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**Satyendra More. *The Memoirs of a Dalit Communist:  
The Many Worlds of R.B. More***

Edited and Introduced by Anupama Rao. Translated by Wandana  
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# Satyendra More. *The Memoirs of a Dalit Communist: The Many Worlds of R.B. More*

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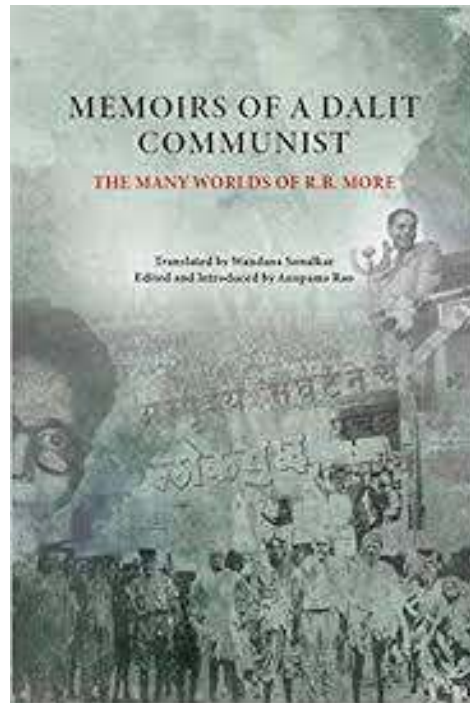
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Satyendra More. 2019. *The Memoirs of a Dalit Communist: The Many Worlds of R.B. More*, edited and introduced by A. Rao. Translated by W. Sonalkar. Left Word Publishing: New Delhi, 2019. 293 pages.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Anupama Rao, the author of the introduction of the book reviewed here, has published a rejoinder to the review. It is available [here](#).

1 There has been considerable interest in writings on Dalits and Ambedkar in recent years. The publication industry has profited greatly, with several new titles being published every month on Ambedkar and Dalits. Translations of vernacular texts, especially Dalit autobiographies, have acquired prominence (Moon 2001; Pawar 2015; Pawar 2009; Pawar and Moon 2014; Rege 2018; Satyanarayana and Tharu 2013). In addition, a different variety of Dalit autobiographies have also emerged. The earlier Dalit autobiographies that made their mark since the 1960s exposed the readers to the Dalit life-worlds that were engulfed in caste-based discrimination and oppression. They gave insights into community history, anti-caste politics and the role Ambedkar played in their lives. In



fact, Ambedkar and his politics acquired a central place in Dalit autobiographies. In contrast, some of the recent Dalit biographies take us into non-Ambedkarite political movements such as the Socialists, the Communists and the Hindu extremist and caste supremacist outfit, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (Meghwanshi 2020). The *Memoirs of a Dalit Communist: The Many Worlds of R.B. More* falls somewhere in between. It documents the journey of R.B. More (1903–1972) who began his political journey with the Ambedkar-led anti-caste movement and later joined the communist movement. The autobiography-biography of R.B. More (RBM) was originally published in the Marathi language in 2003 under the title *Dalit Va Communist Chalvalicha Sashakta Duvā: Comrade R.B. More* [A Powerful Link Between Dalit and Communist Movement: Comrade R.B. More] (More 2003).

2 Despite being a full-time communist, R.B. More (RBM) retained strong links with the Ambedkar-led anti-caste movement. While the upper-caste leadership of the Communist party, particularly in the 1930s and 40s, consistently berated the anti-caste movement as a middle-class and elite phenomenon, RBM supported Ambedkar's position on caste and untouchability. RBM sought to bring these two strands together. In that sense, RBM could be considered as the first proponent of the idea of bringing together the Communist and Dalit movements, which has been summed up by the slogan *Jai Bhim-Laal Salam* in contemporary politics. The experiment to bring together the two strands did not succeed in RBM's time. Even today, the success of this initiative remains unlikely, because while the Communist leadership may have accepted that caste is a problem that needs to be dealt with, they still consider "class struggle" to be the ultimate battle.<sup>1</sup> RBM's lifeworld provides us with crucial insights for understanding the structural difficulties involved in merging these two streams of thought.

## The Text and the Context

- 3 The English translation of RBM's autobiography-biography comes at a time when Dalits and Ambedkar have acquired the centre stage in politics as well as in academics. During the last two decades the Hindu right-wing outfits have made aggressive attempts to appropriate Ambedkar. As a reaction, all mainstream political parties, from the Left to the Centre, have climbed on the bandwagon, claiming Ambedkar for themselves. In academia too, wide-ranging scholars have begun writing on Dalits and Ambedkar. Recent scholarship has drawn attention to the Dalit massacre in Marichjhapi, perpetrated during the Left Front government in West Bengal in 1979 (Byapari 2018). These criticisms have phenomenally affected the legacy of Communist politics in India. As a result, several Left leaning intellectuals and activists have been left with little option but to engage with the caste question (Patnaik 2016).
- 4 The autobiographical part of the text covers the period from RBM's birth in 1903 to his active involvement in the famous Mahad Satyagraha in 1927. The biographical part written by RBM's son Satyendra More (SM) covers the period from the late 1927 till RBM's death in 1972. SM followed in his father's footsteps and joined the Communist Party, and represented the Dharavi constituency in the Maharashtra State Legislative Assembly in 1978. However, SM also died before the book could see the light of the day. It was Subodh More, RBM's grandson, who meticulously compiled and edited both the texts as well as added new information and visuals. Subodh is also affiliated with the Communist Party of India-Marxist's (CPI-M) cultural unit. Thus, the text is quite unique as it connects the three generations of Dalits who, one after the other, joined the Communist Party and still tried to retain their links with the anti-caste Ambedkarite movement.
- 5 The *Memoirs of a Dalit Communist* is an important addition to the field of history of modern India. The memoir provides a powerful perspective on the nature of Ambedkarite activism of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and its relationship with the diverse range of questions such as caste-based discrimination in the workplace, contestations between the Ambedkar-led anti-caste movement and the Communist movement, and Dalit assertion in social, political, and economic spheres. In her introduction to the text, Anupama Rao, the editor of the *Memoirs*, points out that the account of RBM is as much a subaltern history of Bombay as it is an autobiography of an activist. RBM's memoir makes the readers critically revisit and understand the histories of Communist and organized Dalit politics in India under B.R. Ambedkar's leadership and its influence over the erstwhile city of Bombay. The memoir goes beyond an individual narrative. It not only captures important historical events that brought the erstwhile untouchable community into the political limelight but also tracks the struggles waged by the peasants and working classes of western India. RBM's close association with organized Dalit politics, and simultaneously his alignment with labor and Communist movements, is finely documented in the memoir.
- 6 Despite being authored by a prominent Dalit activist from western India, the *Memoirs* moves beyond the old framework of engagement with the anti-caste discourse of the twentieth century. It argues that anti-caste narratives should be understood as going beyond the notion of social mobility. Secondly, the memoir tries to historically unveil the complex relationship between the Communist politics and the anti-caste movement that emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It interrogates the problematic of the caste-class

question from a new historical perspective. It also offers some important and rare historical insights regarding these questions that were taken up by the anti-caste movement. The memoir has three major themes: RBM's struggle for education and the role of Dalits in the military, his involvement in the Mahad Satyagraha, and his decision to join the communist movement. While the three moments provide interesting insights regarding the history of Dalit and communist politics in western India, the interpretations offered by RBM and SM have been contested by many chroniclers of the Ambedkarite movement.

## Caste, Colonialism and Education

- 7 Like most Dalit autobiographies, RBM's lifeworld begins with his struggle for obtaining education in a caste-ridden society that has historically excluded untouchables<sup>2</sup> from the world of knowledge and learning (Paik 2014). However, RBM's narrative brings before us the interventions made by the untouchables, who served the British military, in his initial access to schooling. Employment in the military not only opened economic opportunities for the untouchables, it also gave them access to education. It was this section of the untouchable military personnel who, after their retirement, made efforts to democratize and spread education, especially to hitherto excluded groups. Dasgaon village in the Konkan region, where RBM did his initial schooling, served as a transit point that connected Dapoli military camp with Bombay city (More 2019:53). Most importantly, Dasgaon becomes a place of retirement for the untouchable Mahar military personnel, who played an important role in the social and political awakening. RBM gives a detailed account of the changes that came about with the arrival of British colonial rule and the Mahar's entry into the military. The military connection of the untouchables is crucial for understanding the origins of the Dalit-led anti-caste movement. In fact, this untouchable-military relation can be observed in several organizations that emerged before and during Ambedkar's time.
- 8 As a Mahar, which is one of the untouchable castes in Maharashtra, RBM experiences caste-based exclusion and discrimination during the scholarship examination meant for under-eleven year-old children. RBM writes, "The other boys who had come for the examination were seated inside; I alone was seated on the outside. The question paper was tossed to me from a distance and when I had finished writing my paper, I pushed it forward. It was picked up from there and taken away. All this was carried out with the utmost care to avoid touching me at any point" (More 2019:60). Out of 200 students who attended the examination, RBM is ranked first and secures a monthly grant of 5 rupees. However, this is the beginning of the hurdles. RBM was confronted with staunch opposition from Orthodox Brahmins. When RBM went to Mahad to join the English school, the schoolmaster told him that while they were willing to admit him, the Brahmin owner of building, who had leased the premises to them, had objections. The Brahmin owner, Mr. Dharap apparently told the school authorities that "If you admit a Mahar boy into the school, I will not rent my building to you" (p. 62). The schoolmaster asked RBM to go to Bombay or Poona for his education. At this juncture, social reformers in RBM's village advised him to write a letter about this situation to the colonial state and the same was published in the newspapers. The colonial state responded to RBM's letter and the school had little choice but to admit him. However,

within the school, RBM was subjected to caste discrimination in various ways, which was a common experience for untouchables in colonial India (Constable 2000).

## RBM and the Mahad Revolt of 1927

- 9 The second event that is important for RBM is the Mahad Satyagraha. The Mahad movement was initiated by the untouchables under Ambedkar's leadership to access water from the Chavdar Lake. The Mahad Satyagraha, which is one of the landmark events in modern Indian history, marked the beginning of the politically assertive Dalit movement under Ambedkar's leadership. It is this movement which laid the foundations of organized Dalit politics in modern India. S.K. Bole, the non-Brahmin leader from Konkan, initiated a resolution in 1923 for "opening public reservoirs and *dharamshalas* to Dalits" (More 2019:116). Interestingly, Mr. Dharap, the Brahmin who had placed hurdles in RBM's schooling was the same person who had "filed a suit in court to prevent untouchables from using the water of the Chavdar lake" (p. 64).
- 10 There are multiple narratives around the Mahad movement. RBM and his biographer SM represent one of them. RBM argues that Ambedkar was initially reluctant to preside over the conference at Mahad that launched the Satyagraha (p. 102). According to RBM's account, it was he who had convinced Ambedkar to attend the conference in Mahad. RBM's account not only challenges the popular narrative about the Mahad movement, it also questions the role played by Ambedkar. This narrative has been subjected to immense criticism as it does not match most chronicles, personal accounts, and newspaper reports of the time. Historians of the Ambedkarite movement have consistently reiterated the role played by Konkani Dalits at the Mahad Satyagraha in the decade of the 1920s (Khairmode 1990; Zelliott 2013). RBM also recognizes the initiative taken by Konkani Dalits. Changdev Khairmode, one of the most authoritative biographers of Ambedkar in the Marathi language,<sup>3</sup> has argued that it was Ambedkar, along with associates like Anant Chitre, who were directly involved in planning and launching the Mahad Satyagraha (Khairmode 1990:22-24). In fact, after completing his second doctorate in England in 1923, Ambedkar was actively involved in the politics of Konkan and in organizing the Dalit workers in Bombay city. The writings in the *Bahishkrut Bharat*, the newspaper launched by Ambedkar in the aftermath of the Mahad Satyagraha, also do not mention RBM as a standalone figure of the movement. He was one of the main organizers of the Mahad Satyagraha along with other prominent Konkani Dalit activists. Given this information, RBM's claim of a reluctant Ambedkar in the organization of the Mahad Satyagraha does not hold much ground. However, an in-depth historical enquiry is needed to explore why RBM had staked such a claim.
- 11 In her introduction to the translation, Anupama Rao claims that RBM was the main link between Konkan and Dalit politics in Bombay (More 2019:24). This claim is again contestable, as she does not offer enough supporting evidence to prove the role of RBM. On the other hand, it has been documented that there were many key leaders and activists in the Ambedkar-led movement who were simultaneously active in the Konkan region and Bombay city. For example, mass organizers such as Sambhaji Tukaram Gaikwad and Subedar Vishram Sawadkar had a larger influence over Dalits than RBM (Omvedt 2011). Various writings have noted RBM's proximity to Ambedkar (Dangle 2004:12-17; Sankrityayan 1943:313-26). It is our contention that RBM's rise to prominence as a noticeable voice of the class-based anti-caste politics was primarily

due to his proximate relationship with Ambedkar, who dealt with the intersection of caste and class in a comprehensive manner.

## The Caste-Class Contestations

- 12 After RBM's struggle for education and his involvement with the Mahad Satyagraha, his entry into the Communist party in 1930 is the third most important story of his life (More 2019:166). Why did RBM leave the Ambedkar-led anti-caste movement to become a full-time member of the Communist Party? The question is of utmost relevance for the contemporary political discourse. The Ambedkar led anti-caste movement in the late colonial period has shared an uneasy, at times hostile relationship with the Communists. Despite the rise of Communist politics in Bombay, caste and untouchability did not find notable mention in their agitations, particularly in the period between the 1920s and 1960s. The Communists viewed the caste question as subsumed under "class struggle" and therefore saw the anti-caste movement as a force that divided "class unity" (Adarkar and Menon 2004:212-13). On the other hand, Ambedkar opposed the Communists in Bombay on the grounds that they were unable to understand the central role of caste in perpetuating inequality and impoverishment even among workers. Ambedkar's newspapers like the *Janata* largely agreed with the goals of the Communist politics, but differed with the methods used to achieve them. Therefore, they insisted that the Communists also pursue the annihilation of the Brahmanical caste order, which was the driving force of Indian society.<sup>4</sup>
- 13 In the case of RBM, his contribution to the Communist movement and his association with anti-caste politics became known to the wider audience only after the publication of his memoirs in Marathi in 2003. The same year Satyendra More and Subodh More wrote two-part articles about RBM in the CPI-M's mouthpiece *People's Democracy*. These texts renewed discussions surrounding RBM. Given the political crisis the Communists have been facing, CPI-M leadership was quick to claim RBM as their own. More crucially, they highlighted RBM's proximate relationship with Ambedkar (Dhawale 2016). However, this prominent attention given to RBM's life by the higher echelons of the CPI-M has not resulted in any serious engagement with his thought. RBM's note about the caste question, which he had written to the party in 1953 and 1957, was not given serious attention by the Communist leadership. Subodh More argues that even today the Communist party leadership has not recognized the importance of this note. For instance, in 2013 the CPI-M affiliated Jaati-Ant Sangharsh Samiti (Caste Annihilation Struggle Committee) organized its first convention in Maharashtra through a platform named Dalit Shoshan Mukti Manch (DSMM). However, DSMM did not take into account RBM's interventions on caste for discussion. It was Subodh More, who published RBM's note on caste and circulated it to the wider audience who had gathered for the convention.<sup>5</sup>
- 14 RBM breathed his last before he could complete his autobiography. He was only able to pen down his life till the year 1927. Therefore, we do not have his own account of his becoming a full-time communist party member. The narrative offered by SM is problematic and contestable. SM writes that "During this [1928 Bombay Textile] strike many Dalits took part in the meetings as workers, and More began to feel attracted towards the Communists. Secondly, in the manifesto of 18 demands that had been adopted in this strike, there was the demand that Dalits should be allowed to work in



the cloth-weaving department where the thread had to be moistened with the worker's saliva while winding it on the shuttle. So, RBM was conscious that the Communists were 'aware of social issues' (More 2019:163, emphasis added). Such a narration of RBM's entry into the Communist movement ignores the contentions that came to the fore during the 1928 and 1929 strikes. And, without referring to the challenge posed by Ambedkar, SM conveniently gives credit to communist leaders for taking up the issue of the untouchable workers' right to work in the weaving section.

- 15 Empirical evidence suggests that the Communists did not prioritize their struggles against the practices of untouchability and caste discrimination under the pretext that this would have threatened "class unity." During the 1928 strike, Ambedkar highlighted the exclusion Dalits face from the high-paid weaving department jobs. Ambedkar threatened the Communist unions in these terms: he "will dissuade the Depressed Classes [Dalits] from taking part in the strike" if their right to work in all mill departments was not recognized (Ambedkar 2014a:474). In fact, it was only after Ambedkar's insistence that the Communist leadership reluctantly accepted Dalit workers' right to work in the weaving department and placed it among the seventeen demands presented to the mill owners. However, when the demands were placed before the mill owners, they snubbed the Communists by arguing that if the exclusion of Dalits from the weaving department "was an injustice, they certainly were not responsible for it" (Ambedkar 2014a:474).
- 16 The contestations between Ambedkar and the Communists once again came to the fore during the 1929 strikes. Ambedkar objected to the 1929 strike as the industrial actions of 1928 had pushed Dalit workers towards extreme indigence and indebtedness (Ambedkar 2005:19). As such, Ambedkar felt that they were not in a position to participate in yet another strike. Dalits could not rely upon farmlands during the drawn-out industrial actions, which was the case with their non-Dalit counterparts. It is for these reasons that, when the 1929 general strike was going on, Ambedkar facilitated the supply of Dalit workers to various mills (Lieten 1982:699; Mehta 1954:121). It was clear that Ambedkar posed a major challenge to the Communist activities in Bombay's working-class politics. Therefore, it is very likely that the Communists actively inducted RBM into their fold to create a base among the Dalit workers. Of course, one cannot overlook RBM's ideological commitment to Communist politics despite facing severe hardships and being unable to find a permanent roof for himself and his family members (More 2019:229–30).
- 17 RBM's decision to join the Communist party has been interpreted by Anupama Rao as a rebellion against Ambedkar's politics. However, this assertion lacks substantial evidence. We do not find any examples in the memoir which suggest RBM had major ideological disagreement with Ambedkar. Neither does SM make such a claim that RBM's decision to join the Communist Party was marked by his ideological differences with Ambedkar. In fact, RBM supported Ambedkar's decision to contest the elections in 1937, his demands for separate electorates, and later his call for converting to Buddhism. RBM consistently maintained the importance of Ambedkarite politics. Therefore, RBM's decision to join the Communist party cannot be considered as a path-breaking decision. Rather, his political activism was largely a result of political possibilities created by Ambedkar's intervention in the public sphere.
- 18 Another point that deserves to be mentioned here is that besides RBM, there were many other Dalit activists and leaders who actively aligned with Communist party in



Bombay but kept a close link with Ambedkar. Many prominent Left leaning leaders such as Shamrao Parulekar were part of Ambedkar's political movement in the 1920s and 1930s. As an Independent Labour Party candidate, Parulekar successfully contested the 1937 elections from the Ratnagiri South constituency (Pol 2015:125). Even the editors of the Ambedkar run newspaper *Janata* in the 1930s were outrightly Marxist in their ideological orientation. Devrao Naik, a Brahmin supporter of Ambedkar and the first editor of the *Janata* was sympathetic towards Communism as a political ideology. In his stint as editor, Naik attempted to bridge the difference between Marxist ideas and anti-caste Dalit politics by invoking the importance of Marx. Following Naik, his successors, like D.V. Pradhan and Bhaskarrao Kadrekar reiterated Naik's position on caste and class. The early writings in the *Janata* not only put forth the Marxist perspective on class struggles with unusual firmness but they also asked the Dalits and Communists to incorporate this approach in order to understand Indian caste politics (Pol 2015:95–105).

## Dalits and the Communist Party

- 19 The Communist party criticized the Dalit movement by calling it a middle-class endeavor. It consistently argued that caste was merely an institution of an outdated orthodoxy. For example, in an introduction to the first Marathi translation of the *Communist Manifesto*, undertaken by the Bombay-based Communist group in 1931, Gangadhar Adhikari, who was also the translator of the *Manifesto*, argued that the contemporary Dalit movement was helpful only to the literate Dalit elites in their pursuit of upward social mobility, and thereby, it served no purpose to the ongoing working-class movement envisaged by the Communists (Shaikh 2011:65). This is entirely missed in the *Memoir*.
- 20 The *Memoir* provides a lot of inside views of Dalit political activism. However, SM does not give any significant information about the inner workings of the communist party, except that he writes about some events in passing. For instance, SM refers to the practices of untouchability inside the Communist dominated Girni Kamgar Union (GKU) office. In the GKU office, "there were by tradition two *matkas* (mud vessels) of drinking water. One was for the Caste Hindu workers and the other for the Dalit workers... [T]he Communist leaders would drink from the vessel meant for Dalits, but other Caste Hindu workers did not do so. Even a Dalit leader like Bhise, who was the President of the GKU had to drink water from the *matka* meant for Dalits" (More 2019:185–86). SM does not provide enough information about this practice, except that RBM's intervention resulted in the discontinuation of it. Interestingly, when RBM informed the Communist leader B.T. Ranadive about such practices "he too was perplexed" (p. 186). It is surprising to note that except for the fact that Ranadive was "perplexed," we do not have much information about the discussion that RBM had with the leadership. When RBM offers a solution to "keep only one *matka* of water in the office, so anyone who is polluted by caste considerations can go out and drink water from the hotel" (p. 186)—it is accepted by the party leadership. However, SM does not tell us whether this change resulted in any tensions between the upper-caste and Dalit comrades. If so, how did the upper-caste leaders deal with such a situation. Moreover, we have no information about RBM's experience when his interventions on caste were consistently side-lined by the party leadership.

- 21 SM is also strangely silent about the Communist Party's strategies towards Ambedkar in the decades of the 1940s and 1950s. The 1952 elections continue to be an important event that has left long lasting bitterness among Dalit Ambedkarites towards the Communists. However, while discussing the 1952 elections, less attention is paid to the events that followed the Second World War. After Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union during the Second World War, the Indian Communists followed the Comintern line by terming the war as a "People's War" and adopted a "conciliatory attitude towards both the employers and the [colonial] state" (Chandavarkar 2004:38). The Communists also dissuaded workers from striking against the employers and the colonial state. As a result, the Communists lost their base among the Bombay working classes to the Congress, who were leading the Quit India Movement. Interestingly, Ambedkar took a similar position to the Communists, and supported the war efforts against Nazi Germany (Ambedkar 2014b). However, unlike the Communists, Ambedkar did not lose his base among the working-classes in Bombay. As a result, the Communists were compelled to rely on Ambedkar's supporters during the 1946 election, without which Comrade Dange's victory would not have been possible (More 2019:220). The expectation was that Dange would support Ambedkar in the 1952 elections. However, Dange instructed his followers not to cast their reserved constituency vote for Ambedkar. Dange also criticized Ambedkar by saying that he was pro-imperialist and class-collaborationist, and that he was not part of the national movement. Ambedkar lost the election, and this led to a bitter memory among the Ambedkarite Dalits regarding the Communists—that persists even today (Adarkar and Menon 2004:207–08). However, SM offers a very problematic narrative about the general elections of 1952, which he terms as a lost opportunity for an alliance between Ambedkarites and Communists. For this, SM accuses Ambedkar's Scheduled Caste Federation for consciously creating distance from the Communist Party.
- 22 The *Memoir* also does not provide any information about RBM's struggle within the party. RBM was one of the earliest grass-roots leaders of the Communist party. Looking at his work, Rahul Sankrutayan, a prominent writer and scholar, profiled RBM as one of the new leaders of new India in 1943, along with other upper-caste Communist leaders such as S. Namboodripad, Shripad Dange, Gangadhar Adhikari and B. T. Ranadive (Sankrityayan 1943:313–26). Together with Shamrao Parulekar, RBM initiated the peasant movement by forming Maharashtra Kisan Sabha in 1945.<sup>6</sup> In 1965, RBM started CPI-M's Marathi mouthpiece *Jeevan Marg* from his residence in Goregaon (More 2019:244). Despite RBM's contribution to the Communist party, he was not as successful as his upper-caste contemporaries in climbing the ladder of the party hierarchy. RBM was never elevated to a powerful position within the Polit Bureau. Moreover, RBM was never given the chance to represent the party at the international level. And, unlike thousands of upper-caste Communist children, who benefitted from the higher studies opportunities in the Soviet Union, RBM's children did not have access to any of it. The absence of any significant information about these aspects in RBM's memoirs hints towards the politically fragile position of SM and RBM within the Communist party.
- 23 Despite RBM's explicit loyalties towards Communist politics, Ambedkar supported him and provided opportunities. Ambedkar offered RBM the opportunity to contest the 1937 elections as a part of his Independent Labour Party (p. 207). When Ambedkar was the Labour Member in the viceroy's council, he was surprised to see RBM's name missing from the list of delegates submitted by the All India Trade Union Congress

(AITUC) who were to attend the 27<sup>th</sup> session of the International Labour Conference in 1945 in Paris. Ambedkar used his influence to amend the list and added RBM as a delegate for the conference (p. 217). At the conference in Paris, RBM raised the issue of Dalit exclusion from the weaving departments within textile mills (p. 219–20). This is possibly the first instance of highlighting the issue of caste discrimination at the International Labour Conference. However, back in India, the upper-caste Communist leadership belittled RBM's intervention at the International Labour Conference by saying that *tikde jaaun suddha mandla tar kai? jaatichach muddha mandala!* (Even after going there, what issue did he speak about? Only caste issue was represented!).<sup>7</sup> RBM's disagreements with the upper-caste Communist leadership over the caste question and his support to the Ambedkar led anti-caste movement worked as an obstacle to his upward mobility within the party.<sup>8</sup>

## Missing in Translation

- 24 The *Memoirs* has excluded several important parts from original Marathi text. The editor/translator have excluded Satyendra More's note, in which he outlines how he convinced RBM to write his story, and why he himself decided to complete the narrative. It is here we also come across an important reference about RBM in Rahul Sankritayan's book *Naye Bharat ke Naye Neta* (New Leaders of New India) (Sankritayan 1943:313–26). As mentioned previously, Sankritayan had profiled RBM along with S.A. Dange, B.T. Ranadive and E.M.S Nambudripad as new leaders of new India. The correspondence from 1953 to 1964 between RBM and the Communist Party over the question of untouchability has also been excluded. The communication by RBM shows how he consistently urged the higher echelons of the Communist Party to seriously intervene in the struggle against untouchability. However, RBM remained disappointed with party's approach on the caste question. The English text has also omitted the prefatory note by Prabhakar Sanzgiri, who was the central committee member of the CPI-M. Sanzgiri notes how till the 1980s the Communist Party-run study sessions did not include any discussions on caste and religion—both of which have acquired immense importance in Indian politics. The prefatory note is an important document as it is an insider's critique of the Communist Party's approach to the caste and communal question. The omission of this note by the publication house, which has explicit associations with the CPI-M, was probably deliberate, in order to avoid criticism of their party on the caste question.
- 25 The translator has also erred by translating the name of the Communist dominated trade-union the Girni Kamgar Union (GKU) as Mill Workers Union (More 2019:163, 168, 185, 186). While the translation is correct, the translator has not mentioned the original name of the organization. Those unfamiliar with Bombay labor politics are likely to miss this point and read this as any other textile labor union. The translator could have provided the translation of GKU in a footnote for the English-speaking audience. Lastly, the major error that has taken place is the exclusion of the author's (Satyendra More's) name from the English edition. These shortcomings can easily be corrected if and when the publishers plan their next edition. Notwithstanding these limitations, the translation of RBM's lifeworld is an important contribution to the study of Mumbai city, the Dalits' struggle for education in colonial India, their experiences of exclusion,

the Indian Communist movement and their conflicting relationship with the caste question, and the position of Dalits within the Communist party apparatus.

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## NOTES

1. Sumeet Mhaskar's conversations with Communist-affiliated trade union leaders in Mumbai.
2. The untouchables occupy the lowest position in the caste hierarchy and they were traditionally deprived of any economic, social, and political rights. Dalit is a self-chosen name by the untouchables. Dalit is a Marathi term which means broken or crushed people, and it was first used in the 1920s by several people, including Ambedkar in his writings in the weekly magazine *Janata*, to describe the untouchables. The term Dalit, as a self-chosen name, was revived by the Dalit Panthers movement in the 1970s. However, for all policy purposes, the Indian state refers to the Dalits as Scheduled Castes.
3. Changdev Khairmode wrote 15 volume biography of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar titled *Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar Charitra (Autobiography of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar)*. Khairmode began this project in 1923 and he completed it before his death in 1971. As a biographer, Khairmode had the unique advantage of clarifying various issues directly with Ambedkar. Moreover, he had access to the correspondence between Ambedkar and his colleagues and followers, as well as speeches published by various newspapers.
4. *Janata*, 31<sup>st</sup> August 1931
5. Personal Communication with Subodh More.

6. Personal Communication with Subodh More.
  7. Personal communication with Subodh More.
  8. Personal communication with Subodh More.
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