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Colonialism and Liberation

Ambedkar's Quest for Distributive Justice

Vidhu Verma

Ambedkar denounced caste system for violating the respect and dignity of the individual; yet his critique of caste-ridden society also foregrounds the limits of the theory and practice of citizenship and liberal politics in India. Since membership of a caste group was not a voluntary choice, but determined by birth and hence a coercive association, the liberal view of the self as a totally unencumbered and radically free subject seemed plagued with difficulties. Though the nation state envisages a political community co-extensive with one cultural community, it need not, Ambedkar argued, necessarily lead to abolition of discriminatory caste practices in civil society. To restore the cultural rights of stigmatised populations, unredeemed by the nation state, propelled Ambedkar to seek solution in Buddhism.

IN this essay, I examine the ideas of Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891-1956) who was a dominating figure and active organiser of the dalits during the anti-colonial struggle against the British in India.[1] I examine his concept of distributive justice which is based on the idea of a casteless society. This is of course a vast topic, and in order to make it manageable, I shall concentrate on certain aspects of his theory, namely, the critique of domination and oppression of dalits, and their exclusion from the rights of citizenship. Ambedkar's main claim is that a society based on the caste system cannot be a 'real' community because it violates the respect and dignity of individuals.[2] I shall argue that his critique of a caste-ridden society raises some interesting questions about the limits of the theory and practice of citizenship and liberal politics in India. My intention here is to analyse his ideas on equality and justice in the way they complement other themes and concepts in his work. Since many arguments in this paper are part of a larger project, the numerous simplifications may be regarded as tentative and provisional.

To develop the setting for the discussion on distributive justice, I argue in Section I that Ambedkar's critiques of both the rule of the Indian National Congress and brahmin domination of society place him in an uneasy position within the discourse of nationalism. In Section II, I examine the views of Gandhi and Ambedkar on equality and distributive justice, which I contend, reflect the differences in their approach towards the abolition of the caste system. In Section III, I critically examine three components of Ambedkar's theory of distributive justice. Having done this, I return briefly, in the final section to argue that while Ambedkar believed both in the basic tenets of liberal politics and a casteless society, the principles behind the one often contradict those behind the other.

Some of the questions raised in this account are: first why did Ambedkar differ from other nationalist leaders in his analysis of Indian society? What is the concept of swaraj in Ambedkar's account of brahmin domination? How did Ambedkar resolve, if he ever did, the idea of separate electorates with a conception of distributive justice in the struggle for the liberation of dalits? But in focusing on Ambedkar, some might object that I have ignored many other arguments presented in favour of liberation. Before I look at possible answers to these questions I will give some reasons why it is important to look at Ambedkar from my perspective. There are three contemporary debates to which I hope this essay will make a contribution.

First, consider the claims made by the historians of the freedom movement led by the Indian National Congress. The view that the national movement is a 'popular, multi-class movement' is grounded on the assumption that the entire world of political action can be comprehended through the categories of imperialism, nationalism and communalism.[3] As a corollary to the above, there is the assumption that the concept of nationalism has a deeper significance and therefore it resists multiplicity and retains its indissolubility despite every attempt to resolve it into subdivisions such as region, class, caste and gender.

Of course, recent history writings, represented for example by the historians of the subaltern school, question these assumptions to a large extent.[4] But it is surprising how often one reads about 'subaltern' protests without encountering the name of Ambedkar, and his efforts to improve the condition of the dalits. Moreover, these critiques of colonial discourse valorise indigenous communities; this makes impossible sympathetic evaluations of many movements for women's rights and lower-caste protests which might have utilised aspects of colonial policies and western ideologies.[5]

I will argue that the question of the identity and existence of the nation was addressed by Ambedkar in opposing there elite-led nationalist project. What was the nation, what was national oppression and the way to overcome it, was a common question. What is interesting is his answer which focuses on the oppressive character of the Hindu community based on the principles of the caste system. By arguing for the rights and basic needs of the dalits, he challenges the assumptions of both nationalist politics and indigenous communitarian politics. By choosing to discuss Ambedkar, I hope to point towards histories not neatly preoccupied with anti-colonial natonalism; once ensnared within the 'particularism' of national politics, these leaders found it difficult to maintain focus on social disadvantage as the main fulcrum around which politics should be organised.

The second problem which arises in focusing on Ambedkar is of locating him in the debate on modernity and tradition. Of the various streams which responded to colonialism, Ambedkar could be inaccurately placed, in the category of 'modernists'. This response, as described by Bhikhu Parekh, viewed Hindu society as "beyond hope and their salvation lay in radically restructuring it along modern or European lines".[6] The modernist programme for the "regeneration of India consisted in creating and using a strong, interventionist, democratic, secular and centralised state to recreate society".[7] Although they covered a wide spectrum, the proponents of this view were united in their belief that the state stood for modernity and society for tradition.

I believe, Ambedkar articulates the theme of modernity by claiming that individualist

forms of organisation typically replace communitarian ones like the caste system in modern society. He shares much with his contemporaries in the liberal tradition on this project. However, he goes further because he envisions the reconstruction of our existence embedded in social relations characterised by caste groups. Despite his belief in the project of modernity, he departs from other exponents of this tradition by giving new arguments for certain concepts like equality and distributive justice in the colonial context and by adopting a critical position on the European experience. The prospect of moulding India or its institutions in the image of the British had no appeal for Ambedkar. For how else could he turn to Dhamma?

I raise this point because it is of great importance in the current debate on modernity and tradition in political science. Some scholars question this dichotomy by arguing that "a transformed version of this "traditional" structure had become a vehicle for representative and parliamentary democracy and was functioning as a democratising force". Caste, according to this view, "was anti-caste, in that the horizontal mobilisation of larger lower caste communities was gaining them power, status and wealth which allowed them to challenge and overturn the hierarchy of caste as ritual rank... In this sense, "traditional" structures and communities of sentiment, identity and action seemed to us by no means irrelevant even to competitive democratic politics and the realisation of egalitarian values."[8]

Now this is very different from what Ambedkar wished to achieve by questioning this dichotomy; he saw the caste system as a serious obstacle in the path of democracy. According to him, democracy lies not in the form of government but in terms of association between the people who form that society. Because Indian society is divided and graded on the basis of the caste system, it is not democratic.[9]

The third problem is to explore how questions of caste have entered into formulations of both Indian and Hindu nationalism. According to Gail Omvedt, even before Veer Savarkar developed a coherent Hindu ideology during the 1920s equating 'Hinduism' and 'nationalism', "the dominant elite ideological trend by the end of the 19th century was that of a revitalised Hinduism equated with nationalism".[10] This is the most difficult area to explore. Ambedkar's relationship to the national movement was complicated and problematic. The fundamental error, Ambedkar believed, was to fail to see the danger from the views of, not of the orthodox Hindu, whom he had given up years before as hopeless, but of Gandhi and the Congress. Why could he not isolate the obscurantist and parochial current in this confrontation? In sections below, I address the first two questions, and partly look at the third. I should like to examine the latter at somewhat greater length in the future.

Indian Society: Ambedkar's Analysis

The first question which arises is: Why did Ambedkar not endorse the nationalist discourse of this period? There are several answers to this. One explanation for this is given by Omvedt when she writes: "It is impossible to conceptualise the dalit movement in India in the absence of Ambedkar, it is equally difficult to imagine, sociologically, Ambedkar coming of any other region than the Marathi-speaking areas of British presidency."[11] Let us explore this a little bit more.

Omvedt refers to the existence of an important tradition of anti-caste movement in Maharashtra that needs to be seen as part of the response to industrialisation and urbanisation. This was the site of the radical movement of Jotiba Phule's Satyashodhak Samaj, and from the time of Tilak, it had also provided a strong base for Hindu revivalism in the form of a Hindu Mahasabha.[12] In fact, the Indian National Congress held its first session in 1885 in Bombay.

There was another reason for Ambedkar's critical position on nationalist politics. He was a mahar, the largest untouchable caste in Maharashtra. His actions, then, according to Zelliot, "were moulded not only by his own personal background, and achievements, and the Maharashtrian thinking of his day, but also by his status as an untouchable".[13] This group he came from had begun social and political movements before he assumed a position of leadership.[14] Behind this identification with a non-brahmin group lay the logic of a movement that was essentially anti-caste and not simply a movement for 'untouchability removal' or 'self-reform'.[15] This is not to say that the Mahar movement in the later 19th century was an isolated movement but only to suggest that all these influences constantly streaming in are employed by Ambedkar in a new sense and directed towards a new solution.[16]

To what extent does his work, in this political scenario, represent more than a resuscitation of known and traditional ideas and to what extent does it deviate from the traditional mode and contain new and original thought? There is no doubt that Ambedkar's writings chiefly captured the political tradition of their time: the philosophical views of that time must be at least in part responsible for his dissatisfaction with the nationalist discourse – the new political mood after the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms; an awakening among the minorities for safeguarding their interests in relation to the Hindu majority which pointed towards wider political participation in the national movement. Yet, his thesis does not fit in with the dominant discourse on nationalism. One of the reasons behind Ambedkar's verdict on the national movement and its leaders, I believe, was their general indifference to caste issues. The intelligentsia, as part of the Congress leadership, organised first as social reformers against the British, and also organised as nationalists to challenge many aspects of Indian tradition. But they remained very ambiguous towards removal of the caste system.[17] Linked to the debate on social and political reform was the issue of class. Many communist leaders analysed caste in a mechanical class framework and sought to override traditional identities rather than re-interpret them.[18]

Therefore, a plausible explanation could be found in his own solution for liberating the dalits. Ambedkar realised that the identification of Indian culture with Hinduism is incorrect. Because he believed that absorption into Hinduism meant the acceptance of Hindu leadership in the national movement, he felt it would be wiser to take chances with a religion which has many safeguards. At first, he tried to assert the path of radical autonomy, encouraged the dalits to form their own organisations and to deal independently with some basic issues. It means that the dalits themselves, "would have to redefine and reconstitute their relations with the whole of Hindu society".[19] But if the dalits were not Hindus, what were they? In fact, a non-Hindu choice seems to have led him finally, to identify with Buddhism.[20]

At the theoretical level, Ambedkar's language turned out to be singularly open to misconstruals. It was not easy for many to accept the Indian National Congress, social reform organisations and the Hindu Mahasabha as irreconcilable opponents of the dalits; neither was it easy to accept the praise accorded by Ambedkar to the British state for raising the status of untouchables. Even more open to misunderstanding was Ambedkar's critique of nationalism: whereas Ambedkar attacked the Congress for their failure to recognise caste issues, he was erroneously taken to reject nationalism altogether. He was supposed to be

not only anti-national but to advocate a separatist policy which was anti-sectarian as well. Opposed by both traditionalists and Congress leaders, Ambedkar reserved his most bitter attack for Gandhi's reformism.

Distributive Justice: Debate with Gandhi

In this section, I examine the conflict between Gandhi and Ambedkar in terms of their ideological difference on the caste system. Both the thinkers approach the matter from quite different angles. I argue that there are real and serious disagreements between them, especially regarding the conclusions that each of them draws from their premises.

Gandhi had two arguments against untouchability: the unity or the political argument and the ethical argument. I shall examine these in turn.

As a leader working for a national goal, Gandhi argued for removing injustices faced by 'untouchables' because he felt the need to weave the divergent interests in India into a unified opposition to the British; he argued for pursuing this course of reform without challenging the social fabric of Indian society. He emphasised that a political separation of untouchables from the rest of the Hindu population would reduce Hindu plurality vis-a-vis other minority groups, in part, the Muslims.[21]

The ethical argument is premised on the view that Hindu society must rest on moral consensus, that political conflict can only be kept within bounds if there is a moral consensus on the caste system. Gandhi's ethical argument rested on two claims. First, he claimed that the heart of the caste Hindu could be changed by applying moral pressures within the framework of the Hindu tradition. Second, there was an obligation on the caste Hindu to be individually responsible towards the lower caste groups. In his conception of the moral or perfect society, Gandhi maintained that its enduring basis can only be the moral calibre of the individuals who constitute it.

Although Gandhi's views changed over the years, he always believed in the *varnashramadharma*, the divinely ordained division of society into four defined groups according to duty: brahmin kshatriya, vaishya, shudra. In an exchange of views on this problem, he said:

> I do not believe the caste system even as distinguished from varnashrama to be an 'odious and vicious' dogma. It has its limitations and defects but there is nothing sinful about it, as there is about untouchability, and, if it is a bye-product of the caste system, it is only in the same sense that an ugly growth is of a body or weeds of a crop. It is wrong to destroy caste because of the outcaste, as it would be to destroy a body because of an ugly growth in it, or of a crop because of its weeds...[22]

Later, he distinguished between caste and varna. In his response to Ambedkar's undelivered speech titled: 'Annihilation of Caste' (1936),[23] he said:

> Caste has nothing to do with religion...it is harmful both to spiritual and national growth. Varna and Ashrama are institutions which have nothing to do with castes. 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...The callings of a brahmin – spiritual teacher – and a scavenger are equal, and at one time their due performance carries equal merit before god and seems to have carried identical reward before man.[24]

To this Ambedkar replied, questioning the logical conclusions of his doctrine: "When can a calling be deemed to have become an ancestral calling so as to make it binding on a man? Must man follow his ancestral calling even if it does not suit his capacities, even when it has ceased to be profitable? Must a man live by his ancestral calling even if he finds it to be immoral?"[25]

Following arguments from justice, rather than arguments for unity, Ambedkar states that existing inequalities cannot be morally defended: to avoid the morally illegitimate exclusion of untouchables one would have to differentiate conceptually and practically between different levels of citizenship.

Ambedkar proposed these arguments when he came into conflict with the Congress, and with Gandhi in particular, on two occasions – the temple entry attempts and separate electorates. Ambedkar put forward arguments based on the principle of liberal equality and distributive justice to sustain his case. Equality meant not the equal status of varnas, but equal social, political and economic opportunity for all.[26]

At first, he made several attempts to gain religious and social rights for the untouchables, by using the Gandhian technique of satyagraha; drinking water from a public tank in Mahad (1927), temple entry to the Parvati temple at Poona (1929), and then the Kala Ram temple at Nasik (1930-35).[27] The failure of temple entry movements demonstrated, according to Ambedkar, that the untouchables were not really a part of Hindu society and would never be accepted as equals by Hindus within that framework. It was quite obvious that this low threshold concept of a legal conception of equality allows for different degrees of political participation. In short, it does not allow for a corresponding conception of political citizenship. Thus, from a position of questioning the brahmanical social order, Ambedkar moved towards its rejection: raising the issue of conversion by the untouchables in 1935.

But there was another reason. The second occasion was the Round Table Conference held in 1930 at London, where both leaders confronted each other on the issue of the political rights of depressed classes.

Earlier, in the 'Evidence before the Southborough Committee on Franchise' (1919), Ambedkar (invited as a delegate of the depressed classes) had argued eloquently for uniform franchise, for securing access for the depressed classes to the public sphere – to public wells, roads, schools, temples, and cremation grounds – and for special provisions for their adquate representation of their interests and opinions.

> Untouchability constitutes a definite set of interests which the untouchables alone can speak for. Hence, it is evident that we must find the untouchables to represent their grievances which are their interests, and secondly, we must find them in such members as will constitute a force sufficient to claim redress.[28]

After the Round Table Conference, (where he argued against a general territorial electorate for the untouchables), the communal award of 1932 gave the depressed classes, a double vote, one in a special constituency and one in the general electorate – a decision which appeared to recognise untouchables as a minority group outside of Hinduism. Gandhi's response was to enter fast unto death on September 20, 1932. He expressed his argument on the grounds for unity between the two:

> a heart understanding between the two, the greatest opportunity of repentance and reparation on the part of the suppressors...I would therefore favour widest possible franchise for the suppressed and establish a convention between the two sections for securing proper election of representatives of the suppressed.[29]

Under great pressure from other political leaders, Ambedkar relented. However, the Poona Pact, which followed, recognised untouchables as a political category across British India by providing reservations of seats for the depressed classes in the central

legislature and in the provincial legislature.[30] Admittedly, all of these changes had hardly any effect on the economic conditions of the untouchables, but it did set in motion an important process of transformation at the level of ideology which I now examine.

Limits of Ambedkar's Quest for Liberation

In a limited sense, Ambedkar's conception of equality and justice derive from the liberal vision and tradition. But given the context of the colonial state, he departs from that tradition and innovates thinking about justice in a remarkably novel way. There are three components of Ambedkar's theory of distributive justice. (a) equality of opportunity for all citizens, (b) critique of Hindu society based on an autonomous ideology, and (c) establishment of a casteless society by removing oppression and domination. There might be other aspects but for the purpose of this paper and my argument, I shall only focus on these. I shall critically examine each in detail to point out the limitations of this project.

Ambedkar accepted a legal and social conception of equality, which I call the formal principle of a liberal conception of equality. It entails the elimination of arbitrary advantages in a social and economic system, irrespective of whether the inequality results from one's choice or that of another.

(a) All social inequalities are unnecessary, and unjustifiable and ought to be removed.

What he also found desirable was the idea of equality of opportunity for all human beings in the social and political sphere.[31] It was further linked to his argument for more abundant political and civil liberty for dalits. On his account this requires that any government treat all those in its charge as equals, that is, as entitled to equal concern and respect. I also interpret this idea of equality of opportunity as an example of the maximisation of equal liberty. In this view, to demand equality of opportunity is to demand the removal of obstacles that stand in the way of an individual realising his potential.

Ambedkar's initial programmes attempt to integrate the dalits into society and politics through 'modern' political institutions. He put his faith in the constitution and the legislative process, as well as the representative bodies to correct social and economic injustice. Ambedkar's ideal for the low caste groups was to raise their educational standard so that they may overcome the social disadvantages imposed by their birth, and be in a position to use political power in resolving problems of injustice. His adaptation of western concepts is reflected in the way he used to justify political rights of the dalits based on democracy, fraternity and liberty, in Marathi speeches; he conveyed the implication of these concepts in a single word, *manuski* which means 'humanness'.[32]

While Ambedkar saw the prescriptive uses of the concept of equality in moral and political arguments as quite useful, he was conscious of the inequality of treatment based on caste and tradition. To bring about a more substantial equality must involve treating people differently which is contrary to the formal principle. For such reasons he advocated a separatist policy for the dalits which might accentuate caste distinctions at an initial stage but eventually make these identities unimportant. Therefore, Ambedkar insisted on the right to take into account the special claims of certain communities which had for centuries been excluded from position of equality and respect.[33]

Departing fundamentally from the individualist premise of the equality principle he proposes:

(1) A theory of rights as legal entitlements casting obligations on the members of civil society. The 'untouchables' had a set of rights and the state a duty to eradicate discriminatory practices. Norms of non-discrimination apply not only to government but also to civil society – corporations, schools, places of worship, etc.

Where the rights theorists of the 17th and 18th century tended to regard right as a faculty of possession, Ambedkar encourages us to stress the relational aspect of rights. The important point here is that these rights are put forward as important elements or vital ingredients in a fully realised human life.[34] The core argument is that members of the group suffer because they are neither accorded the same respect nor afforded the same opportunities as other persons or groups. They are prevented from realising their capacities, in other words, they are not treated with full respect and dignity.

(2) The basic human needs of the dalits were not only material (wealth, occupational mobility) but non-material; all have the right to be human and the right to live with dignity and self-respect. Although, he stressed the need for reservation in representative institutions, this is only to acquire equality in other goods. For such reasons, he extended his theory to cover such goods as self-respect, power and honour.

Therefore, I argue, Ambedkar accepted the premise of equality but advocated group-based politics to achieve that goal. The first is constitutive and the second derivative.[35] Ambedkar eloquently pleaded the case the necessary priority of community claims over individual rights on the grounds that these departures from formal equality could be justified in the following way:

The anti-discriminatory theme: The anti-discriminatory principle's main purpose is to prevent private practices and legal procedures from stigmatising the individuals involved. This was viewed as necessary given that structural forms of oppression against the dalits were well entrenched. To remedy this social malaise Ambedkar raises the possibilities for political participation of dalits through reservations. It was his view that a legislature 'mainly composed of high caste men, will not pass a law removing untouchability, sanctioning inter-caste marriages, removing the ban of the use of public streets, public temples, public schools...'[36]

The reparation theme: The other idea was that of historic injustice suffered by the dalits. This theme was proposed to offset the systematic and cumulative deprivations suffered by lower castes in the past. Ambedkar argues that some oppressive cultural practices and social institutions result in injustice and accumulated disabilities for untouchables.[37]

He was aware of the conceptual incoherence these themes gave rise to when applied to policy issues. But as I have argued so far, this is a derivative political position. In fact, he was to warn of the possibility that these special claims might eat the general rule of equality altogether. Unlike anyone else, he pursued the argument that "the constitution should not only declare that we shall have specific rights that every community will have, but that the constitution should provide ways and means by which we shall be protected in the exercise of these rights".[38]

The second component of Ambedkar's theory of distributive justice was the construction of an 'autonomous' ideology opposed in fundamental respects to the traditional ideology of varna. The central problem, for him, in this regard was the formulation of a counter-ideology which can bring about radical social change; he was concerned to fight for a new society based on equal concern for all.[39] This is evident from his critique of the Hindu community on the following basis: (1) the community as unequal; (2) the community as based on segregation both territorial

and ideological; (3) the closed nature of the community; and (4) the distinction between the public and private sphere.

The first aspect of his critique was directed at the theory of 'chaturvarnya' which makes the principle of graded inequality 'the basis for determining the terms of associated life as between the four varnas'. This is not merely notional, but legal and penal: under this system the shudra is subjected to innumerable ignominies and disabilities so as to prevent him from raising above the conditions fixed for him by law.[40]

The second aspect draws attention to the permanent segregation of people in the Hindu community based on the ideological principle of purity and impurity. He rejects the territorial segregation which accompanies this. While distinguishing between the rights of untouchables and the pure he raises some fundamental questions of citizenship: "But the impurity of the 50-60 million of the untouchables of India, quite unlike the impurity arising from birth, death, etc, is permanent: The Hindus who touch them and become polluted thereby can become pure by undergoing purificatory ceremonies. But there is nothing which can make the untouchables purer...It is a case of permanent, hereditary stain which nothing can cleanse".[41]

The third aspect of his critique is directed at the nature of closed religious communities without entry points. In 'Mr Gandhi and the Emancipation of Untouchables' (1945), he points out that the legislative majorities and minorities are political categories which are fluid subject to the process of party formation and electoral practices. But the Hindu and the untouchable relationship cannot be captured by these categories. Their difference is that 'they are separated by a fundamental and deadly antagonism'. Hindus and untouchables are not fluid categories but they are 'fixed as permanent communities'.[42]

He argues against nationalist attempts to define what it means to have equal opportunities – in terms of having the same distribution of results for major social groups in the public sphere. He revealed the inequality in the social sphere arising out of the nature of closed religious communities, because "most people do not realise that society can practise tyranny and oppression against an individual in far greater degree than a government can... What punishment in the penal code is comparable in its magnitude and its severity to excommunication?"[43]

On the basis of these propositions, Ambedkar's solution for the dalits – the establishment of a casteless society – went beyond the liberal framework he was located in. Let me try to reconstruct his argument.

From a liberal point of view, Ambedkar was arguing for an individual's freedom to associate; to form communities and to live by their own terms based on equal concern. A corollary of this is that the individuals should be free to dissociate from such communities.

Again, his view placed great weight on the nature of communities as voluntary associations. But, since membership is determined by birth in a Hindu community, rather than by deliberate choice, it is a coercive association. There is no option of entry for those born outside – even though groups might seek to redefine their boundaries. While superficially attractive, the liberal view of the self as a totally unencumbered and radically free subject seemed plagued with difficulties.

This eventually led Ambedkar to locate the distinction between a (voluntary) political community within which an individual exercises his legal rights, and a (coercive) cultural community within which individuals could not even formulate their aims.[44] People who have the same rights to citizenship may not have the same cultural rights. A political community, argued Ambedkar, may not be co-extensive with one cultural community, as is envisaged by the nation state. For Ambedkar the two forms of community do not always coincide. This distinction leads him to argue that individuals are free to leave – to renounce – membership and to reconstitute their own community. Here Ambedkar was mistaken in his assertions about liberalism's implications: there was no good reason for any liberal to support him in this. But I believe it is this very justification that inspired him to seek conversion to Buddhism.

In Ambedkar's opinion the transition from British to Hindu masters signified no emancipatory potential for the masses. The fight for a national cause, according to him, misconstrues the role of swaraj: "In the fight for swaraj, you fight with the whole nation on your side. In this, you have to fight against the whole nation and that too, on your own... In my opinion, only when the Hindu society becomes a casteless society that it can hope to have strength enough to defend itself. Without such internal strength, swaraj for Hindus may turn out to be only a step towards slavery."[45]

It is this total programme of societal transformation which constituted his conception of swaraj. Swaraj was not just freedom from the British, it was a freedom based on distributive justice.

Concluding Remarks

Ambedkar's critical dialogue with some Congress leaders and his struggles to reform Hindu society occurred within a colonial context. His struggle is not with faith but with false brahmanical beliefs, not with religion but with brahmin domination of Indian society. He portrays the nature of the caste system in our society in particular using it to show that Hinduism was incapable of establishing a just political and social order. His view differed from other nationalist leaders and social reformers in that he never claimed higher caste status for untouchables, nor did he ever invoke another claim – that untouchables were pre-Aryan, the original settlers of the land or claimed spiritual equality for lower castes within the Hindu tradition. And most importantly his reforms were not directed towards the caste-Hindus.

Unlike other critiques of brahmin domination and caste hierarchy which focus on the unity argument, Ambedkar's critique provides a justice argument against the caste system. Most nationalists argued that their country was fragmented, deeply divided into a large number of castes, subcastes and local communities; that is why the Hindus had failed to develop a sense of mutual concern and social campassion. Ambedkar's theory of caste oppression focuses not only the distributive paradigm (allocation of material goods such as resources, income, wealth or the distribution of social positions, such as jobs) as many contemporary liberal theories do, but also brings out the issues of decision-making (representative institutions for the dalits) division of labour (occupational mobility), and culture that bear on distributive justice but were often ignored in national assessments of their social structure.

This argument was premised on two views: (a) the problems of dalits would always have a particularity that could not be subsumed under class or national mobilisation; (b) the status of the dalits was 'irreversible' if they remained isolated within Hinduism. Therefore, he formulated dalit liberation in terms of two solutions – political assertion through separate electorates and ideological liberation from Hinduism by converting to Buddhism.

Unfortunately, the very cogency and persuasiveness of his arguments raise questions as to the broader contours of his thesis. Dissatisfied with the dominant proposals for the reform of the caste system, Ambedkar undertakes a recovery of

Buddhism as a religion that relates to individuals with dignity and respect. However, Ambedkar's point that Buddhism provides the needed theoretical framework to understand Indian politics has its weaknesses. Indeed, by spending considerable energy exploring key conceptions in Buddhism such as ahimsa, rebirth, karma, etc, Ambedkar leaves us wondering how helpful Buddhism is if the terminology is so open to interpretation.[46]

Behind this solution lay the laudable ideal that responsibility for removing group identity status lies with the dalits themselves, not with the larger dominant society. But it is an explanation that completely ignores the pernicious effects of casteism in the Indian social fabric. On the flip side, Ambedkar's 'self-help' ideology perpetuates the mythical notion of a 'monolithic' dalit community which made it possible for them to confront other parties. But this political legitimisation also pre-empts questions of interest differentiation among the dalits.

This takes us to my final observations. All this is not to deny that in his critique of the caste system, Ambedkar is clearly arguing for expanding the rights of citizenship to the 'untouchables'. At a more substantive level he is pushing the case for a casteless society without oppression. How was this possible in practical politics?

My own view is that these two perspectives are contradictory if the objectives they focus upon – the promotion of political and social equality, the abolition of the caste system – are conceived as aims in themselves. But unlike the abolition of the caste system, I do not believe, in Ambedkar's writings, that liberal politics with their emphasis on rights, equality of concern and respect, or freedom to associate can sensibly be defended as more than an instrumental objective. He believed that the more an individual's rights are restricted due to his caste location – for example by constricting the mobility in occupation, of residence, of religion, etc – the less possibility is there of social and distributive justice. The principles underlying the caste system unlock the mystery to the inegalitarian distributive outcomes in other spheres. I do believe that it is an important consideration and one that plays a key role in what I regard as the only cogent justification for removing caste system in Ambedkar's work. He poses the question whether separation, in some fashion, from the larger body politic, may produce more tangible results than have previous strategies (Gandhi's and Shinde's) aimed at integrating them into the system. Hence, his arguments for separate electorates for dalits should be seen as derivative; equal opportunity in liberal politics was not his ultimate goal. In fact, he wishes to achieve much more.

In the most general sense, the dalit community is reconstructed by analysing the structural antagonism and conflict within the Hindu community: the idea of shared meanings, of normative frames and cultural values is questioned. By developing a theory of oppression of the untouchables by locating their exploitation, marginalisation and powerlessness, he highlights the structural and institutional relations that delimit the lives of the dalits. He also gives prominence to their cultural oppression which means how the dominant meanings of our society stereotype one group.

Ambedkar always thought his acount of the role of caste system and its ultimate demise was superior to any other. And as history has shown, he was too optimistic in his predictions and not clear enough in this vision. However, mistaken he was in this analysis and however short-sighted he might appear to many scholars, with respect to the discourse of nationalism, the chief application of Ambedkar's political thought may be seen today to reside in his reflections on social and distributive justice. The subsequent course of Indian politics was to prove him correct; it was not the nation state but its opposite, – irreconcilable political clashes between religious communities and caste-wars that would become the order of the day.

Notes

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1 This paper does not address the changes in Ambedkar's political beliefs after 1940 when be became more famous for drafting the Constitution of independent India.

2 A 'real' community is one in which individuals participate no longer as members of caste groups but as individuals.

3 See for example, Bipin Chandra, *India's Struggle for Independence 1857-1949*, (Delhi: Penguin, 1989), pp 24-29.

4 See Ranajit Guha (ed), *Writings on South Asian History and Society, Subaltern Studies*, vol 1 (Delhi:OUP, 1982), pp 1-7; Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (New Delhi:OUP, 1992); Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Delhi:OUP, 1995).

5 For a critique of this emphasis on community in the subaltern studies see Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (Delhi:OUP, 1997).

6 Bhikhu Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform* (Delhi:Sage, 1989), p 35.

7 Bhikhu Parekh, ibid, p 58. Elsewhere, he devides the Hindu responses to British rule into three categories: modernism, critical modernism and critical traditionalism. I find it difficult to locate Ambedkar here because he never considered himself a Hindu. Secondly, he saw the problematic character of modernity and liberalism while being within their fold.

8 Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, 'Beyond Modernity and Tradition – Theoretical and Ideological Aspects of Comparative Social Sciences' in R J Moore (ed), *Tradition and Politics in South Asia* (Delhi: Vikas, 1979), p 26.

9 See Ambedkar, 'States and Minorities' in W S, vol 1, (Bombay:Education Department, 1989). (henceforth B:ED).

10 Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (Delhi:Sage, 1994), p 91.

11 Ibid, p 139.

12 This was also the area where women like Tarabai Shinde and Pandita Ramabai raised their voices against brahmin domination. See Gail Omvedt, *Dalit Visions* (Delhi:Orient Longman, 1995).

13 Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (Delhi: Manohar, 1996), p 160.

14 The mahar group maintained streets, walls, and cremation grounds, and removed dead cattle in the village. The establishment of British rule in Bombay presidency gave the mahars an opportunity for service in the army, employment in cotton mills, ammunition factories, railroads, dockyards, and as servants in British homes.

Two instances initiated them to organise. The first was the agitation for continuing the recruitment of mahars into the army and lower grades of government service. A second reason was the organisation of mahar caste associations under the name of Somvanshya, a sub-caste of mahars which took up limited issues of internal reform and education. For details about mahars see Zelliot, ibid, p 156; Jayashree Gokhale, *From Concessions to Confrontation: The Politics of an Indian Untouchable Community* (Bombay:Popular Prakashan, 1990), p 218-28.

15 For instance, important efforts were made by Vitthal Ramji Shinde, member of the Prarthana Samaj, who opposed the non-brahmin party and attempted to draw the mahar community into the Congress movement. The Depressed Classes Mission set up by him around this period focused on education and a reformed Hinduism. See Gail Omvedt, ibid, p 143.

16 Some clues regarding the anti-Congress stance of Maratha leaders are provided by Rosalind O'Hanlon in 'Acts of Appropriation: Non-Brahmin Radicals and the Congress in Early 20th Century Maharashtra' in Mike Shepperdson and Cummins (eds), *The Indian National Congress and the Political Economy of India, 1885-1995* (U K: Avebury), pp 102-46.

17 For Ambedkar's attack on the thesis that political reform should precede social reform

see his article published in 1936 'Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah' in W S, vol 1 (B: Ed 1979).

18 See for example Omvedt, ibid, pp 181-82. The All India Kisan Sabha till 1940 emphasises the need for an agrarian revolution and an anti-imperialist struggle but surprisingly attempts no major analysis of the role of caste. See M A Rasul, *A History of the All India Kisan Sabha*, (Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1974).

The issue was also not taken up in great detail in this period by the Communist Party till the political thesis was adopted (at the 2nd Congress, February 26 to March 6, 1948). This document includes the need for caste discrimination to be punishable by law. A separate section condemns Ambedkar as a 'separatist and reformist leader'. See M B Rao, *Documents of the History of the Communist Party of India* (Delhi:PPH, 1976), pp 85, 111.

19 Omvedt, ibid, p 134.

20 See Ambedkar, 'Away from the Hindus', W S, vol 5 (B:ED, 1989). I do not at any point assert that Ambedkar began with this position; the process of disillusionment with Hindu as well as Congress reformism was long and arduous.

21 For a sympathetic reading of Gandhi's views see T N Madan, *Modern Myths, Locked Minds: Secularism and Fundamentalism in India* (Delhi:OUP, 1997).

22 M K Gandhi, *Hindu Dharma* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1950), p 318.

23 Ambedkar's speech was prepared for the 1936 annual conference of the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal of Lahore. The conference was cancelled by the reception committee on the ground that the views expressed in the speech would be unbearable to the conference. See W S, vol 1, (B:ED, 1979), p 85.

24 See M K Gandhi's response to Ambedkar 'A Vindication of Caste' in W S, vol 1, (B:ED, 1979), p 83.

25 Ambedkar, ibid, p 90.

26 Ambedkar W S, vol 1 (B:ED, 1979), p 57.

27 A Depressed Classes Conference was held in Mahad, a small town south of Bombay in 1927. Several thousands moved in to drink water from a public tank. Consequently, the tank was purified by the town's people. It is beyond the scope of this article to go into history of these memorable events. What is relevant here is that these satyagrahas generated an intense mobilisation process among the untouchables.

28 Ambedkar, 'Evidence before the Southborough Committee' in W S, vol 1 (B:ED, 1979), p 256.

29 Gandhi wrote this letter to P N Rajbhoj, a chambhar untouchable in Pune. See his conversation with Sardar Patel. Both are cited in Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (Delhi:Manohar, 1996), p 167.

30 See D Keer, *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Life and Mission* (Bombay, 1954).

31 I also endorse that though equality of opportunity is attractively simple it has little to do with equality at all. This formula does not assume the empirical equality of human beings. The problems it gives rise to in this instance are not addressed in this paper.

32 Zelliot, ibid, p 159.

33 See for example Ambedkar, 'Evidence before the Southborough Committee' in W S, vol 1 (B:ED, 1979), p 267-68; Ambedkar with the Simon Commission, 'Statement Concerning the Safeguards for the Protection of the Depressed Classes', May 29, 1928 in W S, vol 2, (B:ED, 1982), pp 442-45. He argues for a period of 30 years for the right of the depressed classes for priority in the matter of recruitment to all posts, gazetted as well as non-gazetted in civil services.

34 Ambedkar argued against the activities of the Harijan Sevak Sangh which was supporting separate schools, wells and hostels: "What the untouchables want is not education, but the right to be admitted to common schools...the untouchables do not want water. What he wants is the right to draw water from a common well." Cited in 'Gandhi and His Fast', W S, vol 5, (B:ED, 1989), p 372; see also 'State and Minorities. What Are Their Rights and How to Secure Them' in W S, vol 1, (B:ED, 1989), pp 395-96.

35 I rely for this distinction in liberal political theory on Dworkin. He distinguishes between constitutive and derivative positions. A constitutive position is valued for its sake. It is not necessarily absolute because a theory may contain different and to some degree antagonistic constitutive positions. See his 'Liberalism' in Stuart Hampshire and Scanlon (eds), *Public and Private Morality* (Cambridge:CUP, 1978), p 116.

36 Ambedkar, 'Evidence before the Southborough Committee', in W S, vol 1 (1979), p 264; 'Untouchables of the Children of India's Ghetto', in W S, vol 5, (B:ED, 1989), p 108-09.

37 Ambedkar, 'Who Were the Shudras? How They Came to be the Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society', W S, vol 7, (B:ED, 1990).

For a critical examination of these themes in the Indian context see Marc Galanter, 'The Compensatory Discrimination Theme in the Indian Commitment to Human Rights' in U Baxi (ed), *The Right to be Human* (New Delhi:Lancer International, 1987), pp 77-94.

38 Ambedkar, 'Dr Ambedkar at the Round Table Conference', December 31, W S, vol 2, (B:ED, 1982), p 538.

39 Jayashree Gokhale seems to think that conversion to Buddhism was the ultimate step in establishing a new and separate identity apart from Hindu society and its ideology. My argument is different from hers, see, ibid, 156-61.

40 Ambedkar, 'Who Were the Shudras' in W S, vol 7, (B:ED, 1990), p 9.

41 Ambedkar, 'The Untouchables', W S, vol 7, (B:ED, 1990), p 266.

42 Ambedkar, 'Mr Gandhi and the Emancipation of Untouchables', 1945, W S, vol 9, (B:ED, 1990), p 416.

43 See Ambedkar, 'Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah', W S, vol 1 (B:ED, 1979), ibid, p 217.

44 See for an elaboration of this argument Will Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community and Culture* (New York:OUP, 1989).

45 See Ambedkar, 'Annihilation of Caste', W S, vol 1, (1979), p 80, 'States and Minorities', W S, vol 1, (B:ED, 1989), p 414.

46 See Ambedkar, 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' in W S, vol 11, (B:ED, 1991), pp 329-51.