A Note from the Author

Three caveats.

The biography of a man who is principally noted for his words rather than his actions inevitably suffers from a deficiency of incidents and a surfeit of ideas. There is undoubtedly drama and suffering in Ambedkar’s life, but far more consequential is the weight of his writings, speeches, and interventions in the public debates of his time. In opting to reflect this reality, the biographer is obliged to acknowledge that this sometimes makes for a curiously bloodless tale. That the son of an untouchable subedar, scrabbling in the dust in the cantonment town of Mhow, rose to earn two prestigious doctorates and, by sheer dint of his intellectual worth, courage of conviction, and brilliance of articulation became one of the foremost figures among a generation of giants is drama enough for this writer. But the reader is fairly warned: this is the story of the rise of a man of ideas, illustrated with extensive quotations from his writings and speeches, and not of a man of physical adventure.

The second caveat relates to the use of some descriptions in the narrative. In the early chapters, and elsewhere in the book, the word ‘untouchable’ is freely used, even though it is a pejorative term that has long since fallen into discredit. The problem is that at the time being referred to, the word ‘Dalit’, the currently accepted term for the community in question, was not generally in use, and even Dr Ambedkar himself often used the term untouchables. The community—also referred to as the ‘Depressed Classes’—became known after 1935 as the Scheduled Castes, and that term slips into the discourse as the narrative moves on. But the reader is asked in advance to
excuse the author for reflecting the language of the times. No
defence is intended.

And, finally, a third, inescapable, caveat: in my extensive
reading of Dalit writings and commentary on the life and teachings
of Ambedkar, I have become acutely conscious of the fact that
some will object to this book on the basic ground that I am not
a Dalit. I am entirely aware that the analysis of an ‘objective’
author, however well-read or well-informed, cannot match the
insights gleaned from the personal experience of discrimination
and marginalization. I will not protest, as I once did, that I
have grown up oblivious of caste, because I have since been
schooled to accept that even caste-blindness is a reflection of
privilege, and that no Dalit can ever escape being conscious
of her caste, as I was brought up to be unaware initially of
my own. In the end I can only say that I have approached
the subject of this short biography with respect for the man,
admiration for his accomplishments, knowledge of the history,
and awareness of the context. It is up to the reader to judge
whether the result of my efforts is good enough.