmanism in the RSS, temple system offices markets is a white snake in the green Grass but Brahminism in the garb of Marxism is a green snake in the green grass." (125) It means Brahminism in the first case is clearly visible and can be kept from its negative impacts but in the latter case it is impossible for someone to escape unharmed. Brahminism remains camouflaged in Marxist school. Marxism is class based philosophy that can do nothing to work out caste issues. It is Ambedkarite ideology that can be a befitting reply to caste based discrimination and oppression thereon.

Name, Brain and Self-respect

Kancha Ilaiah has an additional surname ‘Shepherd’ that he later suffixed postname to assert and assure his caste pride with specific identity. For this reason he had to suffer lifelong even during his academic and professional life. The specific caste surname ‘Shepherd’ is a direct revolt against the existing caste system. Ilaiah writes, “The name that my parents gave,...sounded like an old villager's name, a farm worker's. I could have changed my name. But I deliberately did not do so...Now I have added Shepherd to it.” Even Sharankumar Limbale, in his widely read autobiography “The Outcaste (Akkarmashi)”, christened his son ‘Anarya’ which displays the author's indignation and resentment towards the existing Arya-Vaishya culture. Ilaiah thinks that the body he has got could not be changed. The body coupled with the brain moulds an individual's personality. He adds, “But since I could not change my body, I started living with enormous respect for my self: body and brain. I knew that my body works and my brain

thinks from within that work. How to make my body work and my brain think was within my control, as I believed in self-respect and self-control.” (124)

Read, Write and Fight

‘Books are the mirror of the soul.’

—Virginia Woolf

A radical political thinker and committed activist, Ilaiah with the notional campaign ‘read, write and fight’ lives his life with missionary zeal. Reading and writing are just as inhaling and exhaling for him. Writing books is fighting against odds galore and social disorder visibly or invisibly present. In other words, he can be termed as a radical writer. Buddha, Jyotiba Phule, Marx and Ambedkar have exercised their (trans)formative influence on Ilaiah. His research on Buddha as a political philosopher amasses criticism and controversy a lot. This has been unthinkable a new approach to the research topic. Manu and Kautilya who wrote Dharmashastra and Arthashastra respectively do not deserve to represent pan-Indian culture in any respect. Ilaiah rightly remarks, “The books written by the upper caste historians were only about themselves and their own philosophy. Treating their philosophy as Indian philosophy is crime in my view.” (126)

Ilaiah's Love for English

Ilaiah's autobiographical endeavour not only delineates his family background, constant strife against adverse circumstances invited or uninvited, academic-professional journey in a lucid and comprehensive language but also portrays the whole socio-economic religio-political and spiritual-scientific picture of Indian society. Although he hails from the Telugu speaking region, he thinks that it is the English language that can be taken far better than Telugu, his mother tongue. Ilaiah has acquired the speaking and writing skills in the English language painstakingly on his own. To him, Marx was his English teacher. His relationship with him was established through English translations. (111) It is clear that he acknowledges the impact of Marxist philosophy on his persona. The Communist Manifesto exercises its indelible imprint on him to a greater extent. He at his early stage had understood the significance of English. He emerged as a globally acclaimed thinker and activist only by dint of his writerly approach and scholarly attributes in English. His love for English literature, History and Political science provided him with an international platform.

My Books: My Intellectual Children

“These Intellectual children, that is, my books, will have a generational impact on human societies.” (110)

His book ‘Why I am not a Hind’, originally written in English and later its Hindi

version 'Main Hindu Kyon Nahin Hun' by Joothan fame writer Om Prakash Valmiki got published to assure its wider readership. This is the book that fetched him a transcendental popularity. His 'God as a Political Philosopher: Buddha's Challenge to Brahminism' that can be considered to be a sequel to the book titled 'Buddha as a Political Philosopher' which is his PhD research work. In 'Buffalo Nationalism' the author has defended the food culture, social practices, dignity of labour and religiosity practised by Dravidians and critiques Arya-Vaishya dominion, To him, the Aryans practise Cow Nationalism whereas Anaryans or Dravidians, Buffalo Nationalism. Ilaiah holds that Harrappan civilization was no doubt a Dravidian, not Aryan civilization. "It was a land of dravidians. The name Harappa could have been the name of a Shepherd. This name is very similar to that of Beerappa, a popular God of the whole Shepherd community of India." (122)

Death of Hinduism and Sanskrit

In 'Post-Hindu India', written keeping in view the Dalit Bahujan discourse, Ilaiah infers the end of Hinduism in case atrocities inflicted on the marginalized people continue unabated. For the death of Hinduism, even the Central Government claims that Hindus are at stake, nothing but Brahminism and none but its blind followers and practitioners who are left scot free to add fuel to fire encouraging and self-involving caste violence, will be held responsible. Ilaiah holds that "Hinduism as a religion survived because of the ignorance of the lower caste masses." (122)

De facto, the myopic elites and upper classes have been deprived of insightful vision about the very interests of Hinduism in the true sense of the term. Only due to the short-sightedness of the head born caste bearers who had kept other caste groups driven away from the learning of Sanskrit. Needless to describe here its present plightful state that is just before us. It seems that it is far from regaining a fresh lease of life. Like Greek and Latin, Sanskrit too has been declared to a dead language. Now the just question is: Who is responsible for its plight? Its answer is not vague. Only its so-called Saviour and preserver. How the preserver of Sanskrit has become its destroyer is a matter of no discussion. One day if even Hinduism meets the same fate, it won't be a wonder. The saviour in guise himself has played the destroyer in real sense.

Ilaiah rightly opines that English is Indian. And majority of the patrons of Sanskrit have changed their course long back and have started taking interests in English. "Bahujan Bachcho English Padho" (Bahujan children! Learn English) is the slogan by Kancha Ilaiah who has been particular for the sake of English education to the dalibahujan. Only education through English medium or english oriented education can help bring about a drastic transformation in modus operandi and modus vivendi of those who have been along

the periphery of society. The author opines that English is now not just a colonial or foreign language in Indian context. English is Indian. Terming it as an alien language now is not justified. Indian English has its own identity and significance on the global map and market. It is not the other. Nor is it alien if taken sincerely and treated fairly. It is not beyond the truth that English medium education can ascertain the holistic progress of this subcontinent.

Moreover, Kancha Ilaiah's book 'Post-Hindu India' became controversial due to one of the chapters titled 'Social Smugglers'. According to him, it is none but nonproductive classes, ie Baniyas, who are interestingly and justifiably termed as social Smugglers. The targeted classes persist for the exclusion of this chapter from the book. But this book is even now available with no alteration or censorship.

Works Cited:

- Shepherd, Kancha Ilaiah. From a Shepherd Boy to a Bahujan Intellectual, New Delhi: Sage, 2022
- Post-Hindu India: A Discourse on Dalit-Bahujan Socio-Spiritual and Scientific Revolution, New Delhi: Sage Publication 2009
- Ambedkar, B.R. What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables, Delhi: Gautam Book Centre, 2009
- Yengde, Suraj. Caste Matters, Haziya: Penguin, 2019
- Kostka, Ivan & Pramod Ranjan (Eds), The Case for Bahujan Literature, New Delhi: Forward Press Books, 2017