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DIGITAL EXCLUSIVE

# Ambedkar beyond the Constitution: A guide, comrade, and kin

An exhibition for Ambedkar's 135th birth anniversary showed him not just as a lawmaker, but as a moral guide, friend, and family man through ephemera.

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An undated picture card issued on Dr. B. R. Ambedkar issued by the Bank of Baroda. At the back of the card, Ambedkar is described as a “front rank Indian nationalist leader” and the “Architect of Indian Constitution”. This card was part of a larger set that included Dadabhai Naoroji, Lala Lajpat Rai, Mahatma Gandhi, Vallabhbhai Patel, Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad, and Jawaharlal Nehru. | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement

Recently, I was stunned to find an online apparel shopping portal, which has also branched out to household items, selling a framed portrait of B.R. Ambedkar in his iconic blue suit. While it seemed like an improvement on images of gurus in loincloth gracing living room walls, the idea

of Ambedkar as dining room decor in fancy apartments still shook me. But, of course, Ambedkar has always been a popular icon in calendar and other assorted arts. Only, in the past, his image had usually been used by institutions whose goals were aligned, at least on paper, to the ideals he upheld.



Curator Vikas Kumar at the exhibition. | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement

The exhibition, “Ambedkar: Through the Lens of Ephemera” (April 14-15), held to commemorate Ambedkar’s 135th birth anniversary on April 14 at The Hinge in the Azim Premji University (APU) campus, brought together a range of objects utilising Ambedkar’s face to promote themselves or to better their aesthetic appeal. These included portraits, posters, calendars, packing labels, philatelic deposit account cards, train tickets, flight boarding passes, and tickets of musical performances. Together, they indicated the importance of Ambedkar as a “brand”, used by public and private institutions to highlight their support for the ideals of social justice and equality that Babasaheb stands for.

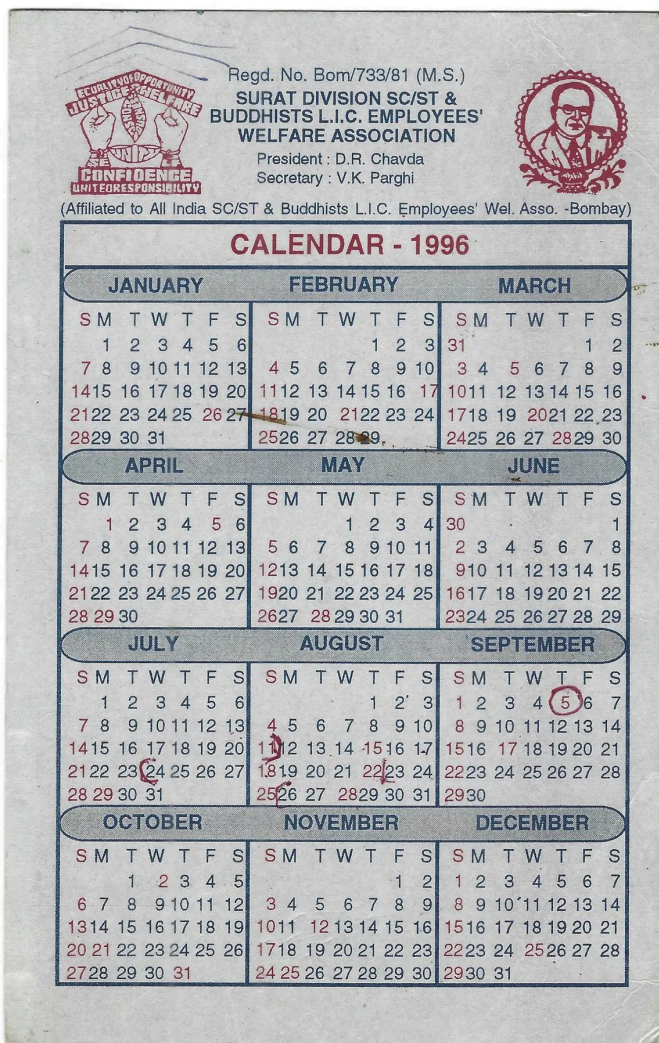
### **Bringing Babasaheb closer**

For instance, a 1996 calendar of the Surat Division of the SC/ST & Buddhists’ L.I.C. Employees’ Welfare Association had a tiny image of Ambedkar as a medallion on the top right. Since the organisation’s logo on the top left carried the legend, “Equality of opportunity, justice and welfare: Unite for responsibility”, it seemed apt that Ambedkar’s face was used to reconfirm the beliefs of the welfare association. A quote by Ambedkar on the back of the calendar said, “For, I am of opinion that most vital need of the day is to create amongst the mass of the people the sense of a common nationality, the feeling not that they are Indians first and Hindus,

Mohammedans or Sindhis and Canarese afterwards but they are Indians first and Indians last. If this be the ideal, then it follows that nothing should be done which will harden local patriotism and group consciousness (*sic*).”

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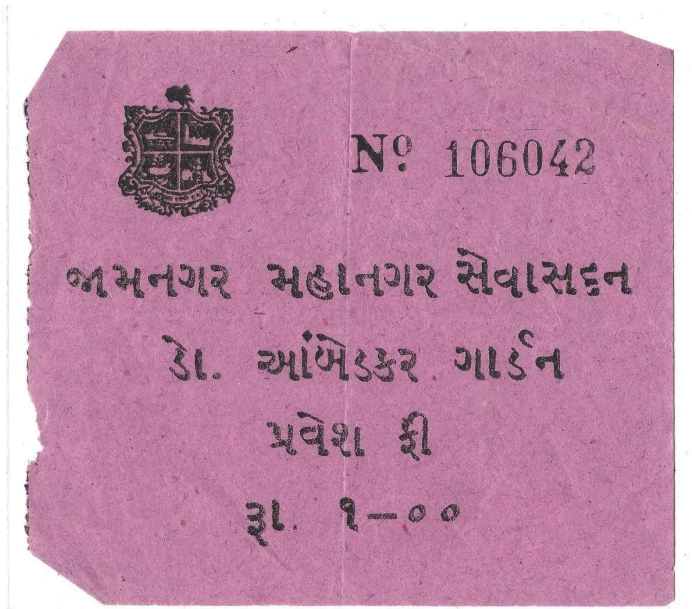
A calendar issued by the Surat Division SC/ST & Buddhists L.I.C. Employees' Welfare Association in 1996. It features Ambedkar’s portrait on one side and a quote by him on the back. | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement

The curator of the exhibition, Vikas Kumar, who is Associate Professor of Economics at APU, said, “This is interesting since almost all the quotes of Ambedkar that have been used in, say, information brochures or commemorative postage stamps, focus on caste oppression. In the following year [1997], a calendar was issued by the General Insurance Employees’ All India Association to mark the golden jubilee of Independence. It featured Ambedkar as an ‘architect of the Indian Constitution’ along with ‘pioneers of Indian Independence’ like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi, Subhash Chandra Bose, and Jawaharlal Nehru.”

He added, “More recently, the All India SC/ST Employees Welfare Association and All India Postal SC/ST Employees Welfare Association (Kalaburagi and Yadagiri division) sponsored special covers on Ambedkar in 2019 and 2024, respectively. These covers, which are quasi-governmental postal products, enrich

the visual repertoire of Ambedkar by adding images that relate to his contributions to specific localities.”

What was interesting about the ephemera on display was that it challenged the Mumbai and Delhi centric imaginations of Ambedkar as a strict lawmaker with an ever-sombre, bespectacled face. It suggested a more genial and relaxed Ambedkar, who is part of a larger body of the struggle for social justice and the neo-Buddhist pantheon. An undated coloured poster, for instance, presented Ambedkar as a Buddhist icon surrounded by the Buddha, Ashoka, Jyotirao Phule and Chhatrapati Shahuji Maharaj, who were collectively identified by the Marathi caption as “Nation Builders”.

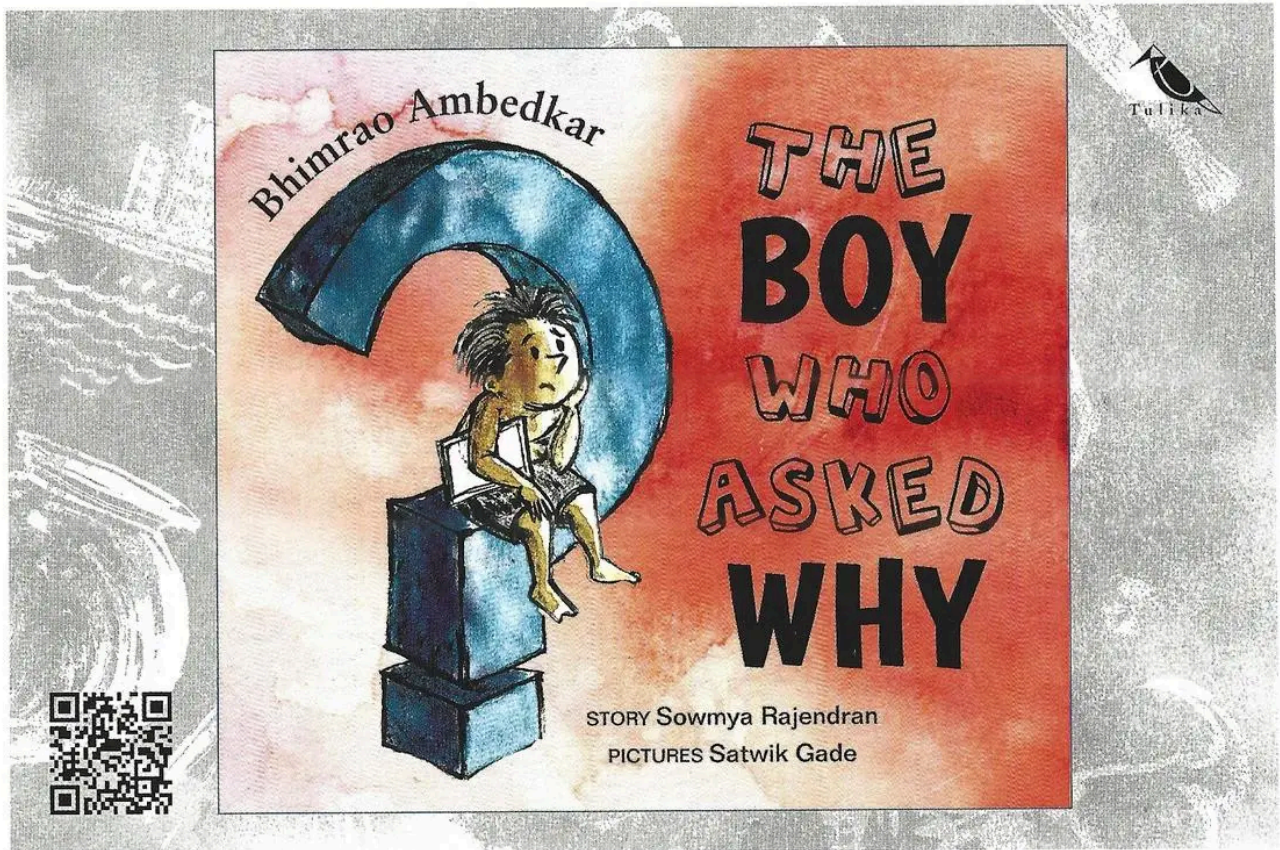


An undated entry ticket (Re. 1) of Dr. Ambedkar Garden of Jamnagar Mahanagar Sevasadan. The text on the ticket is in Gujarati. | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement



An undated coloured poster that presents Ambedkar as a Buddhist icon surrounded by the Buddha, Ashoka, Jyotirao Phule, and Chhatrapati Shahuji Maharaj. | Photo Credit: By special arrangement

Anand Teltumbde's book, *Iconoclast: A Reflective Biography of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar*, calls for a critical rethink of Ambedkar's thoughts as an antidote to the appropriation of his image by the conservative Right. To iconise Ambedkar is to go against the radical element of his beliefs, Teltumbde says. "Ambedkar: Through the Lens of Ephemera" was significant in the way it problematised the iconography of Ambedkar, inspiring inquiry.



A private postcard inspired by the book, *The Boy Who Asked Why* (2015), by Satwik Gade and Sowmya Rajendran, published by Tulika. | Photo Credit: By special arrangement

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Kumar pointed out how those who had visited his earlier philatelic exhibition on Ambedkar ("Baba Saheb: An Extraordinary Philatelic Journey: 1966-2022", curated by Kumar, was held in 2022) remarked on the contrast between the "official" and "non-official" representations of Babasaheb. For instance, the cover of an Amar Chitra Katha biography of Ambedkar from 1979 showed him smiling warmly, while a poster showed Ambedkar and Ramabai as newlyweds, decked in vibrant coloured clothes and garlands, with a floating Buddha on the top giving them his blessings.

Ambedkar, the author of such radical statements as "Democracy in India is only a top-dressing on an Indian soil which is essentially undemocratic," exhorted Indians to question the given in

all areas of life in order to move ahead. By lending credence to this belief, “Ambedkar: Through the Lens of Ephemera” carried forward Babasaheb’s incalculable legacy.

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