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Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar and the Question of Socialism in India

V. Geetha

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For my parents

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Introduction

1 A HAUNTING

Across India, diverse rural and urban neighbourhoods host a statue that is hard to miss: bespectacled, and in a suit, with a book in hand, and right forefinger pointing into the distance. Small, large, grey, painted, garlanded, of mud and stone, these images are of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956), one of modern India’s most original thinkers. A symbol of a living history of resistance to the hierarchical and unequal caste order, and its supplement, untouchability, he is remembered, revered and loved by all those who continue to fight for dignity and equality in a violent and unequal society.

The general Indian public has been content to view him as the architect of the Constitution of India, and as a leader of the Dalits (former untouchables). But to those who are part of various political and social movements inspired by him, and who constitute resilient anti-caste counter-publics, he is a revolutionary thinker, radical democrat and republican, and for some, an unusual socialist. Dalit movements and intellectuals who are active in these various publics have pushed scholars in India and elsewhere to engage with his work, as is evident from the number of research projects and publications that have come to be undertaken over the last three decades and more.

This book joins these efforts. It is about Bhimrao Ambedkar's engagement with 'the question of socialism' in India. At one level, it seems rather contrarian to write on this subject, since Ambedkar did not consider himself a socialist, and was a resolute critic of Indian communism and communists. On the other hand, socialism remained a spectral presence in his thought world, and he did not conjure it away. I seek to understand the nature of this haunting, by viewing it in the context of Ambedkar's conceptual universe, rich, layered and straddling several domains of thought and practice. Rather than mark his interest, or disinterest in socialism, in terms of a lack or limit, I have chosen to understand his engagement with it, through what he achieved, his formidable and challenging critique of the "Hindu social order".¹

I present this critique in and through a mapping of Ambedkar's thought world: I plot and connect the various conceptual nodes that hold this latter in place, and the lines of argument that flow from them.² It seems to me that these various and intersecting approaches were at once epistemic, political and ethical and, in their unity, they made for a historically consequential project that looked to elucidate as well as "annihilate" the order of caste and untouchability.

¹ Ambedkar's socialism has been the subject of the following books: Gail Omvedt's, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994, examines the socialist aspects of Ambedkar's politics. She suggests that he advocated a radical politics of labour in the 1930s and partially in the 1940s, but not thereafter. Anand Teltumbde—in his long introduction to a collection of Ambedkar's writings titled, *India and Communism*, New Delhi: Leftword Books, 2018—points to the Indian left's sins of omission, with regard to the caste question and their unfortunate and tragic misreading of Ambedkar's politics and also draws attention to Ambedkar's engagement with communist literature, including Marx's writings. Anupama Rao has sought to think through Ambedkar's relationship with socialism in tandem with his theorization of the subaltern in a distinctive sort of way (see her 'Ambedkar's Dalit and the Problem of Caste Subalternity' in *The Radical in Ambedkar: Critical Reflections*, edited by Suraj Yengde and Anand Teltumbde, Gurgaon: Penguin India, 2018, pp. 340–358). See also Cosimo Zene (editor), *The Political Philosophies of Antonio Gramsci and B.R. Ambedkar: Itineraries of the Subaltern*, London: Routledge 2013, which features essays that read Ambedkar through a Gramscian lens.

² For a synoptic and rich overview of his writings, see Valerian Rodrigues (editor), *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004.

2 A “POLITICALLY UNIMAGINABLE” POLITICS

Ambedkar worked with different sets of conceptual tools and arguments but refused to be bound by the protocols of reasoning which defined each of them. He drew on dissenting traditions, associated with devotionism, debates in the public sphere in his native Maharashtra, to do with history and religion, French and American republican and English constitutional thought, British socialist literature, American Progressive ideas, historical studies of the African-American predicament, ethnological studies of British administrator-scholars and their Indian peers, specific texts of Marx and Lenin, aspects of Indian rational and materialist philosophy, Buddhist canonical texts, theories of ameliorative economic justice and working-class histories from across the world. Each of these yielded him ideas that he reworked to his purpose.

In effect, he ‘vernacularized’ political concepts, terms of analysis and argument, and even descriptions, by bringing them within the ambit of experiences and histories which defamiliarized them and demanded their reconstitution. Given ways of thinking about democratic representation, minority rights, race, class consciousness, proletarian unity, the republic and the socialist state, as well as social ethics, social suffering and spiritual liberation were dislocated from their originary contexts and rethought, in themselves, and in relation to each other, and from the perspective of those who had been placed beyond the Indian social pale, the so-called untouchables.³ Ambedkar thus sought to imagine what historian Minkah Makalani has described as the “politically unimaginable”, and which seeks

³ The displacement of ideas and events from their discursive and historical contexts and their refiguration was undertaken with deliberative intent. For instance, Ambedkar drew on the history of American abolitionism, including the work undertaken by white people of conscience, to point to how the horrors of slavery were mitigated by such efforts. His point was not to produce the ‘truth’ about abolitionism, but to point to the absence of such parallel efforts in India, with regard to untouchability (*Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, The Education Department, Government of Maharashtra [BAWS], Volume 5, 1989, pp. 80–88, 97–99). He was aware of the complexities of the issues at stake in Abolitionism and the civil war, and knew Henry Aptheker’s work, which he cited in his famous polemic, *What Congress and Gandhi have Done to the Untouchables* (in BAWS, Volume 9, 1991, pp. 173–176); he also noted that the Gettysburg address notwithstanding, President Lincoln’s intent was not to end slavery, but save the Union. In this instance, he compared Gandhi to Lincoln and noted that likewise Gandhi wanted freedom from the British, but did not wish to restructure the unequal Hindu social order (in BAWS, Volume 9, 1991, pp. 270–271).

to conceptualize what it hopes to bring into existence.⁴ This book grapples with this paradox, of naming and thinking what must be, even as it is shaped and restrained by the vocabularies of what is, which it constantly seeks to remake, if not subvert.

3 CHAPTERS

The book comprises seven chapters: the second is in the nature of a short political biography and contextualizes Ambedkar's life and work, by embedding them within multiple histories, of anti-caste movements and thought that existed in his native Maharashtra in western India; Indian nationalism and communism, and the colonial state, in their relationship to each other; caste worlds; and local and global intellectual traditions. I bring Ambedkar's politics and his thought into conversation with what were coeval with either, and point to what he shared with his contemporaries and where he stood apart, as he pursued and conceptualized what often appeared 'unthinkable'.

The 'apartness' which marked the place of the untouchable in Indian society was not only a sociological and existential condition, but an ontological one as well. Ambedkar's acute and critical awareness of the ontological wounding, at once structural and corporeal, that he and his fellow untouchables were subject to, mediated his responses to nationalism and communism. Tragically neither nationalists nor the communists grasped the ethical significance of this critique. In this context it would be useful to recall what W. E. Du Bois wrote of the American socialists in 1913: that the "average modern Socialist can scarcely grasp" the "bitter reactionary hatred of the Negro" and a culture in which "murder and torture of human beings holds a prominent place" and which considers "the defilement of colored women ... [a] joke, and justice toward colored men will not be listened to".⁵

Chapter 3 examines Ambedkar's understanding of colonial rule and the colonial state, of what he ironically called "Pax Britannica". It contrasts and compares his views with those of nationalists and communists and

⁴ Minkah Makalani, 'The Politically Unimaginable in Black Marxist Thought', *Small Axe*, Volume 22:2, July 2018, pp. 18–34.

⁵ W. E. Du Bois, Socialism and the Negro Problem (originally published in *The New Review: A Weekly Review of International Socialism*, 1 February 1913), <http://www.webdubois.org/dbSocialism&NProb.html>; accessed on February 20, 2021.

takes a close look at his engagement with colonial law and such constitutional and political reform that the colonial government undertook through the interwar and the war years (1919–1946). I also consider, briefly, his role in the making of the Indian Constitution and the ill-fated Hindu Code Bill, a piece of legislation that sought to bring into a tidy legal compact, laws to do with marriage, divorce, women’s right to property, maintenance in the event of judicial separation and divorce and adoption. I point out that the political issues at stake in late colonial India did not have only to do with anti-colonial nationalism and communism, and that the equality and justice claims put forth by the untouchables and lower castes, particularly by Ambedkar and his movement, constituted a veritable new politics, which stands to be theorized in its own right.

This politics addressed tensions that, following Frantz Fanon, one might identify as being constitutive of anti-colonial nationalism. As Fanon observed, nationalism “that magnificent song that made people rise against their oppressors ...is not a political doctrine nor programme” and will “die away the day independence is proclaimed”. What was important, therefore was to transform “national consciousness into political and social consciousness”.⁶ This is what Ambedkar sought to do, insisting as he did, during the heyday of nationalism, that nationalists work against the logic of the caste order and untouchability, in as much as they did against alien rule. But, since they failed to do so, he had to redefine the notion of the political, as far as the untouchables were concerned. In a context where the colonial state, though removed from its subjects, yet looked to mediate the untouchables’ right of access to the political, he staked claims that would enable them participate in the world of politics. In doing so, he wagered a productive as well as critical engagement with the state, which pointed to both the historical limits that hedged his choices as well as his creative transcendence of these limits.

Chapter 4 engages with Ambedkar’s vision of history and historical change, and demonstrates how, unlike the communists and nationalists, he did not view the injustice wrought by colonial rule as exceptional or as representing a marked historical stage. Instead he chose to understand it in line with the history of inequality in the subcontinent and thus foregrounded in his writings the long *duree*, rather than the immediate past, in order to examine the ways in which an antique time persisted into the

⁶ Frantz Fanon, ‘The Pitfalls of National Consciousness’ in *The Wretched of the Earth*, London: Penguin, 2001, p. 163.

present. I look at key historical texts that Ambedkar wrote, as well as others that he did not finish. I also draw into focus his understanding of the germinal time of social reproduction, and his expansive understanding of the same. I annotate his complex sense of historical time as subject to what I call—drawing from Gramsci—an “epistemic logic of transformism” and which he looked to disrupt, through forceful thought and the political movement of the untouchables.

Chapter 5 moves away from considerations of time to an examination of structure: since, for Ambedkar, the time of the new had to be birthed by thought, his theorization of the caste order assumes significance. I plot the progress of his understanding through his writings, but also through an examination of what his contemporaries—social reformers and all those who studied caste, as ethnologists, anthropologists and sociologists—had to say on this all important subject. I argue that Ambedkar’s politics, devoted as it was to the annihilation of caste, mediated his understanding. In this context I call attention to how he sought to unravel the secret of what he held to be a fetish, the sacerdotal order of classes, and how, for him, this order could only be upended through the waging of an ontological as well as social revolution.

In my understanding, the intellectual and political labour that Ambedkar undertook in this context is comparable to Marx’s work with political economy. Just as Marx produced capitalism as an object of historical enquiry and critique, and thus denaturalized the regime of capital, so did Ambedkar historicize the production of caste-related inequality that had been rendered sacrosanct by belief, custom and habit. By construing it as an object that modern time had rendered legible and thus enabling its radical critique, he pointed to the need to extirpate it, and argued that this was a necessary prerequisite amongst other “prerequisites” for the advent of communism in India.

Chapter 6 looks at the challenges Ambedkar posed Indian communists in the light of his own engagement with the worker and peasant questions on the one hand and on the other hand, his theorizing of the labour question in the light of its inscription within the caste order and untouchability. I ask if the concerns that Ambedkar raised with regard to labour, the labourer and the labour process, were taken seriously by the Indian communists, and if their practice expressed an understanding that belied their official position, or indeed their articulated theoretical arguments. I draw on the rich scholarship in Indian labour history and labour studies, agrarian and other social movements and conjoin the insights they

offer with the theoretical arguments that emerge from Ambedkar's prognosis for socialism. I also examine briefly insights proffered by anti-caste movements with regard to labour and the labourers.

Ambedkar's critique of caste-based labour, if pursued further, would require that the labour theory of value be redefined in the Indian context. The stigma that marks all manual labour and the refusal of value or worth to labour that untouchable workers are enjoined to do, by custom and coercion, not only complicate our understanding of value, but of work as such.⁷ As an astute observer of the times pointed out, the labourer in India did not seek so much to valorize either his labour time or, for that matter, his skill, rather he looked to enhance his caste status. In that sense, he helped produce a cultural surplus, which fed into the spiritual capital hoarded by India's intellectual and priestly class, the brahmins, which resulted in his continued social alienation.⁸

Chapter 7 is devoted to Ambedkar's views on social reproduction, and his critical engagement with all matters that validated its logic. For long, Ambedkar had argued that caste endogamy kept caste differences in place, and an entire sexual economy had been organized to secure this purpose. I examine the ways in which he sought to come to critical terms with the logic of reproduction by comparing his efforts with those of others who, likewise, looked to opt out of the caste order, in order not to reproduce it: women reformers, including those who converted out of Hinduism, and anti-caste movements that attempted to build eutopic worlds of their own. I argue that the realm of social reproduction comprised three levels: the affective, social and the ontological and that those who desired to reconstruct it came to it from one or the other of these levels. Ambedkar, I note, chose conversion out of Hinduism as a decisive moment of transition in the path to reconstructing social and affective worlds, vitiated by the caste order.

Ambedkar's work in this instance stands to be read along with feminist literature that has complicated the socialist position on reproduction. It

⁷ For a nuanced reading of value and work, in the context of the withholding of "recognition" that potentially could valorize labour, see Gopal Guru, 'New-Buddhism, Marxism and the caste Question in India', in *Classical Buddhism, Neo-Buddhism and the Question of Caste*, edited by Pradeep Gokhale, Oxford: Routledge, 2021, pp. 111–126.

⁸ See in this context, V. Geetha, 'Periyar, Marx and Freedom' in S. V. Rajadurai and V. Geetha, *The Periyar Century: Themes in Case, Gender and Religion*, Trichy: Bharathidasan University, 2008, pp. 174–189.

suggests that the caste family represents a unique figuration of gendered differences and hierarchy, and that the sexual economy that sustains it not only helps reproduce the social relations of production but equally the cultural conditions that structure and validate the latter.⁹

The last chapter—Chapter 8—has to do with Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism. It draws on his major writings on the Buddha and Buddhism to foreground what he looked to do, in and through the conversion process. I argue that his conversion was not so much a point of arrival, as it was a point of departure and that his becoming a Buddhist did not mean that he had chosen to withdraw or retract his labour in secular and political worlds. I go on to offer a reading of his Buddhist ‘turn’ in terms of his continuing and uneasy relationship to socialism, and read the Buddhist “gospel” that he wrote, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, as a text that ‘thinks’ Buddhism and socialism together.

In terms of a philosophy of distributive justice, his socialism centred on the making of a putative welfare state, but in political and ethical terms, it required a mobilization of the untouchables and the lower castes into a unified movement against the caste order and for a socially and ethically just society. Between the state and utopia lay the terrain of the political and Ambedkar was determined to rework its contours and meaning in and through his eutopic endeavour. In this context, I see him as advocating a politics of permanent persuasion, which was not only to constitute a war of position in the Indian context, but was to be advanced in other contexts as well, in order that a putative proletarian state, in pursuit of equality, does not abridge the right to liberty and the need for fraternity.

4 TERMINOLOGY

Throughout the book, I have used the term ‘untouchable’, while referring to that segment of the population against whom untouchability has been historically practised. This is not how former untouchables refer to themselves today. They have preferred a variety of names and the most well-known and widely used term is ‘Dalit’. I use the term ‘untouchable’, odious though it is, because it was one that Ambedkar used widely and

⁹ For a twenty-first century edition of debates on the subject and arguments that flow from thee, see Tithi Bhattachaya (editor), *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression*, London: Pluto Press, 2017.

consistently in his writings, except in places where he resorted to governmental categories, such as the Depressed Classes or the Scheduled Castes. Likewise, with the term touchables: I use it in the manner he does, to refer to the non-untouchable sections of the population. I use terms such as 'lower caste' and 'upper caste' to refer in the aggregate to social groups that are unequally related. The terms are descriptive and in keeping with the historical contexts of their occurrence.

For those who are unlikely to be familiar with the meanings of terms that are specific to the Indian social context, here is a very brief description of each of these:

Caste: refers to an endogamous social group, into which are nested subgroups. In some instances, each of these latter might be endogamous as well. There are literally thousands of castes in India, with each region having its own geographically specific set of castes. A caste is identified as such in any number of ways: based on residence, occupation, shared origin tales, geographical location, on the basis of locally determined ideas to do with status and authority and as it features in official documents, issued by the government.

Varna: a term that is used in relation to caste; it is a notional system, referenced in the most ancient of Sanskrit texts, the Vedas. The varna order comprised four occupational groups, arranged in the following order of prestige: priests (brahmins), warriors (kshatriyas), farmers and traders (vaishyas), and the menials (shudras). Castes seek or claim this or that varna status, or find themselves socially categorized as belonging to this varna, rather than that. A varna in this sense is a super category, a meta construct to which a caste attaches itself.

Untouchability: officially it ceased to exist in India with Article 17 of the Indian Constitution declaring it abolished and a crime. But socially it is widely prevalent, and mediates access to productive and social resources, including property, education, choice of work, place of residence, and renders romantic love and conjugality between the so-called untouchables and those from other castes a fraught and uneasy experience, if not a downright violent and murderous one. Untouchables are divided into several castes and these are endogamous as well.

Brahmanism: a term that is used to refer to (a) an ideology that justifies birth-based differences (b) a state of mind, a notion or attitude

that castes associated with the brahmin varna uphold, to legitimize their superordinate status (c) a historically evolved religious tradition, which is believed to have emerged in the first millennium BCE, and which derived from an earlier Vedic tradition.

Hindu: refers to those who follow the Hindu religion, which historically is distinguished from the Vedic religion as well as Brahmanism, though it retains aspects of either, along with other accretions that evolved over time.



CHAPTER 2

‘A Part Apart’: The Life and Times of Dr. Ambedkar

1 STRADDLING TIMES AND PLACES

Bhimrao Ambedkar spoke and wrote a great deal throughout his life, but rarely about himself. The autobiographical fragments that survive paint a poignant and grim picture of what it was like, growing up untouchable in late colonial India, and to constantly have to negotiate the ‘bar sinister’, the stark social and economic line that divided the so-called untouchables from all others in Indian society.¹ He referenced his times, though, in several essays, as he sought to assess colonial rule and what existed before its advent. The English, he held, ruled India in order to further their own interests, but their presence had ushered in changes that were consequential for India’s poor and marginal populations, especially those deemed untouchable, who felt “delivered from age long tyranny and oppression by the orthodox Hindus”. These changes were not willed so much as undertaken to secure English political authority in the subcontinent, but nevertheless, they had proved far-reaching. Public education, improved communication and a modern legal system had brought India into the

¹ B. R. Ambedkar, *Waiting for a Visa*, in Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches (BAWS), Mumbai: The Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1993: Volume 12, pp. 663–691. Henceforth all references to Ambedkar’s writings in this chapter will cite the acronym, BAWS, followed by volume number, year of publication and page numbers.

very locus of the modern world, even though India's rulers were not particularly committed to realizing the promises of modernity.²

The modern moment, as Ambedkar invoked it, was experienced as startling and unique by countless others as well. Thousands of men and women who found their lives changed on account of colonial land and revenue policies, the coming of factories and the expansion of communication, found themselves in places and moments that were often difficult and shocking, but which also held the promise of the new and unexpected. This was especially so, in the colonial city. Ambedkar grew up in such a city, the western Indian metropolis of Bombay and spent much of his adult life in its working-class neighbourhoods.³

The working class in Bombay comprised largely of rural migrants. Many were touchable peasants whose sociability was shaped by the cultures and castes that they were from. They were recruited into the city's textile mills, and other places of work, through jobbers, who were often from their own communities. Untouchable workers also found their way to the city in a similar manner. For the most part, particular castes and communities came to labour at particular trades. In a structural as well as affective sense, the urban proletariat, thus, remained linked to social worlds, which were not entirely separable from kin and caste networks, or indeed from the rural hinterland.⁴

These ties became the basis for politics in the city, including labour organizing, as is evident from the life of Narayan Lokhande, an early spokesman for labour. From a peasant background, Lokhande started life as a stores supervisor in Bombay's textile mills and eventually became a manager's assistant. He was closely linked to several social causes, associated with the Satyashodak Samaj (the Truth-seekers' Society), founded in 1873 by Jotirao Phule, also from a peasant family who had availed of

² Ambedkar shared the assumptions of his liberal contemporaries in this regard, though he was consistently severe in his critique of what the British would not do, with regard to the untouchables, even if they possessed the power to do so. As he noted on several occasions, they dared not upset the logic of the Hindu social order and face the wrath of the Indian elites, whose cooperation was central to securing their material interests. See *The Untouchables and the Pax Britannica*, in BAWS, Volume 12, pp.132–147.

³ I have relied on Dhananjay Keer's biography, while referencing Ambedkar's life: *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1954.

⁴ See Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes, 1900–1940*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, for a detailed account of the making of Bombay's diverse working class.

modern education and founded the Samaj, envisaged as a cultural revolutionary movement that challenged the caste system and the religious and social domination of the superordinate caste of brahmins. The Samaj was not as active in Bombay as it was elsewhere, but its weekly newspaper, *Dinabandhu*, was published from the city and Lokhande took over as its editor in 1880, a post he held for 17 years.

Meanwhile, his keen interest in bettering the lives of the socially suppressed lower castes and his familiarity with factory life led him to engage with mill labour and *Dinabandhu* became, as it were, a journal committed to the interests of the working classes. Soon enough, Lokhande emerged as one of their more articulate spokespersons, advocating for better work conditions and pay. In 1884, he founded the Millhands Association, which sought a regulation of the working day and leisure time for workers. It was the first working-class body in the city and, on its behalf, Lokhande testified before factory commissions set up in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

Other labour organizations linked to lower caste political assertion emerged soon after. S. K. Bole founded, in 1909, the Kamgar Hitawardhak Sabha (Workers' Welfare Society) whose members worked closely with jobbers and community notables. The Sabha sponsored sporting events, gymnasiums, public lectures on useful subjects, opened night schools for workers' children and helped mediate worker struggles with factory owners. The city was also home to the Social Service League, which employed professional social workers to engage with worker concerns.⁵

Untouchable workers in Bombay might or might not have come within the purview of such work that Lokhande and others undertook. While city life mitigated the worst aspects of physical and social separateness that characterized their lives in villages, it did not do away with the social stigma attached to their persons: even their fellow workers considered them inferior. On the other hand, as we know from the writings of R. B. More, one of Ambedkar's younger contemporaries, the city also radicalized untouchable lives, and made for a richly entangled urban existence:

⁵ For an account of lower caste organizing amongst Bombay labour see Gail Omvedt, 'Non Brahmins and Communists in Bombay', *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 21, 1973, pp. 749–759. For a history of early labour organizing in Bombay, see Aditya Sarkar, *Trouble at the Mill: Factory Law and the Emergence of the Labour Question in Late Nineteenth Century Bombay*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018.

precarious work, difficult and insanitary working and living conditions, and as well, endless opportunities for work and pleasure, social freedom, in spite of the persistence of caste distinctions and new social spaces, signified by trade unions and radical cultural associations.⁶

Being in this world, and aware of its possibilities and limits, Dr. Ambedkar strove to transcend either: for one, he was one of the few from the untouchable castes to access higher education, and travel abroad as a student rather than as a worker in search of a livelihood. The education he received at Columbia University and the London School of Economics, the gathering tide of cataclysmic events in the early twentieth century—World War I, nationalist stirrings that the war had brought to the forefront, the Bolshevik revolution, the growing discontent against capitalism in parts of Europe and the rise of the United States as a comparable world power—left a deep impress on his world view and imagination. At the same time he was conscious of and shaped by a persistent tradition of revolt and dissent against the caste order and untouchability that his part of colonial India had known since at least the mid-decades of the nineteenth century.

Straddling two times, the modern present and an older history of oppression that stood to be challenged, he came to articulate a third: the time of the future, imagined less as a utopia, and more as a ‘eutopic’ universe, realizable in the here and now. This led him to posit a complex politics, of class, caste, and the nation, which challenged the certitudes of both a confident and robust nationalism, as well as a defiant communism.

This chapter situates Ambedkar in the context of colonial India and the Indian social order, shaped by caste and untouchability, and sketches the contours of his life and thought.

⁶ See, in this context, Satyendra More, *Memoirs of a Dalit Communist: The Many Worlds of R. P. More*, New Delhi: Leftword, 2019. Also, for a detailed account of how culture, community and labour identities meshed and were sometimes rendered diffuse, see Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, ‘Workers’ Politics and the Mill Districts in Bombay between the Wars’, *Modern Asian Studies*, Volume 15:3, 1981, pp. 603–647.

2 AMBEDKAR'S MAHARASHTRA

Ambedkar was born in and lived much of his adult life in western India, in what today is known as the state of Maharashtra.⁷ In 1818, at the end of a series of wars that spanned nearly half a century, this part of India came under the rule of the English East India Company. Home to the ruling house of Bhosale that had held the Mughal rulers of the northern plains at bay, the region was unique for having had a dynasty of brahmin rulers at least since the second decade of the eighteenth century. Brahmin ministers or Peshwas, who had attended on the Bhosale royals, effectively usurped power from them and put in place a system of rule that was military-bureaucratic in nature, and which affirmed and extended, in law and through a system of land and monetary gifts, the power and privileges of the brahmin castes.

Meanwhile, military groups, who were not brahmins, and had come into their own in the days of the Bhosale kings, had to now consent to a system of rule in which they were secondary partners. In the past, these men, constituting a linked group of chieftains and minor rulers, a veritable confederacy of military men, redolent with Mahratta pride, had held brahmin power in check, even as they collaborated with it. But now they were deemed socially low. Peshwa rule also downgraded, through specially enacted laws, other castes, comprising of peasants, artisans and local traders. Untouchable castes suffered in particular, being subject to horrific practices of exclusion and humiliation.

With the British victory over the Peshwas in 1818, this system of rule ended. Over time, the East India Company put in place an extractive revenue system and new modes of governance, which transformed economic and civil life. In 1858, the region came under the rule of the British Crown, but the basic features of the system were not substantially altered. Rates of revenue exaction remained high, the peasantry continued to be indebted, artisanal production suffered a retreat and indigent craftspersons swelled the ranks of labourers and tenants in an already overburdened peasant economy. Meanwhile the system served the pecuniary interests of rural revenue farmers and those who held vast tracts of

⁷ I have relied on the following texts for my summary of polity and society in colonial Maharashtra. Rosalind O' Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth century Western India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985; Gail Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Western India*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2011.

land, even as the countryside witnessed continual bouts of hunger and famine.

Half-hearted reform efforts had some effect, but the revenue charges stayed as burdensome as before, and indebtedness was not sufficiently mitigated. On the other hand, in some parts of the region, commercial agriculture, especially cotton farms, made for a dynamic economy, and enabled a general upward mobility of all classes, including peasants with modest holdings and untouchable agricultural labourers. Combined with the access to education, these changes propelled forth into public life, a self-consciously modern generation of lower caste and untouchable publicists and thinkers.

British industrial and trading interests were secured in diverse ways. In the city of Bombay, modern spinning and weaving mills were set up and these produced cloth for export, which, in turn, returned as finished goods, sold by English trading agencies. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, capitalist manufacture with all its attendant ills—long hours, employment of women and children, unhealthy living conditions, urban squalor—was in place in the city. These changes worked to the advantage of Indian merchants and a nascent industrial bourgeoisie, who worked widespread economic misery to advantage.

Responses to these changes were complex and not of one kind. Displaced brahmin elites from the region nurtured great misgivings over their political downgrading. This led to early acts of terror against British rule, which, subsequently, fed into an emergent nationalism. On the other hand, for a smattering of brahmins, who had availed of English education, and were startled by the world of modern science, and their discovery of comparative history, British rule appeared to hold possibilities; at any rate, it promised to assuage some of the worst aspects of the Hindu social life, validated and encouraged by the Peshwas. These men were also cognizant of and agonized over Christian missionary critiques of their faith and society: to some of them at least such criticisms did not appear entirely misplaced. Thus, they came to view British rule as “providential” and themselves as modern political beings, possessed of the knowledge to criticize, evaluate and reconstruct the social order as well as address government with respect to such public grievances that they held to be important, to do with the economy, education and legal reform.⁸

⁸ See, in this context, Richard Tucker, *Ranade and the Roots of Indian Nationalism*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1972, for a description of these transitions as they unfolded

A section of peasant and artisanal castes also held British rule to be providential, but for other reasons. They viewed it as having enabled into existence a new world of ideas and practices that could be counterposed to the values and beliefs that sustained the caste order. This newness was most evident in modern schools and in the sphere of public debate. Notionally at least, the British had made education available to all: not only did this further the material prospects of the lower castes, but also made available to their members, new and critical knowledge worlds. This latter comprised radical republican ideas as well as a strident anti-clerical ones, urged forth by protestant and Anglican missionaries whose prosletysing evangelism called attention to the 'wily' ways of the brahmin priesthood and the follies of a faith that served none but the latter.

Honed as they were in local dissenting traditions, ranging from folk spirituality to organized religious and sectarian cultures which, in the past, had held brahmin authority to account, lower caste learners eagerly heeded the call of modern and rational non-conformism. Inspired by emergent notions of freedom and equality, they came to challenge not merely social mores and beliefs, but social relations as well. The story of Jotirao Phule is important in this context, for, more than any other man of his time, he wrestled with the modern moment to realize the potential for equality and liberty that it appeared to hold, as well as to call attention to social suffering. He was also one of the first amongst the new generation of Indians to address the question of untouchability in and through an evolving register of rights.⁹

3 A WORTHY FOREBEAR: JOTIRAO PHULE AND HIS KINGDOM OF BALI

Phule's life history (1827–1890) is fascinating: he was from a caste traditionally associated with agriculture. His father provided flowers to the royal Peshwa court, and held a small business in their capital city of Pune. He was educated in a school run by Scottish missionaries, and an expanding print culture made available to him and others of his time,

in the life of an important public figure, M. G. Ranade, who was a writer, civic person of eminence and held public office.

⁹ For a detailed account of Phule's life and times, and more generally, of social transitions in lower caste life, see Gail Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society*; Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology*.

a slew of radical literature, including the writings of Thomas Paine and other republicans, as well as the learnings present in, and offered by crucial world-historical events. In particular, Phule was fascinated by the American Revolution and the birth of the republic. Though repelled by American slavery, he was impressed by American abolitionism and the conduct of the Civil War to 'end slavery'. He was aware too of the destructive consequences of British and European presence in the Americas, and in Australia and sympathized with the plight of the Native Americans in the one instance and the aboriginals in the other.

Meanwhile, he was praiseful of British rule in the Indian context, chiefly for putting an end to the Peshwa regime, and for instituting a common legal and education system. Yet he could not desist from wondering at their agrarian policies, especially their pitiless revenue administration and disinterest in developing the rural economy. In despair over the fate visited on the peasantry, he attempted to account for this state of things by an analysis of governance structures. Ambivalent in his assessment of English officialdom, he trained his critical ire against the native bureaucracy. This latter was composed mostly of brahmin civil and judicial officials, who executed and carried forward colonial policies in an everyday sense. Given their exclusive and historically 'high' status, they were prone to viewing peasants and artisans as low, and with contempt. To Phule, native officialdom seemed a network of nepotistic and corrupt men, sustained, on the one hand, by brahmin commercial and landed interests and on the other hand, by their kin and caste brethren in the judiciary.

In accounting for their social existence, and their attitudes, Phule drew on the racial theories of his time and concluded that historically they were "foreign" to the land of their eventual sojourn, being "Iranian-Aryan" invaders who had come to impose their political will and cultural authority over a resident native population. Over time, they had emerged as a powerful intellectual class and sought to exert their authority in the realm of ideas and beliefs. To be sure, their hegemony was seldom as complete as it seemed, challenged as they were by other intellectual currents and historical forces: in ancient times by the Buddha, and subsequently by the advent of Islam, and most recently by English rule. In these periods of resistance to brahmin authority, the lower castes and untouchables had experienced a measure of social ease and freedom, but had suffered when reaction marshalled itself against such dissent that assailed it.

Importantly, Phule likened all those over whom brahmin overlordship was exercised to the Native Americans and aborigines, who had been set upon by white colonizers, and compared brahmin overlords to American slaveholders.¹⁰ His sense of the English was mixed. He identified three segments amongst them: one, the missionaries, inspired by Christ, and who were active in the realm of education, and brought modern education and learning to those Indians, who, traditionally, were disallowed from cultivating their minds. To Phule these men were apostles of a gospel of love, liberty and equality whose work seemed remarkable in a social context, structured by birth-based inequity and the suffering that flowed from it. The second group comprised Englishmen whose actions were inimical to Indian peasants and artisans: planters, traders and officials of government. In cahoots with native officials that they employed, these men, he argued, had bled the land dry. He was particularly severe on them for having made India an exporter of primary crops, which led to peasant distress; for the setting up of what he considered the accursed Forest department that ate into the cultivators' rights over the commons; and for ruining Indian artisanship by flooding the country with cheap imports. The third group represented the state, as much an abstract entity as a structure of rule and governance, and he distinguished it therefore from the individuals who composed it at the lower and local levels. The state for him comprised notionally rational and well-meaning higher British officials subject to a benevolent imperium. However, his sense of what this state could actually do was shadowed by an unease, by a sense that it might not actually act in ways that it ought to.¹¹

¹⁰ Phule's critique of the social power and dispositions of the brahmins of his time were voiced with critical acuity in the preface and introduction to his book *Gulamgiri* (Slavery) and in the text itself. See, in this context, G. P. Deshpande (editor), *Selected Writings of Jotirao Phule*, New Delhi: Leftword, 2002, pp. 26–46, 83–86. Also, see Gail Omvedt, *Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anti-caste Intellectuals*, Delhi: Navayana, 2008, pp. 164–182.

¹¹ Phule's complex sense of colonial rule (G. P. Deshpande (editor), *Selected Writings of Jotirao Phule*, pp. 86–97, 131–140, 154–156) was far more critical and layered than that of his liberal-minded brahmin contemporaries, who also petitioned the government on a range of issues, including agrarian distress and economic ruin. To them, colonial government appeared a practical apparatus of rule, informed by liberal principles some of which stood to be rethought in the Indian context, and they desired that government reworked its policies to help the Indian economy to develop along capitalist lines (See Mahadev Ranade, *Indian Political Economy*, Indian Economic Association Trust for Research and Development, 2000, pp. 20–23).

Historically, the government of British India legitimized its rule by invoking its “beneficence”, but it could not always square this with the practical effects that such a rule had produced. Failed revenue assessments, villagers deserting their homes and fields, unable to pay either government or the money lenders, discontent and rebellion: all of these belied the idea of beneficent rule. To close the gap between what ought to be and what was, colonial rulers often referenced an older time of political oppression, compared to which, their own rule was a vast improvement. Thus, Phule’s mixed sense of what colonial authority could do, and what it failed to do, the exactions that Englishmen were capable of and their proclaimed benevolence and sense of justice owed somewhat to the contradictions that were constitutive of colonial authority, and which were papered over by the rhetoric of just governance.¹²

Phule’s idealized state was, thus, both notion and possibility: it seemed a court of last resort in a context where there seemed no other focal point of public appeal. Meanwhile, society had to be remade, and Phule advanced three lines of change which responded to the times, and anticipated a utopic future. The one had to do with lower caste or shudra self-making, a transformation of intimate and domestic relationships, including conjugal choice, recognition of women’s right to an equal humanity, of the worth of their labour and an affirmation of their right to learning. The other line of change had to do with rethinking social relationships, particularly in terms of the liberty and equality of the untouchables, or *ati-shudras*, as Phule referred to them, and the valuing of their role in the agrarian and urban social and economic order. The third line of change referenced education: the pursuit of modern knowledge, which would help strengthen and upgrade peasant and artisanal practices as well as the seeking of “truth”. This required the rejection of existing religious views and practices and an embracing of rational thought and an ethics that set store by equality, self-respect and collective responsibility.

In order to realize such a vision of society, Phule undertook two tasks: he founded the Satyashodhak Samaj, or the Truth-seekers’ society that put by worship of multiple gods, the services of the brahmin priest with

¹² See in this context, Neeladri Bhattacharya, *The Great Agrarian Conquest: The Colonial Reshaping of a Rural World*, Albany: SUNY Press, 2019 and his reading of government in colonial Punjab as exemplifying “paternalist protection”, a form of rule that could afford to be both “moderate” in its exactions as well as exact in how it brought a recalcitrant rural population to heel (p. 63).

respect to vital rites of passage, and pledged itself to the one Creator who sustained the universe. It also put in place a repertoire of social rites that members could adopt for the conduct of their lives, and argued for ethical self-transformation. The Samaj built on his earlier work, his founding of schools for girls and lower caste, including untouchable children, and his public propaganda work against brahmin social and cultural hegemony. Secondly, the Samaj helped field and communicate one of Phule's most cherished arguments: that there was once a time and place, which were untouched by brahmin dissembling and cunning. This was when Bali-*raja* (the King Bali) ruled and when the peasants, indeed all productive workers and those who loved liberty and equality, were respected and honoured. 'Aryan' invaders had put an end to Bali's rule, but he was not quite defeated, since Bali-like rulers and men made their presence felt time and again. The Samaj's task was to prepare the ground for a return of Bali in the years to come.¹³

Bali's rule, always imminent, was at one level a rich rhetorical move that allowed Phule to constitute the peasant world, which he knew intimately, as holding within itself the shape of an egalitarian universe. Equally, it was a utopic argument, not unlike those invocations of New Jerusalem in mid-nineteenth-century English socialism. In noting that Bali's kingdom will actually come to be, Phule sought to transcend a crucial political impasse. Aware of the extractive and exploitative economic life that the colonial government presided over, and the mandate of socially responsible rule that it refused to exercise, Phule was loath to grant it revolutionary agency. History was to be made by others, those who were aware of the possibilities and promises of Bali's kingdom. They might have woken up to these possibilities in the present moment, and on account of the white man's presence, but they looked to another time and place, to claim what was due to them.¹⁴

For Phule and his constituency, social inequality and the economic suffering that flowed from it were not entirely graspable within the terms of colonial political and economic arrangements. A longer tradition of

¹³ See Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology*, pp. 223–242, for a description of the Samaj's work.

¹⁴ Significantly, both the Prophet Mohammed and Christ were hailed as veritable Bali-*rajas*! That is, all those who interrupted brahmin authority and influence were viewed as redeemers (See G. P. Deshpande, *Selected Writings of Jotirao Phule*, pp. 73–75; Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology*, pp. 203–205).

injustice and colonial rule had fed into it, and this needed a historical reckoning on its own terms: the ‘now’ of history had to be thrust out of its continuum and charged with a millenarian impulse, and one that would endow the peasant, artisan and worker with a sense of their historical destiny.¹⁵

Significantly, Phule disregarded the claims of early nationalism (which had its official beginnings in 1885, with the founding of the Indian National Congress), which, in any case, did not go beyond an invocation of a desired national unity and a plea for greater Indian involvement in the colonial government. Phule found both demands problematic. No unity could be had, he argued, when those who called for it were brahmins and therefore likely to look down upon all others. Secondly, to seek a place in government without actually thinking of who they represented or whose interests they were likely to take ahead, was a ruse to update their own social and cultural authority.¹⁶

An early generation of untouchable thinkers and publicists in Maharashtra, active in public life from the last years of the nineteenth century and into the early decades of the twentieth century, was inspired by the work of the Satyashodhak Samaj. Gopalbaba Valangkar (1840–1900), who had served in the colonial army, reworked Phule’s critique of the brahmin class to foreground untouchable claims to being a warrior-like autochthonous group that was repeatedly defeated by brahmin chicanery. However, unlike Phule, he did not repudiate the scriptural world claimed by brahmins as their own. Rather he sought to re-read, against the grain as it were, texts revered by the brahmins such as the *Rig Veda*, the oldest of texts in the Brahmanical scriptural tradition and the iconic *Bhagavad Gita*, viewed as the epitome of Hindu philosophical thought. His re-readings called attention to how these texts actually did not unequivocally

¹⁵ Phule’s sense of the past as a figuration of the possible must be distinguished from other such invocations of the past, by Indian historians of his time and immediately after. Those ‘pasts’ appeared sites of historical action, where one could recover historical agency, denied to Indians in the colonial present (Georg G. Iggers, Q. Edward Wang and Supriya Mukherjee, *A Global History of Modern Historiography*, London: Routledge, 2013, p. 105).

¹⁶ Phule was critical of the decision the colonial government had made to involve Indians in greater numbers in local self-government, since those chosen to govern would inevitably be from the brahmin castes and therefore incapable of responding to plebeian concerns (Rosalind O’Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology*, pp. 202–203).

endorse birth-based inequality. He argued too that the degradation of the untouchables was a historical event that could yet be remedied.

Valangkar worked closely with the Satyashodhak Samaj, until he and fellow untouchables were kept out of it, by an aspirational lower caste leadership in the decades following Phule's death. Subsequently he founded his own organization and continued to publish and polemicize in public and also petition the government on untouchable grievances. More importantly, he sought to destigmatize untouchable being, by calling attention, on the one hand, to the limitations and imperfections of those who insisted on sustaining stigma, and on the other hand, arguing for a reformed untouchable self.¹⁷

The early twentieth century saw Mahratta princes, who had been allowed to retain their kingdoms under British tutelage, take up the cause of educating the untouchables.¹⁸ Of these, Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur and Sayajirao Gaekwad of Baroda were the most consistent in their efforts. Associated with the old ruling house of Bhosale, Shahu was also invested in an ideological critique of brahmin privilege and the hierarchical caste order, and staffed his government with representatives of the lower castes. He actively intervened in larger debates to do with caste and brahmin supremacy, and constituted public forums where untouchable leaders might congregate and voice their concerns. He also undertook a series of legal and social measures to relieve untouchables of their economic misery and to enable them acquire a modern education.

Untouchables also drew the attention of 'touchable' reformers who looked to ameliorate their lives: V. R. Shinde's efforts in the cause of untouchable education proved somewhat far-reaching in this regard. He founded the Depressed Classes Mission in 1906 to undertake this task. The Mission spread its activities across British India, and became a focal

¹⁷ For a historical assessment of Valangkar, see Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009, pp. 46–49. For a succinct account of other early untouchable thinkers and organizers, see Eleanor Zelliott, *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Mahar Movement*, Delhi: Navayana, 2013, pp. 40–64.

¹⁸ For an account of untouchable 'uplift' and other reform efforts in western India, see Charles Heimsath, *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964. Also, see Gail Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society*, pp. 124–138; and Sayajirao Gaekwar (Gaekwad), 'The Depressed Classes', *Indian Review*, December 1909.

point for Hindu reform and rumination to do with caste and untouchability. Hindu conservative opinion too took up the untouchable cause during this time, and sought to integrate the untouchables within the caste order. The latter however was not called into question, though it was subjected to considerable redefinition. In some instances, this integration was viewed as necessary in the context of the untouchables being drawn to other faiths: in the face of ostensible Muslim and Christian efforts at conversion, indignant Hindu leaders took to ‘reconverting’ converted untouchables and inviting them back into Hinduism!

4 EDUCATIONAL JOURNEYS

Across the Indian subcontinent, lower caste and untouchable thinkers and public figures responded to their times, much as Phule and others in western India did. Having availed of colonial education, experienced professional and occupational mobility and aware of world-historical developments, which presaged equality, they challenged their place in the caste order and berated the Hindu religion and brahmin authority for their role in sustaining an unjust and unequal society. Significantly, all of them insisted that the colonial moment in history was in their favour and denounced nationalist thought and demands, declaring that they preferred British rule to rule by their fellow Hindus. In some places, lower caste and untouchable groups worked together, especially when they sought to gain the ear of the government on this or that matter to do with their being subject to degradation or abuse. But their concerns were not always identical, given that untouchability, as Ambedkar would argue, constituted a distinctive and embodied interest that could only be spoken for, by the untouchables.

Thus, organizations of the untouchables insisted on and addressed the colonial government on their rights to education and government employment and sought to secure either through government ordinances or legislation. With regard to the acute material deprivation their communities were subject to, their responses were diverse, and shaped by the economic changes their regions had endured. Some organized themselves into trade unions, others sought land rights, and yet others became part of peasant movements that challenged landed authority and power. Almost all organizations and the untouchable communities they represented were invested in issues of identity and history. Some claimed a royal past, violently interrupted by the advent of the Aryan-brahmins and

the making of the caste order. Others asserted their place in local society as its most ancient constituents, and yet others drew on ecumenical traditions of worship to proclaim their being an indissoluble part of a larger community of believers.¹⁹

This was the world that Ambedkar came into. At the time of his birth in 1891, and in the first decade of his growing up, a generation of untouchable leaders had been active for a while in what was known then as the Bombay province. They had begun newspapers, were active in self-help ventures in the community and besides were petitioning the colonial government on a range of issues, but especially for their reentry into army service. The practice of recruiting them into the military had ended in 1891 and army pensioners were intent on changing this. For, being in the British Indian army had not only brought relief from harsh labour and social degradation, but also enabled the untouchables to access modern education. Army schools were open to children from untouchable families, in fact, schooling was mandatory for all children whose elders were employed in the army. For these reasons, it appeared important to demand that untouchables be taken back into the army.²⁰

Ambedkar's father was part of a group of retired army men who were active in taking this cause forward. More generally too, he was open to the modern world and what it had to offer to the untouchables. He sent his children to school, in and through the years of privation, when he had to move from town to town to earn a living. Ambedkar took to education,

¹⁹ Histories of untouchable assertion, organizing, economic protests and social dissent across the subcontinent, from the long nineteenth century into the twentieth include G. Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity: A Buddhist Movement amongst Tamils under Colonialism*, New Delhi: Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 1998; Sekhar Bandhopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2011; Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religious Rebels in the Punjab: The Ad Dharm Challenge to Caste*, Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2009; Ramnarayan Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012; and Rupa Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion, and the Social in Modern India*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. For a broad overview of untouchable politics and organizing, see Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*, New Delhi: Sage, 1994.

²⁰ Eleanor Zelliot, *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Mahar Movement*, pp. 45–52. For an account of the mixed fortunes of untouchables who enlisted in the British Indian army subsequently, see Radhika Singha, *The Coolie's Great War: Indian Labour in a Global Conflict, 1914–1921*, New Delhi: Harper Collins India, 2020.

though school was not an easy place to be. Later in his life he recalled instances of abjection and discrimination that he had to endure. After completing his schooling in Bombay, he went on to study in Elphinstone College in the city. Known for its liberal educational culture, and home to a host of reform societies, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the college no doubt introduced Ambedkar to current thinking on political and social concerns. A scholarship from Sayajirao Gaekwad saw him through his college days.

He graduated in 1912, earning a degree in politics and economics. He joined Baroda's administration, as he was expected to, in return for being supported by the Gaekwad. But he did not continue in the latter's employment for long. Given his status as an untouchable, he found it hard to rent living quarters, and had to repair to the untouchable neighbourhoods in the city to eat. His father's death brought him home and to domestic responsibilities. Meanwhile, the Gaekwad announced that he had scholarships on offer to send students for higher education at Columbia University. One such scholarship—that was to cover 3 years of study and stay at Columbia—was awarded to the young Ambedkar, who left for the United States in 1913.

Growing up as he did in a modern household, Ambedkar was yet familiar with Hindu lore, communicated by his father, and with family practices of ecumenical faith associated with medieval devotional traditions, particularly with the one linked to the fifteenth-century songster and poet, Kabir. Kabir's songs were kept alive in untouchable homes, over generations, and valued for their message of dignity and opposition to birth-based discrimination and the power of the priestly class. Ambedkar also appears to have read some Buddhist literature in his youth: he had been given a book on the life of Buddha, after he completed school. 'Rediscovered' in the nineteenth century by European and Indian scholars, Buddhism was viewed as a rational, protestant riposte to what was considered Hinduism, with its discriminatory practices and sanctified illogicality. This rendered it interesting and attractive to both reformists and radicals, but especially to lower caste and untouchable thinkers (see Chapters 7 and 8).

While recalling, in his mature years, early influences that shaped his consciousness, Ambedkar did not grant all of them equal salience. The millennial fervour, characteristic of devotional traditions, he declared, elevated the spirit, but did not challenge existing social relationships; it was given to expressions of transcendent ecstasy, which levelled social

differences temporarily, but did not alter ways of thinking and relating. Yet he did not value these traditions lightly: he dedicated one of his books, *The Untouchables*, to the great untouchable poet, Chokhamela, who identified himself with devotional practices and was fond of quoting from Tukaram, another poet in the tradition, and from a lower caste. His respect for and interest in Buddhism remained a constant in his life.

When he arrived in the United States, Ambedkar thus possessed a keen sense of self and the world, wrought by his experiences and by all that had shaped his imagination. He was eager to make the most of the opportunity that had come his way, and explore worlds where he was not marked as untouchable. His Columbia years proved intellectually momentous: he studied under its most prominent teachers, many of whom had been shaped by the politics of the Progressive era.²¹ He would put to astoundingly novel uses lessons learned in anthropology and sociology classrooms regarding social hierarchy and control, the value of the associated life and social kinship, and equally draw from arguments in political economy and history that he had encountered at Columbia, to advance rich insights to do with equality, justice and fraternity.

Ambedkar left Columbia in 1916. He had completed a Master's thesis and worked on a doctoral dissertation (which was published in 1925 and for which he was awarded a doctorate in 1927). He had also presented his very first exposition of the caste system: a review of extant theories and his own interpretation of the system of social relationships that constituted the caste order. From Columbia, he journeyed to London. He was admitted to Gray's Inn for the study of Law, and enrolled in courses at the London School of Economics where he began work on a second doctoral thesis. However he could not complete his studies, having run out of resources. He left for India in June 1917, with the assurance that he would return to complete his thesis within the next 4 years.

During the few months that he spent in England (October 1916–June 1917) it is likely that he was witness to the political restiveness that was on display in London. Britain was well into the Great War, the Bolshevik revolution was in the offing and the empires of Europe as well as Asia were

²¹ From the 1890s to the 1920s white middle-class thinkers and reformers, since known as the Progressives, responded critically to the depredations caused by unbridled capitalist spread and growth in the United States. Their ideas and plans for a better more just society straddled several domains of thought and action, from workers' rights to regulation of monopolies, municipal health to feminism.

falling apart. London saw a string of demonstrations and rallies, following the February revolution in Russia in 1917, with labour unions and political leaders from the left excitedly commenting on events and thronging the streets.²² We have no indication of how Ambedkar viewed events in Russia at the time they happened, though he did reference these when he came back to London in 1920 to complete his education. That he was concerned about the labour question is evident in his pronouncements on the subject through the 1920s and thereafter.

The Great War and the political changes it wrought, especially the making of nations and nationhood, left a lasting influence on him, and he returned to discussing the principle of self-determination and sovereignty on several occasions. Importantly, he came to reinterpret both ideas: sovereignty, for him, had as much to do with persons as it had to do with beleaguered and emergent nations. Likewise, self-determination was not only a right that accrued to restive and unfree ethnic and other minorities, but equally to socially oppressed selves, and he would go on to mark it as a key component of democracy. Meanwhile, democracy too was reimagined, as he sought to anchor it within the kernel of social relations rather than only within the form of the modern nation-state.²³

5 QUERYING NATIONALISM

Ambedkar's return to India (1917) coincided with the beginning of what might be called the demotic era in the progress of Indian nationalism.²⁴ Until then, the Indian national movement led by the Indian National Congress had proceeded in fits and starts, veering between liberal criticism of empire and ferocious cultural-nationalist assertion. In practical terms this meant that the nationalist petitioned and reasoned with the government on matters to do with the economy or everyday governance; or he

²² For a short note that lists the range of events and publications to do with the British left and the February revolution, see https://warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/archives_online/digital/russia/menshevik/; accessed on July 23, 2020.

²³ B. R. Ambedkar, *Evidence before Southborough Committee* in BAWS, Volume I, 1974, pp. 268–269.

²⁴ For a concise political and social history of late colonial India, including the nationalist years, see Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India*, Delhi: Macmillan, 1983; Sekhar Bandhopadhyay, *From Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India*, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2014.

practised an agitational politics, which had many parts to it. From efforts at national self-help that led to the setting up of nationalist schools and colleges, and industrial experiments that drew on local craft traditions, to acts of violence trained at racist and high-handed individual officers of government, 'extreme' nationalism had proved a draw since 1905. It had also claimed many lives or sacrifices as nationalists would have it.

As important, it was perceived as 'Hindu' in character and expression, and therefore did not find favour with Muslim political leaders, who formed their own political party, the Muslim League, in 1909. The founding of the League coincided with the first round of political reforms (instituted by the colonial government in 1909). The intent was to incorporate a greater number of Indians into the legislature and the executive. The reforms were viewed as necessary in view of the emergence and attractions of extreme nationalism.

In this context, the League demanded that in any reform scheme, the claims of Muslims, as the country's foremost minority population, ought to be respected and that they ought to constitute a separate electorate. As the Congress and League argued for the quantum of representation due to them by dint of their majority and minority statuses, respectively, the question of numbers became important, since the percentage of seats to be allotted to the minority Muslims and the majority Hindus hinged on their demographic claims. Muslims underscored theirs by arguing that the category of Hindus needed to be disaggregated, since untouchables could not really be counted as Hindu. Hindus, on the other hand, insisted that untouchables were very much part of the Hindu fraternity, and that reform-minded Hindus were indeed keen on bringing them within a common social compact. Further, if Hindus had suffered a depletion of their numbers, this was because guileless untouchables had been converted by Muslim and Christian evangelists.²⁵

The question of Muslim political rights remained contentious throughout the decade of the reforms, even as nationalists sought to assure the Muslim League of the Congress' commitment to minority rights, and to find a place for Muslims within its ranks. Meanwhile, other developments proved germane to the evolution and expansion of Indian

²⁵ For a granular gendered critique and account of such claims-making and the larger political and social contexts that shaped them, see Charu Gupta, 'Intimate Desires: Dalit Women and Religious Conversions in Colonial India', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73:3, 2014, pp. 661–87.

nationalism. Inspired by the Irish Home Rule agitations, nationalists, both liberals and extremists, put forth a call for self-rule or “Swaraj” in 1916. The same year a rapprochement was effected between the Muslim League and the Congress, which upheld Muslims claims to preferential representation in particular provinces of British India. In turn, the Muslim League supported the demand for Swaraj.

This was also when Gandhi came to make his mark in Indian politics. He returned from South Africa in 1915, and one of the first things that he did was to travel the country, to persuade Indians to enlist for the war effort! Only subsequently did he begin his experimental political campaigns, including those which were based on economic grievances, and made it clear that these were exercises in passive resistance. Satyagraha or a war of truth, waged against an unjust government, became the watchword of protest for all drawn to his cause. The latter proved increasingly attractive, feeding as it did into widespread discontent during and after the war years.

As the Great War drew to a close, British India stood on the cusp of change. Unrest on the streets on account of rising food prices, and in agrarian India, on account of exactions, political repression in the face of resistance: these developments signalled a historical turn. It became clear that heavy-handed rule might not suffice anymore and the imperial government decided, in 1919, to enlarge the scope of Indian political representation and create constitutional conditions that would enable greater Indian participation in the government. While the franchise would as yet be very limited, Indians were to be elected in greater numbers and also accorded a greater measure of power and responsibility. The reforms also sought to secure places for representatives of the untouchable communities in the to-be expanded legislatures.

For the young Ambedkar, who returned to India on the eve of the reforms, other things mattered, though he kept a watchful eye on the changing social and political landscape. For one, practical and everyday concerns claimed his immediate attention: he had to recompense the Baroda administration for the support extended to his education at Columbia. He therefore took up a position in the state administration, but found it hard to continue working. Given his ‘untouchable’ status, he could not, as before, rent suitable living quarters. His workplace proved daunting as well in this regard: his colleagues scorned him on account of his caste and were uncivil and rude. He returned to Bombay but livelihood options proved limited, in spite of him being highly educated.

On the other hand, his education earned him respect in not just the untouchable community but amongst the lower castes as well. Shahu recognized his worth and lost no time in marking him as a potential leader in an all-untouchable political conference that he convened. These years—1917–1920—may be considered formative as far as Ambedkar's future political life was concerned. He grew into leadership, founded a newspaper—*Mooknayak* (Voice of the Voiceless)—and came to define a cause and constituency that answered to his understanding of inequality and injustice as well as his vision of the good and just society. He testified before the Southborough Commission, set up in 1919 by the imperial government, to ascertain Indian views on extending the franchise to a larger group of Indians, in view of impending political reform. This was perhaps his first act of proactive revolt. He was not invited to submit to the Commission, but, angered by V. R. Shinde's Depressed Classes Mission's submission that untouchables be represented by touchable Hindus, sympathetic to their claims, he sent in a written note. This would be the first of his many testimonies, all of which were actually treatises on democracy, and which detailed how it ought to be re-imagined in a riven and profoundly unequal society.

Ambedkar was critical of the nationalist demand for self-rule, and more generally with the representational claims of the Indian National Congress. Pointing to the manner in which the caste order and untouchability practices had created an unequal and cruel society, he wondered at the uses of nationalism for those who experienced unfreedom and injustice in their everyday economic and social lives. If nationalism was to be taken seriously by the lower castes and untouchables, he argued, it necessarily would have to engage with inequality that was internal to the Indian social system. If Indians desired political equality with the English, and freedom from British rule, they would have to concede such equality and freedom to those placed in the lower rungs of their hierarchical social order. Otherwise, concluded Ambedkar, Indian nationalism would remain a provenance of elite men.²⁶

The first generation of Indian left thinkers, particularly, M. N. Roy who, at that time, was in the Soviet Union, would also doubt the intentions of Indian nationalists. Roy's critique of the Indian National

²⁶ B. R. Kamble (translator), *Mooknayak* (A Newspaper in Marathi founded by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar in January 1920), Kolhapur: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Research Institute in Social Growth, 2010, pp. 32–37.

Congress and Gandhi was relentless and severe. Writing in 1922, he argued that the Congress was a bourgeois nationalist party and that it would mortgage genuine nationalist aspirations for a mess of profit. Yet, Indians, including the working classes were drawn to it, because a “common enemy”, occasioned by colonial rule bound all Indians together and Congress appeared to represent a shared and common cause.²⁷ Roy conceded that one cannot overlook this commonality of purpose, even as one ought not to put by visible and evident class antagonism. Unlike Ambedkar, though, Roy did not subject the socially oppressive caste order to scrutiny and neither did he view nationalist views in this regard, in critical light. His understanding of the caste order was formulaic. He noted that “material necessities” might give rise to “variegated social customs and institutions” but these latter exerted only a secondary influence on human affairs, which, everywhere, were determined by the “stage of economic development of a particular people”.²⁸

Ambedkar’s position with respect to both shared oppression and class differences was different. For him, irrespective of what British rule had wrought, caste divisions within native society mitigated against commonality of any sort and he was nonplussed that this fact was not registered by those who professed to speak in the name of the working class. He wondered too at the attitude of the British Labour Party, which was enthusiastic in its support for Indian nationalism, but did not appear sensitive to the travails endured by India’s true working poor, comprising largely of the untouchables.²⁹ In any event, he chose to redefine the building blocks of modern political life, particularly the idea of political representation and the protocols that were put in place to actualize it.

This is evident from the deposition he made before the Southborough Commission.³⁰ Marshalling republican earnestness, he argued, that untouchables ought to represent themselves, and that others in the Indian context ought not to be given charge of their welfare. Given their extreme marginality, he defined their interests as politically and existentially urgent,

²⁷ M. N. Roy (in collaboration with Abani Mukherji), *India in Transition*, Geneve: Edition de la Librairie J. B. Target, 1922, p. 29.

²⁸ G. Adhikari (editor) *Documents of the History of the Communist Party of India, Volume 2, 1923–1925*, Bombay: People’s Publishing House, 1974, p. 176.

²⁹ *Mooknayak*, p. 44.

³⁰ B. R. Ambedkar, *Evidence before the Southborough Committee*, in BAWS, Volume 1, pp. 247–278.

besides which the interests represented by property, trade and learning appeared indistinct. For, untouchables had been denied their very being in the caste order, and placed beyond the social pale. It was important for them, therefore, to come into “associated life”, as it had unfolded within the realm of rule and governance, and be in a position to influence, if not reset, the terms and priorities of the political and social life.³¹

In 1920, Ambedkar returned to England, to complete his doctoral work. The next few years were spent in resolute study, in frugal and near-poverty like conditions. Yet he did consort with his fellow students now and then and earned a reputation for being radical in his politics—he is believed to have declared his support for the Russian revolution—and feisty in temperament. A student paper that he read was declared to be rather “political”. His dissertation, which looked at the relative merits of gold and silver standards in the Indian context, was viewed as somewhat incendiary, since it criticized British currency policies on the argument that they were to Britain’s advantage and not concerned with the necessarily negative consequences for India’s economy. But he successfully defended it and returned home in 1923 and to a politically charged atmosphere.

6 INTERWAR INDIA: GANDHI, THE LEFT AND AMBEDKAR IN THE LATE 1920S

The end of the war and the years thereafter (1918–1924) had seen Gandhi at his best: he had counselled a politics of Non-cooperation with the government, and indeed, with all things that connoted British authority. This led to spectacular public acts, from the burning of foreign cloth, the boycott of courts and schools to Indian officials resigning from state service. Across British India, peasants, struggling with revenue demands and war-induced poverty and indebtedness, revolted, refusing to pay taxes and cities were witness to a spate of industrial strikes. Gandhi spoke eloquently of national suffering and the need for national unity, across classes and religions. He explicitly sought to integrate Muslims into Non-cooperation. Though the Congress and Muslim League had decided

³¹ Ibid., p. 265; the term “associated life” was one that he consistently invoked to point to a sociality that was the very obverse of the hierarchical and unequal caste order and which afforded critical pedagogic opportunities for all concerned to lay aside their prejudices and unlearn hitherto unexamined social certitudes.

to work together with regard to political reform and Indian representation in colonial councils and legislatures, unease prevailed on the ground. It was in this context that Gandhi issued a call for “heart unity” between the two communities and sought to forge it in a rather startling historical context.

At the end of the Great War, Turkey capitulated to the English and allied forces. The deposed Caliph, no more the suzerain of his domains, lost control over Islamic religious sites, a right that he had held as sacrosanct and given. A section of Indian Muslims protested this loss and insisted that the Caliphate (Khilafat) be allowed to retain its authority in this regard. Gandhi urged fellow Indians to support their claims, even as he entreated the Khilafat agitators to join with Hindus and come into a common nationhood. This whimsical yet imaginative attempt at both ‘spiritual’ and political partnership went against the logic of historical events, as it was unfolding in what was to become republican Turkey, but that did not deter Gandhi or the Khilafat agitators.

The entwined causes of Non-cooperation and the Khilafat brought a large and diffuse constituency of persons into public life, but after the initial euphoria of protesting British laws and the empire’s disregard for Islamic sentiment, it did not prove easy to sustain this politics on the ground. For one, Gandhi’s insistence that Non-cooperation stay non-violent came to be disregarded by irate protesters, and he had to call off the struggle when a group of angry peasants burned down a police station (1922), resulting in the deaths of many policemen. Secondly, for all the talk of heart unity, Hindus and Muslims were locked in antagonistic conflicts, the most visible of which was one that erupted in Malabar in southern India (1921). This struggle followed in the wake of a refusal by poor and oppressed Muslim tenants and agricultural labourers to pay their dues to largely upper caste Hindu landlords. It turned violent, and the violence soon acquired religious overtones. Due to a similar mix of material and ideological reasons, Hindu-Muslim relations on the ground worsened elsewhere too, in the years that followed.

While continuing to affirm his faith in heart-unity and passive resistance, Gandhi staged a retreat: he announced that given the circumstances that did not appear propitious for pursuing the politics he favoured, he would retire into what he termed, “Constructive Work”, which had to do with addressing not government so much, but the ills that beset Indian society, such as untouchability, alcoholism and poverty. The mid and late 1920s saw a reflective Gandhi, not quiescent, yet not as forthcoming as he

had been earlier with regard to direct political action, though he remained a decisive voice within the Indian National Congress. The latter though was captive to other concerns: political reforms, which had looked to have more Indians in the legislature were in place, and nationalists wondered if they ought to work these to their political advantage. Non-cooperation with the government was briskly put away, as a section of the Congress separated itself out, notionally, and contested elections to the enlarged and reformed legislatures.

The mid-1920s also saw the emergence of a distinctive left presence in Indian political life. Enthused by the Bolshevik revolution, Indian nationalist radicals who had fled British India and were scattered across Europe and the United States gathered in Russia in 1919 and after. Some amongst them, including M. N. Roy, were already inclined towards socialism. Watchful of “bourgeois nationalism”, these diasporic radicals, under the direction of the Comintern (the Communist International to which many communist parties across the world were affiliated), sought to coordinate and direct the activities of such men and organizations in India that could be claimed for a socialist cause.³² Roy was particularly active in this context: he founded a short-lived Indian Communist Party in Tashkent in 1920 and starting from 1922, sent in his political observations and notes to the Congress’ annual conferences. He also contacted individual communists and the groups that they were part of, or sought to form, and sought to establish links between all of them.

Even as they remained in conversation with diasporic communists, leftists in India acted as their own immediate situations directed them. As far as labour organizations were concerned, these were not necessarily socialist and the All India Trades Union Congress (AITUC), formed in 1920, comprised a motley group of incipient leftists and liberal nationalists. Such socialists as there were, and who wrote and spoke in the name of socialism, were scattered across British India, and were part of small groups, of ideologues, agitators and labour organizers. At the time Roy got in touch with them, many were, as yet, enthused by nationalist assertion, especially the protests that Non-cooperation had foregrounded and were admiring of Gandhi, even as they were watchful of his influence.

Marginal as it was, socialist presence yet invited wrathful government attention, beset as India’s rulers were by hysteria over a possible red

³² G. Adhikari (editor) *Documents of the History of the Communist Party of India, Volume 1, 1917–1922*, Bombay: People’s Publishing House, 1971, pp. 206–233.

scare, and of Bolshevik ‘infiltration’. Starting from 1921, this led to the British building a set of conspiracy cases—including the famous Meerut Conspiracy Case—that resulted in arrests and detention, of socialists. Meanwhile, those who remained out of jail continued to work with the nationalist Congress, even as they were critical of it, and kept up with trade union work. Leftists came into their own by the mid-1920s, when some amongst them formed the Communist Party of India (CPI) in the industrial city of Kanpur in 1925. Subsequently, under the tutelage of the Comintern, socialists across the country went on to form Workers and Peasants’ Parties (WPPs). Though affiliated to the CPI, these were to function as broad political forums and make room for radical nationalists in their ranks. The peasant question had been marked as important for the Eastern nations by the Comintern, given that the interwar years saw continuing agrarian protests and revolts. The WPPs sought to tap into these latter, and more important to construct a notional, if not an actual, broad-based alliance of peasants and industrial workers.³³

On his return from England in 1924, Ambedkar thus found himself in a world overwritten by Gandhi’s political presence, and emergent communist organizing. He had to reckon not only with the adulation the former incited, and the strength that the latter came to exhibit as the decade progressed, but equally with their founded disinterest in the caste and untouchability questions: the Gandhian Congress as well as the left refused to view the untouchables as a distinctive political constituency with specific interests and claims, and which, potentially could help advance, deepen and widen the nationalist cause.³⁴ Nor were they interested in interrogating the constitutive inequality of the caste order on its own terms.

³³ For a history of this period of left organizing in British India, see G. Adhikari, (editor) *Documents of the History of the Communist Party of India, Volume 2*.

³⁴ In fact Ambedkar had sought to call nationalist attention to the intertwined nature of untouchable and national liberation, as early as 1920. His *Mooknayak* featured an article on the Punjab disturbances (1919), in which hundreds lost their lives, being shot at during a period of intense repression: the writer argued that this wave of state violence had opened the eyes of Indian nationalists to what they were up against, as far as the colonial government was concerned. By the same token, nationalists ought also to come to terms with the violence that their untouchable brothers endured, for “if they remain indifferent towards the progress of the depressed classes, then their slavery due to foreign rule will also remain firm” (B. R. Kamble, *Mooknayak*, p. 191).

A year after his return from London, Ambedkar founded the *Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha* (Depressed Classes Institute): the Sabha set up reading rooms in Bombay city, hostels for untouchable students in places where they were needed, so that they could pursue their education and held meetings that would convince them of the importance of struggling for their rights. The Sabha's motto was "Educate, Agitate, Organise", the familiar slogan of the Fabians, made popular by George Bernard Shaw. In 1926, Ambedkar was nominated to the Bombay Provincial legislature, as a representative of the untouchables (this was part of the reform initiative that had been put in place, in the post-war years). He utilized this admittedly limited opportunity to address matters of practical importance for the poor, from increasing budgetary overheads for public education to rethinking such welfare measures for the indigent that the colonial government deemed significant.

He also sought to address the conditions in which untouchables were forced to labour in the agrarian context: in 1928 he introduced a bill that asked for a repeal of the 'Mahar watan', revenue-free land assigned to the Mahar untouchables in lieu of such compulsory labour as they were expected to perform, for the village and for colonial government. The bill stipulated that the untouchables be allowed to hold on to their land, not as servitors, but as tax payers, and that they be paid for such labour as the local village community and government exacted from them. Other matters to do with land and labour troubled him as well: untouchables were landless, and without land, they could not hope to be self-reliant. But in a penurious peasant economy, where lower caste peasants as a whole were subject to the exactions of a rentier class, no easy solution could be had, unless the rentier class was held in check.

Apart from legislative labour, public pedagogy and civil rights work took up almost all his time. This latter included a slew of campaigns: struggles that sought to secure for the untouchables, rights of access to public spaces and sites; efforts to end degrading social and cultural custom, to do with the subjection of untouchable women to sexual servitude; public education, in and through meetings and conferences that addressed crucial aspects of untouchable existence, from the economic to the religious. Of these, the rights of access, which he and the untouchables sought to public water bodies and temples, defined the contours of a radical republicanism that Ambedkar would strive to refine in the years to come.

In rural India, untouchables did not have free access to water, whether of ponds, lakes or tanks. However, as representatives of the lower castes and untouchables came into the legislature, they lost no time in decrying such discrimination, and as happened in Bombay, enacted legislation that would enable untouchables exercise their right to public water resources. To actualize this law, a group of untouchables under Ambedkar's leadership undertook a campaign (1927) in the town of Mahad, to access the water in a local tank. This became the occasion for Ambedkar to expound on the significance of acts such as these. He invoked the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* during the campaign and adapted its promises to the Indian social context, thus rendering the untouchable a bearer of universal rights.

Even as he upheld one text, he disavowed another: in the second phase of the long-drawn struggle at Mahad, the *Manusmriti*, a law digest from the early centuries of the common era, which defined, justified and contained social relationships based on birth within a punitive order, was ritually consigned to flames. Tradition and custom, Ambedkar made clear, had to give into what the human person deserved and Mahad, he proclaimed, was the "Wittenburg" of India. The Mahad campaign though did not go as the untouchables wished it to go, as we shall see, and the matter, ultimately, was settled in court (see Chapter 3).

Throughout the 1920s, Ambedkar's attitude towards the Hindu religion and its followers remained richly ambiguous. On the one hand, he criticized Hindu orthodoxy and its sophisticated contemporary defenders, many of whom were lovers of political liberty but demurred at practicing equality in their social lives. He was critical of liberal Hindu reformers as well, chiefly because their ameliorative programmes for untouchable uplift remained mired in condescension. On the other hand, he responded to the lofty philosophical arguments that bracketed both orthodox and liberal attitudes, and acknowledged their importance, even as he pointed to the immense distance that separated precept and argument from practice, and demanded that Hindus examined their conscience. This meant literally walking on a knife's edge: in strategic terms, it appeared important to induce a measure of reflective remorse in the Hindus, on terms that they would hold significant, but there was no gainsaying if they would actually come to express reflective sympathy with regard to the untouchables (see Chapter 3).

Meanwhile, Gandhi's campaign against untouchability, which he had undertaken as part of his Constructive Work initiative, was on the anvil,

and on his insistence, nationalists reluctantly conceded that this indeed was a grave injustice. Hindu reformers argued that if the Congress failed to address the problem with the seriousness it deserved, the untouchables were bound to leave the Hindu fold and convert to Islam. Gandhi's approach remained what it had always been: he expressed public remorse for touchable attitudes towards the untouchables and espoused a penitential practice of untouchable 'uplift'. He also sought to redefine Hindu belief and custom, and claimed, somewhat implausibly, that these did not sanction the stigmatizing of an entire population as untouchable. Ambedkar was both intrigued and troubled by his approach, but in the 1920s viewed him as a possible ally.

The communists did not address untouchability explicitly, except to note that it was undesirable, but did speak and write about the relationship between caste-based inequality and the Hindu religion. Writing in 1922, S.A. Dange (who later became an important figure in Bombay left circles) noted that the social order, divided into fixed occupational caste groups, had emerged in ancient times and originally signified a "social division of labour". But, in later centuries this system had turned "oppressive and obsolete" and was held together only by religious sentiment, which had led to Indians accepting their fate and becoming a socially listless people.³⁵ M. N. Roy argued that the caste system was giving way to class divisions and, in this context, called derisive attention to the assertion of the lower castes: he held that British officialdom deliberately sought to cultivate their discontent, in order to sow disunity amongst Hindus. He had nothing to say about the untouchables, though. He was however critical of Hindu and Muslim religious reaction, in the context of the Non-cooperation and Khilafat agitations, and noted that "neither going to the age of the Vedas [*oldest of religious texts*—V.G] nor serving the empire of the Khalifa" was likely to prove useful and that nationalism ought to attend to matters to do with "land, bread, housing, clothing etc."³⁶ A few years hence, when Indian communism possessed

³⁵ S. A. Dange, *Selected Writings, Volume 1*, Bombay: Lokvangamaya Griha, 1974, p. 51. Dange's remarks featured in a 1921 essay, 'Gandhi Vs. Lenin' in which he noted that Gandhi's views were but a restatement of Tolstoy's moral arguments, and while attractive and historically an improvement on the politics of moderate nationalism, were nevertheless not likely to take ahead the interests of the working classes, for which Lenin's political philosophy alone could be a guide.

³⁶ G. Adhikari (editor), *Documents of the History of the Communist Party of India, Volume 1*, p. 336, *Volume 2*, p. 215. Religion and its uses for communism were matters

greater formal coherence and their leaders had built a strong union in Bombay's textile mills, caste and religion would appear expressions of false consciousness: scheming priests were blamed for leading the working classes astray, and described as a parasitic class.³⁷

7 THINKING BEYOND NATION AND CLASS

Political reforms initiated in 1919 had resulted in a partial 'Indianizing' of government at the level of the provinces of British India, but the decade had also shown up the limits of this arrangement and besides been witness to greater nationalist discontent. Therefore, in 1928, imperial government announced the formation of a Commission under the headship of Sir John Simon to enquire into the following: Indian readiness for wider political reforms, enlargement of the franchise and of the scope of responsible government with greater role and authority for Indians. Nationalists boycotted the Commission since it had no Indian representatives, and decried all those who cooperated with it. The AITUC and the WPPs also called for a boycott of the Commission: The WPPs declared that rather than remain content with piecemeal political reform, Indians ought to demand the setting up of a Constituent Assembly with representatives elected on the basis of universal suffrage to resolve urgent constitutional questions on their own.³⁸

that were the subject of debate in the Soviet Union, especially in relation to the Eastern question. Muslims from the Indian subcontinent who had left in large numbers—in 1920—to join their fellow faithful in Afghanistan and Turkey to rescue the Caliphate found themselves guests of the Soviet state. The revolution and its intentions answered to their sense of utopia, which in turn had been inspired by Islamic millenarian ideas. In this context, neither the Bolshevik leadership, nor Roy were openly critical of their faith-based ardour. Roy's critique of the Khilafat emerged a few years hence, in the wake of Gandhi's espousal of it. For a provocative reading of the Bolsheviks' relationship to Islam in the early years, see Patrick Hesse, *To the Masses: Communism and Religion in North India, 1920–1947*, Unpublished Phd. Dissertation, University of Berlin, 2015, pp. 38–70, https://edoc.hu-berlin.de/bitstream/handle/18452/20068/dissertation_hesse_patrick.pdf?sequence=1; accessed on February 19, 2021.

³⁷ *Documents of the Communist Movement in India, Volume 1, 1919–1928*, Calcutta: National Book Agency (n.d.) p. 371.

³⁸ Ibid. The CPI had noted in its 1926 manifesto that political reform was but a blind alleyway and that there was no use attempting to access "impotent and unrepresentative legislative bodies" (p. 324). Only a national assembly, elected on the basis of adult suffrage would ensure a democratized society (p. 339). But neither this document nor the demand

Nationalists, meanwhile, went on to produce their own manifesto for political reform, the Nehru Committee Report (1928). Framed as a constitutional document, the report outlined a list of rights and freedoms as well as a mechanism with its attendant protocols for reorganizing the franchise, elections and existing legislative institutions. More importantly, it outlined the nationalist position with regard to Muslim electorates, answering as it were Muslim apprehensions with regard to their place in a future free polity. The manifesto however contained no reference to untouchables, except the terse note that representative members from this group ought to be nominated to the reformed legislatures.³⁹

Ambedkar, and several other organizations of the untouchables, decided to cooperate with the Simon Commission. Ambedkar made clear that he was also for Indians being included in the latter, and would have liked to see representatives of the lower castes and untouchables called into it. Nationalists however had not asked for a diverse group of Indians to be represented and had assumed that the term 'Indian' stood in for all, when, in practice, it almost always represented only the upper castes. Therefore, he noted, he was left with no choice, but to participate in the reform process, if only to ensure untouchable presence in political life and government.⁴⁰

In his deposition before the Commission, Ambedkar spoke at length on minority rights. He pointed out that the question of political parity had not only to do with religious minorities, such as the Muslims, but also with historically oppressed populations such as the untouchables. Arguing that democracy, even the minimal kind that was possible under colonial conditions, and in a country that was abysmally poor and socially

put forth by the WPPs in 1928 for a Constituent Assembly addressed the question of the untouchables' political rights, except to note that untouchability was undesirable: See, in this context, G. Adhikari, (editor) *Documents of the History of the Communist Party of India, Volume III(C), 1928*, Bombay: People's Publishing House (n.d.), p. 184; 197.

³⁹ The Nehru Committee Report, https://www.constitutionofindia.net/historical_constitutions/nehru_report_motilal_nehru_1928_1st%20January%201928; accessed on February 19, 2021.

⁴⁰ B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Ambedkar with the Simon Commission (Indian Statutory Commission)* in BAWs, Volume 2, 1982, p. 430. Ambedkar was at pains to distinguish the singularity of the untouchables' political claims also because the nationalists sought to view only Muslim claims as significant and worthy of address. Besides, Muslim political claims had come to define the nature of all minority claims.

divided, had to speak to its context, he insisted that the idea of representation ought, therefore, to be rethought. Given the unequal caste order, with differential access to resources, status and respect, the most marginal ought to be elected in numbers larger than their presence in the population would warrant, so that they were not outnumbered or rendered ineffectual.⁴¹

Significantly, even as he welcomed political changes that guaranteed untouchable political rights, he noted somewhat wryly that untouchables and touchables cannot be made to “embrace” each other as coeval human persons through government orders.⁴² For him, the question of social affection towards, and an affirmation of the shared humanity of, the untouchables were matters of ontological importance. Such political claims that he and his fellow untouchables urged forth were, to be sure, necessary, but not commensurate with what would made for a fundamental social transformation.

In a sense, he was pointing to the impossibility of reconciling the two times that shaped existence in the Indian context: one, a time of the political and the historical, and the other, of the social and the utopic. The time of history appeared a time of faith and religion, which had persisted into the modern political present, with religious tenets, from an ever renewable ancient past, shaping social attitudes and relationships and, naturalizing, as it were, social inequality. On the other hand, the social present appeared to possess a ‘now’ness that could put away the past, and enable the historical and utopic to be brought together into a novel constellation. This, perhaps, was why at Mahad, the burning of the *Manusmriti* and the invocation of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* were, each, viewed as defining moments of a consequential revolt. Two times were not only brought together, but inscribed onto the body and being of the untouchable person, who was to be their bearer, as she journeyed towards self-sovereignty.

An important development during these years, when he was busy with the Mahad protest and the Simon Commission, had to do with his exasperated sense of communist organizing. In the course of a long drawn out strike of textile workers in the city of Bombay in 1928–1929, he counselled untouchable workers, all of whom were employed in spinning

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 337–357.

⁴² Ibid., p. 360.

mills, to not take part in it (this was during the second phase of the strike). Most of the strikers were from the weaving shed, which explicitly kept out untouchables. Ambedkar's argument was that untouchable workers were not allowed entry for two reasons: caste prejudices, which prevented them working the loom, since such work required a weaver to wet the warp with his spittle, and if an untouchable were to do this, he was believed to have 'polluted' the object. Secondly, weavers were better paid than other workers and obviously did not want competition. He also wondered at worker solidarity: untouchable workers faced discrimination in mundane matters, for instance, they were not allowed to drink water from a common tap.⁴³

He called attention to the ambiguities that attended communist notions of proletarian unity in *Bahishkrit Bharat* (Depressed India), a weekly he had started in 1927: in a long essay, it was argued that communists appeared to be disinterested in chipping away at such views that constituted worker common sense, and instead sought to build castles in the air with their fine phrases, or as the article put it, they tried to put up a building (build a party of the proletariat) when its foundation (critical consciousness that challenged religious and caste prejudice) was, as yet, not in place.⁴⁴

Ambedkar went on to challenge the communist-led union to act against the discrimination that marked employment in the weaving sheds and while the union agreed that this, indeed, was an issue that ought to be rectified, they blamed mill owners for not recruiting untouchable workers. In turn, the mill owners retorted that they had merely given into the resistance put up by touchable weavers who were loath to them employing untouchables in the weaving shed! More generally, mill owners sought to take advantage of Ambedkar's critique of worker attitudes towards untouchables to discredit the communist-led union.⁴⁵

⁴³ B. R. Kamble (translator), *Bahishkrit Bharat (A Newspaper in Marathi founded by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar in April 1927), Part 4*, Kolhapur: Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Research Institute in Social Growth, 2012, pp. 68–69; 216–217.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 193–196. For a detailed examination of Ambedkar's engagement with the Indian left, see Chapter 6.

⁴⁵ See Dhanajay Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, p. 120; and Georges Kristoffel Lieten, 'Strikers and Strike-Breakers Bombay Textile Mills Strike, 1929', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Annual Number, 1982, pp. 697–704.

For their part, untouchable workers worked through the caste-class conundrum in interesting ways. Many of them were members of the union, but simultaneously, they also spent time and energy in furthering and asserting untouchable rights of access to public and common spaces and in organizing cultural and social events that would help communicate their understanding in this regard.⁴⁶

The communist-led union in the textile mills was not unaware of the riven nature of worker consciousness, but was more sensitive to religious antagonisms, between Hindu and Muslim workers, and not as critical in its understanding of how caste and untouchability shaped worker relationships, in and beyond the factory and the strike committee. This ‘oversight’ may be attributed to three factors. One, the union leaders assumed that solidarity at the barricades was proof enough of proletarian unity and that caste was neither useful nor determinate in this context.⁴⁷ Two, they held that the caste system was a regrettable remnant of a feudal order that, in time, would give way (or had already given way) to more horizontal divisions of class. This was at least what M. N. Roy argued from faraway Moscow (see above and Chapter 4). Thirdly, their political imagination was fuelled by their critique of British rule, and in an everyday sense, they had to reckon with its despotic aspects. This meant that state repression defined the horizon of their politics and understanding (see Chapter 4). In any event, matters to do with internal stratification did not appear more than a detail in a narrative that was given over to ending imperial rule.

In and through all that he said and did during this period, Ambedkar made it clear that given the nature of social relationships in India, neither the nation nor class, as these categories were understood, was a viable basis for bringing about human concord and equality in a deeply inegalitarian society. Both stood to be redefined from the point of view of the untouchables, who were the most oppressed within the social order, and also in view of the distinctive features that marked the latter. The questions he raised in this regard were fundamental: How could untouchables

⁴⁶ Satyendra More, *Memoirs of a Dalit Communist: The Many Worlds of R P More*. Also, see in this context, Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, ‘Workers’ Politics and the Mill Districts in Bombay between the Wars’, pp. 618–621.

⁴⁷ At this moment in time, there were brahmin trade union leaders who insisted that caste rules be observed, when it came to interdining and providing rations for the striking workers (See Parthasarathi Pathak, *Communists on Caste*, Unpublished Phd. Thesis, Kolkata: University of Jadavpur, 2003, p. 204).

experience a sense of national belonging, given their 'separate' existence? Given that untouchables were segregated even within the broader category of workers, was proletarian fellowship possible? Could they therefore count on the lower castes, which were also socially degraded, and to which, ironically enough, many workers belonged, to stand with the untouchables as they took on the caste order?

8 THE MAKING OF A NATIONAL LEADER

In the 1930s, Ambedkar's political life expanded, and turned momentous. The Simon Commission published its report in 1930: Nationalist demands, outlined in the Nehru Report, were not considered relevant. And, as before, Muslims were granted separate electorates. While some concessions had been granted to the untouchables, including a number of seats that were henceforth reserved for them in the legislature, and which they alone could fill, they were not viewed as politically capable: prospective untouchable candidates had to be certified by local officials before contesting elections.

In a conference convened during this time, Ambedkar launched a measured yet incisive critique of British rule, particularly its studied hypocrisy with regard to policies that would benefit the untouchables. As important, he adumbrated his vision of anti-imperialist nationalism, distinguishing it from the Congress'.⁴⁸ He made it clear that he was not opposed to such measures the national movement advocated to resist imperial policies, but was not enamoured of Gandhi's civil disobedience campaigns or of the particular issues that Gandhi identified as germane to his struggle, such as, for instance, the protest against the salt tax. Rather than view the inequity of imperial exactions as a whole, and think through ways and means of addressing these from within the purview of an expanded legislature, nationalists were wont to strike political postures that ultimately served no practical purpose. He noted somewhat wryly that the Congress sought to be all things to all people, but it was evident that when it came to practical action, it was likely to give into the interests of the landlords and industrialists.

⁴⁸ B. R. Ambedkar, *People Cemented by the Feeling of One Country, One Constitution and One Destiny Take the Risk of Being Independent* in BAWs, Volume 17:3, 2003, pp. 24–59.

Ambedkar was willing to enter into a debate with the nationalists at this point, but his arguments elicited no answering reception in nationalist circles. Colonial government, on the other hand, viewed him as an important political and public voice in the Indian context, and along with others, he was called to represent the untouchables at the First Round Table Conference on political reform convened in London (1930). The Conference was to discuss the way forward, given that the Simon Commission had presented its recommendations. Ambedkar would go on to attend two subsequent Round Table Conferences as well, and present his views on a range of issues, to do with reorganizing the polity, state and governance. As we shall see, his complex and nuanced understanding of democracy opened up pathways to reimagine its constituents in a society that was home to multiple and intersecting inequalities.

Ambedkar's rise to prominence unfolded against a series of dramatic political developments. This period (from the late 1920s to almost the mid-1930s) was witness to a saga of political daredevilry, initiated by young men of a radical left-nationalist group, the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army, which earned them the gallows, and rendered their vision of politics attractive to young people. Secondly, communists were gaining slow but steady prominence in national life: socialist idealism attracted young people in the national movement, partially because several young communists had been charged with sedition and interned and yet were heroically arguing their case with verve and intelligence in colonial courts. Thirdly, the Indian National Congress itself grew more strident on the question of national freedom, when Jawaharlal Nehru took over as President (1929–1930) of the party. Inspired by the League against Imperialism, a Soviet-supported organization, and having attended its founding Congress in Brussels, Nehru sought to push the Congress in a leftward direction. Under his leadership the party went beyond its longstanding demand for Dominion Status (self-rule within the empire) and resolved that it desired complete independence from British rule. Lastly, the 1930s saw the Muslim League and Congress drift apart, and the decade was witness to a hardening of positions on the question of national unity, the rights of Muslims as a minority, and the political claims either party advanced as they clashed on various matters.

This set of contradictory developments, which, at times, threatened to fracture the national movement, was addressed with political adroitness by Gandhi. Aware that the late 1920s, a time when the world was sinking into the Great Depression, were particularly propitious to the growth

of a millenarian faith in ready economic justice, if not socialism, Gandhi successfully neutralized the appeal of Nehru and the left wing: he deferred tabling the demand for complete independence as official Congress policy. He suggested that it was prudent to ask the government to take decisive action to further independence, and set a date for the same. If, by that date, the government failed to respond, the demand for complete independence could be proclaimed.

The colonial government held on to its position of not conceding to the Congress' demands, whereupon it passed a resolution in its 1929 conference, calling for complete independence. This was met with government hostility and as discontent grew, Gandhi announced his famous Salt March. He called on people to break the so-called Salt laws, which helped retain government monopoly on salt making, with the persuasive and appealing argument that salt was often what the poor had to season their diet, and it cannot be held to ransom thus. The government reacted by subjecting all those who sought to "make salt" to beatings, arrests and other forms of violence. The Salt March foregrounded the repressive aspects of colonial rule for a world that was stunned by this maverick yet utterly effective mode of opposition. As important, the March stole the thunder from the emerging socialist rump within the Congress.

Embarrassed and outwitted by Gandhi's political dramaturgy, colonial government sought to regain its composure and invited Gandhi for talks with the Viceroy, so as to bring the Congress into the reform process and ensure they were part of the Round Table Conferences (the Congress had boycotted the First Conference). This meant that the government had recognized the Congress as a coeval political force. Gandhi's talks with the government had the desired result: Congress agreed to cooperate with the reform process. Gandhi was chosen to represent the nationalists, and he set sail for England to take part in the Second Round table Conference, which was convened in 1932.

The one issue Gandhi failed to resolve had to do with the Muslim League and its demands: while he held on to his faith in heart-unity and his own charmed sense of what might yet be wrested from increasingly alienated Muslim political actors, the League was mistrustful of the Congress and unwilling to take Gandhi seriously.

Gandhi's English tour proved momentous: he won liberal English public opinion conclusively for the cause of Indian freedom and was feted in anti-imperialist circles. On the other hand, his presence at the Round

Table Conference proved unsettling: representatives of the untouchables, including Ambedkar, and of the Muslims, were irked by his claim that the Congress was truly representative of all communities and interests in British India. Gandhi also held that the demand put forth by the untouchable delegates, that the community ought to be treated as a distinctive national community, separable from the Hindus and Muslims, and granted political guarantees commensurate with its marginality, was not tenable; the untouchables that he knew, he argued, did not wish it and to grant them special constitutional entitlements would only turn the rest of the Hindus against them.

Ambedkar's thoughtful redefinitions of democracy, his attempts to foreground the untouchables as a population whose social suppression ought to entitle them to statutory rights and representation, were thus met with sentimental arguments that smacked of sophistry. And the claims of republican citizenship were trumped by the call to an ineffable Indian national interest and unity.⁴⁹

Things came to a head when the colonial government announced that it would indeed grant untouchables the distinctive status they had asked for, and that in the forthcoming elections they would constitute a separate electorate. Gandhi protested, and went on a fast unto death (1932), declaring that this decision was tantamount to a vivisection of Hindu society, and he would not abide by it. This put Ambedkar in a dilemma: he was furious with this turn of events, but also had to countenance the very real possibility of his untouchable constituency coming under attack from those who viewed it as disloyal and responsible for Gandhi's self-imposed decision.

Reluctantly, Ambedkar agreed that untouchables would not insist on the provision of them being a distinctive electorate. Instead they would rest content with a certain proportion of seats reserved for them in the legislature, to which their representatives would be elected by a two-tier election process. This was not an ideal solution: in the first round untouchables would vote to elect a panel of candidates from the community, but in the second round of polling, both untouchables and touchables would vote to choose their representatives from this panel. Given that touchables would outnumber untouchables as electors, only

⁴⁹ See *What Gandhi and Congress Have Done to the Untouchables*, in BAWS, Volume 9, 1991, pp. 55–93, for a detailed account of Gandhi and Ambedkar at the Second Round Table Conference, and the events that followed from it.

those who commanded the confidence of touchable voters and their leaders would win elections.

Gandhi meanwhile declared that he would set about propagating against untouchability in full force, and render it a matter of national, and not merely social concern. The national movement watched the unfolding of this strange drama with misgiving and on the whole was impatient with Gandhi's commitment to the untouchable cause, such as it was, and bitterly angry with Ambedkar for constantly calling the Indian National Congress to account for its sins of omission with respect to untouchable political rights. To many nationalists, both men appeared to be concerned with distractions, rather than the 'real' issue of confronting the colonial government, and working towards self-rule.

Communists were dismissive of the Round Table Conferences as such and so did not interest themselves in its proceedings, except to criticize them. Of the first conference, an Indian member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), Shapurji Saklatvala noted that it was a game played between "three blind mice": the British government, Princely India (the states under British tutelage, but ruled by so-called loyal rulers) and British India. "Place hunters" from the latter had been invited and the idea was clearly to "give a megaphonic expression to the rights of privileges and interests, and to ignore the very existence of 280 millions of suffering and enslaved humanity..." The conference was "the Indian Politicians' last chance to escape from a Workers' and Peasants' Revolution!" Saklatvala noted in this context, "the solitary voice of Dr. Ambedkar ... who asked for an adult franchise and a freely elected unitary parliament, was easily stifled, as he was speaking for the Depressed Class only!" The Second Round Table Conference was criticized in a similar vein.⁵⁰

Communists in India were otherwise occupied during this time, defending those arrested in the Meerut Conspiracy Case (see Chapter 4). As important, during this period (1929–1933) they had to work through and make sense of Comintern directives that were perplexing, contradictory and often oblivious of the situation on the ground. Thus, the party moved further left for a while (1929–1932), and then was dragged back to an almost centrist position (1933–1934). In each instance, party leaders had to heed theoretical arguments that were obsessed with the

⁵⁰ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/saklatvala/1931/02/x01.htm>; accessed on January 4, 2021.

‘proper’ characterization of the national movement, whether it was to be trusted, or worked with, or denounced and this often foreclosed debate and discussion on other aspects of the Indian situation.⁵¹

9 ANNIHILATING THE SOCIAL ORDER

Ambedkar was troubled and incensed by all that transpired through the early and mid-1930s. Following his bitter and forced engagement with Gandhi’s model of social uplift, he essayed two different but interrelated moves: as he watched Gandhi’s untouchability abolition programme unfold (from 1933 onwards), he was struck more than ever by the reluctance of the touchables to view the untouchables with anything more than sentimental pity. They were willing to be of “service” to the untouchables, but not accept them as equals.⁵² He also wondered what the future held for the untouchables, a section of whom would be voting as well as standing for elections, as soon as the political reform process got under way.

In the event, he did two things: in 1935 he declared that he had enough of Hinduism, the faith he had been born into, and that it had served him and the untouchables ill, being resolutely against the founding ideals of a modern democratic society. He would, he made it clear, not die a Hindu. His announcement was not merely dramatic, it expressed a conviction that would gain strength by the day: that, in the Indian historical context, religious tenets sustained birth-based inequality. Secondly, in 1936, he founded his own party, the Independent Labour Party (ILP), a move that led him to stitch a new constituency together, and one where untouchables could make common cause with fellow workers.⁵³

⁵¹ Sobhanlal Datta Gupta, *Comintern and the Destiny of Communism in India, 1919–1943: Dialectics of Real and a Possible History*, Kolkata: Seribaan, pp. 129–204.

⁵² In this context, Ambedkar wrote a long letter to A. V. Thakkar who was in charge of Gandhi’s uplift programme, urging him to include untouchable representatives in the work that was to be undertaken, and to focus on gaining civil rights for the untouchables, rather than on ameliorative activities. But his request was not heeded (*What Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, in BAWS, Volume 9, pp. 134–140).

⁵³ For a brief account of the party, see S. S. Narwade, *Dr. B. R. Ambedkar And Indian Independent Labour Party: Issues Related To Social Justice Raised In Bombay Legislature, 1937–1939*, Nagpur: Snehavardhan Publishing House, 1997.

The ILP's objectives were decidedly socialist: it desired state management of industry, a guaranteed minimum wage for all workers, free and compulsory education, social insurance and progressive taxation.

While Ambedkar was as critical as ever of the national movement, he was reflective about the consolidation of the left wing within it. In 1934, this latter had emerged as a distinctive group and the Congress Socialist Party, as it was called, had attracted the attention of the communists as well. The CPI was banned that year and the communists had no choice but to function within the limits of legality, and the national movement proved their site of action. Besides Comintern directives enjoined on them to abandon an earlier sectarianism and work closely with the Congress to radicalize it. For Ambedkar a socialist-nationalist combine was both attractive and problematic, and he wanted to define the contours of a politics where socialism could instead be made to speak to the concerns of those who wished to challenge not only an unjust economic order, but an oppressive social and religious order as well. The ILP was to do this. During the years of its existence (1936–1942), it sought to embody a politics whose appeal promised to be wide: for one, the party attracted socialist-minded touchables to its cause, and some of them contested the elections organized under the reform scheme, and actually won. In fact all candidates fielded by the party, including Ambedkar, were elected to the Bombay legislature. The ILP also cooperated with the communists with regard to specific protests, and especially on the subject of a bill to restrict workers' right to strike, and reached out to agrarian organizations, under socialist tutelage.⁵⁴

Even as he looked to build a united front of labour and socialists, Ambedkar continued to speak and propagate against the caste order and untouchability. A year after he had announced he would not die a Hindu, he declared decisively that the caste order ought to be “annihilated” and offered a set of stunningly original observations to explain his case. He also outlined in a public meeting the reasons for his wanting to exit the Hindu faith. These two arguments were captured in two texts that expressed his dual and intertwined intent: *The Annihilation of Caste; What Path to Salvation?*⁵⁵

⁵⁴ See Santosh Suradhkar, ‘Mukti Kon Pathe? Caste and Class in Ambedkar's Struggle’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 9, 2017, pp. 61–69.

⁵⁵ *Annihilation of Caste* is the title of an address that Ambedkar was to deliver at a conference of Hindu reformers, associated with the Arya Samaj, in 1936. Its radical

Yet, nationalists did not heed Ambedkar's scathing social critique and the communists were not willing to join Ambedkar in his exploratory journey through the interlinked worlds of labour, caste and class. The socialists within Congress, particularly those who were active in peasant movements, were perhaps the most open to Ambedkar's ILP, but nothing came of their brief encounter with the party, since socialists did not wish to dissociate themselves from the Congress, as Ambedkar wanted them to.⁵⁶ Thus a historic opportunity to think through the caste-class conundrum was lost, just at the moment when Ambedkar's critique opened up theoretical as well as political possibilities of building a historic bloc that would address colonial exaction as well as caste oppression.

10 THE 1940S AND AFTER: CONSTITUTIONAL LABOUR AND THE BUDDHIST TURN

The decade of the 1940s was shaped by World War II. In the aftermath of the declaration of war, the Indian National Congress demanded a statement of war aims, and what Britain intended for India, in the years to come. Strident critique and a somewhat conciliatory nationalist politics were expressed in turn, as Congress' leaders tried to wrest as much as possible from Britain, by way of political concessions, in return for support to the war. The decade though proved difficult: when the Congress issued its call to the British to "quit India" (1942), it answered several sorts of discontent, and the country witnessed widespread protests, agitations, and violent opposition to the government. British attempts to address nationalist demands did not meet with success, as delegation after delegation discovered to its dismay and it was only after the war ended did

content, which he had made known to them earlier, alarmed a section of the organizers and the event was cancelled. Ambedkar published the address subsequently (BAWS, Volume 1, pp. 25–80). This text is to anti-caste radicals what the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* is to Marxists: it is at once argument and theory, and addresses the socialist as well as the reformer, in order to radicalize them with its vision of caste annihilation. *What Path to Salvation?* (Alternate title, *What Way Emancipation*) was a speech delivered in an assembly of untouchables. It advances reasons for the untouchables to exit Hinduism, on the argument that they constituted a class apart from the Hindus and they had no reason to be part of a society and faith that systematically degraded and denied their being and life (BAWS, Volume 17:3, pp. 113–147).

⁵⁶ Santosh Suradhkar, *The Anti-Khoti Movement in the Konkan, C. 1920–1949*, Noida: National Labour Institute Research Studies Series, No. 106, 2013, pp. 24–26.

the “transfer of power” as it was rightly called acquire practical meaning and significance.

As for the communists, since the mid-1930s, they had been advised by the Comintern to endorse nationalist struggles for independence in a world haunted by fascism. However, as Hitler’s army began to ravage Europe, the Soviet Union signed a Non-aggression pact with Germany and the war well under way came to be viewed as an “imperialist” war. Britain was touted to be the greater enemy and communists in India thus came to advocate a more frontal and insurrectionary politics, on the argument that the country was witness to the growing radicalization of several social segments, including within sections of the Indian National Congress. Predictably enough, this led to repression and arrests. This position lasted until Hitler’s armies invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, and an anti-imperialist war morphed rather dramatically into a “People’s War”.⁵⁷ In practical terms, this led to communists detaching themselves from resistance to the war effort and aligning themselves to the government!

Ambedkar supported the war effort, but also pointed out that Indians had no choice in the matter, since the conditions of British rule left the defence of India in the hands of the government. Generally though the war years were not easy on him. A British delegation visited India in 1941 to ensure that the nationalists did not stymie war efforts. To Ambedkar’s chagrin, these emissaries were not heedful of such constitutional guarantees the untouchables sought, and which would ensure them a modest political autonomy. On the other hand, they were sensitive to demands put forth by the Muslim League. It was as if the untouchables were to trust to the goodwill of the Congress! In this context Ambedkar was left with no choice but to fulminate against what appeared to him gross British betrayal of untouchable interests.⁵⁸

Around this time, the government of India invited him into the Viceroy’s war cabinet, as Labour member, thereby presenting him with an opportunity to explore his political concerns within a broader context. He thus found himself in—in 1942—the midst of a world war, in a war cabinet with a mandate to secure labour’s best interests. That same year

⁵⁷ See, in this context, Sobhanlal Datta Gupta, *Comintern: And the Destiny of Communism in India*, pp. 35–39.

⁵⁸ B. R. Ambedkar, *Important Correspondence Relating to Transfer of Power*, in BAWs, Volume 10, 1991, pp. 445–473.

also saw him found a party of the untouchables, the Scheduled Caste Federation (SCF), since it became evident to him that the nationalists were disinterested in even registering the validity of untouchable political claims (the ILP meanwhile had proved a difficult enterprise to sustain).

The decade proved both productive and difficult: as Labour member, he had to confront and address uncomfortable questions to do with state repression of protesting underclasses, long hours of work that labour was subject to, and a productivist approach that did not augur well for labour's wellbeing. On the other hand, he viewed the war as having opened up opportunities for labour and so went on to adopt measures that would maximize gains for workers, by way of employment and training on the one hand, and better working conditions, wages and industrial safety, on the other. Balancing worker rights with the state's responsibilities to win an anti-fascist war, and the power that the state possessed, with its just execution, so that the working class was not made to suffer more than what it endured in any case, he looked to build precedents and policies, as well as legislation that might make for a lasting welfare legacy for the working class (see Chapter 6).

Meanwhile, he continued to fight for constitutional guarantees for the untouchables in the successive plans drawn up by imperial government and even marshalled together a campaign on the streets, when it was made clear to him that the untouchables would be left out of the final reckoning, when it came to the transfer of power. He wrote on the subject too, outlining his concerns and stating his views on what might yet be done to ensure a fair and just deal for the untouchables and indeed other minorities. Two texts stand out in this context: the one addressed the present, including the imminent division of the country into Hindu and Muslim segments (*Pakistan or the Partition of India*). Ambedkar's writings on a prospective Pakistan came in two editions, with the first published in 1940, and the second, years later in 1945. While he endorsed the partition of the country into two nations in the first edition, in the second, he admitted this might not be an ideal solution and instead urged that a provisional partition might perhaps be a better choice. His arguments in both instances were largely strategic, and followed from an earlier logic: the question of Muslim representation, he had always held, overwrote all concerns to do with representation in the Indian context, including that of the untouchables, and in the 1940s, it is likely that he

wished the question to be settled once and for all so that Hindu society could face up to its factious social core.⁵⁹

Interestingly, like Ambedkar, the communists were supportive of partition, and in favour of a confederation of sovereign states, which was to be demarcated on linguistic and regional lines. But unlike him, they did not think through modalities for representation that would secure rights in a substantive sense for India's differently marginal populations in the Constituent Assembly, nor were they invested in addressing birth-based inequality as a constitutional question, much less a revolutionary one.⁶⁰

As important as Ambedkar's book on Pakistan, was another that addressed the national movement's prevarications with respect to ending untouchability. Titled *What Gandhi and Congress Have Done to the Untouchables*, the book indicted Gandhi for his politics of pity and condescension and worse accused him of dissembling on the question of untouchable rights. It created a storm, alienating him from the national leadership, and for a while, even from Gandhi, who had tried hard to retain his equanimity in the face of Ambedkar's relentless critique of his position on untouchability and caste. Ambedkar was unfazed and in keeping with his determined mistrust of the Congress, which was all set to take over the government, he declared that he was going to take his case regarding constitutional guarantees for the untouchables to the newly formed United Nations! This was when the national leadership took measure of his fury and decided to engage him in conversation.

The war had ended. Elections under the old political scheme had been held in 1946, and a Constituent Assembly convened. It did not augur well that a fellow Indian put independent India on trial in a world forum. Thus, it was the Congress invited Ambedkar—who, like the leading Congress leaders, had been elected to the Constituent Assembly—to head the committee that was to draft India's Constitution.⁶¹ Given

⁵⁹ Before he revised the 1940 edition of his book on Pakistan, he had suggested a way out of what was termed the "communal deadlock" and which would enable both untouchables and Muslims to hold a possible Hindu majority accountable within the framework of a nuanced plan of representation (*Communal Deadlock and a Way to Solve It*, in BAWS, Volume 1, pp. 357–379).

⁶⁰ See Sobhanlal Datta Gupta, *Comintern and the Destiny of Communism in India*, pp. 267–271, for the communist resolution of the Pakistan question.

⁶¹ Ambedkar's labours during this period were however not all political. He dived into ancient history, to account for the origins and history of caste and untouchability, and did this with a sense of urgency. It was as if he desired to elucidate, to all that were willing to

the constrained situation he was in, and aware that the untouchables had lost their political battle, Ambedkar accepted the Congress's invitation. As always, he was scrupulously aware of having to heed the limits imposed by history, and meticulous in working those limits to the possible advantage of the untouchables.

Ambedkar was also appointed as India's first Minister for Law in the interim Indian government. However, his time in the cabinet did not prove salutary: he was unsuccessful in getting his fellow Indian legislators to assent to a legislation that he held dear: the Hindu Code Bill which sought to set domestic and intimate relationships on a rational and more egalitarian footing, and included reformed laws on marriage, female inheritance, adoption choices and the right to divorce. He resigned soon after, and spent the 1950s—until his death in 1956—exploring the possibilities of the political, on the one hand and adopting measures that would enable untouchables to literally remake themselves, in a social and ontological sense, on the other. He contested the first round of elections held in free India, and neither he nor his SCF fared well, even though their politics spoke to a range of working class and subaltern concerns. He continued to follow with bitter disdain developments in left and liberal political circles, and did not find cause in either to augment his vision of a transformed democratic polity and society. The left too did not seek to engage with his world view, except in fits and starts, but almost always to no avail (see Chapter 6).

Bound by contradictory diktat from the Comintern, communist responses to independence were mixed, moving from a position of celebration to disillusionment. This latter resulted in an intensification of struggles for land and grain that they had been waging since the mid-1940s in eastern and southern India. These struggles turned militant and violent, and while they drew into their ranks untouchables, aboriginal and lower caste peasants, they also invited state violence of the ugliest kind. It is noteworthy that this violence transpired in the first years of independence. Importantly, though, these years saw communists address matters to do with social degradation and agrarian servitude. In that sense, the

listen, the extraordinary nature of subjection and inequality in the Indian context, as the world waited for the British to relinquish control over their largest and wealthiest colony.

caste order became, provisionally at least, visible in their politics, even if it was constantly folded into descriptions that marked it as feudal.⁶²

In spite of their shared unease with free India, Ambedkar and his party and the communists remained watchful and critical of each other's politics. Ambedkar's growing interest in rethinking the ethical basis of social life, which led him to explore the thought world of Buddhism, also left him grappling with the question of socialist ethics: would it help create a polity and society that was free, equal and fraternal? Haunted by the promises of socialism, yet not sure of its tenability in the Indian context, Ambedkar went on to advocate that untouchables, and whoever else were committed to the annihilation of the caste order, convert to Buddhism. He made it clear that a new polis and economics necessarily ought to heed and rest on a new ethics. His turn to Buddhism indicated the pathway he intended to travel, and in the event, he came to argue the relative merits of that tradition in comparison with Marxism, unwilling to abandon the moral and political claims of either.

A few weeks before his death, in October 1956, along with millions of his followers, Ambedkar converted to Buddhism, announcing thereby not only his adoption of a new and enabling ethical creed, but also his exit from a civilization and culture that had spawned one of the most enduring forms of injustice. Ambedkar's conversion represented a unique ethical response to the shape of the political not only in modern India, but the world at large.

⁶² For an account of the struggle in Southern India, see P. Sundarayya, *Telangana People's Struggle and Its Lessons*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; for the struggle in Bengal see, Asok Majumdar, *The Tebhaga Movement: Politics of Peasant Protest in Bengal, 1946–1950*, Delhi: Aakar Books, 2011.



Pax Britannica: Conceptualizing Colonial Rule and State

1 A NEW POLITICS

In a student essay, Ambedkar invoked Romesh Chander Dutt, pioneering economic historian and early nationalist, to describe the salutary effects of British rule in India: “Englishmen ... have conferred on the people of India what is the greatest human blessing—Peace. They have introduced Western education, bringing an ancient civilised nation in touch with modern institutions and life. They have built up an administration which, though it requires reform with the progress of the times, is yet, strong and efficacious. They have framed wise laws, and have established Courts of Justice, the purity of which is as absolute as in any country on the face of the earth.”¹

These momentous changes notwithstanding, noted Ambedkar, India’s colonial rulers were primarily invested in political, social and economic stability and therefore did not dare do anything that would disturb the rich and powerful. “Progress involves interference with the existing code of social life and interference is likely to cause resistance. ...As a result of

¹ B. R. Ambedkar, *Administration and Finance of the East India Company* in Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches (BAWS), Mumbai: The Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, in Volume 6, 1989, p. 48. Henceforth, all references to Ambedkar’s writings in this chapter will cite the acronym, BAWS, followed by volume number, year of publication and page numbers.

this, so far as the moral and social life of the people was concerned, the change of government by the Moghuls to a government by the British was only a change of rulers rather than a change of system.”² This was because a government, however sovereign, was limited by its inability to act against the grain of its existence. Distant from the people, colonial government “was not charged with its pains, its cravings and its desires” and besides was openly “inimical to its aspirations” and remained an “irresponsible government”.³

Ambedkar’s critique of colonial rule echoed well-honed nationalist arguments and was not unique. Yet, his understanding of the issues at stake for different sections of Indians in colonial India was. Nationalists, associated with the Indian National Congress, were not sensible of the irony that sustained their demands: that they claimed political equality and liberty while refusing the same to fellow Indians—untouchables and the lower castes—in their everyday social lives. Ambedkar was acutely aware of this paradox and yet granted that history was on the side of nationalism: “If we put aside the painful story of the harsh, cruel and inhuman treatment which the classes in India have accorded to the masses, truth is on their side, for in every country there have been downtrodden communities suffering from social oppression and social injustice, and yet no country has had to be without political power on that account.”⁴

But this did not mean that the political question could not be rethought. Questions of liberty and equality had to be re-posed and addressed in the interlinked domains of politics and the social order. Those who sought self-rule, held Ambedkar, ought to keep in mind that the political problem in India was also a social problem and required political and philosophical redressal. They ought to heed the political rights and claims of untouchables and the lower castes and ensure that these groups were adequately represented in such political arrangements that were sought. At the same time, the unequal caste order and untouchability had to be effectively challenged, if not annihilated.⁵

² B. R. Ambedkar, *The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India: A Study in the Provincial Decentralization of Imperial Finance*, in BAWS, Volume 6, 1982, p. 233–234.

³ Ibid., p. 233.

⁴ Ibid., p. 308.

⁵ Ambedkar followed but upturned a line of reasoning developed by, amongst others, J. S. Mill which held that certain people were fit for representative government than others, and only gradually may a society be ready for self-rule (See J. S. Mill, *Considerations*

The annihilation of caste and untouchability was not central to the politics of either nationalism or communism in colonial India. For nationalists, self-rule and the promise of an independent nation-state defined a telos that was always already valid. For, the nation possessed its own time and when its moment arrived, it would integrate, mystically, as it were, all other identities, whether ascriptive, mandated or imposed. Indian communists also worked with their own sense of time and history: given the constitutive contradictions of capitalism, class struggle and proletarian dictatorship were inevitable. This meant that class as sociological fact and political identity stood to subsume all other historical forms of social being, and all inequalities and injustices stood to be folded into class war.

The politics of caste annihilation, it was clear, did not yet possess political currency, or indeed legitimacy, as the struggles against imperialism and capitalism did. Nationalist civil disobedience against unjust colonial laws and rule yielded a vision of justice that was universally, if reluctantly, recognized as necessary. But civil disobedience when practised against social customs and practices was insistently misrecognized and viewed either as a distraction from real issues or deemed divisive and therefore inimical to the greater common good.

Industrial strikes and militant protests against an extractive and bourgeois colonial state were recognized as rights that workers had garnered over the decades. But these forms of protest and the logic that directed them could not be made to work, when it came to challenging unequal and injurious social relationships, including amongst the working class. For, these latter were shaped as much by custom and religious notions, as they were by property relations and uneven access to material resources. It was therefore not possible to issue notice against the caste order, as strikers did against their employees, given that those who were deemed dominant viewed their social roles and that of their servitors as sanctified by religion.⁶

on Representative Government, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1873, pp. 81–96). He dissociated democracy and self-rule from culture and race and re-associated them with history and the social environment in order to reimagine popular sovereignty.

⁶ Anupama Rao has argued that Ambedkar sought to do precisely this: his demand for a separate electorate for the untouchables was akin to a ‘general strike’; he sought to mobilize “the negative power of the Depressed Classes in the same way that the general strike revealed the secret of capital: that capital includes labour, even though labour is invisible...” (*The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009, p. 137).

Ambedkar's politics thus comprised a set of questions that awaited new forms of thought as well as practices: Through what means, might untouchables and lower castes be mobilized into political citizenship, and one charged with the historical mission of upending the caste order? How was one to work against an unequal and graduated economic and social system in which the untouchables endured the worst forms of poverty and dependence and besides suffered a veritable vitiation of their being? How might one address the "mental habitude" which rendered untouchability 'normal' and caste inequality given?⁷ As important, what sort of intellectual labour was required to take ahead these interlinked struggles?

Working across the realms of law, political reform, colonial governance, historical and social thought, labour and the economy and religion and ethics, Ambedkar essayed a political and intellectual journey that was profound, radical and uncertain. This chapter examines one aspect of this journey: his engagement with law, the colonial state and political reform.

2 SOCIAL LIBERALS, RADICAL NATIONALISTS AND THE COLONIAL STATE

To better understand the precise nature of Ambedkar's endeavour, it is important to address nationalist and communist views on the colonial state and rule. Nationalists' critique of the colonial state is held to have unfolded in and through well-marked historical phases, each of which was ostensibly an advance over the previous one. Thus, from being petitioners, who waited on the goodwill of the colonial government, nationalists in the Indian National Congress moved to becoming dissidents, who disagreed with their rulers and their views, particularly with regard to native representation in government, and from dissidents, it is argued, they became agitators who desired self-rule and eventually complete independence. However, this story is less linear than is often imagined, and the national movement's stance of cooperation, dissidence and opposition to colonial rule often co-existed, and the Congress' leaders moved from the one position to the other and back, often within years.⁸

⁷ For Ambedkar's use of the terms, habit and habitude see his *Their Wishes are Law Unto Us*, in BAWS, Volume 5, 1989, pp. 283–284.

⁸ See Sanjay Seth, 'Rewriting Histories of Nationalism: The Politics of "Moderate Nationalism" in India, 1870–1905', *American Historical Review*, February 1999, pp. 95–116.

This is not to be wondered at. Colonial rule was not viewed only in antagonistic terms: even in its earliest days, when it was Company rule (under the aegis of the English East India Company) and not imperial governance, it was seen as capable of dispensing even-handed justice.⁹ When Company rule gave way to Crown rule, the colonial government emerged into its own, as a distinctive historical entity. Its ‘objective’ character that did not appear to be influenced by custom or creed and its reliance on a uniform system of law appealed to a new generation of Indians. They came to view government, rather its ideal abstracted form, which was the modern state, as a critical agent of a much desired social transformation and placed an ethical charge on its functioning.

From the last quarter of the nineteenth century onwards, addresses to the colonial government resonated with a distinctive and new urgency. Indian liberal thinkers, many of whom were keen students of political economy, imagined the government to be an advance guard of progress. Distinguishing government’s role from the interests of Manchester capital, these men suggested that economic bleeding of India could only be arrested in and through fitful state action. Dadabhai Naoroji, an Indian Liberal member of the British Parliament, invoked the claims of “imperial citizenship” to call attention to the drain of Indian wealth and consequent poverty.¹⁰ The drain, he argued, was occasioned by the high salaries paid to India’s ruling civil elite and by the remittances made to the metropole from the colony. By appealing to the principles of classical political economy, he reminded India’s rulers that a rational and regulated economy would serve the interests of metropolitan capital as well as colonial subjects.¹¹

M. G. Ranade, a man of wide learning and a judge, argued likewise. Though he viewed British rule as providential, he was uneasy with India being treated as a source of raw materials and of Indian resources being used to augment the power and might of Manchester’s capitalists.

⁹ Arthur Mitchell Fraas, ‘Making Claims: Indian Litigants and the Expansion of the English Legal World in the Eighteenth Century’, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, Volume 15:1, 2014.

¹⁰ For a description and critique of imperial citizenship, see Sukanya Banerjee, *Becoming Imperial Citizens: Indians in the Late-Victorian Empire*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2020, pp. 36–74.

¹¹ For a historical biography of Dadabai Naoroji, see Dinyar Patel, *Naoroji: Pioneer of Indian Nationalism*, Boston: Harvard University Press, 2020.

Quoting Mill against Ricardo and drawing on the Physiocrats, Sisimondi and List, Ranade wondered if the colonial government ought not to heed and promote Indian economic interests, rather than have them defined by the play of market forces alone. For one, the law of historical progress demanded that the government acted responsibly, and besides had not India's rulers insisted they were committed to the betterment of the population? Ranade was admiring of Bismarck's efforts with respect to what a modern state might do in this regard and declared himself a proponent of state socialism of the Bismarckian kind. He also followed with keen interest agrarian reforms in czarist Russia and in the Dutch colonies. Each of these instances proved to him that state action was entirely necessary even in the age of laissez-faire, if only to further capitalist growth. In the Indian context, he insisted, the state ought to carry out such reforms as would enable into existence a class of sturdy peasant proprietors. In addition, the state was to foster industrial growth and stem the ruination of Indian artisanal manufacture.¹² G. K. Gokhale echoed Ranade's views and during his term as a representative of Indian interests in the modest legislature that existed in early twentieth century British India, pointed to the absolute limits that hedged the government's understanding of fiscal governance and asked for it to expand its fiscal responsibilities. Gokhale favoured a brisk, enlightened, benevolent state, appropriately Indianized.¹³

In fact, until 1919–1920, nationalists as a whole did not so much want to break away from the empire but only to secure their place within it. In greater or lesser measure, they wanted administrative reform that would enable more Indians to be in government service, with authority to transact governance on their own, and without being constantly vetoed by non-elected, government-appointed officials. There were the radical nationalists, popularly known as the 'extremists', a distinctive rump within the Congress by the first decade of the twentieth century, who agitated for self-rule and derided any and all things British. But even these men charged the colonial state with a mandate to govern fairly and to address

¹² Ranade's writings on economics span a wide spectrum and include his observations on the Deccan famine, peasant indebtedness, cooperative credit and classic themes in political economy. See Mahadev Govind Ranade, *Essays on Indian Economics: A Collection of Essays and Speeches*, Madras: G.A. Natesan & Co, 1906.

¹³ See his speeches on the Budgets debated in the legislature in *Speeches of the Honourable Mr. G. K. Gokhale*, Madras: G. A. Natesan & Co. 1918, pp. 1–219.

economic distress, even as they objected to the colonial government's use of repressive legislation against agitators and to laws that censored free political expression.¹⁴

With the advent of Gandhi as nationalist icon and leader, opposition to colonial rule acquired a moral resonance and mass following. The passive resistance that he advocated took the edge off Indian political extremism, rather it subsumed the cultural fierceness with which the extremists took on colonial rule, within a generalized moral rejection of imperialism and an equally generalized yet fervent call for self-rule. But this did not mean that the "Satanic government", as Gandhi called it, was out of bounds for the nationalist. As Ambedkar would wryly point out, for all its rhetoric in favour of self-rule and its proclamation of complete independence, until the mid-1930s, the Congress officially demanded only Dominion Status: that is, the right to self-government within the empire, as was the case with Australia, Canada and South Africa. Only, subsequently, the party called for the summoning of a Constituent Assembly elected on the basis of adult suffrage to address, define and produce a Constitution for a self-governing and independent India.¹⁵

In truth, through the period of Gandhian passive resistance and call for self-rule (through the 1920s), nationalists remained attentive to the reform process: for one, a self-proclaimed school of liberal nationalists cooperated with the colonial state. Secondly, even within the ranks of the most resolute Non-cooperating agitators, there were those who wished to work the reforms, and they utilized every opportunity to do so, functioning as a faction within the Congress. Thirdly, in spite of a public rejection of reform, nationalists officially outlined specific grievances to the government: for instance, they objected to the absence of Indian representatives in such bodies that were set up to examine reform prospects, such as the Simon Commission. When the colonial government challenged them to produce a constitutional document on their own, they came up with the Nehru Committee Report of 1928. And, in 1931, they agreed to participate in the reform process.

¹⁴ Amongst the extremists were those who not only rejected the claims of the state, but bore arms against it.

¹⁵ For his satiric summary of the shifts in Congress' political position with regard to independence see his *Federation Versus Freedom* in BAWs, Volume 1, 1979, p. 330.

When the British outlined a comprehensive reform scheme—the Government of India Act of 1935—the Congress criticized it in no uncertain terms, but when elections contemplated under the scheme were announced, they contested them and won across British India and took office as well. Yet they insisted that their intent was not to work the reforms so much, as to indicate to the public, their limited nature. In the event, they did govern, until the eve of World War II, when all Congress ministries resigned in protest against Britain dragging Indian into the war without seeking Indian opinion. The war years saw almost all nationalist leaders in prison, while acute political and economic anger rent the streets. When the war veered to a close and it was evident that Britain would not hold on to India, the Congress, with its leaders now out of prison, agreed to participate in various negotiations to do with the transfer of power from British to Indian hands.

The point is the nationalists' policy of opposition to colonial rule, and disengagement with the reform process was more apparent than real and less consistent than they liked to believe. Yet they were disdainful of all who sought to engage with the colonial government, including Ambedkar. Two things contributed to their unease with respect to Ambedkar: the one had to do with their lofty rhetorical rejection of colonial rule and the other with their refusal to grant political salience to the caste and untouchability questions. In fact the two had come to be intimately linked, as the communist M. N. Roy pointed out in an early text.¹⁶ From the 1910s, assertive and atavistic nationalism, noted Roy, was in the ascendant and set itself in opposition to the humanitarian liberalism of an earlier period, which was self-consciously modern, rational and critical of abusive caste practices and illogical religion. The transition from the one to the other proved consequential and divided the nationalist camp into two, the social liberals who were invested in rethinking custom and creed and the political nationalists who were concerned with national freedom. As strident nationalism gained the day, the social liberals who had looked to the colonial government to redress such social ills that they found objectionable, retreated into a gradualist politics that viewed political reform favourably; while the political nationalists wanted nothing short of self-rule. In addition, the nationalists proclaimed that the colonial state cannot be expected to, in fact, did not possess the requisite cultural

¹⁶ M. N. Roy (in collaboration with Abani Mukherji), *India in Transition*, Geneva: Edition de la Librairie J. B. Target, 1922, pp. 188–190.

and moral mandate to address matters to do with caste and culture and that they would do so on their own terms, after self-rule had come to be.

3 REFUSING COLONIAL AND NATIONAL POLITICAL CUSTODIANSHIP

Ambedkar's older contemporary, Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856–1920), a self-confessed political 'extremist', refused to accept that the English were bearers of a higher civilization and countered such claims by invoking and constructing a prideful national identity, through a series of initiatives, ranging from cultural atavism to economic self-help. He was warm in his commendation of those who took to arms and sought to kill British officials, held to be racist and brutal and hailed them as true national heroes.

Unlike those who wished to cooperate with the government and believed that, in time, it was bound to accommodate Indian political aspirations, Tilak held that the colonial state could not be trusted to reform itself or held accountable to constitutional methods. For one, he argued, the colonial state system did not rest on a Constitution. The 1858 declaration of the Queen Empress which set forth the principles of British imperial rule was not a charter, indeed, it contained nothing that defined, regulated and restrained the powers of government. Secondly, while it was true that colonial India was governed by a set of laws, Indians had not made these laws, and they existed largely to serve British interests. Thirdly, all actions by the state's subjects were defined as legal or illegal by the state and those who interpreted its laws. It was not that the law could not be appealed to, but should Indians deem a particular piece of legislation or enactment unjust, they could do so only on terms set by the state. That is, the colonial state could not be expected to answer to Indian notions of right and wrong or to yield anything it was not willing to grant. Tilak knew that by questioning the basis of this legality, he stood to be arraigned in court, as indeed he was, but meanwhile, he had set in place a politics of dissent that would be carried into the popular realm, through other means, by Mahatma Gandhi.¹⁷

¹⁷ For an account of Tilak on English rule and constitutional methods versus more militant ones, see A. G. Bhagwat and G. P. Pradhan, *Lokmanya Tilak: A Biography*, Mumbai: Jaico Publishing House, pp. 181–183.

The delegitimizing of colonial rule found its historical fruition in Gandhi's call to not cooperate with oppressive colonial laws. His campaigns of civil disobedience stripped the colonial state of its prestige in the eyes of a world that was startled by his saintly sagacity. The state, Gandhi made clear, could not be charged with either legal intelligence or moral force: the first was a contradiction in terms, since he viewed the state's laws as furthering its tyranny, and as for the second, not only the colonial government, but the modern state, as such, was not capable of exerting moral authority, indeed it was not constituted in ways that would make for an ethical approach to rule. Gandhi favoured a broad communitarianism, sustained by what he described as "soul force", cultivated through specific corporeal practices and training of the mind.¹⁸ A more familiar opposition to the colonial state, and one that was anchored in a broad socialist critique of imperialism, was articulated by Jawaharlal Nehru.¹⁹

Ambedkar would not have disagreed with the early nationalist view that colonial rule had drastically harmed India's economic well-being. Neither would he have quarrelled with the nationalist critique of government, which held that Indian presence in the legislature could not signify much, when substantive power and authority remained with non-elected and chiefly British members of the council and legislature. He had argued as much in his student dissertation. Ambedkar in fact would not have disagreed with Tilak either, that the state was bound only by such laws that it chose to govern by, and that it did not possess a normative mandate. As he would go on to argue, the government of India was not in sympathy with the "living forces" in Indian society and was distant from what the people desired and wanted.²⁰

¹⁸ On Gandhi's communitarian and anti-Statist vision, see Karuna Mantena, 'On Gandhi's Critique of the State: Sources, Contexts, Conjunctures', *Modern Intellectual History*, Volume 9:3, 2012, 535–563.

¹⁹ Nehru's most succinct critique of colonial rule and state is to be found in *The Discovery of India*, London: Meridian Books, 1947, pp. 328–333.

²⁰ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India: A Study in the Provincial Decentralization of Imperial Finance*, in BAWs, Volume 6, p. 233. An oft-favoured simile that he drew upon to explain and place in context the colonial government's disinterest in furthering nationalist demands was this: "If the Sultan does not abolish Mohammedanism, the Pope ban Catholicism, the Brahmin condemn Caste or the British Parliament declare the preservation of blue-eyed babies illegal it is not because they cannot do these things, but because they will not do these things".

However, Ambedkar was not convinced that the state could be opposed or brought down by defiance of its laws. He was not convinced of the efficacy of civil disobedience therefore or of what Gandhi termed “Satyagraha” or a struggle waged in the name of truth. As he would argue in the 1940s, “if conscience and reason can be insinuated” into a struggle, “they can only qualify but never abolish the injustice”.²¹ For his part, he would rather that both reason and conscience were placed at the service of practical politics, such that they called out the limits to colonial rule in and through a process of reform, argument and legislative labour. This would ensure that the power of the state was limited on the one hand and dispersed and shared on the other. Ambedkar also did not imagine that resolute anti-imperialism, constantly asserted and argued, would make for an effective politics of self-rule, and this, in substance, was his argument with those who thundered for the end of British rule, but did not have a sense of what would follow in its wake. To him the demand for “purna swaraj” or complete independence smacked of demagoguery, rather than an effective political demand.²²

Ambedkar viewed the modern state as carrying out intertwined dual functions: it secured law and order, but it had also been charged with the pedagogic task of ensuring the cultural and social enhancement of the people it sought to govern.²³ In that sense, it possessed a social mandate and untouchables who staked claims to political equality and sought to be part of the state, were intent on influencing it.²⁴ This was imperative, since “...the terms upon which the associated life between the touchables and untouchables is carried on today are the most ignominious to the

²¹ B. R. Ambedkar, *Gandhi and His Fast*, in BAWS, Volume 5, p. 375.

²² B. R. Ambedkar, *Pakistan or the Partition of India*, in BAWS, Volume 8, 1990, pp. 284–286.

²³ This was an argument put forth in an editorial in *Mooknayak* (See B. R. Kamble, *Mooknayak [A Newspaper in Marathi founded by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar in January 1920]*, Kolhapur: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Research Institute in Social Growth (n.d.), pp. 8–10).

²⁴ Ambedkar’s expectations of the colonial state were in line with contemporary views that held that it was out of step with its own time. The first round of political reform in India had been presaged by such expectations. See in this context, K. M. Panikkar (and An Englishman), *Indian Nationalism: Its Origins, History and Ideals*, London: The Faith Press, 1920, pp. 23–30. Also see Bernard Houghton, *The Struggle for Power in India*, Bombay: Sunshine Publishing House, 1924. Houghton was a British civilian administrator, whose writings Ambedkar knew well.

former and highly detrimental to the latter. To make effective the capacities of a people there must be the power to fix the social conditions of their exercise. If the conditions are too obdurate, it is in the interest of the untouchables as well as of the touchables that the conditions should be revised. The untouchables must be in a position to influence the revision.”²⁵

To ask for a political revision of the terms of social existence, so that not merely the untouchables but the touchables too came into the associated life on more equal terms, was to advance a radical republican claim. It positioned untouchables as fitful historical and political actors and their claim to political rights as socially and historically necessary. Indian nationalists were not ready to heed such a claim, and this was evident in the one constitutional document that they produced, the Nehru Committee Report. Unsurprisingly, Ambedkar was critical of its content. He pointed out that the report had given short shrift to the demands of the lower castes and untouchables, who desired to be represented on their own terms in a future polity. Clearly, nationalists did not view such claims as valid and perhaps feared that their hegemony, which was nothing but the authority that the upper caste and brahmin leaders of the Congress had invested in themselves, would be challenged, should the marginal castes find their place and voice in political life. They would rather that they remained custodians of the national good, than examine the terms of its Constitution.²⁶

Ambedkar’s point was also that the political claims of the lower castes and untouchables represented a distinctive historical reckoning with the colonial state. He argued that he and the untouchables viewed the advent of colonial rule as a historical event that had put India in contact with modern European civilization, with “conceptions of liberty, equality and fraternity”, and instilled in Indian society a “sense of shame in respect of the many social customs that have been recognized as part of its social

²⁵ B. R. Ambedkar, *Evidence before the Southborough Committee*, in BAWS, Volume 1, p. 265.

²⁶ See in this context, B. R. Kamble (translator), *Bahishkrit Bharat (A Newspaper in Marathi founded by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar in April 1927)*, Part 3, Kolhapur: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Research Institute in Social Growth (n.d.), pp. 92–96.

and moral code”.²⁷ But this did not mean that they accepted the colonial state, such as it was. They were as convinced as the nationalists that responsible self-government alone would remedy the ills that untouchables and lower castes endured, but they wished to set the terms of such governance and not abide by the nationalist resolution of the political question.

Ironically enough, the colonial government was receptive to the claims of the lower castes and untouchables for reasons of its own: it used these to call into question the representative credentials of the Indian National Congress and to position itself as an even-handed custodian of minority rights. Caught between two sorts of custodial claims, Ambedkar chose to make the most of what the historical circumstances allowed him and his people: he invested his political energies in finding ways and means for the untouchables to be part of the state, even as he called attention to the limits that hedged colonial government and rule. He did the one by engaging with the political reform process and the other by placing a republican and ethical charge on the state.

4 COMMUNISTS, AMBEDKAR AND THE REPRESSIVE STATE

Communist theorizing of colonial rule drew on early nationalist arguments about the impoverishment of India and the degradation of her economy, but it essayed a different political trajectory. The theorists, both diasporic revolutionaries as well as Indian left organizers and thinkers, were influenced by debates that unfolded in the Comintern and which addressed the relative strengths and limits of various anti-colonial struggles and the manner in which these were expected to advance or retard the cause of socialism. The questions that emerged as pertinent in this context were: how might anti-colonial nationalisms be utilized to serve the cause of the world revolution and, as important, how might they be utilized to support the continued existence of the world's first socialist state. Over the years, the second concern came to overshadow the first, and as a result, anti-colonialism morphed into what the Soviet state and the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union deemed it to be, irrespective of conditions on the ground.

²⁷ B. R. Ambedkar, *People Cemented by Feeling of One Country, One Constitution and One Destiny Take the Risk of Being Independent*, in BAWs, Volume 17:3, 2003, p. 45.

Indian communist practice was not always in consonance with the arguments that were put forth by Comintern's Indian emissaries, whether M. N. Roy or the theoreticians of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). This was especially so in the 1920s and early 1930s, but subsequently, the Comintern's influence over Indian communism proved more substantive. The progress of ideas in the international left, both in Britain and the Soviet Union with regard to the India question, is instructive.

British labour politicians followed Indian developments from the 1880s and were supportive of the nationalist struggle. But their attitude to Indian industrial labour was more equivocal: there was a tendency to view Indian workers as competitors, but by the 1920s, this attitude had shifted, with members of the Labour party and also the British Trades Union Congress visiting India to meet with workers in various industries. This was also when Labour looked to rule Britain, and Labourites wished to rethink the empire. Labour politician Ramsay MacDonald fondly hoped that under the firm, benevolent leadership of British trade unions, organized industrial labour in the colonies could march towards a putative labour internationalism: workers of the empire would, he imagined, unite in a labour commonwealth.²⁸

The CPGB was sharply critical of this benevolence and did not imagine that labour-led internationalism would do much for Indian labour or for that matter nationalism.²⁹ The CPGB's suspicions were affirmed by early Indian communist thinkers such as M. N. Roy, who also held that British labour ought to view its interests as linked to those of workers in the colonies in a fundamental sense and grasp the fact that anti-imperialism was a necessary adjunct of socialism. Roy's role in the Comintern brought him in touch with the CPGB and along with the latter's India 'experts', he came to exercise an important role in determining the course of Indian communism until the late 1920s, after which the CPGB's role proved more decisive.

²⁸ For a review of British Labour's policy towards the working class in the colonies in the early twentieth century, see Marcel van der Linden and Anna Sailer (editors), *"This Distress is Impossible to Convey...": British and German Trade-Union Reports on Labour in India (1926–1928)*, De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2020.

²⁹ Clemens Palme Dutt, 'British Labour and India', *Labour Monthly*, Volume 8 September 1926, No. 9, pp. 544–552, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/dutt-clemens/1926/09/x01.htm>; accessed on 4 February 2019.

M. N. Roy was a militant nationalist turned socialist, who left India in 1914, and returned only 15 years later. Meanwhile, he had spent time in different parts of the world, including with the Communist Party of Mexico. The Bolshevik revolution brought him to Russia in 1919. Very soon, he earned the confidence of Lenin and several other leading Bolsheviks, and in 1920, along with other Indian leftists who had found their way to the Soviet Union, he founded an Indian Communist Party in Tashkent. For a decade and more, until the late 1920s, he remained the chief theoretician of Indian affairs and contributed to key debates in the Comintern to do with the so-called Eastern and colonial questions. He wrote incessantly on Indian matters and sought to direct Comintern policy, both with regard to the national movement as well as left mobilization and organizing. His ideas and understanding of the march of history came to define the theoretical terms and conditions for the evolution of communist thought with respect to India.³⁰

Roy's descriptive and theoretical critique of British rule in India was anchored in his understanding of international developments to do with socialism. Given the failure of revolutions in Europe—the abortive Hungarian and German uprisings—he argued that the Bolshevik revolution would be fortified through developments in the East, particularly in India where anti-colonial nationalism was resonant and the working class had emerged as a confident and self-conscious political actor. Lenin was receptive to Roy's views, and the theses on the colonial question outlined in the Second Congress of the Comintern (1920) referenced his arguments.

Roy viewed the national movements in the colonies in a critical even negative light. As far as India was concerned, he held that industrialization had progressed to the point where the Indian capitalists felt empowered enough to assert their political claims.³¹ They had sought to influence and shape the politics of the Indian National Congress, and nationalism therefore bore the impress of their class interests. But, given the restive

³⁰ For an elegant recounting of these years in Roy's life see Kris Manjappa, *M. N. Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2010, pp. 1–97.

³¹ His view of the Indian bourgeoisie and the state of industrial development in India proved contentious, especially in the mid and late 1920s. In the early 1920s, he viewed the Indian capitalists as invested in nationalism, but by mid-decade, they appeared to him a class for themselves that would eventually make peace with the imperialists. Subsequently, though, he came to view them as constituting a nationalist bourgeoisie.

workforce in industrial cities and the alacrity with which they had struck work in the post-war years, it seemed to him that a clear-cut class struggle was in the offing. Therefore, he argued, the Comintern ought to engage with the incipient left rather than the Indian National Congress to challenge and do away with imperialism. Lenin did not agree. He cautioned Roy on this score, and insisted that communists engaged with, and radicalized the movements for national independence in the colonies, even as they built their own organizations.

Roy remained suspicious of nationalist politics and continued to be critical of the Congress in India, but was bound by the line of reasoning advanced by the Comintern. Meanwhile, he went on to offer his own gloss on the colonial present in India. This text, *India in Transition*, published in 1922, featured arguments that he would draw on, repeat and rework in the various addresses that he prepared and sent his comrades in India, through the decade.³²

Roy drew on the nationalist critique of colonialism, but also adduced a new set of arguments, to do with the evolution of the class struggle in India. He noted that the draining of India's wealth was carried out by India's rulers, in cahoots with Indian landlords and rent-receivers. Peasants were forced to grow for the market, at the expense of their own subsistence, and in some places had to assent to the cultivation of commercial crops. This had led to a paradoxical situation: the emergence of capitalist agriculture that rested ironically on semi-barbaric conditions of production that produced indebtedness, poverty and hunger. Indian craft and artisanal manufacture, which was linked both to the peasant and urban economies, had also suffered, on account of cheap foreign goods flooding the Indian market, which enhanced the fortunes of the trader and the speculator. Devastated by the loss of their traditional means of livelihood, artisans had become part of an already large body of impoverished agrarian workers, all of whom were now subject to precarious and exploitative employment conditions.

Meanwhile, those who had profited from this state of affairs, particularly revenue farmers and usurers, had gone on to engage in capitalist manufacture. But this was an incomplete transition, in that the emergent Indian bourgeoisie retained links to their mercantile and trading origins. But, warned Roy, this did not mean that Indian capitalists were uniformly

³² My summary of Roy's views, as presented in the following paragraphs, is based on M. N. Roy, *India in Transition*.

supportive of the colonial state. They yet had to negotiate their place and role within the constraints of the colonial economy, and this pitted them against British capital and the colonial state's support for the latter. In effect they were drawn to the national movement for self-rule. On the other hand, as a class, they could not be counted upon to advance nationalism along progressive lines. For one, they could not be expected to challenge the feudal values of an agrarian society, since many amongst them embodied these values in their very persons. Secondly, their support of nationalism was likely to be compromised, in the likely event of the movement turning popular and militant.

As for the working class, exploited as it was, it bravely protested the conditions of its existence in all the ways it could in urban India. Even in the blasted countryside, feudal relations were under severe strain and bound to give away; for instance, peasant unrest was stark and visible and under an able communist leadership was bound to assail feudal agrarian relations of production. Disaffected and parvenu intellectuals were also unhappy with the current regime, facing, as they did unemployment and an uncertain future. Given these conditions, communist organizing was bound to bring disparate opponents of the ruling classes into a necessary bloc which, in time, would take on not only India's imperial rulers, but their native cohorts as well.

Roy acknowledged the importance of caste as an organizing feature of production in the Indian context. Historically, it had made for a social division of labour, as well as a society divided along class lines. As British rule got under way, the relationship between caste identities and occupations had been thoroughly unsettled. In rural India, land was held not by traditional peasant communities as much as it was by rentiers and usurers. In urban India, with the ruining of artisanship, trade and craft guilds had disintegrated. Further, there had been a shuffling of occupations: thus one might expect to find a brahmin working as a sweeper and a washerman's son in state service. The caste order, Roy argued, had ceased to exist as a functional social system, except when it came to marriage and survived chiefly as a hollow measure of social difference, breeding petty prejudice and resentment. Roy did not think through the phenomenon of untouchability, except to note that the untouchables had become the objects of bourgeois uplift, which was disinterested in the labouring status of the untouchables, many of whom had been pushed into wage slavery.

Roy's assessment of the colonial state was subtle. The state, he pointed out, was content to rule with the help of its feudal allies, but it was not

un-modern, given the rule of law it had initiated, the peace and order it had brought forth and the modern education it had made available. It had helped create a liberal educated class that was open to change and looked to remake India as a modern society. However, this was a restrained modernity. For instance, law in colonial India was meant to protect property above all else and could not be looked upon to deliver any sort of substantive justice to the working poor. However useful, colonial education helped produce a class of subservient men pledged to uphold imperial rule. As for peace, it belied actual class unrest that was rife, and all that the state was capable of was ameliorative action: thus, it might offer a remission of revenue now and then or agree to aid rural credit, but it was unlikely to do more.

Roy did not think that, on its own, the state would yield even a modicum of real power to Indians. Post-World War I, the state was compelled to address political restiveness fuelled by war-related grain shortage and suffering. And it did so through a double-handed gesture: political repression and political reform. These conciliatory measures might suffice for a section of the nationalist leadership, but for workers and peasants, and a growing intellectual class, comprising young men from the *petit-bourgeois*, government would remain the same, unresponsive to their needs and committed to their exploitation.

Writing as he did, in the wake of Non-cooperation, Roy was particularly critical of Gandhi's politics. Gandhi, he held, did not go nearly far enough and had failed to do what was required, that is, extend his Non-cooperation into something like the general strike. Communist organizing and the formation of a communist party would help take forward the political energies that Gandhian politics had sought to muster, and for this, international communist forces ought to take the part of the workers and peasants.

This was to be done in two steps. In the first instance, a quasi-communist agenda for change ought to be placed before the national movement: the creation of an independent federation of Indian states, with its legislature elected on the basis of adult universal suffrage; the abolition of private property in land, the remaking of social and production relations in the agrarian economy and the nationalization of industry. Roy made clear that these were bourgeois democratic demands, rather than proletarian ones, but yet the proletariat had to carry these through, since the waffling and ineffective bourgeois, aligned to the national movement, could not be vested with this historic responsibility. Secondly, even

as communists parlayed with the national movement, they ought to work to separate the anti-colonial and anti-capitalist forces amongst the latter and win them over for communism.

Roy's arguments were taken over and elaborated by the other famous theoretician of the Indian situation, Rajni Palme Dutt of the CPGB (in his iconic text *India Today*). It also remained a staple of Indian left thought and shaped Indian communists' understanding of their immediate and historical contexts, especially in the 1940s. The noticeable shifts in the Comintern's—and by implication, the CPGB's—understanding of Indian conditions had chiefly to do with assessments of the Congress and the bourgeoisie, whether they ought to be viewed as allies or opposed for their class character, and left undisturbed the historical logic that underscored Roy's arguments.

As we have seen, Ambedkar's understanding of colonial rule—in the mid-1920s and after—called attention to its extractive and rapacious economics and its disinterest in promoting the cause of social reform, and in this sense, he was one with Roy. In fact he had offered a critical description of the political architecture of colonial rule and how that helped preserve its economic interests, and of the complex interplay between governance and exaction.³³

The two men differed in the manner they understood the progress of colonial time: Ambedkar did not imagine the march of history in terms of the unravelling of contradictions in the economy. The dialectical movement of capital was but one aspect of a complex historical unfolding that comprised of many other trajectories: there was the time of the caste order and untouchability, of the Hindu religion and of intellectual history, and each of these possessed its own momentum. Neither did Ambedkar think that the ending of colonial rule ought to constitute the defining line of all political engagement. The contingent moments of this rule had to be attended to as well, for they represented historical opportunities that ought to be critically grasped, for what they were likely to yield to India's most oppressed people, of whom the untouchables comprised of a substantial section.

Where Roy viewed colonial rule as essentially class rule, Ambedkar did not think that the instruments of colonial governance could be viewed in these terms alone. For him, the rule of law did not signify the rule of

³³ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India: A Study in the Provincial Decentralization of Imperial Finance* in BAWS, Volume 6, 1989, pp. 229–244.

the propertied merely; the modern justice system possessed a measure of autonomy, given the liberal and equitable norms that governed its workings. He was unwilling to disvalue the norm, even as he was aware of how the law seldom made for the justice it promised (see below). Likewise, modern education was not to be understood only in terms of its structural logic, as a system that produced enslaved minds. Critical as he was of British educational policies, especially because they did not take into account the disabilities that untouchables endured, as they tried to access schooling, Ambedkar yet held such education as was available to be useful and consequential.³⁴

Roy viewed the effects of colonial rule as ‘objectively’ progressive in that it had brought to the fore the class contradictions that constituted the core of the age-old caste order. Ambedkar understood the long duree of colonial presence in more differentiated ways: he did not think that colonial rule had unsettled the caste order. For him, the latter was not an occupational division merely. It was a system of social reproduction as well, sustained by a tacit “law of persons” which neither colonial governance nor modern attitudes had sought to address. This did not mean, though, that the caste order was not permeable to change: on account of modern learning, occupational mobility and the rule of law, the spirit of revolt and a love of critical thought had come to prevail amongst the lower castes and untouchables. On the other hand, the so-called upper castes remained stubborn in their assertion of superiority and birth-based privileges. This had created a series of contradictions, of an antagonistic nature, between the higher castes and the lower ones and between all of them and the untouchables. These contradictions cut across class lines, such that workers could be caste conscious and the upper castes, united in their authority, could be class conscious (see Chapter 6).

Ambedkar and Roy did not meet until much later, when Roy had been expelled from the Comintern and returned to India in the late 1920s. But at that time, or even later, neither man sought to address what the other deemed important. Their non-dialogue was symptomatic of the larger impasse that structured discussions of the class and caste questions in Indian communist thought.

As for arguments essayed by left thinkers in India with regard to colonial rule: early views were not all that different from nationalist critiques

³⁴ B. R. Ambedkar, *Statement Concerning the State of Education of the Depressed Classes in the Bombay Presidency* in BAWs, Volume 2, pp. 408–428.

of colonial economic policies and of the denial of liberties to Indians. From the mid-1920s, these were reframed in ways that called attention to the capitalist nature of colonial exploitation and oppression. This was made evident, during the protests against the Simon Commission, when the communist affiliated Workers and Peasants' Parties (WPPs) issued a call to abjure all attempts by the colonial state to co-opt Indians into legislature and government. Those who sought to cooperate with reform were roundly criticized, especially the movements of the depressed classes (that is, the untouchables) and lower castes, but with this caveat; that imperialism had sought to "make use of them to perpetuate its own existence and ...to secure the continuance of the evils against which these movements protest".³⁵ Even as they conceded the validity of the caste question, the communists stepped back from conceptualizing it and instead polemicized on the subject: by establishing an equivalence between those fighting the caste order and the government that sought to utilize their fight to shore up its legitimacy. While the government remained in their line of critical vision, caste did not.

An authoritative communist critique of colonial rule was offered by the defendants in the course of the Meerut trial. The most active communists of the time—32 of them—were arrested in 1929, in a false lawsuit, the so-called Meerut Conspiracy Case. This latter was the latest in a long list of such cases which had been carefully prepared and orchestrated by the colonial government since 1921. The conspiracy alluded to in this instance was that the accused had concocted a plot to overthrow the sovereignty of the King in British India and "establish a socialist state through the dictatorship of the proletariat and the Supreme command of the Communist International".³⁶

³⁵ See *Documents of the History of the Communist Party of India, Vol. IIIC*, 1928, New Delhi: People's Publishing House (n.d.), p. 249. There were marginal differences in communist reasoning on this subject, depending on where they came from. M. Singaravelu, from Madras Province, where a vigorous anti-caste movement was active, was one of the earliest communists to call attention to untouchability though he too ended up recouping it as essentially an agrarian problem that had to do with the inequality in possession of land. (See, in this context, G. Adhikari (editor), *Documents of the History of the Communist Party of India, Volume 2, 1923–1925*, Bombay: People's Publishing House, 1974, pp. 650–651).

³⁶ *Documents of the Communist Movement in India, Volume 2, The Meerut Conspiracy Case, 1929*, Calcutta: National Publishing House (n.d.), p. 41. The summary of the defence that follows is based on the depositions that feature in this volume.

These charges were made in the wake of a long and protracted strike in Bombay's textile mills from mid-1928 to early 1929. This period had witnessed strikes in several other industries as well, across British India, and the air was rife with rumours about Bolshevism striking roots in the country. Since even the Congress appeared to be entranced by socialism, it seemed to India's rulers that their empire was under threat. This apprehension was elaborated in the prosecution's defence of repression. Unsurprisingly, a substantial part of the defence statement prepared by the incarcerated communists was devoted to addressing the nature of this red politics that the state feared.

Using a wealth of historical and statistical detail, the defendants argued that historically, the colonial state had sought to protect the interests of British capital and added to their coffers through a policy of relentless revenue and surplus extraction, from India's impoverished peasantry and the working class. The state might view itself as a harbinger of progress and insist that it sought to "to guard the liberties and rights of all citizens in the State and see to the best of its ability that they all get fair play and equal treatment" but this was not so.³⁷ But, its actions belied its alleged liberalism, and its bourgeois pretensions were just that. The colonial state, the defendants asserted, was therefore nothing but the "weapon of a naked class dictatorship", and "its form [was] absolutist".³⁸

The defendants insisted that they had not set out to be seditious or spread disaffection or indeed to unseat the sovereign. Through their analysis they had come to the conclusion that empire was but a social form, and that imperialism was a stage of capitalism and that ultimately, the empire stood to be transcended. In keeping with the laws of historical progress, the revolution would ultimately come to India. Their reasoning was predicative, they argued, and not a call to insurrection. Further, at present, they were working to establish a bourgeois democracy, even as they awaited the revolution and its appointed historical hour.

The defence statements ran into hundreds of pages, and no other official document of the Indian left produced in the colonial period was as extensive as this one was, in its delineation of economy and society. So much so, it could be viewed as a sort of manifesto, a comprehensive account of the social totality, which, in turn, explained and justified

³⁷ Ibid., p. 197.

³⁸ Ibid.

communist politics. But in this sprawling text, the social aspects of the colonial question, the manner in which the caste order and untouchability were integrated into the colonial scheme of things, even as they shaped colonial policies with regard to land, labour, manufacture, finance and markets, were not viewed as significant to a critique of colonial rule.³⁹

It was not that the defendants were unaware of how caste shaped economic and social life. They criticized Gandhi's upholding of the panchayats, village-level assemblies in India, as ideal forms of local government, on the argument that these were caste-based, and comprised of heads of the most powerful caste groups in the area.⁴⁰ Also, in marking their opposition to colonial policy with regard to revenue extraction in the countryside, they referenced an important no-tax campaign (the Bardoli struggle) that was conducted in the 1920s under the aegis of the Congress and noted that this was not a class struggle, since great effort was taken to enlist local caste organizations of the marginal communities to exert pressure on those who were inclined to become blacklegs. It was caste rather than class consciousness that was mobilized against the state.⁴¹

The defendants did not disagree that interim demands must be placed before the government and noted that they did not intend to wait until their final tryst with revolution to insist on what was due to the working masses of the country. In the demands they outlined as germane, apart from the economic ones to do with the length of the working day, minimum wages, the need for state insurance and so on, there was a resolution that called for abolition of all "caste and feudal customs and regulations" in the factories.⁴² While it was not made clear what the role of the state ought to be in this regard, the resolution announced an intent: to think through different modes of exploitation and oppression.

In his separate defence, S. A. Dange dwelt at length on the many changes wrought by colonial rule and the responses of different sections

³⁹ S. A. Dange attempted in his separate defence to point to the vertical integration of relations of production, both in ancient India and under capitalism, while explicating the term, 'class'. But this did not lead him on to demonstrate how the vertical lines of division (that is, caste divisions) from the past survived and were reshaped in the present (See *Documents of the Communist Movement in India, Volume 2*, pp. 763–764).

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 251.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 356–357.

⁴² Ibid., p. 418.

of the population to its unpopular policies. In this context, he listed struggles that were not likely to challenge imperial economic interests: those which wanted Indianization of government, and others that sought to change social mores including caste customs. These, he noted, had to do with the superstructure, whereas the actual battle had to be waged in the economic realm. For Dange, the superstructure included “the state, law, morality, religion”, and these helped “maintain a certain equilibrium between contradictory class interests in the structure”. But once the economic structure disappeared, these would cease to be effective, so the real struggle was in effect the one that addressed the economic instance.⁴³

During the Meerut trial, the CPI prepared a Draft Plan for Action which it sent to a Congress conference held in 1931. The Plan sought to engage not only with imperialist rule, but also with landlords, with their system of serfs and slaves and Indian capitalists, and who clearly were upholders of the current system of exploitation. Neither the nationalist mode of political resistance through civil disobedience nor Gandhi’s programme for the abolition of untouchability was viewed as adequate. But neither did the draft plan engage with the questions raised by anti-caste movements and groups with regard to challenging birth-based inequality. In the event, caste remained enfolded within the broader, agrarian feudal order, and was not seen as being constitutive of it.⁴⁴

The communists’ failure to integrate caste and untouchability into their vision of the social totality signified a political as well as theoretical grid-lock. The political rights and claims demanded by the lower castes and untouchables emanated from those very conditions that had cast their world into economic disarray: dispossession, indebtedness and penury, on the one hand, and an expansion of their physical and conceptual worlds on the other. Communists grasped the one, but not the other, and their understanding proved to be insufficiently dialectical: while they sought to radicalize the lower castes and untouchables, as uprooted peasants, agrarian labourers and proletarians, they did not address their existence

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 767–768.

⁴⁴ *Documents of the Communist Movement in India, Volume 3, 1929–1938*, Calcutta: National Book Agency, pp. 81–84.

as caste beings who were intellectually and politically invested in challenging the social conditions of their existence as well.⁴⁵ As consequential, they insisted on reading their demands for social equality and dignity and the critique of caste power and brahmin arrogance as ill-conceived. While uneasily aware of the historical justice of lower caste and untouchable claims, they were yet not able to conceive of these for the democratic and socially radical demands that they were.⁴⁶

Ambedkar did not engage with the moment of Meerut directly or the issues that the trial foregrounded. During this time, he was preoccupied with other matters. This was when (1930–1933) the colonial government convened its three Round Table Conferences, replaying its classic policy of aligning repression and conciliation along the same political axis. Ambedkar attended all three. Interestingly enough, at the first conference (1930), he essayed a critique of colonial rule, repeating arguments he had put forth a few months earlier at a public meeting in India.⁴⁷ He picked on the one issue that the colonial government viewed as proof of its historical relevance, the ostensible gains that accrued to India's most marginal people, the untouchables, and pointed to the absolute limits that hedged colonial policy and action in this regard. These limits were consequential, he argued, since they defined what government might never do, given that its very presence rested on it not unsettling the power and privileges of the upper caste and powerful landed and industrial interests that oppressed the untouchables.

Ambedkar also called attention to the social and economic despotism that the untouchables endured in an everyday sense. The conditions of

⁴⁵ In some contexts, communists worked within the terms set by Gandhi's policies of untouchable uplift, and while these resulted in consequential material transformations—such as the founding of schools for untouchable children—the political rights and autonomy to decide their place in the polity that untouchables claimed were not viewed as pertinent. See in this context, J. Devika, 'Egalitarian Developmentalism, Communist Mobilization, and the Question of Caste in Kerala State, India', *The Journal of Asian Studies* Volume 69:3, August 2010, pp. 799–820.

⁴⁶ S. A. Dange, for instance, was embittered by the anti-Brahmin critique directed against brahmin social arrogance and which protested that class' complete hold over posts in the colonial administration. On the other hand, he reluctantly conceded that there was much justice in these charges, but refused to endorse the strident tone of the critics (See S. A. Dange, *Selected Writings, Volume 1*, Bombay: Lok Vangmaya Griha, 1974, pp. 212–216).

⁴⁷ B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Ambedkar and the Round Table Conferences*, in BAWS, Volume 2, pp. 503–509.

their existence were defined by an utter precarity evident in the punitive economic and social sanctions they were subject to, should they seek to transgress lines of control they were not meant to, such as seeking access to the village well, or the local school: “We do not know of any weapon more effective than this social boycott... the method of open violence pales away before it for it has the most far-reaching and deadening effects. It is more dangerous because it passes as a lawful method consistent with the theory of the law of contract...”.⁴⁸

While Meerut foregrounded the repressive structure of colonial governance and demanded its annihilation, Ambedkar called attention to the everyday violence endured by the untouchables, and which was not recognized for what it was, and so demanded naming, recognition and redressal, both in a legal and constitutional sense. Liberty was foregrounded in the one instance and equality in the other, and while capitalist extraction and colonial political protection of the capitalists were criticized by the communists, Ambedkar pointed to the continuing economic and social bondage that was the lot of the untouchables and which was protected by birth-assigned economic and social authority.

Through the 1930s, communists kept up their critique of colonial rule and also of the Indian National Congress, even as they attempted to radicalize the latter. The CPI was declared an unlawful association in 1934, and many of its constituent organs were banned in 1935, but it continued to work through its peasant organizations and other forums that had emerged within the ambit of the national movement. When World War II broke out, communists were as yet part of the united front against fascism. But in the wake of the Non-aggression pact that the Soviet Union signed with Germany, the Comintern made it clear that the primary contradiction was with the capitalists of imperial Europe and that the communists ought to step up the class struggle. The CPI was thus forced to essay a sectarian turn in 1939, which lasted until 1941, when Germany invaded the Soviet Union, and the anti-capitalist struggle was put away in the interests of a “People’s War”, which meant that the CPI now cooperated with the colonial government. The ban on the party was lifted during this period.

⁴⁸ B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Ambedkar and the Round Table Conferences*, in BAWS, Volume 2, p. 532; he quoted from a report produced by a committee set up by the Bombay government to inquire into the conditions of subaltern communities, including the untouchables, in the region.

This was a time when the CPI retreated from its usual class politics and advocated a policy that even countenanced making peace with “class enemies” such as rentiers, in the interests of “the grow food campaign” to meet wartime needs. The party also welcomed such political reforms as the British held out, as the war veered to a close and the British appeared intent on negotiating the terms of the so-called transfer of power.⁴⁹ Interestingly enough, it was exactly during this period that party units in eastern and southern India took to organizing peasants, tenant farmers and agricultural labourers against rentiers and landlords. These campaigns turned militant and resorted to armed struggles in the first year of India’s independence, with the CPI claiming that the newly attained freedom was a lie and that the free Indian nation-state was anything but that.

During the 1930s, Ambedkar was busy building his Independent Labour Party (ILP) and was at his most radical, calling to account the Congress governments who had taken office across British India after winning the elections announced under the 1935 reforms. He worked somewhat closely with the CPI in the city of Bombay and sought out the Congress socialists in the hope of forming a broad coalition of peasant organizations and his own new party, as an alternative to the Congress as well to reimagine a future free polity and state. This was also when he characterized the national movement as serving the interests of Indian business and set against labour, an argument he would rework in the 1940s (see Chapter 6). The broad socialist alternative he sought did not find traction, and his ILP was left to its own resources. The 1940s saw him busy with the question of untouchable political claims, when, in the wake of World War II, wanting to win nationalist support for the war effort, the British renewed their offer of greater political responsibilities to India at the end of the War. Frustrated with British disinterest in addressing the political claims he sought to articulate, Ambedkar wondered if a nationwide stir was required to make the position of the untouchables clear. Just then, though, he was called to serve as labour member in the Viceroy’s cabinet, and became, as it were, a part of the state. Even so, nothing came

⁴⁹ See Parthasarathi Pathak, *Communists on Caste*, Unpublished Phd. Thesis, Kolkata: Jadavpur University, p. 158; p. 182. But the British continued to look upon the communists with suspicion, which was not entirely without warrant. As Pathak points out, at a 1944 meeting of the All India Peasants Association, a politburo member of the CPI declared that the party ought to prepare for concerted revolutionary action in view of the impending victory of the Soviet Union over the Nazis.

of the demands that Ambedkar placed before the British, and on the eve of the transfer of power, he was an embittered man, angry with the British and the Congress for their studied neglect of untouchable political claims.

This was when elections were held to the Constituent Assembly, which set itself the task of framing a Constitution for free India. Ambedkar—who had been elected to the Assembly—was invited to chair the drafting committee set up for this purpose and subsequently appointed Minister for Law in the first cabinet. He was even more resolutely part of the state, than he was in British India, and though determined to reset the terms of the political debate, he came up against powerfully voiced interests, determined to not retreat from their historically privileged positions.

Meanwhile, as the communist-led agrarian struggles unfolded through the late 1940s, he was unsure as to what this bode for the future of constitutional rule and democracy in free India. In any event, he made a passionate plea for democratic government even as he insisted that democratic ideals were yet to be realized in the economic and social domains.

5 THE MODERN STATE AND COMMON WELFARE: AMBEDKAR, AMERICAN PROGRESSIVES AND BRITISH SOCIALISTS

Ambedkar's understanding of colonial rule and the state bears comparison with two distinct traditions of thought: the anti-caste tradition's view of the colonial state as playing a transformative role, as far as caste society was concerned (exemplified in Phule's understanding), and Ranade's and Gokhale's views on the liberal state and what it ought to do, to redress economic ills. However, Ambedkar did not share these men's optimism with regard to what the colonial state might actually do in either instance. On the other hand, even as he found the historical record of colonial governance wanting, especially with regard to the untouchables, he was unwilling to give up on what a state ought to do. His conception of the state was both ethical and idealist, and it is possible that he was influenced in this regard by views and ideas regarding the state that he had encountered at Columbia and subsequently at the London School of Economics.

Ambedkar's American teachers, the so-called Progressives, were aghast at the disastrous social and economic consequences of the unfettered

capitalism that had come to be, in the so-called Gilded Age and after. Economists, sociologists and historians drew on their research and hypotheses to advance specific as well as broad directions for change that would mitigate the worst of capitalism's ills and allay gathering worker unrest.⁵⁰ James Harvey Robinson, a Columbia historian, perhaps spoke for all of them when he named what bothered him and his peers about the primacy granted to the free market. The latter was invested with an aura usually reserved for "traditional reverences and sanctities, of political fidelity, patriotism, morality, and even religion"⁵¹ and anyone who dared question the economy was reviled and socialists and communists were viewed as "heretics to be cast out, suppressed, and deported to Russia, if not directly to hell as of old."⁵²

Robinson hastened to add that he was not advocating the socialist cause, or "any wide sweeping reconstruction of the social order, although experiments and suggestions should not be discouraged". "What we need first is a change of heart and a chastened mood which will permit an ever increasing number of people to see things as they are, in the light of what they have been and what they might be."⁵³ Robinson's call for a clear and different vision and one that required Americans to think beyond the exigencies of the market represented an ethical challenge that required to be addressed, but not through polemical and chauvinistic arguments. Neither the "dogmatic socialist with his unhistorical assumptions of class struggle, his exaggerated economic interpretation of history, and his notion that labor is the sole producer of capital", nor those who display undue confidence in "the sacredness of private property" and "the blessedness of the profit system" were likely to be useful in this context.⁵⁴

What was required was "more mind than ever before" and the resources that Robinson upheld in this context were the writings of those he believed to be non-partisan: Thorstein Veblen, John Dewey, J. A. Hobson, Richard Tawney, G. H. Cole, Havelock Ellis, Bertrand Russell

⁵⁰ For a comprehensive history of ideas from the so-called Gilded Age onwards to the Depression and after, including of Progressive Thought see Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

⁵¹ James Harvey Robinson, *The Mind in the Making: The Relation of Social Reform to Intelligence*, London and New York: Harper & Brothers, 1921, p. 177.

⁵² Ibid., p. 202.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 217.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 217–218.

and Graham Wallas, “who may or may not have (or ever have had) any confidence in the presuppositions and forecasts of socialism, [but] whose books do make clearer to any fair-minded reader the painful exigencies of our own times....”⁵⁵

Ambedkar’s favourite teacher, the economist Edwin Seligman echoed Robinson’s views and remarked that the “postulate of absolute right of property” and “the supposition of the necessary division of producers into employers and employees” were ideas that were of “comparatively recent conception”. Now that this “right” had exceeded its historical usefulness and, worse, led to human misery, it was necessary to rethink the terms of economic life and examine “in what degree private initiative and governmental action may strive, separately or conjointly, to lessen the tension of industrial existence, to render the life of the largest social class indeed worth living.”⁵⁶ Henry Seager, Seligman’s colleague, observed that “we need not freedom from governmental interference, but clear appreciation of the conditions that make for the common welfare, as contrasted with individual success, and an aggressive program of governmental control and regulation to maintain these conditions.”⁵⁷

Not quite drawn to socialism, yet aware that it was a doctrine that was increasingly popular and consequential in that it roused workers into protests, Progressive-era historians and economists, philosophers and sociologists turned to the state to take responsibility for the common good and displaced onto it their normative claims. Ambedkar would have similar recourse to normative reasoning with regard to the colonial state. In order to countenance the untrammelled play of the law of contract, which existed in the Indian context in the negative form of social boycott imposed on the untouchables, he turned to the state and like the Progressives invested it with moral force and urged it to enunciate, in constitutional terms, directive principles that would ensure justice and equality for the untouchables.

Ambedkar’s idealistic sense of the state was also shaped by his readings in Fabian and more generally British socialism. The views of Richard

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 218.

⁵⁶ Edwin Seligman, ‘Changes in the Tenets of Political Economy with Time’, *Science*, April 23, 1886, pp. 381–382.

⁵⁷ Henry Seager, *Social Insurance: A Programme of Social Reform*, New York: Macmillan, 1910, p. 5.

Tawney appear important in this context, apposite as they were to Ambedkar's ethical concerns, with regard to governance and rule. Tawney did not imagine that society was a context for the organization of production merely. It was an organism that answered to other equally salient influences and tendencies. For instance, social class in England was not a reflex of the economic relations of production. It determined the shape of life itself: thus, a person's access to and experience of "education, health, the opportunities for personal culture and even decency" was meted out on a "graduated scale", depending on his place in the social stratum.⁵⁸ If this was to change, the state ought to serve the cause of equality in two ways: through an active circumscription of the power and authority wielded by wealth and capital and through an enlargement of opportunities for all "to ascend" and "to rise to new positions of comfort and distinction".⁵⁹ As important, it had to actively ensure "social well-being", secure for all a "life of dignity and culture", on the understanding that "civilization is not the business of an elite alone, but a common enterprise which is the concern of all".⁶⁰

Ambedkar would likewise ask for a circumscription of such political power that an elected majority—which he would term as representing the "governing classes"—was likely to wield, by proposing that such power be shared amongst a range of political actors, including the untouchables, and by advocating that the state actively executes its pedagogic, ethical role and ensures untouchable and lower caste welfare and well-being.

6 ARGUING WITH THE STATE

Ambedkar's understanding of the colonial state was honed in the context of specific struggles and given circumstances and was marked by subtle shifts in understanding and emphasis.

In his address to untouchables who had gathered at Mahad in 1927, Ambedkar spoke at length on what being part of the British army had done for them. An untouchable who held a position in the army could not be treated as one by the public at large, or even within the army. Indeed

⁵⁸ Richard Tawney, *Equality*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1952 [1931], p. 69.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 111–112.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

very few risked asking the caste status of an armed man. In this context, he called attention to the decisive battle of Bhima Koregaon that had ended the rule of the Peshwas. This victory, he noted, was the handiwork of the untouchables. Their valour had secured the conditions for British rule, and in turn, the British had educated them, by setting up military schools, thus affording untouchables access to a new world of modern learning. However, he cautioned them, it would not do to imagine that British rule had wrought fundamental changes in their lives. For, the British did what suited them, and the question of untouchable welfare or progress was not an important or fundamental consideration for them. Therefore, it was important for the untouchables to read the present for what it offered them, and rather than wait for military service, they ought to educate themselves and gain state employment, since the “mind of the government” was shaped by the minds of those who administered it.⁶¹

A year later, we find him returning to the question of British rule but in a different context. When taunted by nationalists for agreeing to depose before the Simon Commission and thus conceding imperial government’s right to set the terms of rule, he retorted that he was under no illusion as to what the British might actually do. Untouchables sought political rights and power because they were convinced that none could right their wrongs, as well as they could. They were not so much endorsing colonial rule, as they were acting to right an enduring and historical wrong. Further, they feared a perpetuation of this wrong under national rule, especially since nationalists refused to take cognizance of the iniquitous caste order and were in thrall to the pervasive hold of “Brahmanism”.⁶² Brahmanism, Ambedkar observed was both an expression of the brahmin class’ vested interest, in retaining its intellectual and social authority over all others, as well as an ideology that ensured birth-based inequality was continuously affirmed and renewed. In this sense, it had created the social as well as ideational conditions for imperialism to “take firm root in India”.⁶³

⁶¹ B. R. Kamble, *Bahishkrit Bharat, Part 1*, pp. 21–23.

⁶² B. R. Kamble, *Bahishkrit Bharat: Part 3*, pp. 21–23. Also, see B. R. Kamble, *Bahishkrit Bharat, Part 1*, pp. 155–156, for an elaboration of Brahmanism as a denial of humanity and as homologous to the colonial economic system that had drained India of its wealth.

⁶³ B. R. Kamble, *Bahishkrit Bharat, Part 3*, p. 61.

Ambedkar's critique of British rule, indeed of the colonial moment in history, then, was defined not only by what the rulers did or did not do. Rather, he situated the colonial present within an antique social oppression and measured its impact along a temporal axis that stretched back to the ancient past. His reasoning was similar to that put forth by Phule, and to an extent, by an earlier generation of untouchable leaders, such as Valangkar. But the conclusions he drew from this dual sense of time were different, as we shall see.

Secondly, Ambedkar wished to engage with colonial rule on coeval terms: not as a petitioner, but on behalf of the self-sovereign untouchables, and in this, he was unlike other untouchable leaders of his time, who, more often than not, complied with the terms set by the colonial government, in matters to do with untouchable welfare, even as they sought more from it. In a sense, their imagination of the state did not exceed the limits set by it. Ambedkar was impatient with this approach and chastised those who would express public gratitude for this or that plea that had been granted, and in his own submissions, while watchful of context and heeding of protocol, was assertive.⁶⁴ Thus, he made clear that the state was to be argued with, not merely affirmed and obeyed. Equally, he ensured that his arguments for untouchable political and other rights bore the impress of historical purpose, if not entitlement. Colonial and imperial governments had to grant his formidable learning in political and legal history and philosophy and did heed his arguments with interest.

Ambedkar's assessment of colonial rule argued with scholarly efficiency and verve in the 1920s acquired a popular and radical edge in the 1930s, as he sought to inscribe untouchable political claims within prospective colonial constitutional arrangements. By the late 1930s, and particularly from the early 1940s, though, he came to view the state differently, as an institution that had to be prepared for the eventual transfer of power from British to Indian hands. During this period, he went on to develop a fine-grained critique of the proto-nationalist state. Significantly, his sense of the nation-to-be placed the political claims of the untouchables within a broad democratic and national framework, that is, he made it clear that he was urging forth these claims as much in the interests of democracy and the nation.

⁶⁴ See his critique of a southern Indian leader of the untouchables for being obsequious in relation to the government (B. R. Kamble, *Bahishkrit Bharat*, Part 1, pp. 45–46).

These latter had come to absorb his attention in the 1940s, in view of the discussions to do with the future shape of India. One set of discussions centred on the so-called princely states, partially self-governing units, and outside of the governance structure of British India and their role in a future polity. Conservative in the main, many of these states were the bulwark of reaction, and Ambedkar desired to democratize their functioning, for, if that was not done, social equality and political freedom would stand compromised in these regions.⁶⁵ There was also the question of competing political claims, of the Congress and the Muslim League, and the delicate and complex balance that had to be secured between majority power and minority interests, while retaining an expansive understanding of democracy. This was a matter of concern for him, since throughout the period of political reform he had sought to differentiate the political claims of the Muslim minority from those advanced by the untouchables: now he came to advocate differently argued nationalist resolutions for either group of claimants.⁶⁶

The 1940s were important in another sense: as Labour member in the Viceroy's cabinet, he was part of the state, at its highest levels, and that experience perhaps heightened his sense of what a state might do and might not do, especially with regard to its most marginal subjects. And, finally as a member of the Constituent Assembly and head of the Drafting Committee for the Constitution, and later as Minister for Law, he found himself involved in the intricate as well as powerful act of state-building.

7 COLONIAL LAW AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: AMBEDKAR'S LEGAL LABOUR

As legislator and minister, Ambedkar engaged the state in its historical as well as idealist forms: practical results were not to be the only measure of what was desirable, but at the same time, legal and constitutional

⁶⁵ B. R. Ambedkar, *Federation Versus Freedom* in BAWS, Volume 1, pp. 279–353.

⁶⁶ His writings on Pakistan comprise two parts. The initial volume on Pakistan (1940) argued for the necessity of Partition, but a subsequent edition (1945) was more cautious in its prescription for a solution to the problem of Pakistan (see *Pakistan or the Partition of India*, in BAWS, 1990, Volume 8); in between the two editions, Ambedkar delivered an address to his Scheduled Castes Federation, where he modified the Partition thesis, and argued for a rethinking of the political claims of minorities, including Muslims and the untouchables within a single nation-state (See B. R. Ambedkar, *Communal Deadlock and a Way to Solve it*, in BAWS, Volume 1, pp. 357–379).

idealism had to be rendered practical. His work in the domains of the law and political reforms bears testimony to how he worked the complex relationship between imagined norm and historical possibility.

Ambedkar practised law. He appeared in courts, prepared affidavits, examined witnesses and took on complicated legal briefs. This aspect of his work took him into the very heart of the colonial legal system, and no doubt made for a sombre, realistic view of the relationship between law and justice. In addition, he mused on the subject of law, in the context of specific rights campaigns: during the Mahad struggle, for instance, and subsequently as well, when fellow untouchables staked their right to enter Hindu temples, and touchable Hindu reformers attempted to legislate on the subject. He also engaged with the right of citizens to protection against arbitrary action by the state and took up sedition-related matters and represented several communists. He appeared for those who were active in the anti-rentier struggle that his ILP was part of, and who were accused of unlawful action. Ambedkar was invested in lawmaking as well: he drafted legislation on the vexed question of the Mahar watan, and with regard to the unabridged rights of rentiers of western Maharashtra and subsequently, was involved in drafting a Constitution for free India, as well as codifying aspects of Hindu law, to do with marriage, divorce, inheritance and adoption, and later on, with contentious amendments to the new Constitution.

His early thought on law (formulated in the 1920s) owed to his experiences at Mahad, the temple entry movement and legislation related to both struggles. The Mahad movement had shown up the limits as well as possibilities of legal reasoning: at Mahad, when untouchables attempted to drink water from a public tank, they were attacked by touchable Hindus, who answered the former's assertion of civility with an expression of brutality. Ambedkar later argued that these acts of violence could have been prevented by a discretionary use of law. He referenced the infamous Section 144 of the Indian Penal Code which is prohibitive in intent and used—to this day—to prevent public gatherings, or the mobilizing of persons in large numbers in public places. Citing a decision of Justice Turner, who had officiated at the Madras High Court, he pointed out that the section stood to be understood in its expansive sense, as one that invested the state's judicial officers with authority to prevent those who were opposed to, and thwarted rights campaigns and campaigners as they sought to claim what was due to them in law. In other words, the section

ought not to be used against those protesting for their rights, but against those who obstructed such protests!⁶⁷

Ambedkar went to court over the water issue and finally won the case: he argued that the water tank was a public space, being municipal property, and untouchables, as others, possessed rights of access to it. His opponents had declared that the nature of the space notwithstanding, they had immemorial custom on their side, which held that untouchables ought to be barred from using the tank, on account of their being considered ‘polluting’. The court granted Ambedkar’s suit, but only because it did not find any evidence that custom, as claimed by the touchables, was indeed immemorial. It conceded that even if the tank was municipal property, if customary practice, on reasonable grounds, had kept out the untouchables, the law might be inclined to consider such practice seriously and to examine “whether the custom were unreasonable or contrary to public policy”. But since this was not the case, there was no question of examining touchable Hindu claims to immemorial custom.⁶⁸

The judicial process in this context made evident the two directions that legal procedure could take, with regard to such civil rights that the untouchables sought: it was possible to read the law in ways that substantiated justice claims, as Ambedkar suggested. It was equally possible that the law stood to be interpreted in narrow terms, as the court’s final decision revealed: in allowing the untouchables to access the Mahad tank, the court relied on a rather literal understanding of the issues at stake, particularly on the matter of custom, and while justice was had, it was not based on an affirmation of justice claims, as much as it was on a contingent reading of custom. An ethical claim, the Mahad struggle made clear, could be compromised, even if justice was possible, on account of judicial literalism and temerity.

The complex relationship between law and justice was also brought home during the Kalaram temple entry struggle. Unlike the Mahad campaign, where the right of access had the sanction of legislative fiat, in this instance the struggle had been voluntarily undertaken. However, Ambedkar and others who were part of the campaign for temple access invited the government to heed their moral claims. Not only did the

⁶⁷ B. R. Kamble, *Bahishkrit Bharat, Part 1*, pp. 89–92.

⁶⁸ B. R. Ambedkar, *Mahad Satyagraha*, in BAWS, Volume 17:1, 2003, p. 48.

government not respond with the alacrity expected of it, but its officers actively colluded with touchable Hindus in scuttling untouchable claims, and through a use of violence. This temple entry movement was eventually called off, since it became clear to Ambedkar that touchable Hindus would spare no measure, however, dissembling, to ward off the claimants from pursuing their objective. More important, he realized that the government could not be counted upon in this matter. There may be individual bureaucrats and magistrates who set store by legal idealism and who could and did sympathize with untouchables wanting to claim their civil rights, but government as such was limited by its commitment to formal peace rather than substantive justice. In this instance, the district magistrate refused to concede that the temple was a public space and that untouchables, like other Hindus, therefore, ought to be able to access it.

Ambedkar went on to use the occasion of the campaign to present a critique of social impunity that stymied the working of the law and drew attention to the power of social force, over and against legal dicta.⁶⁹ He also stepped back from the campaign and reasoned aloud its larger intent. He pointed out that untouchables had sought to enter temples, not because they believed it would end their degradation, rather, they desired to be seen as acting decisively and energetically on their own behalf. Such struggles were meant to serve notice to touchable Hindus, so that the latter could re-examine their biases and rethink the principles and terms that could help constitute a united and equal Hindu community.⁷⁰ Ambedkar made clear that the untouchables had acted ethically, but had been served ill by a legal system that was unwilling to take on those who engaged in an enforced perpetuation of unjust social custom.

Subsequently, when Congress reformers introduced a bill in the central legislature to enable the untouchables access to temples in areas where a majority of the population consented to their doing so, Ambedkar rejected the proposed legal measure. For one, he did not imagine that touchable Hindus would ever consent to untouchables accessing temples.

⁶⁹ See Ambedkar's letters to the Collector of the District, a senior government official, where he regretfully notes that he had reason to believe that the local police as well as the District Magistrate had not been as "impartial" as they ought to have been and had acted in ways that favoured those touchable Hindus determined to thwart the temple entry struggle (B. R. Ambedkar, *Kalaram Temple Entry Struggle*, in BAWs, Volume 17:1, pp. 185–191).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 195–201.

Secondly, he wondered as to the intent behind the bill. The Kalaram entry struggle had made clear that the refusal to let untouchables enter temples was not an instance of wrongful custom arising from exigent causes; rather touchable Hindus claimed religious sanction for keeping untouchables away from their temples. Therefore, unless the doctrine that justified such sanction was “abandoned and expunged” from Hindu scripture, law in itself—setting aside, for the moment, whether the law as proposed was sound—could not be expected to do much for the untouchables. “To accept temple entry and be content with it” argued Ambedkar was to “temporize with evil and barter away the sacredness of human personality”.⁷¹ As far as the untouchables were concerned, the question of access was not a contingent one, rather it had to do with their ethical right to reinterpret religious custom and the faith that mandated it.

For Ambedkar, the relationship between an ethical justice claim and the law the claimants appealed to did not appear a simple one. He both valued as well as wondered about the law and even as he worked through established legal and judicial procedure consistently defined justice claims in extra-legal and ethical terms. For him, the claimant in pursuit of justice looked to not merely realize what was denied him, but to propose a new norm.

Ambedkar’s understanding of the “rule of law” bears looking at closely. Pre-colonial Hindu law, anchored in scripture, was not moribund, but it seldom heeded the call of shared and universal right, as it did, of custom and tradition. In contrast, modern law refused to accept these latter as valid on their own terms and sought to evaluate them on the basis of rational and evidentiary arguments. Further, modern law had become increasingly subject to universal considerations, of liberty, equality and fraternity, and while these may be affirmed or abridged in actual legal practice, they were yet central to the legal order, to how the law viewed itself. In this sense, the law had to be worked with, and drawn upon, as the untouchables sought to claim civil personhood.⁷²

⁷¹ Ibid., 201.

⁷² Ambedkar was invested in taking forward civil rights campaigns, in view of the casual and everyday denial of rights to the untouchables. This is evident from the work plan of the Depressed Classes Institute (Bahishkrit Hitkarni Sabha) that he sent out, soliciting support for its activities (BAWS, Volume 17:2, 2003, pp. 407–412), and also in the long note that he sent, A. V. Thakkar, who was in charge of the Gandhian Anti-Untouchability

However, it was also evident that the efficacy of modern law was dependent on its administration, as the temple entry struggle had demonstrated. When judicial and other officers of the government were susceptible to what Ambedkar described as the constitutive “lawlessness” of the Indian social order, the law could not be expected to enjoy substantive currency.⁷³ For, in such circumstances, it was evident that the law, even if universally valid, was not deemed as applicable to those who were viewed as social outcasts: “The untouchable not being a member of the group of touchables is a stranger. He is not a kindred. He is an outlaw. He cannot claim justice. He cannot claim rights which the touchable is bound to respect.”⁷⁴

Ambedkar made clear that he did not think touchable Hindus, in office or otherwise, were morally incapacitated. Rather, their moral acts were limited to their own class and social group and acts directed against outsiders such as the untouchables, even when wrong and unjust, did not trouble their conscience, habituated, as they were to social and ethical indifference in this regard. Even British officials, he held, were likely to heed rather than challenge social habits: whereas in other instances, they had taken on Indian resistance and trained their violent power on those they sought to control and render obedient, with regard to untouchability and caste, they were unwilling to contest popular opinion.⁷⁵

This was precisely why he sought to invest the law with normative force, in order that it could be read in more than literal fashion and in ways that might persuade the state and citizenry to challenge social custom and creed. Thus, in arguing the importance of the Mahar watan bill that he introduced in the Bombay Legislature in 1927, he demanded that the system be ended because watan-holders were treated like bonded serfs, with their untouchable status tying them to forced customary labour and an inequalitarian agrarian economy. The issue at stake therefore did not have only to do with retaining or abandoning the watan, which brought little succor and much trouble to untouchables, equally, it had to do with the phenomenon of enslavement, and the need to end it.

League, later rechristened Harijan Sevak Sangh (*Gandhi and His Fast* in BAWS, Volume 5, pp. 367–371), outlining his expectations of its proposed work with the untouchables.

⁷³ See in this context, B. R. Ambedkar, *Untouchability and Lawlessness* and *Why Lawlessness is Lawful*, in BAWS, Volume 5, pp. 35–74.

⁷⁴ B. R. Ambedkar, *Why Lawlessness is Lawful* in BAWS, Volume 5, p. 63.

⁷⁵ B. R. Kamble, *Bahishkrit Bharat*, Part 3, pp. 15–16.

Arguing in a similar normative vein against an Industrial Disputes Bill which was initiated by the Congress government in the reformed Bombay legislature in 1938, and which curtailed workers' right to strike, he observed that a strike was nothing more than a breach of the law of contract and thus was "simply another name for the right to freedom... the right to the freedom of one's services on any terms that one wants to obtain. ...To penalise a strike, therefore, I contend, is nothing short of making the worker a slave. For what is slavery? As defined in the constitution of the United States, slavery is nothing else but involuntary servitude. And this is involuntary servitude. This is contrary to ethics; this is contrary to jurisprudence".⁷⁶

Perhaps nowhere was the connection between law and norm as important for him, as when it came to the political guarantees he sought for the untouchables. At one level, these comprised of practical measures to be undertaken with regard to electoral constituencies and the nature of the franchise and thus pertained to the domain of policy and governance. At another level, these practicalities had to be weighted with ethical and normative principles that communicated the gravity and relevance of the issues at stake.

8 RETHINKING THE POLITICAL: COLONIAL REFORM AND CONSTITUTIONAL NORMS

Ambedkar's decades-long engagement with the political reform process in colonial India represented a novel exercise in the practice of political democracy. From 1919 to 1947, he essayed a series of moves that sought to expand untouchable political rights, and each such move was defined in ways that called attention to a grave historical wrong that had to be set right. In 1919, when he sent in his testimonial note to the Southborough Commission, he described untouchables as deserving of representation, even though they were poor and not formally educated. It was not right that they should be represented by others, neither was it fair to argue that they could not be expected to know what was good for them. Those who sought to 'speak' for the untouchables were decidedly not committed to enabling them realize their equal and coeval human personhood. And what appeared "benevolent interest in others may be an unwilling mask

⁷⁶ B. R. Ambedkar, *On the Industrial Disputes Bill* in BAWS, Volume 2, p. 207.

for an attempt to dictate to them what their good shall be, instead of an endeavour to agree with them so that they may seek and find the good of their own choice.”⁷⁷

Further, the interests of the untouchable were unique: “They are distinctively their own interests and none else can truly voice them. A free trade interest can be voiced by a Brahmin, a Mohammedan or a Maratha equally well. But none of these can speak for the interests of the untouchables because they are not untouchables. Untouchability constitutes a definite set of interests which the untouchables alone can speak for.”⁷⁸ Pointing out such interests was likely to be ignored, he set about to define them: “... their interests are the greatest. Not that they have large property to protect from confiscation. But they have their very persona confiscated. The socio religious disabilities have dehumanized the untouchables and their interests at stake are therefore the interests of humanity. The interests of property are nothing before such primary interests.”⁷⁹ The untouchables’ right to “personal representation”, he held, would enable them take part in “conjoint activity” in the political sphere, and this in turn would ensure that their touchable peers were also “resocialised” out of their prejudices and spirit of exclusion.⁸⁰

There were historical reasons as well for the untouchable to be viewed as self-sovereign: the Great war had foregrounded the principle of self-determination, and this had to be understood in an expansive sense, as pertaining to subjugated classes within nations, as it did to the nations themselves.⁸¹

Ambedkar’s case for personal representation was heeded in rather limited ways: untouchable representatives, including himself, were nominated to legislatures by the government under a new reform scheme, put in place in the early 1920s. Subsequently, the Simon Commission came to review the scheme and to suggest further political reforms. Ambedkar testified before it in 1928 and argued his case for untouchables being granted political rights from where he left off, nearly a decade ago.

⁷⁷ B. R. Ambedkar, *Evidence before the Southborough Committee*, in BAWS, Volume 1, p. 265.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 268–269.

The untouchable was not only one who possessed the right to self-determination, he argued, but he also constituted a “minority” from whom this right was withheld. In colonial India, the term was applied chiefly to Muslims, but given their distinctive exploited and oppressed existence untouchables ought, also, to be viewed as a separate and definable group of people, who required the same constitutional protection as was extended to minorities across the world. In fact, pointed out Ambedkar, they needed special guarantees, since their minority status had to do with an epochal history of suffering.⁸² In other words, there could be no easy or merely contingent redressal of their plight, and such practical acts that were undertaken had to answer to a condition of historical abjection. Ambedkar went on to propose that untouchables be assured an “adequacy of representation” that would ensure their political presence was taken seriously:

“By adequacy of representation I mean such a magnitude of representation as would make it worth the while of any party from the majority to seek an alliance with the minority. Where a party is compelled to seek an alliance with a minority, the minority is undoubtedly in the position of a dictator. On the other hand where a party is only drawn to seek an alliance with the minority, the minority is only adequately represented.”⁸³

Even as he sought expansive rights that would render untouchable political participation effective and resolute, Ambedkar invested the untouchable political actor with grave responsibility. He noted that the lower classes possessed a “consciousness of mutual dependence” in public life and affairs and were convinced of the “necessities of ...combined action”. This made them naturally more expansive in their politics. Meanwhile, their “untrained powers” and “undeveloped faculties” stood to be enhanced in and through their being part of political life and government,

⁸² B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Ambedkar with the Simon Commission (Indian Statutory Commission)* in BAWS, Volume 2, p. 465.

⁸³ B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Ambedkar with the Simon Commission (Indian Statutory Commission)* in BAWS, Volume 2, p. 362. Ambedkar would return to this notion and further refine it on the eve of Indian independence, at a time when the colonial government was negotiating the transfer of power from British to Indian hands (See *Communal Deadlock and a Way to Solve It* in BAWS, Volume 1, pp. 357–379).

and besides they were invested in self-improvement. Therefore, "it is to the lower classes that we must look for the motive power for progress".⁸⁴

Ambedkar would carry forward his distinctive democratic reasoning, at once practical and normative, into all subsequent reform discussions that followed: the three Round Table Conferences held in the 1930s and the various negotiations undertaken in the 1940s, as Britain looked to transfer power to Indian hands. Through this entire duration, he insisted that such rights as the untouchables demanded were translated into constitutional guarantees which would render the state responsive and responsible to its most vulnerable subject-citizens.

In a memorandum submitted to the First Roundtable Conference (1930), Ambedkar and R. Srinivasan, another representative of the untouchables, demanded that a fundamental right, which "will declare 'untouchability' to be illegal for all public purposes", be enacted in the Constitution itself, for unless this was done, untouchables would not be in a position to actively exercise such political and other rights as they sought.⁸⁵ Further, to render this proposed provision realizable, in an everyday sense, the two men insisted that "liability of the executive officers of the Crown for acts of tyranny or oppression" should be made constitutionally effective.⁸⁶ They thus sought a range of guarantees, some punitive and others directive, which ensured that untouchables were adequately represented in the legislature, executive and services. They also asked that the government set up a special department that would attend to untouchable concerns. The note they prepared to this end represented nothing less than a Constitution in miniature.

Ambedkar's reasoning with respect to state liability, which he understood as embodying a right to redressal against social wrongs and infringement of rights, did not find favour with the British. They held that such redressal as Ambedkar sought pertained to the practical realm of the law and its administration and could not be included within a proposed

⁸⁴ B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Ambedkar with the Simon Commission (Indian Statutory Commission)* in BAWS, Volume 2, p. 350. Even as nominees rather than elected representatives, untouchable legislators essayed their roles with a grave sense of responsibility and sought such changes as were necessary in budgetary allocations, specific laws and administrative decisions to ensure a modicum of welfare and justice for the untouchables.

⁸⁵ B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr Ambedkar at the Round Table Conferences* in BAWS, Volume 2, p. 532.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

Act. Ambedkar differed and asked that his point of view be noted for posterity. Thus, he did not want the “record merely to say that I made certain demands; I want the report also to record the strength of feeling that is in my mind behind this; that it is not merely a demand which I made merely to be accepted or rejected, but I said that the acceptance of these demands was conditional on the acceptance of this.”⁸⁷

In the years that followed, Ambedkar did not give up on his demand for constitutional mandates, but he framed them differently. Even as he and his ILP contested the elections held under the 1935 Act and entered the legislature, he examined the terms by which Indians had taken office and found them wanting: for effective authority remained with the British, and it did not appear that they desired to transfer substantial powers to Indian hands. It was important therefore to examine the political architecture that the 1935 Act had put in place and subject it to study and critique. Ambedkar warned against mere polemicising on the issue and called for a normative assessment of the structures of rule.⁸⁸ He made it clear that whatever he sought for the untouchables was unthinkable outside of a political scheme that was constitutively and radically democratic. In the 1940s, it became evident to him that the British were neither committed to nor interested in heeding untouchable political claims, much less accord them constitutional validity. Yet, he continued to call attention to the following, almost until the eve of independence: separate electorates, preferential access to education and the state services; and separate settlements that would enable untouchables to live away from the touchable Hindus.

Such claims, he made clear, were historically necessary, since the impending transfer of power to the nationalists would secure particular class and caste interests, rather than truly national ones, and prove detrimental to India’s minorities and the poor. While, all along, he had been critical of Indian nationalism, in a post-fascist world, which had seen the waging of what was called a “People’s War”, he adopted a distinctive ‘class’ approach and characterized the nationalists as part of the “governing class”, that looked to uphold mercantile and industrial interests as well as birth-based inequalities. This critique, voiced with anger and acuity in *What Gandhi and Congress have Done to the Untouchables*, marked a

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 541.

⁸⁸ B. R. Ambedkar, *Federation Versus Freedom* in BAWs, Volume 1, pp. 328–353.

crucial point of departure in that what he rejected became the basis for what he embraced.

This was made evident in the model constitutional document, titled *States and Minorities*, that Ambedkar presented to the Constituent Assembly on behalf of the Scheduled Castes Federation (the party he had founded in 1942, after the ILP could not be sustained). The document featured an alternative to Gandhi's communitarian vision of the nation, as a conglomerate of village republics and also resolutely set itself against a limited bourgeois model, rooted in a productivist ethic. It gestured towards the welfare state, whose provisions had been discussed threadbare in British Labour circles during the war years; it paid tribute to Soviet communism; it located the independent state-to-be within a vision of caste annihilation, to be achieved through constitutional principles and protocols. The document also listed its own interpretative principles, thus placing its content within a distinctive vision of history and society.⁸⁹

In 1947, Ambedkar was called into the Constitution-making process, being made the head of the committee that was to draft the Constitution. He did not expect this, but gave in with good grace, even accepting to be the Law Minister in the cabinet of the interim government which functioned under the aegis of the Indian National Congress.⁹⁰ Constitution-making proved to be exciting, mediated though it was by the Congress's insistence that the nation be viewed as an indivisible and organic entity. For Ambedkar, it was not easy to speak in the name of this nation, especially since he did not think that it had come to be, in a

⁸⁹ B. R. Ambedkar, *States and Minorities* in BAWS, Volume 1, pp. 383–428. See in this context, Jon Soske's argument that Ambedkar imagined Constitutional structure as a counter to social disaffection: guaranteed protections for the untouchables would ensure that they were necessary co-sharers in democratic sovereignty. Soske suggests that Constitutional structure was Ambedkar's version of Gramsci's "Modern Prince" (Jon Soske, 'The Other Prince: Ambedkar, Constitutional Democracy, and the Agency of the Law' in *The Political Philosophies of Antonio Gramsci and B.R. Ambedkar: Itineraries of Dalits and Subalterns*, London: Routledge, 2013, pp. 59–71).

⁹⁰ Ambedkar did not expect much from the Constituent Assembly. For one, he held that the Constitution was best made by a group of people who knew Constitutional history and the law. For another he did not imagine that the Constituent Assembly would allow for multiple points of view and was convinced that it would be held to ransom by what he termed a communal (Hindu) majority that would be inimical to the interests of the untouchables (See *Communal Deadlock and a Way to Solve It* in BAWS, Volume 1, pp. 360–366). But given that he always sought to turn the exigent into a purposive moment in time, he took his duties as constitutional expert seriously.

substantive sense. On the other hand, the drafting exercise brought home realities that he sought to grasp with his usual intellectual and ethical acumen. Having to reckon with the difficulties that attended governance in a country, divided along lines of language, ethnicity, ideologies, to say nothing of class and caste, he came to essay a delicate balance between lofty ideals and the ways in which these needed to be sustained in times to come.

For instance, even though in *States and Minorities*, he had envisaged a quasi-socialist and welfare state as ideal for free India, he did not find it easy to convince his fellow drafters of the Constitution that this ideal ought to be rendered justiciable. He thus came to argue against his own preference: he noted that to grant constitutional validity to the term “socialist” would limit the political options that the nation ought to have, as it began its journey into independence.⁹¹ In another, and rather negative instance, too, we seem him weighing norms and details with care. Thus, with regard to the limits to be set to the exercise of liberties, he was not entirely sure if such limits ought to be determined by special laws that parliament might be trusted to enact with the sobriety they deserved or if the judiciary could be trusted to adjudicate and pronounce on laws and procedures that contravened the fundamental rights. He did not query the need for setting limits to liberty, for he did take seriously the state as a purveyor of law and order and public safety. But he was under no illusions that this power, however it was to be vested, would compromise practical democracy. As he pointed out, a parliament “packed with party men” may make laws that “abrogate and violate what we regard as fundamental principles affecting the life and liberty of an individual...”; on the other hand, he was not sure how a group of men sitting in the Supreme court examining laws passed by parliament, “whether by their dint of their own individual conscience or their bias or prejudices” could be trusted to evaluate which law was good and which was bad.⁹²

His seeming equivocation pointed to dilemmas that the Constitution could not resolve, given that it was committed to building a state that would exist, both as a democratic republic as well as an apparatus of governance that had been forged in colonial times. Since its historical existence could not be wished away, Ambedkar sought to make the most

⁹¹ B. R. Ambedkar, *Constituent Assembly Debates*, in BAWs, Volume 13, 1994, p. 326.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 457.

of its reformatory role, even as he chose to abide by its regulatory character. Thus, while he granted that the fundamental rights, enshrined in the Constitution, were central to the normative as well as practical future of India's democracy, they had to be viewed for what they were: "the gift of the law" and state, and which left the state with the right to qualify their application.⁹³

Interestingly enough, while he appeared to endorse state prerogative with regard to liberty, he insisted on state liability with regard to equality. Thus, in the debate that ensued with regard to rights to economic democracy, which had been declared non-justiciable and placed in a separate Section of the Constitution under the head, "Directive Principles", he insisted that just because these rights were not viewed as fundamental, they ought not to be considered formal; rather they ought to be understood as effective instructions and guides to political and legal conduct.⁹⁴

Ambedkar's constitutional endeavour, veering between an assertion of norm, and a concession to the historical and inherited conditions that defined governance and rule, came up against a different sort of limit with the Hindu Code Bill, which sought to reform marriage, divorce, custody, adoption and inheritance practices pertaining to Hindus. The Bill was envisaged as an important legal and not constitutional measure, but given the fact that it was discussed in the legislative section of the Constituent Assembly, the debates referenced constitutional promises, especially the section on fundamental rights. Ambedkar was impassioned about the Bill.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 63. The idea of the bundle of rights being a "gift" ought also to be seen in the context of the social order which was constitutively unequal. That the state reached over and above what the social order was willing to grant rendered it a veritable 'gift-giver'. On the other hand, Ambedkar does not appear to want to concede that, equally, rights had been fought for, in and through diverse forms of anti-colonial resistance and in the courts.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 66. Ambedkar's understanding of the relationship between norm and the practicalities of governance was accented differently with regard to the two rights that he valued: equality and liberty. This was evident in the reasons he offered in support of the first amendment to the Indian Constitution, barely a few months after the latter had come into operation. The amendment had to do with matters relating to three sets of rights: of the so-called backward classes to preferential discrimination; of free speech; and of the state to act in ways that would ensure economic justice. Ambedkar was catholic in his interpretation of the first and last rights, but not so with the right to free speech, which he sought to qualify, drawing on the letter of the Constitution, and extant judgements than with the spirit of either (See *Parliamentary Debates*, in BAWS, Volume 15, pp. 329–387).

He was not associated with its earlier history and came to it, during his tenure as Law Minister. He recognized its importance right away and argued that the proposed Code ought to be viewed in the light of what it represented: “Hindu Society has always believed that law-making is the function either of God or the ‘Smriti’ [*divinely ordained utterances—V.G.*] and that Hindu Society has no right to change the law. That being so, the law in Hindu Society has remained what it was for generations to come. Society has never accepted its own power and its own responsibility in moulding its social, economic and legal life. It is for the first time that we are persuading Hindu Society to take this big step ...”.⁹⁵

In Ambedkar’s reading of history, the sacral and the legal appeared intertwined in complex ways throughout India’s long past and shaped social life at its very core, that is, with regard to intimacy and conjugality. By unsettling this configuration, the Hindu Code Bill communicated to the Indian social order that there was another measure of justice that Indians could avail of, and one that owed nothing to notions of the sacred. Opposition to the Bill took refuge in the argument that public opinion was likely to be against it and that only a legislature elected on the basis of universal suffrage ought to contemplate such a measure, and not the present Assembly, which had been elected on the basis of a limited franchise.

Ambedkar disagreed that public opinion ought to count and argued that the state should do what was right and just. In a matter such as this, he did not imagine that a resolution could be reached through “counting heads”. Rather one had only to be sure that the contents of the bill were in “perfect consonance with the conscience of the community”, which he believed to be the case (see Chapter 7).⁹⁶ Eventually, the Bill was stalled for various reasons, leaving Ambedkar bitterly disappointed. He resigned as Law Minister to express his displeasure. His constitutional and legal labour came to rest thereafter, though he continued to argue cases in court and expand the meaning of constitutional rights in his addresses in free India’s legislature.

⁹⁵ B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Ambedkar and the Hindu Code Bill* in BAWs, Volume 14:1, p. 41.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 41–42.

9 MORAL FORCE, PUBLIC CONSCIENCE AND THE STATE

Ambedkar's invocation of the normative worth of law and the centrality he accorded constitutional mandates for the securing of rights for the untouchables derived from his sense of moral force. Moral force was what granted credibility to authority and rendered a state worthy of respect on the one hand. On the other hand, such force rested, ultimately, on the power of public conscience. Unless there was prior and social recognition of the wrong that the state sought to set right, neither legal action nor constitutional mandates were likely to be effective. As far as the Indian social order was concerned, such recognition was not easy to secure, given the constitutive disaffection that it rested on.

What was to be done, therefore? History offered him instructive lessons: citing the example of the Paris Commune, he noted that even if a revolution was to take place, its intentions could only be secured if the new state could rely on a civil administration that would intuit its purpose and work to achieve it.⁹⁷ Such an administration would have to be deliberately put in place, that is, the state apparatus would have to be consciously restructured and in consonance with the rights claims of the most marginal and oppressed. In the Indian context, this would require that the state was repopulated, with adequate representation for the lower castes and untouchables at all levels of the state structure. And, eventually, untouchables and the working class ought to 'become' the state. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, when he was engaged with the question of labour and labour rights, he exhorted the working class to educate itself and form its own political party, rather than allow class outsiders to lead it (see Chapter 6). During the same period, he urged the untouchables to remake themselves into new historical beings, shun Hinduism and seek their salvation through a new faith, and one that rested on liberty, equality and fraternity.⁹⁸

Politically conscious labour and a historically and culturally transformed community of untouchables, he hoped, could effectively and together constitute themselves into a governing class and remake the

⁹⁷ B. R. Ambedkar, *Antagonism of the Administration*, in BAWS, Volume 5, p. 104.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 403–421.

state. This resolve got strengthened during the war years, as is evident from his exhortation to labour to take charge of their political destiny.⁹⁹

In the 1950s, he returned to arguments he had outlined in *States and Minorities*, especially those that had to do with state socialism and the need to collectivize land.¹⁰⁰ He also returned to notions to do with state liability, with regard to the rights of the untouchables and wondered if the state ought not to monitor its progress in and through a renewal of its constitutional mandate in this regard.¹⁰¹ And finally in *Buddha or Karl Marx*, which, originally, was delivered as a public talk, he wondered if proletarian dictatorship was not a “necessity” for all “backward countries” and spoke warmly of the need to expropriate property owners. But this concession to necessity, he made clear, was not to be elevated to a principle of rule, indeed the workers’ state had to move into a democratic phase of existence.¹⁰²

In this context, he upheld the importance of ethical life and Buddhism. It seemed to him that the Buddhist interregnum in Indian history had ushered in substantive and fundamental transformations of the economy, polity and society and that antique time appeared to hold lessons for the future. The Buddha’s creed, the dhamma, he argued, would sustain such political and economic gains that might be wrought by a socialist state.

This movement between law, state and society, between rule and the domain of civic and individual ethics was richly productive and allowed him to both imagine and act on his utopian vision of an equal and good society.

⁹⁹ B. R. Ambedkar, *Labour and Parliamentary Democracy* in BAWS, Volume 10, pp. 106–112.

¹⁰⁰ B. R. Ambedkar, *Parliamentary Debates* in BAWS, Volume 15, pp. 949–954.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 899.

¹⁰² B. R. Ambedkar, *Buddha or Karl Marx*, in BAWS, Volume 3, pp. 461–462.



A New Time: Arguing with History and Imagining Utopia

1 TURNING TO THE PAST

In 1927 Ambedkar was called upon to lead a campaign to assert untouchable rights to public water resources.¹ The right had been affirmed by a resolution passed in the Bombay Legislature and it urged municipal corporations across the province to open up such resources to all, irrespective of birth and status. But almost no municipality acted on this decision, and a group of untouchables decided that it would wage a struggle to enforce the resolution with respect to a public tank in the town of Mahad.

Ambedkar had emerged as an important intellectual presence in political circles where the untouchables were active, and a rallying figure for a range of concerns, especially the often denied right to equality of access to public places, education, state service and the legislature. He accepted the invitation to lead the struggle at Mahad, and in his very first address to the campaigners spoke eloquently, not just of denied rights, but of the historical issues at stake for those who sought them. He recalled the beginnings of untouchable assertion and demarcated the latter from attempts by Hindu reformers committed to ‘untouchable uplift’. On the

¹ Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994, pp. 150–152. For a detailed account of the Mahad struggle, see Anand Teltumbde, *Mahad: The Making of the First Mahad Revolt*, New Delhi: Aakar Books, 2016.

other hand, he recollected with warmth Jotirao Phule's support for the untouchables and their cause. Given that untouchables had come to speak for themselves, he implored his audience to view themselves as historical subjects, whose past need not remain, or be understood only as a history of servitude.²

Ambedkar would return to the question of history in his subsequent writings and speeches, and look to embed the lives and struggles of untouchables within far-flung histories of oppression as well as resistance, constellating times, places and events to mark past as well as future time. This chapter is about Ambedkar's tryst with time and history, his journeys into the past and the manner in which these intersected with the progress of his politics in the present.

2 AT THE THRESHOLD OF HISTORY

History figured in two important contexts in Ambedkar's thought world in the 1920s and set the tone for the intellectual and political labour that he undertook in subsequent decades: the Mahad satyagraha and his work on the Mahar watan, or tax free land assigned to the Mahar caste of untouchables in Maharashtra for such compulsory service as they were meant to carry out in their villages.

The Mahad campaign unfolded in two parts. In the first instance, when untouchables entered the precincts of the tank and accessed its water, they had to confront the wrath of touchable Hindus on the streets, and in the violent melee that followed the campaigners had to retreat. Further, as we have seen, the matter got embroiled in a lawsuit. Nevertheless, the untouchables returned to re-stake their claims a few months hence.

Meanwhile, Ambedkar wrote at length on the campaign in his weekly, *Bahishkrit Bharat*, and dwelt on a range of matters to do with rights, claims, religion and history. Writing in the wake of the first phase of the Mahad protest, he declared himself nonplussed by those who resisted untouchable efforts to assert their rights. The untouchables, he reasoned, were engaged in a crusade, and they ought to have been heeded by their co-religionists. Instead they were violently attacked, as if they represented a way of thinking that was adversarial. Religious confrontations, when they arose over matters of principle, had pitted faiths against each other

² B. R. Kamble (translator), *Bahishkrit Bharat*, (*A Newspaper in Marathi founded by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar in April 1927*), Part 1, Kolhapur: Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Research Institute in Social Growth (n.d.), pp. 16–27.

across the world: in ancient India, those who espoused the Vedic religion took against the Buddhists who challenged them; in early Christian history, heathens and Christians were locked in a battle of minds, and in medieval Europe and Asia, Christians and Muslims were adversaries. But at Mahad, the trouble that brewed was not between two religious groups, and untouchables had acted on the understanding that their faith was expansive, and sustained by high ideals. They had sought to match precept and practice, in a manner that was sanctioned by Hindu scripture.³

Even as he reclaimed Hinduism for his cause and looked to global history to render the Hindu religion dynamic, Ambedkar simultaneously essayed a counter-move. He proclaimed his willingness to abandon his faith, if its ideals could not be claimed for the present.⁴ Poised between a history that he hoped to redeem and a present that rendered that redemption a risky wager, he served notice to his fellow Hindus. But he also made clear that his doing so was to enjoin them to think, in short, he invited them into an argumentative encounter.

However, it was not a simple choice that he posed: between a redeemable past and a recalcitrant present that would not rethink that past. Rather he desired to understand the relationship between these two times. And he chose to do so, from the vantage point of what might be called a 'new' time: a threshold moment, which he literally called into existence by constellating a set of historical events. This was pointed and evident during the second phase of the Mahad struggle, when he likened the gathering of protesters to the national assembly of France that convened in May 1789, and which saw the revolt of the so-called third estate of the commoners against the other two estates, the clergy and nobility. He reasoned that these three orders were not unlike the ancient fourfold varna divisions in the Indian context. Just as French society had its priests, the nobility and commoners, Indian society had its brahmins (priests), kshatriyas (kings) and the vaishyas and shudras

³ Ibid., pp. 47–48. During this period in his public life (from early to late 1920s), Ambedkar was not averse to moderate reform efforts, such as intercaste dining events, which symbolically broke with the ban on commensality with the untouchables, and did not mind supporting Hindu reformers who sought to invest the untouchables with the so-called sacred thread, a sign of learned piety, which conventionally had been worn only by brahmins (See B. G. Kunte & B. N. Phatak, (Compilers) *Source material on Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar and the Movement of the Untouchables*, Bombay: Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Material Publication Committee, 1982, pp. 30–31; p. 33).

⁴ B.R. Kamble, *Bahishkrit Bharat, Part 1*, pp. 112–113.

(common labouring and productive people, comprising both the touchable lower castes and the untouchables). In France the third estate had set out to reorganize French society, and that was what the untouchables, who were not even counted amongst the varnas, also desired to do. Whereas the French had wished to reorder political, social and religious lives, the untouchables were not concerned with the political at present, but meant to reorder society and religion.⁵

Ambedkar went on to invoke the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* and observed that this remarkable document had become “immortal not only in the history of France, but in the history of all civilised nations” and had made for “revolution worldwide”. Most importantly it affirmed the natural equality of all men and women, and this was an ideal that ought to be realized in the Indian context as well.⁶ As far as Hindu society was concerned, its constitutive inequality had to be attacked at its very source, that is, endogamous marriages. For it was this which sustained the division of society into castes and forbade substantive interaction between them. The untouchables, Ambedkar declared, would be the ones to carry through the historically momentous task of doing away with these divisions and unifying Hindu society. For, like all classes that were powerless, they possessed transformative energy and even as they sought to better their lives, were committed to nothing short of a “social revolution”, being passionate about principles and not guided by self-interest.

Ambedkar also noted that the Mahad protest marked a ‘protestant’ moment in time and the resolutions passed at the second Mahad gathering made this evident. The social order, it was resolved, ought to be subject, not to strictures in religious books and to rules defined by a priestly class, but to laws made by the people and their representatives. Secondly, the priestly vocation was to be democratized: priests were to be chosen through a system of examinations, rather than on the basis of their self-proclaimed and birth-based superiority. Thirdly, the *Manusmriti*, a digest of Hindu law (composed in the second century of the common era) believed to enjoy divine sanction, was to be ceremoniously consigned to flames, and it was, on the ground that it justified the abject servitude

⁵ B. R. Kamble, *Bahishkrit Bharat*, (A Newspaper in Marathi founded by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar in April 1927), Part 2, pp. 201–202. Interestingly, at this point in time, Ambedkar did not draw attention to the fact that the untouchables were not part of the varna order. His referencing of the latter was clearly notional rather than sociological.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 201–208.

of the so-called shudras, or lower castes, who were touchable, but yet subject to various economic and social ignominies.⁷

This linking of the untouchable present with far-flung histories featured in Ambedkar's journalistic writings as well. Drawing on histories of slavery in relation to both Africa and the Americas, he pointed to how enslavement robbed a person of his sense of self and argued that untouchability did much the same.⁸ But yet there were crucial differences between these two comparable experiences, for slavery was underwritten by the colour line, whereas untouchability was not. Untouchables were not racial others to the Hindu touchables, and the extreme degree of alienation they endured was legitimized through other means, especially religious strictures. But in an ontological sense, the slave and the untouchable suffered a similar vitiating of being.

Ambedkar elaborated on this historical equivalence in his analysis of untouchable village labour associated with the Mahar watan in Maharashtra.⁹ Historically, as we have noted, untouchables, particularly those of the Mahar community, were expected to perform a range of village services, in return for land (watan) assigned to them. In the colonial period, labour expended for government was added to this service list. Theoretically Mahars were to be paid by the village, in cash or kind, and the government was to compensate the villagers for charges incurred on its behalf. In practice, this often translated into Mahars not being paid at all, or if they were, with scanty amounts of grain. If, for some reason, those with assigned watans were not able to perform the menial and unpleasant tasks imposed on them, their family and kin were held liable.

⁷ Ibid., p. 210; for details of the Mahad resolutions, see pp. 150–151.

⁸ Ambedkar had read the British socialist, Lord Olivier's *Anatomy of African Misery* and, drawing from a passage that noted how the "slave relation" once established was buttressed by a resolute refusal to admit that the slave was "capable of anything better", went on to note: "Untouchability is a kind of perpetual slavery. Brand some people as untouchable for some reason, get all possible dirty work done by them, ... take away their possible human rights ...close all doors to education...these things are not seen in any country, where even the system of slavery is continuing..." (B. R. Kamble, *Babishkrit Bharat, Part I*, pp. 199).

⁹ The watan had become the subject of critique and reform after Shahu Maharaj abolished, within his domain, the false privileges it conferred on the untouchables. He thus set an example that Ambedkar would elaborate on and seek to abolish in British India (B. R. Kamble (translator), *Mooknayak (A Newspaper in Marathi, founded by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar in January 1920)*, Kolhapur: Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Research Institute in Social Growth, (n.d.), pp. 76–78).

For Ambedkar the Mahar watan symbolized servitude of a distinct kind: it was the untouchable's social being, embodied in his or her person and literally reproduced across the generations that marked the Mahars as a servile class.¹⁰ He insisted therefore that the untouchable be viewed as a working person, a labourer and not a birth-born servile person, and that untouchables be recompensed in cash for such work they performed for the government and the village. As for the watan, it could be made taxable land, and as tax payers, Mahars would be able to hold their property with dignity, and either work on it or sell it. Arguing that it was important for untouchables to move from a situation where their labour was premised on their degraded status to one where their services were underwritten by contract, Ambedkar sought to substitute birth-defined bondage with wage labour, almost as if he were marking a process of historical transition.

He also likened the ending of the watan system to the emancipation of slaves in the United States: he noted that on the announcement of their liberation at the end of the Civil War, slaves in the American South did not think to hold on to the meagre protections that their enslaved status entailed. They chose to be free, even if freedom meant uncertainty. The abolition of the watan system, Ambedkar made clear, was akin to the abolition of slavery and possessed the same emancipatory significance.¹¹ In keeping with the narrative of American slavery, he suggested that the Mahars seek separate settlements including land for farming, and it is likely he had in mind the land that the former slaves had sought in the wake of the Civil War.¹²

He approached the question of untouchable servitude from another angle as well. During this time, his sense of labour was shaped by the textile workers' strike in the city of Bombay (1928–29) and more generally by the history of unionism. He noted in this context that industrial workers were free to offer or withhold their labour and that their relationship with employers was underwritten by the logic of exchange. Owner and employee were coeval and they could meet and bargain as "equals". But untouchable labour, especially in an agrarian context, was seldom

¹⁰ For his extensive critique of the watan, see B. R. Kamble, *Bahishkrit Bharat*, Part 2, pp. 9–13; 26–27; 43–46; 108–110.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 47.

¹² Ibid., pp. 110–111.

viewed as such, though it ought to be. Referring to how untouchables, who chose to not hold their watan rights or who asserted their rights in a more general sense, were threatened with economic and social boycott by their fellow villagers, Ambedkar suggestively argued that untouchable defiance must be understood as equivalent to the strike and treated as such. If they refused to perform customary service labour, they were well within their rights to do so.¹³

By placing the untouchable's historical as well as contemporary existence within world-historical contexts, each recalled as an emblem of what human persons had achieved through critique and resistance, he sketched it in high relief. It was as if he desired to both illuminate and overwrite the long and seemingly 'hidden' time of persistent social inequality, by global and public histories of change and resistance. By marking untouchables as makers of history, Ambedkar made it clear that the untouchables' vision of time and change would, necessarily, prove consequential to the social order as a whole. To him, they seemed a universal class and he would spend the next two decades, developing this argument.

3 COULD HISTORY BE FREEDOM?

Ambedkar's engagement with history was long-standing and Mahad was certainly not the first occasion when he mused on the relevance of tradition and the demands of the present. He had studied history at Columbia and counted among his teachers the university's leading historians, men who were credited with setting new directions in historical research: he attended classes taught by James Harvey Robinson, James Shotwell and Charles Beard. For these men, America's "newness" constituted the horizon of their reckoning with the past. Unlike Europe, America was not shackled to tradition. Further, the seemingly limitless space that America appeared to be, and the distinctive temporal life that had unfolded across its vastness, rendered history an open-ended and pedagogically significant discipline. History in this sense was synonymous with freedom.¹⁴ As Shotwell observed: "If man is a free agent, even to a limited degree, he can find the meaning of his history in the history itself, the only meaning

¹³ Ibid., pp. 106–108.

¹⁴ For an account of theories of history advanced by the Progressives, see Ernst Breisach, *American Progressive History: An Experiment in Modernization*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

which is of any value as a guide to conduct or as throwing light upon his actions". But in order to realize such historical knowledge, one needed to be truly free in one's inquiry and seek to "escape from the bondage of consecrated ideas".¹⁵

The weightlessness of the past meant that the future was all, and the relationship of the past to the present and future appeared less taut and more flexible than it would in a context, where history had been made and remade in response to a long and complex train of events, and time appeared to march to a determined rhythm. This was perhaps what made Ambedkar's mentor John Dewey view history as that which matters in the now: "History deals with the past, but this past is the history of the present". Just as how the "present social state cannot be separated from its past ... equally ... past events cannot be separated from the living present and retain meaning".¹⁶ Dewey also warned that history therefore ought not to be understood—or taught—as "an accumulation of results or effects, a mere statement of what happened", but communicated as "a forceful, acting thing".¹⁷ Grasped thus, history became "an organ for analysis of the warp and woof of the present social fabric, of making known the forces which have woven the pattern". In the event it helped cultivate "socialized intelligence", an "intelligent sympathetic understanding of the social situations of the present in which individuals share" and "a permanent and constructive moral asset".¹⁸

Ambedkar's understanding of history was equally framed by a sense of the exceptional present, the modern age, but the future, therefore, did not appear limitless and open. For one, the present had its shadow, the long and oppressive past which threatened to overwhelm the future as well. Unlike Roman slavery, medieval serfdom and villeinage, all of which had disappeared into the folds of time, the past of the Hindu social order had endured, not as relic or residue, but as living, breathing injustice. The challenge was to historicize the manner of its survival, in other words, to make history reckon critically with its own historicity. For unless one

¹⁵ James Shotwell, 'The Interpretation of History', Reprinted from *The American Historical Review*, Volume XVIII, No. 4, July 1913, p. 701.

¹⁶ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (Indian Edition), New Delhi: Aakar Books, 2004 [1915], p. 231.

¹⁷ John Dewey, *The School and Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1915, p. 156.

¹⁸ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 235.

accounted for the making of history, and its persistence, its future may not be anticipated. Secondly, if history, rather the knowledge of it, was to be forceful, “a moral asset”, it ought to be understood in ways that would liberate the present and future from the past.

For Ambedkar’s contemporaries who, like him, were engaged in a study of the past and its relevance for the times, the future of history appeared clear: it would ‘arrive’ in the form of the free, sovereign nation. Not only the nationalists, but left-leaning public actors and thinkers also accepted the importance of India arriving into freedom and sovereignty, though they did not view the nation as the apotheosis of history’s progress. Even as they looked to establish what they viewed as a revolutionary national and democratic government, they anticipated its transcendence, and the inevitable arrival of proletarian dictatorship. The nation and the socialist future were not merely historical forms that awaited their moment. They also served as epistemological guarantees to help direct thought and action in the present.

For Ambedkar there existed no guarantees for the future. The ‘new time’ he invoked bore the shape of the future, but did not suggest the modality of its realization. On the other hand, the constellation of histories that constituted this newness allowed him to critically grasp the past and produce it as an object of knowledge. This epistemic act, he hoped, would help reconstruct both time and the social order.

4 THE LEFT TURN TO ANCIENT INDIA

In the historiographical arguments of the time, the historicity of history was acknowledged chiefly by the communists. For them, historical time comprised stages of growth and evolution, each determined by the extant mode of production and all past time thus stood to be transcended by what came after. It was not that there was no continuity but the relationship between past and present was not a simple one, rather it was dialectical. This dialectic was best grasped through an understanding of what informed it, in this case, class struggle, which in turn resulted in the emergence of new modes of production.

S. A. Dange, who had professed socialism as his creed since the early 1920s, held that the ancient fourfold (varna) division of society emerged out of a “primitive communist” past, and that originally it was a mere economic device that helped organize production at a time in history that

required it. Subsequently, this functional division became captive to the interests of those who did not labour, but had agreed to be the protectors of faith and land, and they decided to render it “permanent”, thus transforming a social form, founded on the basis of economic necessity, into an ideological construct, which enjoyed divine sanction. This led to the making of the invidious caste system, which rendered social classes permanent and defined them as high or low as the case may be. Heredity thus came to replace economic convenience and arguments to do with birth-based differences were used to justify an emergent new mode of production.¹⁹

M. N. Roy picked up another moment of historical transition from the past: he argued that originally the caste order had encoded production relations, but these were transformed and cast into disarray with the advent of mercantile capitalism. However, the ideological shell of caste remained, to affirm differences of status, but it too was bound to disappear in view of the class divisions that had begun to emerge in colonial-capitalist India. Caste thus stood to be subsumed in class with the advance in capitalist production (see Chapter 3). Roy was critical of such ideological arguments that legal and sacred texts offered to legitimize the social order, though he did not quite elaborate on the ideological labour that they performed.²⁰

Bhupendranath Dutta, a left sociologist, read past history as unfolding through a series of epochs, which was knowable largely through religious literature. What appeared sacerdotal though was to be mined for its secular meanings. For instance, various religious differences and quarrels as existed in ancient India were to be understood as expressions of class struggle, necessitated by shifts in economic power. The history of these shifts was yet to be written, Dutta noted, but meanwhile it might be surmised that class interests were at stake in the defence of religious privileges and those that challenged the latter on religious grounds were, no doubt, representatives of newly emergent productive forces.²¹

¹⁹ S. A. Dange, *From Primitive Communism to Slavery: A Marxist Study of Ancient History in Outline*, New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1972 [1949].

²⁰ M. N. Roy, (in collaboration with Abani Mukherji), *India in Transition*, Geneve: Edition de la Librairie J. B. Target, 1922.

²¹ Bhupendranath Dutta, *Studies in Indian Social Polity*, Calcutta: Purabi Publishers, 1944.

Ambedkar was aware of some of these studies, but, to him, history did not appear only a progressive unfolding of well-marked economic stages. For these changes notwithstanding, the Hindu social order appeared set in its logic, as he had reminded his British interlocutors during the First Round Table Conference, while assessing the rights and wrongs of Pax Britannica. It seemed to him, therefore, that there was another time at work, which secured this logic, and which shaped not so much relations of production, but those of social reproduction. To comprehend the nature and passage of this time he took to examining conjugal and sexual relationships in caste society and the ideological and affective conditions that reproduced them. These conditions, he held, were shaped by the reproduction of ever renewable ideas and worldviews, under the aegis of the brahmin class, and in and through the modality of sacerdotal law and texts.

It is not that left-leaning historians were not aware of the power and influence of religion or the stilted progress of ideas under the guardianship of an intellectual class that appropriated to itself the right to settle both secular and sacred matters, with respect to time, change and the future. Dange was forceful in his critique of such a class in his early writings, especially the editorials that he wrote in the weekly he edited, *Socialist*.²² M. N. Roy was scathingly critical of the influence that religion exercised in the Indian context, though he was not particularly attentive to the overweening influence commanded by the brahmins, at least not until the early 1930s. Dutta offered the most exhaustive critique of the brahmins and the social and spiritual authority that the class had historically made its own.²³ But none of them sought to construct a history of intellectual life and influence, and the manner in which the terms of political and social existence came to be defined by either. Nor did they enquire into how notions of the so-called sacred, as defined by the brahmins, shaped the mundane realms of production, labour, conjugality and family. This was what Ambedkar set out to do.

²² S. A. Dange, *Selected Writings, Volume 1*, Bombay: Lok Vangmaya Griha, 1974, pp. 143–151.

²³ See especially his account of what he calls the Brahmanical counter-revolution (Bhupendranath Dutta, *Studies in Indian Social Polity*, pp. 9–32; 156–201).

5 HISTORY AND THE QUESTION OF INDIAN NATIONAL UNITY

As we saw, Ambedkar's entry into public life (the decade of the 1920s) coincided with the beginning of a tumultuous period in the progress of Indian nationalism. The call to self-rule was heeded by students, lawyers and those who worked in colonial government, while the prospect of an undefined but infinitely attractive freedom pushed India's large working populations, including peasants and agrarian labourers to protest uncertain and exploitative economic conditions. Assertive and commanding a large constituency, nationalism, was however shadowed by what it had not entirely resolved: the Muslim question for one, and for another, the problem of untouchability which Gandhi had taken up as a worthy cause. There was a third concern too: the status of women, which appeared locked into cruel Hindu custom and tradition. All three concerns threatened national unity, however one conceived of it. Those engaged in imagining such a unity turned to the past to resolve the tangle of the present, and in doing so, conscripted the word 'Hindu' to do duty to the here and now.

Some held the term to signify an enduring religious tradition that had sustained over vast swathes of time, interrupted only by Muslim invasions, which, it was argued, had led to the corruption of Hindu ideals, particularly to do with women's status and worth. Hindu disunity, evident enough in caste divisions, was partially responsible for this, since a divided society could hardly be expected to resist invaders. Others argued that Hinduism was not really a religion so much as a capacious civilizational impulse which accommodated diverse beliefs and influences, including those that came with invasions, and had proved dynamic and open to change. These two ways of conceiving national unity were variously interpreted, but the anxieties that they answered were similar: were Muslims part of the civilizational whole that was India? Or did their presence as rulers connote a 'dark' age, as British historians of India argued? How might one make historical sense of the caste order and untouchability, which pointed to a divisive logic within Indian society? Was this logic a perversion of an original and harmonious social formation? Was the past

redeemable at all, when it came to rethinking women's lives or would it have to be abandoned?²⁴

For Ambedkar, matters appeared in a different light. He pointed out that the issue at stake was not unity so much as equality: it won't do, warned Ambedkar to merely proclaim the essential catholicity of India's religious traditions, invoke its so-called glorious philosophical heritage that had insisted on the ultimate unity of all souls. Rather one ought to ask why, historically, Hindu practices, unequal and cruel, seldom squared with these lofty precepts, and why contemporary reform efforts, even if well meant, remained half-hearted and timorous.²⁵

Ambedkar's questions were not merely rhetorical. Through the 1920s, the Arya Samaj, a Hindu reformist organization, extolled the distant Vedic past and its traditions of thought and sought to 'refashion' the varna order such that it could be brought in line with what ostensibly existed in ancient India. The Samaj's ideologues went on to argue that originally the varna order was nothing more than an optimal and interdependent system of occupational divisions and that no constituent of this order was viewed as superior to the other. Worth and authority rested on virtue and competence, and not on birth. It was important therefore to recover for the present the original intent that had informed the varna universe, and make it clear to the world at large that varna differences were neither divisive nor birth-based. Varna, it was emphasized, was an organizing principle of the social, and not a sign of Hindu disunity, or indeed of the Hindu reluctance to accept change and growth.²⁶

Ambedkar and his cohorts, active in an emergent untouchable public sphere, did not agree. A prescient essay in Ambedkar's *Mooknayak* noted that the upper castes in the Hindu social order were hailed in and through terms that signified their always already superior and benevolent status, while those that hailed them thus were marked as obedient supplicants. Notions of high and low, the article made clear, were coded in words,

²⁴ M. N. Roy offered a radical reading of the relationship of Islam to Indian history in *The Historical Role of Islam*, (Bombay: Vora and Co, 1937, pp. 95–106): "In the time of Mohammadan conquest, there lived in India multitudes of people who had little reason to be faithful to Hindu laws and the traditions of Brahman orthodoxy, and were ready to forsake that heritage for the more equitable laws of Islam which offered them protection against the tyranny of triumphant Hindu reaction" (p. 98).

²⁵ B. R. Kamble, *Bahishkrit Bharat, Part I*, p. 13.

²⁶ Lajpat Rai, *The Arya Samaj*, London: Longman, Green & Co., 1915, pp. 141–143.

and rendered given through linguistic habit; so much so that even if the upper castes ceased being figures of respect, and the lower castes were loath to praise them, the former remained “obstinate” in claiming their superordinate status, even as the latter remained “moribund” and failed to claim the self-respect due to them.²⁷ While the Arya Samaj looked to redefine and thereby reclaim a worthy past, to make up for a scarred present, Ambedkar and other untouchable ideologues pointed to what exceeded the grasp of time and history and existed as the very stuff of social life and as habitude. History, they made clear, cannot be an alibi for what had not been realized in practice.

Ambedkar’s suspicion of contemporary reform efforts was voiced emphatically through the 1920s, and history was the one theme that resonated through these expressions: whether or not the untouchables could hope to benefit from or learn from histories that did not have a place for them; and if they were not better off, making history, which would prove inspiring to future generations.²⁸ It seemed to him that in order to be part of history, one ought to grasp it critically and with a keen sense of what it was likely to yield to the present. His earliest attempt at history writing in fact belongs to this moment, when social reform sought to draw on a golden past.

Thus we have him revisiting—in the pages of *Bahishkrit Bharat*—his student essay, *Castes in India* (1916), which had enquired into the principles that sustained the caste system. Sociological in intent, but also drawing on colonial ethnology, the essay had gestured towards the question of the origins of the caste order.²⁹ Thus, it was argued that in the distant past, in order to render itself exclusive and insuperable, the brahmin varna had fortified itself into a closed social group through the practice of endogamy. This pushed the other varnas to enclose themselves in a similar manner. These enclosures made conjugal intermixing across

²⁷ B. R. Kamble, *Mooknayak*, p. 32. Significantly enough, one of the resolutions passed during the Mahad protests declared that no one ought to be known by their varna or caste appellations, but that it was alright to retain names that denoted places of geographical origin or one’s profession (B. R. Kamble, *Bahishkrit Bharat, Part 2*, p. 151).

²⁸ B. R. Kamble (translator), *Mooknayak*, pp. 165–168.

²⁹ In a finely argued essay, Umesh Bagde has characterized Ambedkar’s historical approach as anti-positivist and called attention to his critical reflections on historical method (*Ambedkar’s Historical Method: A Non-Brahminic Critique of Positivist History*, New Delhi: Critical Quest, 2015).

varnas impossible, if not a crime, and not only locked people in, but also kept people out. This manner of separating and excluding people across varnas made for a subtle and complex social hierarchy.

Returning to these arguments in 1927, Ambedkar pointed to what the brahmins as a class had gained, historically, through this process: for one they had rendered perpetual their priestly vocation and thereby their access to scriptural knowledge. Secondly, they had gone on to rank other varnas, each comprising various social groups, within a hierarchical system, such that no group could consider itself sovereign or self-possessed and all had to assent to the brahmin class' superordinate status and authority.³⁰ This reworked essay contained within it—and anticipated—themes that Ambedkar would explore, theoretically and historically, for the next two decades: the centrality of social reproduction to the making of the caste order; the various ideational processes—law, scripture—that sustained reproduction; and the role of the intellectual class and the state in this regard.

6 WRITING HISTORIES OF INEQUALITY

The 1930s saw Ambedkar work at several fronts: sceptical of, but willing to give an opportunity to touchable Hindus to examine and remake their relationships with the untouchables; engaging with the political reform process, and in the event parlaying with Gandhi and differing from him on the constitutional safeguards he desired for the untouchables; organizing a party of labour that would be expansive enough to address the needs of the working class in town and country, and yet not lose sight of the specific remedies that untouchables required and claimed, in a political and social sense. This was also when he announced that though he was born a Hindu he would not die as one.

Ambedkar looked to history to explain and justify this complex politics, especially his momentous decision to move away from Hinduism. The one thing he wished to do, in this context, was to establish, in historical terms, the ineluctable difference that marked untouchable existence, so as to underscore their distinctive political claims on the one hand and their perpetual opposition to the caste order on the other. This is evident from the various texts and addresses from this period, and also from a book—*A People at Bay*—he had set out to write, and meant to have completed by

³⁰ B. R. Kamble, *Bahishkrit Bharat, Part 1*, pp. 154–155.

the end of the 1930s. This book appears to have been a conspectus of his historical and political vision.³¹

Ambedkar's overall plan for *A People at Bay* was ambitious. Comprising sixteen chapters, it was conceived as a critique of the political present that was also a historical indictment of a civilization. There were to be chapters on untouchable struggles in the modern period, and the manner in which these were received by the colonial administration and importantly Gandhi and the nationalists; on the relationship of untouchables to other marginal sections of the population, and also to non-Hindus, along with observations on the distinctive nature of inequality in the caste context. The book intended to feature sociological and psychological inquiries into Hindu beliefs, customs and what might be called caste psychology, and of the role of Hindu law and faith in sanctioning "lawlessness" against the untouchables.

Ambedkar had also planned to map the history of such revolt as there had been against the caste order and untouchability from distant times, and, in this regard, write on the devotional bhakthi movement and the Buddha. He wanted equally to sketch the impact and influence on untouchable lives, of historical events such as the advent of Christianity in India, and the institution of colonial rule. Most important, the book was to explore the history of untouchability: its possible origins and its similarity with and differences from other world-historical forms of inequality, such as slavery and villenage. The last section of the book was to do with the uses or otherwise of a Hindu religious past for untouchables, with a special focus on the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Though the book was announced as ready for publication in the late 1930s, it was not completed at that time. The essays that were to feature in it were not all finished, and those that Ambedkar did complete were eventually taken over into other books, not all of which were published in his lifetime. This was perhaps on account of the urgent political concerns that he had to address, as the 1930s gave way to the 1940s. For one, whatever untouchables had gained by way of sheer numbers when it

³¹ See Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches (BAWS), Mumbai: The Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Volume 17:2, 2003, pp. 131–136 (Henceforth all references to Ambedkar's writings in this chapter will cite the acronym, BAWS, followed by volume number, year of publication and page numbers). The proposed book was also the subject of a lengthy news article in *The Times of India*, 29 March 1938 (See B. G. Kunte & B. N. Phatak, *Source Material on Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar and the Movement of the Untouchables*, pp. 171–172).

came to political representation, had not really enabled their political autonomy, rather it had rendered them vassals of the Indian National Congress. Secondly, it became clear to Ambedkar during this period that the question of caste and untouchability had been decisively pushed to the background, as nationalists hurried to resolve the tangle of Muslim nationalism, and the demand for Pakistan. And finally, the political future of the untouchables did not appear promising, given the manner in which the British kept them out of all negotiations to do with the eventual transfer of power to Indian hands.

In contrast to these developments that limited the political progress of the untouchables was the expansive experience he gained as Labour member in the Viceroy's Cabinet. However, straitened his working conditions were, he had known what it was to work the state to a just purpose. Importantly, these years made it evident that social and economic inequality needed to be addressed in tandem, and he was drawn to examining what he would call the "prerequisites" of communism in the Indian context.

The 1940s thus pushed Ambedkar to reassemble his research and writing and *A People at Bay* transmuted into several book projects, all of which were historical in intent and which took on board the concerns of the decade and integrated these within the themes that had already been enunciated. The essays on Gandhi and Gandhism were taken into an extensive volume on Gandhi and the Indian National Congress and published in 1945 under the title, *What Gandhi and Congress Have Done to the Untouchables*. This was addressed to the world, at a time when India stood to become independent, and Ambedkar wanted to raise questions about the future of minorities in the independent nation-to-be. He wanted especially to show up the limits to Gandhi's approach in this regard and warn the world that under the aegis of Gandhi, India did not stand to progress, rather it was likely to suffer a regression into a less democratic age. The book traced the evolution of Gandhi's position on caste and untouchability as well as the Congress' prevarications in this regard.

The possible history of the untouchables that he had set out to write was published as a separate book, *The Untouchables* (1948). This was a companion volume to another and more extensive book, *Who were the Shudras?*, which was brought out two years earlier and sought to account for the social degradation of the lower castes (a subject that had existed as a subsection to a chapter in *A People at Bay*). These two books presented

a social history of exclusion, inequality and untouchability, which made it clear that an internal social revolution was as necessary in the Indian context, as a transfer of political power from British to Indian hands.

Several other essays, complete and half-complete, were to be gathered into new volumes that Ambedkar sadly did not finish. These included essays on untouchability, the logic of the Hindu social order, and the vexed relationship between the untouchables and other equally marginal social groups: he appears to have wanted to publish some of these as a separate volume titled, *Untouchables or the Children of India's Ghettos*. Others he wished to include in another collection, broadly titled, *India and Communism*. Some of the chapters on the history of social reform that he had completed were to be taken into a further set of books that he had grouped under the rubric, *Revolution and Counter-revolution in Ancient India*. The last set of chapters in *A People at Bay*, conceived as an inquiry into the *Bhagavad Gita*, was to be expanded into a separate book. He also appears to have wanted to write a history of the brahmin class, its social and political role at various moments in time, and the world view that it had come to be associated with it; and it is possible that sections of *A People at Bay* would have gone into it.

7 CONCEPTUALIZING CONFLICT AND CHANGE

Ambedkar's journeys in history were undertaken at a time when history was the provenance of the publicist, the ideologue and the journalist, as it was of antiquarians, philologists and archaeologists. For all concerned, ancient India was a favoured historical destination: a 'place' which positioned them as historical actors, in contrast to the present, when action appeared constrained. 'That' time was also viewed as 'authentic' in a way the colonial present was not, and Indians, it was argued, necessarily ought to master their own knowledge and philosophical traditions that were second to none, if they were to march forward into a nationalist future. Arguments such as these animated political and public expressions, and were writ large in key—and diverse—nationalist texts. Tilak's commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita* and its importance as moral philosophy, Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*, which urged forth what he viewed as Indian civilizational claims, and Nehru's congenial and romantic *Discovery of India* that narrated his journeys in history were all equally imbued with this allure of the past, and its usefulness.

Those who undertook systematic studies of the ancient past—the professional historian, conscious of his vocation, as well as the ‘amateur’, captive to the power of the past—were equally motivated by their desire to endow the emergent nation with a history that pointed to its manifest destiny. But this was not easy: for, however, arcadian this past might have been, the present appeared disjunctive, and was out of joint with it. In this context, the ancient past possessed an allure and was hailed, recalled and narrativized.³² It seemed important to do this, given the standard and pedagogic histories that were in circulation. Drawing from James Mill’s compendious narrative, such histories made it clear that India’s golden age notwithstanding, the country had fallen into the dark ages on account of internal disunity and the long period of Muslim rule. Only with the advent of the British had history essayed a progressive turn, under the watchful eye of a benevolent empire. Not only colonial scholars and administrators, but a generation of Indians was schooled into understanding their history in these terms.³³

In a notional sense, Ambedkar agreed with those who argued that early Indian society was perhaps less unequal and hierarchical than what it became thereafter, but he did not dwell so much on this purported quasi-egalitarian golden world. Rather he was interested in those instances of disruption that punctuated ancient time and which suggested the presence of conflict and dissension. He framed his approach as one augured by the modern moment: he ironically remarked on his own status as an interloper, who, historically, had been disallowed from accessing the sacred texts. In that sense, the texts and times he sought to study were

³² For a short overview of the historiographical debates of the time, see Georg G. Iggers and Q. Edward Wang with the assistance of Supriya Mukherjee (editors) *A Global History of Modern Historiography*, London: Routledge, 2008, pp. 97–116. For a discussion of the conceptual issues at stake for the historian and historiographer during this period, see Prachi Deshpande, *Creative Pasts: Historical Memory and Identity in Western India, 1700–1960*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007; and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Calling of History: Jadunath Sarkar and his Empire of Truth*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

³³ Vincent Smith’s *A History of India* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1919) is a classic instance of colonial history writing, complete with a vilification of Islamic rule and rulers, which, as an early reviewer pointed out was “sicklied o’er ...with the dogma of the superior race” and besides was written with an eye to convince university students of the “white man’s burden” and “the righteousness of British imperialism in India” (See Benoy Kumar Sarkar, ‘An English History of India’, *Political Science Quarterly*, Volume 34:4, 1919, pp. 644–653).

not particularly precious. To him, he made clear, they constituted vulgar rather than sacred literature, and he was not therefore bound by their authority and he was determined to take a critical lens to them.³⁴

For Ambedkar, the past, when viewed in its conflictual moments, appeared less seamless than it was made out to be.³⁵ By the same token, dissent and heresy acquired importance. Ambedkar worked three moments of conflict into his historical writings: in *Who Were the Shudras?* (and also in a set of incomplete essays) he explored the brahmin-kshatriya encounter, that is, the relationship between the priestly class and the class of warriors and which led to the downgrading of a section of the latter into the class of shudras. In *The Untouchables*, he offered a speculative theory of the historical origins of untouchability, linking it to the effects of persistent clan and tribal wars. Lastly, in a long essay, *The Triumph of Brahmanism*, he considered a counter-revolutionary instance of conflict, which purportedly led to the gradual eclipse of Buddhism and Buddhist politics in the subcontinent and made way for a reconfigured and unequal social order, with the brahmins presiding over it.

Ambedkar's histories of rupture were shaped by contemporary scholarship on religion and ancient Indian history, particularly by studies that addressed the time of the Buddha and Buddhism. The Buddha and his teachings had emerged as subjects of study and scholarship from around the mid-nineteenth century and texts, monuments, art and sculpture, associated with Buddhism, came to be mined for what they could yield about a figure that some held was comparable only to Christ. For many engaged in this enterprise, both Indians and others, the Buddha appeared important for two reasons: he was a historical figure, and not a mythical one and to him could be attributed valuable aspects of a broad Indian culture, especially all that the modern rational mind held to be important, such as equality, compassion and ethical discretion. As important, he exemplified a tradition of dissent and critique of what they had come to understand as Brahmanism.

Scholarship on the subject comprised a set of interrelated arguments. One strand examined the changed status of the brahmin varna: brahmins

³⁴ B. R. Ambedkar, *Who were the Shudras? How they came to be the Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society* in BAWS, Volume 7, 1990, pp. 14–17.

³⁵ Gail Omvedt has argued that unlike the Marxist Dange, Ambedkar strove to stress the “contradictions and exploitation inherent in caste and the revolutionary ‘breaks’ in the formation of the system” (*Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, p. 247).

who had held the exalted position of priests in early varna society, the famed Vedic past, came to insist on their insuperable status, and mandated the subordination of all other varnas to their authority. The authority they claimed over rites and rituals and which made them indispensable ritual specialists however proved hard to sustain: for one, on account of the power they wielded, they turned degenerate, and for another, their role and the content of their religious lore were subject to critical questioning, both from within their ranks, and from without, especially by those who belonged to the kshatriya varna. These challenges translated into diverse forms of philosophical and ethical thought, of which the creed espoused by Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, proved attractive and influential.

A second set of arguments had to do with ‘placing’ the Buddha in history. For some, he was to the compromised priestly faith, what Luther was to the Catholic Church. He had turned away from rite and ritual, which the brahmin priestly class had viewed as important and instead called attention to conduct and ethics. In effect he was a ‘protestant’ critic of a fallen Brahmanism and those who argued thus, suggested that he was coeval with, and drew inspiration from those within the brahmin class who had turned away from Brahmanical ritual and rite, and had essayed a philosophical turn. Not all were inclined, though, to this rather evolutionary understanding of the Buddha and his philosophy. To them, the Buddha had decisively broken with the past, in the manner he argued for equality, not only of souls, but also of persons, and in his time had attracted followers from marginal social groups, such as sanitary labourers, barbers, graveyard workers and besides was supported by sections of the productive classes, by peasants, artisans and merchants (in short the social equivalents of those that were viewed as untouchables and touchable lower castes or the shudras in the present). His creed was therefore singular and did not derive from previously existing heresies. It was in fact revolutionary.³⁶

³⁶ The literature on the Buddha and his place in history and the constructivist readings of his life and times are vast and contentious (see Chapter 8). Those who argued these views in late colonial India seldom held them tidily, and their emphasis shifted, in keeping with what and who they addressed. For an account of the contradictory arguments put forth in the popular realm in this regard, see this review of the Hindu reformer-revivalist Swami Vivekananda’s views on the subject: Jyothirmaya Sharma, *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism*, Noida: Harper Collins, 2015, pp. 137–146. For a nuanced and socially situated approach to the Buddha’s life and Buddhist philosophy from this period in time, see Gitanjali Surendran, ‘Beni Madhab Barua and the study of Buddhism

A third set of ideas considered the historical life of Buddhism. It was accepted that brahmin social and sacral significance, already on the wane, since the advent of the Buddha, came under critical pressure in the centuries that followed. The reign of the Emperor Ashoka, of the Mauryan dynasty was viewed as decisive in this regard, in that the special privileges accorded the brahmins were withdrawn during this time. Besides Ashoka publicly acclaimed the importance of the Buddha's creed and announced an imperial intent to realize its salience in and through specific acts of governance. However, the Buddhist revolution that reached its apotheosis in Ashoka's reign soon received a setback: following his death, the Mauryan polity lost its lustre and went into crisis, and eventually a veritable coup, carried through by a brahmin general in the Mauryan army ended an unusual moment in history and made for an onset of reaction. For the brahmin class, looking to regain its ascendant social position, the coup created the conditions for them to re-assert their pre-eminent place in the social order.³⁷

Ambedkar marked his own position within these debates fairly clearly. He viewed the Buddha as a revolutionary and agreed with those who held that his creed had reshaped the polity, as much as it had influenced society. He also concurred with readings that interpreted the decline of the Mauryan state as signalling the onset of Brahmanical reaction. Characteristically enough, he offered an expansive reading of this Brahmanical 'victory': he argued that it represented nothing less than a Brahmanical "invasion", of Buddhist India. Viewed thus, the onset of reaction was comparable to, and even more far-reaching in its consequences than the so-called Muslim invasions of India. The latter had merely stirred the waters, and having gained political victory, allowed the sediments that came up, to settle down. In other words, India's Muslim rulers had not sought to remake the social order. In contrast, the brahmin general's coup signalled the beginning of what might be called the eventual triumph of Brahmanism.³⁸

in Calcutta c.1918 to 1948', in *Theravada Buddhism in Colonial Contexts*, edited by Thomas Borchert, London: Routledge, 2018, pp. 189–205.

³⁷ This was argued by Haraprasad Shastri, a scholar Ambedkar respected and drew on (See B. R. Ambedkar, *The Triumph of Brahmanism* in BAWS, Volume 3, 1987, pp. 268–279). It was also a widely known argument.

³⁸ In *Krishna and His Geetha*, Ambedkar outlined the soteriological and social features of this triumph, which he described as a veritable counter-revolution (BAWS, Volume 3,

His work on the shudras and untouchables identified two important moments in this history of reaction and downgrading, which had reshaped social and political relationships, and equally the affective domain of conjugality and the family.

8 WHO WERE THE SHUDRAS? AND THE UNTOUCHABLES?

Ambedkar's history of the shudras examined what historians of ancient India held to be a constitutive feature of an evolving social order: the conflictual relationship between the brahmin and kshatriya varnas.³⁹ Ambedkar read this conflict in 'class' terms, in that he established an equivalence between class and varna. During the time of the Mahad campaign, he had likened varnas to estates, but in the 1930s and 1940s, he considered varna divisions to be akin to class divides. In the first instance, the comparison of varnas to estates was undertaken to establish a point of historical congruence, between the untouchables' struggle for rights and the declaration of rebellion and rights by the third estate of commoners. In the second instance, varna morphed into class, but not in the socialist sense, rather it indicated broad and unequal social divisions. Further, at Mahad he had included the untouchables as part of a putative class of commoners, but subsequently he had come to underscore their social separateness which distinguished them as different, even within the class of commoners. The untouchables, in effect, were outside the 'class' system, as he defined it. His reference to the conflict between brahmin and kshatriya varnas in ancient India as an instance of a protracted class war needs, therefore, to be understood in terms of the meanings he imputed to 'class' over a period of time.⁴⁰

p. 380). Here he took his cues from the historian K. P. Jayaswal who had described the Brahmanical reaction as the "great counter-revolution". This was cited in Bhupendranath Dutta's study of ancient India (*Studies in Indian Social Polity*, p. 20). Ambedkar knew Dutta's and Jayaswal's work, and adapted their arguments to his purpose. See, in this context, B. R. Ambedkar, *The Triumph of Brahmanism*, in BAWS, Volume 3, p. 270.

³⁹ B. R. Ambedkar, *Who Were the Shudras?* in BAWS, Volume 7, pp. 9–203, contains his speculative theory of the shudras and their past. What follows is a summary, with such additions as are found elsewhere in his writings.

⁴⁰ B. R. Ambedkar, *Touchables vs. Untouchables*, in BAWS, Volume 5, 1989, p. 192–210.

As for the war itself, he noted that it took place between individuals as well as the two varnas and both sides saw victory and defeat. Eventually a section of the kshatriyas lost out to the brahmins and was progressively degraded by brahmanical injunctions and marked as servile and subordinate. Thus was born the shudra varna: the subordination of its members was secured by a series of strictures that denied them their former rights and forbade them from acquiring new ones: they lost their right to kingship, the performance of rituals, to property, knowledge, marriages of their choice and the bearing of arms. They were also subject to a legal code which was punitive in the extreme. The term ‘shudra’ came to connote lowness, incited opprobrium and became the measure of utter powerlessness.

Gradually all those that the brahmins considered inimical to their interests and to the social order—and here Ambedkar had in mind the groups comparable to the heterogeneous lower castes of his time—were marked ‘shudra’. The abuse and hurt hurled at the disgraced kshatriyas-turned-shudras now came to be trained at them, making for what Ambedkar described as a social “massacre of the innocents”.⁴¹ Over time, specific strategies of social and sexual control were put in place to reproduce the shudra category of persons so that shudra lowness was reproduced in a generational sense. Thus, a specific instance of ‘class’ war, that was brutally concluded, and discursively affirmed, furnished the interpretative means and social modalities for defining all subsequent acts of control and subjugation.

To Ambedkar, the reproduction of the category of the shudra, particularly, the naming that accompanied it, appeared significant. For such naming secured contingent moments and events within an atemporal linguistic space which preceded and overshadowed all definitional efforts, and this led to the making of a veritable “law of persons”, which hypothesized “differences in status” by enumerating and defining concomitant “differences of right, duty or capacity”.⁴² Ambedkar also argued that this lawmaking was granted sacerdotal value by two texts, the *Manusmriti* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, both of which ought to be viewed as the official literature of reaction.

⁴¹ B. R. Ambedkar, *Who Were the Shudras?* in BAWS, Volume 7, p. 10.

⁴² B. R. Ambedkar, *Why Lawlessness is Lawful* in BAWS, Volume 5, p. 64.

Ambedkar's understanding of shudra history remained his own. He had distinguished his approach from that adopted by western scholars, who viewed shudras as natives set upon by marauding Aryan invaders, who arrogated to themselves racial superiority and sought to enslave the former. Ambedkar did not agree with this racist view, but conceded that such explanations were at least secular: "After reading the Brahmanic theories with their long and tedious explanations attempting to treat a social fact as a divine dispensation, one cannot but feel a certain amount of relief in having before oneself a theory, which proceeds to give natural explanation of a social fact".⁴³

Indian scholars of ancient India who addressed the shudra question sympathetically—and were his contemporaries—advanced other explanations. They viewed the shudra's place in history in terms of the expansion of cultivation, changed relationships of land ownership and labour, growth in artisanal production and commerce and the emergence of distinctive labouring groups. While they did concede that religious stricture and law shaped social understanding with regard to the shudras, the latter, they held, was too vast and complex a population to be understood in terms of a singular logic of degradation. It was also argued that the status of the shudras over time was by no means static, and while the law books insisted on their lowness, their economic roles and functions did secure for some of them—peasants settled in new territories, skilled artisan groups—a measure of social protection and well-being.⁴⁴

These scholars, who were left-leaning, did not, as Ambedkar did, address the social and ontological belittling that the shudras were subject to, though all acknowledged the social and legal virulence directed at them. To Ambedkar, this indeed was the problem: if the shudras were viewed only as dispensable and lowly workers that were not to be wondered at, since such classes of people existed in all societies. It was a veritable historical puzzle that a very large and productive class was made

⁴³ B. R. Ambedkar, *Who Were the Shudras?* in BAWs, Volume 7, pp. 65–66.

⁴⁴ Bhupendranath Dutta, *Studies in Indian Social Polity*, and R. S. Sharma (*Sudras in Ancient India*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1958), both examined the material details of shudra life and the latter's history of the shudras was defined by a broadly socialist approach to the past. Sharma distinguished his study from existing work, including Ambedkar's text, and noted that he was not looking to view the shudras in the light of modern concerns, which had to do with the battles between the orthodox and the reformers. Rather he was interested in the shudras' "material conditions and the nature of their economic and social relations with ... the higher varnas" (pp. 6–7).

the object of extreme and deliberate social dislike and punitive action beyond any sort of warrant. And here Ambedkar referenced punishments reserved only for this class for persons, all of which involved physical torture, calculated to cause social hurt and humiliation. For instance, should the shudra be convicted of adultery, the law books insisted that the offending organ be excised. Should he seek to access scriptural lore forbidden to him, his ears were to be stopped with poison. Whether such punishments were actually carried through or not, graduated and differentiated punitive action ensured that for the same offence, the shudras were punished in ways that affirmed their always already low civil status. This difference in criminal jurisprudence appeared to Ambedkar the very acme of inequality, since it ensured that the shudras were subject less to a sociological marking than a legal and punitive naming that secured their subordination.⁴⁵

As was his wont, he sought to situate the shudra's civil and legal condition in a world-historical context: in this instance, the graded status of the citizenry in imperial Rome. Comparing aspects of Roman law as it applied to various categories of citizens (and slaves), with the interdicts and injunctions, which featured in the Hindu law books and scriptural lore with regard to the shudra, he pointed to how the shudra had been placed beyond legal and civil redressal and reprieve.⁴⁶ The reason, Ambedkar argued, had to do with the fact that during the Buddhist interregnum, the shudras—along with the vaishyas—had experienced social mobility and also a measure of spiritual and social freedom. In order to show them their place, the Brahmanical order that came to be, consigned that class of persons to civic death or civic non-being.⁴⁷

Ambedkar's understanding was shaped as much by the shudra present, and their location in modern Hindu society, as it was by his readings of ancient texts. Shudras continued to be bound by restrictive social injunctions, and this extended even to those with material prowess, such as, for instance, the Mahratta royals, whose claims to high status were subject to stiff and reluctant brahmin approval. In such instances, the brahmins did not care to be bound by precedents that they had themselves set, nor were they willing to abide by such resolutions as had been settled, as far as

⁴⁵ B. R. Ambedkar, *Who were the Shudras?* in BAWS, Volume 7, pp. 43–57.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 57–64.

⁴⁷ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Triumph of Brahmanism*, in BAWS, Volume 3, pp. 309–313.

shudra status was concerned. In short, brahmin authority was capricious in the extreme.⁴⁸

This, on the one hand; on the other hand, shudras in the present, even when they sought to resist this imposition of arbitrary authority, did not always abide by a general ethic of equality. Placed below the brahmins and others who claimed high birth, but above the untouchables, they possessed neither the careless generosity of the former, nor the resistant spirit of the latter. This was why, Ambedkar noted, he had felt it necessary to address the question of shudra identity: "When one remembers that it is the shudras, who have largely been instrumental in sustaining the infamous system ... I allowed the necessity of educating ... the Shudra fully ...".⁴⁹

Ambedkar's approach to the question of untouchability's origins was bold and startling. As with his enquiry into the making of shudra identity, his concerns in this regard emerged from his critical sense of the present. Separated spatially from all other communities in the village, condemned to the vilest of occupations, bereft of land, kept away from accessing common natural resources, such as ponds and lakes, and viewed with distaste if not odium, the abjectness imposed on the untouchable appeared without parallel in world history. For Ambedkar, the utter meanness of untouchable existence did not appear only an instance of cruelty directed at a population that was in economic and social bondage: it seemed also a founded hatred, and he wondered at the social and historical provocation that must have given rise to it.

Existing accounts of untouchability were limited in their understanding and scope of inquiry. European and English accounts viewed untouchables as descendants of an 'inferior' race that the so-called Aryan invaders of India had encountered, and then sought to degrade and punish. Others, notably Indian scholars who enquired into the phenomenon, noted that in the distant past, those who were viewed as not observing 'Aryan' mores, and were heretical were deemed to asociality. They were

⁴⁸ B. R. Ambedkar, *Who were the Shudras?* in BAWS, Volume 7, pp. 182–185.

⁴⁹ B. R. Ambedkar, *Who were the Shudras?* in BAWS, Volume 7, p. 18. He had tried to work as much as the circumstances would allow him with the shudras, in and through the Non-brahmin movement that had emerged out of the Satyashodhak Samaj. Unfortunately its leaders were coopted into the Congress, and this, to Ambedkar, had signalled the end of whatever political autonomy they had sought to consolidate (Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, pp. 208–209).

not sure, however, if untouchables, when they emerged in history, might be viewed as belonging to this class of persons, or if they were enslaved populations who were banished to the social fringes. It was also not clear how one was to understand the notion of untouchability: was it an expression of older and persistent rules of taboo and pollution or did it connote an extreme and punitive measure, meant to keep an already subject population captive, so as to access and exploit their labour?⁵⁰

Ambedkar was not convinced of any of these arguments. Racial theories were untenable, given the mix of populations in the Indian context, and appeared credible only because of the white scholar's fascination with notions that ranked societies high and low, on the basis of racial differences and in which he had an investment, convinced as he was of the European races' superiority over all else. Ritual and ceremonial pollution, ideas to do with defilement that attended particular rites of passage: these were known to all societies, Ambedkar conceded, and were present in India as well. However, untouchability was different. It had been imposed as a permanent condition on an extremely large segment of the Indian population, and importantly, untouchables were kept spatially distinct from others: this was territorial segregation, and quite different from the stoppage of social contact for a temporary period of time. Likening this forced separation to the drawing of a "cordon sanitaire" and the putting of people behind barbed wire, (a practice that happened during epidemics, and which had re-emerged in the Nazi camps) he pondered over the conundrum of a whole group of people being consigned to untouchable status and forever.⁵¹

His anguished sense of this segregation notwithstanding, he went on to enquire into the conditions that might have caused it. Drawing from anthropological and sociological studies that looked at societies which transited from nomadic to settled life, he postulated that the untouchables were perhaps akin to the "broken men" who came to be separated from their own social groups when defeated in inter-community conflicts. Forced to live outside settled village spaces, to which they could not claim

⁵⁰ For a review of the scholarship on untouchability of his time, see R. S. Sharma, *Sudras in Ancient India*, pp. 131–133.

⁵¹ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Untouchables* in BAWS, Volume 7, 1990, pp. 266. What follows is a summary of his arguments on the origins of untouchability from the same volume (pp. 271–355).

access, not being of the same blood kinship as the settlers, they were probably granted the duties of watch and ward, or enjoined to perform tasks the village required, in return for being allowed to live on its fringes. But the question was why did such an arrangement persist, when it had ceased to exist in other global contexts? For, in comparable instances, the claims of blood kinship had eventually ceased to matter, and the stranger was brought into the community. What prevented the broken men in the Indian instance from being absorbed into settled society?⁵²

Admitting that his observations were speculative and that he had to “imagine” links between different historical moments, where none existed, Ambedkar suggested that broken men in India became permanent and reviled strangers, because of two reasons: one, they were perhaps Buddhists, in addition to being strangers, and this put them in an enduring confrontation with the brahmins, who were central to settled existence, and over time, the Buddhist broken men came to be shunned and disregarded. The second reason was that the broken men consumed the flesh of dead cows, at a time when eating beef was viewed with disgust. Though originally beef had formed an important part of the diet of all varnas, in the light of the Buddhist critique of the wholesale slaughter of cattle in brahmin-officiated sacrifices, there had come to be an aversion to the practice of killing cows.

The brahmins, who had once demanded the slaying of animals for their sacrificial rituals, were now forced to re-examine their views, since the respect shown to all life, including animals by the Buddhists had entered common sense. On the other hand, the brahmins were eager to outwit the Buddhists, and so decided to go one step further than their ideological opponents who counselled loving kindness towards all living beings: they turned vegetarian and more importantly instilled an interdict on eating

⁵² Ambedkar's views bear comparison with Max Weber's views on the subject. Reading off such accounts as were available on Hinduism and caste, Weber suggested that the extreme situation of the untouchable represented the negation and exclusion of communities that had lost their “residential anchorage”, and were reduced to complete economic subservience that they had no choice but to fulfil what settled communities required. Characterising untouchables as “guest people” who were kept out of the caste order, Weber compared their lot with those who were considered “low” but yet valued for the specific labour and goods they provided a sedentary society; unlike the untouchables they were integrated even if unequally within the social order (Max Weber, *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism* (translated by Hans G. Gerth and Don Martindale), Glencoe: The Free Press, 1958, pp. 11–15).

beef. The broken men who had to live off the flesh of dead animals—not fresh meat, which was the prerogative of the settlers’ diet—had no choice but to continue eating beef and this rendered them odious in the eyes of the settler society, which by now was in the grip of Brahmanical reaction, and further had to heed royal edicts to not kill cows, which had been put in place.

Popular histories that invoked a glorious past for the untouchables were legion and were produced in several contexts and languages across British India (see Chapter 7) and all of them marked the untouchables as belonging either to a different race, or as followers of a different cult and religion. In this sense, Ambedkar’s surmise that the untouchables were broken men and perhaps Buddhists was in line with these other arguments in that all of them sought to distinguish the untouchables from the Hindus. For his part, he desired to position them, historically, in an agonistic relationship to the social order: to characterize their past thus was also in view of what he expected of them in the present, that they confront and challenge the caste system and the conditions that circumscribed their lives. Buddhism was invoked to not only illuminate a distant time, but also suggest that untouchables ought to profess such a creed in the present as well.

9 HISTORY AND THE QUESTION OF REPRODUCTION

Ambedkar’s historical studies on the constitution of the shudras and untouchables as distinct categories of persons conceptualized a new object of knowledge: the social disaffection that was directed at either category of persons, and which was structured into the social order through a series of prohibitions which separated the acceptable from the transgressive. These pertained to all aspects of life: diet, comportment, labour, sex, sexuality, marriage, motherhood and childbirth. Detailed and profuse, these interdicts set the limits of the social universe, and by the same token, became the justification for the practice of distance, separation and disaffection.

Ambedkar went on to examine these in terms of three levels of sanction that underwrote the relationship between the varnas and between the touchables and the untouchables: civil interdictions to do with social relationships; legal restraints, defined in and through a punitive legal discourse that sought to naturalize inequality at all levels of society; religious notions that reconciled contradictions and inequalities arising out

of civil, social and legal interdictions and rendered them bearable and acceptable. This enterprise yielded nothing short of a complex and layered theory of social reproduction.

Of all the civil interdicts that were put in place to regulate relationships between different social groups, the ones to do with ‘commensality and connubium’ appeared to Ambedkar to be the most significant. Commensality was largely absent in the Hindu caste order: brahmins resolutely refused to eat alongside other social groups whereas untouchables were forbidden to give or receive food from others, except in prescribed ways. Lower castes were also subjected to a set of strictures, to do with who they could eat with and who they could not. To Ambedkar this appeared the gravest sort of infraction, given that sociality had its basis in breaking bread and sharing food. This would also explain his interest in the relationship between food and status and the interdict on beef eating: it was not so much the prohibition on eating the flesh of cows that bothered him. Such prohibitions were after all present in many faiths, but nowhere else was a practice both forbidden as well as mandated, with the untouchables left to consume what was forbidden to others. Difference and a violent inequality thus came to be inscribed at the very heart of sociality, the act of eating together.⁵³

As for connubium: in *Castes in India*, he had examined the making of endogamous enclosures. Characteristically, he had begun from the historical present, with the degraded status of Hindu women in his time, visible particularly in four practices, wife-burning, infant marriage, male polygamy and compulsory widowhood. Largely but not exclusively practised by the brahmins, these were seen as perversions of archaic customs. Ambedkar thought differently. To him, “customs and morals [were] like fossils” that narrated “their own history”.⁵⁴ They were not to be viewed only as the measure of traditions that had gone wrong, rather they had to be made to yield their congealed histories.

For his part, he argued that these practices, regrettable as they were, had been put in place, historically, to manage the problem of “surplus” that in all likelihood emerged, when endogamy became the accepted mechanism of marriage. That is, if conjugal parity was to be maintained

⁵³ B. R. Ambedkar, *Philosophy of Hinduism*, p. 47; *The Hindu Social Order: Its Essential Principles*, p. 105 in BAWS, Volume 3; *The Untouchables* in BAWS, Volume 7, pp. 317–320.

⁵⁴ B. R. Ambedkar, *Castes in India* in BAWS, Volume 1, 1979, p. 13.

within a community, a set of rules was required to regulate conjugal choices. Wife-burning, male polygamy and the practice of men marrying very young women, including girls and children, as well as compulsory widowhood helped take care of surplus women. As for male surplus, men were allowed to opt out of the household and family, and embrace the ascetic or spiritual life.⁵⁵

Ambedkar returned to this essay—in the unfinished *Revolution and Counter-revolution in Ancient India*—and sought to historicize his earlier observations on endogamy. Now, he chose to read rules regarding marriage and sexuality not as mere mechanisms that helped manage surplus and sustain endogamy, but as deliberately wrought historical measures instituted to thwart as well as manage conjugal mixing across the varnas. Originally, he observed, marriages across varnas were not forbidden. And when such mixing was frowned upon, the miscegenated social groups that emerged, thereof, were consigned to the margins of the social order. With the advent of Buddhism, these groups were drawn into its fold, and their social fortunes were transformed. Women too experienced a relative measure of freedom during this time.

When Brahmanical reaction set in, it wanted to ensure that mixed groups were shown their place, and not allowed to turn heretical and it also sought to secure social control over women's lives. This was when, suggested Ambedkar, strict endogamous strictures perhaps came to be imposed: and were overlaid, as it were, on older forms of sexual restraint to do with exogamy, which, in its time, was freeing, since it enabled unions beyond kin circles. Ambedkar also hinted that perhaps there were other reasons as well for the emergence of endogamous enclosures: new, especially conquered communities had to be shown their place and function within an expanding economic and social order and sexual and conjugal enclosures helped achieve this.⁵⁶

These two processes, of countering the effects of Buddhism and recouping newly subject communities within the logic of the social order, were consolidated and granted legal validity by the *Manusmriti*, the digest of law that provided punitive sanction for the Brahmanical

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 9–13.

⁵⁶ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Triumph of Brahmanism* in BAWS, Volume 3, pp. 301–308.

order and helped sustain its validity over time.⁵⁷ The *Bhagavad Gita*, meanwhile, legitimized this order in sacerdotal and affective terms.

While scholarly opinion was divided on the question of how the *Manusmriti* translated into practice in pre-British India, and whether it had ever been the basis for operational law, or an active jurisprudential text, Ambedkar was convinced that the text represented the law of the state in the ancient past and continued to exercise its influence as custom and habitude.⁵⁸ Custom, Ambedkar made clear, was not to be viewed lightly, for “the compelling force of an organized people is far greater than the compelling force of the state”.⁵⁹ He noted that the *Manusmriti* had proved influential in the centuries past its time of composition in view of two factors: its pronouncements were granted and rendered coeval with divine sanction and interdicts. Secondly, such states and rulers that came to be were called upon to abide by the text’s moral intent, and royal rule was made contingent on monarchs agreeing to keep in place the social order as defined in the *Manusmriti*, failing which the brahmins were allowed to exercise their “right” of regicide! Ambedkar noted that this dictum to rulers to sustain the social order was taken seriously in recent times as well, and pointed to the examples of Maratha and Peshwa rule in western India.⁶⁰

Ambedkar took note of the hierarchical taxonomy that the *Manusmriti* had drawn up, to list, accommodate and rank various social groups, particularly those it believed to be the products of varna miscegenation. The system, Ambedkar pointed out, was both fantastic and “ignoble” in

⁵⁷ The *Manusmriti* was the subject of research and debate during this period: P. V. Kane, a fellow Maharashtrian, had published his formidable annotated studies of the text. Ambedkar knew Kane’s work and graciously acknowledged its importance, even as he set out to deconstruct the *Manusmriti*. Shridhar V. Ketkar, whose work on caste Ambedkar had read with great interest as a student had produced a rather generous critique of the text. Within the wide circle of anti-caste activists, the *Manusmriti* was criticized, reviled and on more than one occasion ceremoniously burnt in public. Indian women who looked to marriage reform and to an enlargement of their rights were also critical of the text. From the left, M. N. Roy engaged with debates to do with the text, without enquiring into its substantive content, but viewed it as central to the workings of what he termed as “orthodox nationalism” (See M. N. Roy, *Fragments of a Prisoner’s Diary: India’s Message*, Calcutta: Renaissance Publishers, 1952 [1950], pp. 134–189).

⁵⁸ B. R. Ambedkar, *Their Wishes are Law Unto Us* in BAWs, Volume 5, pp. 272–286.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

⁶⁰ B. R. Ambedkar, *Manu and the Shudras* in BAWs, Volume 12, 1993, pp. 719–722.

that its author appeared to have envisaged every sort of sexual mixing between the varnas and had sought to reorder the offspring of such unions into disparate categories. It was as if he was convinced that the social order was, or was likely to be, beset by a “wholesale state of promiscuity” that had to be contained.⁶¹ In this elaborately drawn scheme, the brahmin emerged and was marked as the sole measure of value and all other social groups were held together in a relationship of equivalence in relation to the brahmins, whose superordinate status had, meanwhile, been rendered unquestionable. But in their relationship to each other, they were unequal.⁶² The untouchables were placed outside this system and the *Manusmriti*, Ambedkar argued, clearly did not regard them as part of the Hindu world.⁶³

Ambedkar viewed this arrangement as comprising myriad enclosed worlds, strung along an invisible thread: “...the castes form a system in which all hang on a thread which runs through the system in such a way that while encircling and separating one caste from another it holds them all as though ... it was a string of tennis balls hanging one above the other”.⁶⁴ Bound by an inner logic of endogamy and an outer and constitutive logic of inequality, a caste was both a social world and a study in asociality.

The *Manusmriti*’s classification of castes and its vision of the social order was underwritten by a set of rules, regarding individual conduct as well as social behaviour, this latter being understood in terms of the ‘proper’ relationship that ought to exist between various castes. Both forms of action, that is, individual observances and social acts were classified as licit and illicit, with some acts placed beyond these classificatory limits. Thus there were two sets of illicit acts: those that could be expiated, whose rules, Ambedkar described as “penances”; and those that did not deserve or could claim an expiation, such as wrongful marriage. This was an infringement so severe that the doer was expelled from the social fold and was rendered an outcaste.

⁶¹ B. R. Ambedkar, *Manu’s Madness or the Brahmanic Explanation of the Origin of the Mixed Castes* in BAWS, Volume 4, 1987, p. 225.

⁶² B. R. Ambedkar, *The House the Hindus Have Built* in BAWS, Volume 5, pp. 160–163.

⁶³ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Hindu and His Belief in Caste*, in BAWS, Volume 5, pp. 101–102.

⁶⁴ B. R. Ambedkar, *The House the Hindus Have Built* in BAWS, Volume 5, p. 163.

Such a rule which advocated permanent social expulsion, Ambedkar argued, represented the “soul” of the caste order, whereas penances, imposed for other infractions such as interdining between castes, that were forbidden to do so, constituted its “body”.⁶⁵ The caste being, Ambedkar made clear, was constituted by interdicts. He was concerned in this instance as well, with the phenomenon of naming: notions of transgression and punishment were written into the language of caste transactions, in ways that made it difficult, if not impossible, to think beyond the semantics of enjoined as well as forbidden sociability. This is what rendered the caste order durable and ensured its ‘triumph’ over time.

If *Manusmriti*’s obsessive rule-making set legal limits to the caste order, the affective power of the *Bhagavad Gita* helped secure this order as an expression of divine injunction. The text, viewed as part of the epic *Mahabharatha*, comprised a set of arguments advanced by Krishna, one of the protagonists of the epic: these exhort the warrior Arjuna to not hesitate to take on his kinsfolk in battle, since the latter had done great wrong and deserved to be opposed, if not annihilated. For the modern Indian, who looked to his scriptural past to validate his ethical choices in the present, the *Gita* appeared to hold lessons in moral philosophy. It was read avidly and to diverse ends by the Arya Samajists, Tilak and Gandhi, amongst others and hailed as a guide to purposive political as well as moral conduct. In addition, it was read for what it had to say about the ideal society. Ambedkar’s reading of the *Gita* joined these other efforts, and he essayed a critique of both the text and the uses to which it had lent itself. He did not however look to rebut extant readings, rather he offered a historical accounting that proceeded from different premises.⁶⁶

He called attention to what appeared to him to be the *Gita*’s polemical role in history, that it was composed to upend the challenges posed by

⁶⁵ B. R. Ambedkar, *Symbols of Hinduism* in BAWs, Volume 3, p. 144.

⁶⁶ Ambedkar’s interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita* (BAWs, Volume 3, pp. 357–380) is best read alongside various other readings, including of fellow Maharashtrians, Tilak and Telang, and Gandhi, all of whom read it both as a guide to action in the present and as a founding text of Hindu moral philosophy. Equally popular readings by those associated with avowed Hindu groups such as the Hindu Mahasabha and Arya Samaj insisted that the *Gita* was a worthy precursor to the Buddha’s creed and some even made bold to define the Buddha as carrying forward the *Gita*’s message of selfless service and ascetic forbearance. Ambedkar entered these debates along with others, whose work influenced him, particularly the writings of Dharamananda Kosambi.

Buddhist thought and the historical Buddha. The text, he held, absorbed the Buddhist critique of birth-based inequality and the Buddha's emphasis on loving kindness towards all beings but transformed these in significant ways.⁶⁷ Firstly, in reckoning with the Buddhist emphasis on the equality of all persons, it declared that a person's varna identity was not assigned on the basis of being born into a certain class. Rather it had to do with his or her character, that mix of three gunas, or attributes, passion, gentleness and darkness, which exist in a hierarchical relationship to each other. Ambedkar considered the substitution of character for birth an instance of specious reasoning. For, the theory of character that the *Gita* drew on pointed to the constitutive instability of the three gunas. This meant that a person's character was always in flux, in a state of eternal "becoming". To argue that a fixed social identity such as varna derived from a state of flux was nothing but an instance of verbal casuistry; an argument that sought to order social identity in ways that subverted the radical possibilities held out by the guna theory which allowed for the possibility that a person was likely to evolve, and change, in keeping with changing circumstances. As he noted, with satiric anger:

"How could it be granted that a particular guna, in a particular individual which at one time, say the time of his birth happens to dominate his other gunas will continue to dominate them for all times, till his death? ...Unfortunately neither Hitler nor Mussolini were born when Krishna propounded his theory. Krishna would have had considerable difficulty explaining how a signboard painter and a bricklayer could become dictators capable of dominating the world."⁶⁸

To Ambedkar, the *Gita*'s defence of the varna order, even if on ostensibly different grounds, represented a refusal of changes that time and human action might yet achieve. This was also why he found it intriguing that after stating that character rather than birth was central to human identity, and that human beings are to be judged by their actions, the *Gita* sought to define proper and improper action. All action, the text held, ought to be performed dutifully and in keeping with what had been

⁶⁷ Ambedkar's essay on the *Gita* is sadly incomplete. He referenced it at length in several short notes as well: *Literature of Brahmanism* in BAWS, Volume 3, pp. 239–240; 244–246; 261–265.

⁶⁸ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and the Future of His Religion* in BAWS, Volume 17:2, 2003, p. 102.

ordained for each individual, in keeping with a person's social station. To Ambedkar this manner of linking action and social duty appeared an indirect endorsement of varna-defined labour as well as a means of effectively containing, within structural limits, such action that might evolve in the course of time. This was why, he argued, *Gita* had outlined a series of interdicts against those who failed in their so-called duties or took on tasks that were not mandated for them.⁶⁹

The *Gita* conceded that the performance of such duties might prove onerous, but the individual was not to despair, therefore. He ought to bear his lot with forbearance in view of the great love that an all-loving divinity bore him, and which his devotion could kindle into protective care. In any event, noted Ambedkar, the call to devotion was ingenious: it enfolded the Buddhist notion of compassion but detached it from respect and equality. Divine love thus became the affective glue to hold together an unequal social order and render it acceptable to all. In surrendering to the divine that held all in equal and loving measure, the bind of guna and duty appeared less onerous.⁷⁰

In reading together civil, legal and divine interdictions, Ambedkar annotated the expansive history of Brahmanical reaction. His critique established that the timelessness of the social order, asserted in and through the discourses of reaction, was belied by what produced it: biological and generational reproduction and everyday acts of living that were bound to change and evolve. He had noted in *Castes in India* that the various interdicts which secured endogamy were mere means, whereas the end was the creation of an unequal social order. But since the means came to be idealized by "the philosophies in honour of them", there was a confounding of means and ends, and of the real and the ideal. This made it seem as if the regulation of reproduction did not have to do with the real movement of history, but was an inalienable aspect of a structure that was given and eternal.⁷¹

This closing of the gap between real and ideal had made an immanent critique of the social order impossible, not only in an epistemological sense, but also in an ethical sense as well: "Whatever progress in improving the terms of associated life between individuals and classes has

⁶⁹ B. R. Ambedkar, *Krishna and his Gita* in BAWS, Volume 3, pp. 362–363.

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 369–371.

⁷¹ B. R. Ambedkar, *Castes in India* in BAWS, Volume 1, p. 14.

been made in the course of history, is due entirely to the recognition of the ethical doctrine that what is wrongly settled is never settled and must be resettled".⁷² But, in the case of the Hindu social order, such resettling had been rendered always already gratuitous.

In order to break the false and opaque unity thus forged between the real and the ideal, Ambedkar sought to rethink the structure. He drew into historical focus what might be called the hidden time of social reproduction, such that it would be known for what it was: as one that had resulted in social as well as ontological wrong, and caused the vitiation of both affective emotions and the associated life.⁷³

⁷² B. R. Ambedkar, *Who Were the Shudras?* in BAWS, Volume 7, p. 32.

⁷³ S. A. Dange was possibly the only left thinker to address social reproduction, which he did while mapping the changes that ostensibly occurred when primitive communism gave way to slavery and subsequently to the epoch of private property (S. A. Dange, *India: From Primitive Communism to Slavery*, Bombay: Popular Publishing House, 1972 [1949] pp. 68–82).



Graded Inequality and Untouchability: Towards the Annihilation of Caste

1 THE RIGHT TO WELL-BEING

In a fragment titled *Frustration*, Ambedkar notes, drawing on lines from the poet Percy Busshe Shelley, that the untouchables were a “spent and sacrificed people”. They were “pale for weariness of climbing heaven, and gazing on earth, wandering companionless, among the stars that have a different birth”.¹

It is likely that he set these words down in the mid- or late 1940s, when it became clear to him that in transferring power to Indian hands the British were unlikely to accede to such claims and guarantees that the untouchables sought, with regard to their political rights. As always, he reckoned with the moment, by explaining to the world the untouchables’ existential and political condition. They were unable to affirm their “essence” and all their efforts to do their best were actively thwarted, and they had to suffer a “withering” of their “faculties” and a “stunting” of their personalities.² Citing a historical instance that had become the

¹ *Frustration* in Babasaheb Ambedkar, Writings and Speeches (BAWS), Mumbai: The Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Volume 12, 1993, p. 733. Henceforth, all references to Ambedkar’s writings in this chapter will cite the acronym, BAWS, followed by volume number, year of publication and page numbers.

² Ibid.

symbol of utter downgrading and abjectness—the plight of the Jews—Ambedkar observed that even this tragic history had seen unexpected twists and turns.

In the past, there was the exodus from Egyptian slavery and the release from Babylonian captivity. Further, as ‘chosen’ people, the Jews took courage from the covenant they had forged with God and developed a “plus condition of mind and body”. The tragedy of the untouchables was that they could expect no such succour, since there was nothing redeeming or energizing in “their dull drab deadening past” or indeed in their social environment. This latter was at least as important as the faith that one placed in God, and Ambedkar went on to describe his vision of an enabling and propitious social world, where no class of human persons would suffer restraint or obstruction of their being, and where in fact each of them would be “entitled not only to the means of being, but also of well-being, where no man is forced to labour so that another may abound in luxuries, where no man is deprived of his right to cultivate his faculties and powers so that there may be no competition with the favoured, where there is emphasis of reward by *mento* [merit] ...where there is goodwill towards all...”.³

In contrasting the untouchables’ state of frustration with what they and others deserved, Ambedkar pointed to all that was at stake for an unhappy and mangled people. His longing for another world, energetic and dynamic, free, equal and compassionate, was not merely utopic; rather, it shaped and equally, was called forth by his critical conceptualization of the Hindu social order and untouchability. This chapter examines the nature and content of this extraordinary critique.

2 THE CASTE ORDER AND UNTOUCHABILITY: A DOUBLE NEGATION

Ambedkar’s characterization of the weariness that marked untouchable existence was of the moment, and not. Not only in the 1940s, but earlier too he had notated untouchability as a condition which divested the untouchable of his and her vital energy, of all that made life liveable. This social and ontological devitalization was not on account of who or what the untouchable was, where she was located, or what she said

³ Ibid., p. 734.

or did: instead, it had to do with how touchable Hindus experienced the untouchable, the social odium and nausea that they expended on her person.

Ambedkar had accounted for this odium in two ways. One, in terms of what it did and achieved: it represented a confiscation of personhood, and a loss of one's right to self-determination. The untouchable was thus akin to a minority, who was relegated to the sidelines in the making of triumphant nationhood. He viewed untouchability through the prism of slavery as well: a historical condition of which he had read in detail, with regard to Roman as well as 'Negro' histories. He was inclined to recall in many instances Plato's definition of a slave, as a person who was not an end unto himself, but received the purpose of his life from others. Considerations of slavery led him to examine whether related words such as 'serf' and 'villein' answered to the condition of untouchability. The problem was these words and what they denoted had historically been transcended and were inadequate to describe what appeared enduring and was insistently present.⁴

Secondly, he looked to define untouchability in terms of what was denied the untouchable: associational life and fraternity. They were consigned to, in fact, were, "the children of India's ghettos" and subject to as terrorized an existence as the one imposed on the Jews. Further, though seen as Hindus, they were not treated as such and remained separated and separate. They could not claim a national name or presence either: when Gandhi invited him into shared nationhood, he pointed out that he was not part of a whole, rather he and the untouchables were "a part apart".⁵ All his attempts at an adequate definition of the untouchable condition thus yielded a residue that exceeded the terms of analysis available to him.

There was yet another challenge: to hold within a conceptual whole, the Hindu social order and untouchability. On the one hand, touchables themselves were not a social whole, since each caste group held itself aloof from all others, such that no group was equal to any other group. On the other hand, this non-social order was yet a society and it viewed itself thus, on the basis of the difference it marked and established between

⁴ For a brilliant comparison of slavery in the Roman empire and in the Americas with untouchability see B. R. Ambedkar, *Which is Worse? Slavery or Untouchability?* in BAWS, Volume 12, pp. 741–759.

⁵ For a richly argued comparison of the untouchables' situation with that of the Jewish people see B. R. Ambedkar *Parallel Cases* in BAWS, Volume 5, 1989, pp. 77–78; *What Gandhi and Congress Have Done to the Untouchables*, in BAWS, Volume 9, 1991, pp. 397–398.

itself and a group of persons it considered beyond the social pale. Rather than “social endosmosis” to use Ambedkar’s favoured Bergsonian term to describe an ideal social order, a profound and consequential negation was the basis for Hindu sociality.⁶

Ambedkar came to challenge this double negation which characterized the untouchable condition from a historically revolutionary position. He posited untouchables as primary agents of history, the class that would both think and act to unsettle and annihilate the conditions of its existence and the social logic that informed it. The untouchables would thus not only remake themselves, but also outline ways and means to reconstruct the unequal system to which they were attached, and which, yet, kept them out of its precincts.

3 CASTE AND OTHER ANXIETIES: APOLOGISTS, REFORMERS, CRITICS

The caste order and untouchability bothered a range of people in colonial India: reformers were uneasy with either and sought to conceptually reorder the caste order, in ways that ‘restored’ it to what they held to be its original and good purpose; lower caste intellectuals and publicists, as well as those from untouchable communities, challenged brahmin spiritual authority, the Hindu religion and the caste order, in greater and lesser degree; nationalists insisted that the order was not sanctioned by tradition and, in time, would change for the better; and socialists were convinced that the caste order would disappear with, or be absorbed within, an emergent capitalism. Colonial officialdom, English and European scholars, ethnologists and sociologists were also obsessively concerned with these two phenomena and held them to characterize Indian ‘difference’. In addition, caste was endlessly debated in newspapers, public forums and amongst old and new religious communities, and indeed by people of all faiths. Ancient texts in their modern editions, British court rulings, census documents, caste histories, folk knowledge of local communities: debates

⁶ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Hindu Social Order: Its Essential Principles* in BAWS, Volume 3, 1987, p. 113. See in this context, Anupama Rao’s suggestive description of the distinctive agonism that marked untouchable existence (‘Revisiting interwar thought: Stigma, labor, and the immanence of caste-class’ in *The Political Philosophies of Antonio Gramsci and B. R. Ambedkar: Itineraries of the Subaltern*, edited by Cosimo Zene, London: Routledge 2013, pp. 43–58).

on the subject drew from any or all of these and this made for contentious and sometimes acrimonious conversations.

The reformers comprised many groups and tendencies: pertinent to our purpose are three organizations, the Brahmo Samaj, the Prarthana Samaj and the Arya Samaj and a group of liberals clustered around the journal, the *Indian Social Reformer*.

Founded in the eastern province of Bengal in 1828, the Brahmo Samaj looked to replace what it considered degenerate Hinduism—its idolatry, the dissembling brahmin priest and superstitious and arcane practices—with a faith that looked to a transcendent and singular God. It hearkened back to Vedic philosophical traditions to reconstruct a religion for the times. From around the 1860s, the Samaj came to propound an eclectic faith and looked favourably at rational Christianity. Members of the Samaj, known as the Brahmos, were largely from the educated upper castes, and their reformism had limited appeal, even amongst their own kind. Besides, within the organization, there developed a radical tendency that further prejudiced those who already viewed the Samaj as heretical. These radicals, many of whom were young, rejected social and ritual markers of brahminhood, declared themselves in favour of intercaste marriages, emphasized the importance of women's freedom and education, and endorsed their right to marriages of their choice. In and through these declarations and the practices that accompanied them, they articulated a critique of the caste system. And, as important, they strove to challenge the one practice that helped perpetuate caste, the endogamous marriage.⁷

The Prarthana Samaj was founded in western India in 1867 and advocated a more modest reform agenda: it desired to do away with religious pomp, obscure practices and rituals and served as a forum for those from the upper castes, particularly reformist brahmins, who desired to break with onerous caste habits, to criticize such religious injunctions that justified the latter and to develop moral and logical arguments against the current form of the caste system. Its members upheld the worth of the great devotional traditions of worship, popular in western India and which propounded an eclectic and inclusive faith. They also supported modest

⁷ Nandini Chatterjee, 'English Law, Brahmo Marriage, and the Problem of Religious Difference: Civil Marriage Laws in Britain and India', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Volume 52:3, 2010, pp. 524–552.

reform projects, including women's education, and a transformation of moribund practices to do with marriage.⁸

Ambedkar was not drawn to the Brahmo Samaj nor did he appear to have considered its history relevant to his own understanding of the caste order. It is likely he was wary of Brahmo attempts to reconcile philosophical and social worlds, especially the argument that Hindu thought affirmed the essential equality of all beings, since they are all aspects of the Ultimate Reality, or the transcendent Brahma. On the other hand, the Samaj's interest in rethinking caste through a simultaneous rethinking of faith was somewhat comparable to his own efforts: he was as concerned about the relationship between social practices and religious ideas, and invested in rethinking the religious basis of social ethics, and the ethical aspects of religion. He was aware of the reformist Prarthana Samaj and respected individuals associated with it, but did not expect much from it.

The Arya Samaj was a different sort of reformist organization.⁹ Founded in 1875 by Dayananda Saraswati, it rejected contemporary Hinduism as degenerate, was critical of Brahmanical rituals and looked to revive what it viewed as pure and unsullied religion, as expounded by the Vedas, and by that token, the 'original' varna order. Dayananda argued that originally, caste society, as he and his contemporaries experienced it, did not exist. In the Vedic age, there were only functional social and occupational divisions, and these were not organized, as in the present, as a vertically integrated system; rather, they represented horizontal groupings based on a person's temperament, actions and character. That is, varna divisions were not based on birth, and the arrangement of individuals into defined groups was not meant to perpetuate a hierarchy but instead had to do with ensuring that the social order remained harmonious and interdependent.

Dayananda also declared that Vedic society had valued women's social place and role: in the distant past, women were educated, just as men were. Early marriages were not the norm, and men and women married after either had gone through a period of study and self-cultivation.

⁸ Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth Century Western India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 221–222.

⁹ This account of the Arya Samaj is drawn from Chiranjiva Bharadvaja, *Light of Truth or an English translation of the Satyarth Prakash by Swami Dayananda Saraswati*, Agra & Oudh: The Arya Prathinidhi Sabha, 1915.

Marriage was based not on birth-based identities but on compatibility and aptitude, and the offspring of such unions were assigned to occupations for which they were fit and to varna categories that became their character. Dayananda outlined a practical programme that would remake caste society such that it was restored to its Vedic form, so that the four varnas could once more be coeval. To achieve this end, the Samaj organized itself as a mission, along the lines of Christian groups in colonial India and founded a number of organizations, including schools and colleges.

The Arya Samaj's reformism came into public focus after Dayananda's death, and in the context of an emergent nationalism that looked to a golden past for inspiration. Its zealots thus came to the varna and caste questions from the point of view of their national significance, and espoused Hindu unity, and for this reason, argued that untouchability must go, and untouchables brought within the purview of the varna system. Until the 1920s, the Samaj attracted a number of untouchables to its fold, but eventually, intellectuals and publicists from untouchable communities left the organization, irked, as they were, by the social and religious condescension that the Samaj leadership displayed towards them. Some went on to found movements of their own.

Ambedkar was a keen observer of the Arya Samaj and its activities, and admired one of its more articulate and popular emissaries, Swami Shraddhanand, who attempted to interest the Indian National Congress in addressing untouchability.¹⁰ Yet he remained wary of the Samaj's reformism: if Vedic texts did not affirm birth-based differences and varna divisions were indeed functional and based on attributes, what purpose was to be served by retaining the varna appellations, for these names were "associated with a definite and fixed notion in the mind of every Hindu... of a hierarchy based on birth. So long as these names continue, Hindus will continue to think of the Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and

¹⁰ Interestingly enough Ambedkar was not as enamoured of the Arya Samaj's most visible political face, Lala Lajpat Rai, who was as committed to untouchable 'uplift' as Shraddhanand, and who lived in New York at the same time he was in Columbia. Rai was interested in matters to do with race and knew of and exchanged views with W. E. Du Bois. Ambedkar's contention was that Rai failed to bring the critical lens he took to race when it came to caste (BAWS, Volume 5, p. 57). Shraddhanand on the other hand was forthright in his condemnation of the caste order and untouchability, even as he upheld an ideal varna system, and supported non-endogamous marriages (see Shraddhanand Sanyasi, *Hindu Sangathan: Saviour of the Dying Race*, Delhi: Arsh Sahitya Prachar Trust, New Edition, 2016 [1926], p. 108).

Shudra as hierarchical divisions of high and low, based on birth, and act accordingly”.¹¹

Secondly, if marriage was to be on the basis of attributes, one would have to do away with the Vedic notion that a woman had no varna of her own and had to belong either to her father’s or husband’s varna. This meant that her independent existence be acknowledged and accepted. In addition, she ought to be allowed the right to know and interpret scripture on her own terms. But the Arya Samaj was unclear on these matters and this seemed proof enough of the fact that their reimagined varna was of strategic rather than substantive importance to them.¹²

Thirdly, Ambedkar sought to unpack the notion of interdependence that the Samajists referenced while upholding the virtues of the varna order. Given the division of labour in the system, the lowest varna of the shudras had to look up to the priest, the warrior and agricultural classes for support and survival; in short, it would remain beholden to them: “Assuming that the relationship between the different classes is that of guardian and ward...”, the varna system did not have a “provision to safeguard the interests of the ward from the misdeeds of the guardian”.¹³

A more liberal strand of reform viewed the caste order and untouchability critically, and sought to persuade civil society at large of the wrongness of the principles that informed either. *The Indian Social Reformer* (founded in 1890) was a forum for such reformers and its pages were devoted to a cautious yet consistent examination of all that was wrong with the Hindu social order. Drawing on a recognizably modern democratic register of rights, reformers associated with it upheld untouchable rights to education and to shared public spaces, including wells, tanks, streets... Ambedkar knew some of these men who undertook uplift activities of various kinds, and while he was critical of their condescension and their inability to grasp the fact that untouchables were coming onto the historical stage on their own, their earnest moral intent appealed to him.¹⁴

¹¹ B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, in BAWs, Volume 1, 1979, p. 59.

¹² Ibid, p. 61.

¹³ Ibid., p. 62.

¹⁴ *The Indian Social Reformer* reported regularly on untouchability-related practices, supported attempts to found schools for the untouchables and carried thoughtful and critical essays on the caste order.

Amongst the nationalists, the caste and untouchability questions did not elicit consistent critical attention. Liberals such as Gokhale noted with embarrassment that if Indian nationalists were worried about racial policies in South Africa that affected immigrant Indian traders and indentured workers, they ought also to look to their own context and take note of untouchability. But the Indian National Congress of Gokhale's time did not exert itself, thinking through the conundrum of caste, or the phenomenon of untouchability. Militant nationalists such as Tilak rejected the usefulness of such a critique and resolutely upheld the caste order. It was only with the advent of Gandhi that nationalists were pushed to address untouchability, but even then they stayed clear of coming to terms with the caste order and the manner in which it divided Indians.¹⁵

Gandhi's views on these matters were contradictory and shifting: he was opposed to untouchability and desired its abolition. But he was equivocal in his assessment of the caste order. In his early pronouncements on the subject, he defended the interdicts on commensality and non-endogamous marriages (though he would reject both in the last decades of his life).¹⁶ Like the Arya Samaj, he distinguished between varna and caste and declared that the latter represented a perversion of the ancient varna system, but his defence was rather different, from the one espoused by the Samaj: "The law of Varna teaches us that we have each one of us to earn our bread by following the ancestral calling. It defines not our rights but our duties. It necessarily has reference to callings that are conducive to the welfare of humanity and to no other. It also follows that there is no calling too low and none too high. All are good, lawful and absolutely equal in status".¹⁷

Gandhi conceded that the present social order was not as optimal. The infinite number of castes, their isolation from each other, the ranking of

¹⁵ The first official declaration issued by the Indian National Congress, protesting the practice of untouchability, was made in 1917.

¹⁶ See in this context, Anil Nauriya, 'Gandhi's Little-known Critique of Varna', *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 13, 2006, pp. 1835–1838.

¹⁷ See 'A Vindication of Caste by Mahatma Gandhi' in B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, in BAWs, Volume 1, p. 83. Intriguingly enough, in a letter to one who wanted him to clarify his stance on the varnas, Gandhi noted that in the present age, all ought to view themselves as shudras, since what was left to most of humanity was to serve and it was important to view one's life as a labour of service (see *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Volume 51, The Publications Division: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1972, pp. 350–352).

occupations as high and low were unfortunate developments and they were not to be countenanced. On the other hand, the spirit of the original varna order was not to be scorned either. It was still alive and active in that the labour expended in the cause of an assigned vocation marked an individual's identity. It was important therefore that individuals stayed with the vocations assigned to them for purposes of earning a livelihood. However, they were free to undertake other forms of labour, if they were so inclined, but not to make a living out of these.¹⁸

Gandhi's obstinate and somewhat illogical insistence on the immutability of caste-based vocations had to with his philosophy of everyday life, linked to notions of abstinence and containment with regard to food and sex. In this scheme of things, all activity was to be measured and disciplined and undertaken in a spirit of duty, and as service. To be promiscuous about work, to want to do things that were not 'given' to oneself was detrimental to individual and social well-being.

Ambedkar was quick to point out the many fallacies in Gandhi's ideas: the dishonouring of certain occupations did not have to do with the nature of the task, but the identities of those who performed them. The stigma was attached to the labouring body and did not stem from the work that such a body performed. A brahmin who undertook sanitary work remained a brahmin, just as an untouchable, like himself, even if educated, continued to be viewed as an untouchable; and therein lay the paradox of work and identity. Secondly, it was pernicious to insist that one ought to earn one's keep by labouring at a task assigned at birth or to the caste to which one belonged. For one, there was no gainsaying what one's ancestral vocation was, and how far back ought one to go, to identify it. Further, to force men to fit into vocations for which they are not suited or which they avidly disliked was not only unnatural, but also unfair since it rendered an imposition a hallowed task. Such an ideal, as he noted in another context, failed to acknowledge the "infinite diversity

¹⁸ Quoted in B. R. Ambedkar, *What Gandhi and Congress Have Done to the Untouchables*, in BAWS, Volume 9, pp. 275–278. It must be noted here that Gandhi was serious about destigmatizing labour as such, given the Hindu social order's devaluation of the workman, almost always a lower caste person or an untouchable. He experimented with various forms of artisanal labour and persuaded those who looked up to him, to do likewise. He made a special plea for touchables to undertake sanitary labour and set an example in this regard. But as must be evident, none of these measures challenged the social economy of caste, in a conceptual and political sense.

of active tendencies and combination of tendencies of which an individual is capable".¹⁹

Radical analyses and descriptions of caste were not wanting during this period. Anti-caste movements across the subcontinent offered their own vigorous criticisms: some viewed the social order as one imposed on autochthonous peoples by invading Aryans, while others saw it as an irrational system, calculated to serve brahmin self-interest and which was kept alive by that class' outlandish systems of thought (see Chapter 7). P. Lakshmi Narasu from Madras (a renowned freethinker who took to Buddhism) produced what was perhaps a classic rationalist refutation of caste. Drawing from current debates in sociology and anthropology that refused to settle for simple racial or functional arguments while describing and assessing social formations, Narasu argued that the varna-caste order was an instance of "bad physiology" as well as "bad sociology". "To divide society into 4 classes is bad physiology because you cannot divide the body into self-subsistent organs. We work with the whole body... not mere parts.... it is bad sociology because you cannot have a class which merely or mainly thinks ... and another which merely works... Difference of function is essential in a society ... but beyond the difference in external functions, there must be an inward likeness..."²⁰ Narasu also took issue with attempts to derive a theory of economic utility and harmony from the varna order and with those that insisted that it was akin to Plato's conception of the ideal republic, arguments that Ambedkar would also respond to, but in a different vein.²¹

Official Indian communist thought did not add anything significant to the existing debates on the caste order and untouchability, except to view these as aspects of a long-standing feudal system that was fast being replaced by a capitalist one (see Chapters 3 and 6). While there were individual communists who held more latitudinarian views, there were none

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 292; see also, B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, in BAWS, Volume 1, p. 60.

²⁰ P. Lakshmi Narasu, *A Study of Caste*, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 2003 [1922], p. 123.

²¹ Ibid., p. 125–128. For Ambedkar's notions to do with caste and the economy, see Chapter 6. With regard to Plato, Ambedkar was inclined to be far more critical than Narasu was, and viewed Plato's scheme as limiting and dismissive of individual freedom and aptitudes (*Annihilation of Caste*, in BAWS, Volume 1, p. 60). It is not clear whether Ambedkar knew Narasu's work on caste, as he did his work on Buddhism.

whose perspective was startlingly different. The one time that Indian leftists thought of these matters within the framework of socialism was when some of them were in the Soviet Union on the eve of the Third Congress of the Comintern. This was when an assortment of diasporic Indians sought to win the ear of the Bolshevik leadership, and the statements they circulated contained their analysis of the situation in India.²² Almost all of them differed from M. N. Roy's view of Indian affairs (see Chapters 2 and 3) and not the least of their differences had to do with their characterization of the Indian proletariat and peasantry as being bound by the caste order. Whereas Roy had argued that the Indian national movement was inexorably bourgeois and that the international communist movement ought to look to building the nascent, but powerful Indian working class in the cities, these men pointed to the latter still being captive to religious and caste dogma.

Abdul Rabb, a pan-Islamist turned communist, noted that the proletariat in India was only "caste conscious and not class-conscious" and that it was being "led and exploited by the political revolutionaries for the benefit of the political revolution". He went on to argue that the real proletariat of India were the so-called untouchables, "who possess neither home nor hearth, have no caste, no religion, no history and no traditions. They constitute the fruitful soil for socialism. They are a class, and when class-conscious, shall constitute a terrible weapon against social enormities and all other classes ... They are to gain everything and lose nothing by social revolution except their disabilities..."²³

Virendranath Chattopadhyay, a radical nationalist, who was in exile in Europe and had since become a communist, also pointed to how, in India, the "horizontal cleavage—so sharp and clear—drawn in the industrial West" has been "intersected, from the very inception of its history, by exceptionally strong vertical lines of social division and, latterly, of religious antagonism". These social divisions were so remarkably strong that a poor person from the brahmin class was more likely to feel a "community of interest with richer members of his own caste as against a member

²² Made available to Indian historians in the post-Glasnost period, these and other documents from the period have since been anthologized in an impressive volume, *Indo-Russian Relations: 1917–1947: Select Documents from the Archives of the Russian Federation, Part 1, 1917–1928*, edited and compiled by Purabi Roy, Sobhanlal Datta Gupta, Hari Vasudevan, Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1991.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

of his own economic class belonging to another caste". There was also the phenomenon of untouchability, and untouchables, poor, wretched and the objects of "social taboo and repugnance" were looked down upon by "members of their own economic class from among the constituent castes of Hindu society". If India had evolved on her own into the modern capitalist era, such divisions might have given way to class divisions, but British imperialism had intruded and "not only given a fresh vitality to these causes, but has also in itself been further obstacle to the emergence in India of those conditions which make a revolutionary class-conscious proletariat possible".²⁴

Rabb and Chattopadhyay, however, did not outline plans or arguments as to how caste and untouchability were to be addressed as socialist concerns; instead, they dovetailed their views into a generalized plea for fighting imperialism, which, they held, would transform untouchable lives as well. While Chattopadhyay wrote of how important it was to develop critical research and thought that inferred from a study of Indian history the peculiarities of economic and social development in the subcontinent, he did not put down his own views on what these peculiarities would amount to, and how they ought to be analytically examined and comprehended, and if the socialist framework was adequate to this task, or if it would have to be recast.²⁵ Ambedkar did not know of these arguments; indeed, they were not known until the 1990s, when Indian historians discovered these documents in the Russian archives, when these were opened up for research.

Subsequently, from amongst the rank of communists in India, S. A. Dange, as we have pointed out, recouped antique history within a Marxist historical framework: he suggested that ancient India had known a form of primitive communism, which subsequently transformed into a class society. The primitive past that he praised was the idealized varna order, which he attempted to understand in anthropological terms, along the lines of Engels' argument in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*. But he did not theorize the caste order that he found repugnant, on its own terms, and remained content with noting its feudal character. More analytical works followed and some of these

²⁴ Ibid., p. 118.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 110.

were roughly contemporaneous with Ambedkar's own writings, such as those of Bhupendranath Dutta and R. S. Sharma (see Chapter 4).

E. M. S. Nambudiripad, a leading member of the CPI, examined the caste order in terms of its evolution in southern India, more specifically Kerala. Writing as he did, in the 1940s, at a time when in neighbouring Madras, racial theories about indigenous people being subjected to Aryan-brahmins enjoyed political currency, he argued that an extant and older, "non-Aryan" social formation, characterized by "mother-right", was eventually replaced by a social order that asserted "father-right", and in effect introduced the caste system into this part of the world. Drawing from Engels, and concurring with colonial administrator-scholars, he viewed "matriarchy", as it existed in Kerala, as evidence of the survival of a backward social form, and viewed its supersession by the Brahmanical system of patrilineal and patriarchal arrangements as a historical improvement. By the same token, the caste order was seen as a functional and superior expression of an advanced mode of production that the brahmin class was responsible for instituting in this part of the subcontinent.²⁶

Ambedkar was familiar with Dutta's arguments and perhaps he knew Dange's work, but since Nambudiripad's text was not translated from the original Malayalam until later, it is unlikely he had heard of it.

4 CASTE MATTERS AND COLONIAL KNOWLEDGES

Caste had attracted the attention of travellers, missionaries, merchants, soldiers... with missionary accounts reaching Europe as early as the sixteenth century. After the English East India Company secured political control over parts of the Indian subcontinent in the eighteenth century, its officials took to studying the institution, and in the event, a body of 'authoritative' knowledge on the subject was put in place. Drawn from existing and mostly missionary accounts and interpretations provided by Indian, largely brahmin informants, and organized around ideas and references gleaned from Hindu scriptural and legal digests, this knowledge rendered caste at once arcane and living. Subsequently, through the long nineteenth century, textual studies of caste came to be supplemented with information gathered from the field, through surveys of the population,

²⁶ See Dilip Menon, 'Being a Brahmin the Marxist Way: E. M. S. Nambudiripad and the Pasts of Kerala' in *Invoking the Past: The Uses of History in South Asia*, edited by Daud Ali, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 55–90.

on the one hand, and description of caste customs, rituals and occupations, on the other. Ethnological tools, including, of phrenology and anthropometry, were put to use in this process.²⁷ While some of this work tended to reify castes rather than viewing them as dynamic social entities, others acknowledged the difficulty of constructing caste as a stable object of knowledge, since much of what enumerators and surveyors put together was mediated through the informants' vision of the caste order, and particularly of their entitled or negative place within it.²⁸

Caste was understood in a variety of ways, but it was generally agreed that it was a hoary institution, defined by notions of high and low, purity and pollution, and kept in place by a canny brahmin priesthood.²⁹ While missionaries tended to view the caste order in terms of a religious logic, administrator-scholars looked to ethnology and anthropometry to make sense of it. Some scholars mapped castes onto racial types, and this in turn created contentious arguments as to the origins of the system, and whether it was an import from the time of the early Aryan migrations, or one that emerged in the migrants' encounter with local communities. Racial arguments were used to mark castes as advanced or barbaric, civilized and criminal and castes came to be endowed with particular traits, as if each caste possessed its own racial 'essence'.

The caste order was viewed in functional terms as well, as comprising occupational divisions. At the same time, it was argued that relationships between castes had as much to do with social rank and distance, with relative status being marked along a measure that linked the socially and economically well-endowed castes to a 'pure' status, and the less endowed to relative or absolute 'impure' status as the case might be. Not all agreed that religious ideas to do with purity and pollution constituted the founding principles of the caste order. Contrary views in this context included those which listed the most salient aspects of

²⁷ For a critical appraisal of the colonial encounter with the caste order, see Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

²⁸ For an account of the administrator-scholar's reckoning with caste, in a theoretical as well as practical sense, see C. J. Fuller, 'Colonial Anthropology and the Decline of the Raj: Caste, Religion and Political Change in India in the Early Twentieth Century', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 26:3, 2016, pp. 463–486.

²⁹ See Suvira Jaiswal, *Caste: Origin, Function and Dimensions of Change*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1998, pp. 32–39 for a succinct summary of studies to do with caste in colonial India.

the Hindu social order as comprising occupational specialization, hierarchization of groups and their mutual repulsion. Then, there were those who attempted to pull together a number of social and historical developments, in their accounts: the shaping power of notions of taboo and totemism, the magical and affective power associated with trading and artisanal guilds, forms of worship, specific to certain families and clans, interaction between matrilineal and patrilineal groups, state policies...

A crucial arena for both the dissemination of governmental knowledge about caste and the making of such knowledge was the domain of law. Called upon to adjudicate a variety of claims and causes, to do with the rights of communities, the nature of caste customs, the relative status to be accorded this or that caste, and acts of discrimination that sought refuge in prior practices, even as they were challenged by the victims of such discrimination, courts drew on textual and scriptural knowledge, as well as on the newly minted colonial studies and surveys. They viewed caste claims in terms of what was owed to the varna, which claimants affirmed was theirs, or to which they desired to be assimilated; and assessed what a varna's rightful entitlements were, on the basis of what they held to be sacral rules and interdicts. Sometimes, they relied on census reports and how these had classified castes, in relation to varna divisions. In other cases, courts heeded claims of particular castes, based not so much on varna or textual definitions, but on local custom and usage. In yet other contexts, they agreed with those who argued that their actions were neither sacred nor customary, but were based on self-imposed norms and rules.³⁰

All who studied caste were perplexed by its relation to varna. The varna system with its ordering of occupations was referenced in the oldest texts, the Vedas, but what was its relationship to the bewildering and complex caste order? Some held that varna and caste were two different orders of social existence: the one was perhaps akin to an estate, and marked social rank, whereas the other was built on the idea of differences, and marked levels of highness and lowness. Others held the varna order to be formal; that is, it was a notional, normative order of ranking, which enabled castes to view themselves as high and low, but castes were, themselves, multifarious, and their interrelationship contingent on both geography and

³⁰ See Marc Galanter, 'Changing Legal Conceptions of Caste', in *Structure and Change in Indian Society*, edited by M. Singer and B. S. Cohn, Chicago: Aldine, 1968, pp. 299–36.

historical developments. There were also those who argued that the caste order emerged from the varna system, on account of the sexual ‘mixing’ that took place between the different varnas.

Historians viewed the making of the caste order in dynamic terms, as having to do with the expansion of agricultural frontiers, the absorption of forest and other remote communities into a sedentary growing agrarian society. To some, this appeared an instance of superior modes of production, armed with better technological resources, taking over less developed modes of existence. To others, it seemed an act of aggressive conquest. But to all those who looked to material history, its dynamism appeared a function of its civil and secular character, and they differed from those who held caste to be a primarily religious ordering of society.³¹

The relationship between the caste order and religion was endlessly discussed: if it was justified in scripture and was mandated by divine injunction, or if it was a matter of convention and habit, and legislated upon by law codes that were concerned with social order rather than with sacral notions of high and low.³² The position of the brahmin caste and its appropriation of a superior and exclusive status to itself were also debated, with those opposed to the caste order most vociferous in their critique. The brahmins did not have too many defenders, and even those that held them to be preceptors, teachers and makers of civilization had to reluctantly agree that they had the greatest incentive in sustaining hierarchy. On the other hand, brahmins were viewed as open to democratic changes and it was proclaimed that they were looking to reform themselves and the social order.³³

British administrator-scholars agreed that caste defined their colony and that it was best not to tamper with its workings, since this would incite discontent and rebellion. From time to time, individuals fulminated against what they conceived to be its regressive, barbaric and inequalitarian

³¹ Suvira Jaiswal, *Caste: Origin, Function and Dimensions of Change*, pp. 49–51.

³² For an account of how the religious argument, particularly those advanced by missionaries, occluded the structural inequality of the system, which was based on differential access to land and related resources, see Rupa Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion, and the Social in Modern India*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2014.

³³ This was the burden of Gandhi’s arguments when it came to pointing to the Hindu readiness for change.

aspects, and held that it was caste that kept Indians backward. The official despair over caste proved strategic: it helped to mark British rule as essentially benign and necessary, to save Indians from their own history and culture.³⁴

Indian scholarly as well as public opinion on these matters was structured along similar lines, yet was inflected in particular ways, reflecting the growing tide of intellectual disaffection with colonial and missionary expositions: reacting to criticisms of the caste order, many wondered if it was all that different from class and status differences, and exclusions of various kinds that had restricted free social intercourse in other countries across the world, including in Europe.³⁵ Some insisted that the caste order was largely secular and had to do with occupational divisions and did not reflect an Indian, rather Hindu essence, as it was believed to.³⁶ It was also argued that the caste order had ensured social cohesion, reduced economic competition, made for continuity and civilizational endurance, and that each caste, in itself, was a harmonious, democratic whole.³⁷

Of the bewildering number of texts produced on the subject through the long nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth, some acquired iconic status, and some opinions circulated more widely than others. James Mill, who wrote a history of India in several volumes, devoted a few pages to caste and religion, and particularly to the *Manusmriti*. Mediated through his protestant and utilitarian understanding, his views became a staple in administrative as well as pedagogic contexts. He castigated the caste order, held it responsible for all of India's ills and blamed the brahmins for sustaining it. He forcefully argued that India's future could be redeemed only if it was entirely sliced off from her past, and to this end recommended a programme of utilitarian modernization, starting with education and the rule of law. Mill's texts were prescribed reading for prospective administrators and his understanding

³⁴ For an elaboration of this argument, see Mithi Mukherjee, *India in the Shadows of Empire: A Legal and Political History, 1774–1950*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 72–104.

³⁵ Shridhar V. Ketkar, *The History of Caste in India*, Ithaca: Taylor and Carpenter, 1909, fn 11, p. 100.

³⁶ Bhupendranath Datta, *Studies in Indian Social Polity*, Calcutta: Purabi Publishers, 1944, pp. I–III.

³⁷ G. S. Ghurye, *Caste and Race*, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Turner & Co, 1932, pp. 25–26.

of historical evolution in the Indian subcontinent influenced subsequent historical writing, by both colonial and Indian scholars, until challenged by nationalist writers.³⁸

Of missionary texts, Abbe Dubois' work was read widely: notwithstanding the fact that the French priest resided in India for several years, his writings were not so much based on his observations, as they were on previous and largely French Jesuit writings on caste and history. The Abbe was severe in his condemnation of what he understood to be the Hindu religion, but rather warm in his endorsement of the caste order, which he suggested had helped people hold out against the ravages of time and conquest, and made for a moral ordering of their lives; tellingly enough, he pointed to the lives of the so-called outcastes to illustrate his point. Their unruly and barbaric lives, unfolding outside of the caste order, he declared were proof enough of the salutary influence of caste.³⁹ Of the English missionaries, the writings of John Wilson proved influential, particularly in western India.⁴⁰

As for the writings of administrator-scholars, the work of Lewis O' Malley, Edward Blunt, E. A. Gait, John Nesfield, Herbert Risley, Denzil Ibbetson and J. H. Hutton was consequential, in that these men defined the discursive field that came to anchor official studies on caste. More recondite accounts, by ethnographers and sociologists, were well known in academic circles, and an early generation of Indian social science students was familiar with Celestin Bougle, Emile Senart and Max Mueller.

Amongst Indian writers on caste, the writings of Ambedkar's Maharashtra contemporaries proved influential: P. V. Kane, a formidable scholar, who wrote a magisterial history of the dharmashastras, the ancient texts that dealt with law, caste and religion and who wondered if a critique of the caste order was adequate, without a concomitant vision of what

³⁸ See in this context, Sasha Riser-Kositsky, 'The Political Intensification of Caste: India Under the Raj', *Penn Historical Review*, Volume 17:1, Fall 2009, pp. 31–53.

³⁹ Abbe Dubois (Translated into English by Henry Beauchamp) *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906, pp. 29–36. Paradoxically enough, a number of Indian critics of the caste order, including Ambedkar, drew on the Abbe's descriptions of caste and Hinduism, without necessarily agreeing with his endorsement of the system.

⁴⁰ Phule drew on Wilson's writings in making his own critique of caste and untouchability. See *Selected Writings of Jotirao Phule*, edited with annotations and introduction by G. P. Deshpande, New Delhi: Leftword Books, 2002, p. 143, p. 145; p. 147.

would replace it; Shridhar V. Ketkar, who wrote a compendium on the *Manusmriti*, tracing its history and making, and who sought to assess Manu's vision on the basis of what he imagined was a just appraisal; and G. S. Ghurye whose views on caste veered between the thickly descriptive and the ideological, invested as he was in 'explaining' its existence to those who tended to view it solely through the critical views expounded by missionaries and other scholars.

Ambedkar was familiar with almost all of this literature and, in addition, with caste surveys and reports, produced across British India, notes that accompanied the decennial Census, polemical exchanges on the subject as these transpired in newspapers and weeklies. He disagreed with racial arguments, submitted much of the ethnology to careful critique, was meticulous in his reading of news from the field, as recorded by the administration and by journalists, and held some of the Indian scholars he read, such as Ketkar and Kane in esteem, even though he did not agree with all they had to say. Mill's formulations on caste run through his writings, albeit in ways that the Englishman might not have anticipated: they were used to argue for Ambedkar's vision of the modern and to demonstrate the desirability of challenging tradition and custom.

Working his way through these texts and also what he had gathered from the field—he was a member of the Starte Committee set up to enquire into the conditions of the depressed classes and aboriginal communities in the Bombay province—Ambedkar rearranged familiar and widely shared ideas into a rigorous conceptual order that answered to lower caste and untouchable lives and experiences, as well as to the constitutive limits that defined and shaped them. In doing so, he decisively moved away from existing approaches to the understanding of caste and untouchability.

Firstly, he thought through the practice of endogamy—viewed by almost all writers on caste as a constituent feature of the caste order—in historical as well as structural terms and came up with what might be called a comprehensive theory of social reproduction, which placed gender relationships at the heart of the system. Secondly, he was not concerned so much, as others were, with establishing the basis of the caste order, whether its logic was racial, or had to do with occupational divisions, or primitive notions of permissible touch and unpermitted taboo. Instead, he engaged with the consequences of this logic, of difference and hierarchy, interdependence and repulsion and produced a radical theory that accounted for its material and social effects. Thirdly, unlike

all others, he sought to theorize the phenomenon of untouchability and to go beyond arguments that traced it either to practices of miscegenation or to interdicts to do with purity and pollution. Lastly, he sought to link caste and the Hindu religion in rather novel ways: rather than explaining, and so justifying, the meanings of the caste order as many did, through a recourse to indexing themes from Hindu philosophy, he rendered such themes the objects of critical inquiry.

5 THE SEXUAL ECONOMY OF CASTE

Ambedkar's understanding of endogamy was detailed in his earliest writing on the subject, *Castes in India*. In this text, he approvingly cited Shridhar V. Ketkar, who explicitly identified endogamy to be a constitutive and foundational feature of the caste order. While this fact had been noticed by almost all that studied caste, Ketkar gave it definitional prominence. He argued that endogamy came about on account of vanity and lack of affection between groups, with each group viewing itself as substantively different and wanting to retain its "pure" nature. As a result, a class society (this is how Ketkar referred to the varna system), which had known only occupational divisions, came to be substantially transformed: "Classes are converted into castes by becoming endogamous".⁴¹

Ambedkar went further: to him, endogamy was consequential not because it implied a transformation of rank and estate into a status group that jealously guarded its privileges (or was forced to conform to its condition of deprivation). Rather, endogamy signified an important social practice, instituted at a crucial historical moment by the brahmin class and represented a closing of the social commons, so to speak. Caste, Ambedkar argued, echoing and rephrasing Ketkar, is therefore best understood as "enclosed class", with enclosure reifying potentially mobile social divisions.⁴²

Risley had also called attention to endogamy: that it perhaps came about on account of racial differences; that it must be viewed as related to exogamy, and therefore as both widening and restricting marriage circles; that it probably had also to do with interdicts on hypergamy, that is,

⁴¹ Shridhar V. Ketkar, *The History of Caste in India*, p. 28; 28–29. Ketkar understood the varna-class divisions to be akin to the different Estates in medieval Europe.

⁴² B. R. Ambedkar, *Castes in India* in BAWs, Volume 1, p. 15.

the practice of disallowing women of a higher rank from marrying men lower in social stature (the reverse was allowed, men could take wives from lower social groups). Risley linked infant marriage and endogamy as well: anxious to find husbands for their daughters within a limited circle of suitable grooms, high ranked families probably settled for early marriage to stave off competition.⁴³

That endogamy was overlaid on exogamy and that it not only restricted choices, but also threw up the problem of numbers, were matters that Ambedkar also dwelt on. Unlike Risley, however, he did not let these observations remain at the level of descriptive analysis. Rather, he went on to produce a theory: that the condition of endogamy must necessarily lead to an excess or lack of partners, and this in turn would require an effective regulation of sexual and conjugal mores. In other words, a sexual economy to regulate and manage the closing of the social commons had to be put in place and the brahmin class had done precisely this: it enabled certain sorts of sexual and conjugal choices and forbade others.⁴⁴

The question was how the practice of endogamy came to be widespread, and here Ambedkar did not think that the brahmin class, persuasive and socially coercive as it was, could have imposed the practice on all others.⁴⁵ Thus, he conceded and went on to elaborate a tendency already taken note of by ethnologists: those who ranked lower in the social order tended to “imitate” those above them. The extent of imitation was in inverse proportion to how a particular social group was situated in relationship to the one they sought to imitate. The greater the distance, the less powerful was the pull of customs cherished by the powerful. To that extent, the lower social orders were imperfectly integrated into the sexual economy of endogamy and caste. On the other hand, Ambedkar pointed out sharply, imitation invariably went hand in hand with defiance, and here the lower orders came up against limits that they could not hope to

⁴³ H. H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal: An Ethnographic Glossary*, Volume 1, Calcutta, 1891, pp. Ixxvi- Ixxviii; xc-xciii.

⁴⁴ B. R. Ambedkar, *Castes in India*, in BAWS, Volume 1, pp. 5-22.

⁴⁵ Nesfield had pointed to the Brahmanical origins of caste endogamy: “No child either male or female could inherit the name and status of Brahman unless he or she was of Brahman parentage on both sides. By the establishment of this rule, the principle of marriage unionship was superadded to functional unionship and it was only by the combination of these two principles that a caste in the strict sense of the term was or could be formed” (*Brief View of the Caste System of North-western Provinces and Oudh*, Allahabad, 1885, p. 115).

breach. For, even as the privileged enclosed themselves, the less privileged found doors shut upon them, with punitive injunctions that disallowed and warned against sexual and conjugal trespass.⁴⁶

It was generally agreed that this rigid system of endogamous enclosures did not work as it was meant to, and that mixed unions were pervasive. Ambedkar drew some interesting and original conclusions in this regard.⁴⁷ Early lawgivers, he argued, reluctantly accepted the breaking of varna enclosures, even as they attempted to reorder social relationships that emerged on account of such a breaking. Thus, it was deemed permissible for the upper varnas to take wives from those below them, and the children of such unions were deemed legitimate. The reverse, women from the upper varnas marrying men from groups beneath their own was not viewed as desirable, yet not stopped. The children begotten from these mixings were accorded a lesser rank and differentiated into groups with greater and lesser rights: those who were heirs and kinsmen and those who were kinsmen but nor heirs. The principle of differentiation at this stage had to do with limiting access to property and lineal identity, and not social intercourse as such.

However, this somewhat flexible manner of ordering the social order changed, as the Brahmanical reaction to Buddhism marshalled itself against the latter. Such changes as took place were evident in how the *Manusmriti* (which Ambedkar held to be the founding text of the Brahmanical counter-revolution, see Chapter 4) reworked existing legal categories of the sexual economy. Even as it retained earlier forms of indexing and classification of social groups and relationships, it introduced new strictures, and to Ambedkar, these appeared significant. A new interdict had to do with a detail which, he held, had not been accorded importance by commentators on the text, whether in the past or in the present. This was an injunction that disprivileged women from lower varnas, who found themselves in unions with men from the upper varnas. Where there was more than two degrees of separation between the varnas, to which the respective women and men belonged, the children born of their union were not to be granted the rank of their fathers. Instead, their

⁴⁶ B. R. Ambedkar, *Castes in India* in BAWS, Volume 1, p. 18.

⁴⁷ For an account of his views on these matters and on the *Manusmriti* and the two interdicts that he examined at length and considered significant, see *Manu's Madness or the Brahmanic Explanations of the Origins of the Mixed Castes* in BAWS, Volume 4, 1987, pp. 215–232.

descent was to be reckoned through their mothers. In an evolving patriarchal social context, the tracing of descent through the mother was an anomaly, and signified an affirmation of the sexual entitlements—without concomitant social responsibility—of men from the upper varnas.⁴⁸

The second set of new strictures that the text had outlined had to do with classifying, naming and arranging in an elaborate hierarchy, the offspring of mixed unions. Ambedkar argued that this classificatory move was perplexing since some of the groups that were considered the products of miscegenation were independent social communities that existed outside the purview of the social order, and therefore of the logic of enclosure and endogamy. It seemed to him that the *Manusmriti* had elevated its anxiety with regard to mixed social groups to the status of a principle, such that all communities that the emergent social order sought to engage with had to be recouped within its terms.

To Ambedkar, these two interdicts appeared important not only in terms of what they set out to do, but also because they demonstrated how the *Manusmriti* actually produced its object of knowledge: by devising a clever and dissembling taxonomy that was discursively generated and which sought to overwrite social and historical developments and practices that were at odds with its cataloguing. Such overwriting, in effect, fused together the real and the ideal, such that it appeared impossible to assess practice except in terms of the ideal and the ideal meanwhile could not be contemplated, other than in terms of what had come to be allowed.

Ever since James Mill identified the *Manusmriti* as the source of all that was wrong with Hindu society and civilization, it had elicited consternation and embarrassment amongst Indian thinkers and publicists. Eventually, with the advent of Hindu reform and nationalism, the text came to have its apologists as well. Ambedkar's fellow Indian scholars did not go beyond the text's self-legitimizing logic, even as they unpacked its constituents carefully and meticulously, as Kane did. And when they conceded, as Ketkar did, for instance, that the *Manusmriti* was excessively harsh towards the shudras, they nevertheless held that the text was not to be read only as one that legitimized and upheld birth-based privileges and

⁴⁸ Unlike Nambudiripad (see above) who viewed history in linear terms and understood patriarchy to be an automatic improvement over what existed, Ambedkar drew attention to the continual and insidious reinscription of male sexual privilege in and through systemic change.

discrimination. Ketkar suggested that the punitive system, which it elaborated, based on its elaborate taxonomy, ought not to take away from the fact that the text was fundamentally a study in justice; only such justice was not to be understood within the limited terms of what might be attained in this life. Instead, it was to be viewed in the context of the many lives that a human being moved through. The notion of karma, or the effects of one's deeds, coupled with the idea of rebirth, argued Ketkar, was the context in which the *Manusmriti* elaborated its justice code. For those who looked to the text as a guide to right and wrong social conduct, the justice it prescribed seemed right, when measured in terms of the entire cycle of birth and rebirth, and not only in terms of what a person endured in the social present.⁴⁹

Ambedkar went beyond anger and apologia in his reading of the *Manusmriti*. He accepted that it was, indeed, a study in justice, only this was not to be measured in terms of the doctrine of karma and rebirth. Rather, it had to be understood in terms of the corporeal and existential effects that its interdicts and sanctions produced. The text's justice system was best understood as one that sought to secure the social order—and the inequality that it rested on—in a realm where the strictures that it enjoined were most likely to be viewed as 'natural': the realm of intimate and familial relationships, where notions of right and wrong birth, purity and defilement could literally be inscribed onto the human body. Sexual and social reproduction, mapped onto each other in a seamless manner, thus ensured the perpetuation of inequality in a generational sense, and as significant, led to a fusing of the 'real' human body with the 'ideal' category that it was meant to inhabit.

6 FETISHIZING INEQUALITY

Ambedkar's understanding of the caste order was directed towards its annihilation, and in this, he differed from all other Indian expositors of caste. His younger contemporary Ghurye, for instance, who went on to become one of India's eminent sociologists, was critical of its rigid hierarchy and rigorous classification of social groups, yet insisted that the social order must be viewed as an interdependent structure that made for civic harmony. He hastened to add that this was not a "harmony of

⁴⁹ Shridhar V. Ketkar, *The History of Caste in India*, pp. 114–115.

parts that are equally valued, but of units which are rigorously subordinated to one another” but was reluctant to read subordination in other than functional and structural terms.⁵⁰

In fact, Ghurye was not alone in holding such opinions. Almost all Indian scholars who looked to understand caste were not unsettled by what they sought to interpret. J. N. Bhattacharya, whose work on caste Ambedkar knew, was also convinced of the order’s functionality. Bhattacharya conceded that caste might have impeded the lower castes from shaking free the fetters of an imposed profession and improving their situation, but for the higher castes, it was a veritable “golden chain” that they had worn willingly around their necks, because it had ever been to their advantage and fixed them to only that which is “noble and praiseworthy”. But, the fact also was that the system was venerated even by the lower castes who were not more eager than the upper castes to break caste customs. Further, the original brahmin lawgivers were sagacious and concerned about social unity and put in place such strictures as would make for assimilation of very diverse people into a unified social order.⁵¹

It was clear to Ambedkar that in whatsoever manner castes interacted, or perceived themselves, such interaction was neither equal nor mutual. No one constituent within the order was coeval with another, and besides, each caste was graded in relationship to all other castes, within what essentially was a pyramidal structure. As important, they were arranged along an axis that marked rank and status on the basis of what he termed an “ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt”.⁵² This rendered the caste order not merely hierarchical, but one that was sustained by “graded inequality”, at every level of its existence.⁵³ Graded

⁵⁰ G. S. Ghurye, *Caste and Race*, p. 27.

⁵¹ J. N. Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects*, Calcutta: Editions Indian, 1896, Reprinted, 1968, pp. 3–11.

⁵² B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr Ambedkar at the Round Table Conferences*, in BAWS, Volume 2, 1982, p. 506. For one of the earliest (1919) and differently worded uses of this phrase, see, *Evidence before the Southborough Commission* in BAWS, Volume 1, p. 257: “an ascending scale of preference and a descending scale of hatred and contempt”.

⁵³ This phrase features very widely in Ambedkar’s writings. For example, see B. R. Ambedkar, *The Hindu Social Order: Its Essential Principles*, p. 106; *The Triumph of Brahmanism*, p. 275, p. 317, p. 319 in BAWS, Volume 3, 1987; *The Hindu and His Belief in Caste*, in BAWS, Volume 5, p. 101; *Who were the Shudras?* in BAWS Volume 7, 1990, p. 26; and *What Gandhi and Congress have Done to the Untouchables* in BAWS Volume 9, p. 170; p. 468.

inequality, Ambedkar made clear, was a startling phenomenon: it had not been sufficiently studied or understood but unless this was done, the distinct nature of the caste order was not graspable.

In order to expound its logic, Ambedkar analysed the system in two ways: as an integrated system of class and caste divisions, and as one that disallowed a consequential critique of its structure. Deploying the term ‘class’ and mapping it on to varna, he noted that the Hindu social order comprised classes, and that each class in turn comprised particular castes. The relationship between a varna and its caste constituents was complex. For one, no varna was internally self-consistent. Castes that identified with a broad class division were not all of a kind. They were more or less endowed, in material terms, as well as in terms of social entitlements. Further, they did not always seek to subsume their respective identities within the broader varna to which they claimed adherence, or to which they were assigned. The Hindu, Ambedkar pointed out, was thus both caste conscious and class conscious: “Whether he is caste conscious or class conscious depends upon the caste with which he comes in conflict. If the caste with which he comes in conflict is a caste within the class to which he belongs he is caste conscious. If the caste is outside the class to which he belongs he is class conscious”.⁵⁴

Ambedkar’s reasoning also made it clear that whether a caste considered itself kshatriya or resented being called shudra was not as significant as the fact that in choosing a varna appellation, a caste sought to grant itself a social identity which answered to its sense of itself, irrespective of whether this had to do with its occupation, or cultural practices or even social location. Varna thus conferred a measure of ‘class’-like self-consciousness on those who desired to be more than an ascriptive social group. This class consciousness though seldom transcended its structural limits, and in fact, it was constitutively incapable of reflexive and critical thought. For, unequal as all castes—across the varnas—were in greater or lesser measure, with regard to both “the benefit and the burden”, they were not pushed to re-examine their respective varna positions, since such re-examination would require them to give up their relative privileges vis-a-vis other varnas.⁵⁵ Ambedkar wryly noted that the Hindu social order was a system where all were co-sharers in inequity, but none dared to

⁵⁴ B. R. Ambedkar, *Symbols of Hinduism* in BAWS, Volume 3, p. 146.

⁵⁵ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Triumph of Brahmanism* in BAWS, Volume 3, p. 320.

protest, since this would deprive them of the spoils that such a system allocated to all, in however graded a measure.⁵⁶

Ambedkar's characterization of the Hindu social order as informed by the logic of graded inequality was at once acute in its perception as well as radical in its implications: however the order had come to be, it was a structure that continuously recomposed itself. That is, in keeping with changed economic and political conditions, a caste could move up and down the pyramid, courting a varna status than what was ascribed to it, or be pushed down into one that was deemed more suitable to its condition, but this did not entail or require a change in the structure or the logic that sustained it. The challenge was to understand the ideological assent that the structure and its constitutive logic had secured over time, and this required a critical grasp of its doctrinal aspects, of what, in a philosophical and cultural sense, rendered it acceptable. Ambedkar thus came to submit chaturvarnya or the theory of the four varnas to an intense and relentless critique.

As Ambedkar well knew from his studies of the *Manusmriti* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, chaturvarnya was at once legal and moral philosophy. Its prestige and worth rested on this ostensible fact. In this context, it appeared important to interrogate not so much the content of the doctrine, which existed as common sense, but the centrality accorded to it. Ambedkar thus raised the question of its status as theory and sought to understand why it had come to be viewed as a veritable fetish.⁵⁷ The doctrine of chaturvarnya had acquired this status, argued Ambedkar, because it had successfully concealed the history of its emergence and thus placed itself beyond the pale of secular critique. It was important therefore to produce this history, and this he set out in his masterly reading of a purportedly ancient creation hymn, the *Purusha Sukta*.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ambedkar drew on Max Muller's argument about sacred books and codes of law becoming something of a fetish, but extended it to point to the "consecration of the social order" that the Hindus had managed to achieve (*The Rock on Which It is Built* in BAWS Volume 5, p. 190).

⁵⁸ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Riddle of the Varashram Dharma* in BAWS, Volume 4, p. 251; *Who were the Shudras?* in BAWS, Volume 7, pp. 21–33. Ambedkar's interest in the *Purusha Sukta* was also on account of his interest in the historical emergence of the shudras as a distinct varna, and he viewed the text as playing a role in 'fixing' the shudra in his status of perpetual ignominy.

Conventionally, this hymn was viewed as proof of the divine origins of social difference and inequality and therefore of the doctrine of *chaturvarnya*. Ambedkar argued, as other scholars had, that in all likelihood, this hymn was not as ancient as claimed, and that it was an interpolation, an allegorical fragment that had been inserted into the *Rig Veda*, the oldest of the *Vedas*. He went on to speculate on the reasons for this interpolation. Aware as he was that all ancient texts had their recensions, he was interested in excavating the conditions in which texts were recomposed and transmitted and which, in his understanding, had as much to do with social and historical changes, as with hermeneutical ones.

Ambedkar held that, in itself, the allegory of the *Purusha Sukta*, perhaps described a historically specific social division of labour as well as a graded society brought about by sexual and social enclosure. He had referenced this history at length in his study of the historical—and degraded—evolution of the *shudras* (see Chapter 4). He had noted too that under the benign guidance of the Buddhists, this vexed class, since sunk into servility, and the productive class of the *vaishyas* came into their own. This led to the *brahmins* and the *kshatriyas* combining together to form a resolute front against them. The *brahmins* ensured that they remained insuperable, and even as they accorded the *kshatriyas* an elevated status, placed the latter under their intellectual tutelage. The *varna* order, as explicated in the *Purusha Sukta*, referenced this development, which marked an important moment in the history of Brahmanical reaction.

In order to perpetuate this historically evolved social order, and render it given, the allegorical text was imported into the *Vedas*, and once installed there, it acquired the status of a creed. This was because the *Vedas* were viewed as infallible and a text inserted into the oldest of the *Vedas* partook of this infallibility. It was important, therefore, to interrogate the notion of Vedic infallibility as well, since it was this which helped valorize *chaturvarnya*. Reviewing a range of ancient texts that referenced the *Vedas*, Ambedkar pointed out that many amongst them disparaged the latter. The philosophical tradition that was believed to have emerged towards the end of the Vedic Age, the *Vedanta* tradition, was particularly severe on them. Yet in a series of texts that followed thereafter, attempts were made to reconcile the content of the *Vedas* with the contrary philosophical arguments that constituted the *Vedanta* series. Over time, a consensus emerged which held the *Vedas* to be carriers of the oldest and the most efficacious spiritual truths, which ought not to

be interrogated.⁵⁹ Vedic infallibility being what it was, once the *Purusha Sukta* was made part of it, it came to enjoy immunity from critique.

The critical fallibilist that he was, Ambedkar took apart the text of the *Purusha Sukta* to point to how it was at odds with the older narrative of which it had been made a part, and how, as a creation tale, it was unusual. After recounting the origins of animals and other species, it jumped to depicting the origins, not of human beings, but of social classes. The four classes were said to have been created out of the primordial purusha, or the divine body: the brahmin from his mouth, the kshatriya from his shoulders, the vaishya from his thighs and the shudras from his feet. The very form of the allegory was intriguing, pointed out Ambedkar, and called attention to what it sought to achieve. Thus, the “formula of equating different classes to different parts of the body” helped fix “the gradation of the class” and in turn the gradation fixed “the function of the class”.⁶⁰ The allegory thus succeeded in raising “the real, namely, the existence of the four classes in the Indo-Aryan Society, to the status of an ideal” but this was “a deception” because the ideal was “in no way different from facts as they exist[ed]”.⁶¹ And this confounding of the real and ideal, Ambedkar reasoned, helped “perpetuate an illegal gain obtained by one class and an unjust wrong inflicted upon another”.⁶²

Subsequently, chaturvarnya was reaffirmed in its sacerdotal status by the *Bhagavad Gita*, in which text it was declared to be a decree that proceeded from the greatest god of all, or Paranthama. Ambedkar observed that if chaturvarnya’s infallibility was only on account of its association with the Veda that might not have been adequate for all time, given that the Buddha had pronounced the Vedas to be worthless. Therefore, the idea needed to be upheld through other means as well, and the *Gita* provided the conceptual arguments that would render it an

⁵⁹ In his unpublished *Riddles in Hinduism*, Ambedkar devoted an entire section to examining the thesis of ‘Vedic Infallibility’ (BAWS, Volume 7, pp. 16–70). He observed that infallibility was asserted in a context where the Buddhist had resolutely negated the importance of the Vedas.

⁶⁰ B. R. Ambedkar, *Who were the Shudras?* in BAWS, Volume 7, p. 32.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 31.

⁶² Ibid., p. 32.

eternal verity.⁶³ Additionally, it came to be regarded as the very foundation of justice, a dogma that was elaborated and rendered given by the *Manusmriti*.⁶⁴

Suitably fetishized, the doctrine sought to reproduce the social order it sanctified through a complex hermeneutics of naming. It tied identity down to not just a category whose features were fixed forever, but to a designated name as well. The name assigned a caste fixed its identity in perpetuity, with regard to privileges and penalties, and no individual, whether by dint of his action or character, was free from being ranked high or low.⁶⁵ Besides, “No matter what changes took place in the relative position of an individual, his social status as a member of the class he is born in, in relation to another person belonging to another class shall in no way be affected. The first shall never become the last. The last shall never become the first”.⁶⁶

To rename oneself, as one wished, in keeping with one’s sense of self-worth or to indicate higher status than what had been granted, therefore, never quite achieved its intent. At best, re-naming remained an instance of “protective discolouration”. At worst, the camouflage failed, and the original and elided social category to which a person belonged was rendered visible, and particularly so, if one was untouchable.⁶⁷ Ambedkar reasoned that to seek a change of name without challenging the doctrine of chaturvarnya was futile, since this was an act of “clandestine” conversion that the Hindus would never countenance. In other words, whatever the changes in one’s material station, and however one sought to redefine it, one cannot expect to become another person, and opt out of one’s ascribed and fragmentary identity. For that, one ought to opt out of the sacred compact that underlay the caste order, declare it as irrelevant to oneself.⁶⁸

Ambedkar’s speculative history was a fine instance of logical reasoning. The varna-caste system evolved in complex ways, and while aware of this,

⁶³ B. R. Ambedkar, *Buddha and the Future of His Religion* in BAWS, Volume 17:2. 2003, pp. 100–102.

⁶⁴ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Triumph of Brahmanism* in BAWS, Volume 3, pp. 327–331.

⁶⁵ B. R. Ambedkar, *Philosophy of Hinduism* in BAWS, Volume 3, p. 38.

⁶⁶ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Hindu Social Order: Its Essential Principles* in BAWS, Volume 3, p. 115.

⁶⁷ B. R. Ambedkar, *Away from the Hindus* in BAWS, Volume 5, pp. 419–421.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 420.

in order to illustrate the origin of the chaturvarnya doctrine, Ambedkar chose to view its historical unfolding in terms of the logic that secured it, rather than accounting for the material conditions that produced it (except for pointing to the Brahmanical opposition to the Buddhists). He was interested not so much in a material history of the times, as he was in a history of transmission: the making of a Brahmanical thought-world that recouped historical shifts and changes within a seamless vision of the social. This instance of epistemic transformism frustrated as well as fascinated him: inscribed in language and affective relationships to do with intimacy and conjugality, it had secured for itself a perpetuity that could not be easily countenanced and interrogated.⁶⁹

Ambedkar also speculated about the relevance of chaturvarnya to the practice and endurance of untouchability. Chaturvarnya legitimized inequality, but perhaps more important, was its insistence on the separation of social groups, the manner in which it interdicted commensal and connubial practices. Thus, a veritable law of persons and family came to be, and “disunity and discord became a matter of course”.⁷⁰ This being the case, Ambedkar was not convinced by arguments, such as those put forth by the Arya Samaj and subsequently Gandhi, that untouchability was an excrescence that had grown over the varna order, which was internally coherent and harmonious; and therefore, Hindus ought to rally together to abolish untouchability, and put aside the anxiety that this would lead to, and require a breaking of varna strictures, or a cessation of the varna order.

Ambedkar disagreed with this reasoning. As far as he was concerned, the asociality of the varna system and the social odium it directed at the untouchables had to be understood as aspects of a totality that was defined equally by what was kept out, as by what was mandated and kept within its boundaries.⁷¹ The untouchables, as they were regarded at present, may not have been part of the original varna scheme, or indeed of the complex graduated order that had begun to take root in ancient India. But the

⁶⁹ His *Riddles in Hinduism* (in BAWS, Volume 4) comprises essays that demonstrate the making of this logic: through critical appraisal of scripture and law, Ambedkar demonstrates how every contingent and historical moment, of opposition to, and questioning of established wisdom, had been successfully folded into a logical point of difference and accommodated within the discourse or narrative in question, and subsequently neutralized.

⁷⁰ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Triumph of Brahmanism* in BAWS, Volume 3, p. 326.

⁷¹ B. R. Ambedkar, *The House the Hindus have Built* in BAWS, Volume 5, p. 169.

logic of separation that defined their lives was an old one: the Hindu social order had always sought to keep a set of people outside the confines of sociality.⁷²

7 ONCE AN UNTOUCHABLE ALWAYS AN UNTOUCHABLE

Ambedkar's scholar contemporaries took notice of the practice of untouchability, but they did not often go beyond description, and such arguments as they advanced to illuminate its workings remained perfunctory, and Ambedkar was aware of their limited semantic utility (see Chapter 4). Colonial government, meanwhile, was invested in constructing the untouchables as a category of governance, and from 1911 onwards utilized the official census to this purpose. In view of the 1930s debate around separate electorates for the untouchables, the government was anxious to set the terms by which untouchability could be identified and untouchables enumerated.⁷³ Ambedkar joined this debate, while giving evidence on the subject of untouchable rights to the franchise: while he agreed that no universal test might be applied to measure untouchability, it was, yet, important to recognize that the untouchables knew how they were viewed by the rest of society. They were united by a "consciousness of kind" which had to do with the social discrimination they were subject to, and to them, to be viewed as untouchable had to do with the social odium that the touchables expressed in regard to them.⁷⁴ Thus, argued Ambedkar, it was not important whether touchables held that untouchables caused ritual pollution, or they believed that it was their right to hold them at bay, denying them rights of access to shared resources, including water. For, these were but "outward registers" of an "inward feeling of defilement, odium, aversion and contempt. ...".⁷⁵

⁷² B. R. Ambedkar, *The Hindu and His Belief in Caste*, in BAWS, Volume 5, p. 100.

⁷³ See the discussion on the difficulties in identifying and enumerating the untouchables in *The Report of the Indian Franchise Committee, Volume 1*, Calcutta: Government of India Central Publication Branch, 1932, pp. 112–116. Also see in this context, Simon Charsley, 'Untouchable': What is in a Name?', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Volume 2:1, 1996, pp. 1–23.

⁷⁴ B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Ambedkar with the Simon Commission (Indian Statutory Commission)* in BAWS, Volume 2, p. 491.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p. 492.

Further, the social nausea that untouchables elicited did not have to do with the empirical details of their actual social existence: “Once an untouchable always an untouchable has been the rule of Hindu social life. This is its cardinal feature and it is this which distinguishes it from the class system in which the social status of the individual rises or falls not with that of the community to which he belongs but with his own personal merits and demerits”.⁷⁶

To Ambedkar then, untouchability was both a structural feature that placed a population beyond the bounds of the social order and an instance of ontological alterity.⁷⁷ This was evident in the manner the asocial world of the caste order yet distinguished its constituents from those placed outside of it. The lines of separation that divided the varna groupings (assuming all castes could be packed into one or the other of the varna categories) were different from the line that divided these from the untouchables, and the so-called primitive and criminal tribes. Thus, the “partition” that divided the shudra category from all others within the social order was nothing more than a “curtain”, and it did not entail absolute and permanent separation. The line that divided the varnas and the primitive and criminal tribes was firmer and sturdier, but this separation was not a severance.

On the other hand, the untouchables were separated from all else, from the primitive and criminal tribes, who, like them, were placed beyond the social order, as well as from those included within the latter. The division, of the untouchables from all others, was “real and immovable... a barbed wire fence” and meant to impose complete separation.⁷⁸ What this meant was, argued Ambedkar, that all others but the untouchables stood to be integrated within the social system. There was no ‘bar sinister’ that

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 495.

⁷⁷ Ambedkar noted elsewhere that the given-ness of this odium was most evident in the fact that even the so-called primitive and barbaric communities, also kept outside the pale of the social order, expressed social distaste as far as the untouchables were concerned (*Problem of Isolation*, in BAWS, Volume 5, pp. 115–116). It must be noted here that he was ambiguous about the rights of such groups to political self-determination: he affirmed these rights in his earliest remarks on the subject (*Dr Ambedkar at the Round Table Conferences*, BAWS, Volume 2, pp. 736–742); but subsequently argued that these communities needed to advance further to be able to exercise this right, and that until then, they ought to be given the benefit of protective legislation (*Communal Deadlock and a Way to Solve It* in BAWS, Volume 1, p. 375).

⁷⁸ B. R. Ambedkar, *The House the Hindus Have Built*, in BAWS, Volume 5, p. 168.

prevented the primitive and criminal tribes from becoming Hindu, so to speak, and being absorbed within the social order. But the untouchables could expect no such courtesy. True enough that primitive and criminal tribes were likely to be integrated as unequal and oppressed constituents of the social order, but the untouchables were enjoined to remain “separate and segregated”. If at all they could be viewed as a part of the social order, which paradoxically they were, they were yet “not a part of the whole”.⁷⁹

Ambedkar sought to conceptualize the Hindu social order while aware that he was not “part of the whole” that he wished to grasp. His location rendered his relationship to the order fundamentally agonistic, and while he sought out a politics that built on the logic of separation and segregation, he did not seek to valorize the distinct status he claimed for the untouchables. Rather, he chose to transmute the inexorable difference that marked untouchable existence into a claim for its universality: placed beyond the pale of the social order, he came to outline a critique of it, and simultaneously gestured towards what ought to replace it. The untouchables, he made clear, were invested in upending the caste system as well as in reconstructing a new world.

Ambedkar’s two pronged approach that sought to annihilate as well as reconstruct is best understood in terms of those ideals that enabled him to reckon with the caste order in the ways he did, and which showed up the limits to the latter. The constitutive inequality of the social order appeared all the more violent, when viewed in the light of the equality that Ambedkar invoked as its antithesis. He thus came to think the two together, in order to foreground the issues at stake for the untouchables, as well as the enormity of what they had to confront.

8 EQUALITY AND FRATERNITY: BEYOND RULES AND TOWARDS PRINCIPLES

Equality was a primary value, from which flowed the other ideals that Ambedkar cherished: fraternity, the sacredness of the human person and liberty. To him, equality was force and necessity, it had to be accepted for the axiomatic value that it was, and deemed ethically consequential. This was because, irrespective of the differing capacities of human

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 169.

persons, equality was an ineluctable marker of “the sacred character of the human personality”.⁸⁰ He also viewed equality as connoting more than legal and civil rights and entitlements to all, and expanded its meanings to include equality of opportunity and status. When required, he argued for its significance on utilitarian grounds as well. He admitted to its ‘fictional’ nature, in that it was desirable, might not even exist as it was imagined, but nevertheless had to be understood as an ideal, a social wager that must be staked, if not won.⁸¹

In a historical sense, he identified equality as a constituent of various moments in time: of the Buddha; the English, American and French revolutions; and the Soviet state. Grasped thus, equality was both an idea and what was born of the idea. The Protestant moment in history, embodied in the glorious English revolution, had been heralded by the emergence of spiritual equality.

Equality of persons and estates, argued and debated through the eighteenth century, led to the making of the American and French republics. The emergence of socialism, as idea and practice, brought to the fore the importance of distributive equality and justice and made for the world’s first workers’ state.⁸²

Thus possessed of the charge of equality, Ambedkar pointed to its routine irrelevance in the Indian context and how, its obverse, inequality was not only given, but how, in a granular sense, it shaped the world of the Hindus, at every level and moment of their existence.⁸³ Choice of diet, clothes, rites of passage, forms of worship, social consensus as to the

⁸⁰ B. R. Ambedkar, *Philosophy of Hinduism* in BAWS, Volume 3, p. 36.

⁸¹ B. R. Ambedkar, *Philosophy of Hinduism*, p. 25; p. 36; *The Hindu Social Order: Its Essential Principles*, p. 97 (in BAWS, Volume 3); B. R. Ambedkar, *The Revolt of the Untouchables*, p. 253; *Gandhi and His Fast*, pp. 369; 383 (in BAWS, Volume 5). I have benefitted from Aishwary Kumar’s *Radical Equality: Ambedkar, Gandhi, and the Risk of Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015) in thinking through Ambedkar’s vision of equality and justice.

⁸² Ambedkar entertained no illusions about the past as well as present prospects for equality, with regard to the historical instances that he quoted. Equality of status and opportunity were compromised in the racial world of the United States. Its promises were thwarted by the persistence of the law of contract which defined economic life in the parliamentary democracies of interwar Europe. In the Soviet Union, political unfreedom had impeded its successful and sustained realization.

⁸³ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Hindu Social Order: Its Essential Principles* in BAWS, Volume 3, pp. 102–104; *Who were the Shudras?* in BAWS, Volume 7, pp. 42–49.

rightness and wrongness of certain customs and practices, interdicts that sanctioned and penalized social behaviour: these were determined on the basis of such entitlements and denials, which accrued to an individual as a result of his or her location within the social order. Hindu life was thus not only produced in a social sense, but simultaneously policed and punished, with the intensity of punishment varying in keeping with a person's varna status. This was the case, even if Hindu life in the present was subject to a modern criminal justice system, since those who administered the law and carried out sentences were Hindus, whose sensibilities were shaped by a social ethics that accepted inequality as given.⁸⁴

To Ambedkar, the necessity of equality was underscored by what frustrated its realization, the absence of fraternity:

“Fraternity is the name for the disposition of an individual to treat men as the object of reverence and love and the desire to be in unity with fellow human beings. This statement is well expressed by Paul when he said ‘Of one blood are all nations of men, There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither bond nor free, neither male nor female; for yet are all one in Christ Jesus’. Equally well was it expressed when the Pilgrim Fathers on their landing at Plymouth said: ‘We are knit together as a body in the most sacred covenant of the Lord by virtue of which we hold ourselves tied to all care of each other’s good and of the whole’”.⁸⁵

In the absence of such fraternity, society was bound to be barbaric and such barbarity, argued Ambedkar, was built into the very core of the Hindu social order, inhering in primary social acts, of eating and loving.⁸⁶ Breaking bread together, he observed, was an ancient and affective practice that helped consolidate fellowship, but this was not to be had in the Indian context. Likewise, love and marriage, across differences, helped cement ties, but endogamy strictly enforced and observed, rendered this form of sociality impossible. Social sympathy thus was restricted

⁸⁴ B. R. Ambedkar, *Antagonism of the Administration* in BAWS, Volume 5, p. 106.

⁸⁵ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Hindu Social Order: Its Essential Principle* in BAWS, Volume 3, p. 97.

⁸⁶ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Hindu Social Order: Its Essential Principles* in BAWS, Volume 3, p. 98. He echoed the words of J. S. Mill in this context: “A person in whom social feeling is not developed cannot but bring himself to think of the rest of his fellow-beings as rivals struggling with him for the means of happiness whom he must endeavour to defeat in order that he may succeed in himself”.

to members of one's caste. These boundaries were further fortified by the almost casual and everyday manner in which each caste looked to itself, and distinguished itself, to the tiniest detail, from all other castes. Ambedkar noted rather wryly that "it is the Hindu instinct ...never to overlook a difference if it does exist, but to emphasize it, to recognise it and blazon it forth".⁸⁷

The most expressive form of "difference" was the social disaffection directed at the untouchables, and here, Ambedkar indexed the petty and trivial ways in which touchable Hindus sought to differentiate themselves from the untouchables and so shore up their exclusivity and superiority: often these had to do with denying untouchables the right to practise what appeared right to them, from wearing clothes of their choice to wanting to send their children to school, from cooking food that they desired to designing marriage ceremonies as they thought fit.⁸⁸ The impossibility of claiming what was due to oneself, as a human person, like other persons, meant that individual desire and will counted for nothing, and the individual was seldom viewed as unique.⁸⁹

Nothing illustrated the disregard for the individual in the Hindu scheme of things than the elaborate and multitudinous social rules, to which he was subject. Such rules, Ambedkar held, were not only dreary and tedious but they appeared set in stone and "invested with the character of finality and fixity". Fettered, thus, by "a multitude of commands and prohibitions" and a "legalized class-ethics", the moral life of the Hindus was "deprived of freedom and spontaneity". They were also deprived of the right to happiness, which, as he observed, varied "with the conditions and circumstances of a person, as well as with the conditions of different people and epochs. That being the case, how can humanity endure this code of eternal laws, without being cramped and without being crippled?".⁹⁰

The ubiquity of rules that defined life in the Hindu social order was only matched by, what seemed to Ambedkar, a glaring lack: that it was

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 101.

⁸⁸ B. R. Ambedkar, *Problem of Isolation* in BAWS, Volume 5, pp. 118–120.

⁸⁹ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Hindu Social Order: Its Essential Principle* in BAWS, Volume 3, p. 95. Rather poignantly, Ambedkar cited in this context the theologian, Jacques Maritain: "To say a person is a person is to say that in the depth of his being he is more a whole than a part, and more independent than servile..."

⁹⁰ B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* in BAWS, Volume 1, p. 76.

not defined by definite principles. Unlike rules, which were really like “cooking recipes” and pointed to what a person ought to do and how he were to do it, principles enabled a person assess his or her actions in relation to a norm. “A principle, such as that of justice, supplies a main head by a reference to which he is to consider the bearings of his desires and purposes...” To act with regard to a principle meant that one acted out of choice, and with a measure of responsibility. Whereas with a rule, one merely acted in obedience. It was not so much the content of the norm or the rule that was important, when it came to ethical action, but the action itself. For, even if the principle was wrong, the act would yet be “conscious and responsible”; whereas to follow a rule, even if a good one would remain a mechanical act.⁹¹

To foster and encourage responsible action, a religion that heeded principles was necessary, for only such a religion would make for subtle and meaningful ethics. The Hindu religion had failed this test: it remained a religion of rules and was not alive to ever changing human needs and wants. Historically, argued Ambedkar, religion had held society together, and in two ways: by answering to human fears and thus serving a utilitarian purpose, and responding to justice claims and thus answering an egalitarian need.⁹² Utilitarian considerations had been paramount in early societies, when survival and generational continuity had to be ensured. That was a time when gods were not strangers, but forefathers and community members, who needed to be invoked, appealed to and placated during times of crisis. This was a world where religion and community were coterminous. Subsequently, as societies changed and evolved, belief in a familiar god was replaced by a desire for one that would answer to human notions of justice and injustice, and this led to a conception of the divine as impartial, universal, and the creator and

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 75. Ambedkar echoed Dewey in thus distinguishing principle from rule (See John Dewey and James Tufts, *Ethics*, New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1936 [1908], pp. 304–313) Dewey and Tufts defined principles as intellectual, and pertaining to method, and rules as practical and pertaining to habit. They also distinguished an ethical approach that heeded principles, and fostered moral discretion, from a legal view of conduct, which heeded the letter than the spirit of morality. For Ambedkar, this distinction proved useful in identifying the limits of legal philosophy as expounded in the *Manusmriti* from the ethical philosophy he came to associate with religions that were defined by principles rather than injunctions.

⁹² For the most detailed examination of religion in this manner, see B. R. Ambedkar, *Philosophy of Hinduism* in BAWs, Volume 3, pp. 22–72.

governor of the universe. The goodness, greatness and inherent justice that came to be identified with the Creator mirrored men's own yearnings, for a better and more just world and their insistence that such justice should heed reasoned ethical claims.

Ambedkar noted that except perhaps in its earliest days the Hindu religion had not acknowledged the universal and indivisible nature of human need: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need is not the principle of the Hindu social order. The principle of the Hindu social order is: From each according to his need. To each according to his nobility".⁹³ Neither had the religion adequately answered justice claims. Divinity, though imagined as compassionate and capable of infinite love, was not viewed as a dispenser of even-handed justice, but rather as one who presided over and endorsed a complicated and graded system of rewards and punishments. While human beings could appeal to God's all caring compassion, there was no insistence that they were as compassionate in their relationship with each other. This had made for a profoundly anti-social ethics and created a situation where "no one is a brother to the other, [and therefore] no one is the keeper of the other".⁹⁴ This attitude had come to be normalized and existed as an expression of what appeared "habitual, self-suggested tendencies".⁹⁵

To work against the grain of this mental habitude which paid no heed to human suffering or made for human solidarity, one needed more thought and greater liberty of thought, and here, Ambedkar made bold to argue that it was one thing to submit the Hindu social order, its constitutive inequality and social disaffection and the doctrine of *chaturvarnya* to relentless critique, but ultimately what was required was a philosophical vision that would both upturn the caste order and reconstruct a just, equal, fraternal and free social universe. But for this, philosophical thought ought to be recognized as inexorably social, as having always emerged out of concrete social circumstances. Ambedkar was at pains to point this out, because, for too long, Hindu reformers had desisted from undertaking a thorough critique of the social order and instead pointed to philosophical debates to do with the soul and the Absolute, to argue

⁹³ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Hindu Social Order: Its Essential Principles* in BAWS, Volume 3, p. 111.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁹⁵ B. R. Ambedkar, *Their Wishes are Law Unto Us* in BAWS, Volume 5, p. 284. These are the words of the historian Grote that Ambedkar integrates into his argument.

that the Hindu religion did hold all beings equal, and as aspects of the divine. They had also refused to concede that philosophical arguments ought to be socially responsive. To Ambedkar this seemed an untenable position, since philosophy did not arise *ex nihilo*; rather, it had “its roots in the problems of life” and hence it seemed logical to claim that “whatever theories philosophy propounds must return to society as instruments for reconstructing society”.⁹⁶

Unless this happened, argued Ambedkar, the religious basis of social life would remain moribund. To reconstruct the social universe, a revolution in thought was necessary, but equally revolutionary ideas needed to be substantiated in and through the positing of enabling religious ideals and practices. Positing a dynamic relationship between philosophy and religion, and religion and society, he noted that “Philosophy is concerned with knowing the truth. Religion is concerned with loving the truth”. Understood thus, religion was “directly and vitally effective of politics” and thus it could be argued that “religion is politics and politics is brotherhood...”.⁹⁷

9 SOCIAL KINSHIP AND SYMPATHETIC RESENTMENT

Ambedkar’s turn to religion to anchor a reconstructed world view was, in a sense, logical: his critique of the Hindu social order had pointed to not what it lacked by way of ideals, or its failure to live up to such ideals that it professed. Rather, he had demonstrated that it was normatively flawed and that the flaw had to do with its religious basis. The Hindu religion had to be dismantled, overthrown, for only then the social order could be reconstructed. Whether touchable Hindus would do it or not was another matter; for it would require them to be critically reflexive in a manner that their religious texts had seldom taught them to be. On the other hand, should they wish to do so, they had to be ready for a

⁹⁶ B. R. Ambedkar, *Brahma is not Dharma, What God is Brahma* in BAWS, Volume 4, p. 286.

⁹⁷ B. R. Ambedkar, *Philosophy of Hinduism* in BAWS, Volume 3, pp. 86–87. Ambedkar cites, in this context, Max Plowman (1883–1941), an English pacifist and socialist, associated with the *Adelphi*, a socialist journal. Plowman was influenced by William Blake’s poetry and sought to rethink his apocalyptic verse in the context of the socialist future, which, for him, signified the advent of the New Jerusalem (see Max Plowman, *An Introduction to the Study of William Blake*, London: Frank Cass & Co Ltd., 2nd Edition, 1967).

radical rethinking of cherished precepts and this would require a “complete remoulding” of their faith, “a considerable scraping and chipping off the ore” it contained. Such an overhaul was akin to a “conversion” and meant that they had to ready themselves for a “new life”.⁹⁸

For the untouchables, such conversion, in its material and metaphorical sense, was not a choice, but a necessity. Their critical and agonistic relationship to the social order required them to exit it and re-comport themselves within a different social and religious universe. This was essential to end their social isolation and energize their imagination, and to enable them experience the equality and fraternity long denied them. It was not that there were no other means for the untouchables to experience a sense of belonging. After all, they were part of political communities, to do with nationalism and labour. And they had sought to also claim political rights for themselves. The nation proposed one form of belonging, it guaranteed citizenship in return for political allegiance; and communist movements made for a putative comradeship.

But there was no guarantee that either of these collectives would make for social kinship, for a compact that instilled in the untouchables the feeling and conviction that they were equal members of a fraternal whole. Ambedkar was convinced that this was possible only if they were part of a religious community, for in a historical sense it was religion that had made for community life, had helped forge social kinship and render it a “social covenant of brotherhood”.⁹⁹ Such kinship, which was established on the basis of shared principles and moral measure, argued Ambedkar, made for a feeling of “sympathetic resentment”. A compound of “tender emotion and anger”, sympathetic resentment was akin to the protective anger that a parent felt towards one that had wronged a child. And, “anger invoked in this way is the germ of all moral indignation and on moral indignation is justice and the greater part of the public law are founded”.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* in BAWS, Volume 1, p. 78.

⁹⁹ B. R. Ambedkar, *Away from the Hindus* in BAWS, Volume 5, p. 417. During the Constitutional Assembly debates, Ambedkar would rue the impossibility of constitutional morality taking root in the Indian context, and perhaps he had in mind the social absence of sympathetic resentment; as moral sentiment, it had a role to play in the making of a sense of justice, and clearly he did not think it would take root in a culture, shaped by caste.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 415. Ambedkar draws on the writings of the social psychologist William McDougall here. McDougall (1871–1938) was something of a maverick, who was opposed to behaviourism, and instead outlined a theory of action, based on his understanding

Ambedkar argued that the realm of religion was consequential for other reasons as well. At all times, religion had to do with social processes, with human efforts at conserving and sustaining life; in fact, it might be said to have enabled the “consecration of social life”. It was the very basis of the social, akin to language, and in this sense constituted a necessary condition for human co-existence, communication and the emergence of shared values: “Religion emphasizes, universalizes social values and brings them to the mind of the individual who is required to recognize them in all his acts in order that he may function as an approved member of the society”.¹⁰¹ This meant that if untouchables were to embrace a religion that accorded them respect, recognized the sacredness of their human persons and made for equality and fraternity, they would become ethically self-conscious and responsible in ways that were not allowed them in the Hindu religion and social order. In turn, this would invigorate their selves, since religion acted on the emotions and made for hope and confidence, even as the philosophy of the religion in question appealed to their reason.¹⁰²

In urging the untouchables to move away from the Hindus and Hinduism, Ambedkar sought to reconstruct them as a vanguard, a people, whose consciousness would not remain circumscribed by their ascribed social position and which, instead, would enable them emerge as a class of people, acting on their own, and with an acute political and self-consciousness of all that was due to them. In the task of upending the caste order and untouchability, they would thus be in the forefront, as much in the realm of thought, as in the realm of practice.

It is evident that Ambedkar viewed annihilation of the social order and the advent of a new life as aspects of a singular dialectical move. However,

of instincts and inherited characteristics; in turn, this led him to propose a racialized understanding of human worth. Ambedkar drew from his earlier work, *An Introduction to Social Psychology*, London: Methuen & Co, 1908.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 409. Charles Ellwood (1873–1946) is Ambedkar’s muse here. Ellwood was an American sociologist, best known for his advocacy of using sociology to address social problems and for his study of intolerance. He was also active in anti-racist work in the South, especially against the Ku Klux Klan. The book that Ambedkar references here is *The Reconstruction of Religion*, New York: the Macmillan Company, 1923. Ellwood wrote the book in the years following the Great War and was one amongst many that argued for a rethinking of religion for the present, in keeping with the insights proffered by the social sciences.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 418.

he also viewed the making of this new life in terms of other, and intersecting, transformations. For, after all, the philosophy of Hinduism had led to great material distress as well. It had validated the dissection of “society in fragments”, and the dissociation of “work from interest... intelligence from labour...” and had thus exonerated the expropriation of “the rights of man to interests vital to life” and worse, actively prevented “society from mobilising resources for common action in times of danger”.¹⁰³ It appeared important, therefore, that the justice claims of fraternal philosophies were examined and claimed, and this was precisely what Ambedkar looked to do with socialism. Poised between a eutopic endeavour and a brisk sense of history that made him act in the circumstances given to him, he straddled several traditions of thought and politics as he did several temporalities.

¹⁰³ BAWS, Volume 3, p. 71.



The Pre-requisites of Communism: Rethinking Revolution

I A MAN FOR LABOUR

In 1942, the colonial government of India invited Ambedkar into the Viceroy's Council and made him the member in charge of Labour. At this time, Ambedkar was frustrated by the refusal of the imperial government to heed the political claims of the untouchables, a fact which had become amply clear to him when Labourite Sir Stafford Cripps undertook a trip to India earlier in the year. His task was to persuade the nationalists to cooperate with the war effort and to discuss with them the modalities for the future transfer of power from British to Indian hands. The Cripps Mission, as it came to be known, proved a failure, and the Congress went on to issue its call to the British to "quit India". Meanwhile, given the gathering hostility on the streets, the government refused to parley with the nationalists and arrested all of them, and many, including Nehru and Gandhi, would spend part of the war years in prison.

This was when Ambedkar was called into the Council. As noted earlier, it was not easy speaking for labour concerns at a time when labour was expected to be productive and put up with difficult work conditions. In any case, Ambedkar took to his responsibilities with alacrity. Apart from carrying out a slew of important practical measures that extended worker rights, he also made it a point to address workers and visit their places of work. His speeches at labour conferences and camps comprised a set of

interlocking themes. He warned workers of the dangers of Nazism, and its pernicious racial philosophy. He also asked them to re-examine their commitment to the nationalist struggle. What could labour have to do with a philosophy, he asked, which required “worship of the ancient past ... the discarding of everything that is not local in origin and colour ...” Labour, he noted, had to trust in the future and must not “allow the living faith of the dead to become the dead faith of the living”. While this was a continuation of his lifelong critique of nationalism in India, it possessed a new edge, in that it linked the perpetuation of the Hindu social order to a thwarting of what he termed the “expanding spirit of man” which thus stood to be “strangled by the hand of the past which has no meaning for the present and no hope for the future”¹. In another instance, he noted that nationalisms, across the world, had seldom taken into account labour’s sacrifices: “More often than not, the free independent national state which emerges from a successful nationalism and which reared on their sacrifices, turns to be the enemy of the working class under the hegemony of their masters. This is the worst kind of exploitation that Labour has allowed itself to be subjected to”.²

Ambedkar’s interest in the labour question was not new; he had sought to address worker concerns from his earliest days in the legislature. He followed the progress of left politics keenly, though he was barely sympathetic to the Communist Party of India (CPI) and its trade unions. He was less hostile to the socialist rump within the Indian National Congress and did engage with socialist leaders, especially those that were part of agrarian movements, through the 1930s and even after. In the 1940s, his engagement with the labour and socialist questions became more pronounced, and as India moved close to becoming an independent nation, he was more or less convinced that the future republic ought to aspire to being a socialist state. As we have noted, the decade of the 1940s was also when he was actively researching and working on the ancient past, and Buddhism loomed large in his imagination. This chapter

¹ Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Why Indian Labour is Determined to Win the War* in Writings and Speeches (BAWS), Mumbai: The Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Volume 10, 1991, p. 40. Henceforth, all references to Ambedkar’s writings in this chapter will cite the acronym, BAWS, followed by volume number, year of publication and page numbers.

² B.R. Ambedkar, *Labour and Parliamentary Democracy*, BAWS, Volume 10, p. 111.

traces the history of his engagement with the labour and socialist questions through the decades and argues that his turn to Buddhism, to which he and the untouchables would convert, has to be viewed alongside and in relationship to his evolving socialist concerns.

2 PLEBEIAN REVOLTS AND LABOUR'S FUTURE

During his term as Labour member, Ambedkar appears to have embarked on a wide-ranging study of the labour and socialist questions, as is evident from the eclectic collection of books, all published in the 1940s, that he acquired and read during this time. While he does not reference all of them in his writings, he read some books more intensively than others and marked passages he considered important.³ For instance, if one were to consider a well-thumbed book such as Norman Mackenzie's *Socialism: A Short History*, certain sections have been read and marked in detail and these reference themes that Ambedkar looked for and read in other texts.⁴

One such theme had to do with the relationship between heretical religious thought and political and economic struggles. The parts in Mackenzie's text that spoke to him in this regard had to do with peasant uprisings in England, associated with John Ball in the fourteenth century and Gerrard Winstanley in the seventeenth century. Of these revolts, Mackenzie notes (and Ambedkar marked these lines): "In spite of brutality and bloodshed, these plebeian heresies flourished amongst the peasants and among the poorer townsmen, keeping alive the early Christian doctrine that private property was sinful... that men had a right to equal share of the wealth they produced".⁵

Given his preoccupation, since the mid-1930s, with exiting Hinduism, a history of resistance anchored in a millenarian understanding of justice and equality no doubt affirmed and strengthened his resolve, and, as important, furnished him proof of how religion was not irrelevant to

³ Scott Stroud has argued eloquently for reading Ambedkar's markings and jottings as significant, in that they help trace the ideas that he viewed as important and made his own. See Scott Stroud, 'The Like-mindedness of John Dewey and Ambedkar', *The Forward Press*, May 19, 2017; <https://www.forwardpress.in/2017/05/john-dewey-pragmatism-communication-and-bhimrao-ambedkar/>; Accessed January 24, 2021.

⁴ All references to the book are from the 1949 edition, Norman Mackenzie, *Socialism: A Short History*, published by Hutchinson University Library.

⁵ Norman Mackenzie, *Socialism: A Short History*, p. 17.

struggles against injustice. He read further on the relationship between religion and revolt, in particular on the relationship between science, socialism and faith, on the one hand, and science, socialism and ethics on the other. The one led him to review reflections on Christian socialism, such as the work of Joseph Needham, and the other, to reflect on writings on science and the future society by left-leaning authors, including Julian Huxley, Howard Selsam and Jack Lindsay.

Another set of related concerns which featured in Mackenzie's book had to do with alternative ways of living, not defined by private property, whether these were Proudhon's cooperatives, or the settlements founded by Robert Owen. Ambedkar, as we know, favoured separate settlements for the untouchables, and he imagined these in two ways: separate villages where they would not have to deal with touchable Hindus, and a settlement house-style initiative in the city of Bombay.⁶ While committed to practical results in the struggle against inequality and social odium, Ambedkar sustained a eutopic imagination, which looked to build a new world, not in the distant future, but in the here and now.

A third concern was an old one, but in the 1940s and after, it had to be rethought: this was the question of the state and what it might yet do, or not do, for the most marginal of its citizens. Ambedkar appears to have found the French historical experience interesting at this point in time. He was drawn to views espoused by the socialist Louis Blanc, possibly because Blanc held that the state could be used as an instrument of reform rather than a machine of domination of one class over the other. These lines in Mackenzie's book, to do with the transformed post-revolutionary French state, attracted Ambedkar's attention: "The intense political experience of the revolution could no longer be forgotten. Socialist ideas were no longer an abstract doctrine. Men had learned that the State may be used to abolish privilege, to direct production and control distribution, to give reward according to need, to sustain the interests of the poor against the greed and exploitation of the rich".⁷ This description appears a distinct vision of the post-War British welfare state-to-be, rather than of

⁶ Mary Simkhovitch who was married to his teacher at Columbia University, Vladimir Simkhovitch, was part of a settlement house, and it is likely Ambedkar knew of it. He referenced such institutions in the note he prepared as part of his campaign to elicit support for the social centre that he wished to found for untouchables in Bombay city (*A Social Centre for the Untouchables in Bombay*, in BAWS, Volume 17:2, 2003, pp. 445–454).

⁷ *Norman Mackenzie, Socialism: A Short History*, p. 21.

the French state under Napoleon. In any event, it was this idealized state that Ambedkar invoked in his addresses to workers during this period, and he would reference such a state in his writings on Buddhism as well.⁸

Thinking through the possibilities of labour's political advancement as he addressed workers, he appears to have been drawn to those sections in Mackenzie's book that had to do with the First International and the Paris Commune. It is likely that the International, with its working-class members and the way it conducted its affairs and the revolutionary and democratic functioning of the commune, interested him. In both instances, the working class was present, as itself, and imbued with keen political awareness, and historical self-consciousness. Ambedkar had consistently held that workers must think beyond their status as workers and acquire political self-knowledge. He did not think that a party that was not led by them, but by professional agitators or revolutionaries, could help them achieve this. Rather, he desired the working class to fashion itself into its own party, with workers arbitrating their affairs directly.⁹

Ambedkar's concerns as they emerge from his readings to do with labour and socialist questions pertained to the moment of the 1940s, but they were not only of it. Rather, they represented ideas and arguments that had held his attention for nearly two decades, and which led him to pursue several radical intellectual and political projects all at once.

3 LABOUR AND CASTE: FROM THE INTERWAR YEARS TO THE 1940S

Ambedkar's student work, undertaken at Columbia and the London school of Economics, had to do with commerce, public finance, trade and monetarism.¹⁰ From his published work from this time, it is clear that he favoured a strongly argued historical method. More specifically, in his writings on colonial rule and policy in India, with regard to revenue and finance, he adopted a nationalist historical approach. He indexed the

⁸ B.R. Ambedkar, *Buddha or Karl Marx* in BAWS, Volume 3, pp. 453–462.

⁹ B.R. Ambedkar, *Trade Unions Must Enter Politics to Protect Their Interests* in BAWS, Volume 17:3, 2003, pp. 182–192.

¹⁰ For the coursework that Ambedkar undertook at Columbia University, see <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/timeline/graphics/courses.html>; Accessed January 24, 2021.

human costs of colonial commerce, fiscal and revenue policies, and called attention to the transformed lives of labourers, artisans and peasants, on account of the changes that beset India's economy.¹¹ His monetarist writings were specialized in the main, having to do with the relative merits of the gold and silver standards and the gold exchange standard, but remained resolutely historical in terms of method. In them too might be detected a distinct nationalist strain.¹²

From his earliest days in public life, he wondered about the doubly ignominious status of the untouchables: their economic dependence on the upper castes, and their spatial and physical segregation from all others, including fellow workers. And as we saw, he wondered if there was indeed a class of people elsewhere in the world like them, and whether their situation was not historically unique:

"It is one which is midway between that of the serf and the slave, and which may, for convenience, be called servile with this difference, that the serf and the slave were permitted to have physical contact, from which the Depressed Classes are debarred. What is worse is that this enforced servility and bar to human intercourse, due to their untouchability, involves, not merely the possibility of discrimination in public life, but actually works out as a positive denial of all equality of opportunity and the denial of those most elementary of civic rights on which all human existence depends".¹³

His work on the Mahar watan enabled him think through the material and social status of the untouchables, and as we saw, he viewed it through the prism of slavery, which, in turn, was redefined to explain what obtained in the Indian context (see Chapter 4).

The condition of labour was a staple of his Budget speeches through the 1920s and 1930s, and he argued for progressive taxation and generous state spending on public utilities, including health care.¹⁴ Given that untouchables could not hope to pursue an independent economic

¹¹ B.R. Ambedkar, *The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India: A Study in the Provincial Decentralization of Imperial Finance*, in BAWS, Volume 6, pp. 51–312.

¹² B.R. Ambedkar, *The Problem of the Rupee: The Problem and the Solution*, in BAWS, Volume 6, pp. 317–618.

¹³ B.R. Ambedkar, *Need for Political Power for the Depressed Classes*, in BAWS, Volume 2, p. 503.

¹⁴ B.R. Ambedkar, *On Budget*, in BAWS, Volume 2, pp. 1–44.

existence, and their untouchable status stigmatized all that they did, Ambedkar looked to the state for material redressal. In his addresses to the committees set up to negotiate political reform in India, he insisted that untouchable welfare ought to be the first charge on the state's finances.¹⁵

Further, in his role as an official assigned to the Starte Committee constituted—in 1929—to enquire into the condition of the depressed classes (as untouchables were officially referred to, at the time) and the so-called tribes in the Bombay province, he sought to conceptualize the condition and nature of untouchable lives and labour, in as precise a manner as possible. In a questionnaire he designed to guide committee members as they went about collecting information, he indexed a range of concerns: what sorts of labour were imposed on the untouchables? Were they forced to labour when they defaulted on paying interest on loans? Was their land, if they had any, attached as a result of their inability to repay loans? Had their indebtedness elicited the concern of the government and had anti-debt legislation in the past helped their case? Did every untouchable community have its own assigned profession, and if so, did it receive support for transacting it, by way of cooperative loans? If no specific profession was assigned to an untouchable caste, what sorts of labour were its members compelled to perform, and were they paid for the same? Did untouchables have access to land, and should they?¹⁶

The Starte Committee recommended a set of measures to address concerns that it viewed as important, and some of these were based on demands raised in the 1920s, in the conferences convened by the Bahishkrut Hitkarni Sabha, the organization Ambedkar had founded in 1924 for advocating and realizing civil and other rights for the untouchables: for instance, the demand that the government assign village common or forest land to the untouchables. The Starte Committee also

¹⁵ His—and the Scheduled Caste Federation's—most comprehensive statement to do with public allocations for untouchable advancement is to be found in *States and Minorities* (BAWS, Volume 1, 1979, p. 403).

¹⁶ See B.R. Kamble (translator), *Bahishkrit Bharat (A Newspaper in Marathi founded by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar in April 1927), Part 4*, Kolhapur: Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Research Institute in Social Growth, pp. 103–105. While the Committee was charged with enquiring into the condition of the backward and depressed classes as such, which included those designated by the government as 'criminal', the questions, focused as they are on the status of untouchables, indicate that Ambedkar was instrumental in framing them.

asked, as the Sabha had, for commutation of such debts as the untouchables incurred, and for increased state spending on their education.¹⁷

The question of land remained a constant concern, and in the 1930s, in the wake of his founding the Independent Labour Party (ILP), he chose to address the inequity that was constitutive of the overall agrarian economy (in western Maharashtra). In this part of the country, there existed a rentier system which was extractive and coercive and included the imposition of customary labour on tenant farmers. After Ambedkar raised the issue in the Bombay legislature in the late 1920s, his followers had sought to work in the region, rousing both touchable and untouchable tenants into several sorts of protests against the rentiers. In 1937, after being elected to the Bombay legislature on behalf of the ILP, Ambedkar worked on legislation that would regulate the rights of rentiers and firm up tenancy rights.¹⁸

During the early ILP years, that is the late 1930s, Ambedkar imagined a new politics of radical solidarity. He was keen on building a peasant-worker alliance and was looking for fraternal movements to be part of it. He appears to have looked to such peasant organizations as had emerged in Bihar and Gujarat.¹⁹ As far as the struggle against the rentiers in western India was concerned, he envisioned a unified movement that would bring touchable and untouchable tenants, and untouchable landless labourers into a new compact. The proposed law was a measure of this solidarity. On the ground, there was a great deal of ferment as touchable and untouchable tenants rallied together against the rentiers. Interestingly, Ambedkar even offered to put the social struggle against untouchability in abeyance in order to enable the fight against the rentiers to succeed.²⁰ In addition to being personally present in villages where

¹⁷ *Report of the Depressed Classes and Aboriginal Tribes Committee, Bombay Presidency, March 1930*, Bombay: Central Government Press, 1930.

¹⁸ B.R. Ambedkar, *Bill No. XX of 1937 to Abolish the Khoti System*, in BAWs, Volume 2, pp. 96–103.

¹⁹ Gail Omvedt notes that Ambedkar's initiative represented an interesting third option in the Indian context: between the anti-imperialist united front and the vanguard party (*Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994, p. 185).

²⁰ My account of the anti-rentier struggle is drawn from Santosh Suradhkar, *The Anti-Khot Movement in the Konkan, C. 1920–1949*, Noida: V. V. Giri National Labour Institute, 2013. With regard to his decision to stay action against untouchability, see pp. 25–26.

tenants refused to pay their dues, he appeared in court for those who had been charged with several crimes even as they protested.

The 1930s saw left-leaning, nationalist agrarian organizations active across the country. Local leaders supported by the Congress socialists and the CPI, which functioned as a clandestine group, being banned in 1934, had built a formidable network of agitating peasants and agricultural labourers, and many of the latter were untouchables. Ambedkar knew of these efforts and was not averse to seeking common ground with the agrarian groups, and met with important peasant leaders, and suggested that together they constitute an independent, non-nationalist economic and political front.²¹

However, an expansive politics that envisaged a crucial role for untouchable agricultural labourers was not easy to argue for, or indeed sustainable in practice, in the specific context in which he and the ILP were active. Even as untouchable and touchable tenants stood together in the face of rentier attempts to split their ranks, they remained divided when it came to everyday relationships: for instance, the customary service labour that untouchables were expected to perform for the village continued to be demanded of them, and when they refused, this did not endear them to the touchable peasants. Secondly, even as Ambedkar and the ILP spoke up for the rights of tenants and sharecroppers, they knew that a majority of the untouchables who were mostly landless were unlikely to benefit over much from the struggle against extractive rent. They needed land, but could not stake claims that were likely to be heeded or respected.

The ILP put forth a rather novel demand in this context that it hoped would help address the situation of the landless: a minimum standard wage for agricultural labourers. This was a radical move, for, in the existing system, workers were paid in grain, and the amount paid out varied with the measure of harvest, and in consonance with the service labour that untouchable workers had to carry out. In its place, the ILP sought a fixed wage, thus seeking an end to a capricious system of payments within a caste-defined economy. In the event, the party sought to reconceptualize untouchable labour and transform the caste labourer into a wage labourer, a transition that neither colonialism nor

²¹ Ibid., p. 25.

capitalism had been able to bring about consistently and across British India. It is unlikely that peasants took kindly to this demand.²²

The question of untouchable landlessness and their being forced to perform servile labour bothered Ambedkar for years to come, and he would go on to argue that he was not interested in tenancy reform that only helped create peasant proprietors, but left the landless out of the ken of distributive justice. In the 1950s, he would state as much in a lawsuit to do with the abolition of the rentier system in northern India, where he argued that he did not see how public purpose was served by legislation that contented itself with tenancy reform and did not seek to address the problem of untouchable landlessness. If, instead of rentier property being acquired by the state to dispense to tenants, land had been nationalized, that would have constituted true public purpose; but in this instance, land was to be given to some and not others, especially the untouchables, and that was a perversion of public interest.²³

Ambedkar's engagement with labour and socialism in the urban context was at once critical and productive. As we have noted, in the late 1920s, he called attention to communist disinterest in addressing worker prejudices and practices that had to do with their adherence to caste and religious norms. It was Ambedkar's argument that caste prejudice, which came in the way of untouchables working in the weaving department (crucial to the textile industry), needed to be addressed both in its contingent and ideological aspects.²⁴ Untouchable workers ought to be allowed in the weaving department and at the same time the caste disaffection that

²² Ibid., p. 18.

²³ This was a rather odd lawsuit, with Ambedkar appearing for a rentier, whose lands stood to be alienated by a new act that relieved them of land that exceeded a certain ceiling set on its possession. Ambedkar redefined the idea of public purpose which alone would justify the non-payment of compensation for such land as was being acquired: he made clear the 'public' cannot exclude the untouchables. See <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/629631/>. Supreme Court of India, Raja Suriya Pal Singh vs The State of U.P. and Another (And Other Cases) on 27 May, 1952, 1975 AIR 1083, for a summary of arguments that Ambedkar made in court.

²⁴ On Ambedkar's insistence the communist-led trade union tabled the inclusion of untouchables in the weaving department as part of the demands that were submitted to mill managements. See G. Adhikari, *Documents of the History of the Communist Party of India*, Volume III (C), New Delhi: People's Publishing House (n.d), p. 111; and B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Ambedkar with the Simon Commission (Indian Statutory Commission)*, in BAWs, Volume 2, p. 474.

shaped worker relations had to be addressed.²⁵ In this context, it is pertinent to note that communist leaders were convinced that one could not hope to make much headway in constituting a united front against imperialism by taking up social reform concerns to do with caste. In at least one instance, it was argued that a lower caste that sought rights, hitherto denied to it, was unlikely to support the granting of rights, or for that matter, the breaking of caste rules in other instances. The matter was best not raised, and left-leaning nationalists ought, instead, to work at keeping different segments of the population together.²⁶

Ambedkar also rebuked the communist-led textile union in Bombay—in the late 1920s—for their attempts to rouse workers on matters that did not have much to do with their immediate concerns, but which fed into a generalized nationalist discontent.²⁷ He argued that this was done without taking into account the conditions of working-class existence, especially of untouchable workers. Prolonged strike periods affected untouchable workers more than others, since they had neither land nor other sources of support in the rural hinterland that would help them tide over the period. They got into deep debt and found it difficult to get out of it. Subsequently, while recalling the 1920s strikes, he wondered if the communists were not fetishizing the strike as a political

²⁵ Untouchability proved a line of division that split the working class in some contexts more than others. In colonial Madras, for instance differences between the two segments were pronounced, and untouchable workers resolutely refused to join strikes and the colonial government ensured that they remained aloof (See V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar*, Calcutta: Samya, 1998, pp. 181–198). On the other hand, worker solidarity was not absent in all contexts, but even when present, did not make for proletarian politics that challenged caste and untouchability; thus workers would insist that their standing together on workplace demands was one thing, but to dine together was an entirely another matter, and was not acceptable, since it went against the social and moral codes they lived by (See Nitin Sinha, 'The World of Workers' Politics: Some Issues of Railway Workers in Colonial India, 1918–1922', *Modern Asian Studies*, Volume 42:5, 2008, p. 1023).

²⁶ See Moni Singh, *My Life is a Struggle*, p. 16; Quoted in Parthasarathi Pathak, *Communists on Caste*, Unpublished Phd. Thesis, Kolkata: Jadavpur University, pp. 142–143.

²⁷ Historians of labour are divided as to whether or not the strikes were fuel led by political agitation. Chandavarkar for instance suggests that strikes had to do largely with labour concerns and that political agitators took advantage of the moment (Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, 'Workers' Politics and the Mill Districts in Bombay Between the Wars', *Modern Asian Studies*, Volume 15:3, 1981, pp. 603–605).

weapon, “as was done in the good old days of the revolutionary syndicalists” and if so, such an exercise was not one that revolutionary Marxists would have viewed with approval.²⁸

In the 1930s, Ambedkar’s support of industrial labour possessed a different tenor. As we saw, he passionately argued against the anti-worker industrial relations bill that was tabled in the Bombay legislature in 1938. A massive workers’ rally was organized by the ILP to protest the proposed law and was addressed by labour leaders, including from the CPI. During this time, he was convinced that untouchables ought to constitute themselves as the proletariat in distinctive ways, and dare to imagine that day when they would lead labour politically. After all, he argued, they were well situated to do so, given the “great social wrongs” done unto them. The consciousness of such wrong was bound to instil in them an acute recognition of the importance of not just their economic rights, but their political rights as well. The untouchables thus stood to become the “beacon light to all labour in India in the matter of genuine political organization”.²⁹

In 1942, the ILP ceased to be, and Ambedkar went on to establish a new political party, the Scheduled Castes Federation (SCF), a party of and for the untouchables, in conditions of political uncertainty. The SCF retained the core ideals of the ILP but stopped short of specifying its economic vision, which, in the earlier instance, was recognizably socialist.³⁰ This was also when he was invited to become the Labour member in the Viceroy’s cabinet. Wartime industrial expansion and production appeared to hold possibilities, in that a new generation of lower caste and untouchable labourers could be inducted into modern factory labour with security of tenure.³¹ To Ambedkar, this seemed a compensation for the general restrictions on labour mobility and rights during this period: “The Government of India for the first time has taken

²⁸ B.R. Ambedkar, *Trade Unions Must Enter Politics to Protect Their Interests*, in BAWS, Volume 17:3, p. 183.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 17:3, p. 191.

³⁰ See B.R. Ambedkar, *Independent Labour Party*, in BAWS, Volume 17:2, pp. 413–419 for a newspaper account of the formation of the ILP and its broad aims and objectives; for the *Constitution of the Scheduled Caste Federation*, see BAWS, Volume 17:2, pp. 455–458.

³¹ B.R. Ambedkar, *Why Indian Labour Is Determined to Win the War*, in BAWS, Volume 10, pp. 36–43.

upon itself the responsibility which it never did before of fixing the conditions on which a labourer may be employed. I think this is altogether a new principle which had no place in our labour legislation so far, and I am sure that this principle which has found its place in wartime legislation will be given a permanent place in the labour legislation of this country".³²

In practical terms, though, he had to steer his way through times that saw the colonial government veer between repressive legislation and confused conciliation with regard to 'managing' labour. Things proved tricky, especially with measures the government adopted to expand production: long working hours, the difficult and exploitative working conditions in the new and small industrial units that mushroomed across the country and the curbing of workers' rights to exit from jobs that were poorly paid or work situations that were exploitative.³³

One of the more unpopular measures that the government undertook during the War years was to re-employ women in coal mines. The demand for coal was immense and production had to be stepped up. Women who had ceased to work in the underground mines for nearly a decade and more were therefore called back.³⁴ Attempting to justify their reintroduction into underground work, Ambedkar wryly argued that perhaps this move would bring the men to work as well, since they would be loath to send their women to labour on their own and the labour shortage would thus be redressed. He also pointed out that the income the women earned would help compensate the privations endured by a large sector of the proposed workforce, given wartime scarcity and hunger.

Nevertheless, the decision invoked national and international indignation. In the event, in private conversation with government officials,

³² B.R. Ambedkar, *Government's Policy Towards Labour*, in BAWS, Volume 10, p. 151.

³³ See Shivangi Jaiswal, 'Labour Ministers, State and the Prism of Law, 1942–52', *Südasiens-Chronik—South Asia Chronicle* 8, 2018, pp. 233–256, for a detailed examination of his tenure as Labour member.

³⁴ The ban on mine employment was a hastily executed measure and left more than 40,000 women workers without work, and with no prospects of compensation and also allowed mine owners to not improve working conditions, or bring in much needed mechanisation which would have bettered the latter. In the war years, these conditions remained as they were earlier, but the government promised to put in specific welfare measures. See Urvi Khaitan, 'Women Beneath the Surface: Coal and the Colonial State in India During the Second World War', *War & Society*, Volume 39:3, pp. 171–188, for an account of wartime mining and Ambedkar's stance as Labour member with regard to a range of controversial issues to do with worker rights and protection.

Ambedkar tried—unsuccessfully—to reverse the measure and, when that was not forthcoming, insisted on a review of the working conditions. He also pushed ahead with important amendments to the Maternity Benefit Act that would enable women workers that were pregnant at the time of work to take leave and yet be compensated and to enact enhanced mine safety legislation.³⁵

In order to ensure that the stress on productivity—not just in the mines but all sectors—did not take away from worker rights, or left them adrift should they choose to protest, Ambedkar worked to put in place a tripartite arbitration system, involving personnel from the labour departments of federal and provincial governments, representatives of unions and of the employers. While the colonial government was concerned about industrial peace and on terms that it could arbitrate and control, Ambedkar, as was his wont, viewed the proposed measure in republican terms:

“Industrial peace based on social justice is a hopeful proposition. This involves a triangular approach which must start by recognizing (1) on the part of the workers, the duty to work which is the same as elimination of shirking; (2) on the part of the employers to pay reasonable wage which is the same as elimination of exploitation and to provide comfortable conditions of work— which is another name for labour welfare, (3) the duty on the part of the State and Society to realize that the maintenance of proper industrial relations is a public affair and is not a mere matter of contract between the employer and the employee”.³⁶

He also attempted to institute a system to ensure that workers across industries and also in the agrarian sector would be paid a statutory minimum wage and on legislation that would allow the enactment of a unified scheme of insurance and social security. His suggestions were listened to, but termed unviable. With regard to the minimum wages, the plan was seen as far too ambitious and it was argued that it might be possible to assure such a wage in particular industries, but certainly not with regard to agrarian workers. With regard to insurance, the colonial government felt it was too premature to be thinking in these terms

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Quoted in Shivangi Jaiswal, ‘Labour Ministers: State and the Prism of Law, 1942–521’, p. 236.

and that administrative machinery was not available to implement such schemes.³⁷

Ambedkar had been taken with the idea of social insurance since his Columbia days. Whether this had to be done through legislation that addressed specific insecurities that particular sections of labour endured, or whether there ought to be a single comprehensive scheme of social insurance, modelled on the Beveridge plan that had been prepared for post-War Britain, were matters that were debated and discussed in the federal Indian legislature of the time. Studies and reports on the conditions of labour in various industries, including the mines, were commissioned by the government and Ambedkar read these thoroughly, as he worked through his plans for a broad social insurance policy.³⁸

As the war ended, and India's independence appeared imminent, he decided to bring up, yet again, the matter of political safeguards for untouchables and insisted that these be written into the conditions that defined the transfer of power. However, this did not transpire, and Ambedkar left for Britain to gain the ear of interested individuals in Britain, including the old imperialist Winston Churchill, who, for thoroughly opportunist reasons, took up for the untouchable cause in order to embarrass the nationalists.³⁹ But given the historical moment—the end of fascism, and the cries that resounded everywhere, in Asia and in parts of Africa for the dismantling of colonial empires—the questions that Ambedkar raised with regard to Indian nationalist disinterest in honouring the political autonomy of untouchables were not granted premium. This was when he decided to turn to the United Nations to seek their support for untouchable political and constitutional concerns, arguing that if the UN could be approached, in the matter of racial

³⁷ B.R. Ambedkar, *Field Marshal Viscount Wavell to Lord Pethick-Lawrence*, in BAWS, Volume 10, pp. 480–481.

³⁸ See Ravi Ahuja, 'A Beveridge Plan for India? Social Insurance and the Making of the "Formal Sector"', *Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis*, 2019, pp 1–42, for a comprehensive review of the debates on this subject. For review of colonial and nationalist ideas of planning and development, see Benjamin Zachariah, *Developing India: An Intellectual and Social History, c. 1930–50*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 25–79.

³⁹ For a detailed account of Ambedkar's visit to the UK and all that followed thereafter, see Jesús Francisco Cháirez-Garza, 'B.R. Ambedkar, Partition and the Internationalisation of Untouchability, 1939–1947', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Volume 42:1, 2019, pp. 80–96.

discrimination against Indians in South Africa, a similar case could be made for caste discrimination in India.

Just then, and under pressure from its English progressive friends, who were sympathetic to Ambedkar's claim and impatient with nationalist disinterest in this matter, the Indian National Congress invited him—in 1947—to head the drafting committee set up to prepare a Constitution for free India. He was also inducted into the interim government's cabinet as Minister for Law. As the Constituent Assembly began its deliberations, he found himself at the helm of affairs. Meanwhile, he made his own purpose clear in the document that the Scheduled Caste Federation drew up, by way of their vision of the Constitution: *States and Minorities*, which restated the political claims of untouchables but within a decidedly socialist framework, was submitted to the Constituent Assembly in 1947.

Other things were on his mind as well. He was looking to complete a book on India's readiness or otherwise for communism. He had written parts of it, sections that argued why the sacerdotal sanction for inequality would have to be tackled by all those invested in a socialist future. He was deeply interested in the economic future of India and keen on holding the portfolio of Planning along with that of Law. This did not come to pass, in spite of the fact that he had been in the thick of economic affairs in the Viceroy's Cabinet: in addition to being Labour member he had held charge of the department of Public Works and besides was familiar with public finance. Whatever ideas he had entertained with regard to an administered and planned economy, and one that did not abide by the hated law of contract, as he referred to economic relations presided over by a regime of private property, did not get the political attention they deserved.⁴⁰

However, during the Constituent Assembly debates, he kept alive the question of economic and social justice and referenced it as a fundamental concern for the free Indian nation-state, and one that would determine the workability of political democracy.⁴¹

⁴⁰ B.R. Ambedkar, *Dr Ambedkar and the Hindu Code Bill*, BAWs, Volume 14:2, 1995, pp. 1318–1319.

⁴¹ B.R. Ambedkar, *Constituent Assembly Debates*, in BAWs, Volume 13, 1994, p. 327; pp. 351–352; p. 1216.

4 THINKING OF COMMUNISM: THE PRACTICE OF THEORY AND THE POLITICS OF PRACTICE

On account of the first-hand acquaintance with working-class life that he had, living in Bombay's working-class districts for the better part of his life, the experience he garnered as Labour member, and his readings in history and socialism, Ambedkar came to define a set of questions, rather problems to do with labour, caste, class and socialism that he wished the left to address. These were arguments that he outlined from the late 1920s onwards, and into the following decades.

A fundamental concern that he entertained with regard to communism in the Indian context had to do with the readiness of India for revolution, especially for the insurrectionary politics favoured by communists. That strategy had worked in Russia, but it was not clear that it would, everywhere. In China, for instance, the imperial order had been challenged frontally but decades after it had happened, China's political and social prospects had not improved; rather, the revolution of 1911 had "produced a chaos of such magnitude that her (China's) very independence has been put in peril". He thus wondered if the constitutional monarchist Yuan Shih-k'ai was not right in viewing the Chinese democrats as having indulged in premature and hasty action, rather than heeding a more gradual rhythm of change.⁴²

With regard to India, Ambedkar redefined the problem of a "premature" revolution somewhat differently: he called attention to the importance of heeding and building the "prerequisites" for communism. His was not an argument about stages of history that would have to be crossed and transcended and whether communists ought to heed the real movement of history, in contrast to an evolutionary and gradualist understanding of progress. Rather, his contentions had to do with the problems that the social order posed the votaries of revolution: "Had Lenin been born in India he would have buried the caste system and the practice of untouchability first, and without doing this, he would not have thought of the workers' revolution in the country".⁴³ A "Leninist" solution, he made clear, would require that the social order be viewed with critical seriousness: "... the social order prevalent in India is a matter which a

⁴² B.R. Ambedkar, *Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah*, in BAWS, Volume 1, 1979, p. 235.

⁴³ B.R. Kamble, *Bahishkrit Bharat*, Part 4, B.R. Ambedkar, p. 195.

Socialist must deal with, ... unless he does so he cannot achieve his revolution and ... if he does achieve it as a result of good fortune he will have to grapple with it if he wishes to realize his ideal... He will be compelled to take account of caste after revolution if he does not take account of it before revolution. This is only another way of saying that, turn in any direction you like, caste is the monster that crosses your path”.⁴⁴

Taking on caste was no easy task, warned Ambedkar, for one cannot expect a united uprising against the caste order, given that it comprised “a graded system of sovereignties, high and low, which are jealous of their status and which know that if a general dissolution came, some of them stand to lose more of their prestige and power than others do”.⁴⁵ In order to bring about a ‘break’ in this graduated social life, it had to be disrupted by thought, which would not only challenge the religious truisms that naturalized caste inequality and untouchability, but also install a new and critical approach to the self, the social order and social relationships. Nothing short of a “conversion” from Hindu ways of being to another mode of existence would help achieve such a transformation.⁴⁶

But meanwhile, practical efforts were not to be scorned, and socialists, Ambedkar noted, ought to recognize the fact that a democratically elected legislature, with guarantees of adequate representation for all minorities including untouchables, was a necessary prerequisite for the eventual success of democracy and socialism. As important, the state had to be repopulated and institutions that comprised it recomposed. As far as the untouchables were concerned, they needed separate electorates, adequate representation in the services and executive and separate settlements that would ensure they were not harmed and abused by the touchables.⁴⁷ Referencing Marx, Ambedkar noted: “That a civil service in tune with

⁴⁴ B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, BAWS, Volume 1, p. 47. While Ambedkar references socialists here, he used the term in a dual sense: addressing the Congress socialists, who were a distinctive rump within the national movement at this time as well as the Communist Party of India.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 72.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 78.

⁴⁷ B.R. Ambedkar, *Memorandum Submitted to the Cabinet Mission*, in BAWS, Volume 17:2, pp. 171–179.

the new order was essential for the success of the new order was recognized by Karl Marx in 1871 in the formation of the Paris Commune and adopted by Lenin in the constitution of Soviet Communism".⁴⁸

Communists thought of "prerequisites" in rather formulaic terms, and in terms of the various historical stages that had to be crossed before the moment of insurrection was made manifest in history. Caste and untouchability thus appeared relics of a feudal past that stood to be transcended. In the event, their systematic character (that Ambedkar was at pains to grasp and theorize) was not acknowledged. That caste existed as a sacerdotal and social system, and equally, as social and mental habitude evaded communist understanding. As for the practical matters that Ambedkar valued, the CPI was ambivalent in its stance with regard to these. In 1946, when the Scheduled Castes Federation launched a struggle in Bombay to protest against British recalcitrance to provide statutory political safeguards for the untouchables, the protesters were met with police action and violence. At that time, the CPI protested state terror and high-handedness and declared that the untouchable question was the proverbial "skeleton in the Indian cupboard" and that the national movement ought to attend to the matter of constitutional guarantees and also work out an economic programme that would free the untouchables from economic bondage to the upper caste Hindus. Economic misery, the communists held, had pushed the untouchables to protest and it was important that they did not view their struggle in isolation and united with the "workers and peasants against the British rulers, against the present plan and the present social system".⁴⁹

While they affirmed the need for constitutional guarantees, they did not seek to define their own understanding of what these could look like, from a socialist point of view. This meant that they would rather that the SCF took these concerns ahead; that is, they did not view them as germane to the socialist approach to labour. Eventually, in the 1950s, they withdrew their endorsement of such guarantees that the SCF had sought. Also, even as they conceded the distinctive nature of the inequality endured by the untouchables, they refused to accord it the theoretical emphasis that it deserved, and as always, foregrounded the economic aspects of their existence.

⁴⁸ B.R. Ambedkar, *Antagonism of the Administration*, in BAWs, Volume 5, 1989, p. 104.

⁴⁹ See Editorial, *People's Age*, July 28, 1947, Quoted in Parthasarathi Pathak, *Communists on Caste*, p. 181.

In view of their persistent theoretical reluctance to address caste in relation to socialism, Ambedkar's poser to the communists with regard to the doctrine of worker equality, of the fact of it being an indivisible and sovereign value, has acquired historical heft: "Men will not join in a revolution for the equalization of property unless they know that after the revolution is achieved they will be treated equally and that there will be no discrimination of caste and creed. The assurance of a socialist leading the revolution that he does not believe in caste, I am sure, will not suffice. The assurance must be the assurance proceeding from a much deeper foundation, namely, the mental attitude of the compatriots towards one another in their spirit of personal equality and fraternity".⁵⁰ The worker, argued Ambedkar, must be told that he ought not to claim "rights which he is not prepared to give to other workers".⁵¹

How did communists view worker attitudes? In an everyday sense, union organizers as well as party leaders viewed workers, in whom they attempted to instil proletarian consciousness, as 'backward' and 'simple' and susceptible to ideologies and causes that did not benefit them, such as Gandhian nationalism, or the various forms of religious propaganda that they encountered. As for caste divisions amongst workers, the CPI, as well as the All-India Trades Union Congress addressed these in and through periodic appeals to worker unity and brotherhood. This invocation of a putative comradeship was seen as sufficient to take care of whatever caste prejudices a worker might harbour.⁵²

The irony was that in an everyday sense, caste intersected with communist practice in ways that were perhaps not viewed as such. For one, in the course of organizing, communists deployed social idioms that referenced caste-related customs. For instance, they had recourse to social shaming, to denigrate blacklegs and other recalcitrant workers who were not as willing to heed the call to strike. In caste society, shaming was

⁵⁰ B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, in BAWS, Volume 1, p. 46.

⁵¹ B.R. Ambedkar, *Trade Unions Must Enter Politics to Protect Their Interests*, in BAWS, Volume 17:3, p. 180.

⁵² In the various sessions of the All India Trades Union Congress, to which the communist unions were affiliated intermittently and then permanently, generalized resolutions were passed that called for the abolition of discrimination based on birth and sex, caste and faith, but apart from these, there were no arguments that offered an explicitly socialist glass on abolition, or why it ought to be a fundamental socialist concern. This, in spite of the fact that many communist unions comprised workers from the lower castes and untouchable communities (see Parthasarathi Pathak, *Communists on Caste*, pp. 209–211).

routinely resorted to, to punish transgression of caste strictures and typically required that family, kin and community boycott the transgressors for a specific period of time. That unions in Bombay adopted such tactics, without demur, only meant that caste was not so much an idea, as it was habit and attitude, which shaped behaviour and emotions. This is clear from the fact that workers from the lower castes as well as from untouchable communities too observed the practice of shaming. In the north Indian city of Kanpur, municipal sweepers not only refused to clear out waste from the homes of jobbers and clerks who stayed loyal to the employers, but actually dumped mounds of excreta in front of them. The men thus shamed were from the touchable castes and to ‘pollute’ them seemed a fit riposte for their refusal to support the strike.⁵³

Then, again, caste as a marker of social identity and a context for mobilization proved critical to the success of communist organizing. In Kerala in southern India, a peasant and workers struggle that was led by the CPI—in 1946—comprised, for the most part, protesters from the Ezhava caste that had been viewed as near-untouchable, denied rights of access to public spaces, and kept out of Hindu temples even until the 1930s. Since the early decades of the twentieth century, Ezhavas had fought for rights of equal access and espoused an egalitarian world view. When they came within the ambit of communist organizing, this prehistory stood them in good stead and enabled their emergence as militant participants in the 1946 struggle, which, tragically, was brutally crushed. In subsequent appraisals of the event, Ezhava self-consciousness was viewed as having transited into class consciousness, under communist tutelage; whereby the conditions that had shaped their evolution as political subjects, and which had to do with their keen awareness of caste-based inequality were not sufficiently acknowledged or considered germane in the making of their socialist selfhood.⁵⁴

⁵³ See Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, ‘Workers’ Politics and the Mill Districts in Bombay Between the Wars’, pp. 625–626 for a description of how shaming was deployed. When organisations of lower castes and untouchables threatened to socially “boycott” members who refused to join campaigns that resisted unfair practices, shaming might be said to work differently, as a spur to defiance. With regard to the Kanpur protests, see Chitra Joshi, *Lost Worlds: Indian Labour and Its Forgotten Histories*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2003, p. 215.

⁵⁴ T.K. Oomen, *From Mobilisation to Institutionalisation: the Dynamics of Agrarian Movement in Twentieth Century Kerala*, pp. 34–46, Quoted in Parthasarathi Pathak, *Communists on Caste*, pp. 166–167.

Paradoxically, these modes and moments of the communist engagement with caste coexisted with their consistent dismissal of lower caste political claims as well as the political demands put forth by the untouchables. The question that Ambedkar raised in this context therefore was important: were the communists indeed philosophically and politically committed to ensuring that lower caste and untouchable workers are treated with respect and viewed as equal by their fellow workers? Or were they likely to fold lower caste and untouchable grievances into strategic and unreflective reasoning, which left matters to do with belief, custom and everyday sociality unquestioned?⁵⁵

Ambedkar also raised what might be termed explicitly socialist concerns to do with caste and untouchability, when he pointed out that the Indian worker experienced a rather distinctive alienation and one that had to do with the choice of labour that awaited him. Touchable labourers were relatively free in their choice of work, but given that a large section of them was from the lower castes, they could only access work options that were immediately given to them, either on account of their having done such work for long, or because they were deemed fit only for certain sorts of work. The situation was worse where untouchable workers were concerned, since they ended up working at the most menial and physically taxing tasks in any work environment.⁵⁶ Ambedkar called attention to the

⁵⁵ It is not that workers were not capable of solidarity and sociality across caste divides. Or that they all heeded caste differences in self-conscious ways. To be sure caste existed as habit and notion, but as is clear from the untouchable communist Ramachandra More's life, comradeship and social affection were not lacking, and a measure of communist sociality had been forged in working-class neighbourhoods that made for shared spaces, occasions, eating and being together. But it is also evident that these had as much to do with individual behaviour and everyday practices, rather than with conscious political work that addressed caste-based differences and untouchability (see Satyendra More, *Memoirs of a Dalit Communist: The Many Worlds of R. B. More*, New Delhi: Leftword, 2019).

⁵⁶ The Census and various other enumerative exercises carried out by the government tended to 'fix' occupational identity such that it appeared that a particular caste had always laboured at a certain task, or been saddled with a specific vocation. This resulted in a reifying of certain categories of workers, such that they were deemed fit only for that task and not others. For a forceful critique of this, see Ramnarayan Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2014 [2010]; and also Vijay Prashad, *Untouchable Freedom*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001. Ambedkar abstracted from the actual mess of occupations that lower caste and untouchables workers found themselves in, to call attention to their choiceless pursuit of these avocations.

relationship between social identities and labour choices and what that implied for the making of proletarian consciousness, offering as it were, the beginnings of a theory of alienation that spoke to Indian realities:

“... the greatest evil in the industrial system is not so much poverty and the suffering that it involves, as the fact that so many persons have callings which make no appeal to those who are engaged in them. Such callings constantly provoke one to aversion, ill will, and the desire to evade. ... There is a constant desire to evade and escape from such occupations, which arises solely because of the blighting effect which they produce upon those who follow them, owing to the slight and stigma cast upon them by the Hindu religion. ... As an economic organization Caste ... involves the subordination of man’s natural powers and inclinations to the exigencies of social rules”.⁵⁷

In addition, the caste order, argued Ambedkar, dissociated labour from intelligence: “The theory of the Caste is that a Brahmin who is permitted to cultivate his intellect is not permitted to labour, indeed is taught to look down upon labour. While the Shudra who is required to labour is not permitted to cultivate his intelligence. ... Education, wealth, labour are all necessary for every individual if he is to reach a free and full manhood. Mere education without wealth and labour is barren. Wealth without education ... is brutal...”⁵⁸ Ambedkar’s point was this: the constitutive listlessness that was the labourer’s lot in caste society rendered him

⁵⁷ B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, in BAWS, Volume 1, p. 48. Ambedkar’s argument in this context is strikingly similar to the one advanced by a mid-nineteenth-century lower caste radical thinker, Tukaram Paduval, also known to and associated with Phule (see Rosalind O’Hanlon, ‘Caste and Its Histories in Colonial India: A Reappraisal’, *Modern Asian Studies*, Volume 51:2, 2017, p. 457). Clearly, there had emerged an intellectual lineage that viewed the caste economy as necessarily limited and ill-articulated with modern conditions of production, trade and labour and which looked to rethink this relationship between the caste and production orders.

⁵⁸ B.R. Ambedkar, in BAWS, Volume 3, pp. 68–69. The relationship between caste origins and labour recruitment has been examined at length in several studies. See Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in Bombay: Business Strategies and the Working Class in Bombay, 1900–1940*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994; and Nandini Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 145–147.

a poor subject for proletarian politics, in that he remained trapped by his caste location and identity, and his sense of worth remained tied to his social place within the caste order.⁵⁹

The question of alienation was addressed in material terms by the communists. For instance, union organizers were meticulous in detailing the lives of stigmatized workers, such as those involved in municipal sanitation: their work that involved physical carriage and disposal of night soil and cleaning of choked and overflowing city drains, and their everyday needs, including food and housing. They also mobilized this workforce for better wages, and improved work conditions, often in the face of concerted opposition from municipal government. While sanitary workers, most of whom were untouchables, had organized and protested even when there were no formal unions, the presence of the latter set a seal of recognition on their labouring lives and rendered them socially relevant and productive. Further, strike calls issued by unions possessed public worth, and in the wake of such strikes, workers no doubt experienced a measure of prowess, since they knew they could bring the city down to its knees. This instilled in them a sense of defiance and pride, evident in the acerbic and witty critique of caste society which tempered their speeches, and was expressed in the form of lampoons and satire.⁶⁰ The alienation that was constitutive of caste-based labour was thus momentarily leavened by an assertion of self and labouring worth.

⁵⁹ The south Indian anti-caste radical E.V. Ramasamy Periyar offered a deft description of the phenomenon of worker alienation in caste society, as one that prevented the worker from viewing himself as a labourer, along with other labourers; thus rather than investing time and energy in thinking through his labouring status, he was more likely to worry over and seek to upgrade his caste status (see V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar*, p. 439). Periyar's astute remark ought to be viewed in the light of efforts undertaken by workers, including labouring peasants and artisans to destigmatize labour, as such: thus, they sought to re-value what they did, in terms of reinvented religious selves that allowed them to define their labour as worthy. This proved to be a riven project, for while such self-making obviated the need for measuring oneself according to the dictates of caste, it also meant that such assertions of identity could turn into celebrations of particular caste identities (see in this context, William Pinch, *Peasants and Monks in British India*, Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, pp. 107–114).

⁶⁰ This account of sanitary workers and the left is drawn from: Tanika Sarkar, 'Caste-ing Servants in Colonial Calcutta' in *Servants' Pasts*, Volume 2, edited by Nitin Sinha and

In another instance too, communist descriptions and analysis of labour that was almost exclusively performed by the lower castes, tribal workers and untouchables proved consequential. When the government of India revoked the ban on women workers labouring in underground coal mines, the CPI prepared an extensive report on work and living conditions as these shaped the everyday lives of the miners. The report pointed to how women had come back to mine work, driven by the hunger in their bellies on account of the wartime famine in eastern India, and that in many cases, the government had held out the threat of stopping rations, should they not comply with wartime work demands. The report was instrumental in getting various liberal and left organizations, including labour unions and women's associations in the UK, to protest the measure and this resulted in the government reluctantly agreeing to improve conditions of labour and living for the workers, especially women.⁶¹

The concerns that the report raised, though, were defined by what it failed to address, and in that sense, its failure needs to be understood in the context of the long history of employers' subterfuge with regard to the social reproduction of the working class, and their refusal to secure for workers even minimal safeguards, with regard to their health and well-being. As happened in the mining sector, reproduction devolved to the workers' families and the castes and communities to which they belonged. Often, and unsurprisingly, the onus for sustaining such ties fell on the working woman. For it was she who mediated this world, by returning periodically to her kin, during health crises or child birth. Given that labour for the mines, and indeed, for other sectors was recruited from particular communities, the social reproduction of the working class meant also the reproduction of the conditions of labour. That is, the caste universe structured these latter and defined the terms of their continual

Nitin Verma, Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2019: pp. 239–264. Also see, in this context, Vijay Prashad, *Untouchable Freedom*.

⁶¹ Urvi Khaitan, 'Women Beneath the Surface: Coal and the Colonial State in India During the Second World War'.

reproduction.⁶² In essence, this meant that the labourer remained trapped in his or her given social identity, in ontological lowness. Communists addressed the question of worker precarity, with regard to wages and safety and health care, in terms of a discourse of protection, but not in terms of how, in a structural sense, capital necessarily relied on caste and community arrangements for its workings, and did not in fact require their rupture for its progress.⁶³

Caste-alienated labour faced other related issues as well: given the unequal ways in which workers accessed work, untouchable workers faced special liabilities; indeed, the alienation they experienced was unique. They could not expect to rise in the ranks and were likely to remain at the bottom rung of the working class, as coolies and manual labourers. Their lack of education was one reason, but the other had to do with their existence as a stigmatized community. Of the untouchable railway worker, Ambedkar noted: “Very rarely is he employed even as a porter. That is because as a porter, he must also work as a domestic servant, as a part of his customary duties, in the household of the Station Master. A Depressed Class worker becomes quite useless to the Station Master who is generally a high caste Hindu; because he can not avail himself of the services of the porter for his household purpose if the porter is an untouchable”. More generally, he observed, “in days of slump he is the first to be fired as in the boom he is the last to be employed”.⁶⁴

Ambedkar argued that the ‘untouchable’ and stigmatized aspects of worker existence needed to be addressed in their singularity, and if this

⁶² See Dilip Simeon (‘Coal and Colonialism: Production Relations in an Indian Coalfield, c. 1895–1947’, *International Review of Social History*, Volume 41, 1996, pp. 83–108) for a broad overview of coal production and the labour force that worked in the mines; and Dhiraj Kumar Nite (‘Familist Movement and Social Mobility: The Indian Colliers (Jharia) 1895–1970’, *Indian Historical Review*, Volume 41:2, 2014, pp. 297–322), for an extended account of how miners and miner families negotiated the conditions under which the family and community were made responsible for the reproduction of the workforce.

⁶³ It might appear that this reliance on the extended community was a feature of mercantile capital, which held sway over the mining sector at this point in time, but in other instances too, as with urban factory and non-factory workers, the working class was crucially dependent on the hinterland for its survival (see Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in Bombay: Business Strategies and the Working Class in Bombay, 1900–1940*, pp. 159–167).

⁶⁴ B.R. Ambedkar, *Trade Unions must Enter Politics to Protect their Interests*, in BAWS, Volume 17:3, pp. 178–179.

meant that untouchables required their own unions, they ought to go ahead and form these. In the event that they failed to do so, or it did not prove easy to do so, untouchable workers ought to ensure that in whatever trade union they were members, their specific grievances are addressed: "Firstly, you must insist upon a special representation in the executive of the union so that your special problems will receive the attention and support of this union. Secondly, you must insist upon some part of your contribution to the union to be earmarked for being used if necessary for fighting on your grievances".⁶⁵ Communists did not look favourably on separate unions for the untouchables, though, at times, they had to reckon with organizations whose members demanded that the discrimination they experienced at the hands of other workers be viewed seriously.⁶⁶

But while they could insist on the primacy of class and choose not to engage with such unions that sought to link class politics with caste claims in urban contexts, in rural, agrarian India, caste and class were intertwined in ways that needed to be delicately unravelled. Since the early decades of the twentieth century, peasant organizations across British India had been active and were subject to the nationalist sphere of influence. These forums yielded important local leaders who came together in 1935 to form the All-India Kisan Sabha, or Peasants' Association, and while it yet bore the stamp of nationalism, the Association soon acquired a distinct left character. The question that emerged as important in this context was this: who was a peasant? To be sure, the peasant was clearly distinguishable from the landlord and rentier, since him and, in some instances her, was the actual cultivator. But as one astute agrarian organizer, Swami Sahajanand pointed out, this did not mean the category of the peasant

⁶⁵ B.R. Ambedkar, *Trade Unions Must Enter Politics to Protect Their Interests*, in BAWS, Volume 17:3, p. 185. Nandini Gooptu has pointed out how, in view of the lack of mobility with regard to such work that they found, untouchable labourers looked to other avenues for self-improvement, and that anti-caste movements and ideologies were instrumental in making available to the workers a discourse of equality and cultural defiance that enabled them retain their sense of self-worth and look to education and political power to transform their lives (Nandini Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor*, pp. 152–178).

⁶⁶ A group of untouchable workers separated themselves from the existing union of textile workers in Kanpur city and, among other things, pointed out how they were not represented in the Union's Executive committee. See, in this context, Chitra Joshi, *Lost Worlds: Indian Labour and Its Forgotten Histories*, pp. 254–255.

was an internally consistent or stable one.⁶⁷ Apart from those who held large acres of land, there were those with modest holdings and others with very small ones. Then, there were the agricultural labourers who worked on lands held by all others, and very rarely had any of their own. To Sahajanand, labourers who tilled and ploughed also were peasants and the act of tilling and ploughing, he observed, was the most important measure of all, to assess who was a peasant and who was not.

While well aware of how the caste factor impinged on rural economic life, Sahajanand yet refused to accept that rural inequalities could be mapped on to the touchable-untouchable divide alone. The landless, he pointed out, were not only from untouchable castes, which had no claims on land, but from many cultivator castes who had lost all claims to land, either on account of indebtedness or because they had to abandon cultivation on what, essentially, were meagre and unviable holdings. Also, the peasants that held land, even if from touchable communities, were not all the same. Some tilled their land on their own, others employed workers to do so, but the conditions of their existence were not very different from the ones that the landless endured: hunger, debt and related privations. Sahajanand held that given the general bleakness of peasant life, to invoke broad categories to define its contradictions was unlikely to serve any useful purpose. It would not do, therefore, to “confuse the movement of agricultural labourers with the caste movements of ... the most depressed members of the society”, as some were wont to. Those who organized such movements imagined the problem of the untouchable agrarian worker to be of a religious nature, and in proclaiming so, failed to view him in his immediate rural context, where his problems and concerns were entangled with those of fellow touchable workers.⁶⁸

Sahajanand, however, conceded that agrarian inequality was layered and in rather poignant ways. While all agricultural labourers were held in contempt, amongst them were workers from castes which were “regarded, though wrongfully as base, low and mean. They are not regarded as we

⁶⁷ See Walter Hauser, *Sahajanand on Agricultural Labour and the Rural Poor*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2005 [1994] for a richly annotated introduction to this thoughtful peasant leader's views. What follows is a summary of these latter, drawn from Hauser's translation of Sahajanand's writings.

⁶⁸ Walter Hauser, *Sahajanand on Agricultural Labour and the Rural Poor*, pp. 73; 81. Sahajanand was in all likelihood responding to a charge from a Congress untouchable leader Jagjivan Ram who accused the Peasant Association of not heeding the travails of untouchable agrarian labourers.

regard ourselves... what a tragedy it is that those who are most indispensable to the very sustenance of society and without whom all its comforts would go unmet should be viewed in these terms...".⁶⁹ Sahajanand made clear that peasant associations had to fight against such attitudes. Tellingly enough, he noted that it was not that members of different castes were being asked to "take food together or enter into marriage relationships with the khet mazdoors (agricultural labourers) and make them their kith and kin. This is an altogether separate question and has nothing to do with the manner in which one treats a fellow human being". But, the peasant must ask himself how is it that the affection he bore towards his farm animals was often greater than the respect and regard he has for the labourer and his family. Once he searched his heart out thus, he was bound to understand that if he did not "treat the agricultural labourers with a sense of decency and humanity", he was effectively "cutting off his own limbs".⁷⁰

In terms of how peasant organizations ought to function, Sahajanand was clear: the struggle ultimately ought to be against the rentiers and superior tenure holders and for betterment of the conditions of production to ensure growth. To be sure wage struggles, such as agrarian labourers sought to engage in, were important, but it was necessary to keep in mind the fact that labourers worked for peasants who were, themselves, struggling and that this diffuse penury signalled the constitutive limit of the agrarian economy. While wages had to be fair, they also had to be viable and were best worked out in negotiated and practical ways.

Narendra Deva, associated with the All-India Kisan Sabha, and a Congress socialist, acknowledged the complex issues at stake for socialist organizing in the agrarian context in a forthright manner: "If romantic conceptions were to shape our resolves and prompt our actions, we would aspire to organize first the agricultural labourer and semi-proletariat of the village, the most oppressed and exploited rural class which suffers the worst degree of economic and social bondage.... but if we do so we shall certainly be neglecting the interests of the huge exploited

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 80.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 93. Ambedkar's ILP was in touch with Sahajanand and suggested that along with other peasant groups they form a non-Congress front.

masses consisting of small and middle peasants and landowners with small incomes who are in no sense better than small peasants...". What socialists could hope to do by way of addressing the special grievances of untouchable workers was to take forward struggles "for the abolition of the system of forced labour", and "for better wages from rich peasants and landlords".⁷¹

This dual approach, of fighting exactions and loss of land, on the one hand and demanding higher wages, on the other, remained a staple with agrarian organizing, until it came to be re-examined in the context of militant and armed peasant struggles, under communist tutelage, which emerged in the mid-1940s and after. In the one instance, peasants from Bengal in eastern India refused to surrender a large portion of the grain to rentiers and their agents, as had been the custom (this was the Tebhaga struggle); and in the other, peasants and agricultural labourers in Telangana in the south of India came together to protest a range of land-related concerns, including exactions, evictions, dispossession, agrarian servitude and debt bondage. In both regions, landless labourers from untouchable communities and sharecroppers and tenants and impoverished peasants from touchable castes made common cause, as they took on the rentier class and its agents. This led to the communists addressing not merely questions of land and bondage, but also social inequity and untouchability and to take forward untouchable claims to denied public and cultural resources.⁷²

But once land had been regained, through struggle, from the rentier class, and had to be redistributed amongst the peasants and labourers, the question of claims was hard to settle and the fragile unity forged in the heat of the struggle appeared frangible. In Telangana for instance, the CPI had to strike a fine balance and work out a graduated redistributive plan, with regard to various land claims, including of the untouchables and other marginal social groups. This did not prove easy, since peasants refused to part with land to the landless untouchables, even in the face of party pressure to do so; often, it was village common or grazing land that had to be made over to the untouchables. This posed a conundrum

⁷¹ Narendra Deva, *All India Kisan Congress, Gaya, Presidential Address*, 1936, pp. 14–15, Quoted in Parthasarathi Pathak, *Communists on Caste*, p. 213.

⁷² Whether the communists actually forged a common front of untouchable labourers and peasants in Telangana remains a subject of contentious debate (see Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, pp. 308–313).

for socialist justice, and communist leaders in the South admitted that the question of caste and land needed to be addressed in ways that had not been done, until then.⁷³

But though history had opened up a moment of possibility for the communists to theorize afresh matters to do with land, caste and labour, official left rethinking on these matters was not particularly forthcoming. This was evident in the long note on untouchability that the CPI prepared in 1948 and presented at its Second Congress. In spite of the untouchables constituting the mainstay of such militant land struggles as were in progress, the document did not address the question of their right to land or the social disabilities they endured. Instead, it was resolved that landless untouchable labourers, as well as landless touchable labourers, ought to be mobilized around demands for “fair wages” and for “regulation” of the conditions in which they laboured.⁷⁴ Secondly, while untouchables were viewed as “a powerful reserve in the struggle for democratic revolution”, the details of the latter were not spelt out, nor was their role in effecting such a revolution granted salience.⁷⁵ This last was a glaring omission in that the caste and untouchability questions ought legitimately to have figured in considerations of the democratic struggle, in fact viewed as constitutive of it. But, communists contented themselves by fulminating against nationalist bourgeois approaches to untouchability abolition which, it was pointed out, had failed to integrate the struggle of

⁷³ For an account of the complex articulation of land, caste and labour issues during the Telangana struggle, see K. Srinivasulu, *Telangana Peasant Movement and Change in the Agrarian Structure: A Case Study of Nalgonda District*, Unpublished Phd. Thesis. New Delhi: School of Social, Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1988; <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/19067>. Accessed March 1 2021.

⁷⁴ M.R. Rao (Editor), *Documents of the History of the Communist Party of India, Volume 7, 1948–1950*, Delhi: People’s Publishing House, p. 97.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 111–112. While this was as yet the most extensive note that communists had prepared on untouchability, it did not represent a marked improvement on what, until then, had been their most vocal critique of the phenomenon, the draft party programme they had sent to the Indian National Congress in 1931. That document claimed that imperialism was responsible for the continuing enslavement of the untouchables, criticized Gandhi’s philosophy of uplift, denounced “the reactionary caste system, religious deception and the slave and serf traditions of the past” and called for the abolition of untouchability, which was a “shameful blot” on the Indian people. Tellingly, it also warned the untouchables to not be influenced by “British reactionary agents” who sought to set them against “the other toilers of our country” (*Documents of the Communist Movement in India, Volume 3, 1929–1938*, Calcutta: National Book Agency (n.d.), pp. 81–83).

the untouchables for social and economic emancipation with the general struggle for national freedom.

Ironically enough, Ambedkar who, all along, had insisted that the nationalists' political struggle ought to reckon with inequities specific to the social order, was also subjected to heavy-handed critique. He was accused of being "reformist and separatist" and for keeping the untouchable masses from the "general democratic movement" and for fostering the "illusion that the lot of untouchables could be improved by reliance on imperialism". As always, the limitations of a nationalist as well as a "separatist" approach were turned into alibis for the socialist failure to think through the caste and untouchability questions. These remained matters that were to be addressed "only through a united struggle of the entire toiling people against all exploitation".⁷⁶

Ambedkar took issue with communist understanding of class and caste from another point of view as well: that it did not address ruling class consciousness in its historical as well as conceptual specificity. Ambedkar's use of the term 'class' bears understanding in this regard. As we have seen, in his lexicon, 'class' was not consistently related to production relations, but used in a more generalized and abstract sense to reference social groups locked in conflict. In the 1940s, he inflected the term somewhat differently and distinguished the "governing" classes from the "servile" classes. He argued that the former commanded political power and authority as much on account of their birth-based privileges, as on the basis of their place in the economic order. Historically, the governing class was drawn from the brahmin and kshatriya varnas, that is, priests and warriors, while in the present, the warrior had been replaced by the merchant-traders or the bania (communities associated with the vaishya varna). The servile class, comprised all others, peasants, artisans and workers.

The bania, or the so-called capitalists, included the industrial bourgeoisie, as well as the traditional class of merchants and moneylenders, and in many instances, the former were drawn from the ranks of the latter. The

⁷⁶ As if to demonstrate what such a united front could look like, the CPI organized a conference of Scheduled Caste youth workers in which the graded inequality of the workforce was acknowledged, but the question of how to challenge caste as an institution was not addressed, and as always, the struggle of the toilers was urged forth as a solution to end untouchability and graded inequality (Parthasarathi Pathak, *Communists on Caste*, pp. 324–326). For a critique of Ambedkar in this context, see M. S. Rao (editor) *Documents of the History of the Communist Party of India, Volume 7*, pp. 111–112.

social character of this class was shaped by the culture of the traditional men of commerce and here Ambedkar echoed plebeian perceptions of the bania, which, in characteristic fashion, he placed within the semantic universe of the Hindu social order:

“The Bania is the worst parasitic class known to history. In him the vice of money-making is unredeemed by culture or conscience. He is like an undertaker who prospers when there is an epidemic. The only difference between the undertaker and the Bania is that the undertaker does not create an epidemic while the Bania does. He does not use his money for production. He uses it to create poverty and more poverty by lending money for unproductive purposes. He lives on interest and as he is told by his religion that money-lending is the occupation prescribed to him by Manu, he looks upon it as both right and righteous”.⁷⁷

On the whole, the governing class of brahmins and banias heeded “Brahmanic philosophy” and on that account held itself separate and aloof, such that it was “not a part of the Indian people” and in fact was “completely isolated from them”; worse it believed in “isolating itself, lest it should be contaminated by them”. Besides, this class chose not to value “motives and interests which are hostile to those who are outside its fold” and therefore “did not sympathize with the living forces operating in the servile masses whom it has trodden down”. It was also “not charged with their wants, their pains, their cravings, their desires”, and in fact was “inimical to their aspirations” and resolutely did not “favour any advance in their education, promotion to high office” and consistently disfavoured “every movement calculated to raise their dignity and their self-respect”.⁷⁸

The CPI viewed the ruling class as comprising the bourgeoisie and the feudal landlords of rural India. If this class strove to speak for all, as it did, in and through the rhetoric of nationalism or Gandhism, this

⁷⁷ B.R. Ambedkar, *What Gandhi and Congress Have Done to the Untouchables*, in BAWS, Volume 9, p. 216–217. For a description of plebeian expressions of class and culture, see Nandini Gooptu (*The Politics of the Urban Poor*, pp. 143–144), who cites the writings of Kashi Baba, a mill worker, who characterized the capitalist as one who is of high caste status and yet given to “thieving”, in the sense of appropriating resources for himself and denying these to others, particularly the so-called downgraded untouchables.

⁷⁸ B.R. Ambedkar, *What Gandhi and Congress Have Done to the Untouchables*, in BAWS, Volume 9, p. 486.

was understood as an instance of deliberate dissembling. Such ideological pretensions were to be unmasked to reveal the class interest that they endorsed, and this latter was to be challenged, through democratic as well as class struggles. Arguments such as these constituted standard communist fare on the subject of the ruling class ideologies, and they precluded the emergence of a more situated critique.

When Ambedkar and others in the anti-caste movement called attention to “Brahmanic philosophy” or Brahmanism, communists were uneasy with the usage. To them, Brahmanism was, at best, a historical tendency which, in the past, had sought to justify a birth-based social order, and they did not think that the term served a critical purpose in the present. By refusing to grant it analytical significance, they sidestepped questions to do with the historically specific expressions of ruling ideologies and interests in the Indian context.⁷⁹

To Ambedkar, their reluctance to do so was of a part with a more general reluctance to engage with the terrain of religion. His own understanding of religion, as we have seen, was complex and layered, but in this instance, he wished to draw attention to the role of the brahmin class in perpetuating inequality, and rendering it sacerdotal, in and through the roles they had historically assigned to themselves: they were both religious preceptors and intellectuals. Amongst other things, he interrogated the details of brahmin self-making: throughout history, brahmins had actively ensured that none but they had access to the study and knowledge of scripture, and the laws that derived from it, so that they remained sole custodians of these traditions of learning. This not only rendered them self-assured purveyors of ideas and arguments, whose terms they came to set, but it also made for a static conception of knowledge, which had proved dangerously consequential: “If on any point we have attained to certainty, we make no further inquiry on that point; because inquiry would be useless, or perhaps dangerous. The doubt must intervene, before the investigation can begin. Here, then, we have the act of

⁷⁹ The CPI insistently misread Ambedkar’s and more generally the anti-caste movements’ critique of Brahmanism as a critique of the brahmins, and one of its leading ideologues loftily argued that “we are not in favour of suppressing brahmins, nor do we consider them as enemies, we are for the end of all caste oppression...” (From *Cross Roads, The Progressive Weekly*, December 28, 1951, p. 7, Quoted in Parthasarathi Pathak, *Communists on Caste*, p. 330).

doubting as the originator, or, at all events, the necessary antecedent, of all progress".⁸⁰

Ambedkar's point was not that the brahmin class was not assailed by doubt, but that, in wanting to sustain their vision of the sacred and the social as enduring and timeless, they subverted changes wrought by time and history, in ways that were always already conservative. Thus, every moment of historical disjuncture—for example, the revolution wrought by Buddhism—was reworked as a moment of transition that only affirmed what already was. Theirs, Ambedkar warned, was an “acquisitive politics” that enabled them to hoard spiritual and intellectual surplus through an appropriation of diverse sorts of thought to their purpose, and in order to naturalize social inequality.⁸¹

Ambedkar's sorrow was that in India, the intellectual class had not only failed to “lead”—a term that he freighted with pedagogic and political resonance—but had insinuated itself into public consciousness in ways that rendered it worthy and worshipful simply because it proclaimed itself to be so: “The Hindus are taught that the Brahmins are Bhudevas (Gods on earth) ... [and] that Brahmins alone can be their teachers”.⁸² In effect, the brahmins' claims to knowledge were not tested, and neither were they expected to prove their worth. To Ambedkar, this seemed a veritable travesty of the intellectual vocation, which, he held, ought to have “no limitations arising out of any affiliations to any class or to any interest”.⁸³

Such limitations appeared particularly acute, given that the brahmins had arranged knowledge systems within a gradation such that knowledge of the practical arts and crafts, of labour and production was not granted the same valence as intellectual and philosophical speculation. This meant that the productive and working classes that intuited these other knowledges could not aspire to produce intellectuals. This was in contrast to

⁸⁰ B.R. Ambedkar, *Riddles in Hinduism*, in BAWS, Volume 4, p. 8. Ambedkar echoes the words of Henry Buckle, who he read closely and clearly admired.

⁸¹ B.R. Ambedkar, *The Triumph of Brahmanism*, in BAWS, Volume 3, p. 331. Ambedkar's use of the term “acquisitive” here is not accidental: he uses it in the manner Richard Tawney did in *The Acquisitive Society* (London: G. Bell & Co, 1921). Brahmins who sought to hoard all learning unto themselves and who insisted that this was in consequence of divine law were not unlike those who affirmed the sanctity of unbridled capitalist-driven industrial growth.

⁸² *Annihilation of Caste*, in BAWS, Volume 1, p. 71.

⁸³ *The Triumph of Brahminism*, in BAWS, Volume 3, p. 322.

societies where each strata had its educated class and to Ambedkar this was consequential for there was “safety ... if no definite guidance, in the multiplicity of views expressed by different educated classes drawn from different strata of society”. Thus, there was “no danger of Society being misguided or misdirected by the views of one single educated class drawn from one single class of society...”.⁸⁴ This creation of different groups of organic intellectuals had not happened in India even in modern times, when learning was open, notionally at least, to all, and much of society remained bound by world views validated by the brahmins.⁸⁵

The Indian left’s relationship to religion and its understanding of the intellectual class were of a different order. Generally speaking, communists held religion to be a constituent of the superstructure, and an engagement with the religious realm therefore was not viewed as significant as struggles carried out on the shop floor or the field. On the other hand, the many uses of religion in the modern period—Gandhi’s politics, for instance, or those espoused by Hindu and Muslim groups—appeared to them to be politically noteworthy, since they looked to distract attention away from the ‘real’ economic struggle.

In addressing this paradox, the left resorted to a somewhat ambivalent politics: for instance, the Meerut defendants noted that, as communists, they were irreligious but they had not set out to demonstrate the validity of their understanding, for “religion is not the central fact of the present situation... we are not concerned now primarily with anti-religious propaganda, though we do not exclude it...”. They added that they sought to combat religion by “pointing out its reactionary role in political and social affairs and its historical roots in exploitation and subordination of class to class”. However, this must not be taken to mean that they would not cooperate with people who hold religious beliefs or even preach religion.

⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 325–326.

⁸⁵ Ambedkar had plans for writing a book titled, *What the Brahmins Have Done to the Hindus*. One of the sections was to have addressed the following themes, which encapsulated for him Brahmanism’s substantive effects: (a) The Disease of Degraded Inequality, (b) The Debasement of Man, (c) The Degradation of Religion, (d) The Darkening of the Mind, (e) The Deadening of Conscience, (f) The Depreciation of Life and (g) The Death-knell of Democracy (See B.R. Ambedkar, in BAWs, Volume 3, p. 469).

But, since they held the economic and political struggle to be paramount, “questions relating to religion” were to be “subordinated” to it.⁸⁶

In practice, this meant that the CPI criticized the use of religion to further ruling class interests, and propagated for unity amongst workers on the basis of a shared experience of economic injustice, but when they encountered religion in the flesh, so to speak, they realized that it could not be easily put away. For, in many contexts, religious expressions associated with Hindu, Muslim as well as Sikh sacred and cultural narratives constituted cultural common sense, and as happened in Bengal during the agrarian struggle of the 1940s, communists ended up drawing on the rich repertoire of local cultural resources to communicate their political ideas and mobilize people into protest actions.⁸⁷ In urban India too, religious festivals and holidays were central to the everyday lives of workers and multiple religious and cultural organizations were active in working-class neighbourhoods. Communist organizing had to reckon with the worker’s keen interest in these matters, and as important, ensure that it did not lead to inter-religious strife. In many instances, unions did mitigate sectarian uses of religion, especially the rivalry that sometimes bedeviled Hindu and Muslim worker interactions.⁸⁸

The left’s understanding of Hinduism bears consideration in this regard. Very early in his political life, S. A. Dange sought to grapple with Hinduism critically, but apart from a few sporadic articles in the *Socialist*, nothing came of his efforts, until much later, when he took a historical lens to the distant past (see Chapter 4). M. N. Roy was interested in matters to do with religion and philosophy and more generally with the history of ideas. Through the 1920s his critique of religion was voiced not only with reference to the Hindu-Muslim question, but also with regard to the persistence of the religious world view in modern Indian political and public life and consciousness. He was critical of Gandhi’s saintliness and, equally, of tendencies in the public life of the time to have recourse to religious rhetoric. In the 1930s and after, in the context of fascism’s

⁸⁶ *Documents of the Communist Movement of India, Volume 2, 1929*, Calcutta: National Book Agency (n.d.), p. 493.

⁸⁷ Parthasarathi Pathak, *Communists on Caste*, pp. 256–257.

⁸⁸ See Chitra Joshi, *Lost Worlds of Indian Labour*, pp. 236–245.

advance in Europe, he wrote a great deal on the relationship between religion and the political imagination in India.⁸⁹ Roy's critique of Hinduism, in this context, was quite similar to Ambedkar's: he pointed to the philosophical stranglehold exerted by Brahmanic traditions of thought on all subsequent history, the limits of Hindu moral philosophy and the unfortunate retreat of Buddhism from the role it essayed in its heyday. He also drew parallels between Nietzsche's ideas and those expounded in Brahmanical texts, and pointed to how Hindu society was fertile ground for the growth of fascist thought.⁹⁰ However, Roy did not offer a critique of the brahmin class and its role in the modern period, though in his latter day writings, he did indict the orthodox amongst the nationalists for harbouring protofascist ideas.⁹¹

As far as the role of intellectuals or of the brahmin class was concerned, left thinkers speculated on the intellectuals and their presence in colonial society, but not in relation to the brahmin class. For instance, in an extended note on modern intellectuals, S. A. Dange referred rather sweepingly to what appeared to him a putative social group that comprised "salaried employees" who functioned as the "office machinery" of capitalism in colonial India.⁹² Comprising clerks, office workers, journalists and teachers, this educated and self-conscious group seemed an "intellectual proletariat" but it was yet not a class, since there "was no solidarity in the very base of its economic position between the two classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat".⁹³ As a consequence, the consciousness of its constituents was shaped by "caste, community and province", and in the event, these men were unable to rise beyond their immediate and often limited political and material demands. They wanted better salaries, more Indians in government and were prey to clever propaganda.

⁸⁹ See in particular M.N. Roy, *Fascism: Its, Philosophy, Professions and Practice*, Calcutta: D N Library, 1938.

⁹⁰ In this context, see M.N. Roy, *Heresies of the Twentieth Century*, Moradabad: Pradeep Karyalaya, 1940. Interestingly enough, Roy held Islam to have caused a major disjuncture in Indian intellectual and social life, and granted it the same salience that Ambedkar granted Buddhism (see his *The Historical Role of Islam*, Bombay: Vohra & Co. Publishers Ltd, 1938 [1937]).

⁹¹ See M.N. Roy, especially the essay, 'Marx or Manu' in *Fragments of a Prison Diary, Volume 2: India's Message*, Calcutta: Renaissance Publishers, 1952, pp. 134–189.

⁹² *Documents of the Communist Movement of India, Volume 2*, 1929, pp. 1069–1070.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 1074.

Dange did not consider it germane that these men were mostly brahmins and Hindus.⁹⁴

5 DESPITE THE COMMUNISTS: AMBEDKAR AND BRITISH SOCIALIST THOUGHT

Given the nature of the communist response to the problems posed by the intermeshing of caste, class and religious identities and interests, it is unsurprising that Ambedkar did not and, in fact, could not view the CPI as a fraternal ally. Neither his understanding of the ways in which caste set the coordinates for the labour question in the Indian context, nor his critique of religion and the brahmin class, elicited responses that rendered his suggestive and rich insight matters of vigorous debate. He would not have been unhappy with a socialist resolution of the caste-class conundrum, had consistent and critical attention been bestowed on the history of its endurance, and the role of religion in securing the latter. Ambedkar thus marked a lonely trajectory, and one that led him to domains that the Indian left of his time did not consider important: of religion and ethics, as these shaped public and personal lives, and civil and political societies.

Yet, he found filial comrades in the realm of thought, amongst writers and ideologues of the British Left. Ethics and matters to do with consciousness were constituent aspects of the socialism espoused by British Labour and more generally by socialist writers. Since many of them were closely associated with the Labour party and with other worker organizations, they wrote to influence practical politics, or at least to widen the imagination and sympathy of those who were drawn to the socialist cause. In different ways, they sought to reconcile the claims of liberty, guaranteed by the liberal modern state, with the more difficult claims of equality, and invoked a socialism that went beyond the securing of justice and plenty, and which would ensure a richer and more creative life for all. This socialism, they held, would come about by labour being present in realms of rule.

⁹⁴ Interestingly enough, Dange was far more sensitive to how caste and other ascriptive categories shaped bourgeois class experiences. He thus noted that while capitalism strove to transcend social differences, of caste and faith, driven by its search for profit, the bourgeois was not averse to heeding such lines of difference when it came to the appropriation of surplus (*Ibid.*, p. 1075).

Of these thinkers, Tawney and Laski expounded ideas that Ambedkar argued out in the Indian context: as we have seen, Tawney's sense of what was owed to the human person spoke to Ambedkar's own sense of the denuded humanity that had come to be, in view of the workings of the Hindu social order (see Chapter 3). In contrast to Tawney who called attention to the conditions of individual flourishing that the state ought to ensure, Laski's socialism addressed the state's role in rather pointed ways. He declared himself wary of what he described as the "social service state", which was nothing but a modified bourgeois state that sought to position itself as an insurance against revolt by the disinherited.⁹⁵ Such a state, he cautioned, might enable "the outworks of the capitalist system to be surrendered to its opponents" but it was unlikely to enforce or even desire the "inner citadel's surrender".⁹⁶ Laski's argument was that parliamentary democracy, a necessary adjunct of such a state, could not but be held hostage to capital and its interests. His pessimism in this regard led him to examine the Soviet model and without entirely endorsing it, he wondered if the working classes might not find in it a "more than adequate substitute for the freedom to which capitalist democracy entitles them".⁹⁷ But after the end of World War II he was less severe on democracy and called for rejuvenated democratic governments, underscored by socialist principles.⁹⁸

Ambedkar's *States and Minorities* is interesting in the manner it echoes the ideas outlined by Tawney and Laski. It argued for a state socialism that was to be mandated by parliamentary democracy and noted that this was in consequence of the state having to not merely honour fundamental rights, but also work at creating remedies to secure justice and equality. In other words, it was not enough to limit the power of the state with regard to such arbitrary action as it might undertake with regard to its citizens, it was equally important to restrain the powerful and propertied amongst the citizens from acting in ways that would injure the workers and those less endowed. This authority was to be vested in parliament and enforced through democratic means. In a language that recalled both Laski's and

⁹⁵ Harold J. Laski, *Democracy in Crisis*, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1933, pp. 13–66.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁹⁷ Harold J. Laski, *Democracy in Crisis*, p. 258.

⁹⁸ Harold J. Laski, *Reflections on the Revolutions of Our Times*, Allahabad: Central Book Depot, 1946.

Tawney's words, the document noted that it did not wish to see liberty compromise the cause of equality:

"How many have to relinquish their constitutional rights in order to gain their living? ...If a person who is unemployed is offered a choice between a job of some sort, with some sort of wages, with no fixed hours of labour and with an interdict on joining a union and the exercise of his right to freedom of speech, association, religion, etc., can there be any doubt as to what his choice will be. How can it be otherwise? The fear of starvation, the fear of losing a house, the fear of losing savings if any, the fear of being compelled to take children away from school, the fear of having to be a burden on public charity, the fear of having to be burned or buried at public cost are factors too strong to permit a man to stand out for his Fundamental Rights".⁹⁹

The entangled yet complex nature of the struggle for liberty and equality rendered it a conundrum. British labour intellectuals sought to 'resolve' this question in thought, by their anticipation of a state that answered to the individual's creative needs, while retaining for itself a mandate for distributive justice. There was a response to the claims of revolution and the historical arrival of the Soviet state, from within the long history of British labour organizing and socialism, including of the utopian kind. Ambedkar's invocation of such a state in the Indian context at the very moment of its inception, when it sought to give itself a Constitution, was an equally idealist gesture, and he was aware of it. By assenting to draft a Constitution for free India, he had risked a wager that it was actually possible to build a republic of reason and civility that would help establish the justice and necessity of equality in all spheres of life. Clearly, he valued constitutional morality, but as he argued, it did not yet exist in India.¹⁰⁰

He had reasons to worry about it ever taking root in Indian soil: some of these were old ones, having to do with the mental habitude

⁹⁹ B.R. Ambedkar, *States and Minorities*, in BAWs, Volume 1, pp. 409–410. State socialism of one kind or another was referenced in a range of documents, during this period, including those produced by the colonial government in the interwar years, India's capitalists, the Indian National Congress' National Planning Committee and trade unions. In this sense, Ambedkar's gesture towards state socialism was not unusual or unprecedented. But his placing of untouchable and anti-caste concerns at the heart of socialist planning and the normative worth he brought to his reasoning were.

¹⁰⁰ B.R. Ambedkar, *Constituent Assembly Debates*, in BAWs, Volume 13, pp. 60–61.

fostered by the caste order. Others were relatively new and contingent, and had to do with local as well as global developments. The communist-led militant struggles for grain and land made him wonder whether such struggles could be preempted, without a wholesale transformation of the economy.¹⁰¹ Secondly, across the world, the law of contract, as he put it, had mitigated against the actual experience of freedom and equality and the prospects for democracy appeared bleak. There was also the problem of the modern state, and if it could be trusted to be democratic in the substantive sense of the word.¹⁰² The optimism that he exuded in his wartime addresses to labour about an enhanced and expanded life for workers in a post-war world did not carry over into his post-war speeches.

He remained invested in the world of thought through all of this. Progressive intellectuals had placed just such a trust in knowledge, sometimes glossed as professional expertise and at other times as open-ended learning and Ambedkar clearly retained faith with his mentors in this regard. As to what knowledge could do, and if indeed, it was likely to prove effective in addressing social and political crises, the Progressives had been optimistic. The historian Charles Beard for instance held that politics as a field of knowledge was, necessarily, open to experimental thinking, and that what appeared a political and historical impasse need not remain one. Writing on the Bolshevik revolution, Beard observed that after 1917, “a simple and drastic attempt to dispose of the contradiction between political theory and economic facts” had been undertaken.¹⁰³ On the one hand, “class antagonisms” were addressed by the nationalization of land and industrial capital. On the other hand, the communist government had to give into peasant cooperatives, in the face of peasant reluctance to give up land, accept the necessity of an official bureaucratic class that would help run the government and engage with craft unions with their differential demands for compensation. A common justice for the working class as such, Beard argued, remained an abstraction. Meanwhile, the idea of political democracy was “denounced and cast aside as a

¹⁰¹ For a tangential reference to the possibility of the most oppressed taking to militancy, see B.R. Ambedkar, *Fragments*, in BAWs, Volume 12, 1992, p. 734.

¹⁰² B.R. Ambedkar, *Conditions Precedent for the Successful Working of Democracy*, in BAWs, Volume 17:3, pp. 472–486.

¹⁰³ Charles A. Beard, *The Economic Basis of Politics*, New York: Alfred P Knopf, 1928, p. 95.

mere “bourgeois” device calculated to delude the working class”.¹⁰⁴ The socialist experiment in Russia had thus yielded uneven results, none of which could be adequately foretold, and this made it evident that as far as the political domain was concerned, there were ever newer frontiers to be conquered.¹⁰⁵

Ambedkar had studied under Beard and continued to read him, and it is evident that politics remained, for him, an experimental science. In the last decade of his life, he thus sought to link and connect the various themes that had held his attention through the years: the burden of history and its uneven bequest, the mental habitude that helped reproduce graded inequality; the degradation of women’s lives as these were lived out, within the social order; matters to do with labour, caste and untouchability; the uncertain future of democracy and the welfare state; necessity of evolving a philosophy and ethics that would challenge Brahmanism. He accommodated all these concerns into a singular resolve: to exit Hinduism and embrace Buddhism. Given that he viewed Buddhism as having existed, historically, in a dialectical relationship to Brahmanism, he chose to explore and, indeed, actualize the movement of the dialectic in his own time.

This was a move that was deliberate and yet a venture into the unknown, a studied gesture, which sought to expand the frontiers of political thought and social practice, of justice and ethics.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 99.



What Path to Salvation? The Conundrum of Social Reproduction

1 THE RIDDLE OF SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

In 1936, Dr Ambedkar spoke to a gathering of untouchables in Bombay and declared that he was considering converting to another religion. Touchables and untouchables constituted two classes, he noted, and the daily violence directed at the untouchables was an expression of class war, which denied their right to freedom, equality and fraternity and sought to crush their very being. This was a war, sanctified by Hinduism, which was nothing short of a “disease”, a “mockery” of the human spirit and for the untouchables an eternal “punishment”; a religion that forbade touch, insisted that a man could not be human with his fellow beings, and rendered inequality given and permanent.¹

He declared that as far as he was concerned, untouchables needed a religion that made for individual flourishing. This was not possible as long as they did not possess freedom of mind, for it was this that was constitutive of the human person, this capacity to live and act in the light of one’s own understanding, and not directed by a purpose given by others. Hinduism was set against such freedom and worse denied untouchables

¹ Babasaheb Ambedkar, *What Way Emancipation*, in Writings and Speeches (BAWS), Mumbai: The Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Volume 17: 3, 2003, p. 145. Henceforth all references to Ambedkar’s writings in this chapter will cite the acronym, BAWS, followed by volume number, year of publication and page numbers.

the right to even seek it. Conversion, held Ambedkar, would enable untouchables experience mental and ontological liberty: “Convert” he entreated, “for securing equality.... for getting liberty... so that your domestic life should be happy.”²

This call to remake one’s public as well as domestic self, to wage an ontological revolution, no less, was remarkable. It was not merely a question of claiming the individual right of conscience to choose a religion of one’s choice, rather it was a claim that was staked in order that human persons could reconstruct their lives and worlds. The conundrum of social reproduction, the cruel paradox of literally reproducing one’s lowness that had haunted him from his student days, thus came to be addressed in its most expansive aspect: while social and civic sanctions organized the Hindu social order, it was religious affect that nurtured and justified it, rendered it given. To refuse that affect and to seek another way of living and relating to oneself and one’s fellow beings signified a will to rethink all relationality, including in the intimate and domestic spheres.

A decade and after in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Ambedkar would go on to address directly and forcefully the sphere of reproduction, when he laboured hard on the Hindu Code Bill that sought to grant women equal rights in marriage, divorce, inheritance and with respect to adoption of children. For various reasons, the Bill was not passed, and an embittered Ambedkar, who defined his work on the Code as supremely important, resigned his post as Law Minister. The various parts of the Code eventually became law in the years that followed, but these were now detached from that historically significant—and paradoxical—act of codifying Hindu law under a secular aegis.

Following his resignation from the cabinet, Ambedkar devoted much of his time to examining ways and means to convert out of Hinduism, moving as it were between a constitutional vision of change and one committed to an ontological transformation. This chapter addresses his approach to the question of social reproduction, in the light of other civic, legal and religious initiatives that were undertaken in late colonial India, especially by women who, as much as the untouchables, had an existential stake in rethinking social reproduction.

² Ibid., p. 113.

2 THE WOMEN'S QUESTION IN LATE COLONIAL INDIA

We saw that Ambedkar's earliest text to deal with social reproduction, *Castes in India* examined the ways in which the brahmin class enclosed itself, through regulatory acts which hinged on women's sexual and civil subordination: infant marriage, imposed widowhood, male polygamy and the practice of sati, or wife burning. Historically, these practices—except male polygamy—were not found in all castes or in all parts of the subcontinent. While wife burning had been declared abolished by law in 1829, infant marriage and imposed widowhood continued to be legion in the upper caste—largely brahmin—families everywhere.³ Since the emergent educated Indian elite comprised men from such families and castes, they viewed these matters as socially pertinent. In effect, they, and an early generation of women who equally were invested in these matters, set the terms of debate, of what came to be known as “the women's question”.⁴

Women's status needed to be reformed, of that very few were in doubt. As important, reformers desired to know if women's contemporary status represented the entire truth about their position in society. Surely there was a time when they were respected and freer and more equal, before petty rules and onerous practices hemmed in their lives. Reformers in fact looked to such a past to ratify their arguments for change in the present: they mined ancient texts, particularly Vedic literature and ‘discovered’ the ideal woman of their imagination in antique time.⁵ She was also appropriately reimagined for the present, as a fit helpmeet to the reforming brahmin and, more generally, upper caste man: educated, but not opinionated, engaged with the world, but content to be a companionable wife, and most important, the able and enlightened mother of his children. In her was reposed the responsibility of being ‘true’ to national culture and traditions, and she was to ensure that either was suitably interpreted for these modern times. Meanwhile, women's reformed situation appeared an

³ See Lata Mani, ‘Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India’, *Cultural Critique*, No. 7, Autumn, 1987, pp. 119–156, for a richly argued critique of the colonial construction of wife-burning, and the manner in which it shaped debates to do with women's status.

⁴ For a comprehensive view of reform debates to do with the women's question see Tanika Sarkar & Sumit Sarkar, *Women and Social Reform in Modern India: A Reader*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2008.

⁵ See A. S. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilisation: From Prehistoric Times to the Present Day*, Benares: The Culture Publication House, 1938.

object lesson to all those who held India to be backward and benighted: an emblem of the modern nation-to-be, not dissociated from history, yet open to the possibilities of the present.

Charged with a historical task that her modest life struggled to accommodate, the upper caste woman found herself having to prove she was worthy of reform. As important, she had to ensure that she was 'different' and unlike the 'wrong' sort of woman. The list of 'wrong' women that reformist discourse produced included lower caste and untouchable workers, vendors and traders, singers and dancers, and those who were custom-bound to sexual servitude, in the guise of either performance cultures or temple service and those who were in prostitution. In short the wrong woman was one who was mobile, worked for a living, traversed public spaces, and was not restrained in her speech and behaviour.⁶

Needless to say neither the ideal held up to women whose lives stood to be reformed, nor the legislation that addressed their needs, pertained to the complex and layered worlds of the so-called lower caste and untouchable women. This proved consequential in ways that the reformists did not bargain for, but which, in retrospect, revealed the limits within which they lived and acted. For instance, reformist legislation to do with the remarriage of Hindu widows did not take on board the fact that women in several lower caste communities, if widowed, could and did remarry. Whatever conditions had to be fulfilled for such marriages were determined by local custom. The regulations the new law put in place went against the grain of the latter. For the legal constraints imposed on the remarrying widow's right to her deceased husband's property and the care of his children abridged and limited existing customary rights. The reverse too was the case in that the law did not take cognizance of the fact that the conditions in which widows customarily remarried were not always propitious to their welfare: this was the case in north-western India, where

⁶ See Charu Gupta ('Writing Sex and Sexuality: Archives of Colonial North India', *Journal of Women's History*, Volume 23: 4, Winter 2011, pp. 12–35), for an account of didactic manuals and assorted popular literature that addressed upper caste women and which contrasted ideal and coarse femininity, and high-caste sexual purity and low-caste and Muslim lasciviousness. For an appraisal of representations of lower caste and dalit (untouchable) women's bodies in public literature, see Charu Gupta, *Representing Dalit Bodies in Colonial North India*, New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Museum and Library Series, 2012.

they were forced into unions that were contracted to control their labour, sexuality and access to property.⁷

Further, law and custom clashed in ways that proved bewildering. When courts relied on the letter of the law and ignored local practices, as often happened, women's choices with regard to divorce and remarriage were deemed illicit and not maintainable as 'Hindu'. For instance, when women from artisanal castes, many of which were deemed 'low' contracted second marriages, because they were unhappy with their first, they were viewed as having committed a crime, and accused of bigamy by the courts, though they had the consent of their caste councils to remarry.⁸

Also, reformism, which viewed practices in elite castes with alarm, failed to recognize related concerns in subaltern caste contexts. Those who were invested in marriage reform, especially the ending of infant marriages and raising the age of marriage and sexual consent (within and outside marriage) were oblivious to the situation of lower caste and untouchable girls. Socially and sexually vulnerable, they could be and were abducted, abused and trafficked. Representatives from these communities who testified before law committees, which received public opinion on proposed reforms in marriage laws, raised these concerns, but they were not heeded in ways that answered their anxieties. For the reformers, a law that sought to protect upper caste girls from inappropriate marriages and which penalized sexual acts committed upon married girls under a certain age pertained to those whose worth was beyond dispute. As for others who were not deemed sexually 'worthy' a different set of rules applied. Thus, in the discussions around raising the age of sexual consent, outside of marriage, some reformers argued that if in such instances there was to be a higher age bar, this would cause difficulties for the prostitute class!⁹ Rights and respectability clearly went together.

⁷ For a critical account of widow remarriage legislation, see Lucy Carroll, 'Law, custom, and statutory social reform: the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, Volume 20: 4, 1983, pp. 363–388.

⁸ See Padma Anagol, *The Emergence of Feminism in India, 1850–1920*, Oxford: Routledge, 2019, pp. 120–122.

⁹ V. Geetha, *Undoing Impunity: Speech After Sexual Violence*, New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2016, p. 50.

Anti-caste movements were invested in challenging the culture of sexual ignominy imposed on lower caste and untouchable women, especially those who were performers and musicians and some of whom were deemed prostitutes. They were dependent on such patrons that fancied them or performance contexts that denied them dignity and forbade them to marry or lead a 'respectable' life. Ambedkar addressed their situation as it existed in his part of the world and focused on what the women might do in this instance: he asked that they abandon these professions and stake their claims to marriage and social respectability.¹⁰ He did not view his arguments as having to do only with the women's question: to him, they were part of his larger campaign to annihilate caste. Untouchable women, performers as well as labourers, responded with alacrity to the movements founded by Ambedkar and came to hold the labour, caste and gender questions together in an adroit manner.¹¹

There were other aspects to lower caste and untouchable lives that eluded the reformers' understanding. In peasant society, women farmers and workers on the land were publicly visible and active and subject to various travails. Widows and women who remained single suffered in particular and not only because they were sexually vulnerable. They found it hard to retain control over their meagre resources, whether these were inherited tenancy rights or access to family goods that ought to be shared with them, but seldom were. There were other concerns as well: in some instances, landlords extracted non-rental revenue from their tenant farmers in a variety of ways and one of the cesses that they imposed had to do with what they termed illicit sexual behaviour—especially sexual and conjugal relations contracted across castes—which stood to be fined! Men as well as women were liable to this form of exaction.

When peasant organisations emerged in northern India towards the end of the 1910s, they addressed some of these issues, and it is evident that not all matters related to women's lives were resolved in ways that expected them to prove their virtue before they could ask for redress. A

¹⁰ For a critical and historically situated review of Ambedkar's views on sexual servitude see Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009, pp. 50–68.

¹¹ See, for example, the charter of demands that untouchable women put out on the occasion of the first conference of the Scheduled Caste Federation (SCF) in July 1942 (*Progress of Community is Measured by Progress of Women: The All India Depressed Classes Women's Conference Held at Nagpur on July 20, 1942*, in BAWs, Volume 17: 3, pp. 277–283).

variety of options was made available to the women in order that they might realize a measure of sexual and economic justice. Yet rural India was not entirely impervious to debates to do with the women's question, and at times, peasant organizers, familiar with arguments to do with the women's question, counselled women to stay 'respectable'¹²

As we have seen, Ambedkar was engaged with the agrarian world, and with the lives and rights of the untouchables who were part of it. From the 1920s, he addressed the conditions in which they had to labour on land and the menial tasks that were theirs, on account of their caste status. During the Mahad protests in which a large number of women participated, he implored them to not assent to imposed, undignified customary labour, or abide by behavioural strictures that insisted on marking them as socially low, and which had to do with dress and deportment, and with practices that required them to accept leftover food from village households.¹³

Disengaged as they were with rural realities, reform debates did not reckon with concerns that bothered peasant leaders and anti-caste actors. Reformist discourse did not also quite grasp the transformations that had beset working women's lives, as was evident in the manner they understood the lives and fate of the substantial number of mobile women who worked in plantations or in urban industrial contexts, and who migrated to different parts of the British Empire, as part of the large army of indentured labour. While trade unions and welfare associations addressed some aspects of their working worlds, and uplift and temperance movements (inspired by Gandhi) looked to 'improve' their 'moral' condition and family life, these women remained socially invisible; except when they were marked as symbols of moral degradation wrought by colonial rule. This was especially the case with indentured female labour

¹² For a fascinating account of the sexual economy of peasant society in early twentieth-century northern India, see Kapil Kumar, 'Rural Women in Oudh, 1917–1947: Baba Ramachandra and the Women's Question', in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, edited by Sudesh Vaid and Kumkum Sangari, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999 [1990], pp. 337–369.

¹³ See his address to women during the Mahad satyagraha, in which he exhorted women to put by practices that marked them as untouchable (B. R. Kamble (translator), *Babishkrit Bharat (A Newspaper in Marathi founded by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar in April 1927), Part 2*, Kolhapur: Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Research Institute in Social Growth [n.d.], pp. 167–170).

whose abjectness became a visible sign of all that was wrong with colonial venality.¹⁴

In any event, debates to do with reform of women's lives remained resolutely framed by the familial worlds of the upper castes, and unsurprisingly, they elicited responses chiefly from women from these communities. While their responses were diverse, in all instances, they had to craft these carefully and ensure that they remained within the bounds of respectable femininity even when they sought to transgress its limits. Thus, those who looked to change their lives and that of women like themselves did not fail to valorize the domestic sphere, and their role as wives and mothers; on the other hand, they also came to render their calling, to do with affection and duty, as an instance of a 'higher' morality, and this enabled them carry forward reformist tasks that seemed urgent to them.¹⁵

In and through these strategic ways of claiming their due in the modern world, a small group of women thus came to be visible in public life, asserted their sex's claims to justice in matters to do with family, especially the rights of widows to a dignified life; insisted on their rights to an education of their choice, and spoke up against the more problematic aspects of custom and tradition which demeaned them. Many associated themselves with the national movement and came to be active in the Indian National Congress. They also joined social campaigns, to do with untouchable uplift, and in modest ways supported working-class women through ameliorative acts, such as the setting up of training centres for women to learn a new trade, with provisions for child care and temperance unions that took against alcoholism amongst the urban working poor.¹⁶

¹⁴ For an account of labouring women's lives see Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. For a critique of the sexual politics of indenture, see V. Geetha, 'In a Faraway Sugarcane Field: Imagining Indentured Labour in Colonial India', in *Contemporary India and South Africa: Legacies, Identities, Dilemmas*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2012, pp. 48–64.

¹⁵ For a detailed account of how upper caste women in western India (Ambedkar's immediate context) rethought their lives and roles within the limits allowed them, see Padma Anagol, *The Emergence of Feminism in India, 1850–1920*, pp. 57–104.

¹⁶ See in this context, Radha Kumar, *A History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1890–1990*, New Delhi: Kali for Women 1993. Ameliorative acts did not often take into consideration the conditions under which women worked and reproduced and sometimes ended up reifying women's roles as mothers and care-givers (see Samita Sen, 'Gender and Class: Women in Indian Industry, 1890–1990', *Modern Asian Studies*, Volume 41: 1, 2008, pp. 75–116).

Male as well as female reformers looked to change social practices through a recourse to the law. This elicited sharp rebuke from those who held that the colonial government had no right to legislate on matters to do with tradition, faith and custom. Such arguments emerged in the wake of an assertive nationalism and led to that division between social and political reform that Ambedkar felt to be a significant turn in modern Indian public life. Women though were invested in legislation to do with their lives and testified before legal reform committees. For those who found themselves in unusual circumstances, which had destabilized their families, or who looked to rethink their location within, what seemed to them, a limited caste and religious familial situation, the challenges were greater, as we shall see.

3 LEGISLATING FOR EQUALITY: THE HINDU CODE BILL

Impatient with the limited nature of social reform as it was argued out in the public sphere, though holding it indispensable, Ambedkar called attention to how it had rendered the upper caste family an object of fitful critique, while the Hindu social order that shaped it was left out of critical reckoning.¹⁷ In his understanding, the critique of the family ought to have led to and compelled a debate on caste and all that justified it. For his part, he essayed two moves. One, he looked to legal reform to address matters to do with marriage and family, and for another, he sought to establish the links between marriage, family and the caste order, in a historical and sociological sense and the one came to inform the other in consequential ways.

As far as the law was concerned, he joined efforts to legislate not just against practices that limited the lives of upper caste women, but the broader world of Hindu custom and tradition to do with marriage, divorce, adoption and property and proposed the making of a comprehensive Code of Hindu law to do with these matters. And as is evident from the arguments and counter-arguments that accompanied the making of the doomed Code, the question of caste emerged as salient: whether it had to do with protective legislation to do with intercaste marriages, flexible rights to divorce, which were available to lower caste and untouchable

¹⁷ B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, in BAWs, Volume 1, 1979, pp. 41–42.

women, but not to their upper caste counterparts, or with the rights of the widow, it was evident that caste and gender were hopelessly entangled.

Constituting this entanglement as the subject of legal redressal was not easy: for one, it literally shaped and anchored the so-called private and familial sphere and therefore elicited anxiety and apologia. Secondly, it required bringing within a rational system of rights, a plethora of customary practices, scriptural-legal dicta, learnings from traditional commentarial legal literature and contradictory arguments from colonial case law. In undertaking the task of codification, Ambedkar drew on such work as had been accomplished by previous Law Committees. These latter had worked closely with women reformers, who, since the 1930s had argued for liberal marriage and divorce laws, just and fair maintenance for women, in case of judicial separation, and their right to adopt children, should they so desire. They had also insisted that women ought to be given their share of family property.¹⁸

Ambedkar went on to do more. It seemed to him that the legal raw materials that were available, including judicial readings of customary practices, partially reformed statutes, scriptural norms that had been written into legislation, and important judgements, ought to be assessed for what they could yield by way of “an integrated system consistent with our Constitution”.¹⁹ Such a system, the Code that he had in mind, he held, would offer legal protection to the modern Hindu who sought to live and act in ways that answered his conscience and choice, and yet not entirely invalidate such existing practices that appeared consonant with Constitutional ideals. For instance, a reformed and codified marriage law would allow the sacramental character of marriage to be retained, even as it enabled and protected civil marriages that did not heed the endogamous logic of the caste order.²⁰

The idea of a Code that strove for uniformity of legal definitions and application did not appear viable to some of those involved in the debate

¹⁸ For a history of the making of the Hindu Code see, Chitra Sinha, *Debating Patriarchy: The Hindu Code Bill Controversy in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012; Eleanor Newbigin, *The Hindu Family and the Emergence of Modern India: Law, Citizenship and Community*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

¹⁹ B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr Ambedkar and the Hindu Code Bill*, in BAWS, Volume 14: 1, 1995, p. 772.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 267–268. Also, see in this context, B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr Ambedkar and the Hindu Code Bill*, in BAWS, Volume 14: 2, 1995, pp. 1201–1202.

over its content. It was argued that public opinion would be set against the overriding of customary practices, always already diverse, by a uniform law. Ambedkar pointed out that across the country, custom had been the basis for a considerable amount of lawmaking and such laws which did not vitiate the principle of justice had been taken into consideration. The Hindu Code was therefore not unmindful of custom, rather what it had done was to shut the door on the evolution of new customs and, in their place, sought to make available to citizens, laws that were the definitive distillate of customs, judgements and earlier statutes.²¹

It was also argued that given the complex and layered society that India was, the Code ought not to bind all communities, and instead be made optional. Ambedkar argued that the pace of change in the country had not been uniform and some parts of the subcontinent were already set on more rational and consistent ways of thinking about law, and that an optional clause would set time back.²² Further, he noted, the plurality of practices notwithstanding, for long, Hindus and indeed, even Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs, had been governed by practices and norms, sanctified by and derived from values upheld by Hindu scripture. This was a historical development that could not be wished away. Even the Buddha, he noted, who differed from and challenged the Vedic Brahmins, “did not propound a separate legal system for his own followers; he left the legal system as it was”.²³

Ambedkar’s argument in this context was that howsoever different, practices of communities, within the pale of the Hindu civilizational universe, were subject to and shaped by the logic of graded inequality and endogamy and that this bitter truth ought to be acknowledged: “Whatever else Hindu society may adopt, it will never give up its social structure

²¹ B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr Ambedkar and the Hindu Code Bill*, in BAWs, Volume 14: 1, p. 40. The Hindu Code Bill was introduced in the legislative section of the Constituent Assembly in 1949, but subsequent discussions took place 2 years later. During this time, Ambedkar elicited the opinion of a range of scholars well-versed in Hindu law from all walks of life, including orthodox teachers. He also held meetings with communities that were governed by well-established matrilineal systems of law, as in the southern Indian state of Kerala. These discussions yielded amendments which were incorporated into the Code (see G. R. Rajagopaul, ‘The Story of the Hindu Code’, *Journal of the Indian Law Institute*, Volume 17: 4, 1975, pp. 537–558).

²² B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr Ambedkar and the Hindu Code Bill*, in BAWs, Volume 14: 2, p. 1166.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 887.

for the enslavement of the Sudra and the enslavement of women. It is for this reason that law must now come to their rescue in order that society may move on".²⁴

The legal labour expended on the Hindu Code bore the impression of Ambedkar's long-term engagement with the histories that had shaped Hindu legal and moral philosophy. As we have seen, he identified Brahmanism's "triumph" with the making of the *Manusmriti* and the inscription of Brahmanical values in the structures of affective life. The consequential developments in this regard had to do with the tightening of marriage rules with regard to cross-varna unions and interdicts that punished miscegenation; punitive and regulatory codes of conduct that stymied women's lives; the growing authority of the brahmin father which replaced the pedagogic and spiritual authority vested in the brahmin teacher, and which ensured that only those with the right paternity could access scriptural learning; and finally a system of graded punishments that ensured that these other interdicts were not flouted. In addition the responsibility for enforcing proper and appropriate social conduct was vested in the monarch, with the brahmin class granted the authority to reprimand an erring monarch or even engage in regicide.²⁵

Ambedkar thus made clear that reform of marriage and all that related to conjugality ought, necessarily, to keep in mind the historical evolution of caste and the persistence of its logic of difference and hierarchy. The logical and legal coherence that he brought to the task of legal codification was thus in the service of reforming what might be termed the caste family, and in this sense, the Hindu Code Bill represented a measure and an endeavour that sought to reckon with and challenge the long duree of social reproduction. This was also why the act of codification, however limited it was in terms of what it sought to achieve, seemed a historical novelty. Ambedkar noted in bitterness and sorrow, when it was not passed, that an epochal opportunity had been missed: "The Hindu Code was the greatest social reform measure ever undertaken by the Legislature in this country. No law passed by the Indian Legislature in the past or likely to be passed in the future can be compared to it in point of its significance. To leave inequality between class and class, between sex and sex which

²⁴ Ibid., p. 1160.

²⁵ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Triumph of Brahmanism*, in BAWs, Volume 3, 1987, pp. 291–301.

is the soul of Hindu Society untouched and to go on passing legislation relating to economic problems is to make a farce of our Constitution and to build a palace on a dung heap. This is the significance I attached to the Hindu Code".²⁶

In any case, at the time that debates on the Code appeared productive, Ambedkar walked a fine line while explaining its necessity: whenever the occasion demanded, he pointed out that he and others who had worked on it had reckoned with and drawn from the discursive world of familiar and revered Hindu law texts and customary practices.²⁷ He also repeatedly noted that the Code did not mandate what it viewed as appropriate social and legal behaviour, it merely protected those who chose to live in ways that were not sanctioned by custom and tradition.

Significantly enough the women members of the Constituent Assembly who, to the last person, supported the Hindu Code, were convinced that if they were to realize the rights guaranteed to them in the Constitution, their affective and social worlds ought, necessarily, to be reordered. Thus, even as they framed their responses to the Code within the terms of, what they termed, a changing and accommodative Hindu culture and civilization, they made it clear that the Code would enable them to rebuild the social world on altogether different premises than what existed at present. For instance, speaking of the proposed law on adoption of children, Sucheta Kriplani, who would go on to be Chief Minister of free India's largest province, observed that in the past, boys were adopted for religious reasons, in order that the family had a heir and the lineage was secured, ancestors remembered and appropriate rites performed in their honour; and often the adopted son succeeded to such property and professions that were the provenance of upper caste families. But the new Code, she noted, ought to affirm and protect adoption undertaken for secular and civic reasons and that children should be adopted because they were desired and that girls, and not only boys, ought to be adopted.²⁸

Padmaja Naidu who would also hold high office in free India insisted that if women were to enjoy the fruits of freedom for which they had fought as hard as the men, they needed to be assured that their domestic

²⁶ B. R. Ambedkar, *B.R. Ambedkar and the Hindu Code Bill*, in BAWS, Volume 14: 2, pp. 1325–1326.

²⁷ See for instance his defence of women's right to their rightful share of ancestral property: *B.R. Ambedkar and the Hindu Code Bill*, in BAWS, Volume 14: 1, pp. 280–282.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 29–30.

lives were not circumscribed.²⁹ As important, the Code was supported since it helped prepare women for a future that was likely to be a planned society, and one where "... woman's place shall be equal to that of man's... woman shall not be excluded from any sphere of work on ground of her sex... Marriage shall not be a condition precedent to the enjoyment of full and equal civic status and economic and social rights by women".³⁰

The idea of a planned society had gained currency through the war years, and the Indian National Congress had set up committees to explore different aspects of Planning. In view of the debates in the interwar years about welfare state and socialism, Planning had acquired a certain utopian charge and nowhere was this as evident as it was in the document drawn up to delineate women's role in the planned economy. Critical and idealist in its reasoning, it was a rather remarkable statement on how a generation of publicly active, nationalist and reformist women envisaged their lives and the lives of other women. Women's work, at home and outside, was analysed and its devaluing admonished; domestic and conjugal life were viewed as integral to how women experienced the world, and as limiting women's work choices; caste-based labour, as women performed it, was decried, and it was pointed out that upper caste women as much as men benefitted from caste-linked servitude. Male attitudes to women's work and lives, including of fellow labourers, and trade unions were both subjected to critique. At the same time the document affirmed what was yet to be achieved: the rethinking of marriage, not as a sacrament, but as contract; the economic value of women's care labour and the importance of granting women their place as citizens, unmarked by their sex, and identified as rights-bearing subjects.³¹

A dissenting note attached to the report sought to go further: decidedly socialist in its understanding of the planned society, the writer of the note observed that the primary identity of the woman ought to be that of the worker and that all other forms of affiliation rendered irrelevant. As for a woman's personal life, that need not be the concern of the community or indeed of anyone else, other than herself. She might marry or stay single, and marriage under all circumstances ought to be a voluntary

²⁹ B. R. Ambedkar, *B.R. Ambedkar and the Hindu Code Bill*, in BAWS, Volume 14: 2, pp. 1149–50.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 1026–1027.

³¹ *Women's Role in the Planned Economy*, Bombay: Vora and Co. Publishers Ltd., 1947.

association, a contract that could be broken off. The unmarried mother ought to receive the support of the state (in fact all children should be rendered to state care), and equally a woman must possess the right to abortion. The prostitute must be viewed as a product of a society where women were viewed as property and like the wife whose counterpart she was, have her civic rights protected.³²

It is not clear if Ambedkar took note of these strands of thought, some of which emerged in the course of the debates on the Code, or if he was familiar with the long history of such arguments. In any event, his sense of the normative and the women's sense of the future were not dissimilar. Also, as we shall see, his persistent invocation of a new life for the untouchables bore an elective affinity to efforts undertaken by those women who sought to remake female lives in an existential as well as practical sense.

4 REFUSING CASTE REPRODUCTION: THE CASE OF PANDITA RAMABAI

Apart from reformed Hindu world views, which were legion and shaped upper caste women's attitudes to marriage and domesticity from the last quarter or so of the long nineteenth century, Christianity proved to be a draw for those amongst them, who looked to exit the Hindu faith. Their experiences are best understood in the overall context of Christian conversion in colonial India.

The reasons for conversion were diverse. Mass conversion was on account of caste-defined oppression and the promise of a better life that Christian missions held out, though contingent reasons also played a part. There were individuals who followed the dictates of reason and conscience, and there were those who converted in order to marry those they loved. Some converted because their husbands or fathers did. And a clutch of upper caste women converted because they experienced their ancestral religion as essentially abusive and self-denying. For almost all concerned, conversion proved phenomenologically complex and socially consequential.

For the Christian converts, who had been kept away from sacred spaces and told that their low status was mandated by the Creator himself, to

³² Ibid., pp. 232–243.

partake of the Eucharist was a momentous event; and to be taken note of and 'loved' and 'cared for', even if in a condescending spirit of service, signified an acknowledgement of social suffering. There were also material changes: missions and missionaries worked closely with their often dirt poor, untouchable converts, as they strove to assert their rights, to common land, pasturage or to retain such land as they might have acquired. Mission schools for the lower castes and untouchables brought sections of either group within the purview of modern education and in some instances industrial training for both boys and girls.³³

Conversion affected women's experience of their given roles, within the family as well as the larger caste order. Lower caste women converts were relieved of humiliating caste customs that required them to be socially and sexually submissive. At the same time, they were initiated into new practices of domesticity. Hard working women, who spent time in the field and market, were now expected to comport themselves differently, learn useful feminine arts, such as lace-making and embroidery! Those amongst them who appeared charismatic and desired to educate themselves were declared fit to spread the word of God and as local catechists and 'Bible-women' they acquired a rather novel and worthy civic status. This hard won civic respectability was seldom easy to uphold, since their attempts to interest Hindu women in Christ were met with hostility, derision and anger.³⁴ Conversion also made available a model of conjugality that was viewed as the obverse of existing Hindu models, and while this perhaps was more notional than possible, there were instances of Christian companionate marriages, which announced a new familial ethics. Ostracized by kin and caste, self-aware Christian couples had to form their own community.³⁵

The upper caste woman convert was a distinct and often lonely figure, and in this context, the story of a brahmin woman convert, Ramabai,

³³ For a detailed account of conversion and its afterlives, see Sundararaj Manickam, *Studies in Missionary History: Reflections on a Culture-contact*, Chennai: Christian Literature Society, 2006.

³⁴ See in this context, Eliza Kent, *Converting Women: Gender and Protestant Christianity in Colonial South India*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

³⁵ The life of Lakshmbai Tilak, a Hindu woman whose husband had converted to Christianity, while she remained Hindu, until she took to the faith, points to all that awaited the Christian conjugal unit. For Lakshmbai's fascinating life, see her memoir, *Smritichitre: The Memoirs of a Spirited Wife*, translated by Shanta Gokhale, New Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2017.

bears telling, if only because her decision to convert in some ways paralleled Ambedkar's own. Both were inveterate critics of Brahmanism and did not find anything redeeming in the Hindu past, though Ramabai did hold that the Vedic age was kinder to women than all subsequent moments in history. Both saw conversion as a pathway that would take them away from the oppressive world of an 'enclosed' social commons. And finally, they were both invested in reconstructing the social order, the one through practical acts that would enable women take hold of their lives, and at the same time bring them into a new and freeing religious community, and the other through the exercise of public reason and argument, which, eventually, would make for a transformation of social being.

As important, like Ambedkar, Ramabai viewed the degradation of women and the interdicts imposed on the shudras and the relegation of the untouchables to an abject existence as intertwined aspects of a single structure of inequality. Calling attention to the conditions under which women, the shudras and the untouchables could find salvation within the Hindu system of things, she noted that women were refused the knowledge that helped one experience transcendence and instead were told that only the "utter abandonment" of their wills to that of their husbands would ensure their spiritual emancipation. Likewise, the Shudras were warned that they must "not study the Veda, must not perform the same religious act which a Brahman has a right to perform". It was also said that a Shudra's only hope of "getting liberation is in serving the three high castes as their lifelong slave". As for the untouchables, they were denied all hope and in fact had to assent to their degradation before they could hope to escape it: "The things which are necessary to make it possible for them to born to be born into higher castes are that they should be contented to live in a very degraded condition serving the high—caste people as their bond servants..."³⁶

Ramabai's life (1858–1922) was rather unusual.³⁷ Her father was regarded as an exceptional scholar of Hindu scripture and philosophy, and he educated his wife in reading and interpreting these texts. Ramabai

³⁶ Ramabai Sarasvati, *A Testimony: The Life Story of Pandita Ramabai*, Melbourne: Ramabai Mukti Mission (1907; 1946), pp. 11–13.

³⁷ This account of her life is drawn from *A Testimony*, and Ramabai Sarasvati, *Pandita Ramabai: the Widow's Friend: An Australasian Edition of "The High-Caste Hindu Woman"*, 2nd Edition, Melbourne: G. Robertson, 1903.

learned Sanskrit from her mother and grew up to be proficient in that language. Her life was unusual in other ways as well: her parents were itinerant mendicants who travelled across the subcontinent with their children, speaking on matters of philosophy and metaphysics to interested spectators, chiefly from the touchable upper castes, for which they were rewarded with food or a place to stay. Given their peripatetic life, they were relatively free of the bind of kin and caste authority. Growing up thus, Ramabai was not trammled by local custom and besides got to travel literally thousands of miles at a time when very few women from her social background could expect to.

But this life took its toll on her family and she lost her parents and a sibling to the great famine that beset southern India in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Her experience of the great hunger of the times, and of watching people die, would shape all that she wrote and did. After her parents' death she and her brother found their way to Calcutta, where her unusual learning brought her into contact with the reformers of the Brahmo Samaj. As we have seen the Brahmos were critical of Hinduism and encouraged the breaking of caste taboos, including with regard to marriage. Ramabai was both intrigued and influenced by their arguments and drawn to their exposition of the Christian faith. She crossed the caste line herself by marrying a reformist 'shudra' man. However, her husband died soon after, leaving her with a daughter.³⁸ She was in her mid-twenties, a single mother and a 'widow' and could not expect civil recognition or social empathy.

But meanwhile, she had read widely in Hindu scripture and law, observed what upper caste women endured, having had the opportunity to spend time with many a unhappy wife and widow. Convinced that Hindu traditions were responsible for the misery that plagued the lives of women that she had got to know, she looked to modern education as a means of change. She resolved to become a doctor and travelled to

³⁸ Ramabai's interest in Christianity was at odds with how women from the same caste context as hers viewed the faith: as alien, and determined to downgrade Hinduism. Self-educated, highly intelligent, and looking to advance women's education and autonomy in whatever ways they could, these women chose to abide by the notion of a Hindu golden age—which some of them were admittedly ironic about—and sought to retrieve what appeared to them the essential aspects of the Hindu faith (Padma Anagol, *The Emergence of Feminism in India, 1850–1920*, pp. 57–104). Ramabai was as well situated as any of them to do this, given her immense learning in Hindu religious texts, but she chose not to walk that path. She was clearly in search of a different ethical universe.

England to study, earning her passage by publishing a book on the ideal moral life prescribed for Hindu women. However, when in England, she was diagnosed with a hearing disability and so was barred from medical school. But she was determined to train herself in other useful ways and enrolled in a college to study English and other subjects. Meanwhile, she made her home with a female Anglican community, of whom she had known in India.

A few months after she had been in England, Ramabai was officially baptized and acquired a formal Christian identity. While she chose to convert, the decision appears to have caused a measure of sadness and anguish. For one, a companion who had accompanied her from India committed suicide, for fear of being forced to convert. She had also tried to attack Ramabai. This experience proved disquieting and troubling. But there were other reasons for her to feel a sense of loss: being unmoored from all that she knew and from familiar ways of living and being did not prove easy. She found it difficult to give up all aspects of her pre-Christian life and remained resolutely vegetarian, and retained a deep love for the Sanskrit language.

On the other hand, she was all too aware of the blindness to social suffering in the Hindu community and the dissembling that characterized even reform efforts. In contrast, Christianity appeared sensitive to social hurt and exhorted its adherents to nurture active love and compassion, especially towards the scorned and rejected in society. The persona of Jesus, and his presence on the Cross stood testimony to the goodness of this creed: he had suffered in order that humanity might be redeemed. His crucifixion was the guarantee of his love for all humanity and a call to all to come to terms with their own sinful nature and look to redeem it. The crucifixion spoke to her sense of what one might yet do and endure to lead a good and useful life, and also convinced her that it was possible to earn the love of the Almighty without having to please His priests. As she would remark, years later: “No caste, no sex, no work, and no man was to be depended upon to get salvation”.³⁹

Ramabai refused to submit to official Anglican doctrine, such as was espoused by those around her. For one, she sensed in its claims to her unquestioned obedience the racism and arrogance that she had witnessed at home. For another, she viewed Christianity as a faith that had a place

³⁹ *A Testimony*, p. 26.

for conscience and individual discretion, and did not want to be told what to do. But she remained appreciative of the Anglican sisters' work with so-called fallen women. This labour had come to be in the context of widespread debate and action to do with the Contagious Diseases Act that subjected sex workers to compulsory medical attention, often of a punitive kind. She was also very moved by what had inspired the Anglicans: Christ's refusal to judge the woman from Samaria. Subsequently, she travelled to the United States, and lived there for three years and raised money to found a prospective widow's home, on her return to India. Her supporters were all Christian women devoted to female education, temperance work and some had been active in anti-slavery circles.

While in England, her knowledge of English had expanded and she took to reading widely, and the time she spent in the United States with women who, like her, were independent and committed to a life of the mind and spirit, proved very valuable. The series of travel essays she wrote on American life in her native language, Marathi and sent to India to be published, provides a fascinating insight into her political and social evolution, and indicate how, like Ambedkar, she drew inspiration from a range of emancipatory histories.

In her essays, she referenced the unfair and cruel fate visited on Native Americans, reflected on the horrors of slavery, the virtues of the abolitionist movement and the Civil War, and admired the efforts of American feminists who gathered in Seneca Falls in 1848, and sought the franchise for women.⁴⁰ She was particularly moved by the 'Negroes' struggle against their enslaved condition (and visited Harriet Tubman in New York), and their experiences seemed apposite to her own understanding of the incarcerated plight of the Hindu widow and of Indian women, on the whole.⁴¹ She was also a keen observer of developments across the world and remarked on the heroism of the Russian narodniks as they sought to take on the Czar and state in Russia.⁴²

⁴⁰ Meera Kosambi (editor and translator), *Pandita Ramabai's American Encounter: The Peoples of the United States*, 1889, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013, pp. 65–67; 70–72; 114–118; 167–171; 198–200.

⁴¹ Letter no. 116, *The Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai*, edited by A. B. Shah, Bombay: Maharashtra State Board for Literature and Culture; Ebook. <https://sahitya.marathi.gov.in/ebooks/The%20Letters%20and%20Correspondence%20of%20Pandita%20Ramabai.pdf>; accessed on January 24, 2021.

⁴² See Letter no. 102, *The Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai*.

She returned to India thereafter and set up a care home and school for brahmin widows in Bombay. In spite of her decided disregard for Brahmanical authority and her critique of caste, Ramabai's widow's home and school initially took in only brahmin girls. The reasons were tactical: brahmin families were unlikely to send their widowed wards to school, if it were known to accept students from all castes. In fact, girls who came into her school and home were allowed to practice their caste customs, unless they were convinced that these were wrong and wanted to give them up, and over the years some did. Students were also encouraged to plan for an independent career and life, but in the event of anyone wanting to marry, she was not discouraged from doing so.

At the same time, Ramabai continued to practise her faith, and while she did not ask that her wards followed her into Christianity, the fact remained that her charisma was such that some did convert. And she did not dissuade them. Her enterprise came in for heavy-handed critique from both orthodox brahmins as well as the reformers (the latter had initially supported her). The former were appalled by her openly Christian life and by what they assumed was her real intent: conversion of hapless Hindu widows to the Christian faith; the latter were unsure as to her religious intent and troubled by her resolute independence.⁴³

Two years into its existence, the school moved from Bombay to Pune. During this time, a severe famine killed thousands in central and western India and Ramabai set out to look for and reclaim female outcasts: uncared for child widows, girls thrown to the streets or sold by families, and young women from socially marginal groups that had been branded as 'criminal' by colonial administration. She brought them back to Pune, but could not house them all, because the plague had struck Bombay and Pune, and government regulations insisted that no care home ought to be crowded. Meanwhile, she had acquired some land in rural parts, not too far from Pune. The famine children, as they came to be called, were

⁴³ Phule was one of the very few that supported her decision to convert. Fellow women reformers, many of whom had remained staunchly Hindu, also refused to renege on their friendship with her. Likewise, Christian women in the country came to her assistance, the most prominent being Soonderibai Pawar, who belonged to an elitist Christian family and was well known and respected as a catechist and teacher. She had worked in a variety of contexts, including with working class women, who came to her with tales of how factory life had ruined the men in their families, rendering them addicted to drink and opium. She taught for several years in Ramabai's schools (see Padma Anagol, *The Emergence of Feminism in India, 1850–1920*, pp. 20–31).

moved there. In subsequent years, as the famine raged on, more girls and eventually some boys were brought into her care.

From an initiative that addressed the needs of the 'high caste' Hindu widow, Ramabai's endeavour thus grew to encompass women and girls from a range of castes and communities. She went on to set up diverse care homes, separating out famine victims from those who had been sold into prostitution, and child widows from all others. A special care place was prepared for those who had suffered severe physical distress and sexual abuse during the famine years. Regular as well as vocational education was offered in these institutions and women were encouraged to become adept at a profession and become economically self-reliant.

Since the first set of learners she educated were young widows, little more than children, she looked to modern educational approaches, especially those espoused by Froebel and Montessori. She had learned a great deal by observing novel schooling practices in the United States and also gained considerably from her own education in England. She was aware too that her wards were likely to be traumatized, deprived as they had been, of their childhood, and her curricula and teaching methods were designed to address this reality. With regard to her other wards, the ones rescued in the famine years and brought under the aegis of her Mukti Mission, the issues she had to confront were different. Their life worlds were not familiar to Ramabai and her cohorts. These young women resisted the disciplined life expected of them and some clearly felt uneasy in their new surroundings. Their situation perhaps reminded Ramabai of what she was witness to in England: the 'fallen' women that her Anglican spiritual mentors had attempted to save and redeem from their 'sinfulness' and suffering. The notion of sin, which had haunted her, even during her time in England, acquired a particular resonance as she grappled with defining and working towards a future for the motley group of women gathered under her roof.

Sin in fact became a modality that would help women come to terms with their present situation. Thus it was that a set of girls from the famine rescue effort came to anguish over their 'sinfulness' and declared that they could feel the Holy Spirit descend on them. Some began to speak in tongues and many declared they were ready to accept Christ. Ramabai announced that she could feel the power of the Pentecost and that the benediction of the spirit was indeed an augury of the undifferentiated grace of God, who did not discriminate between castes, races,

or indeed men and women. She thus sought to link the ecstatic expressions of faith she witnessed to the life worlds of those who experienced it: worlds of want, hunger and sexual ignominy.⁴⁴ The spirit revival that took place thus helped cement a community: millenarian ardour became the means through which a new world of women, across castes, came to be imagined. By the same token, it signalled a decisive moment in the community's life: the consolidation of the spirit of evangelism that had always informed its existence, but which now became its hallmark.

Ramabai's endeavour was unique in that she eventually built a community of disparate women, who learned to survive and live through dint of their own labour and skills, and who came to exercise, within limits, their right to conjugal lives of their choice. The world of social reproduction, in effect, of the caste family was thus reordered; in some instances, along homosocial lines, and in others by new and emergent Christian households. While the bind of social class and caste-based habits and attitudes was not easy to shake off, the fact remained that a diverse group of women, who had coalesced around a millenarian faith, lived and worked together.⁴⁵

Ramabai did not figure in Ambedkar's writings, even in those in which he examined Christian conversion and how consequential it had been for untouchables, and equally what it failed to do for them. Nevertheless her conversion mirrored his in complex ways, and this mirroring points to the two ends of the social spectrum that stood to be reconstructed by those who took on Brahmanism and the Hindu social order: the one was given by endogamy, and the other, by *chaturvarnya*. Ramabai challenged the logic of endogamy from the perspective of female sexual autonomy and economic self-reliance; and Ambedkar chose to do so, by his radical critique of *chaturvarnya*, and the graded inequality of the caste order that it sanctioned. Whereas Ramabai undertook to realize her vision of the

⁴⁴ For an account of the Pentecost and its descent in Ramabai's school, see Allan Anderson, 'Pandita Ramabai, the Mukti Revival and Global Pentecostalism', *Transformation*, Volume 23: 1, January 2006, pp. 37–48.

⁴⁵ The power of faith to destabilize caste was also recorded by Lakshmi Tilak. Initially dismayed by her husband's choice to exit the Hindu faith, she came to accept and value his decision, and prior to her own conversion, appears to have had an epiphanic experience that washed out feelings of caste prejudice that lay congealed within her. Following this, she not only converted, but took in children, again victims of famine, from the untouchable communities into her household, and raised them (*Smritichitre: The Memoirs of a Spirited Wife*, pp. 217–287).

new community, in and through the labour of schooling and care, he advocated a transformation of consciousness through conversion in the hope that this would help reconstruct selves and the society. In effect, both sought to anchor civic equality in religious belonging.

For Ramabai, such belonging was defined by the social forms of existing Christianity. However, differently she inflected it, the extraordinary community of women that eventually evolved, on account of her efforts at rescuing and rehabilitating those who found themselves outcasted, was anchored in a discourse of sin, redemption and salvation. In any event, her critique of Brahmanism got folded into her fervent understanding of Christianity and her determination to not let only caste customs define women's lives came to be valued chiefly for its evangelical fervour and usefulness. Ambedkar, on the other hand, desired to build a community whose social future was not given and had to be actively imagined, and his redefined Buddhism came to serve that purpose.

In the historical circumstances given to Ramabai, the two worlds that engaged with the women's question were those of the reformers and of the anti-caste movements. The reformers had shunned her, and in any case she was not convinced of their half-hearted attempts to take on Hindu custom and tradition as these impinged on women's lives. While she remained in touch with reformist women, she and they occupied very different social worlds, and her embrace of a resolute Christianity perhaps alienated some of them. Though Phule had spoken up for her in the late 1880s when she was reviled for converting to Christianity, his Satyashodhak Samaj, the most prominent anti-caste movement of her time, was perhaps far too removed from her social universe.⁴⁶ In this context, the textual as well as social world of Christianity provided Ramabai the anchor she needed, to explore such concerns that she had. Besides, it provided her a spiritual and community home, which, as a single woman, unattached to family and caste, and a convert, she could not hope to find easily elsewhere.

Ambedkar's choices unfolded in a different time and within a more expansive civic and political world. While he had established the endogamous enclosure as the foundation of the caste order, and its sexual economy as being the basis for graded inequality, he sought to address

⁴⁶ See G. P. Deshpande, Editor, *Selected Writings of Jotirao Phule*, New Delhi: Leftword, 2002, pp. 207–208; 216–218 for Phule's defence of Ramabai's Christian beliefs and of her independence.

either, in and through a politics of justice, but as important, in terms of social as well as ontological freedom. With regard to the latter, he shared common ground with anti-caste thinkers who were equally critical of Brahmanism, and who, likewise, had sought to reimagine the social universe, by defining ideas and world views that were essentially utopian in their content and reasoning; and of whom, some were invested in reimagining the personal and domestic sphere. While Ramabai's choices locked her into a Christian universe, and her intellectual quest turned less critical and more affective, his lifelong political and intellectual labour helped expand the universe of anti-caste thought and practice.

5 JOTIRAO PHULE: UNSETTLING THE CASTE FAMILY

Ambedkar's anti-caste lineage comprised thinkers and actors from the lower castes and from untouchable communities across India, who had sought to call Hinduism to account, in and through a critical rejection of its core values, and who looked to remake their life worlds (including in some instances, the world of social reproduction). Jotirao Phule was one of the earliest to do so. As we have seen, Phule viewed the caste order as emerging out of Aryan conquest, and the forced subordination of the native peasantry and producing communities. He also understood its iniquitous core in terms of how it regulated women's lives.⁴⁷ On the one hand, it devalued women's labour, productive social roles and minds; on the other hand, it denied them education, freedom of choice, when it came to their familial lives and relegated upper caste women, especially brahmin widows, to a harsh and punitive regimen. While along with the shudra and atishudra (untouchable) castes, women endured a common fate on account of their structural location within the caste order, they were also constrained by male social authority, which did not grant them coeval status or respect.

In keeping with his understanding of inequality, Phule sought to rework the realms of both production and social reproduction. He argued for an economic life that placed the peasant and worker at the heart of the social order, and valued and respected their labour and knowledge.

⁴⁷ What follows is based on Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth century Western India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985; Gail Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Western India*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2011.

He also called attention to the worthy lives that peasant and labouring women led, and their capacity for skilful labour, intelligence and their role as providers, and made it a point to foreground the capabilities of untouchable workers. He sought to co-opt not only men but also women into a 'truth seeking' fraternity (the Sathyashodhak Samaj), on the argument that they were as capable of intuiting truth and as rational as men. And when the right of women to an exercise of their conscience and intelligence was thwarted he defended them. When Tarabai Shinde, a Mahratta woman, wrote a brilliantly argued polemic that criticized men's ill-argued and misogynistic views of women and women's lives, she was criticized by Phule's colleagues in the Sathyashodhak Samaj. Around the same time, Ramabai was subject to abusive criticism by not only just the orthodox brahmins but also reformers. Phule used the occasion to call attention to male social and intellectual power and arrogance.

In order that women's lives were freed into a better future, Phule looked to education. To start with, he educated his wife, Savitribai and together they began schools for untouchable children, especially girls. They had recourse to critical pedagogy, committed as they were to the widening of minds, as they were to the imparting of useful skills and competencies.⁴⁸ One of Phule's more startling initiatives had to do with brahmin widows who had to endure a fraught familial and social existence; for not only were they not allowed to remarry but at all times, they had to abjure male company and attention. This imposed sexual abjection left them sexually vulnerable; either they were forced to submit to the sexual attention of powerful men in their families and kin network, or should they contract a relationship of affection, they could not hope to take it ahead, without inviting abusive criticism. In these circumstances, should they get pregnant, widows either had to face up to social ignominy or abandon or do away with their children. Phule and Savitribai created an

⁴⁸ Phule and Savitribai's educational work was fundamentally critical and it is evident that the students who went to their schools turned their learning to address their immediate social context. A young woman student, Mukta Salve, had this to say, in a letter to a newspaper: "O learned pandits, fold up your selfish priestcraft and stop the prattle of your hollow wisdom and listen to what I have to say. When our women give birth to babies, they do not have even a roof over their heads. ... If they get some disease while giving birth, where will they get money for the doctor or medicines? Was there ever any doctor among you who was human enough to treat such people free of cost?" (<https://www.forwardpress.in/2020/02/165-years-ago-first-female-dalit-writer-wrote-about-the-grief-of-the-mangs-and-the-mahars/>); accessed on January 24, 2021.

informal home for brahmin widows' foundlings and adopted one of them as their own. In doing so, they 'did' the unthinkable: assumed responsibility for those who were neither kinsfolk nor caste peers, and were in fact considered 'fallen'. As important, their actions served to highlight the constitutive cruelty of the sexual and conjugal enclosure that the brahmin class had built for itself.

They also addressed the fortification of social relations at the point where it was secured: endogamous marriage. Not only did they encourage unions across castes, but under the aegis of the Satyashodhak Samaj, sought to desacralize marriage as such. The usual practice was to have marriage affirmed by the brahmin priest, a fixture at all rites of passage. Phule called for a doing away with the priest's services in all matters, and with respect to marriage, invented new vows and rites, which sealed relationships not on the basis of kinship and caste, but which regarded understanding and trust as important. Phule might thus be viewed as one of the early supporters of companionate and civic marriage. His own wedded life challenged usual social expectations: not only did he educate his wife, but accorded her the status of a coworker and she continued to be active in public life, even after his death.

Phule's followers were not as willing to countenance and support the revolt of the untouchables and women. To be sure, they challenged brahmin social and political authority and subjected that class to withering critique, but this did not often translate into a politics of fraternity as far as untouchables were concerned and after Phule's time, the latter were discouraged from being part of the Satyashodhak world. Further, in their continuing and adversarial relationship to brahmin elites with whom they frequently clashed, some of those associated with the Satyashodhak Samaj resorted to a sexualized politics: the brahmin woman's sexuality became a favoured trope and was used to both denigrate brahmins and to assert Non-brahmin (Mahratta) virility, a development that was at considerable odds with the manner in which Phule had approached the entangled realities of caste and gender.⁴⁹

Ambedkar was aware of Phule's work and also of how the promised fraternity, especially of the touchable shudras and the untouchable atishudras had come into crisis. Nevertheless, he kept faith with the practical aspects of Phule's truth-seeking endeavour. The education of untouchable

⁴⁹ Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009, pp. 50–60.

girls, not only in the formal sense, but also their schooling into a politics of self-respect and social action remained an important concern for him. And as we have seen, he addressed the vexed question of caste endogamy consistently, in thought, and in terms of the law; and tellingly enough, his more trenchant observations in the course of legislative debates on the Code had to do with the Hindu widow, and the different ways in which different traditions of Hindu law limited her rights.⁵⁰

Ambedkar differed from Phule in the manner he understood the role of the Hindu faith in securing social reproduction: he viewed it less in terms of a cultural and political imposition by marauding Aryans, and more as a system built and rebuilt over time by a powerful and canny class, whose origins were not germane to the unequal structure they had sustained throughout history. Rather, the logic of endogamy and enclosure, and the imposition of shudrahood and untouchability on vast sections of the population and the manner in which the one fortified the other were deemed important. To be sure, Phule worked against the grain of this logic in practical terms, but it was Ambedkar who systematized the terms of its constitution, by offering an extended theory of social reproduction.

These differences notwithstanding, Ambedkar and Phule were both given to utopic reasoning: Phule's reimagining of the self in a vitiated social context, in terms of its capacity to seek truth, gestured towards a denied ontology, and deemed ignorance and consequent hurt. For Ambedkar as we have noted, social suffering seemed a veritable theft of being and to regain the confiscated self, he looked to law, the state, transformed economic lives and to a new and transformative creed. Significantly enough, he had worthy precedents in this regard as well.

6 ANTI-CASTE MOVEMENTS AND THE QUESTION OF SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

Colonial rule and its economics affected and reshaped lower caste and untouchables lives in consequential ways. High rates of revenue exaction, indebtedness, ruined artisanship, recurrent famines, migration to cities and to places across the British Empire where the colonial state required labour, for road and rail building, reworking irrigation systems, and in

⁵⁰ B. R. Ambedkar, *B.R. Ambedkar and the Hindu Code Bill*, in BAWs, Volume 14: 1, pp. 261–263.

plantations and mines: these developments made for tragedy as well as opportunity and often a mixture of both. Individual lives were transformed, for better and for worse. Rack and ruin and death were the lot of several workers, but those who survived found promise and hope in city life, with its myriad possibilities of both work and leisure. Also, those who availed of colonial education discovered new thought worlds and came to evaluate familiar ideas and practices through the prism of rational critique.

In effect, there emerged from the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and across urban India, and in the Indian labour diaspora, a generation of thinkers and ideologues from untouchable communities who subjected the Hindu social order to unsparing critique, and by that token, to upturn its logic of high and low. Lowness was seen as a condition imposed on the untouchables, and stigma and social rejection as modalities that secured their enslavement. The Hindu religion and its brahmin priesthood were blamed and new definitions of culture and religion were outlined. As important, untouchables and lower castes were exhorted to exercise their minds and to think matters out for themselves, rather than follow custom or habit. Many of these men were also wary of nationalism and viewed British rule as essentially benign, and when the political reform process got underway in the 1920s, they chose to cooperate with it, and stood with Ambedkar as he sought separate electorates for the untouchables. Ambedkar was aware of most of these movements, and some amongst these proved inspirational, in that they mapped for him a historical trajectory that he strove to take ahead, as we shall see.

In the colonial city of Madras, a large number of untouchables had converted to Buddhism in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Inspired by the ideas of the charismatic Iyothee Thass (1845–1914), an untouchable Tamil doctor who specialized in a tradition of medicine known as *siddha*, untouchables in southern India and elsewhere in the Tamil labour diaspora, as well as a smattering of touchables, across the British Empire exited their Hindu faith, and accepted Buddhism as their creed.⁵¹ Thass repudiated brahminical social and cultural authority, and, like Phule, viewed brahmins as ‘Aryan’ interlopers who had brought with them a dissembling culture and an unequal social order. Through complex hermeneutic strategies, brahmins had obscured indigenous world views, especially the Buddha’s creed, which Thass held to be a sort of ur-religion,

⁵¹ This account of Iyothee Thass is drawn from G. Aloysius, *Iyothee Thassar and Tamil Buddhist Movement*, New Delhi: Critical Quest, 2015.

and native to the subcontinent. In the event they had transformed an existing free and equal society into its very opposite.

A similar argument was put forth by Swami Achutanand (1879–1933), who, in the 1920s, founded the Adi-Hindu movement in the city of Lucknow in northern India.⁵² His father served in the British army and he grew up in a cantonment town, availed of modern education, travelled across the country and briefly was part of the Arya Samaj. But he did not stay with the latter and soon came to outline a critique of the caste system, the *Manusmriti* and of Hindu scripture, including the Vedas. He also developed arguments that made possible a critical appraisal of the role of brahmins and Brahmanical thought in perpetuating casteism and untouchability. And like Thass, he went on to argue that the so-called shudras and untouchables were an autochthonous people, and makers of a civilization that had been taken over and destroyed by wily and power-hungry brahmin interlopers. The great devotional traditions of the subcontinent constituted the original faith of the Indian people, and the brahmins had sought to destroy these and substitute their various false faiths in their place.

Both Thass and Achutanand contrasted the “really useless” knowledge systems of the brahmins, as Thass characterized them, with other ways of knowing. Thass posited two other kinds of knowledge. The first inhered in undercaste and untouchable practice, of arts that sustained life, be it agriculture or animal husbandry, trade or artisanship. Not only were the practical arts to be viewed as life affirming and productive, but those who performed them were to be valued, rather they had to learn to value themselves, and assert their rights to the fruits of their labour and intelligence. In short, the truly “useful” knowledge of labouring communities was to be upheld as worthy, in a context where the “useless” textual knowledge of the brahmins was often proclaimed as transcendent. Significantly, an Adi-Hindu ideologue, Ramcharan, from a working-class family who went on to become a lawyer, would argue as much.

The second kind of knowledge that Thass upheld was ethical, and it rested on an understanding of the central Buddhist ideal of fellowship or world-sustaining compassion. This ideal was defined in contradistinction to the graded inequality of the Hindu social order, where affection was seldom social, and often restricted to one’s one kin and caste folk. This

⁵² All observations to do with the Adi-Hindu movement are from Nandini Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 152–176.

made for rancour, envy and an intellectual culture that could not but be dissembling, since it sought, above all, to keep inequalities and spurious differences in place. In contrast, knowledge leavened with compassion made for conduct that was truly social, and free from that spirit of envy and exclusion which informed the Hindu social order.

Acchutanand was critical not only of the Vedas and *Manusmriti*, but also with the ideas espoused by their modern day interpreters, particularly the Arya Samajists. He held them to be false prophets, whose philosophy was a “trickery”, construed to save the Brahmanical religion from attacks by Muslims and Christians. Their redefinition of varna was a “mere jugglery of words” and the Arya Samajist was not to be trusted, being “an enemy of history” and “murderer of truth”. All that the Samaj wished to do was to make the untouchables slaves of the Vedas and the brahmins.⁵³ Acchutanand exhorted his followers to think for themselves, and not accept an idea or practice simply because a “socially superior person” held such a view. Real knowledge ought to lead to self-realization, he held, and this meant that one possessed the discernment to know right from wrong.⁵⁴

Thass recouped the new thought worlds he had identified as valuable within a recognizable Buddhist world view. He declared that Buddhism was the original faith of the untouchables, and so they ought to ‘return’ to it. His conversion and the efforts he expended on the making of a Buddhist community in southern India comprised both ideational and practical acts. He wrote of and propagated Buddhism, even as he outlined a series of practices that he desired the former-future Buddhists adopt. These included acts that would enable civic rights of access to public spaces, land, labour, education, artisanship and trade, and to representation in government. As important, Buddhist neophytes were to adopt new practices, to do with everyday life and significant rites of passage, such as marriage and death. Thass was not convinced of the exhortation to marry within one’s caste, just as he was opposed to customs that affirmed male sexual privilege, particularly polygamy and child marriage. He was also concerned with the plight of the widow, though he was as critical of her potential promiscuity as he was of those who had pushed

⁵³ Quoted in Tapan Basu, ‘The Dalit Personal Narrative in Hindi: Reflections on a Long Literary Lineage’, *Biography, Caste and Life Narratives*, Volume 40: 1, 2017, p. 46.

⁵⁴ Nandini Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor*, p. 162.

her into civic death and sexual quiescence. The more freeing alternatives with regard to marriage forms and rituals that he suggested were drawn from what he claimed were Burmese and Japanese practices, that is, those that informed life in Buddhist societies. Thass went on to create practical and institutional spaces to house his vision of the new community: a Buddhist vihara, a care centre for mine workers, handicapped in the course of their work, library, a publishing house, schools that imparted a Buddhist-accented education...

Thass' recovery of Buddhism intersected with other significant cultural developments in southern India, including the emergence of freethought and atheism. A new generation of university educated men took to these ideals, and one of them, P. Lakshmi Narasu upheld Buddhism as a veritable scientific creed, and which he argued was suitable and relevant to these modern times. Narasu worked for some time with Iyothee Thass but subsequently they parted ways; the rationalist Narasu found it hard to empathize with Thass' powerful yet esoteric writing on the Buddha's life and Buddhism. In later decades, in the 1930s, years after Iyothee Thass had passed on, the Buddhist impetus he had initiated was assimilated into a broader anti-caste movement (see below) that emerged in Madras in the 1920s. As a consequence, the ontological significance that Iyothee Thass had granted to reclaiming Buddhism acquired sociological depth and political resonance, and was folded into an assertive and expansive register of republican protest.

Acchutanand upheld the devotional traditions of the northern region, particularly those associated with untouchable poets and saints. His close associate, Bodhanand, did more: an itinerant ascetic, he had renounced Hinduism for its cruelty and indifference to the lives of shudras and untouchables and became a Buddhist in 1916. He combined Acchutanand's views with his studies in Buddhism and like Thass, posited the Buddha as a world teacher and as one who instituted the old and true religion of the subcontinent, which sadly, had been destroyed by the cunning Aryans. He counselled his shudra and untouchable followers to 'remember' their original creed and its history and to own it up in the present. Like Narasu, Bodhanand also sought to frame Buddhism within a modern scientific world view and posited it as a philosophy of liberation for these modern times. The ideals of the Buddhist organisation he founded included the "removal of casteism and feelings of hierarchical differences for the sake of awakening ideals of humanity" and to

undertake a “comparative study of Buddhism in relation to present-day science...”⁵⁵

The Adi-Hindu movement staked its claims to cultural rites that it claimed were its own and independent of what the Hindus did. At the same time, Adi-Hindu adherents challenged the everyday strictures of untouchability and sought to remake themselves, especially in the cities, and came to sport clothes and other accoutrements that were denied them. Like all movements that opposed the caste order, the Adi-Hindus also favoured greater freedom with regard to marriage. But their ideas in this regard had to heed the circumstances within which they functioned. Even a modest anti-caste measure, such as the movement’s attempt to initiate commensality between different untouchable groups had not been very successful.⁵⁶ It is unlikely therefore that the suggestion to extend connubial relationships was taken up with enthusiasm.

The Adi-Hindu movement also attempted to mobilize into their ranks, the working classes from the lower castes, but in this they did not manage to make much headway, given the fact that these latter were reinventing themselves as virile, masculine communities, who sought to hold their own against whoever thwarted them. Their self-perceptions were shaped by the Arya Samaj’s efforts to mobilize Hindus against Muslims, and in the event, gave rise to local cultures of assertive masculinity.⁵⁷ In this context, challenges to the caste order, especially its Hindu and Brahmanic core, were urged forth chiefly by the untouchables.

In all instances where ideologues, publicists and social actors from untouchable communities sought to leave behind Hinduism and remake themselves in view of new identities that they made their own, public claims to do with history and identity proved inspirational and productive; while efforts to remake the order from within, through an unsettling of conjugal relationships and their endogamous logic, enjoyed considerably less or, in some cases, almost no traction. For example, the claims to autochthonous identity and history, which the Ad-dharm movement of

⁵⁵ This short account of Bodhanand is drawn from Douglas Fairchild Ober, *Reinventing Buddhism: Conversations and encounters in Modern India, 1839–1956*, Unpublished Dissertation, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 2016, pp. 258–266; <https://open.library.ubc.ca/cIRcle/collections/ubctheses/24/items/1.0340476>; accessed on February 2, 2021.

⁵⁶ Nandini Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor*, p. 169.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 200–230.

untouchables in north-western India upheld and sought to actualize, went hand in hand with efforts to circumscribe women's lives and choices.⁵⁸

A notable exception in this regard was the Self-respect Movement founded by the Southern Indian radical, E. V. Ramasamy Periyar (1879–1973), who lived and worked in Madras. He propagated, wrote and argued against brahmin hegemony, untouchability and the caste order and equally against male sexual and familial authority. The Self-respect movement encouraged intercaste marriages, and a rejection of Hindu rituals and the presence of the brahmin priest on such occasions. In conceptual terms, the movement came to think of caste and gender concerns together. Periyar held that untouchables and women were both enslaved at a similar moment in history: the labour of the one was deemed necessary for social production and rendered captive through the imposition of untouchability, and the reproductive capacities of the other were regulated to ensure male control over female lives, fertility and the family. Constrained in different ways, untouchables and women had the greatest stake, argued Periyar, in challenging the unequal sexual and social order that had since come to be.

Uniquely, women in the Self-respect movement were viewed, and viewed themselves, as important constituents of a new and emergent utopic community. They were eloquent on the subject of self-transformation and made clear that so long as gendered differences and fixed notions of the masculine and feminine ordered familial and social lives, the social and ontological were inseparable. Their struggle, they argued, required a politics that had to cross the threshold space that separated home from the streets, both ways and make for new ways of individual and social being. In the event they went on to affirm a politics of female liberation that included a putting by of marriage and motherhood, in favour of education, work and public life. Or, alternately, marriages based on choice, and which were deemed contractual, rather than sacral, and

⁵⁸ The Ad-dharm movement rejected Hinduism, and looked to the devotional traditions of worship claiming these were autonomous of the broad Hindu spectrum. Founded by somewhat prosperous and upwardly mobile untouchables, some of whom had travelled widely, it was successful in mobilizing untouchables into claiming their own cultural history. While its founders were initially part of the Arya Samaj, they left that organization, accusing it of condescension and of wanting to draw the lower castes and untouchables into its fold to get even with Muslims. See in this context, Mark Juergensmyer, *Religious Rebels in the Punjab*, New Delhi: Navayana, 2009. For the movement's view of women, see the official statement of rules and tenets, pp. 304–306.

which could be ended at will, should the ‘contract’ break down. The movement also engaged with law reform, in this regard.⁵⁹

Periyar and the movements that he built urged forth a republican politics and endorsed Ambedkar’s call to annihilate caste and untouchability, including his decision to exit Hinduism. He was as insistent as Ambedkar that Hinduism ought to be served notice, and from the 1940s, argued that not only the untouchables, but all Hindus, who desired to be free and self-respecting, ought to exit their faith. Periyar urged the untouchables to convert to Islam, where they were likely to be welcomed into a social kinship that was fraternal in the widest sense of the term. Meanwhile, he suggested, Muslims ought to rethink the women’s question in terms of liberty and equality and actualize their purported ethic of brotherhood in ways that transcended gender differences.⁶⁰

Ambedkar was familiar with all these movements: the Adi-Hindu movement supported his civil and political endeavours, especially his demand for separate electorates and over a period of time, its members became part of his SCF. Ambedkar met Bodhanand in the 1920s and was drawn to the Buddhist monk and impressed with his learning, his deep knowledge of Buddhism and his relentless critique of the caste order. He remained in touch with him through the decades and discussed his decision to convert with him. He came to know of the south Indian Buddhists in the 1940s, chiefly through the writings of P. Lakshmi Narasu and from his compatriots who were part of the SCF in Madras. Narasu’s *The Essence of Buddhism* appeared an augury of what he might yet do with his understanding of the Buddha’s creed. He republished it in 1948 (it was originally published in 1907), out of deference, he noted, to the requests of those who had asked him to recommend a good book on Buddhism.

He noted in the preface he wrote to the book that Narasu “had fought European arrogance with patriotic fervour, orthodox Hinduism with iconoclastic zeal, heterodox brahmins with nationalistic vision and

⁵⁹ See V. Geetha & S. V. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar*, Calcutta: Samya, 1998, pp. 378–419, for an account of the Self-respect movement and the women’s question.

⁶⁰ See the Self-respect movement’s weekly, *Kudi Aracu* [KA] (The Republic) (KA, 14.10.1928; 25.11.1928 for an early articulation of such views; see also, V. M. Subagunaranjan, ed. *Namakku En Indha Izbi Nilai? Jati Maanadugallillum Jati Ozhippu Maanadugallillum Periyar* (Why Are We in this Degraded Position? Periyar’s Speeches at Caste and Caste Abolition Conferences), Kayal Kavin, Chennai, 2018, pp. 360, for a similar observation, but in the 1940s.

aggressive Christianity with a rationalistic outlook all under the inspiring banner of his unflagging faith in the teachings of the Great Buddha.”⁶¹ His description of Narasu’s endeavour may be read as a statement of his position as well, with regard to why he would want to convert to Buddhism: to settle a historical quarrel with Brahmanism, to cut through various reformist initiatives with a decisive turning away from Hinduism and towards a cosmopolitan yet nationally grounded vision of the new society, and to work towards a transformative process of conversion that was at once rational and ethical.

Ambedkar knew of the Self-respect movement and Periyar, in fact his weekly *Bakishkrit Bharat* had featured news about the Southern anti-caste radicals in the late 1920s. It is not clear if he was as aware of the work undertaken by the movement with regard to the women’s question but he appreciated Periyar’s utopic call to reimagine the nation, as essentially one that would be free from the bind of caste, brahmin hegemony and Hinduism as well as the parasitic Bania (Vaishya class), or as Periyar put it, the “brahmin-bania combine”. He also discussed his proposed conversion with Periyar, who supported his decision, and who accompanied him to a Buddhist conference in Nepal in 1954.

7 EUTOPIC ACTS: ANTICIPATING A NEW SOCIAL ORDER

Self-making and social reconstruction were intertwined acts, given that in all instances that we have discussed above, the new self was not viewed as a monad, but as one that would emerge into another way of being, along with others, and in relation to them. Howsoever these acts were to be undertaken through secular and social organising, or through the calling forth of a new spiritual community, or both, they were to be done in the now: whether it was Phule’s invocation of truth and reason or Iyothee Thass’ and Bodhanand’s recovery of an originary Buddhist moment, these were not only responses to historical necessity. Rather these acts were eutopic, that is, they were oriented towards creating a good and just world not in the distant future, but in the moment, and in the world as it existed.

However, as noted earlier, except with the efforts undertaken by the Self-respect movement, these did not always result in the remaking of

⁶¹ Introduction to P. Lakshmi Narasu, *The Essence of Buddhism*, 3rd Edition, Bombay: Thacker & Co., 1948, p. viii.

the domain of familial and affective relationships. Ambedkar's turn to Buddhism was unique in this regard: he looked to reconstruct the world in ways that would disrupt, in thought, and eventually in practice, the intertwined logics, of endogamy and graded inequality. He thus made clear that Buddhism was apposite to his historical purpose also because he held it to have resolved the women's question in its own time.⁶² Conversion to that creed, he was convinced, would thus make for a different sense of the familial, as much as it would enable a new and fraternal culture into existence. While he did not dwell on the details of how exactly this would transpire, the manner in which he invoked the dhamma, or the Buddha's creed, made it clear that in a Buddhist universe relationality as such would be reimagined. In this universe, where fraternity would rule, familial and affective relationships would, necessarily, be recast.

⁶² See in this context, his essay on the fate meted out to women in the wake of Brahmanism's triumph, and how this contrasted with the Buddha's response to women that sought his counsel: B. R. Ambedkar, *The Rise and Fall of Hindu Women: Who Was Responsible for It?*, in BAWS, Volume 17: 2, pp. 109–129.



Buddha or Karl Marx: Fraternal Ethics and Economic Justice

1 DID THE BUDDHA PREACH AGAINST GREED?

Ambedkar wrote *The Buddha and His Dhamma* as a gospel text, to be read and used by potential converts to Buddhism. Quarter way into the narrative, he raised questions about the Buddha's relevance to the present: "Did the Buddha teach justice? Did the Buddha teach love? Did the Buddha teach liberty? Did the Buddha teach equality? Did the Buddha teach fraternity? Could the Buddha answer Karl Marx?" Noting that such questions were hardly ever raised with regard to the Buddha's teachings, he asserted that they were yet pertinent.¹ The rest of the book comprised responses to these questions.

That the Buddha set store by compassion and fellowship was accepted widely in late colonial India. He was also viewed as an asker of questions who welcomed debate and dissension. Opinions differed regarding his views on social divisions, and whether he actually took against the evolving varna order of his time. Following the historian K. P. Jayaswal, the publicist, P. Lakshmi Narasu and Buddhist scholar Dharmananda

¹ *The Buddha and His Dhamma* in Babasaheb Ambedkar, Writings and Speeches (BAWS), Mumbai: The Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, BAWS, Volume 11, 1992, pp. 225–226. Henceforth, all references to Ambedkar's writings in this chapter will cite the acronym, BAWS, followed by volume number, year of publication and page numbers.

Kosambi, Ambedkar asserted that the Buddha was resolute in his condemnation of social inequality and that he had taken note of the discord that it caused. Quoting from the *Mahanidan Sutta* a key text in the Pali language canon, comprising the oldest Buddhist texts (constituted over a long period, from the 5th to first century BCE), he remarked that for the Buddha, incessant craving, the cause of mortal suffering, had its origin in the “desire for gain” and “a passion for possession” and this made for social strife.²

Elsewhere in the text he suggested that such an understanding of social avarice had led the Buddha to insist that the order of monks that he founded, the sangha, ought not to possess property, since it was bound to entrance the senses, and render a person less than impartial in his grasp of the world. Dispossessed and wandering, the monks or bhikkus, as they were called, were to minister to the human thirst for knowledge and foster social affection and respect.³ The sangha of his conception was a novel entity, a combination of an evangelical mission committed to social pedagogy and a vanguardist movement, intent on social reconstruction.

The Buddha and His Dhamma was published after Ambedkar’s passing on. He had been working on it for a while and during the time of its composition, he spoke and wrote on Buddhism in the public realm as well. In these addresses and writings, we find him explaining and accounting for Buddhism’s relevance and usefulness in a world traumatized by war and often in conjunction with socialism, which appeared both a counter to, as well as an affiliate of Buddhism. This was a relatively new discursive move on his part. While he had spoken and written of both socialism and Buddhism since the 1920s, he had not quite brought them into conversation with each other, or sought to hold them together. This coming together of two creeds that he had referenced all his life represented a unique distillation of ideas, a constellation of histories and arguments that seemed as much a point of departure as it was a point of arrival.

² Ibid., p. 239.

³ Ibid., pp. 432–433.

2 THE RELIGIOUS, THE MORAL AND THE FRATERNAL

As we know, Ambedkar had looked to convert out of the Hindu religion and social order as early as the 1920s, and Buddhism had emerged as an option in the 1930s. In 1936, a year after he had announced that he would not die a Hindu, he addressed a large audience of Mahar untouchables on the theme of conversion, in which he indexed various acts of discrimination and violence directed against them and which effectively robbed them of their right to life and livelihood, education and worthwhile labour.⁴ He wondered if they ought to remain Hindus and in this context examined the possibilities of them converting to another religion and one that would address their material and social needs. He noted quite firmly that he was disinterested in a question that appeared to bother liberal and progressive-minded touchable Hindus: whether “religious conversion or economic progress” was more important for the untouchables. This seemed to him a dry and pointless way of approaching the subject, since “several methods are required to be applied for the development and progress of the society. Each of these methods has its own significance. No definite seriatim can be applied for the application of these methods”.⁵ However, he would, himself, prioritize conversion, since the stigma of untouchability made it hard for untouchables to practice professions unimpeded, and besides marked their labour as economically valueless. Conversion might help destigmatize their persons, which in turn would render their labour worthy of value. Social odium, he noted, was directed at the labourer and if the latter was ‘reborn’ into another community, and acquired a different identity, his economic fate was likely to be different.

Subsequently, when he angrily insisted that untouchables must get themselves away from the Hindus (in an essay that was probably written in the early 1940s) he submitted Christianity, to which many untouchables across the Indian subcontinent had converted in earlier decades, to a searching critique and found it wanting in several respects. His critique differentiated religious belonging, which Christianity had enabled, from social kinship, which it had failed to secure; and material succour, which, in some instances, Christian conversion had made possible, from social

⁴ See B. R. Ambedkar, *What Way Emancipation?*, in BAWs, Volume 17: 3, 2003, pp. 113–147, in this context. What follows is a summary of his arguments.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

standing that continued to be refused to the untouchables. Untouchables therefore needed to choose a religion that made for spiritual and social endosmosis.⁶ For him, as we have noted, religion was constitutive of the social and not a domain of distinct experiences that answered the needs of an identifiable “religious instinct”. Like language, it was “essential for social life and the individual has to have it because without it he cannot participate in the life of the society”.⁷ And as with some of his other ethical concerns, his perspective is better grasped when situated in the context of arguments within Progressive anthropology and sociology.

Anthropologists at Columbia came to questions of social cohesion and conflict from what has been described as a ‘race and culture’ approach. Franz Boas set the tone for the discipline and this was accented in rich ways by his pupil Alexander Goldenweiser, who presided over the seminar in which Ambedkar read the paper that we know today as *Castes in India*. Boas and Goldenweiser both refused to connect biological traits with psychological or mental capacities; or, for that matter, racial differences with intellectual and moral characteristics. They insisted on the importance of historical contexts in shaping human behaviour, rejected a teleological view of cultures and the yardsticks of progress used to measure the latter. Goldenweiser’s pithy definition of civilization may be taken to sum up this position:

“According to the prevailing view, man is many and civilization one, meaning by this that the races differ significantly in potential ability and that only one, ‘the white race’, could have and actually has achieved civilization. The reverse view, forced upon the ethnologist and the historian by a more critical and open-minded survey of the facts, reads thus: man is one, civilizations are many, meaning by this that the races do not differ significantly in psychological endowment, that the variety of possible civilizations

⁶ See, B. R. Ambedkar, *The Condition of the Convert*, in BAWS, Volume 5, 1989, pp. 445–476.

⁷ B. R. Ambedkar, *Away from the Hindus*, in BAWS, Volume 5, p. 409. Ambedkar drew on Durkheim’s arguments which demonstrated that “all great social institutions have been born in religion... if religion has given birth to all that is essential in society, it is because the idea of society is the soul of religion” (Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Translated from the French by Joseph War Swain, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1964 [1915], p. 419).

is great and of actual ones, considerable, and that many civilizations other than ours have achieved things of genuine and unique worth".⁸

Ambedkar's studied rejection of race as an explanatory principle for assessing culture and community was clearly in consequence of arguments such as these, and this is a line of reasoning that he held on to, as he examined a range of phenomena to do with the caste order and untouchability. As important, he refused to grant civilizational value to communities simply because they had managed to survive and exert cultural authority over all others: as we have seen, this was his quarrel with those who extolled the Hindu social order on account of its resilience. In contrast, he viewed communities as actively constituting and reconstituting themselves.

Race figured in a different way in American sociology. Sociology at Columbia during this period was shaped by the same set of concerns that animated the work of historians and economists. Generally speaking, from the Gilded Age onward, but more particularly in the early twentieth century, when the country was literally growing its migrant population by the day, and cities were fast becoming homes to former slaves, matters to do with social cohesion and inequality on the one hand, and the so-called cultural and mental dispositions of different racial groups, on the other, absorbed the sociologist's attention. In a society given over to individual achievement and freedom, how might one account for differences, whether of race or class? Who or what would ensure equilibrium of conflicting interests?⁹

Frank Giddings and Charles Cooley who both taught at Columbia came to these questions in and through an analysis of social consciousness, or that which held human beings together, and shaped their world-views and sense of the common good. For both of them, a harmonious social order that assimilated men and women from diverse backgrounds into a common culture appeared both possible and desirable. Giddings set store

⁸ Alexander Goldenweiser, *Early Civilization: An Introduction to Anthropology*, New York: Alfred P Knopf, 1922, pp. 14–15.

⁹ For a valuable summary of the sociological debates on race and class, see Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 98–256.

by what he defined as “consciousness of kind” or “preferential association”.¹⁰ This was the basis of the social, as such, he argued, and was to be secured through legal command as well as social pressure: the latter, he conceded was more important and drew on the writings of the apostle Paul to demonstrate how fellow feeling, based on a shared world of beliefs, helped create and sustain early Christian communities and enabled them make “headway” against “older religions ...with their priesthoods, their carefully graded ranks or classes of believers, their rituals and festivals...”.¹¹

For Giddings, like-mindedness threw up diverse social combinations, but not all of these created viable social worlds. Only “that part of a population which can lay some claim to mental and moral unity, which can do things collectively, which has, in a word, common purposes backed by social instincts and habit” was capable of being a “people”.¹² Giddings made clear that the emergence of the people was contingent on racial character, and while eventually all races would come to be within the boundaries of the social, there were patterns of growth and culture that were racially determined: ‘Negroes’, for instance, even when they possessed consciousness of kind, could not claim to be a people and to become one, they, necessarily, had to endure a socializing and assimilationist process, whose terms were set by the “considerate” (white folks). Class conflict in this view of things was inevitable and would be “settled” by those who could command moral unity and shared purpose.¹³

Cooley viewed social cohesion as an instance of moral unity, rooted in what he termed “primary experiences” honed in “face-to-face groups that are somewhat alike in all societies; groups of the family, the playground, and the neighborhood”.¹⁴ These experiences made for fellowship in the widest sense of the word and, he argued, all our aspirations for

¹⁰ Franklin E Giddings, *Principles of Sociology*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1922, p. 17. Also, *Studies in the Theory of Human Society*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1922, p. 166.

¹¹ Franklin Giddings, *Democracy and Empire*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1900, p. 49.

¹² Franklin Giddings, *Studies in the Theory of Human Society*, p. 123.

¹³ Ibid., See also Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science*, pp. 129–130; 228–220.

¹⁴ Charles Horton Cooley, *Social Organization: A Study of the Larger Mind*, New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910, p. 30.

“ideal democracy—including of course, socialism, and whatever else may go by a special name—are those naturally springing from the playground or the local community; embracing equal opportunity, fair play, the loyal service of all in the common good, free discussion, and kindness to the weak. These are renewed every day in the hearts of the people because they spring from and are corroborated by familiar and homely experience”. Interhuman exchanges rather than re-ordered social and economic relationships were viewed as the basis of a more egalitarian society.¹⁵

Ambedkar had studied under Giddings and Cooley and read their work as well. He deployed the term “consciousness of kind” in his writings to reference both what was absent in the Hindu social order, as well as to call attention to how untouchability marked the untouchables as a group that was held together by an alienating and negative experience. Importantly, Ambedkar refused the racial implications of Giddings’ arguments about the making of a people: for one, he did not think racial talents had anything to do with making a culture or civilization worthy, and for another, he did not view assimilation as a process that made for genuine sociality. In the Indian context, civil coercion, a punitive legal system and cultural dissembling had enabled the assimilation of a variety of people into a rigid and unequal social order (see Chapter 4). This latter, resolutely, was not a society, nor had it produced a ‘people’. Ambedkar did agree with Giddings on the role of religion in the making of the social. He too drew from the apostle Paul to affirm the need for such sociality as would establish social kinship. He read the Pauline injunction as an annulment of differences between human beings and as one that made for moral and affective unity.

Ambedkar also set store by interhuman experiences, of the sort Cooley had listed, and interpreted these in terms of the moral emotion of “sympathetic resentment”: the feeling of care and protection that an individual experiences, when one of her kind is hurt.¹⁶ Within the Hindu social order, the untouchables were refused this emotion, indeed, primary human care was denied them, as was evident in instances of doctors refusing to treat people even in an emergency, simply because the afflicted person happened to be untouchable.¹⁷ For Ambedkar, the remaking of

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁶ B. R. Ambedkar, *Away from the Hindus*, in BAWS, Volume 5, p. 415.

¹⁷ B. R. Ambedkar, *Outside the Fold*, in BAWS, Volume 5, pp. 20–25. p. 29.

interhuman relationships therefore appeared of paramount importance: socially and religiously ordained class and caste behaviour had to give into expansive fraternity, and one that derived from a unified moral consciousness.

Ambedkar's decision to convert to another religion was thus grounded in an understanding that viewed sociality in vitalistic, affective and moral terms. In this context, Buddhism appeared an ideal choice. As he saw it, Buddhism was unlike other religions, for rather than metaphysical doctrine, morality, leavened by compassion, was its core. In other faiths, morality was incidental and invoked only when "peace and order" were involved. But with Buddhism it was integral, and not "a wagon attached to it" and which could be taken off and detached as the occasion required. When he actually did decide to convert to Buddhism, Ambedkar made clear that he was embracing, not a faith, but the dhamma, which had taken the place of God in the Buddhist universe, and which was the very form of morality.¹⁸

Ambedkar further held that in other religions, concerned as they were with creed and custom, forms of worship and rituals, all of which were directed toward God, the moral was not the basis for the social. Men were enjoined to love each other, because all were equally the "children of God" and not because of the "direct necessity for man to love man".¹⁹ But the dhamma counselled otherwise: rather than God and his commandments, it was focused on human persons and the social worlds that they had made and concerned, therefore, with "the right relations between man and man in all spheres of life". Interpreting right relations as those anchored in an ethic of love, Ambedkar argued that dhamma required men to love each other "not to please God" but for their own good.²⁰ The dhamma thus reimagined the moral, as having to do with the social, rather than with the sacerdotal. By the same token, the social was also recast, as one that necessarily excluded the divine and included the moral. Divinely constituted inequality thus stood to be countered by the morally constituted equal and fraternal society.

¹⁸ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, in BAWS, Volume 11, p. 322.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 322–323.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 323.

3 DISCOVERING THE BUDDHA

As his biographers tell us, Ambedkar came to Buddhism early when he received a book on the Buddha's life as soon as he completed high school. That he was reading Buddhist texts from his student days is evident from his referencing the Jataka Tales (Buddhist ethical narratives) in his master's thesis, as sources that were more likely to yield information on secular and economic matters than the Brahmanical texts. Deploying a phrase, used by G. B. Shaw, he observed that having monopolized education, and staying away from labour and production, the brahmins were more or less "drones in the hive, gorging at a feast to which they [had] contributed nothing". While they thus vicariously accessed "conspicuous leisure" and "conspicuous consumption", they remained disinterested in economic activities as such and these latter thus found no mention in the literature they produced. In contrast, Buddhist texts featured the everyday lives and labour of ordinary people.²¹

He would go on to build on his critique of the parasitical nature of the brahmin class, and in that context contrast it with the fraternity of socially empathetic and propertyless Buddhist monks that the Buddha had gathered around him. This theme featured in essays and occasional notes in *Mooknayak* and *Bahishkrit Bharat*, and it is evident that he had embarked on a systematic study of Buddhism from as early as the 1920s and was well into it, by the 1930s. By the 1940s, he was convinced that Buddhism was the religion that untouchables ought to make their own.

Ambedkar's engagement with Buddhism unfolded in a historical context that witnessed what has been called the modern discovery of Buddhism. Early scholarly exponents were French and German writers, whose work proved influential to all who came to the subject thereafter. Much of this literature had been published by the mid-nineteenth century. However, this scholarship received a fillip, when the object of its study, the Buddha and his creed, acquired public acknowledgement and resonance in Victorian Britain and also in India and more generally South and South-east Asia. The discovery of Buddhist ruins, the massive translation projects initiated by Oriental scholars and an emergent popular interest in Buddhism in the UK, USA and Europe, in tandem with a more generalized fascination with non-Christian spiritual traditions, rendered

²¹ B. R. Ambedkar, *Commercial Relations of India in the Middle East*, in BAWS, Volume 12, 1993, p. 6.

the Buddha a favoured critical subject. Ironically enough Buddhism came to be viewed, less as living faith, which it was, across the vastness of Asia, and more as a discursive object: it appeared exotic and ethereal, because it was now 'extinct' in the land of its birth, and such versions of it that had survived elsewhere were marked as degenerate and hybrid versions of an exalted creed, whose pristine clarity and beauty had been preserved in the vast corpus of Buddhist texts.

This period of intense scholarly labour began in the third quarter of the nineteenth century and continued well into the twentieth. It yielded a vast amount of literature, comprising translations, commentaries, descriptive essays and narratives. T. W. Rhys Davids' The Pali Text Society presided over much of this endeavour. Max Mueller's *Sacred Books of the East* included volumes on Buddhism. Buddhologists, as they came to be called, in Bombay and Calcutta were also engaged in acquiring and publishing manuscripts from the Himalayan regions where Buddhism was a living faith, with support from wealthy local and global patrons.²²

The Buddha's persona and the fact that he was a historical figure rendered him interesting and attractive to those who looked to understand ancient India and Indian civilization and culture in decidedly secular and rational ways. For those scholars and students who were perplexed by the forest of ideas and narratives that they termed Hinduism, the Buddha's life and work augured a protestant moment in a complex history and many came to view him as a wise moralist, who chose not to explore metaphysical niceties, though he was aware of them.²³ To others, he seemed comparable to Christ and this made for a fascinating as well as troubled relationship that they compulsively wrote about, either dismissively or with reluctant admiration. On the other hand, they were happy enough to view him as a counter to what they found hard to countenance,

²² The 'rediscovery' of Buddhism has been extensively written about. See, Donald S. Lopez, Editor, *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995; Charles Allen, *The Search for the Buddha: The Men Who Discovered India's Lost Religion*, New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2003; Philip Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

²³ Almost all commentators who 'spread' the word about the Buddha in a popular sense, including T. Rhys Davids, sought to balance his wisdom with his metaphysical acumen (see T. Rhys Davids, *Buddhism: A Sketch of the Life and Teachings of Gautama, the Buddha*, London: Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, n.d.).

but had to, in course of their proselytising: the Hindu social order, with its brahmin priesthood and plethora of beliefs.²⁴

The Buddha also attracted social dissidents, including from the English working class, and the anti-colonial Irish, who found in his call to compassion an antidote to colonial capitalism and its destructive energies.²⁵ At a popular level, the Theosophists worked on the textual object that was Buddhism and helped to create a repertoire of ideas to do with the Buddha and Buddhism that proved influential in India and Ceylon. Their work fed into, and, in turn, was shaped by the reconstruction of Buddhism along modern lines by the Ceylonese Buddhist scholar, Anagarika Dharmapala, whose institutional and cultural labour proved far reaching, encompassing as it did diverse Buddhist worlds, in India, the UK and other parts of Asia.²⁶

Indian scholars who worked on translations, from the Sanskrit and Pali language texts, associated with what came to be called the Northern and Southern versions of Buddhism, respectively, could not but be moved by the Buddha's life, and by what Rhys Davids considered Buddhist India, with its republics and public assemblies, and its clear-cut ethics. Equally, they were inspired by Buddhist polity, by the figure of the Mauryan King Ashoka, who had given up a life of violence and war to emerge, as his public edicts put it, a proponent of the dhamma. While they were as fascinated, as the missionaries and some scholars were, by the contentious relationship that the Buddha appeared to have had with the brahmins and Brahmanism, they found it a fruitful contradiction which they interpreted in diverse ways. For Indians, charged with modern, democratic ideals, the Buddha seemed a worthy forebear and it is not accidental that anti-caste thinkers referenced his life and work and some, as we saw, converted to Buddhism, rather, they claimed they were returning to their original faith. For those who were impatient with Orientalist celebrations of the Indian past, and who viewed themselves as heirs to a world-historical moment, marked by scientific knowledge and social reason, the Buddha's creed

²⁴ See, in this context, Philip Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism*.

²⁵ See Alicia Turner, Laurence Cox, and Brian Bocking, *The Irish Buddhist: The Forgotten Monk who Faced Down the British Empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

²⁶ For an account of Dharmapala's life and work, see Stephen Kemper, *Rescued from the Nation: Anagarika Dharmapala and the Buddhist World*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015.

seemed particularly apposite to the history they felt Indians ought to own up to and carry forward.²⁷

There were also those who were uneasy with the Buddha: this included Hindu nationalists who blamed him for effectively ‘demasculinizing’ Hindu society and laying it open to Islamic aggression and who were angrily nonplussed by the modern construction of the Buddha as a rationalist, atheist and one who denied the existence of the soul. Then there were those who blamed Buddhism for introducing idol worship and false beliefs and thereby impeding the evolution of Brahmanical philosophical thought.²⁸

Ambedkar read widely in Buddhism: he was familiar with the Pali as well as the Sanskrit canon of texts in translation, and with key writings on the subject by Orientalists, administrator-scholars, missionaries, Indian researchers and popularizers of the life and message of the Buddha. The writings of P. Lakshmi Narasu, Dharmananda Kosambi and Haraprasad Shastri appealed to him in as much as they viewed the Buddha’s presence in Indian history as consequential and his teaching to be radical in its implications. He was familiar with iconic texts of the time, by Hermann Oldenberg, T. Rhys Davids and Carolyn Rhys Davids, Edward Thomas and Spence Hardy (and of many others) as well as the work of an older generation of scholars, such as Emile Burnouf. He read widely in popular Buddhism as well, including writings by James Pratt, Henry Olcott, Paul Carus and Kenneth Saunders. As was his wont he assembled out of this vast archive a tidy and systematic array of arguments that answered to the concerns that he had addressed all his life: questions to do with liberty, equality and fraternity, economic and social justice, the limits to love and the capacity for hatred in an unequal social order, the mental habitude that sustained and perpetuated untouchability, the relationship of the sacerdotal to the social, of law and society and the role of the intellectuals in legitimizing the social order.

²⁷ Jawaharlal Nehru’s interest in Buddhism was on this account. See, in this context, Gitanjali Surendran, *The Indian Discovery of Buddhism: Buddhist Revival in India, c. 1890–1956*, Unpublished Phd. Dissertation, Harvard University, 2013, pp. 148–159.

²⁸ See Jyotirmaya Sharma, *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism*, New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2013, pp. 137–141; 176–180 for a succinct account of how a range of decidedly modern Hindu thinkers, both revivalists and atavistic nationalist Hindus, engaged with Buddhism.

4 A BUDDHIST FUTURE?

Ambedkar's studies in Buddhism resulted in writings, not all of which were completed in his lifetime. In one way or another, all of them were concerned with the relevance of the Buddha for the times and with socialism. In the post-independent years, he wondered if the one was possible without the other: poverty, the endemic abuse of and violence against the untouchables and the growing tide of militant communism, from the late 1940s in parts of the country, were phenomena that belied the prospect of a just and independent India. Besides, the young nation continued to be beset by a resolutely non-republican social culture that threatened the rule of law and it seemed as if social interdicts against the untouchables would continue to prevail over the latter's constitutional rights. Also, the post-War world, tired from the fascist onslaught and littered with mangled democracies appeared to mock at his own faith in democracy. On the other hand, communism appeared to have survived and inspired hope, not only in the Soviet Union, where it had helped win a war, but also elsewhere in the world, including in Buddhist Asia, where China had set a rousing example of how a revolution might be fought, won and sustained. Yet, communism had built authoritarian and non-democratic political systems.²⁹

In this context, it appeared urgent that the Indian republic did not renege on the promises that it had made, and enshrined in its Constitution, and that the citizenry was schooled in democracy and constitutional morality. Ambedkar did not think that either task could be undertaken without adopting a world view that brought together principles of justice and acts of social affection. It seemed to him that untouchables could set an example in this regard, in and through the act of conversion, and by adopting the Buddhist way of life. After all, even in the Buddha's day, Ambedkar noted wryly, it was the sangha that realized in miniature the liberation that the Buddha wanted for all. It stood to reason that even if a section of society was to take to Buddhism that could prove an inspiring and critical instance of what might be done unto the Hindu social order.³⁰

²⁹ See in this context, his thoughtful reflections on democracy and the times: B. R. Ambedkar, *Failure of Parliamentary Democracy will result in Rebellion, Anarchy and Communism*, in BAWS, Volume 17: 3; pp. 422–428; also see in the same volume, *Conditions Precedent for the Successful Working of Democracy*, pp. 472–486.

³⁰ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, in BAWS, Volume 11, p. 434.

The conjuncture of the 1950s was both propitious and fateful for thinking socialism and Buddhism together. In Burma and South-east Asia, anti-colonial struggles had seen nationalists, socialists and communists come together to fight British and French imperialism, respectively, while nearer home, in Buddhist Ceylon, a generation of English-educated radicals had founded communist forums, including one with distinctive Trotskyite leanings. In these countries, emergent communism was not only anti-colonial, but had come to challenge the pieties of Buddhist monkhood and the power and authority invested in Buddhist institutions. In turn, a section of the Buddhist clergy, encouraged by conservative factions within nationalist groups, actively took against communism, particularly in Burma and Thailand. Meanwhile, from the late-1940s, South-east Asia became a playground for cold war tacticians and both the Soviet Union and the USA attempted to influence Buddhist opinion in favour of and against communism, respectively.³¹

At the same time, in Burma and Ceylon, some left-leaning thinkers attempted an ideological rapprochement between socialism and Buddhism. Burmese nationalists adumbrated a socialism that acknowledged the importance of Buddhism, and Prime Minister U Nu's efforts in this regard were well-known at that time. In Ceylon, a young Trotskyite, who called himself Leuke put out a thesis on the subject. Leuke was the pseudonym of S. N. B. Wijeyekoon, and he wrote this tract in 1943, attempting, as it were, to set up a critical and productive conversation between key Buddhist ideas and Marxist tenets.³²

Leuke wanted to assure his Buddhist interlocutors that socialism was not inimical to the so-called Buddhist way of life: "A Socialist society ... by removing the Prime Necessity for man to struggle against man for his basic economic existence, will create environmental conditions in which not merely the few, who in their ethical life rise above environmental influences, but the vast majority of the human race could eschew a

³¹ For a lively account of the issues at stake for all involved, see Eugene Ford, *Cold War Monks: Buddhism and America's Secret Strategy in Southeast Asia*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017, pp. 13–29.

³² See Manuel Sarkisyanz, 'On the Place of U Nu's Buddhist Socialism in Burma's History of Ideas', *Studies on Asia*, 1961, pp. 53–62); and for a succinct summary of Leuke's views, George Jan Lerski, *Origins of Trotskyism in Ceylon*, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/srilanka/ch03.htm>; accessed on 6 June 2019. Ambedkar knew Leuke's text, a copy of which was found amongst his papers (see BAWS, Volume 3, p. XV).

self-centered disposition in life. As such a socialist society will greatly facilitate the practice of non-attachment which is fundamental to the Buddhist mode of life".³³ Leuke also argued for a reconciling of socialist ends and Buddhist ethics: "According to Buddhism, our relationship with others should be based on Maitriya which is kindness not merely to each and every human being but to all sentient creatures ... the criteria of ethical conduct applied by Dialectical Materialism is Social Good".³⁴

Ambedkar was aware of developments in the region. For one, he counted on Buddhist nations to endorse his proposed conversion project, and for another, he was interested in thinking through the political and cultural possibilities of a Buddhist cosmopolis, which would provide both a home and a 'habitat' for the untouchables. The looming presence of communism in these nations made him wonder about the future of Buddhism. He took measure of the socialist concerns that had emerged as pertinent in Buddhist societies and chose to address the relative merits of socialism and Buddhism in his post-war writings and speeches.³⁵ While on a visit to Ceylon in 1950, he briefly alluded to Buddhism's socialist content in the course of a lecture that he delivered on the future of Buddhism in India.³⁶ In a talk aired over BBC Radio, he expressed his dismay at the Buddhist nations turning socialist and pondered over the attractions of the latter for a Buddhist, who, he reasoned, could find more coherent answers for the questions posed by the socialists within his own creed.³⁷ And in India, he polemicized with communism during the conversion ceremony and later on, in a speech he made at a Buddhist conference in Nepal, he elaborated on the relative merits of Buddhism over Marxism, on being requested to do so.³⁸

³³ Leuke, *Gautam the Buddha and Karl Marx: A Critique and Comparative Study of their Systems of Representation*, Colombo: Sri Vijaya Publishing House, 1943, p. 79.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 95–96.

³⁵ B. R. Ambedkar, *If Buddhist Gospel Is Not Adopted History of Conflict in Europe Will Repeat in Asia*, in BAWS, Volume 17: 3, pp. 493; also see, in the same volume, *Why I Like Buddhism*, pp. 515–516.

³⁶ B. R. Ambedkar, *Buddhism Paved Way for Democracy and Socialistic Pattern of Society*, in BAWS, Volume 17: 3, p. 407–409.

³⁷ B. R. Ambedkar, *Why I Like Buddhism*, in BAWS, Volume 17: 3, pp. 515–516.

³⁸ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha Dhamma Will Be the Saviour of the World*, in BAWS, Volume 17: 3, pp. 537–543.

5 THE BUDDHA, THE DHAMMA AND THE ACQUISITIVE INSTINCT

Of Ambedkar's writings on Buddhism, three texts are important: *The Buddha and the Future of his Religion*; *The Buddha and His Dhamma* and *Buddha or Karl Marx*. The first was an essay, the second, a gospel text for new converts and the last was based on his Nepal address. *The Buddha and His Dhamma* was not as complete as Ambedkar would have liked it to be, and the version that has been published since his death is perhaps a last draft rather than a final text.

The Buddha and the Future of His Religion (1950) may be taken to be a statement of intent, in which Ambedkar laid down the first principles of Buddhism that he considered germane to the times and his purpose.³⁹ Drawing on John Dewey's dictum that only those aspects of the past that are relevant to the present ought to be retained as useful history, he observed that the Buddha in fact viewed his religion as serving history in just this sense: "His religion was not to be encumbered with the dead wood of the past. He wanted that it should remain evergreen and serviceable at all times. That is why He gave liberty to his followers to chip and chop as the necessities of the case required".⁴⁰ This freedom was premised on the Buddha's confidence about the dhamma: it was a pathway rather than a bundle of beliefs, and others could follow and make this way their own, and unlike faiths identified with their founders or prophets, it did not require his salvific presence or mediation.

Characterizing the Buddha's teachings as essentially different from Hindu tenets, Ambedkar observed that the dhamma ought not to be confused with the Hindu notion of "dharma". These might appear to be similar words, but they referenced very different things. The Hindu dharma had to do with everyday acts based on rules and strictures, and exceptional spiritual acts that were pursued when they appeared to be

³⁹ See B. R. Ambedkar, in BAWS, Volume 17: 2, 2003, pp. 97–108. What follows is a summary of its content.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 98; John Dewey (*Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, Indian Edition, New Delhi: Aakar Books, 2004 [1915]) had observed. "Every society gets encumbered with what is trivial, with dead wood from the past...As a society becomes more enlightened, it realizes that it is responsible not to conserve and transmit the whole of its existing achievements, but only such as to make for a better future society..." (p. 22). Further, "A knowledge of the past and its heritage is of great significance when it enters into the present, but not otherwise" (p. 82).

needed. There was nothing intrinsically moral about any of these. But the dhamma was different. It was constitutively moral, and given its reflexivity, it was in accord with science. In popular understanding, the dhamma had been reduced to the singular principle of non-violence. But that was not all, since the Buddha taught “as part of his religion, social freedom, intellectual freedom, economic freedom and political freedom. He taught equality, equality not between man and man only, but between man and woman”.⁴¹

In order to make Buddhism available, in the manner he imagined it, to the untouchables and others that might favour conversion, Ambedkar desired to put in place three things: a gospel that would draw on key Buddhist texts, but would be more than a “narrative or an ethical exposition”. He wanted its style to be “lucid, moving” and to “produce a hypnotic effect”. Therefore, the “linguistic side of it was not to be neglected.”⁴² Secondly, the order of the Buddhist monkhood was to be reconstructed. The Buddha, Ambedkar insisted, had wanted his sangha to be a living example of men who practised his ideals, a “body of intellectuals” who would give “laymen true and impartial guidance”. But they were not to be dogmatic, and were to retain an open mind. This was also why they were enjoined to not own property, since “one of the greatest obstacles in free thinking and application of free thought” was the love of private possession.⁴³ Thirdly, an international Buddhist Mission was to be organized. Ambedkar managed to fulfil the first of the demands he had set himself and his fellow converts. The other two, the creation of an ideal Sangha and an international Mission did not take place during his time.

⁴¹ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and the Future of His Religion*, in BAWs, Volume 17: 2, p. 105. Scholars of Buddhism have pointed out that Ambedkar’s reading of Buddhism was very much his own and not quite sanctioned by the canonical texts or indeed Buddhist scholarship. Others have noted that there was both continuity and difference in his interpretations. For a range of views on the subject, see Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Beltz, Editors, *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004. See also Pradeep Gokhale, ‘Ambedkar and Modern Buddhism: Continuity and Discontinuity’ in *Classical Buddhism, Neo-Buddhism and the Question of Caste* (edited by Pradeep Gokhale), London: Routledge, 2021, pp. 257–273.

⁴² B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and the Future of His Religion*, in BAWs, Volume 17: 2, p. 106.

⁴³ Ibid.

The Buddha and His Dhamma which was the name he finally gave his gospel text offered a reading of the Buddha's life and thought, details of which were gleaned from a variety of sources.⁴⁴ Ambedkar had chopped, pruned and edited from the canonical Buddhist literature, in Sanskrit and Pali, and reassembled the edited texts, along with his comments and refurbished narrative contexts, into a new whole.⁴⁵ Aware as he was of the interweaving of myth and biography in extant versions of the Buddha's life, and also of the attempts to view him as a Hindu reformer, or at least as one who did not see himself as being outside the pale of the civilisation he was part of, Ambedkar chose to write a different sort of biography. His Buddha was to be a universally credible human person, and, at the same time, an exceptional individual who defined new and radical ethics and philosophy.

The text comprised eight parts. It sequenced events in the Buddha's life, in a manner that was not very different from other such studies: Siddhartha Gautama's early life and his transformation into the Buddha; his conversion of others to his way, especially women, and those deemed socially low and degraded; his teachings and their place in religious history; his founding of the sangha and the rules and dicta that bound its members; his place in the society of his times; his passing on, and the imprint of his existence, in his own time.⁴⁶ While scrupulously loyal to the sources for the most part, Ambedkar yet inscribed his distinctive vision of the Buddha and his teachings within the narrative, sometimes speaking as himself, but in the guise of an omniscient narrator; and at other times, in and through a merger of his voice with those of the sources. This latter

⁴⁴ See B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, in BAWs, Volume 11 (Supplement to Volume 11), pp. 1–29; 43–46.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 1–23. Even a cursory look at the sources and the manner in which they figure in the text is enough to indicate how complex this process of assembling texts had been.

⁴⁶ Two influences appear to have been important in this context: Dharmmananda Kosambi's Marathi text, *Bhagwan Buddha* and his play 'Bodhisattva' (see Meera Kosambi, editor, *Dharmamanand Kosambi: The Essential Writings*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010, pp. 348–402 for an English version of the latter); Edward Thomas' *The Life of Buddha as Legend and History*, London Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956 [1927]. Kosambi was as resolute as Ambedkar in 'humanising' the Buddha, and as important, he had been drawn to socialism and besides spent time in the Soviet Union, examining manuscripts and working with Soviet scholars in the 1920s. Thomas' work disambiguated mythical accretions to the Buddha's story, from what he held to be a more historical portrait.

could be something as seemingly slight as the substitution of one word for another, or a paragraph inserted into a formal description or argument drawn from the canon.

The Buddha as a human person had attracted much scholarly attention and even hardened rationalists were not immune to the charm and urbanity, gentility and moral worth of the individual whose character, as much as what he said, appeared important.⁴⁷ Ambedkar's protagonist, both the young prince Siddhartha Gautama and the Buddha that he eventually became, was just such an individual. Thus, the prince is shown to be a reflective man, and somewhat at odds with the life that he is expected to lead: he does not favour the royal hunt, is not convinced of the need to go to war. He is saddened by the sight of labourers working hard on the fields of others and wonders "why the labourer should toil and the master live on the fruits of his labour". He also does not disdain working on the land himself.⁴⁸ The future Buddha meditates too, in order that he might overcome the habit of thinking of living beings in terms of "difference and discrimination" and to rise above the limitations that such an approach fostered.⁴⁹

When Siddhartha leaves home to search for answers that would help him comprehend the enigma of human suffering, this is not on account of his sudden discovery of mortality, as conventional narratives of his life would have it. Rather, he chooses voluntary exile, as a form of self-inflicted punishment for voicing a dissident point of view, during deliberations on a water dispute in the ruling council of his republic. His supportive and companionate wife is shown to be sympathetic and understanding of his situation and endorses his decision to leave home. She notes that she is aware that he is set on a quest for knowledge and wishes him well.⁵⁰ And, when the prince attains enlightenment, it is made clear

⁴⁷ See for instance, the portrait of the Buddha in P. Lakshmi Narasu's *The Essence of Buddhism*, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1993 [1907], pp. 1–21. Also see Kenneth J. Saunders, *Gotama Buddha*.

⁴⁸ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, in BAWs, Volume 11, p. 10.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁵⁰ See *ibid.*, pp. 24–32, for an account of the water dispute and thereafter. Ambedkar relied on Dharmananda Kosambi's play *Bodhisattva* for this section of the narrative (see fn. 45). This was an unusual point of view, and it served Ambedkar well, as it did Kosambi, to mark the future Buddha as a proto democrat and a man of ideas, who was troubled by the fact that all was not well in his state.

that the dhamma, or the path that would end suffering, which he seeks to propound, is not a “revelation”, but a “discovery” that came about through his “inquiry and investigation into the conditions of human life on earth” and into “the working of human instincts ...the moulding of ... instincts and dispositions... as a result of history and tradition”.⁵¹

While describing the post-enlightenment quandary that the Buddha found himself in, as he wondered if he should communicate to other seekers and laypersons, his hard-earned experience and knowledge of enlightenment, or view it solely from the point of view of self-cultivation, Ambedkar inserted his own voice into the sources, to annotate the Buddha’s decision to propagate what he had learned. Thus, we have his Buddha stating to himself that he does not wish to be an ascetic, and “sit...with folded arms” and be the “personification of inactive impassivity”. Instead, he wishes “to change the world and to make it better”. If his doctrine can help “banish misery and unhappiness from the world” he must “return to the world and serve it”.⁵²

Ambedkar sought to establish that unlike other philosophers of his time, the Buddha did not think only in logical and abstract categories. Rather, he heeded the materiality of existence, that mix of mental states, and ways of being, which comprised the detritus of past time, the residues of feeling and thought, action and emotions, as well as the rush of the new, of all that interfered with habit and routine. His enlightenment was to be understood, therefore, as a tryst with the totality of human experience in a historical sense, and with the limits as well as possibilities of the human condition.⁵³

Ambedkar was also at pains to show him to be a fitful pedagogue, who explained, argued and shared his own experience of reaching the coveted moment of enlightenment. He was thus positioned as a corrective to the more familiar image of the charismatic religious persona, who was either the messenger of God or his prophet or an incarnation of the divine, or the divine. It is likely that Ambedkar also wished to contrast the Buddha with the modern political sage, as exemplified in Gandhi’s persona, and

⁵¹ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, in BAWs, Volume 11, pp. 217–218.

⁵² Ibid., pp. 112–113.

⁵³ See in this context, Christopher Queen’s account of what he calls Ambedkar’s ‘engaged Buddhism’: ‘Dr Ambedkar and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation’, in *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, edited by Christopher Queen and Sallie King, Albany: SUNY Press, 1996, pp. 45–72.

equally of the militant revolutionary. While Ambedkar was not opposed to the prospect of a just war, he was critical of what seemed to him a revolutionary vanguard that was not possessed of the power and clarity of thought and relied on political action alone. Further, as he would argue in his enigmatic *Buddha or Karl Marx*, those who received the message of revolution, ought to be persuaded of its worth, and schooling them in this regard was as much a revolutionary task.⁵⁴ The dialogic teacher was important in this scheme of things, and the Buddha was made to bear the burden of a historical mission that Ambedkar found important.

The most important change that Ambedkar brought into his narrative had to do with the question for which the Buddha sought answers.⁵⁵ Having exiled himself, his Buddha finds out that the cause for which he left home does not exist anymore, since the warring factions had decided to settle matters through dialogue and discussion. But yet he persists in his quest, for now he is troubled by a larger question: as he had explained to a monarch who attempted to reason with him, and gets him to end his exile, he had been “wounded by the strife of the world” and looked to find peace.⁵⁶ The use of the word “strife” in this context is intriguing. Two English translations of the original Sanskrit canonical text, from which Ambedkar drew his citation, and that were well-known at the time of his writing the book, do not use the word.⁵⁷ It is possible a Hindi translation of the text, which is listed in Ambedkar’s bibliography, might have done so. But in any case, to reference strife in this context could only have been deliberate.

⁵⁴ See below, for a discussion of this text.

⁵⁵ All changes that Ambedkar had brought into his text have been carefully annotated. See, in this context, Adele Fiske and Christoph Emmrich, ‘The Use of Buddhist Scriptures in The Buddha and His Dhamma’ in *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, edited by Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Beltz, pp. 97–119.

⁵⁶ It is of course not accidental that the strife referenced here had as much to do with the threat of social boycott and confiscation of property as it has to do with war: Siddhartha was told that he had to make good the rupture caused by his dissidence or else his family would be subject to such eventualities (B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, in BAWs, Volume 11, pp. 27–28).

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 54. In Edward B Cowell’s translation of the original Sanskrit text (*The Buddha-Karita or Life of Buddha* by Asvaghosha, New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1977 [1894], the sentence reads: “I have been wounded by the enjoyment of the world ...” (p.119). Another translation of the same sentence: “I have been transfixed by the arrow of the cycle of existence...” (E. B. Johnston, *The Buddhacarita or the Acts of the Buddha*, Part II, Calcutta: The Baptist Mission Press, 1936, p. 160).

Clearly, Ambedkar wished to indicate that the prince had encountered the world as a conflictual space, and not only as one that induced world-weariness. This was not only on account of what he endured, but also because he had come to realize that his situation was not singular and that there was dissension everywhere, in families, between social groups and individuals. Further, it seemed to him that “the conflict between nations” was but provisional, whereas, “the conflict between classes” seemed perpetual. And this, he concluded was “the root of all sorrow and suffering in the world”.⁵⁸ Here, Ambedkar both referenced the sources, as well as added his own sense of conflict to the description. The generalized dissension that he speaks of is from the former, and the reference to nation and class is of course his own.

In most readings of the canonical literature, which were published during Ambedkar’s lifetime, suffering and the sorrow that attended it, were marked as individual afflictions that all human persons experienced. Rhys Davids, for example, argued that suffering was caused by the individual’s inability to view himself as existing essentially in relation to the world, and his insistence on his separateness. Delusions of the self, he held, caused discontent, anxiety and sorrow, and the Buddha’s dhamma was to be pursued in order to allay and overcome these emotions. In this sense, the dhamma demonstrated how the self could unmanacle itself of those fetters that rendered it a prisoner of the passions and which trapped it within a cycle of loss, pain and sorrow.⁵⁹ Lakshmi Narasu echoed these views in a somewhat different vein, and noted that the Buddha sought to remind human beings of the limits of their petty egoistic desires and the vanity of seeking fulfilment in ways that only augmented want. He drew attention to how, in pursuit of their passions, individuals not only remained captive to their own needs and cravings, but also became immune to the suffering of others. In place of such an existence, Narasu reasoned, the Buddha outlined the possibilities of a gracious life, where the mind, freed from desire and want, was suffused with “philosophical enthusiasm” and “earnest devotion to the good of others”.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, in BAWS, Volume 11, pp. 57–58.

⁵⁹ T. Rhys Davids, *Buddhism: Its History and Literature*, London: G B Putnam’s Sons, 1926 [1896], pp. 124–130.

⁶⁰ P. Lakshmi Narasu, *The Essence of Buddhism*, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1993 [1907], pp. 120–125.

For Ambedkar, such explanations did not suffice. All his life he had argued for the recognition of social suffering, of the effects of normalized degradation and violence and noted that the problem was not that the untouchables and lower castes endured hurt, but that an entire social order was schooled in social odium. Unsurprisingly, he came to read canonical references and arguments on the subject to expand his understanding in this regard. The canonical texts had it that the four cardinal truths that the Buddha realized upon enlightenment were the following: that the world is mired in suffering; that suffering is caused by craving; that for suffering to end, craving has to cease to be; and that the way out of craving is the pursuit of the eight-fold path of ethical living. Ambedkar addressed himself emphatically to the second and fourth of these truths: what caused suffering and how might one end it. In doing so, he drew on such ideas that he had utilized to explain the structuring of inequality in the Hindu caste order. Amongst his varied critical descriptions in this regard, was a set of remarks that addressed power and venality, and in all these instances, he had used and adapted to his context, the phrase “acquisitive instinct.”

It is intriguing that he would deploy this phrase, which was used widely in the literature of social psychology that he knew well. In much of this literature, the instincts were alluded to, as both physiological and psychological, and as having to do with heredity as well as learnt behaviour. A typology of instincts was referenced in several texts, and the acquisitive instinct was contrasted with the predatory instinct and sometimes viewed in continuum with it.⁶¹ Given Ambedkar’s interest in theorizing moral qualities in vitalistic terms, it is not surprising that he had recourse to the term and he also had in mind the use of the word ‘acquisitive’ in Richard Tawney’s book, *The Acquisitive Society* that examined the moral correlates of industrial capitalism and the productivist ethic.

In any event, he used the term to point to instances of avarice and hoarding, and which did not have only to do with material objects, but equally with the retention of cultural goods and power. Thus, in summing up his critique of Brahmanism, he remarked that it sought to cover its “acquisitive politics” with “the cloak of religion”.⁶² In his unfinished

⁶¹ See, in this context, William McDougall’s *An Introduction to Social Psychology* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1928), a book that Ambedkar knew well.

⁶² B. R. Ambedkar, *The Triumph of Brahmanism*, in BAWS, Volume 3, 1987, p. 331.

essay on the *Bhagavad Gita*, he observed that Buddhism had established that social misery was caused by incessant craving—*tanha* (in Pali)—or the acquisitive instinct, and once they had learned this was indeed so, the populace at large was reluctant to assent to wasteful Brahmanical sacrifices and the Vedic sanction that rendered them significant.⁶³ Here, the referent was clearly more material, but it included as well the excessive authority that demanded sacrifices as forms of expiation.

Writing of the Hindus and their social character—in his provocative book on Pakistan—he noted: “The Hindus have a trait of character... formed by their acquisitive instinct and aversion to share with others the good things of life. They have a monopoly of education and wealth... and take every move to exclude the lower classes ... from wealth, education and power, the surest and the most effective being the preparation of scriptures, inculcating upon the minds of the lower classes of Hindus the teaching that their duty in life is only to serve the higher classes”.⁶⁴

In all these instances, the phrase, ‘acquisitive instinct’ connoted a tendency that was the very badge of what he viewed as socially illicit and politically powerful. It also augured class war in that it produced ill-will and dissension, and made for social strife. In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, he deployed the phrase to mean a more or less similar disposition of the mind, but given the context of its occurrence, it acquired a distinct resonance. For one, he used it in conjunction with and sometimes in the place of the canonical and conventional phrases, “craving” and “sensations” which, according to the Buddha, fettered the self. Thus, his Buddha notes: “Avarice or possession due to uncontrolled acquisitive instinct calls for watch and ward...” and on this account, the world is thrown into dissension and conflict: for such “craving and greed” produce “many a wicked state of things....blows and wounds, strife, contradictions and retorts; quarrelling, slander and lies”. Ambedkar concludes this canonical passage—from the *Mahanidan Sutta*—by coming in as narrator: “That this is the correct analysis of class struggle there can be no doubt”.⁶⁵

⁶³ B. R. Ambedkar, *Krishna and His Gita*, Volume 3, p. 364. He refers to Tawney’s work in this instance.

⁶⁴ B. R. Ambedkar, *Pakistan or the Partition of India*, in BAWS, Volume 8, 1990, p. 123.

⁶⁵ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, in BAWS, Volume 11, p. 239.

Another significant usage of the phrase is to be had in the last section of *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, ‘The Man who was Siddharth Gautama’, where it featured as a subheading: “His Dislike of the Acquisitive Instinct”. A short and pithy paragraph followed, which more or less repeated what he had cited earlier from the *Mahanidan Sutta*, but with this difference. Ambedkar retained the original context of the Sutta in this instance. Considered one of the premier works of the Pali canon, the Sutta offers an epistemic distillation of the Buddhist theory of dependent origination. Aware of its significance, Ambedkar abstracted a section from the sources to posit his own theory of the origin of conflict, which is both a description of the social, as it is of the phenomenon of origination as such. This was a rather bold move in that he reworked a complex philosophical argument into a synoptic view of the evils caused by the acquisitive instinct and how such evils made for suffering and hurt.⁶⁶

In both these moments in the narrative, the use of the term ‘acquisitive instinct’ helped to mark suffering as an experience that emerged not only out of the self’s encounter with the impermanent and ever-changing phenomenal world, but also equally of a habitude of mind, to own and possess, to the detriment of not just the self, but the world. Whereas craving was viewed in the canonical literature as the cause of suffering, Ambedkar read it to cause conflict, which, in turn, led to suffering. Craving thus came to connote not only the passions that fettered the mind and the emotions, but also an anti-social and alienating force that was often deliberately exercised. The implication was that the overcoming of craving could not, therefore, only be an individual pursuit of liberation from sensual fetters, it necessarily had to be substantialized as social reconstruction as well.

Ambedkar’s insistence on reading conflict as the basis of suffering is better understood, when viewed in line with his understanding of how the Hindu social order had defined either. Chaturvarnya, for instance, rendered one’s social being determinate in all instances, and suffering or its absence, it was argued, had to do with one’s station in life and what

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 588–589. Interestingly enough, he retained in this instance the canonical verse that has the Buddha speak of his having overcome craving, perhaps because this part of the narrative focuses on the Buddha as a person: “I recognise the earth as earth. But I have no craving for it. ... Therefore it is, say I, that by extirpating all cravings, by not lusting after them, but by destroying and abandoning and renouncing them all, that I acquired enlightenment” (p. 589).

had been mandated and ordained. To Ambedkar, this was unacceptable, and for two reasons: it left out of the reckoning the environment and its shaping power and put the onus on birth and identity. Ambedkar was at pains to point to the importance of the circumstances in which one found oneself, also because these were rendered irrelevant by the doctrine of karma—of action and reaction—in the Hindu scheme of things. The doctrine held that an individual endured or enjoyed his present existence on the basis of his past lives and all that he had done and said thereof. Thus, not only did his social identity shape and limit his choices, but the burden of the past was transmitted via the deathless soul, which bore the marks of all previous deeds, and which was how housed in his body. This meant that the individual was trapped, in bodily existence by his social location, and in his or her moral life by his previous births! Neither his will nor his actions or for that matter the environment mattered as much as these two factors.⁶⁷

As important, the Hindu social order had ensured that the definable human origins of suffering were neither relevant nor visible. Ambedkar had argued in his writings on the untouchables' religious, social and political situation, that the suffering inflicted on them had to do with the way touchable Hindus lived their lives and viewed themselves, and not with what the untouchables did or said, or how they conducted themselves. But matters were seldom viewed in this manner, and the usual response, even if offered in good faith, despaired at all that the untouchables endured, but did not take measure of what the touchables did. What was thereby not acknowledged was the fact that strife was constitutive of the social order: "The Indian village is a negation of the republic. ...it is a kind of colonialism of the Hindus designed to exploit the untouchables....the untouchables ... are only there to wait, serve and submit".⁶⁸

To adduce conflict as the cause for suffering and read it, along with, and in lieu of craving as a foundational experience, was one thing, but to

⁶⁷ See B.R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, in BAWS, Volume 11, pp. 337–338 for Ambedkar's summary of Hindu ideas on this subject. Ambedkar's Buddha baldly rejected the theory of karma and was barely receptive to the form in which it was retained in Buddhism. Ambedkar went on to offer a modified reading that equated the effects of deeds performed in previous births to a notion of heredity, on the one hand, and, on the other, to the lingering social effects of deeds after one's death. He also asserted that the Buddha held environmental influences to shape conduct, rather than anything inherited from the past (ibid., pp. 338–344).

⁶⁸ B. R. Ambedkar, *Outside the Fold*, in BAWS, Volume 5, p. 26.

read the canonical arguments that addressed the cessation of suffering as equally applicable to the ending of class and other conflicts was another matter altogether. Ambedkar thus had to reimagine the obliteration of craving in terms of the eradication of the acquisitive instinct; and to position the eightfold path to liberation as enabling the ending of conflict. Both required him to subtly re-read key canonical texts and he did this through drawing on select passages and ignoring the rest, through an adroit re-signifying of meaning and intent and by bringing key aspects of his thought-world to bear on the extracts that made up his narrative.

Thus, with regard to the Buddha's first sermon, which announced to his first disciples his discovery of the four cardinal truths, Ambedkar cited only part of the content. He retained the Buddha's explication of his middle way, neither one of indulgence of desire, nor of self-mortification, but one that sought to address and end suffering in and through training the mind and dispositions. But he left out the Buddha's explanation of the causes of sorrow. Neither craving nor the acquisitive instinct were referenced here, instead their effects were indexed, as instances of social suffering: "sorrow, misery... and poverty".⁶⁹ Following this, Ambedkar went on to explain the nuances of the eightfold path. It was as if he wished to parse conflict in terms of its effects, and craving, in terms of what would annihilate it.

In another key instance, his Buddha referenced craving, but in ways that linked it to both sorrow and conflict. In his narration of the Buddha's Fire Sermon, which contained some of the most well-known and poetic descriptions of what holds being, consciousness and the mind in thrall, Ambedkar cited the core verses and observed that this account of craving, constituted the "most forceful explanation for the unhappiness of man". He went on to note that craving expressed itself in three ways: as attachment, antipathy and ignorance. The first two, which produced lust, infatuation and greed, and hatred, anger and repugnance, respectively, preyed on the emotions and affected "the whole scale of one's attitudes and feelings towards other beings". Ignorance on the other hand acted on the mind, and made for misrecognition and delusion, which prevented one from knowing the truth about experience or indeed the world.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, in BAWS, Volume 11, p. 121.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

In this exposition, Ambedkar dwelt, as the canonical text did, on the causes of suffering, but yet subtly indicated that suffering was not just what the individual endured, but which also shaped his relationship to other individuals and the world. He went on to argue that the Buddha's vision of liberation did not imply an extinction of all passions, or indeed a retirement from the world, rather it had to be understood as setting the context for the pursuit of the righteous life.⁷¹ With regard to the latter, Ambedkar upheld the importance of the eightfold path and strove to redefine it as radical social ethics. In this capacity, it was to reshape individual dispositions in ways that would enable a critical as well as an empathetic relationship to the world, and thus obviate the possibility of conflict.

Ambedkar's reading of the eight injunctions drew on his lifelong critique of the Hindu social order and Brahmanism and was mediated by his acute awareness of all that marred equality and freedom in an everyday sense, for the lower castes and untouchables.⁷² The injunction to cultivate the right view or knowledge thus became a call to free the mind from superstition and unreason and importantly from the "sanctity of the Shastras" (*Hindu scripture*—V. G.).⁷³ Right resolve required each individual to recognize his or her "aims, aspirations and ambitions" as worthy and to ensure these were not ignoble. In a social context, where resolve was always pre-defined in that the lower castes and definitely the untouchables were given the purpose of their lives by others, it appeared important to train the mind to value the will and desire for a life of one's choice. The imprecation to speak right was defined as schooling

⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 237–238.

⁷² See *ibid.*, pp. 123–127 for his exposition of the eightfold path. Conventionally, the path comprised the following: right views, right resolve, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right endeavour, right mindfulness and right concentration. Ambedkar perhaps read the eightfold path in a Deweyan vein. Dewey had argued in *Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us*, written in the context of the rise of Nazism, that democracy ought to be seen not as external to the individual, but as "a personal way of individual life" and as signifying "the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character and determining desire and purpose in all the relations of life" (<http://www.beloit.edu/~pbk/dewey.html>; accessed on June 24, 2020).

See, in this context, Scott Stroud, 'Creative Democracy, Communication, and the Uncharted Sources of Bhimrao Ambedkar's Deweyan Pragmatism', *Education and Culture*, Volume 34: 1, 2018, 3–22.

⁷³ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, in BAWS, Volume 11, p. 124.

oneself to speak courteously and sensibly, and significantly, “without fear or favour” and without the “slightest reference to what a superior might think of his action, or to any loss which right speech might involve”.⁷⁴ Ambedkar had always been concerned with the power of words, and with the phenomenon of naming, and critical, attentive and fearless use of language was a crucial aspect of the liberation and dignity that he sought for the untouchables. This was not only an endorsement of their right to freedom of expression, but an argument for their right to expression as such.

As for right conduct, Ambedkar’s Buddha made clear that it “should be founded on respect for the feelings and rights of others”. Right livelihood, likewise, was defined as that which did not cause “injury and injustice to others”, and in both instances, the Buddha had recourse to the language of constitutional rights and justice, and equally to the caste and class-based exploitation that structured economic life.⁷⁵ Right endeavour was glossed as a quality of mind, as that which opened it out to the world, to the path of liberation, and this reading reflected Ambedkar’s great faith in the limitless possibilities of thought. Right mindfulness was defined tersely as mental alertness, and right concentration, Ambedkar made sure, was not confused with a call to meditative stillness. Rather, it had to be understood as the capacity to think of the good, to develop a “permanent turn” of mind that would ensure that it kept with the good.⁷⁶ Ambedkar had despaired of the evolution of constitutional morality precisely because the turn of mind, that would understand and make this morality a matter of civic and political life, had not yet taken place in Indian society. And as he argued, this was not likely to come about through a mechanical adherence to the law or even constitutional principles, but required the exercise of public conscience and an ethics that baulked at social suffering.⁷⁷

The question was, if the eightfold path was what would enable liberation from craving and conflict, who was likely to take to it? Those who held power or were set in authority were unlikely to, and Ambedkar was

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 125.

⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 125–126.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 127.

⁷⁷ See his remarks on an official report that detailed atrocities against the untouchables: he noted that it was not charged, as it ought to be, with ethical fervour, necessary to rouse public conscience and indignation (B. R. Ambedkar, *Report of Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Tribes for 1953*, in BAWS, Volume 15, 1997, pp. 895–898.

not unaware of this. As he remarked, it was entirely possible that one would need not only the dhamma, but the magistrate as well to ensure that the strife of the world was addressed, in the interest of the greater common good; thus an empirical justice system, as much as the practice of a radical ethics was necessary.⁷⁸ This was also why he argued that the Buddha himself was not against a just war, and had refused to fetishize the principle of non-killing, important as it was in his moral universe. Ventriloquizing the Buddha's voice in this instance, Ambedkar pointed out that a just war would have to secure a just and generous peace as well. Punitive peace, he argued, was no peace at all and justice had to be secured through means that did not eternally alienate those who were being served their just deserts.⁷⁹

Ambedkar was all too aware that in addressing conflict, the claims of ethics and justice had to be held in a delicate balance. While he foregrounded class war, he sought to mark it as ethically consequential as well, and looked to the dhamma to set in place the coordinates for establishing the desired balance.

6 THE DHAMMA AGAINST BRAHMANISM

In Ambedkar's understanding, the Buddha's teachings, both his view of suffering and of the path that would help engage with it, together constituted the dhamma. In order to draw attention to its ineluctable attributes, he sought to mark its radical difference, from all things to do with the Hindu social order and all that legitimized it. He thus marked the dhamma as a negation of Brahmanism and listed all that it resolutely was not, in this regard: ritual sacrifices, unprofitable metaphysical speculation, pedantry, scriptural infallibility and bookish knowledge, all of which informed Brahmanical acts as well as systems of thought.⁸⁰

But, the dhamma also transcended what it negated: the Brahmanical sacrifice, which benefitted none but the officiating priests and ostensibly the monarch or nobility who called for them, was countered with the ideal of the self-sacrificing royal who would rather that he died, to feed

⁷⁸ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, in BAWS, Volume 11, p. 317.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 509. This was also his critique of the Soviet state: that it stifled the liberty of those it punished or dispossessed in ways that were punitive, rather than persuasive (see the section on *Buddha or Karl Marx* in this chapter).

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 249–278.

his kingdom and ensure the common good. But that was not all. The ideal of self-sacrifice was elevated—and transformed—to represent a positive ethical attribute that marked the good and just society. As Ambedkar noted, it was not compassion alone that the Buddha stressed, he called attention to social fellowship, the ideal of *maithri*, that impulse which led one to institute for all, “the same happiness which one seeks for one’s own self” and which enjoined the mind to remain “impartial” and “open to all, with affection for everyone and hatred for none”.⁸¹ In a social order, where no man was deemed his brother’s keeper, the imprecation to sustain mutuality and equality in social relations and to insist on shared and sympathetic joy was a call to rethink the basis of the social universe.

The Buddha’s disinterest in metaphysical enquiry, likewise, was not merely a critique of existing schools of thought. For, his critique of the Brahmanical theory of the soul and the belief in God, in essence, freed him to enquire into other matters: the making of consciousness, and therefore dispositions, and most important, argued Ambedkar, it led him to posit the centrality of the mind, and its prowess.⁸² Here again, it was not only the ability of the mind to know, define and comprehend that appeared important to the Buddha, but also equally its capacity for moral discernment. Ambedkar insisted that the Buddha was unique in linking knowledge to virtue, on the one hand, and compassion and mindfulness on the other: it was not enough to think right, but equally to act right. Action redounded not only on the self but also on the world, and it was proper therefore to be aware of the moral scope of one’s actions and their effects.⁸³

With regard to learning as such too, the Buddha went beyond the brahmins. Where Brahmanism had relied on a constant iteration of scriptural verities, both with respect to understanding and conduct, and recouped differences and dissension seamlessly into its vision of the enduring faith, the Buddha sought to free knowledge and action from the bind of the past, and into radical openness. Thus, he went on to argue, that nothing was given or permanent. In this context, Ambedkar reasoned, it was important to grasp the true import of the idea of impermanence, the Buddhist notion of the void, or *sunnyata*: “It is on the

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 104–105.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 295–297.

impermanence of the nature of all things that the possibility of all other things depends. If things were not subject to continual change ... the evolution of all of life from one kind to another and the development of living things would come to a dead stop...".⁸⁴

The dhamma too was part of this impermanence, but it was not therefore relative. Its very impermanence freed it from the bounds of time or place, and it thus stood to be interpreted, again and yet again. The universality of the dhamma, Ambedkar made clear, lay not so much in its unchanging character as it did in its existence as a common—and ever-renewable—ethical measure, as against relative and contingent moralities, particularly group moralities that were shaped by particular and sectarian visions.⁸⁵ For him, this universality was in direct contrast to the caste ethics of the Hindu social order: "A Hindu's public is his caste. His responsibility is only to his caste. His loyalty is restricted only to his caste. Virtue has become caste-ridden and morality has become caste-bound. There is no sympathy to the deserving. There is no appreciation of the meritorious. There is no charity to the needy. Suffering as such calls for no response. There is charity but it begins with the caste and ends with the caste. There is sympathy but not for men of other caste".⁸⁶

The dhamma, as an expansive social ideal, was thus the basis for a new sociality, the very form of that fraternity that Ambedkar held to be the basis of the just and equal society. As important, it had to be viewed as such and therefore needed to be propagated, and this required responsible and dialogic teaching and learning. This is where the sangha emerged as important. Ambedkar envisaged a radically new role for the Buddhist sangha. In the secular realm, he had planned to found a school for democracy and a settlement house for the untouchables. Evidently, he thought of the sangha as an affiliate of such initiatives: even as these other institutions engaged with civil society, the polity and the modern state, the sangha would function as a radical vocational assembly of permanent persuaders who would propagate the necessity of the dhamma. But, in order to essay such a role, the bhikku, on whom the sangha depended, would have to be more than a traditional monk. While Ambedkar positioned the bhikku as the veritable 'other' of the brahmin, he also made

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 241.

⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 324–325.

⁸⁶ B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, in BAWs, Volume 1, 1979, pp. 56–57.

clear that the bhikku would not only be steeped in classical Buddhist learning, but also take measure of and act in recognizably modern ways.

Ambedkar's vision of the bhikku and the sangha was shaped by modern scholarship on the subject, as well as his dismay over monastic practices that were extant in his own time. Those who wrote on Buddhism contrasted the monk with the Brahmanical priest and chose to extol the former. Lakshmi Narasu, for instance, sketched a fervent and romantic image of the bhikku.⁸⁷ Others did more. Eugene Burnouf, the French orientalist astutely pointed out that the bhikku sangha of the Buddha's time was a truly revolutionary organisation, and it is likely that Ambedkar knew this argument.

Burnouf held that the Buddha accepted the social order of his time, unequal though it was and accepting of social differences on the basis of birth. He explained it "as the Brahmins did, by the theory of sorrows and rewards" and did not demur from linking baseness of birth to reprehensible action committed in a previous life.⁸⁸ On the other hand, in opening the doors of his monastic fraternity to all men, he offered the individuals, who came to him for instruction and learning, the means to break this vicious cycle both "absolutely and relatively": absolutely, by putting him on the eightfold path that would one day lead to the annihilation of the cycle of birth and death; and relatively by ordaining him as a monk, who, like the Buddha himself would then become one of the assembly, bound together by shared vows, practices and the dhamma.⁸⁹ Had the Buddha stopped with saying that emancipation from the cycle of birth and death was possible to all, irrespective of birth, at some future date, the brahmin class would have tolerated his hypothesis. But he challenged them directly by offering the possibility of "actual deliverance" as well as "relative freedom" guaranteed by the monkhood, and this was "nothing less than destroying, in a given time, the subordination of castes, as far as it touches on religion".⁹⁰ Further, those brahmins, who took to the dhamma had to submit to the monastic assembly as such, or to one from it, and be prepared to "receive an investiture that did not give them more

⁸⁷ P. Lakshmi Narasu, *The Essence of Buddhism*, pp. 114–115.

⁸⁸ Eugene Burnouf, translated by Katia Buffetrille and Donald S. Lopez Jr., *Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019, p. 226.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

rights than the lowest of slaves, and to take their place in a hierarchy based on age and knowledge, beside the most scorned of humans”.⁹¹

In contrast to what the bhikku and the sangha had been in their historical environment, in the present, their roles appeared limited. But either could be reimagined and repurposed: and for Ambedkar, the bhikku and the sangha thus appeared logical and historical links between the dhamma and the world, persona and institutions that would help the dhamma to be propagated and renewed.

Thus, he came to envisage the bhikku as a critical teacher, who was neither bound by dogma, nor by claims to a superior intelligence, but who was what he was, by dint of his ethical practice. In this, he was unlike the brahmin priest, or indeed the modern, secular brahmin, both of whom acted and functioned with a sense of spiritual and intellectual entitlement and who, therefore, were not inclined to be reflexive and mindful. Secondly, the bhikku was expected to not parrot what he had read and learned, but interpret, argue and engage in a dialogue with his listeners and interlocutors. In other words, he was not to subsume arguments within extant texts and discourses, rather he was to stay open to being proved wrong, or challenged. He was also bound by the collective democratic ethics of the sangha, which Ambedkar understood to be historically constitutive of it and not be a virtuoso intellectual.⁹²

Meanwhile, the sangha was also reimagined: as an educational and public space, comprising institutions that would take ahead its functions of ministry and propagation. In this context, Ambedkar had in mind the example set by the Christian missions as well as the modern Hindu missions that had emerged in late colonial India.⁹³

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 228.

⁹² For his views on the bhikku, the brahmin and the bhikku's vocation and his relationship to the sangha, see *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, in BAWs, Volume 11, pp. 432–455.

⁹³ See, in this context, the objects that he listed for what might be viewed as a modern day equivalent to the sangha, “The Buddhist Society of India”, in BAWs, Volume 17: 2, pp. 478–479.

7 AGAINST THE COUNTER-REVOLUTION OF THE PRESENT

Ambedkar's novel reading of the Buddha's teachings was not only on account of what he desired to claim from the past for the present. It also had to do with the present, which he held was fast turning into an age of counter-revolution.⁹⁴ He did not expand on this tantalizing theme in detail, but there are suggestive remarks that point to a certain line of reasoning that he intended to take to its logical conclusion.

What was the revolution whose promises had been betrayed in the present age? In its most expansive sense, revolution, for Ambedkar, lay immanent in the modern moment, a time when liberty, equality and fraternity stood to be realized, and which underscored the importance of thought and knowledge in the making of the good and just society. In the Indian context, though the possibilities of the modern were limited by the reinvention of tradition, and a return of antique time. This had effectively upended the flow of history and ideas, and to Ambedkar, Gandhi stood at the head of such a process of upending:

“This Gandhi age is the dark age of India. It is an age in which people instead of looking for their ideals in the future are returning to antiquity. It is an age in which people have ceased to think for themselves and as they have ceased to think they have ceased to read and examine the facts of their lives. The fate of an ignorant democracy which refuses to follow the way shown by learning and experience and chooses to grope in the dark paths of the mystics and the megalomaniacs is a sad thing to contemplate”.⁹⁵

The charisma that attached to Gandhi rendered him an attractive and enigmatic figure and Ambedkar perhaps wondered if he was not like Krishna, who had successfully ingested and recast the Buddha's creed. In his essay on the *Gita*, Ambedkar had noted that the text enunciated the importance of the devotional path, and in that context, posited that irrespective of the accidents of birth and character, all persons stood to

⁹⁴ He had planned to write on this theme and had provisionally titled it, ‘The Present Age is the Age of Counter-revolution’. This was to be part of a book—Book IV—in the series titled, *Revolution and Counter Revolution in Ancient India* (see B. R. Ambedkar, *Plans for Books*, in BAWS, Volume 3, pp. 468–472), parts of which are available to us today.

⁹⁵ B. R. Ambedkar, *Federation Versus Freedom* in BAWS, Volume 1, p. 352.

be embraced by the divine, if only they would cultivate the following virtues: loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and detachment. Ambedkar pointed out that these were decidedly Buddhist tenets, but whereas the Buddha had defined them as principles of behaviour that ought to mediate human relationships, the *Gita* had rendered them attributes of the ideal devotee. Social responsibility which the Buddha held to be paramount was thus disaggregated into a series of experiential acts, directed at the divine.⁹⁶

It is likely that Ambedkar viewed Gandhi's engagement with modern political life as calamitous just as he viewed Krishna's role as fateful, with regard to the future of Buddhism. For, as is evident from his appraisal of Gandhi, he viewed him as appropriating, to his purpose, modern political ideals including liberty and equality and recasting them within the terms of what he held to an ideal social order. Liberty was glossed as freedom from colonial rule, but freedom that the untouchables sought from touchable oppression was not granted the same premium, and they were told to wait on the goodwill and conscience of such touchable Hindus that viewed untouchability as a sin and sought to redeem themselves by serving the untouchables. Equality between races and faiths was upheld by Gandhi, but he was less warm toward untouchable claims in this regard: he affirmed that they ought to be viewed as equally human as others, but yet withheld the "title deeds" to their humanity from them and in fact left the touchables in charge of these, rendering them "trustees" of untouchable well-being.⁹⁷

Meanwhile, untouchables were asked to improve their lives, stay clean and hygienic, acquire an education and be content with the work assigned them, though they were told, in the same breath, they could consider other vocations as their own, only they ought not to make a living through them. In the event of their being deprived of their rights, they were enjoined to apply to the law if they could, or else desert their villages, en masse. Gandhi had thus sought to retain ancient systems but added to them "modern improvements", and this to Ambedkar was not to be countenanced. At least the extant social order was transparent, it was

⁹⁶ B. R. Ambedkar, *Krishna and his Gita*, in BAWS, Volume 3, pp. 369–370.

⁹⁷ B. R. Ambedkar, *What Gandhi and Congress Have Done to the Untouchables*, in BAWS, Volume 9, 1991, pp. 269.

crude and its cruelty, unmasked.⁹⁸ Gandhi, on the other hand, sought to ‘Hinduise’ the social order in ways that “smoothen[ed] its surface” and gave it the “appearance of decency and respectability” thus altering it and embellishing it, “as to make it even attractive”.⁹⁹

In order to grasp the nature of this counter-revolution of the “present age”, Ambedkar undertook two hermeneutical tasks: he sought to construct a theory of revolution, drawing from the history of ancient India, and his writings on Buddhism were a result of that effort. But he also wrote a history of the eventual and violent subsumption of Buddhism. These histories enabled him to understand the ways in which a concomitant subsumption was in progress in his own time. For, even as Ambedkar sought to rethink the historical Buddha in the context of the modern moment, the figure of the Buddha was placed at the very centre of a vast, state-driven process of civilizational worth and glory. This owed in no small measure to the manner in which India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, came to adopt the symbology around Buddhism as India’s own, for strategic as well as subjective reasons.

Uneasy with the colourful and messy world of popular Hindu belief and unsure of its traditions of philosophy Nehru was at home in the rational, humane world of the Buddha’s teachings. His vision of free India required such a symbol: linked to the past, but yet relevant to the present, the Buddha’s humanism and rationality served this purpose well. At the same time, invoking the Buddha linked India to Asia as such and invested the former colony with a sense of historical purpose, if not civilizational and political leadership in the region: a free nation that would seek to connect with other potentially free nations in and through a shared culture, symbolized by the Buddha’s creed.¹⁰⁰

While Ambedkar does not reference these developments in his writings, he could not have been unaware of them, and perhaps these, as much as Gandhi’s historical role, rendered his engagement with Buddhism urgent.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 244.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 296.

¹⁰⁰ See, in this context, Douglas F. Ober, ‘From Buddha Bones to Bo Trees: Nehruvian India, Buddhism, and the Poetics of Power, 1947–1956’, *Modern Asian Studies*, Volume 53: 4, July 2019, pp. 1312–1350.

8 WHAT OF MARX?

Ambedkar was more forthright in thinking socialism and Buddhism together in the address he delivered in Nepal and which subsequently was written up as the text titled *Buddha or Karl Marx*.¹⁰¹ Importantly, his reading of Buddhism in this instance stressed not so much conflict and suffering, but morality that would secure appropriate and just means to end both.

The text starts off with a preamble which suggested that comparing the ideas of Buddha and Marx was bound to be “attractive and instructive”, especially for Marxists, who were prone to scoff at the Buddha, but who might actually benefit from heeding him.¹⁰² Ambedkar then indexes what he considered the salient features of the Buddha’s creed, and which were what he had placed at the core of the Buddha’s teachings in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*: religion as committed to reconstructing the world; morality as central to religion, being the very law of life; the notion of permanent impermanence of all things; the recognition of social conflict and the consequential suffering it causes; the need to do away with private property; acceptance of all human beings as equal, and valuing merit over birth; the importance of social fellowship; the need to align learning with virtue.

He next defines what he called the “original creed of Karl Marx”, which advanced a notion of socialism that Marx considered “scientific”, “inevitable and inescapable”.¹⁰³ He lists its significant features thus: the transformative purpose of philosophy, the inevitability of class struggle, the reality of exploitation, the growing impoverishment of the working class, the enduring power of private property and the necessity of establishing a proletarian dictatorship to end exploitation and inequity. Of these, he argues, only the following were relevant: the role assigned to philosophy, the importance of class struggle, the relationship between private property and exploitation and the necessity of abolishing private property through nationalization.

The Buddha’s understanding, he reasons, was congruent with Marx’s on the first three counts, since he too considered the role of knowledge as essentially transformative, recognized the misery brought about by a

¹⁰¹ B. R. Ambedkar, *Buddha or Karl Marx*, in BAWS, Volume 3, pp. 439–462.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 441.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 443.

conflict of interests, held possession to be the root of this misery and decreed that his monks not own any property. But the differences were as significant: the Buddha held misery to be a measure of individual misconduct as well as social inequity and counselled the walking of the eightfold path, which would transform one's disposition and by that token remake one's relationship to the world. Marx and his followers on the other hand had looked to insurrectionary violence to end the old iniquitous order and the dictatorship of the proletariat to build and sustain the new order.

In this context, Ambedkar draws on John Dewey's observations on the relationship between means and ends and notes that the adoption of violent means might secure an important end, but, meanwhile, would destroy other valid and desirable ends. Proletarian dictatorship, brought into existence through violence, might have been necessary to secure the "permanent" revolution but this valuable end required the sacrifice of other equally valuable ends, including life and liberty. Distinguishing the use of "force as energy" from "force as violence" he wonders how one might deploy force as energy.¹⁰⁴

Interestingly, at this point in his argument, he references a parable from a key Buddhist text, which foretold the descent of the good society into moral chaos. In the face of civic discontent, state power that ought to have been exercised in a spirit of empathetic moral discretion, as counselled by the Buddha turns mechanical—and ultimately brutal—in its mode of governance. This sets off a chain of events, which lead to dissembling and destruction. Finally, a few escape this relentless sequence of actions and reactions and retire into the thickness of the forest, only to reemerge after they have once again learned the importance of following the dhamma.¹⁰⁵

Characterizing this fable as a fine account of what happens when moral force gives way to brute force, Ambedkar argues that in a context where a proletarian dictatorship had been put in place, moral force alone could secure such gains as had been made. Noting somewhat wryly that "a Russian Dictatorship would be good for all backward countries" he goes on to say that such dictatorship, if instituted, ought to soon give into a polity, sustained by moral and democratic persuasion.¹⁰⁶ For, in the long

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., pp. 451–452. He had dwelt on this question in one of his earliest essays, a review of Bertrand Russell's *Principles of Social Reconstruction*. See in this context, *Mr Russell and the Reconstruction of Society*, in BAWS, Volume I, pp. 483–492.

¹⁰⁵ B. R. Ambedkar, *Buddha or Karl Marx*, in BAWS, Volume 3, pp. 453–459.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., pp. 461–462.

run, no authoritarian regime could hope to consolidate gains procured in the cause of justice. Also, the question of means and ends ought not to be circumvented on the understanding that proletarian dictatorship was but a provisional moment in the unfolding of history and that the state would ultimately wither away: the real question was how might one sustain the revolution's gains?

The dhamma, Ambedkar suggests, had a role to play in this regard, for it would help cultivate a liberatory spirituality, necessary to sustain the gains of communism. Such a ministry of the spirit was necessary even where equality had been achieved, to reignite the need for liberty and fraternity and to render them coeval and co-existent with equality. The dhamma would also act as a check on the authoritarian state, as well as its nemesis, anarchy and disruption.

Ambedkar had dwelt on the need for both material and spiritual succour for the poor and the unequal at a speech he delivered at the massive conversion ceremony, held in October 1956, when he and lakhs of his followers embraced Buddhism. The “school of Karl Marx”, he had noted, desired economic change above all, on the understanding that all other changes would follow in its wake; his own position was different, for he was convinced that while economic changes were necessary, men and women needed more. They needed to feel enthusiastic, creative, be gripped by energy to change things. For them to experience this, religion was necessary and in the case of Buddhism, it would energize them to think critically and act virtuously.¹⁰⁷

Buddha or Karl Marx brought an ethical lens to Marxism, and took a socialist lens to Buddhism in that Ambedkar made it do service to a philosophy of distributive justice, in a more emphatic manner than he had in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. But, yet, his reading of Marxism is intriguing. He does not quote Marx directly or reference particular texts or arguments. He does not also invoke the inspirational aspects of socialism and socialist history—the history of British labour, the writings of Tawney and others—that spoke to his needs and concerns. On the other hand, it may be argued that it was precisely this non-communist socialism, which he cherished, which made him argue for a leavening of the dictatorship of the proletariat with a generous measure of ethical understanding.

¹⁰⁷ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha Dhamma Will Be the Saviour of the World*, in BAWS, Volume 17: 3, pp. 537–538.

The question remains, though, as to what exactly he drew on, when he listed the ‘redundant’ aspects of “Marx’s creed”: “There is hardly any doubt that Marxist claim that his socialism was inevitable has been completely disproved. ... Nobody now accepts the economic interpretation of history as the only explanation of history. Nobody accepts that the proletariat has been progressively pauperized”.¹⁰⁸ These ‘unacceptable’ aspects of Marx’s thought bear resemblance to arguments advanced by the German social democrats, particularly Eduard Bernstein. Ambedkar had not drawn on the revisionist critique of Marx, prior to writing this text, but that does not mean he was not aware of it. For one, he had encountered it in his Columbia days, having taken courses with the socialist-minded Vladimir Simkhovitch, including one titled ‘Marxian and Post Marxian Socialism’ and the course description specifically referenced German revisionism. Simkhovitch’s extended argument on revisionism and reform within the world communist movement, *Marxism versus Socialism*, was published in 1913, and took its cues from Bernstein’s work. Ambedkar might have read this text or heard its author expound on it.¹⁰⁹

Yet, it is curious that he would draw specifically on German revisionism in the 1950s. Ambedkar was neither concerned with the substantive content of revisionist arguments nor with what they signified in the overall context of European Marxism. But as we saw, he had his own quarrels with the ‘inevitability of socialism’, and the revisionist position provided him a rhetorical anchor to hold and advance a set of views that he had argued for nearly two decades and more in the Indian context.

What Ambedkar retained as important in Marx was interesting: he foregrounded those aspects of his thought that answered to the historical experiences of the Hindu social order. Given that knowledge had been denied to a vast section of the Indian citizenry, with such denial constituting a veritable violation of the right to think and interrogate the world, the possibility of reconstructing the world through knowledge appealed to him. While Progressive thought too upheld the claims of knowledge in addressing social concerns and crises, Marx did more: he had contemplated the end of philosophy in terms of a radical transformation of the world, which would both bring philosophical thought to practical fruition

¹⁰⁸ B. R. Ambedkar, *Buddha or Karl Marx*, in BAWS, Volume 3, p. 444.

¹⁰⁹ Vladimir Simkhovitch, *Marxism Versus Socialism*, New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1913.

as well as obviate its necessity. As we have seen, Ambedkar sought to conceptualize the caste order and untouchability only so that they could be effectively annihilated. His critique was to further the latter, and in doing so, it was to render gratuitous all philosophical systems that had justified chaturvarnya, and at the same time point to the necessity of the dhamma, as revolutionary practice that would reconstruct the world.

As for class conflict and the rule of property: Ambedkar understood all too well the reality of either. He had chosen to read ‘class war’ in ways that would answer to the realities of caste differences, and birth-based inequity and the pedagogic as well as political implications of the term obviously mattered to him. However, Marx and Marxism did not appear useful to him, as he sought to work against the grain of graded inequality and untouchability: the ontological challenges they posed were not resolvable within the “Marxian creed”, as he had known it in the Indian context. Buddhism held answers in this regard, at least at the level of doctrine and history.

His antipathy to private property, and the law of contract led him to value Marx’s views on the subject, but he did not view the reign of property in historical terms. Private property enclosed what ought to be the commons and the law of contract helped naturalize caste-based servile labour. While he was aware of the historical origins of these interrelated phenomena, he was less concerned with the histories and more interested in the logic that kept them in place and which had sustained itself through time.

9 RECONSTRUCTING THE WORLD

Ambedkar had long wanted to serve notice to the Hindus, and his conversion to Buddhism accomplished that, but the Hindus steadfastly refused to take heed of his decision for what it signified. As we have noted the year of his conversion was also the year that the Indian state took to celebrating the 2500th year of the Buddha’s birth, but the ceremonies that unfolded and the intellectual effort expended in this context did not reference Ambedkar’s decision to convert, indeed the Indian state did not find a role for him in the various events that had been planned. Sadly enough, Prime Minister Nehru refused his request for support in publishing *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, on the paltry argument that his government did not have the resources to do so, even as other studies on Buddhism were commissioned and published.

The other ideal that Ambedkar had sought to build into his vision of change, democratic socialism that would answer to the needs of the graded inequality of the social order, acquired its characteristic Indian form during this period: Nehru's government instituted its first five year plan in 1952, which focused on infrastructural development and in 1956, the year of the Buddha, it embarked on the second, which prioritized the development of state-owned heavy industries. This was an exercise that Ambedkar was well-suited to be part of, given his sustained interest in the role of the state in furthering economic growth as well as distributive justice, and his familiarity with practical economics. But he was not part of the systems that emerged to take either ahead. He had been relegated to the political margins by an electoral democracy that disallowed the untouchables from being politically autonomous.

His turning away from the Hindus and their ways in 1956 was poignant on both these counts, in that they pointed to that separateness that he had sought to theorize and resist all this life, and which was both adamant and supple: it was constantly renewed and reinforced. In this sense, conversion was an act that decisively helped him and the untouchables step out of this historical process. Ambedkar did not live long enough to take full measure of that epochal moment and its long term implications. But meanwhile he had achieved the unthinkable: presented the untouchables with a history, and universal ethics that they were charged with taking forward. From being the abject victims of history, they were marked as its most dynamic constituents and from being a people who incited social odium and were refused fraternity, they stood transformed into veritable historical subjects, who not only dared hold the social order to account, but were all set to reconstruct the world.

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