

# An Interview with Anand Patwardhan

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*For over 40 years Anand Patwardhan's documentary films have stood for freedom of expression. He faced censorship on numerous occasions, took the government to court, and won each time. Anand is not just a filmmaker but an activist in the cause of Indian democracy, clearly under threat today. In this candid conversation with the author, Anand discusses his views on the challenges before us, and most importantly, how he perceives both Gandhi and Ambedkar as liberation theologians whose ideas are in danger of being revised by their enemies. [First published in [Countercurrents.org](http://Countercurrents.org), April 5, 2017]*



VB: As a freedom lover secularist what is the difference between today's media and that which existed during the official Emergency in 1975.

AP: The Emergency of 1975 was visible to all. The world condemned it and in India some brave newspapers protested with blank editorials. Within a fairly short time a strong resistance movement grew. Today's Emergency is largely invisible to the masses because Indian media houses have been corporatized and these corporates, both Indian and foreign, are direct beneficiaries of an economic system that has been surreptitiously imposed on the country not just by the present regime but by forces that were already moving in the same direction but at a slower pace. We have sold our sovereignty to USA and the global corporates and people have been told that this is for our own good. The invisible Emergency of today depends on what Chomsky called "manufactured consent".

VB: Today we face the biggest challenge to Indian democracy since independence when our civil liberties are under the attack, when freedom of expression is under threat and when media is constructing the 'news'. Is 'free media' now the biggest threat to democracy?

AP: The media is free in the sense that it now has the freedom to tell lies about both, the domestic economy and about national security – lies that parrot an American-Israeli-Saudi axis which created, nurtured and unleashed Al Qaeda and ISIS on the one hand and pretended to “fight terror” on the other.

VB: You have documented major events not only of communal violence but also of violence against Dalits in Maharashtra. After the death of Rohit Vemula, in HCU, JNU and other campuses, students of all ideological frames – from the Left, to Ambedkarites and other Bahujan groups, joined in a common struggle against the ABVP and its attempt to vitiate the climate in the universities. Today that unity appears to be crumbling and we are again at the cross roads. Why ?

AP: The fault lies as much with the Left (of all shades) which is still unclear about how to destroy the caste system within, as with Dalit groups that fall prey to red-baiting and exclusivist identity politics. On one side are traditional Marxists who were brought up to think that caste is part of a superstructure that will automatically wither away when the economic base becomes socialist. On the other side are those who think that the caste of your birth alone forever determines how you think and how you act. Not only is such thinking contrary to the teachings of Dr. Ambedkar, it mirrors the mindset of the worst Manuvadis who believe that caste determines everything.

Luckily reality is proving both positions wrong. I believe that the Left and Dalits are natural allies so it is a matter of time before a genuine, long-lasting unity is forged. People like Govind Pansare, Kanhaiya Kumar and Jignesh Mevani have shown us that this unity is possible. Into this mix I would add progressive Gandhians – people like Narendra Dabholkar and Medha Patkar. Together these forces represent the politics of Reason that this country so desperately needs.

VB: Your film *Jai Bhim Comrade* was an extraordinary work which brought us back the memories of the struggle for justice of the people of Ramabai Nagar in Mumbai. You screened the film in various places. What were the reactions?

AP: The film as you know took 14 years to make. In the winter of 2011 we screened it in the open air in Dalit bastis across urban Maharashtra. We bought a powerful video projector, made a huge foldable cloth screen, and in each basti erected bamboo scaffolding to mount it on. As the screen was being erected, we played progressive film songs and Dalit movement songs to alert and attract the audience. Often the crowd would swell to well over a 1000 people. As we could not afford so many chairs, people sat on the ground or stood at the back and on the sides for the three hour duration of the film. At the end of the screening we tried to organize a discussion but often instead of a back and forth question and answer session, people just grabbed the mike and poured their hearts out about what the film had meant to them. It was an overwhelming experience for me. Later I began to understand the reasons for this amazing response. Although in the bastis, little of the hardship shown in the film was unknown to people, the fact that the film presented its protagonists not as victims but

as resisters, was a morale booster. The genre of music heard in the film was in danger of either dying out or getting commercialized, so the film, so full of these songs captured over decades, served as a valuable archive. Lastly the politics of the film was appreciated, as it did not pull punches. It called to task not only sections of the Left for not recognizing the primacy of caste, but also Dalit leaders who were being lured by Manuvadi Hindutva to betray the legacy of Dr. Ambedkar.

Much later I began to show the film in colleges and schools and other middle class and elite circles. Here the response was enthusiastic but very different from that in the bastis. Even though people generally appreciated the film, almost invariably someone would ask about the evils of “reservations”. It was as if the audience had been blind and deaf to what they had just seen. After 3000 years where manual scavenging has been reserved for one caste alone and education has been forbidden, was it not time to reserve education seats for the dispossessed? In the end after long discussions, we agreed that reservations could be done away with only when the children of the rich and the children of the poor start going to the same schools – from the primary to the college level. Such prolonged inter-caste, inter-class contact could also open the door for inter-caste marriages. Many generations of such mixed marriages could finally end the caste system. This sounds idealistic but in my view this is the only way to finally end caste – when bloodlines become so mixed that no one can clearly say what caste they come from.

VB: Do you think that as secular activists we have not been able to communicate to common people in the language they understand or have failed to use the great secular legacy of India which was radical and rational as well?

AP: In general this is true but in particular some people are genuinely trying to address this. Of course the task is huge and we are up against a fascist force in the Brahminist RSS that has created a hydra-headed, cadre based organization that indoctrinates people in the name of cultural and religious pride, as well as today, of fake nationalism. In the early days they attracted mainly Brahmins. Today they are drawing in all castes and tribes that can be mobilized against their stated three enemies – Muslims, Christians and Communists. Religious culture and right wing politics is a potent combination and we rationalists have so far failed to match the organizational genius that runs this fascist machine.

VB: This government has been in hyper-active mode to keep people busy but if we analyse their actions we find clear attempts to divide people and polarize the debate. It started with their favorite topics like ‘Gaay’, Ganga, Rastrawaad, beef, Jana Gana Mana and then to Kashmir. Things went horribly wrong in Kashmir and the last part was a surgical strike but that too was questioned. Then came demonetization which hurt the poorest of the poor but was dressed up to look like an attack on “black money” and the rich. Each act is commonly linked, in my opinion, to privatizing our national resources and creating business for crony capital.

AP: Yes there is a clear strategy. Nothing in the Hindutva Parivar happens ad hoc or without central planning. At the same time perhaps Modi and Amit Shah have surprised even their own cadre by their willingness to be brutal and dishonest. Demonetization is an example. Even the direct beneficiaries, like the crony capitalists who emptied the banks and refused to pay back their loans must have been surprised

at how the poor were squeezed to fill the bank coffers up again and then sold the idea that this was a strike on the unscrupulous rich. Even when all the “black money” came back into the banks and became white money, no question was raised while thousands of jobs were lost across the nation. It may be the undoing of Modi in the long run but in the short term he is still fooling most of the people most of the time.

VB: Communalism or I would call it Brahminism has joined hands with capitalism here but the resistance too is stronger. Unfortunately, political parties are unable to join hands with their egos and brinkmanship for votes. Will people’s pressure bring them together?

AP: At the moment there is no visible peoples’ pressure. There is visible suffering but the anger is not yet visible. Let us see if it manifests later.

VB: Do you feel that the Indian way of secularism i.e. equal respect to all religions, or what we call Sarva Dharma Samabhava is damaging the cause of social change as it allows religious dogmatics to hijack the leadership of different communities? There is a virtual competition between the religious right taking place in the polity thereby denying common persons of all communities the means to counter them. How do we respond to it?

AP: All over the world rationalists have found that religion that has existed for centuries is hard to stamp out and some form of co-existence is the norm in most secular countries. After the Soviet Revolution, St. Petersburg became Leningrad but in 1991 it became St. Petersburg again.

In India, both Gandhi and Ambedkar recognized that this country was so steeped in the idiom of religion that atheism or pure rationality would not be easily accepted by the masses. I consider Gandhi and Ambedkar, each in their own right, to be liberation theologians. Of course, Gandhi unlike Ambedkar, did not choose his own religion, he inherited it. But to whatever he inherited, he applied post-Enlightenment ethical values that were essentially modern. When he began to do manual scavenging and began to advocate this (even force it) on to his followers, he actually destroyed the very basis of the Pollution/Purity dichotomy that is at the heart of the caste system. Theoretically he for a long time infamously clung to the concept of Varnashram Dharma, but in actual deed he destroyed it the day he took up manual scavenging, a job that had been hitherto reserved for the so-called ‘untouchables’. As time went on Gandhi became ever more radical. He clearly learned from Dr. Ambedkar as well as from his own intuitive understanding of the world he was witnessing. For instance, towards the latter stages of his life, Gandhi refused to attend any marriage that was not an inter-caste marriage. By the end of his life he had fashioned out of his inherited Hinduism, something entirely new. Only the idiom remained, and not the original hierarchical Sanatan dharma. Whether his reluctance to discard the idiom was a practical decision that stemmed from a desire to remain in touch with the vast Indian masses in a language they could easily follow, or from his own inner belief system, is something that can be debated, but is of no great interest to me. What is unmistakable is that Gandhi’s ethical code bears little resemblance to the hierarchical and vengeful structure of traditional Hinduism.

Dr. Ambedkar in some ways was more fortunate than Gandhi in that he clearly saw how oppressive the religion of his birth was, being as he was, a direct victim of it. So he discarded it and searched for the best alternative to it. After examining many religions he finally chose the religion that was closest to Reason. Buddhism is the one world religion that does not posit an external, all-knowing God. However it has a very strong ethical core that Dr. Ambedkar highlighted. At the same time he discarded irrational and unproveable Buddhist tenets like Reincarnation that many traditional Buddhists ardently follow. This is why I see both Ambedkar and Gandhi as liberation theologians. In the same way that Left wing priests like Ernesto Cardinale in Latin America, a minister in Nicaragua's revolutionary Sandinista government, re-interpreted Jesus Christ as a revolutionary who fought and died for justice to the poor and powerless, Gandhi and Ambedkar gave new ethical meaning to the religions they adopted and adapted.

Make no mistake that I am equating the two. Their differences are obvious. One came from a privileged caste, the other from the most oppressed. One was educated in a limited sense and steeped in traditional religion in his formative years while the other came from a caste denied the right to education and rose to become the best-read and easily the greatest intellectual of modern India.

I am not at all blind to the things about Gandhi that are paradoxical and irrational like his life-long demonization of sexuality. Gandhi's insistence on chastity puts him in the same irrational, patriarchal boat as the priests and monks and nuns of many world religions. To examine this aspect in depth would take a whole chapter. And yet this same sex-denying man, by introducing the Charkha as a weapon of non-violent resistance, brought thousands of women into the mainstream of the Indian freedom movement.

I realize that I have let my stream of consciousness diverge from your original question. To get back to the issue about whether Sarva Dharma Samabhava can take the place of constitutionally guaranteed secular democratic rights, I think it cannot. We need Dr. Ambedkar's Constitution much more than we need holy books. And yet as many in our country are still hooked to holy books and unholy pretenders, we need liberation theologians who can help people to culturally discard the worst features of their inherited religious culture and replace these with ethical, just and non-exclusivist interpretations.

Waiting for everyone to become atheist or rationalist may take centuries. Ethics is the answer. Small wonder that Ambedkar and Gandhi, each in their own way, arrived at individual definitions of Ahimsa.

VB: In post-Mandal India communities are seeking their space in the polity. In the earlier phase of secularism the Indian elite always kept the marginalised communities like Dalits, OBCs, Muslims outside the gates of their decision making bodies and public platforms but things are changing now. Very unfortunately more than the seculars it is the communalists who are jumping into identity politics and social engineering. Meanwhile communist parties still retain their upper caste leadership. Will we be able to face the challenge in such a way?

AP: Actually identity politics is a double-edged weapon. As long as oppression of identifiable groups exists, it is perfectly legitimate for oppressed groups to unite

according to their identity. ‘Black is beautiful’ was a necessary movement for Afro-Americans in the USA, just as pride in Dalit or Buddhist identity is necessary in India. The trouble begins when this turns into an exclusivist or separatist movement. Malcolm X went through a Black Muslim phase when he described all white people as “devils”. But in the latter stages of his life he completely rejected this theory for a much more inclusive critique of injustice and inequality. That is when the American deep State killed him. Similarly while a broad section of Dalits are inclusive and fully understand the distinction Dr. Ambedkar made between the ideology of Brahminism and individuals who happen to be born into one or the other “upper” castes, there is a tiny section of separatist Dalits today who see birth as the sole determining factor. The fact that Western post-modern academia encourages such identity politics in preference to class analysis has given this form of separatist politics international acceptance. Meanwhile in India Manuvadi forces feel obvious glee when Dalits attack the Left or Gandhi, as both have long been the enemies of Hindutva.

VB: Hindutva people are expert in appropriating icons who are secular. They used Ambedkar, Bhagat Singh, Vivekananda, Subhash Chandra Bose, Sri Narayan Guru etc for their purposes. Is this because an overdose of Gandhi and Nehru’s role in our freedom struggle minimized all other icons that a kind of resentment began against Nehru and Gandhi?

AP: Frankly I am not a fan of Subhash Chandra Bose. I cannot swallow his alliance with Hitler and Hirohito. Freedom could not be wrested at such a cost. Vivekanand is also very troubling because he advocated a kind of machismo that I think is deeply problematic. Also what is little known about him is that he was deeply casteist. In fact he seems perfectly suited as a BJP icon. The resentment against Gandhi lies at the heart of the project of Hindutva which is why they killed him first and then attempted to appropriate his glasses and broomstick later. Nehru is hated because his development paradigm goes against the grain of privatization. Ambedkar they do not dare criticize openly these days so the only option is to use his image, minus any content.

VB: Your uncle Achyut Patwardhan was an icon of the socialist movement in India. We heard a lot about his relationship with Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar. Was there any influence of him on your socio-political thoughts?

AP: Achyutkaka and Aruna Asaf Ali, according to British records, were amongst the most wanted underground leaders of 1942. He ran the underground radio and was a master of disguise amongst other things but in later years he ensured that history erased him. You hardly hear or read about him anywhere because soon after Independence he became disillusioned with mainstream politics. He did educational and social work but he would never discuss the past, even with me. He felt it had all been mostly an illusion. His elder brother, Purshottam (Raokaka to me) was also a freedom fighter and spent over 10 years in British jails. In the 1930’s while he was making an anti-communal speech, Madanlal Pahwa tried to assassinate him but was caught. Raokaka who was a Gandhian socialist, refused to file charges and Pahwa was let off. Later this same Pahwa threw a bomb at Gandhi and was part of the conspiracy that finally killed him.

To answer your next question, it is true that in the decade of the 1930's Dr. Ambedkar spent several months living, writing and studying at our family farm home in Ahmednagar, but this again is a chapter of history that has been irretrievably lost. Raokaka like Achyut left active politics after Independence and both, by their own choice, were written out of history. I have heard that Dr. Ambedkar and Achyutkaka were friends and met when Achyutkaka was underground, but I have no documents about this. What I do know is that my family opposed the caste system and many married outside their own caste, including my parents.

VB: You have always tried to bring together not only left and Ambedkarites but also what you call 'Progressive Gandhians'. Why are you using this term? You have been critical of people who as you say 'blow out of proportion' the differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar. Many of the Ambedkarites feel it quite disturbing?

AP: I must speak the truth as I see it. I have always felt that the affinities between Gandhi and Ambedkar are greater than their differences. They were both egalitarian humanists at heart. It may not win me any popularity contest today but I think those who are ready to set prejudice aside and undertake a proper historical study will come around to this point of view. Take the act of "Satyagraha", a term coined by Gandhi. Ambedkar used this very term and form of struggle to launch his Mahad Satyagraha to claim drinking water rights. There are many other examples of common ideas and action. I was pleasantly shocked to read what Dr. Ambedkar had to say in 1932 immediately after concluding the now infamous Poona Pact (where the idea of separate electorates for Dalits was abandoned in favour of reserved seats for Dalits). Popular theory is that Ambedkar was blackmailed by Gandhi's fast-unto-death into accepting a bitter compromise. But Ambedkar's statement in 1932 after signing the pact was totally different in tone. He had high praise for Gandhi and stated that the "Mahatma" (yes, contrary to popular belief, Ambedkar referred to Gandhi as "Mahatma" at this point in time) offered a much better deal for Dalits in terms of reserved seats than Ambedkar himself had asked or hoped for. There is *no denying* however that Ambedkar did get disgusted with the Congress in later years. How much of the blame for the failures of Congress are attributable to Gandhi is a matter of discussion and debate. We know that Gandhi's writ did not work in preventing Partition or the bloodshed that preceded and followed it and that Gandhi did not attend the Independence Day flag hoisting at the Red Fort in Delhi. He was busy fighting the communal inferno in the countryside.

Gandhi had a lot of obscurantist ideas to start with but as time went on he was honest enough to keep evolving. In the end I see him as a great humanist who died for his belief in non-violence and religious universality. He was also an inventive anti-Imperialist (though in his earlier days he had supported the British Empire) and an organic naturalist that today's madly consumerist, globally warmed world desperately needs. Are most of today's Gandhians like that? Of course not. That is why I used the term 'progressive Gandhians'. It describes dedicated non-violent fighters like Medha Patkar, Narendra Dabholkar, the whole Baba Amte family, Sandeep Pande, S.P Udaykumar, Teesta Setalvad, Aruna Roy, Admiral Ramdas, *and so many* others. It certainly does not include government-fed Gandhians and those Gandhians who jump onto the Hindutva bandwagon as soon as it gathers steam.

Today I believe that all humanists, rationalists and fighters for social and economic justice must unite to fight the usurpers of our democracy and our history.