

# **Ambedkar and the Indian Communists: The Absence of Conciliation**

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During my undergraduate degree, I found secularized Buddhist philosophy an excellent lens through which to interpret the world and my place in it. Buddhism has helped give me the strength to face several personal and physical hardships.

Exploring Ambedkar's personal journey towards Buddhist philosophy has provided new insight into Buddhism and strengthened my belief in its use as a rational means through which to examine my place in the world and my relationships with others.

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## **Abstract**

B. R. Ambedkar's role as an Indian political leader during the late colonial period has attracted increased attention politically and historically. However, there is a startling disconnect between the modern, often mythological, construction of Ambedkar and the near forgotten historical figure. His broader programme for social uplift of the underprivileged is often lost in the record of his conflict with M. K. Gandhi and the Indian National Congress and their role as the dominant nationalist group in India at the time. The deification that has resulted from his use of Buddhism as an emancipatory identity has obscured his interpretation of it as a secular political tool in a political debate shaped and dominated by religious identity. This thesis will argue that the Buddhist conversion was a continuation of his political and social programme, not, as some have suggested, a retreat to religion after failing to secure reforms to Indian law and society. His relationship with non-dominant political groups, such as the Indian Communist Party, are representative of the forgotten historical figure and help to demonstrate the consistency in his untouchable uplift movement and democratic programme. The relationships with smaller, non-dominant, political and social groups are often glossed over without examining their engagement with and impact on each other.

This thesis makes use of available primary source documents from Ambedkar, the Indian Communist Party and individual Communist Party members to analyze the relationship between Ambedkar and the Indian Communists.

## Permissions

“A Biography of Dr Ambedkar” from Indira Y. Junghare, “Dr. Ambedkar: The Hero of the Untouchables, Ex-Untouchables of India,” *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (1988), pp 106-8. Digital permission: April 8, 2008. Benjamin Dorman, Co-editor, *Asian Ethnology*.

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## Introduction

In 2000, Upendra Baxi wrote that B. R. “Ambedkar remains a totally forgotten figure.”<sup>1</sup> While there has been a steady growth of interest since then, Ambedkar’s apparent absence to this point is all the more stark for his role in Indian Independence and as an advocate for the rights of untouchables and other minority communities. However, Ambedkar is more easily recognized as a religious figure than as a political figure. His conversion to Buddhism weeks before his death in 1956 and his role in the modern Buddhist movement in India have secured his acceptance as a religious figure. Analysis of his effects on Indian politics and history is still relatively sparse when compared to other leading Indian political figures such as M. K. Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru or M. A. Jinnah. However, his role was no less important than these other figures in building the modern Indian state.

Ambedkar was an untouchable political leader. Ambedkar is part of a continuum of anti-caste activists including E. V. Periyar and Jotirao Phule.<sup>2</sup> Initially a local leader in Maharashtra, Ambedkar’s education and caste level brought him to national attention with the Round Table Conferences. His confrontation with Gandhi over the communal award secured his place as a national statesman. Ambedkar has left an indelible mark on

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<sup>1</sup> Upendra Baxi, “Emancipation as Justice: Legacy and Vision of Dr. Ambedkar” in K. C. Yadav ed., *From Periphery to Center Stage, Ambedkar, Ambedkarism & Dalit Future*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 2000), p 50. Baxi is a legal scholar on human rights and international law. He has oft been an advocate for Ambedkarism and the plight of subordinated peoples. He has also been critical of Indian academia’s delayed acceptance of Ambedkar as an important political figure in regards to the development of rights for subordinated people.

<sup>2</sup> For an examination of these two leaders see: V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millenium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar*, (Calcutta: Samya, 1998) and Rosalind O’Hanlan, *Caste, Conflict, and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).



the modern Indian political landscape. He has become an icon for Dalits, with statues of him found throughout India.<sup>3</sup> He was a key architect of the Indian constitution and reinvigorated Buddhism in the country of its birth. In 2006, a poll conducted by the India News Network (IBN) found that 81 percent of respondents felt that Ambedkar's legacy has proved more durable than Gandhi's legacy.<sup>4</sup> Ambedkar has left an indelible mark on the nation while remaining one of the least analyzed of India's political leaders.

Literature about Ambedkar reflects the diverse opinions about his life and movement. The first detailed biography was *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission* by Dhananjay Keer. Keer introduced the key themes of Ambedkar studies: his role in untouchable uplift, his role as a political leader, his problem with Hinduism, his conflict with Congress and Gandhi and his engagement with Buddhism. However, Keer's biography of Ambedkar is hagiographical. The characterization of Ambedkar's parents is especially revealing of the attributes necessary to construct Ambedkar as an acceptable national figure.<sup>5</sup> His mother is characterized as pious, gentle and dutiful.<sup>6</sup> Ambedkar

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<sup>3</sup> The growth of modern Dalit art and the prevalence of Ambedkar and Buddhist imagery is examined by Gary Michael Tartakov, "Art and Identity: The Rise of a New Buddhist Imagery," *Art Journal*, Vol. 49, No. 4, (1990): pp. 409-416.

<sup>4</sup> "QOTD: Gandhi vs. Ambedkar," *ibnlive.com*, December 2006 / Video 4, Network 18, [http://www.ibnlive.com/videos/27864/12\\_2006/facethenation\\_0612\\_1/qotd-gandhi-vs-ambedkar.html](http://www.ibnlive.com/videos/27864/12_2006/facethenation_0612_1/qotd-gandhi-vs-ambedkar.html) April 1, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Ambedkar's opposition to the dominant Hindu-nationalist identity often created conflict between him, Congress and Gandhi, with the later characterized as defenders of an independent and united India, while Congress supporters, then and now have characterized Ambedkar as pro-British and pro-colonial. This idea will be explored further in Chapter Two. For examples of these characterizations see Arun Shourie, *Worshipping False Gods*, (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2000) and C. Rajagopalachari, *Ambedkar Refuted*, (Bombay: Hind Kitbas, 1946).

<sup>6</sup> Dhananjay Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1954), p 9.

father's core characteristics were his industriousness and his religiousness.<sup>7</sup> Even in regards to Ambedkar's historic conversion, Keer is careful to construct an interpretation of Buddhism as a part of a larger Hindu community of religions.<sup>8</sup> He states that Ambedkar “provides a lesson that one should rely upon one’s own efforts in life rather than depend upon the help or patronage of others. Ambedkar’s eternal search for knowledge, his incredible industry and his unflinching aim with which he raised himself from dust to doyen, from the life of a social leper to the position off a constitution-maker and his heroic struggles for raising the down-trodden to human dignity will constitute a golden chapter in the history of this nation and in the history of human freedom as well.”<sup>9</sup> Keer presents an acceptable addition to India’s political and religious history to as wide an audience as possible. While Keer is repeatedly critical of Gandhi, his explanation of the conflict between Gandhi and Ambedkar maintains Gandhi’s role as an elder statesman.<sup>10</sup> Keer’s objective is to elevate Ambedkar’s socio-political contribution without degrading the role of Gandhi or Congress.

While Keer’s biography introduced the common themes of Ambedkar scholarship, two other biographies have become the foundation for the bulk of later scholarship: Eleanor Zelliot’s, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and the Untouchable Movement*, and Gail Omvedt’s, *Ambedkar: Towards an Enlightened India*. These biographies have accomplished two key aims; first they moved away from mythology of Ambedkar’s life<sup>11</sup> and second, they clearly defined Ambedkar as an oppositional figure

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<sup>7</sup> Keer, *Life and Mission*, p 10.

<sup>8</sup> Keer, *Life and Mission*, pp 518-19.

<sup>9</sup> Keer, *Life and Mission*, p xii.

<sup>10</sup> Keer, *Life and Mission*, p 54.

<sup>11</sup> The story relating to a gift that Ambedkar supposedly received after he passed the

in modern Indian historiography.

In *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and the Untouchable Movement*, Zelliott outlines the development of the untouchable movement in the Maharashtra and the impact Ambedkar had on that movement. Zelliott's analysis of Ambedkar and untouchability is rooted in the social history of the Mahar caste, even when analyzing Ambedkar's role on a state level. While the focus on the Mahar localizes the history to a specific community, this approach helps illuminate several differences between the social and political development of the Mahar and other castes in India. Specifically, unlike in other regions, where Christian missionaries had a role in the process of developing anti-caste movements,<sup>12</sup> Zelliott clearly states that it was the Mahar's role and eventual removal from the British military that stimulated their anti-caste movement.<sup>13</sup> While Zelliott provides a comprehensive history of the Mahar and Ambedkar, she does so primarily in relation to the dominant political party, the Indian National Congress.<sup>14</sup> Other political forces are largely absent, save for the Congress Socialists, conservative Hindus and the British.

In *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, Omvedt provides a different direction to

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Bombay University matriculation is a particular example of progressing away from a folkloric presentation of Ambedkar's life. Keer makes a specific point about Krishnaji Arun Kelsukar giving Ambedkar a book, the *Life of Gautama Buddha*. Zelliott makes the point that this assertion is not founded upon historical evidence. Lastly, Omvedt goes so far as to ignore the "gift" entirely. Keer, *Life and Mission*, p 19. Eleanor Zelliott, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and the Untouchable Movement*, (New Delhi: Blumoon Books, 2004), 4n, p 63. "An article by K.A. Kelsukar ... describes Kelsukar's conversation with Bimrao's father at the celebration ... No mention of the gift is made." Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*, (London: Sage Publications, 1994), p 6. This could mean that either the story is apocryphal or that the gift had little importance to the young Ambedkar or the supposed gift giver

<sup>12</sup> Geetha and Rajadurai, *Non-Brahmin Millenium*, pp 83-85.

<sup>13</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, p 39.

<sup>14</sup> Eleanor Zelliott "Chapter III: The "Depressed Classes" in Politics, 1917-1935" in Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*.

the study of untouchable uplift and Ambedkar. She approaches Ambedkar and the untouchable uplift movement from a Marxist framework. Omvedt discusses both caste and Ambedkar within the larger framework of caste movements in general. She distinguishes between the ‘medieval’ synthesis and the industrial colonial/post-colonial synthesis. The former could only produce ‘negative’ rebellion, (i.e. Equality while maintaining the Hindu framework). The later was capable of producing a more productive and egalitarian society, couched in the ideologies of “radical democracy and socialism.”<sup>15</sup> Despite the emphasis on a Marxist interpretation of the untouchable movement, Omvedt only briefly discusses the competing and often antagonized relationship between Ambedkar and the Indian Communists.<sup>16</sup> Further, her analysis of the confrontation focuses primarily on the Communist response to Ambedkar and caste and not on Ambedkar’s response to the Communist movement.

In *Ambedkar: Towards an Enlightened India*, Omvedt again explores the main basic themes outlined by Keer. However, her interpretation of Ambedkar’s movement and life is rooted in Marxist analysis. This is a concise examination of Ambedkar’s life. Omvedt briefly examines Ambedkar’s antithesis to Marxism.<sup>17</sup> However, the antagonized relationship between Ambedkar and the Communists is again only briefly mentioned.<sup>18</sup> Her analysis remains focused on the problems of the Communist party without critiquing Ambedkar’s response to the Communists. A concise synthesis of the history of absence between the Communists and Ambedkar remains lacking. Her work has become the

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<sup>15</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 50.

<sup>16</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, pp 177-187.

<sup>17</sup> Gail Omvedt *Ambedkar: Towards an Enlightened India*, (New Delhi: Penguin, 2004), p 138.

<sup>18</sup> Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, pp 89-91.

standard which other historians base their critiques of Ambedkar and his movement, whether they agree or disagree with Omvedt's positive interpretation of Ambedkar's impact on the Indian polity. Her work has examined Ambedkar's development as a political leader of untouchables and India. Her analysis, often critical of Gandhian and Hindu nationalism, elevates a historical figure who had become largely absent from the historical record, who worked and existed in opposition to those dominant modes of nationalism.

In *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability*, Christophe Jaffrelot provides yet another way to analyze Ambedkar's movement. Jaffrelot uses strategic analysis (game theory) to examine Ambedkar's analysis of caste oppression and his "strategies of emancipation."<sup>19</sup> Jaffrelot examines Ambedkar's role as both radical and collaborator in regards to the British and Congress. Jaffrelot briefly examines Ambedkar's critique of Marxism and the Communists.<sup>20</sup> However, Jaffrelot denies the connection Omvedt makes between Ambedkar's movement and Marxism, despite Ambedkar's embrace of socialist policies in his political platform. Jaffrelot confuses the rejection of class-conflict as the only means of social analysis with its entire rejection as a mean of analysis in the Indian context.<sup>21</sup>

Other recent scholarship has sought to explore Ambedkar's movement through post-structural and post Marxist lenses. Debjani Ganguly, in *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity*, is critical of the modern secular interpretations of caste that draw "on

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<sup>19</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analyzing and Fighting Caste*. (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005), p 6.

<sup>20</sup> Jaffrelot, *Ambedkar and Untouchability*, pp 75-76.

<sup>21</sup> Jaffrelot, *Ambedkar and Untouchability*, p 76.

the legacies of liberalism and Marxism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.”<sup>22</sup> She examines the legacy and endurance of caste and its relation to Ambedkar and the Mahar. She argues that caste cannot be encapsulated in narratives of modernity.<sup>23</sup> Further, there is no single modernity through which caste can be judged, rather that caste has its own modern expressions that cannot be dismissed as backwards and feudal and cannot simply be educated away.<sup>24</sup> She uses this theoretical position to discuss how Ambedkar is unable to conceptualize caste. She accepts Ambedkar’s analysis of caste as a holdover of feudal India.<sup>25</sup> However, she fails to recognize the nuances of Ambedkar’s analysis of identity and its application to caste. Ambedkar expresses caste in both secular and religious terms, a division of workers rationalized by religious sanction, but not defined by it.

In *Anti-Imperialism and Annihilation of Caste*, Anand Teltumbde provides an in-depth analysis of caste from the perspective of Ambedkar and the Indian Communists. Teltumbde is intensely critical of the Communist and ‘pseudo-nationalist’ interpretation of caste and their recognition of caste as a problem.<sup>26</sup> Unlike Ganguly, Teltumbde does not waver over the oppression that caste engenders. Like Ambedkar, Teltumbde argues that “the caste system is intrinsically an imperialist institution.”<sup>27</sup> Further, because of the pervasiveness of caste, it requires a parallel struggle to the class struggle in order to overcome the inequality it engenders. Teltumbde is most critical of the communists for their failure to acknowledge caste as a problem, though he does scorn blind adherence to

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<sup>22</sup> Debjani Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity: Notes on the Postcolonial Hermeneutics of Caste*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), p IX.

<sup>23</sup> Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity*, p X.

<sup>24</sup> Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity*, p X.

<sup>25</sup> Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity*, pp 58-9.

<sup>26</sup> Anand Teltumbde, *Anti-Imperialism and Annihilation of Castes*, (Dombivali: Ramai Prakashan, 2005), p ii.

<sup>27</sup> Teltumbde, *Anti-Imperialism*, p vii.

Ambedkarism for its failure to innovate the Dalit movement beyond a few core parameters.<sup>28</sup> In short, he argues that for either movement to be successful, together or separately, Communists must recognize caste and Dalits must transcend it.

There are a variety of sources for primary material for this thesis. I utilized *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches* extensively to develop a background into this topic. However, this compendium remains a work in progress that has had to overcome political and social hurdles to see the light of day.<sup>29</sup> In an effort to make Ambedkar's writings more accessible, large selections from his writings and speeches has been made available at [www.ambedkar.org](http://www.ambedkar.org). This on-line source offers many of Ambedkar's important writings and speeches, but also remains an incomplete source for Ambedkar's writings and speeches. Further, care must be taken assessing the chronology of works presented by the website, as the document order does not accurately present the chronology of his writing.<sup>30</sup> I also used D. C. Ahir's *Selected Speeches of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1927-1956)* for some of Ambedkar's speeches that were widely unavailable either in the collected works or on the website during my research and Valerian Rodrigues' *The Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar* to provide further context to Ambedkar's writings. Primary sources for other persons have been gathered either from their respective collected works or from collections of selected works. The latter was generally the case for documents relating to the Indian communists and the Indian Communist Party, while the former related to prominent historical figures such as Nehru

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<sup>28</sup> Teltumbde, *Anti-Imperialism*, pp 250-53.

<sup>29</sup> Jaffrelot, *Ambedkar and Untouchability*, p 144.

<sup>30</sup> Using on-line sources can be risky, but [www.ambedkar.org](http://www.ambedkar.org) remains a stable web-site. Sources used have been checked for accuracy at the time they were accessed and cross referenced at <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/>, a website maintained at Columbia University by Dr. Frances W. Pritchett as a course resource.

and Gandhi.

Omvedt's *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution* provides the framework for the lacunae I am exploring, where she briefly discusses the relationship between Ambedkar, the Indian Communists and the Indian Left. Her brief discussion tends to ascribe the difficulties of their relationship to the Communists. She presents their inability to work together as fairly straight forward and related to the communists inability to counter the "Hinduist interpretation" of Indian history.<sup>31</sup> I intend to expand on her initial analysis, discussing why Ambedkar's movement failed to find allies among an ideologically similar group with similar goals and how this affected his movement. I will examine the absence of conciliation from the perspective of both the Communists and Ambedkar. The sources are English and English translation. The bulk of Ambedkar's work was written in English or has since been translated by other scholars.<sup>32</sup> Further, the bulk of the secondary sources about Ambedkar are also available in English.

As a practicing Buddhist, I am aware of the dangers of failing to adequately critique Ambedkar's interpretation and application of Buddhism; an interpretation that I personally have found very useful and insightful. My interpretation of Buddhism is as a philosophy promoting rational self-reflection, and I have seen this reflected in Ambedkar's own interpretation of Buddhism.<sup>33</sup> However, I am aware that Ambedkar

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<sup>31</sup> Gail Omvedt, *Dalit Visions: The Anti-Caste Movement and the Construction of an Indian Identity*, (New Delhi: Orient Longman Private Limited, 2006), p 64.

<sup>32</sup> I have maintained Ambedkar's use of Pali spellings for concepts he specifically used, such as Dhamma, Bhikkhu, etc.

<sup>33</sup> There are aspects of Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism I continue to find troublesome, especially in regards to his comparison between Buddhism and Communism in "Buddha or Karl Marx (1956)," and his speech "Buddhism and Communism (1956)." In both cases Ambedkar appears to have overstated his case comparing the similarities and differences between Buddhism and Marxism, relying on a



approached Buddhism as an emancipatory ideology for different reasons and from a different cultural perspective from my own. Taking this into account, I tended to be very self critical of my own interpretation of Buddhism. I took great care approaching the topic of Buddhism and how it related to Ambedkar's movement and his relationship with other political groups.

Chapter One will briefly analyze the formative aspects of Ambedkar's life, examining his family, community, and personal history. It will highlight differences in personal communal histories that are specific to the Mahar and Ambedkar that help to shape his political and social platform. Chapter Two will further contextualize Ambedkar within Indian politics. This chapter will focus on Ambedkar's political development in regards to Gandhi and the Indian National Congress and his resulting radicalization and the development of his critique of Indian nationalism while focusing on caste as necessary problem to be solved before significant 'positive' change could be made in Indian society.

Chapter Three introduces the Indian left, specifically the Communists and their analysis of caste and class in Indian society. First, I will briefly outline the development of the Indian Communist movement between 1920 and 1947, and the points of possible collaboration between the Communists and Ambedkar. Then I will briefly discuss the Communists official response to caste and two Indian Communists who, while considering caste, reflected the dominant consensus of the Indian Communists at different points during this period.

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vulgar interpretation of Marxism that I will examine further in Chapter Five.

Chapter Four discusses Ambedkar's development of Buddhism as an emancipatory identity in continuation of his political and social movement. First, I will briefly examine the impact of conversion on the Indian political landscape. Second, I will examine some of the critiques of conversion and Ambedkar's response. Third, I will discuss the nature of Ambedkar's Buddhist movement. How it is different from traditional Buddhism. Finally, I will discuss how Ambedkar viewed Buddhism as an ideal response to Communism, taking its best traits while dispensing of its worst.

Chapter Five is a counterpoint to the previous chapter. It examines Ambedkar's various responses to the Indian Left and his interpretation of Marxist theory. First, I will examine Ambedkar's attempt to develop a politically competitive party devoted to workers and other underprivileged groups in society. Second, I will examine moments when the Communists and Ambedkar were brought together either through choice or circumstance from Ambedkar's perspective. Finally, I will critique Ambedkar's often 'vulgar', though useful, interpretation of Marxism.

This thesis focuses on the lack of unity between the Indian Communists and Ambedkar. Many other organizations had similar ideals to both of these groups. However, this is an attempt to understand why the Communists and Ambedkar did not set aside their differences to work together in common cause and how Ambedkar responded to the lack of conciliation. The lack of agreement between Ambedkar and the Communists represents a history of absence. Similarity in cause was not enough to overcome differences in ideals. Ambedkar's isolation from the Communists as well as other political groups in India allowed him the freedom to develop his own political response to Congress and the Communists, culminating in the adoption of Buddhism as

an emancipatory identity.

## Chapter One

### Ambedkar: His Life, Family and Community

The baby grew like the moon

Ramji's house was bathed in light.  
Even though he played in a Dalit hut,  
He became determined to fight injustice.  
Sleep, baby, sleep. Sleep, baby, sleep.<sup>34</sup>

Fifty years after his death, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar remains a controversial figure in India's political and social history. The above excerpt, from a folk song, demonstrates Ambedkar's continued relevance within the Mahar community and the celebration of his social justice movement for the Dalit community.<sup>35</sup> By locating him socially and economically within the Dalit community, the song hints at the discrimination leveled against Ambedkar and the untouchables, while celebrating the hope that he brings to dalits. However, the Mahar characterization is only one representation of Ambedkar. Some celebrate him as a religious icon, a social revolutionary or a father of modern India. Others vilify him as an anti-nationalist, a political radical or, conversely, a colonial sycophant. Until the centenary of his birth, historians largely ignored Ambedkar. Upendra Baxi stated that the “Indian social science has disarticulated Babasaheb Ambedkar by studious theoretical silence.”<sup>36</sup> A complete

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<sup>34</sup> Third verse from a Mahar folk song about Ambedkar, Indira Y. Junghare, “Dr. Ambedkar: The Hero of the Untouchables, Ex-Untouchables of India,” *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (1988), pp 106-8. See Appendix A for the complete song.

<sup>35</sup> For the purposes of this paper for any information from before Indian independence the term “untouchable” will be used to describe the broader Dalit community. For any information post-independence I will use the term “ex-untouchable” or “scheduled caste” for the same purpose, as historically the term Dalit was not yet in common usage, though it is becoming more common.

<sup>36</sup> Upendra Baxi, “Emancipation as Justice: Legacy and Vision of Dr. Ambedkar” in

corpus of his work remains a ‘work-in-progress.’ Despite this absence, Ambedkar’s biographers have constructed a clear, though sometimes contentious, picture of Ambedkar’s life and movement.

The kaleidoscope of Ambedkar's life can be divided into six parts: childhood and youth (1891-1912), education abroad (1913-23), local leader (1923-29), social and political radical (1929-1938), democratic reformer (1938-51) and social revolutionary (1951-56). Each of these stages represents a particular phase of his political development.<sup>37</sup> However, Ambedkar’s development was aided by two factors, the support of his family and the development of the Mahar community into a modern political force.

The experiences of the Mahar in many ways mirror Ambedkar’s own journey, at the same time the community was exceptional and oppressed. Traditionally, the place of the Mahar in the village was one of twelve *balutedars*, servants with duties to the village whole, not a single landlord, and whose recompense came from the village as a whole.<sup>38</sup> Unlike other *balutedars*, the Mahar was also entitled to a *watan*, a fixed amount of land that remained in the possession of the inheritor of the *balutedar* position.<sup>39</sup> However, the land grant did not signify position, but rather the “recognition of the necessity of Mahar

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Yadav, *Periphery to Center Stage*, p 49.

<sup>37</sup> Upendra Baxi, “Emancipation as Justice: Legacy and Vision of Dr. Ambedkar” in Yadav, *Periphery to Center Stage*, pp 50-51. Baxi describes a kaleidoscope of Ambedkar’s, seven of which she outlines in “Emancipation as Justice: Legacy and Vision of Dr. Ambedkar.” I have reduced this kaleidoscope to six, combining her third and fourth picture of Ambedkar as a militant into the category of social and political radical. Admittedly, these categories tend to bias interpretation of Ambedkar from a positive perspective.

<sup>38</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, p13.

<sup>39</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, p 14.

work.”<sup>40</sup> The Mahar balutedar had many duties including: watchman, guide and messenger of government servants, arbitrating boundary disputes, escorting the government treasury, tracking thieves, repairing the village hall (*caudi*) and village wall, sweeping village roads, reporting deaths to other villages, removal of animal carcasses from the village and bringing fuel to the burning ground.<sup>41</sup> The Mahar’s “fifty-two rights” reciprocated these duties.<sup>42</sup> These rights included the hides of dead cows, the ‘privilege’ of begging for left-over food from door to door, and ritual related gifts such as “money thrown into her platter when a Mahar woman comes to wave a lamp around the head of the bride or bridegroom's mother.”<sup>43</sup> While the balutedar system disappeared, the low status of the Mahar remained.

Despite their low status, the Mahar were often characterized as inquisitive and clever.<sup>44</sup> Zelliott argues, in *Dr. Ambedkar and the Untouchable Movement*, that the low status of the Mahar was reinforced through ritual, clothing and language. Rituals emphasized the pollution of the Mahar's touch and the Mahar's caste specific clothing, usually a stick and blanket, served to isolate the Mahar from touchable castes.<sup>45</sup> Proverbs, such as *Mahar mela, mal gela* (The Mahar is dead, the dirt is gone) and *kombde bakre dhan nahit: mahar mang jat nahit* (Hens and goats are not wealth, Mahars and Mangs are

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<sup>40</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, p 14. Since not everyone could inherit this position, other Mahar probably laboured on the lands of others.

<sup>41</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, p 15-16.

<sup>42</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, p 15, from R.E Enthoven, *Tribes and Castes of Bombay, Vol. II*, (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1922), pp 416-417.

<sup>43</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, p 15, from Enthoven, *Tribes and Castes of Bombay*, pg. 417.

<sup>44</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, p 17 from Mountstuart Elphinstone, “Report on the Territories Conquered from the Paishwa,” (Calcutta: Government Gazette Press, 1821), pg. 47.

<sup>45</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, p 17.

not castes) reveal and reinforce the concept of the low status of Mahars in Maharashtrian society.<sup>46</sup>

Several biographies of Ambedkar and the Mahar emphasize the role of Bhakti devotional cults as a part of the social and political development of the man and the community. Zelliott expands on another aspect of Mahar life that she argues was of greater importance than religion. She states that the Mahar's role in the military helped to foster community cohesiveness and the development of their political consciousness.<sup>47</sup> The Mahar's martial service during Shivaji's reign seems to have developed as an extension of their village guard duties.<sup>48</sup> Even during the Peshwa period there is evidence of Mahar service in the military. "The factor of Untouchability was surmounted by military necessity."<sup>49</sup> The arrival of the British offered new opportunities to Mahar recruits, specifically through army education. "[A]rmy education has caused the Untouchables to question the behavior, ideology and origin of the Hindus...."<sup>50</sup> Ambedkar himself stated that military service, along with its requisite compulsory education for both male and female children of Indian soldiers "gave them one advantage, which they never had before. It gave them a new vision and a new value. They became conscious that the low esteem in which they had been held was not an inescapable destiny but was a stigma imposed in their personality by the cunning contrivances of the priest. They felt the shame of it as they never did before and were

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<sup>46</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, p 19.

<sup>47</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, pp 38-45.

<sup>48</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, p 39.

<sup>49</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, p 40.

<sup>50</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, p 43. Gopal Baba Walangkar on the effect of the army on untouchables in his petition against the exclusion of untouchables from the military starting in 1891.

determined to get rid of it.”<sup>51</sup> The response to the forced end to military service was the first Mahar attempt to organize political action.<sup>52</sup> Ambedkar’s movement built on these initial challenges to caste oppression of the Mahar.

Ambedkar’s father, Ramji Sakpal, was the latest in the family to enter the army, serving the colonial government. Ramji eventually attained the highest rank available to an untouchable, Subhedar-Major. He was a teacher, trained at a Government Normal School. For fourteen years, Ramji was the headmaster of a military school in Mhow.<sup>53</sup> Ambedkar’s mother, Bhimabai, was from another untouchable family (Murbadkar) that was also well represented in the military; her father and six uncles were all Subhedar-Majors in the Army. Military service gave unprecedented opportunities to the Mahars in terms of education and social advancement that would be otherwise denied to them because of their caste location.<sup>54</sup> Education was mandatory for both male and female relatives of the military soldiers.<sup>55</sup> Thus, Mahars that joined the military were provided a means of social advancement otherwise denied to untouchables.

Religion played an important role in Ambedkar’s family. Both of his parents’ families were followers of the Kabir, a Bhakti sect. Ambedkar’s father, Ramji, appears to

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<sup>51</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables 2nd ed.*, (Bombay: Thacker and Co. Ltd. 1946), p 189.

<sup>52</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, p 42.

<sup>53</sup> Keer, *Life and Mission*, p 11. It was here that Ramji earned the rank of Subhedar-major.

<sup>54</sup> Eleanor Zelliott “The Nineteenth Century Background of the Mahar and Non-Brahman Movements in Maharashtra (1970)” in Eleanor Zelliott, ed., *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*, (New Delhi: Manohar. 1996), p 36. In other regions of India, such as Tamil Nadu, missionaries provided education for lower castes. This marks a large distinction between the development of the Dalit movement among Mahars and other untouchable groups.

<sup>55</sup> Keer, *Life and Mission*, p 11.



have been particularly dedicated to the Kabir devotional cult.<sup>56</sup> Bhakti faith, dominated in Maharashtra by the Vithoba, Mahanubhavs and Kabirpanthi sects, is a subset of Hinduism that synthesizes Brahminical, non-Brahminical and Muslim traditions.<sup>57</sup> However, the essential tenants of Bhakti devotional cults reject the caste-based divisions of society. Instead, they advocate equality before God.<sup>58</sup> Despite the importance of the Bhakti faith to Ambedkar's family, he rejected these devotional cults because, while preaching equality before God, they did nothing to relieve inequality in their day-to-day lives. While Bhakti Sants, such as Cokhamela, accepted their "place in the village hierarchy, twentieth century Mahars saw no option but to leave what they saw then as servility, a part and parcel of Untouchability."<sup>59</sup> For Ambedkar, a rejection of caste became equally a rejection of the Brahminical Varna system that enabled it.<sup>60</sup>

Ambedkar was born on April 14, 1891, at Mhow. In 1879, his uncle predicted a great man would be born to his family. Ambedkar was the last of fourteen children, seven of whom died. Gail Omvedt states that Ambedkar "was a spoiled and much beloved child."<sup>61</sup> As he aged, he developed a belligerent and stubborn determination to fight and win.<sup>62</sup> While Ambedkar's personality would serve him well as a political leader, outside

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<sup>56</sup> Keer, *Life and Mission*, p 9.

<sup>57</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 3.

<sup>58</sup> Keer, *Life and Mission*, p 9.

<sup>59</sup> Eleanor Zelliot, "Chokhamela and Eknath: Two Bhakti Modes of Legitimacy for Modern Change (1980)" in Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, p 12. Cokhamela is a poet saint of the Mahar that preached equality before God in the fourteenth century.

<sup>60</sup> B.R. Ambedkar "The Path to Freedom (1935)," in D.C. Ahir, ed., *Selected Speeches of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1927-1956)*, (New Delhi: Blumoon Books, 1997), p 19. "So long as we remain in a religion which teaches man to treat another man as leper (sic), the sense of discrimination on account of caste ... cannot go. For annihilating caste and untouchability from among the untouchables, change of religion is the only antidote."

<sup>61</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 3.

<sup>62</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 4.

factors helped to mould and direct Ambedkar into that direction.

Ambedkar was given his surname by a teacher when he enrolled in a government middle school. His was changed from “Ambadavekar” to the teacher’s own name because the teacher took a shining to Ambedkar.<sup>63</sup> Ambedkar felt indebted to the attention and support he received from this teacher well after Ambedkar became a national figure.<sup>64</sup> Ambedkar was not the most diligent of students, but with the support of his father, he continued his education.<sup>65</sup> In 1906, while still in middle school, he was married to Ramabai, though she would remain an obscure figure in Ambedkar’s life.<sup>66</sup> One year later he passed the Matriculation examination of the University of Bombay. In celebration of Ambedkar’s achievement, a rarity for untouchables, friends and family threw a party presided over by S. K. Bole. At the party, Ambedkar received his first formal connection with Buddhist thought through a gift from family friend, Keluskar, *Bhagwan Buddhache Charita*. In 1908, he joined Elphinstone College, with a Rs. 25 per month scholarship from the Maharaja of Baroda.<sup>67</sup> Ambedkar’s first and only surviving child, Yeshwant, was born in 1912. After graduating from Elphinstone (1912), Ambedkar

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<sup>63</sup> Balkrishna Govind Gokhale, “Theravada Buddhism and modernization: Anagarika Dhammapala and B.R. Ambedkar,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (1999), p 40. It was traditional for Mahar to take the name of their ancestral village as their surname and add the suffix “kar”. Ambedkar’s family originally heralded from Ambadavekar.

<sup>64</sup> Zelliott (2004) 3n, p 62. Ambedkar’s former teacher wrote him an affectionate letter at the time of the Round Table Conference.

<sup>65</sup> Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, P 5

<sup>66</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, p 63. Ambedkar was fifteen and Ramabai was nine or ten when they married. Despite similar family backgrounds and military connections, and a relation to the early Mahar leader Gopal Baba Walangkar, Ramabai did not appear to share Ambedkar’s drive for education or advancement. Ambedkar’s second wife, Dr. Sharda Kabir, was herself a controversial figure. She was born a Brahman. They married in April 1948 and she converted to Buddhism with Ambedkar in 1956.

<sup>67</sup> K.N. Kadam, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and the Significance of his Movement*, (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1991), p 71.

went to Baroda (1913) and was appointed to the State Service, with the rank of Lieutenant. While there, he could find neither residence nor useful employment.<sup>68</sup> In 1913, after being granted another scholarship from the Maharaja of Baroda, Ambedkar went to America to continue his studies.

Ambedkar's time in America enlightened him to the possibilities of different social constructions. He “found a healthy soil for growth” of his own “natural proclivities and interests.”<sup>69</sup> He studied under several luminaries of American scholarship including Edward Seligman and John Dewey.<sup>70</sup> While studying at Columbia, Ambedkar acquired “‘a strong, unwavering belief in the power of democratic institutions to bring about social equality’ ... [T]hese ideas were to a large extent passed on to him by Dewey”.<sup>71</sup> His early work showed engagement with issues of inequality, especially caste and gender. In “Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development,” Ambedkar discusses the

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<sup>68</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 7. No department would take him and he was shifted around without being given permanent work. Ambedkar and his father quarreled over Ambedkar’s decision to work in Baroda instead of remaining in the more “open” atmosphere of Bombay.

<sup>69</sup> Eleanor Zelliot “The American Experience of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar” in Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, p 85.

<sup>70</sup> For a brief primer on Dewey see Robert B. Talisse, *On Dewey*, (Belmont: Wadsworth Thomson learning, 2000). Also see John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1921). Dewey rejected dualism and traditional philosophy. He favoured a philosophical method based on interaction with the real world not detached contemplation. He was critical of any theory or idea that was claimed to be of exclusively intellectual concern. Further, he advocated making philosophy more scientific. Finally, he recast the terms science and value to allow for their reconciliation. Dewey’s emphasis on the importance of education appears to have the greatest follow up in Ambedkar’s own work. However, given the importance that education had in Ambedkar’s own family and personal uplift, it is not unreasonable to suggest that in this case Dewey provided encouragement to Ambedkar’s pursuit of the idea of education as a means to uplift and was not the initial source of Ambedkar’s own position regarding the importance of education.

<sup>71</sup> Jaffrelot, *Ambedkar and Untouchability*, p 28.

maintenance of caste through endogamy.<sup>72</sup> He discusses and defines the purpose and use of Sati,<sup>73</sup> enforced widowhood and child marriage and finally gives a brief explanation of the lowering relative adherence to these practices among different castes as they increase in social distance from Brahmins, attributing the lessening of application both to that relative distance and the barbarity of these practices. While not directly challenging the inequalities faced by women, “Caste in India” contains the seed that will later germinate into his programme to protect the equal rights of women. Additionally, Ambedkar also breaks ground by challenging that “students of caste have unduly emphasized the role of colour in the Caste system.”<sup>74</sup>

He completed his Master of Arts in Economics in 1915. In 1916, he moved to London to continue his studies at the London School of Economics and Grey’s Inn. That same year, Columbia accepted Ambedkar’s thesis for Doctor of Philosophy on *The National Dividend: A Historical and Analytical Study*, though he was not officially awarded his Ph.D. until 1917. Ambedkar studied for one year in London, but at the end of August 1917, his scholarship from Baroda was not renewed and “his ambitious studies [were] halted by poverty.”<sup>75</sup> Again, he went to work for the government of Baroda. However, due to mistreatment at work and eviction from a Parsee inn because of his untouchability, Ambedkar quickly returned to Bombay.<sup>76</sup> In 1918, Ambedkar became a

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<sup>72</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Caste in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development (1916),” *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>73</sup> Sati is ritual wife burning after the death of the husband.

<sup>74</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Caste in India (1916),” *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>75</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 9.

<sup>76</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, *Ambedkar: Autobiographical Notes*, (Pondicherry: Navayan, 2003), pp 13-19.

professor of political economy at Sydenham College of Commerce, continuing that post until 1920, when he had saved enough to continue his studies in London. In 1922, he submitted his thesis for Doctor of Science for the first time, but it was not accepted until 1923, after it was revised and resubmitted because it was deemed too critical of British policy and too much of a departure from orthodox thinking on international exchange.<sup>77</sup> Later in 1922, Ambedkar went to Bonn University to study Law and in 1923, in India, he was called to the Bar.

Ambedkar's political life started in 1919, when he wrote an article under the alias 'A Mahar'. He stated that "[h]ome rule is the birth-right as much of the Mahars as that of the Brahmins. The Depressed Classes have first to be elevated."<sup>78</sup> Later that same year, he also started publication of a newspaper, *Mook-Nayak*, to champion the rights of untouchables. Ambedkar's nascent political career was interrupted by his return to London to complete his Ph.D. With Ambedkar's return to India in 1923, he had secured his role as a local political leader. In March of 1924, Ambedkar convened a meeting in Bombay to found the Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha (BHS) as a vehicle for his social uplift movement. In July, the BHS was formally constituted with the motto 'Educate, Agitate, Organize.' The aims of this group were to represent the grievances of the Depressed Classes and promote education. At the same time, he severed his connections with *Mook-Nayak*, which stopped publication soon after. In December 1925, Ambedkar was nominated to the Bombay Legislative Council.<sup>79</sup> While a member of the legislative

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<sup>77</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 13. This has been often overlooked by his critics when they argue he was a supporter of Britain's colonial government.

<sup>78</sup> Kadam, *Significance of his Movement*, p 76.

<sup>79</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, p 113. Ambedkar presented a ten page report to the Southborough Commission discussing Franchise. He urged, among other reforms, for

council, Ambedkar spoke on prohibition, education, small land holdings and a variety of other topics covering economic, political and social issues.<sup>80</sup> In 1927, Ambedkar also started and edited a new publication, *Bahishkrit Bharat (Excluded India)*.<sup>81</sup> These initial steps towards political mobilization against caste led to the Mahad Tank Satyagraha.<sup>82</sup>

The Mahad Satyagraha accomplished two goals. First, it established Ambedkar as a leader of untouchables. Second, it represented an early example of Ambedkar's

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joint electorates with reserved seats for Muslims, a low-pitched franchise for Marathas and communal representation for untouchable is enough numbers that would allow them to claim redress, arguing that franchise for untouchables should be "so low as to educate into political life as many untouchables as possible." The nomination procedure was developed during the Southborough Commission in Bombay. The government would select a person based on recommendation to represent the untouchable community in Bombay. The first nominated representative was D. D. Gholap, in 1921. He was nominated on the advice of Sir Narayan Ganesh, a member of Shinde's Depressed Classes Mission Society. Golap was Ambedkar's research assistant for the Southborough Commission and an editor for Ambedkar's first newspaper *Muknayak*. Ambedkar was nominated by the Governor of Bombay. Keer, *Life and Mission*, p 69.

<sup>80</sup> Kadam, *Significance of his Movement*, pp 82-92. Ambedkar argued in support of prohibition, increased educational access, that industrialization must precede the consolidation of land holdings and for a progressive taxation of land, among other things. Keer, *Life and Mission*, p 38 and 83.

<sup>81</sup> This publication replaced *Muknayak (Leader of the Dumb)* and was in turn replaced by *Janata (The People, 1929)* and finally *Prabuddha Bharat (Awakend India, 1955)*. Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, p 89. Each of these publications were geared to provide information to untouchables on issues important to them, though they also presented articles and editorials supporting the independence movement, as long as the rights of all people were protected. Keer, *Life and Mission*, p 145.

<sup>82</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, pp 80, 88, 210-11. Ambedkar borrowed the Satyagraha as a means of protest from Gandhi. However, his opinion of them is tepid at best. Ambedkar preferred education and parliamentary procedure. They were a means to energize the untouchable community. He made use of them sparingly for temple entry, and without the ideological commitment to *ahimsa*, and eventually stopped giving advice to those satyagraha that, in his opinion, sought only to maintain inequality through the acceptance of Hinduism as idol worshippers. Ambedkar's gradual rejection of temple entry as an adequate path to equality contrasts with E. V. Periyar who remained locked in a struggle with Brahminical dominance and their ritual privilege. He was an 'oppositional' activist rather than developmental activist, as Ambedkar became. Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp 263-65.

movement attacking both the symptoms and, in Ambedkar's view, the cause of caste discrimination. The goal of the Mahad Satyagraha was to secure access to clean water from a public tank for the untouchable members of the community. The caste Hindus denied access to the tank because the religious pollution of the untouchables was thought to pollute the water.<sup>83</sup> On March 19 and 20, 1927 Ambedkar led untouchables to draw water from the Chavadar Tank. Caste Hindus rioted against the untouchables, following a rumour that the untouchables would also attempt entry into the Veereshwar Temple. However, Ambedkar was concerned with more than gaining access to the water. He wanted to challenge the system that created and allowed for caste oppression.

After a brief absence from Mahad that witnessed increased control by caste Hindus over water access, Ambedkar returned for another scheduled Satyagraha. On December 25, 1927, Ambedkar publicly burnt the *Manusmriti* as a symbol of the religious and social oppression faced by untouchables. Addressing the conference attendees Ambedkar stated:

[o]urs is a movement which aims at not only removing our own disabilities, but also at bringing about a social revolution that will remove all man-made barriers of caste by providing equal opportunities to all to rise to the highest position and making no distinction between man and man so far as civic rights are concerned.<sup>84</sup>

The burning of the *Manusmriti* was a direct challenge to high caste Hindus, who again responded to the insult with force.<sup>85</sup> These events also taught Ambedkar that while the specific battle was important, a larger agenda that works towards the same goals on a

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<sup>83</sup> Jaffrelot, *Ambedkar and Untouchability*, p 47.

<sup>84</sup> Kadam, *Significance of his Movement*, p 87.

<sup>85</sup> Jaffrelot, *Ambedkar and Untouchability*, p 47.

broader scale was needed to support the untouchable cause.<sup>86</sup>

The 1930s were a period of radical change for Ambedkar. He started to drift away from liberal democracy toward social democracy. While Ambedkar never fully embraced Marxism, this shift is significant because it allowed for the possibility of alliance with other labour and peasant groups. It was also during this period that Ambedkar became a recognizably national political figure; he was recognized by the British government through the Simon Commission (1928) and later the First Round Table Conference in Britain, boycotted by Congress (1930).<sup>87</sup> The results of the Second and Third Round Table Conferences led to the conflict between Ambedkar and Gandhi over the Communal Award, the Poona Pact and the All India Untouchable league.<sup>88</sup> The Poona Pact was the result of two key opposing positions: first, an attempt to present an anti-colonial united front against the British and second, an attempt to protect the political voice of untouchables provided by the Communal Award that could have divided the national movement with Congress and Ambedkar representing these respective views.<sup>89</sup> Congress officials argued that the Communal Award would divide the anti-colonial movement. While Ambedkar sought a means to protect the right of untouchables to their own political voice, he argued, despite the contentions of Congress to the contrary, that untouchables are distinct and separate from Hindus.<sup>90</sup> The Poona Pact was an attempt to reconcile these two positions, though Gandhi's fast left Ambedkar in an untenable

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<sup>86</sup> Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, pp 32-33.

<sup>87</sup> Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, pp 40-41.

<sup>88</sup> This conflict will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two.

<sup>89</sup> Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, pp 47-48.

<sup>90</sup> Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables* (1945), *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.



position to choose between his principles and the lives of his followers should Gandhi die.<sup>91</sup> By 1933, Ambedkar became disillusioned with the compromises he made with Gandhi. After Ramabai's death in May 1935, Ambedkar broached the idea of leaving politics, especially considering the falling fortunes of the Justice Party in Madras and the Non-Brahman Party in Maharashtra in the upcoming provincial elections.<sup>92</sup> Instead, Ambedkar redoubled his efforts. In 1935, Ambedkar made the pledge that, while he had been born Hindu, he would not die one.<sup>93</sup> This became an essential point of contention between Ambedkar and Gandhi, one that came to define the political difference between the two.<sup>94</sup> In 1936, Ambedkar formed the Independent Labour Party (ILP) to contest the elections to the Legislative councils outlined in the 1935 Government of India Act and appeal to a wider political base. Through the middle to late 1930s, Ambedkar started to find increasing common ground with the Communists. Their relationship culminated in 1938, in response to the Industrial Disputes Bill, which removed the workers' right to strike.<sup>95</sup> While this period shows a general trend on the part of Ambedkar towards the left, he maintained the democratic rather than revolutionary roots of his party and philosophy.

When World War II broke out in 1939, Ambedkar again found himself politically isolated. Neither the Congress nor the Communists would support the British in their war effort against Nazi Germany. Despite, or perhaps because of, this isolation, through the

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<sup>91</sup> Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, p54.

<sup>92</sup> Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, p 60.

<sup>93</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936)," *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>94</sup> The conflict between Ambedkar and Gandhi will be discussed further in Chapter Two.

<sup>95</sup> Jaffrelot, *Ambedkar and Untouchability*, p 79.

1940s Ambedkar's political position began to shift once again, incorporating Marxist thought into an alternative economic development program and a concretely social democratic platform. When the war ended, Ambedkar's social democratic ideals were tempered by his pragmatic politics, resulting in his acceptance of a position in Nehru's Cabinet as Law Minister and head of the committee charged with writing India's constitution. The constitution did not guarantee all rights that Ambedkar had championed during his political career. The most notable provision absent was the protection of women's rights to property and divorce.<sup>96</sup> However, the constitution did contain a far-reaching system of affirmative action that protected the rights of untouchables from being discriminated against in areas of education, employment and access to the public service. The constitution also ensured a quota of placements for the scheduled castes and tribes in

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<sup>96</sup> Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, p 131. These provisions remained absent largely due to the conservative Hindu wing of the Congress Party. By 1935, as demonstrated in the "Annihilation of Caste", Ambedkar was cognoscente of the plight of women, especially among untouchable communities, under Hindu religious codes. "The protagonists of Chaturvarnya do not seem to have considered what is to happen to women in their system. Are they also to be divided into four classes, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra? Or are they to be allowed to take the status of their husbands. If the status of the woman is to be the consequence of marriage what becomes of the underlying principle of Chaturvarnya, namely, that the status of a person should be based upon the worth of that person? If they are to be classified according to their worth is their classification to be nominal or real? If it is to be nominal then it is useless and then the protagonists of Chaturvarnya must admit that their system does not apply to women. If it is real, are the protagonists of Chaturvarnya prepared to follow the logical consequences of applying it to women? They must be prepared to have women priests and women soldiers. Hindu society has grown accustomed to women teachers and women barristers. It may grow accustomed to women brewers and women butchers. But he would be a bold person, who would say that it will allow women priests and women soldiers. But that will be the logical outcome of applying Chaturvarnya to women. Given these difficulties, I think no one except a congenital idiot could hope and believe in a successful regeneration of the Chaturvarnya." B. R. Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936)," *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

the public service.<sup>97</sup> For his work on the constitution, he was hailed by some as the modern Manu, though his critics would continue to minimize his role in writing the constitution.

Despite the apparent acceptance of Ambedkar by Congress, he remained an outspoken and controversial figure. When he argued that a case could be made for the partition of India and Pakistan, he renewed his conflict with many Indian nationalists. One particular Gandhian response by C. Rajagopalachari, in *Ambedkar Refuted*, challenged him directly, criticizing Ambedkar's unpatriotic attitude.<sup>98</sup> However, Rajagopalachari based his critique on a single source, without citing various other speeches and writings that argued passionately for a united India.<sup>99</sup>

By 1950, it was clear that Ambedkar had found a religion with which to realize his promise of 1935, further distancing him from the Hindu political majority. In May 1950, he wrote the article "The Buddha & The Future of His Religion". In this article, Ambedkar outlined the benefits of Buddhism, the deficiencies of Hinduism, and the requisites needed to produce a Buddhist resurgence.<sup>100</sup> To further this goal he made connections with the Buddhist community abroad. He visited Sri Lanka to learn of the state of Buddhist observance and to speak to the Young Men's Buddhist Association on "The Rise and Fall of Buddhism on India."<sup>101</sup> Ambedkar actions showed détente with Hinduism was unlikely.

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<sup>97</sup> Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, p 121.

<sup>98</sup> Ambedkar's discussion on nationalism, identity and the nation and responses will be developed further in Chapter Two, Four and Five.

<sup>99</sup> For an example see B. R. Ambedkar "A Plea to Preserve Unity of India (1946)" in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, pp 23-31.

<sup>100</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, pp 173-74.

<sup>101</sup> Kadam, *Significance of his Movement*, p 21. From the early 1940s Buddhism had a growing place in Ambedkar's analysis of Indian History, politics and society.

The last six years of Ambedkar's life shifted direction for this now elder statesman of independent India. While Law Minister, Ambedkar tried to correct the oversight of ensuring women secular rights. The Hindu Code Bill was meant to ensure rights to property, inheritance and divorce that Hindu religion denied to women.<sup>102</sup> In a long struggle to have the Code Bill passed, Ambedkar had a falling out with Nehru and Congress over a lack of promised support, prompting Ambedkar to resign from cabinet.<sup>103</sup> However, instead of leaving politics quietly, in the last weeks of his life, Ambedkar, along with almost half a million former untouchables, converted to Buddhism.

Like his interpretations of socialism and democracy, Ambedkar's Buddhism is distinct. The important aspect of Ambedkar's neo-Buddhist movement is an essentializing of Buddhist thought, while adapting it as a means for social reform.<sup>104</sup> In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Ambedkar isolated Buddhism's core philosophies from the superstition and ritual that Ambedkar felt had accumulated over the millennia.<sup>105</sup> Despite all his accomplishments, when Ambedkar died two months after his conversion in 1956, he had left his larger mission, the liberation of untouchables, unresolved.

Ambedkar's life is seemingly removed from the traditional social, economic and political place of the Mahar, while representing a continuance of their special place in the

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<sup>102</sup> Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, pp 132-33.

<sup>103</sup> Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, p 133. The promised support evaporated in the wake of renewed dissent from the conservative Hindu wing of the Congress Party who argued that Ambedkar was insulting Hindu ideals such as Ram and Sita.

<sup>104</sup> In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Ambedkar reduces Buddhism to its essential tenets for ease of reading and to allow anyone access to Buddhist thought while encouraging all his followers to go out and convert others. The particulars of this essentialization will be discussed more fully in Chapter Five.

<sup>105</sup> D. C. Ahir, *Dr. Ambedkar's Vision of Dhamma: An Assessment*. (New Delhi: B.R. Publishing, 1998), p 19.

Indian village. Ambedkar's education, religion and activism, his family and his community were important aspects of his early development. Education freed Ambedkar of the ignorance mandated by his caste position. His opposition to religious oppression was encouraged by the role of egalitarian Bhakti faith in his family and community. However, its inability to challenge Brahmanism led Ambedkar to find other means of challenging Hindu dominance. Finally, the growing level of political awareness and activism deriving from the army recruitment movement provided Ambedkar with a support base from which to launch the activism and reform movements of the third and fourth phases of his life. Ambedkar sought to ensure the rights of untouchables but his social ideals remained tempered by political pragmatism, an understanding that a push too far could cause more harm than good to the untouchable community.

## Chapter 2

### Ambedkar: Developing a Critique of Indian Nationalism

Gandhiji, I have no homeland.<sup>106</sup>

Ambedkar's first and most persistent political challenge came from Gandhi and the Indian National Congress. Congress represented the main political force of the Home Rule movement. Under Gandhi's stewardship, Congress became a more populist organization. Gandhi's work to broaden the political scope of Congress drew people from a wide cross section of Indian society, from highest to lowest, in an effort to create an organization that could legitimately be called a united front. As the dominant anti-colonial organization, Congress played a prominent role in presenting the dominant national identity. However, as the nationalist movement progressed, the dominant form of national identity exemplified by Congress continued to represent only a minority within the larger whole. Gandhi's and Ambedkar's conflict derived from whether or not, under these circumstances, untouchables were represented by the Congress. Their relationship is remains one of the most controversial and contentious of the independence movement. Gandhi argued for a nationalist project that presented a modified Hinduism that championed the role of all persons in society, regardless of caste or religion, while maintaining an idealized Varna system. Ambedkar came to find Gandhi's image of India unpalatable and repressive. Ambedkar was critical of Gandhi's focus on religion as a basis of national identity since this was a divisive form of identity, most visibly causing

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<sup>106</sup> Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, p 43 from Keer, *Life and Mission*, pp 165-68.

division between Hindus and Muslims.<sup>107</sup> Instead, Ambedkar argued that if India was to be one people then those things they held in common should be emphasized.<sup>108</sup> In order to foster this sense of common identity, it was necessary for the state to create institutions of social and economic democracy and recognize multiple types of social stratification, such as caste, gender and class, in building a modern democratic state.

When Partha Chatterjee asked in response to Benedict Anderson, 'whose imagined communities,' he helped to undermine the fallacy of national definitions structured by limited modular forms made available to by the nations in Europe and the America's.<sup>109</sup> In opposition to colonizer, colonial nations adopted spaces not appropriated by the colonial authority through which to express their national identity, specifically in social spaces of home, culture and religion, while appropriating the structures of government imposed by colonial authorities, to suite their own needs. These spaces of home, culture and religion, often interpreted as backwards to western perspectives on the nation, became in various ways key points of self-identification.<sup>110</sup> However, while these points of identification would become key aspects of defining the post-colonial nation, they did so while being inexorably linked of the structures of national politics marked by governmentality.<sup>111</sup> In India, these points of identification, more often than not, were

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<sup>107</sup> Ambedkar, *Pakistan or the Partition of India* (1940), *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>108</sup> Ambedkar, *Pakistan or the Partition of India* (1940), *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>109</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World in Partha Chatterjee, The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p 5.

<sup>110</sup> Partha Chatterjee, "Beyond the Nation or Within," *Social Text*, No. 56, (Autumn, 1998), p 61.

<sup>111</sup> Partha Chatterjee, "Anderson's Utopia," *Diacritics*, Vol. 29, No. 4, Grounds of Comparison: Around the Work of Benedict Anderson, (Winter, 1999), pp 129-30. In this article, Chatterjee is discussing a perceived conflict between 'unbound' and the 'bound'

presented in terms of Brahminical Hindu culture. Ambedkar offered an oppositional position to that offered by Congress, one that did not rely on a narrow definition of who and what constituted the nation. Further, Ambedkar attempted, and in some ways succeeded, in articulating a nationalist discourse about Congress and the Indian state that foresees Chatterjee's conclusion of *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, in that:

[t]he critique of nationalist discourse must find for itself the ideological means to connect the popular strength of those struggles [of the people-nation] with the consciousness of a new universality, to subvert the ideological sway of the state which falsely claims to speak on behalf of the nation and to challenge the presumed sovereignty of a science which puts itself at the service of capital, to replace, in other words, the old problematic and thematic with new ones.<sup>112</sup>

Ambedkar rejected the Congress' claim to speak for all of India, in that it did not represent the reality or the interests of all of India.

Some aspects of Ambedkar's vision for an independent India were similar to those presented by Nehru and the Congress left, specifically in regards to economic development.<sup>113</sup> However, Ambedkar rejected the implicit and explicit national identity

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serialities presented by Anderson. Unbound serialities being those narratives of everyday universals of modernity (nations, citizens, bureaucrats, intellectuals and revolutionaries, etc), narrated through structures of print capitalism (newspapers and novels). Bound serialities of governmentality, produced through the modern census and the modern electoral system. Chatterjee concludes his critique by refuting Anderson's claim of the 'badness' of bound seriality as an engine of divisive ethnic politics and the separateness of unbound seriality from governmentality. "[I]t is morally illegitimate to uphold the universalist ideals of nationalism without simultaneously demanding the politics that spawned by governmentality be recognized as an equally legitimate part of the real time-space of modern political life of the nation." Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought in* Chatterjee, *Partha Chatterjee Omnibus*, p 134.

<sup>112</sup> Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought in* Chatterjee, *Partha Chatterjee Omnibus*, Chatterjee, p 170.

<sup>113</sup> Both Nehru and Ambedkar argued for program of economic development in post-colonial India with state ownership of key industries in manufacturing and the reform of land ownership. However, the implementation of these reforms was not always successful, especially in regards to land reform. Raosaheb Kasbe, "The Ambedkarian



of Congress and its representatives. In his speech, “Annihilation of Caste,” Ambedkar states his position for the need for social reform in India and laments the dissolution of the Social Conference as an institution promoting social reform in favour of the political reform advocated by the Social Conference's sister organization, the National Congress.<sup>114</sup> Ambedkar cites W. C. Bonnerji as a typical representative of the politically minded Congress:

I for one have no patience with those who say we shall not be fit for political reform until we reform our social system. I fail to see any connection between the two ... Are we not fit (for political reform) because our widows remain unmarried and our girls are given in marriage earlier than in other countries? Because our wives and daughters do not drive about with us visiting our friends? Because we do not send our daughters to Oxford and Cambridge?<sup>115</sup>

Ambedkar characterizes this speech as a funeral oration for the Social Conference. In response to Bonnerji's argument, Ambedkar proceeds to list examples of discrimination based on caste prejudice that governing officials did not respond to in a timely manner and that often resulted in violence against untouchables for the slightest perceived insult, such as eating ghee.<sup>116</sup> Ambedkar's point was that “[e]very Congressman who repeats the dogma of Mill that one country is not fit to rule another country must admit that one class is not fit to rule another class.”<sup>117</sup> While Ambedkar laments the end of the Social

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Ideology: A Perspective” in Yadav, *Periphery to Center Stage*, pp 80-81.

<sup>114</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936),” *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>115</sup> W. C. Bonnerji (1892) in B. R. Ambedkar, “Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936),” *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>116</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936),” *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008. Ghee is a type of oily butter.

<sup>117</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936),”

Conference, he remained critical of its reform agenda.<sup>118</sup>

The reform agenda of the Social Conference that Ambedkar presented mirrors that which Chatterjee argues was employed by nationalist movements in the colonial world.

In as much that:

[t]he Social Conference was a body which mainly concerned itself with the reform of the high caste Hindu Family. It consisted mostly of enlightened high caste Hindus who did not feel the necessity for agitating for the abolition of caste or had not the courage to agitate for it. They felt quite naturally a greater urge to remove such evils as enforced widowhood, child marriages etc., evils which prevailed among them and which were personally felt by them. They did not stand up for the reform of the Hindu society.<sup>119</sup>

These men, Ambedkar continued, were not concerned with caste or broader social reform, only the family, and this was the reason the Social Conference lost to the National Congress.<sup>120</sup> In regards to political reform taking precedent over reform of the family, Ambedkar agreed that this was possible. However, this did not mean that political reform should have taken precedence over the reconstruction of society. Further, this partial victory by the political reform movement, as Ambedkar characterized it, did not represent a total victory over the social reform movement.<sup>121</sup>

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*Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>118</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936)," *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>119</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936)," *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>120</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936)," *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>121</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936)," *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

Ambedkar argues that the political reform movement's need to deal with the reality of India's social structure necessitated that they respond to social inequality.

Ambedkar argued that this was the significance of the Communal Award.

That [the] political constitution must take note of social organisation. It shows that the politicians who denied that the social problem in India had any bearing on the political problem were forced to reckon with the social problem in devising the constitution. The Communal Award is so to say the nemesis following upon the indifference and neglect of social reform. It is a victory for the Social Reform Party which shows that though defeated they were in the right in insisting upon the importance of social reform.<sup>122</sup>

He followed this by stating; “let political reformers turn to any direction they like, they will find that in the making of a constitution, they cannot ignore the problem arising out of the prevailing social order.”<sup>123</sup> From Ambedkar's perspective, social and religious revolution was a necessary precursor to political revolution.<sup>124</sup>

However, he was not concerned simply with social or political revolution, but the form of those revolutions. The Congress Left argued that by addressing material inequalities, social inequalities would disappear. However, Ambedkar suggested that social inequalities could dominate material inequalities, with the rich would be held in sway by “penniless Sadhus and Fakirs.”<sup>125</sup> Further, the dominance of certain social

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<sup>122</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936),” *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>123</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936),” *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>124</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936),” *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>125</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936),” *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

categories, specifically in terms of religion, undermined political equalities, even in a democracy. Ambedkar used the Roman Republic as an example of the role religion can have undermining the political equality.

It was an accepted creed of the whole Roman populus (*sic*) that no official could enter upon the duties of his office unless the Oracle of Delphi declared that he was acceptable to the Goddess. The priests who were in charge of the temple of the Goddess of Delphi were all Patricians. Whenever therefore the Plebians elected a Consul who was known to be a strong party man opposed to the Patricians or “communal ” to use the term that is current in India, the Oracle invariably declared that he was not acceptable to the Goddess. This is how the Plebians were cheated out of their rights. But what is worthy of note is that the Plebians permitted themselves to be thus cheated because they too like the Patricians, held firmly the belief that the approval of the Goddess was a condition precedent to the taking charge by an official of his duties and that election by the people was not enough.<sup>126</sup>

The Plebeians, he continued, would willingly sacrifice their political rights to a social institution dominated by the Patricians.

The social revolution that Ambedkar demanded was more than just a revolution of political structures, such as those of a democratic secular state, but the internalization of the people to assert their political authority over that of a social minority. A revolution of this sort could not happen:

unless [Men] 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 (*sic*) from [a] much deeper foundation, namely, the mental attitude of the compatriots towards one another in their spirit of personal equality and fraternity.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936),” *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>127</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936),” *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>,

In order to accomplish this there had to be a change in the social order first, and this was not a point that either Gandhi or Congress was willing to concede.<sup>128</sup>

Ambedkar's role in the independence movement is confused by the power structures with which he was engaged. Ambedkar was a singular individual, as discussed in the previous chapter. Ambedkar's roots in an untouchable community informed his politics. His roots also impacted on his relationship with Congress and the British. Ambedkar was stigmatized as socially inferior to the former due to his caste, a stigmatization that he could not overcome, no matter how educated and no matter how many honours he received.<sup>129</sup> Further, he was a well educated political outsider, who upset the perceived status of Congress as the voice for all communities in India.<sup>130</sup> However, while his education could not overcome his caste status in India, it offered him opportunities in the developing governing structure of late colonial India.<sup>131</sup> Through the route provided by his education Ambedkar was able to gain political and intellectual standing with the British and

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<sup>128</sup> Gandhi because he celebrated the traditional Indian social order based on an idealized chaturvarna as being superior to other modes of social construction and Congress because they believed that political and economic reform would overcome social inequity.

<sup>129</sup> Jaffrelot, *Ambedkar and Untouchability*, pp 28-29.

<sup>130</sup> This was especially the case with Gandhi. Ambedkar and Gandhi would continually challenge each others claim to leadership of the untouchables. Gandhi would often take a paternalistic attitude towards Ambedkar's assertion that he represented untouchables. Ambedkar's response was that someone who was not untouchable could not speak to the social and institutional discrimination experienced daily by untouchables. Jaffrelot, *Ambedkar and Untouchability*, p 57.

<sup>131</sup> His role in the Bombay Legislative assembly in the 1930s and 1940s, as well as the evidence given at the Simon Commission (1928), the Round Table Conference (1930-32) and Franchise Committee (1932) are examples of the opportunities that Ambedkar exploited when engaging with the colonial authority. At each of these forums, Ambedkar advocated for the rights of untouchables.

by exploiting that standing was able to further secure his political standing as a national political leader, a standing that would lead to conflict with Congress and Gandhi.<sup>132</sup>

Ambedkar's conflict with Gandhi was important because Gandhi represented a dominant and politically vibrant variant of neo-Hindu national identity. Gandhi did not espouse the only variant of Hindu national identity, but one of its more visible permutations. Hindu nationalism developed out of the orientalist assumption of binary difference between east and west.<sup>133</sup> The Hindu nationalist movement represents a "discovery and revival of an indigenous heritage ... that is also reactionary, elitist, and exclusionary."<sup>134</sup> Early examples of the orientalist revival were undertaken by Annie Besant, Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Bal Gangadhar Tilak. These leaders celebrated different aspects of Indian tradition. However, collectively they located "modernity in a resuscitated past" that fused science and religion into an 'evolved' cultural heritage.<sup>135</sup>

Gandhi's recognition as a leader in Indian politics by Ambedkar followed from his perception of Gandhi as a dominant voice in the independence movement, and the only major Indian political leader who recognized caste as a problem in Indian society, stating that: "[b]efore Mahatma Gandhi, no politician in this country maintained that it is necessary to remove social injustice here in order to do away with tension and conflict,

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<sup>132</sup> As was discussed in the previous chapter, Ambedkar had secured his role as an untouchable leader by the late 1920s. His conflict with Gandhi and His inclusion in the Round Table Conferences helped to thrust him onto the national stage.

<sup>133</sup> For more on this binary see Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

<sup>134</sup> Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief*, (Princeton: Princeton University, 1998), p 206.

<sup>135</sup> Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, p 206.

and that every Indian should consider it his sacred duty to do so.”<sup>136</sup> While he recognized Gandhi as an Indian political leader, Ambedkar refuted Gandhi's claim to speak on behalf of untouchables. Gandhi rebutted, arguing that “Congress, [as] the spearhead of the national movement, was the natural representative” of untouchables.<sup>137</sup> Ambedkar's lukewarm acceptance of Gandhi as a leader was largely a result of Ambedkar's rejection of Gandhi's 'resuscitated past' and its reliance on modified Hindu tradition (the *chaturvarna*) as a form of social order. Ambedkar rejected Gandhi's idealized version of the four Varna's and his celebration of the village, characterizing the latter as “the ruination of India...What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism?”<sup>138</sup> Gandhi and the national image he presented became in many respects the foil against which Ambedkar's programme for national development and his untouchable uplift movement was defined.<sup>139</sup>

Gandhi's variant on the 'resuscitated past' was particularly anti-western. Gandhi celebrated the idealized village of traditional India.<sup>140</sup> He essentialized the east-west binary, rejecting the concept of western modernity. Gandhi advocated a simple life based

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<sup>136</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, pp 73-74, from Kairemode, *Da Ambedkar*, Vol II, (Bombay: Bauddhjan Panchayat Samiti, 1958), pp 117-118. Ambedkar stated this in 1925.

<sup>137</sup> Jaffrelot, *Ambedkar and Untouchability*, p 57.

<sup>138</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Draft Constitution – Discussion (1948)” in Vasant Moon, ed., *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Volume 13, (Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1994), p 62.

<sup>139</sup> This characterization of Gandhi's national movement as a foil for Ambedkar's does not preclude the further refinement of Ambedkar's movement in regards to other national movements, including the Indian Communists, as will be discussed in the following chapters. Ambedkar was not reactionary in his critique of Gandhi. Rather, he was critical of various movements and their abilities to promote untouchable uplift and modernization and used these critiques to help bolster his own movement's aims for modernization and the annihilation of caste. This foil will be discussed further below.

<sup>140</sup> Surinder S. Jodhka, “Nation and Village: Images of Rural India in Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 37, No.32 (2002): pp 3345-48.

on an anti-industrialist platform that rejected the consumerism of the west.<sup>141</sup> Further, he viewed western civilization as soulless and, in the long run, destructive.<sup>142</sup> He asserted that Hindu tradition provided a ready-made role for every member of society.<sup>143</sup> In Gandhi's national image, caste was stripped of its negative characteristics, with everyone recognized as equal before God.<sup>144</sup> Despite Gandhi's rejection of modernity and the west, his national program was steeped in a curious cross between Victorian Christianity and Hinduism.<sup>145</sup> He advocated that each person work industriously in their proscribed role (their *Varna*) and attempt to live a morally stringent life within the bounds of Gandhi's idealized Hinduism. Ambedkar's conflict with Gandhi was precipitated by a rejection of this national identity.

There are four confrontations between Ambedkar, Gandhi and Congress that define the progress of their conflict and Ambedkar's development of a critique of the Indian nation.<sup>146</sup> The first engagement resulted from Ambedkar's recognition of Gandhi as an Indian leader who was awakened, at the very least, to the plight of the untouchables.<sup>147</sup> The second confrontation was the Second Round Table Conference, the

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<sup>141</sup> M. K. Gandhi, "Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule (1908)" in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* Vol. X (*CW Gandhi*), (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Trust, 1963), pp 61-62.

<sup>142</sup> Gandhi, "'Hind Swaraj'" in *CW Gandhi*, Vol X, pp 19-21.

<sup>143</sup> Gandhi, "Hind Swaraj" in *CW Gandhi* Vol. X, p 37.

<sup>144</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936)," *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>145</sup> Stephen Hay, "The Making of a Late-Victorian Hindu: M. K. Gandhi in London, 1888-1891," *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1. (1989), p 96 and P. Spratt, "Gandhi in Retrospect," *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 4, (1969), p 354.

<sup>146</sup> The following four confrontations are in no way the only disagreements Ambedkar had with both Gandhi and Congress, but they are representative of these conflicts and help illustrate Ambedkar's developing critique and response to implicit and explicit forms of Hindu national identity.

<sup>147</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 152.



first time that Gandhi and Ambedkar actually met, and the resulting struggle over communal representation.<sup>148</sup> The third was over Ambedkar's unread but published speech for the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal conference, "Annihilation of Caste" (1936) and his speech at the Yeola Conference on October 13, 1935, about conversion from Hinduism. The fourth confrontation was Ambedkar's tacit support for Muslim independence, as long as certain conditions applied. The development and resolution of each of these conflicts demonstrates different aspects of the development of Ambedkar's political and national vision.

When Ambedkar returned to India after finishing his studies abroad in 1923, he started campaigning for the rights of untouchables in earnest. Issues of religious equality dominated this early period of Ambedkar's political movement.<sup>149</sup> Ambedkar had yet to develop a broad national image or programme. However, the Vaikam Satyagraha became an early example for what Ambedkar argued was positive and negative with the approach of Gandhi and Congress towards untouchables. He recognized the unique position Gandhi had in contrast with the rest of Congress. As mentioned above, Ambedkar recognized that Gandhi was at least willing to discuss the problem of caste. However, Ambedkar was also critical of the limited scope of Gandhi's approach to untouchable uplift. Gandhi did not question the place of untouchables in society, just how they were treated.<sup>150</sup> Ambedkar, like Gandhi, initially confronted untouchability on religious grounds. However, when religious leaders reneged on a promise to open the doors to all Hindus at a new temple in Thakurdwar in 1927 and after a decision by a temple in

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<sup>148</sup> Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, p 42.

<sup>149</sup> Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, p 153.

<sup>150</sup> Gandhi, "Ambedkar's Indictment – II (1936)" in *CW Gandhi* Vol. LXIII, p 153.

Amaravati to continue the exclusion of untouchables, Ambedkar refocused his efforts.<sup>151</sup>

Ambedkar stated that the movement's goal was to "remove all man-made barriers of caste ... and making no distinction between man and man so far as civic rights are concerned...."<sup>152</sup> Hinduism was a force of oppression to be overcome. Instead of fighting for religious rights, Ambedkar sought to improve the secular rights of untouchables through direct action.<sup>153</sup> By this time, Ambedkar had rejected the politically dominant national identity that defined India along religious lines.

Gandhi's aims were not as revolutionary as Ambedkar's. When discussing colonialism, Gandhi celebrated the religious and social traditions of India while denigrating western civilization.<sup>154</sup> Gandhi was clear when he stated: "We hold the civilization that you support to be the reverse of civilization. We consider our civilization to be far superior to yours."<sup>155</sup> Unlike Ambedkar, Gandhi looked to Indian traditions for solutions to perceived problems. He celebrated the role of

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<sup>151</sup> Kadam, *Significance of his Movement*, p 84. The temple initially stated it would be open to all Hindus, but reneged on the promise and then ritually re-purified the temple after Ambedkar's presence 'defiled' the temple.

<sup>152</sup> Kadam, *Significance of his Movement*, p 87.

<sup>153</sup> Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, p 33.

<sup>154</sup> Many historians have analyzed how caste, religion and tradition have been affected by colonialism. Partha Chatterjee provides an excellent analysis of how Indian society defined its identity in opposition to the colonizer. "The most powerful as well as the most creative results of the nationalist imagination in Asia and Africa are posited not on an identity but rather on difference, with the 'modular' forms of the national society propagated by the modern west." Partha Chatterjee "Whose Imagined Community?" in John Hutchinson, et al, ed., *Nationalism: Critical Concepts in Political Science*, Volume III, (London: Routledge, 2000), p 940.

<sup>155</sup> Gandhi, "Hind Swaraj" in *CW Gandhi* Vol. X, p 61. This document had two key audiences, the British, as an appeal to why India should be independent and more importantly to the Indian nationalist movement, as an appeal on how to construct an independent India. As late as 1938, as stated in the third addition of "Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule," Gandhi was presented as being firm in his convictions of his interpretation of Indian tradition and the dangers of modern civilization.

Varna as a means to mitigating social friction and providing a secure structure for social interaction, employment and governance.<sup>156</sup>

There are many interpretations of caste available to modern scholarship, many of which provide only a partial or poor understanding of the function of caste in India.

However, there are two interpretations of caste that mirror the division on caste between Gandhi and Ambedkar. The first is articulated by Ganguly and the second by Dilip Menon. In the *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity: Notes on the Postcolonial Hermeneutics of Caste*, Ganguly presents caste in terms of different 'life-worlds.'<sup>157</sup>

Ganguly is careful not to dismiss the discrimination of lower castes but insists that these are only aspects of the various ways that caste can express itself, and that not all of these forms of expression are negative.<sup>158</sup>

While not directed specifically at Ganguly, Menon's critique of the post-colonial interpretation of caste in "The Blindness of Insight: Why Communalism in Indian is About Caste," is a direct rebuttal to Ganguly's 'life-worlds' as a means to understanding caste. Menon states that:

[t]here has been a reluctance to engage with what is arguably an intimate relation between discourses of caste, secularism and communalism. That Hinduism ... is a hierarchical, inegalitarian structure is largely accepted, but what has gone unacknowledged in academic discourse is both the casual brutality and the organized violence that it practices towards its subordinated sections.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Gandhi, "Dr. Ambedkar's Indictment (1936)" in *CW Gandhi* Vol. LXIII, p 153.

<sup>157</sup> Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity*, p 5.

<sup>158</sup> Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity*, p x.

<sup>159</sup> Dilip M Menon, "The Blindness of Insight: Why Communalism in India is About Caste," in Dilip M. Menon, ed., *The Blindness of Insight: Essays on Caste in Modern India*, (Chennai: Quadro Press, 2006), p 2. Menon states this in the context of communal violence and how it is related to communal violence. Specifically why untouchables partake in violence against Muslims: how violence against the internal other "has been displaced as one of aggression against an external Other ...?"

Ganguly's 'life-worlds', while not overtly dismissing the discrimination of subordinate groups, seeks to mitigate the discrimination by asserting that it is only an aspect of caste and that caste's quotidian reality remains beyond modernity's ability to decipher.<sup>160</sup>

Ambedkar's response to Gandhi's invocation of the Chaturvarna system as a means to social harmony was poignant. It demonstrated the growth of Ambedkar's analysis of the place of women in Indian society and the inconsistency of Gandhi's application of the Varna system with regard to women. He stated that if the status of women is to be based on marriage, then it is 'nominal' and:

the protagonists of Chaturvarna (*sic*) must admit that their system does not apply to women. If it is real, are the protagonists of Chaturvarnya prepared to follow the logical consequences of applying it to women? They must be prepared to have women priests and women soldiers. Hindu society has grown accustomed to women teachers and women barristers. It may grow accustomed to women brewers and women butchers. But he would be a bold person, who would say that it will allow women priests and women soldiers. But that will be the logical outcome of applying Chaturvarnya to women.<sup>161</sup>

Ambedkar's own response to the plight of women, untouchables and other oppressed persons is direct. "Make every man and woman free from the thralldom of the Shastras, cleanse their minds of the pernicious notions founded on the Shastras, and he or she will inter-dine and inter-marry, without your telling him or her to do so."<sup>162</sup> But while elegant in its simplicity, this statement was more

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<sup>160</sup> Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity*, p x-xi. For more on Ambedkar's critique of caste and gender with regards to the Indian Communists, see Chapter 3, pages 50 and 57-58 especially.

<sup>161</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936)," *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>162</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936)," *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>,

difficult and naive for it, because of the influence of the power structures that benefited from the maintenance of caste inequality.

Gandhi attempted to mitigate the stigmatization of caste while maintaining its role as an integral part of Indian society. Ambedkar rejected the unequal religiously mandated hierarchy as a basis for modern India. As early as 1927, Ambedkar had started to argue that the caste system must be abolished so that Indian society could “be constructed on the basis of equality.”<sup>163</sup> Implicit in Ambedkar’s argument for a ‘social revolution’ to end caste was the development of a civic Indian nation based on the equality of the individual and not of the group, whether religiously and colonially defined.

Ambedkar's role as an anti-colonialist was defined by two competing interests, political independence for India and socio-political independence for untouchables. Ambedkar did not view these interests as mutually exclusive, nor did he feel that the latter had to wait for the former. Ambedkar would eloquently argue for independence, with the oft repeated caveat, that while home rule is the ultimate goal, the quality and form of that independence must be built into the movement and not wait until after independence.<sup>164</sup> He stated that “[w]e know that political power is passing from the British into the hands of those who wield such tremendous economic, social and religious sway over our existence. We are willing that it may happen, though the idea of Swaraj recalls to the mind of many of us the tyrannies, oppressions and injustices practiced upon us in the past and

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April 1, 2008.

<sup>163</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “India Needs a Social Revolution (1927)” in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 3.

<sup>164</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, “Need For Political Power (1930),” in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 11.

fear of their recurrence under Swaraj.”<sup>165</sup> However, this did not mean that he believed that British rule should continue indefinitely.<sup>166</sup> Ambedkar was willing to wait for independence as long as it was a just independence for all Indian citizens.

Ambedkar's willingness to wait for a just independence was based in part in his interpretation of the British role in India. While Ambedkar was not necessarily supportive of the British presence in India, he did recognize the benefits British rule had brought to some groups of people in India, particularly untouchables, by providing access to routes of social mobility that had been previously denied to them.<sup>167</sup> Ambedkar argued that the British could have done more to overcome the institutional aspects of caste inequality, stating:

[t]here is certainly no fundamental change in our position. Indeed, so far as we are concerned, the British Government has accepted the social arrangements as it found them ... we do not accuse the British of indifference or want of sympathy. What we do find is that they are quite incompetent to tackle our problems ... we have come to realise on a deeper analysis of the situation is that it is not merely a case of indifference [to the plight of untouchables], rather it is a case of sheer incompetence to undertake the task.<sup>168</sup>

However, on the whole the British presence could do nothing but undermine Ambedkar's larger aims of political and social equality. Despite Ambedkar's ambivalence towards British rule, his nuanced interpretation of colonial rule often led to confrontations with other anti-colonial authorities over levels and types of political participation and, arguably, of the appropriation of Ambedkar by the

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<sup>165</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, “Need For Political Power (1930),” in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 11.

<sup>166</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, “Need For Political Power (1930),” in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 9.

<sup>167</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, “Need For Political Power (1930),” in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 7-8.

<sup>168</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, “Need For Political Power (1930),” in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 8.

British authorities as a dissenting voice in India that could provide legitimacy to certain colonial policies and to the presence of the British, and thus serve to undermine a united anti-colonial front despite his continued stance in favour of independence.<sup>169</sup>

In 1931 in Bombay, Ambedkar's first meeting with Gandhi touched on Ambedkar's ambivalence towards the nation that was being created under the stewardship of the Congress and Gandhi's understanding of the place of untouchables in the nation. *In Ambedkar: Towards an Enlightened India*, Gail Omvedt characterizes this meeting as uncomfortable, because Ambedkar was antagonistic towards Gandhi's acts of social reform.<sup>170</sup> As a retort to both Gandhi and the congress home movement, Ambedkar stated "Gandhiji, I have no homeland...How can I call this land my own homeland and this religion my own wherein we are treated worse than cats and dogs, wherein we cannot get water to drink?"<sup>171</sup> Further, during this meeting Ambedkar felt that Gandhi was not trying to find common ground, but attempting "to gauge the position of an irreconcilable opponent."<sup>172</sup> Based on this meeting and a later one during the Second Round Table Conference in London, Ambedkar decided that Gandhi's programme, despite some similarities in their goals, could not help the untouchables, and implicitly to Ambedkar this meant that the Gandhian path could not be a basis for an independent India.

At the Second Round Table Conference in 1931, Ambedkar was the government

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<sup>169</sup> See C. Rajagopalachari, *Ambedkar Refuted*, (Bombay: Hind Kitbas, 1946).

<sup>170</sup> Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, pp 42-3.

<sup>171</sup> Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, p 43 from Keer, *Life and Mission*, pp 165-68.

<sup>172</sup> Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, p 43.

appointed representative for untouchables in the Minorities Committee. Ambedkar proposed separate electorates to protect the political rights of untouchables, similar to those already given to the Muslims. However, Gandhi was opposed to any action that “tended to perpetuate the line between the untouchable and the rest of the Hindu Community.”<sup>173</sup> The Committee was unable to reach consensus and on October 8, 1931, Gandhi called for its adjournment since no compromise could be reached, suggesting that informal consultation would solve the ‘communal problem’.<sup>174</sup> Omvedt asserts that since Congress had already reached an agreement over separate electorates with the Muslim League, that the ‘communal problems’ in contention refer specifically to the untouchables.<sup>175</sup> At the conference, Ambedkar stressed the need for ‘empowerment and political protection’ of untouchables. However, Gandhi took a paternalist perspective, stating untouchables needed “protection from social and religious persecution.”<sup>176</sup> Unable to reach consensus, their debate soon became a contest over who truly represented untouchables.

Despite the failure at the Round Table Conference, Ambedkar continued to petition the British for separate electorates. Ambedkar was able to swing British support to his position resulting in Ramsey Macdonald’s Communal Award on August 16, 1932.<sup>177</sup> The Communal Award gave 71 seats to untouchables for which they alone could vote. Gandhi’s response was a fast-unto-death. Gandhi’s fast left Ambedkar in an untenable position. Continued opposition of Gandhi meant the untouchables could have

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<sup>173</sup> Pyarelal (Nayyar) “The Epic Fast (1932)” in Homer A. Jack, ed., *The Gandhi Reader: A source Book*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1956), p 282.

<sup>174</sup> Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, p 44.

<sup>175</sup> Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, p 44.

<sup>176</sup> Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, p 44.

<sup>177</sup> Kadam, *Significance of his Movement*, p 100.



faced the wrath of caste Hindus (especially if he should die),<sup>178</sup> or negotiate a new agreement with caste Hindus and lose the right to a separate electorate.<sup>179</sup> Faced with this decision, Ambedkar chose to negotiate a new agreement rather than risk the safety of his community. This confrontation also highlighted the fragility of the untouchables' place in a society that did not guarantee individual rights, but perpetuated group difference through ritual privilege and pollution.

The Poona Pact, signed September 24, 1932, promised the untouchables 148 seats representing the areas where they were the most numerous of the Depressed Classes. The problem was that while the untouchables would nominate the four persons standing for election, the entire electorate for those constituencies would vote, regardless of caste.<sup>180</sup> Jaffrelot suggests that for Gandhi, the Poona Pact “was much more than an exercise in political engineering: it had wider implications for society as a whole, as evident from his comment to Ambedkar in 1933: ‘In accepting the Poona Pact you accept the position that you are Hindus’.”<sup>181</sup> Ambedkar’s attempt to secure the untouchables position as a separate political entity in India, similar to that of the Muslims, was thwarted by Gandhi’s fast-unto-death.

One of the key results of the Poona Pact was the formation of the All India Anti-Untouchability League. The wealthy industrialist G. D. Birla set up the League as agreed. However, almost immediately, Ambedkar came into conflict with the caste Hindus over

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<sup>178</sup> Jaffrelot, *Ambedkar and Untouchability*, pp 64-65. Gandhi would himself predict violence if there were separate electorates, though he predicted that untouchable and Muslim ‘hooligans’ would attack caste Hindus, and that they needed to be protected from the British sponsored solidarity between the two.

<sup>179</sup> Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, pp 47-48.

<sup>180</sup> Jaffrelot, *Ambedkar and Untouchability*, p 67.

<sup>181</sup> Jaffrelot, *Ambedkar and Untouchability*, p 67.

how the Anti-Untouchability League was operated.<sup>182</sup> Ambedkar asserted that the League should advocate for civil-rights, especially access to water, schools, admission in village squares and public conveyances. Further, he called for campaigns for equal opportunity employment and programs that encouraged social relations by having caste Hindus accept untouchables “into their homes as guests or servants.”<sup>183</sup> However, Ambedkar’s demands were not even acknowledged. Instead, the league focused on developing personal virtue. Gandhi even introduced a new moniker for untouchables, *Harijan* (Children of God), and renamed the League the Harijan Sevak Sangh.<sup>184</sup> Further, in order that the Harijan Sevak Sangh not alienate conservative caste Hindus, its focus was limited to issues of untouchability.<sup>185</sup> Gandhi’s solutions for untouchability had one other drawback incompatible with Ambedkar’s aims for untouchable uplift. Gandhi believed that untouchability was a sin of caste Hindus, and thus they should take the leadership roles in the Harijan Sevak Sangh.<sup>186</sup> Ironically, this only perpetuated caste hierarchy in an organization whose original purpose was to overcome caste oppression.

Disillusioned with the results of the Round Table Conferences and the Poona Pact, Ambedkar’s next confrontation with Gandhi started with Ambedkar’s call for conversion. Ambedkar’s speech for the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal conference and his speech at the Yeola Conference on October 13, 1935, called for untouchables to leave the Hindu

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<sup>182</sup> Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, p 49.

<sup>183</sup> Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, pp 49-50.

<sup>184</sup> It was at this time, in response to the term ‘Harijan’ that dalit became a more prevalent term in Hindi and Marathi to translate names such as the ‘Depressed Class League’. Gandhi dominated the direction of the reforms pursued by Harijan Sevak Sangh, focusing its efforts on “the religious equality of untouchables, or, rather, the ending of the sin of untouchability within Hinduism.” Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, p 51.

<sup>185</sup> G. Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity*, (New Delhi: New Age International, 1998), pp 185-6.

<sup>186</sup> Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, p 51.

religion since untouchables would be unable to overcome caste oppression from within the Hindu fold. Speaking to untouchables in May 1936, Ambedkar stated that:

[t]he problem of untouchability is a matter of class struggle between caste Hindus and the untouchables. This is a matter of injustice being done by one class against another. This struggle is related to social status ... Your status in their eyes is low; you are impure; you must remain at the lowest rung. Then alone will they allow you to live happily. The moment you cross your level the struggle starts.<sup>187</sup>

Ambedkar's solution was simple and direct. Since the source of discrimination was based on religious proscription, Ambedkar concluded that the only way to "cleanse this filth ... is to throw off the shackles of Hindu religion and society."<sup>188</sup> Ambedkar was pragmatically recognizing the reality of the Indian political situation, namely that it was dominated by religious communities. If the untouchables were to convert en masse, they could potentially undermine the Hindu position politically. Further, this call to action was a direct threat to Gandhi's assertion that untouchables were a part of the Hindu community.

Gandhi recognized the validity of Ambedkar's critique of the treatment of untouchables at the hands of caste Hindus. Further, Gandhi admonished caste Hindus for their treatment of untouchables.<sup>189</sup> However, Gandhi also stated that caste is not actually a part of the Hindu religion.

Caste has nothing to do with religion. It is a custom whose origin I do not know and do not need to know for the satisfaction of my spiritual hunger. But I do know that it is harmful both to spiritual and national growth. Varna and Ashrama are institutions which have nothing to do with castes.... It also follows that there is no calling too low and none too high.

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<sup>187</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "The Path to Freedom (1935)" in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 16.

<sup>188</sup> B. R. Ambedkar "The Path to Freedom (1935)" in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 18.

<sup>189</sup> M. K. Gandhi, "A Vindication of Caste by Mahatma Gandhi" in "Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936)," *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

All are good, lawful and absolutely equal in status. The callings of a Brahmin— spiritual teacher—and a scavenger are equal, and their due performance carries equal merit before God and at one time seems to have carried identical reward before man. Both were entitled to their livelihood and no more.<sup>190</sup>

The key difference between Ambedkar and Gandhi was that the latter was calling for the equality of persons before God, while the former continually demanded equality of persons before the law. Gandhi idealized the Varna, condemning those that contravened it, while excluding them as examples of its application.

Ambedkar's responded that Gandhi had missed the point of the call for conversion. Ambedkar was not discussing religious equality, but the equality of persons. His assertion was that Hinduism encouraged inequality and must be confronted on those grounds.

Hindu society must be reorganized on a religious basis which would recognise the principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity; That in order to achieve this object the sense of religious sanctity behind Caste and Varna must be destroyed; That the sanctity of Caste and Varna can be destroyed only by discarding the divine authority of the Shastras.<sup>191</sup>

The caste system was not the only problem that Ambedkar confronted, but the religious system that gave it sanction. He argued that no matter how idealized, a religion based on unequal relationships could not form the basis of a civil society.

The best of men cannot be moral if the basis of relationship between them and their fellows is fundamentally a wrong relationship. To a slave his master may be better or worse. But there cannot be a good master. A good man cannot be a master and a master cannot be a good man. The same applies to the relationship between high caste and low caste. To a low caste man a high caste man can be better or worse as compared to other high

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<sup>190</sup> Gandhi, "Dr. Ambedkar's Indictment (1936)" in *CW Gandhi* Vol. LXIII, p 153.

<sup>191</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936)," *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

caste men. A high caste man cannot be a good man in so far as he must have a low caste man to distinguish him as high caste man. It cannot be good to a low caste man to be conscious that there is a high caste man above him.<sup>192</sup>

Ambedkar argued that Indian society required the abolition of the caste system. If untouchables were to be freed from caste, they must also free themselves from its traditions and the most effective means to accomplish this goal was through conversion.

In 1940, Ambedkar published *Pakistan, or the Partition of India*. This book was the culmination of his critique of the nation. His conclusion was that Muslims had a right to partition, but that partition was not a necessary result of separate nationalities.<sup>193</sup> He argued that Muslims constitute a separate nation and that Congress' arguments to the contrary were based on incidental commonalities, whereas the divisions between the two communities were fundamental.<sup>194</sup> This constituted a direct challenge to the nationalist movement as developed by the Indian National Congress. It undermined the idea that India is one nation indivisible within its colonial borders. By delving into the question of partition, Ambedkar also laid the foundation for his critiques of nationality and nationalism. In Ambedkar's view, nationality is based on a feeling of sameness or difference; it "is a social feeling."<sup>195</sup> Its expression only requires the desire to live as a

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<sup>192</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936)," *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>193</sup> B. R. Ambedkar "A Nation Calling for a Home (Is There a Case for Pakistan?) (1940)" in Valerian Rodrigues, *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), p 461.

<sup>194</sup> B. R. Ambedkar "A Nation Calling for a Home (Is There a Case for Pakistan?) (1940)" in Rodrigues, *Essential Writings*, p 466.

<sup>195</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, *Pakistan or the Partition of India* (1940), *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

nation and a territory in which to make a state.<sup>196</sup> According to Ambedkar, if these conditions are met then it is of no use to deny the nation's reality.

Ambedkar differentiated between nationality and nationalism. He wrote that they are two different states of the human mind.<sup>197</sup> The first is a consciousness of kinship. The second represents the desire for a separate national existence.<sup>198</sup> Ambedkar cites examples from around the world, where a community consciousness did not necessarily develop into a demand for independence.<sup>199</sup> In these cases, Ambedkar argues that the different kinship groups must negotiate with each other to create or maintain the state. The nation is an entity continually created and negotiated between people and not predetermined. One group cannot insist that another group stay in a state against its will. Further, even if a nationality is not expressed at one moment in time, this does not negate its expression at a later time.<sup>200</sup> Gandhi was critical of Ambedkar's thesis for Muslim Independence. However, Gandhi failed to contradict Ambedkar's argument, stating instead that it "carried no conviction" and that he was a "lover of communal unity."<sup>201</sup> Though Gandhi did recognize the right to self-determination, instead of confronting

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<sup>196</sup> B. R. Ambedkar "A Nation Calling for a Home (Is There a Case for Pakistan?) (1940)" in Rodrigues, *Essential Writings*, p 469.

<sup>197</sup> B. R. Ambedkar "A Nation Calling for a Home (Is There a Case for Pakistan?) (1940)" in Rodrigues, *Essential Writings*, p 468.

<sup>198</sup> B. R. Ambedkar "A Nation Calling for a Home (Is There a Case for Pakistan?) (1940)" in Rodrigues, *Essential Writings*, p 468.

<sup>199</sup> B. R. Ambedkar "A Nation Calling for a Home (Is There a Case for Pakistan?) (1940)" in Rodrigues, *Essential Writings*, p 468. His example of the French in Canada has since proved inadequate, but he was writing before the Quiet Revolution and the growth of Quebecois nationalism. B. R. Ambedkar "A Nation Calling for a Home (Is There a Case for Pakistan?) (1940)" in Rodrigues, *Essential Writings*, p 468.

<sup>200</sup> B. R. Ambedkar "A Nation Calling for a Home (Is There a Case for Pakistan?) (1940)" in Rodrigues, *Essential Writings*, p 467.

<sup>201</sup> M. K. Gandhi, "Letter to M. A. Jinnah (1944)" in Aravinda Malagatti, ed., *What Gandhi says about Ambedkar*, (Mysore: Prasaranga, 2000), p 290.

Ambedkar on this issue, he reconciled himself to this “unfortunate difference.”<sup>202</sup>

Ambedkar progressively developed a national image in opposition to the dominant identity presented by Gandhi and Congress. Ambedkar’s critique of the nation grew out of his critique of caste. While he preferred the unification of all communities in colonial India into a civic nation, he also recognized that unity could not be forced on the Muslims. A group with a legitimate desire and claim for independence had to be acknowledged. Unfortunately for Ambedkar, based on his own criteria, untouchables could not constitute a separate nation. While they did have a separate kinship identity, there was no homeland that could represent a cultural home for untouchables.

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<sup>202</sup> M. K. Gandhi, “Letter to B. R. Ambedkar (1933)” in Malagatti, *What Gandhi Says*, p 289.

## Chapter 3

### The Indian Left and the Question of Caste

It is frequently claimed that Communism has been most successful where it has been able to combine with populist issues, less when it mobilized strictly on class questions. This goes some way to explain why demands advocated by the Communists are often not particularly progressive in terms of the lower classes, while appealing to middle-class constituencies.<sup>203</sup>

The Indian Left, like Ambedkar's personal philosophy and movement, cannot be described as either singular or static. The Communist movement adapted to reflect political conditions both at home and abroad. Sometimes, this led to policies that were counter-intuitive to the political and social situation in India. However, the Communists also demonstrated an ability to conform to the broader political situation when needed. Towards the end of the colonial period, the Communists for the most part maintained a policy of forming a united-front against the colonial government. This policy and the refusal to address non-economic forms of oppression directly, led to an inability to engage broadly with low caste groups that could have represented natural allies. As the above quote suggests, this appears to be a characteristic of Communism. Thus, while Ambedkar's movement appears to be a potential political ally, the Communists instead heavily criticized him, while often allying themselves with Congress. The failure of a possible alliance is due, in part, to the way the Communist movement developed in India and Ambedkar's disapproval of certain aspects of Marxist philosophy that struck him as

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<sup>203</sup> Ross Mallick, *Indian Communism: Opposition, Collaboration, and Institutionalization*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), p 257.



undemocratic.<sup>204</sup> The most likely period of ideological intersection between the Communists and Ambedkar started in the early 1930s, as he moved further left politically, until the early 1940s, when Ambedkar was on increasingly better terms with Congress. During this likely period of intersection, the Communists failed to engage with Ambedkar's critique of either nation or caste, while Ambedkar became increasingly antithetical to Communist philosophy as a means to ending inequality. As a result, what may have been a mutually beneficial alliance, never materialized.

The Communist movement in India went through five distinct phases prior to independence. First, a preliminary phase (1920-29) marked by haphazard political growth and internal conflict.<sup>205</sup> The intermediary phase (1930-1933) that, as defined by Jarius Banaji in *National and Left Movements in India*, characterizes the Communists as lacking organization and having backward development relative to the nationalist trend of Indian society.<sup>206</sup> This was followed by the United Front phase (1934-1939), characterized by a general alignment of anti-imperialist forces against colonialism, but ended in contradiction. Then came the War phase (1940-1945), which was a period of further contradiction, serving to alienate the Communists from both potentially anti-fascist allies and the nationalist movement. Finally, the phase of Independence and Partition (1945-49), where the Communists often appeared rudderless. Over this period, Indian Communism "evolved haltingly, trailing after events rather than anticipating

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<sup>204</sup> Ambedkar's disapproval of Marxism will be discussed in Chapter Five.

<sup>205</sup> Satyabharata Rai Chowdhuri, *Leftist movements in India, 1917-1947* (Calcutta: Minerva Associates, 1977), p 84.

<sup>206</sup> Jarius Banaji "The Comintern and Indian Nationalism" in K. N. Panikkar, ed., *National and Left Movements in India*, (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing, 1980), pp 235 and 249.

them.”<sup>207</sup> After independence, an alliance between Ambedkar and the Communists became unworkable.

The preliminary phase covers the foundation of the Communist Party of India (1920-29). M.N. Roy was one of the key leaders during the preliminary phase of Communist development in India.<sup>208</sup> He helped to develop the Communist path in India, mostly while abroad. However, one key aspect of this period was the struggle for control of the Communist Party in India. The key contention was whether the party would be controlled by the British Communist Party - mirroring colonial subjugation in India, whether a group of Indian Communists located in Germany would lead or, if Roy and his allies would lead.<sup>209</sup> The conflict over control of the nascent Indian Communist Party help to retard its growth and, combined with the Meerut Conspiracy, had the effect of leaving the Communist Party of India nearly moribund when nearly all of its founders were tried and convicted of conspiracy against the crown.<sup>210</sup> Prior to the 1930s, neither the Communists nor Ambedkar were in a position to aid or affect each other, let alone form an alliance for the benefit of workers and low caste Hindus. At this point, both were still putting their houses in order, preparing their political machinery and defining their

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<sup>207</sup> Gene D. Overstreet and Marshall Windmiller, *Communism in India*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1960), p 19. Overstreet stated this about the Communist party for the entire period leading up to independence, but it is particularly applicable for during this developmental period.

<sup>208</sup> Roy became a Communist during his time in Mexico while looking for aid in America to help remove British rule in India during World War One. For a detailed analysis of Roy’s life see Sibnarayan Ray, *In Freedom’s Quest: Life of M. N. Roy*, (Kolkata: Renaissance Publishers, 2005).

<sup>209</sup> Ray, *Freedom’s Quest*, p 22.

<sup>210</sup> Chowdhuri, *Leftist Movements*, p 64. The Meerut Conspiracy Case charged 31 leading trade union leaders for having “conspired to deprive the King Emperor of his sovereignty of India.” Sankar Ghose, *Socialism and Communism in India*, (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1921), p 60.

places in the Indian political landscape.

Roy eventually lost his position of the political leadership of the CPI.

Unfortunately, it was Roy's objectives that appear most amenable to cooperation with Ambedkar. Roy wanted to train social elements, other than the counter revolutionary bourgeois, that would step into the positions of national leadership.<sup>211</sup> As with Ambedkar, the goal was to promote leadership among groups normally excluded from that role. This similarity may have been one reason that Roy sought out Ambedkar in April 1931 to discuss Indian politics.<sup>212</sup> Roy was seeking new allies. During this interview, Ambedkar "found that Roy had not given thought to the problem of Untouchables."<sup>213</sup> Because of this difference, Ambedkar did not see Roy as a suitable ally.

Roy's exile from the CPI coincided with an increasingly rigid interpretation of Marxist theory and directives from the Communist International (Comintern) that dominated their analytical framework. Roy was expelled by the Comintern in 1929 over his advocacy for an alliance with German Social Democrats to counter the Nazi's in 1929 and an earlier controversy over decolonization.<sup>214</sup> Roy had argued that revolution need

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<sup>211</sup> Chowdhuri, *Leftist Movements*, p 77.

<sup>212</sup> Keer, *Life and Mission*, p 162. Further Roy, like Ambedkar, was critical of Gandhi's role as a revolutionary figure, arguing that he was a religious and cultural revivalist and therefore was bound to be a "reactionary' socially and culturally, however revolutionary he might appear politically." Samaren Roy, *M.N. Roy: A Political Biography*, (New Delhi: Orient Longman Limited, 1997), p 48.

<sup>213</sup> Kadam, *Significance of his Movement*, p 95. Roy had attended the meeting under the pseudonym of Dr. Mohamud, but Ambedkar appeared to have seen through the deception. There is limited evidence about what occurred during the meeting other than it did occur and that Ambedkar apparently saw through Roy's disguise. The absence of detailed evidence creates certain difficulties in analyzing purpose and outcome of the meeting.

<sup>214</sup> Samaren Roy, *Political Biography*, p 83 and p 85. The decolonization controversy

not necessarily occur first in industrialized states.<sup>215</sup> However, the CPI continued to follow the Comintern's assertion that the revolution would first come in industrialized states, despite evidence to the contrary that could support Roy's thesis in the form of the Russian Revolution, which even Lenin thought was too agrarian for a communist revolution to take hold.<sup>216</sup> Despite their calls for independence, the Indian Communists remained deferential to an external authority, sacrificing their ability to respond independently and quickly to variable local conditions. The prime example of this was the Indian Communist's lack of independence in WWII.<sup>217</sup> The resulting rigidity towards changes in the political landscape repeatedly hampered the Indian Communists ability to make and maintain political connections.

Despite Ambedkar's political shift to the left during the 1930s, his analytical framework remained rooted in liberal traditions. Ambedkar continued to embrace democracy as the ideal form of social construction. By 1936, Ambedkar was arguing for an expanded definition of democracy beyond the purely political, that democracy "is essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellowmen .... [That few] object to liberty in the sense of a right to free movement, in the sense of a right to life and limb. There is no objection to liberty in the sense of a right to property, tools and materials as being necessary for earning a living to keep the body in due state of health."<sup>218</sup> Further,

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evolved out of his assessment that British colonialism had brought European capitalism to India and encouraged native capitalism. For this he was labeled an apologist for British imperialism. Samaren Roy, *Political Biography*, p 81.

<sup>215</sup> Samaren Roy, *Political Biography*, p 64.

<sup>216</sup> Samaren Roy, *Political Biography*, p 129.

<sup>217</sup> This will be discussed more later in this chapter.

<sup>218</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936)," *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

Omvedt states that Ambedkar's conception of socio-political organization echoed the dominant theoretical interpretation of how economic organization, with a dominant role for the state in agriculture and heavy industry.<sup>219</sup> The assumption was that state ownership of these industries was the best model to assure economic democracy and industrial development. He argued that Socialists were too focused on the economic aspect of social stratification and that this led them to ignore or dismiss the role of caste and religion.<sup>220</sup> Ambedkar continued to develop his social democratic framework through the remainder of his career, arguing that neither economic nor political equality were independently sufficient.<sup>221</sup> This assertion would continually lead to confrontation between Ambedkar and the Indian Communists.

During the second phase (1930-33), the Communists failed to engage with either the larger nationalist movement or the plight of untouchables. One key event in the development of the Indian state, the Poona Pact, was largely ignored by the Communists, even though it would continue to play a vital role in elections until independence.

"Marxists did not take part because they were unable to, but because they did not see the issue of caste and Untouchability as important."<sup>222</sup> Thus, they missed an important opportunity to shape Indian politics. In the aftermath of the Poona Pact, there were three major untouchable organizations. Of these three major untouchable associations in the

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<sup>219</sup> Omvedt "Undoing the Bondage: Dr. Ambedkar's Theory of Dalit Liberation" in Yadav, *Periphery to Center Stage*, pp 123-125.

<sup>220</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936)," *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>221</sup> B. R. Ambedkar "The Future of Parliamentary Democracy (1949)" in Barbara R. Joshi, ed., *Untouchable! Voices of the Dalit Liberation Movement*, (London: Zed Books, 1986), p 40. Ambedkar presented this position to the Constituent Assembly while defending the constitution on 25 November 1949.

<sup>222</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 177.

1930s, the Communists had relationships with none, while Ambedkar, Gandhi and Hindu fundamentalists did. The first of these groups was the Depressed Caste Association, with links to the Hindu Mahasabha. The second of these groups, the Depressed Classes Federation (the Scheduled Caste Federation after 1942) had direct links to Ambedkar. And finally, the Depressed Caste League (also called the Harijan League) had direct links to Gandhi and Congress.<sup>223</sup> The Communists failed to utilize these existing structures, or create new ones, to expand influence among untouchables.

The Communists preferred to use the *Kisan Sabhas*.<sup>224</sup> The communists working within the Kisan Sabha started to secretly mobilize the rural poor on local issues.<sup>225</sup> Kisan Sabhas started forming in the late 1920s and the 1930s, with the first meeting to the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) was in Lucknow in 1935.<sup>226</sup> These parties allowed a front through which Communists could work legitimately, since the Communist Party was an illegal organization in India at the time. These organizations also typify the Communist political framework dismissing or ignoring less tangible vertical cultural divisions that ‘distracted’ from the material and structural relationships of oppression. EMS Namboodiripad (EMS) would later write that the Poona Pact “was a great blow to the freedom movement. For this led to the diversion of the people’s attention from the

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<sup>223</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 181.

<sup>224</sup> Jairus Banaji “The Comintern and Indian Nationalism” in Panikkar, *National and Left Movements*, pp 236-37. The Kisan Sabhas were peasant workers parties throughout India united under the AIKS. They worked to “secure [the] freedom of the peasantry from economic exploitation and attain economic and political power for the peasants, workers and all other exploited classes.” Debal K. SinghaRoy, *Peasant Movements in Post-colonial India: Dynamics of Mobilization and Identity*, (New Delhi: Sage, 2004), p 55.

<sup>225</sup> SinghaRoy, *Peasant Movements*, p 55.

<sup>226</sup> A.R. Desai, “Indian Kisan: Their Principal Movements Before Independence” in A. R. Desai, ed., *Rural Sociology in India*, (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 2005), p 393. The Congress Socialists also worked with the AIKS.

objective of full independence to the mundane cause of the uplift of Harijan.”<sup>227</sup> This leads to an important distinction between Ambedkar and some leading Communists. The Communists advocated independence, while they postponed or dismissed issues regarding the quality of that independence. “Marxists in India never showed the mental boldness of Mao in recognizing the impact of ‘spiritual things and social consciousness on social existence.’”<sup>228</sup> As with Congress, systematic problems like caste and gender, that Ambedkar and like minded advocates brought to the fore, were postponed until after independence.

During the third phase (1934-39), the Communists proceeded to pull their members from non-Congress affiliated parties. The Congress, by this time had become the preeminent anti-imperialist party in India. In keeping with this growing dominance of Congress, the Communists tried to focus their influence where they felt they could accomplish the most. “The representatives of [left] organisations [in Congress] will have to be able, and will be able, to utilise the meetings of the Congress organisations not only for agitating for the minimum platform of the united front, but also for explaining and defending the complete, undeleted programme of the anti-imperialist and agrarian peasant revolution under the leadership of the working class.”<sup>229</sup> The Communists, like many groups, pulled themselves further into the political orbit of Congress. As independence became a more tangible possibility, many groups, including several

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<sup>227</sup> E.M.S. Namboodiripad, *A History of the Indian Freedom Movement*, (Trivandrum: Socialist Science Press, 1986), p 492 in Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 177.

<sup>228</sup> P. C. Joshi, “Reflections on Marxism and Social Revolution in India” in Panikkar, *National and Left Movements*, p 182.

<sup>229</sup> *sic*, Anonymous, “Problems of the Anti-Imperial Struggle in India (1935)” in Subodh Roy, ed., *Communism in India: Unpublished Documents, 1935-1945*, (Calcutta: Ganashakti Printers, 1976), p 41.

formally independent untouchable groups aligned themselves with Congress. For the Communists, there are two key reasons for this realignment. The first was a directive from the Communist International suggesting that the Indian Communist's resources were best utilized by entering, and if possible, commandeering the nationalist movement.<sup>230</sup> It was clear that Congress was one of the few groups recognized by the British Government to talk on behalf of India. A second reason was Gandhi's radicalization following the Lahore Congress in 1929.<sup>231</sup> By advocating independence, Gandhi "took the wind out of the sails of the Extremists ... and divided the ranks of the opposition by winning over some of the left wing leaders."<sup>232</sup> By the end of this period the Communists were attributing a progressive role to Gandhi rather than critiquing him for his bourgeois tendencies.<sup>233</sup>

The fourth phase isolated the Communists from other political forces in India. The key reason for this overnight change in the position of the Communists was World War II. Initially, the Communists sided with Congress' decision not to actively support the British in the war.<sup>234</sup> This left them isolated from political organizations that supported the British against fascism, of which Ambedkar and the Scheduled Caste Federation was one. Because of the treaty of non-aggression between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, the Communists argued against the war on the ground that it was a war

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<sup>230</sup> Jairus Banaji, "The Comintern and Indian Nationalism" in Pannikar, Pg. 261.

<sup>231</sup> Jairus Banaji, "The Comintern and Indian Nationalism" in Pannikar, p. 227.

<sup>232</sup> S.C. Bose, "The Indian Struggle 1920-42, Bombay," p 159 from Jairus Banaji, "The Comintern and Indian Nationalism" in Pannikar, p 227.

<sup>233</sup> There is no corresponding evidence that the Communists also shifted their position in regards to Ambedkar during this period.

<sup>234</sup> G. Adhikar, "The Second Imperialist War (1939)" in Subodh Roy, *Communism in India*, p 153. The Communists originally argued against the 'second imperialist war' and that the Soviet non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany ended the Nazi threat in Eastern Europe.



between imperialist powers, and thus, the Communists could not take any action that would support the British. Several other Indian organizations took the same position, including Congress. Thus while the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact remained in place the Communists appeared secured in their political situation. However, as soon as Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union, the Indian Communists changed their position on the war. This had the effect of isolating the Communists from Congress and making their new 'allies' wary of their future intentions.<sup>235</sup> This was clearly a case where international events adversely affected the fortunes of the CPI. Circumstance and intention isolated them politically. While the CPI followed the Soviet Union's lead in war or peace, Ambedkar campaigned in favour of the British war effort. He had the freedom to follow his personal beliefs. Given Ambedkar's unconditional belief in democracy, anything other than support for the British war effort was unthinkable. This, at the very least, allowed Ambedkar to develop a consistent policy on the war while the Communists were caught wavering.

The fifth phase (1945-49) heralded the end of any hope for a working relationship between the Communists and Ambedkar. While the Communists finally appeared to have the issue of caste on their political radar, their engagement with caste and Ambedkar was hardly conducive to an alliance, however temporary. From the perspective of the Communists, Ambedkar's agreement to work in the new Congress cabinet in 1947 served to provide the Communists further proof of Ambedkar's bourgeois tendencies.<sup>236</sup> Other supposed proofs include Ambedkar's support for liberal democracy, his antagonism with

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<sup>235</sup> Ghose, *Socialism and Communism*, pp 315-316.

<sup>236</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 183. This, despite the Communists own efforts to work within and along side Congress in earlier periods.

the dictatorship of the proletariat and his view that non-material concerns must also be recognized and confronted in any fight to end oppression.<sup>237</sup> While this shift appeared to be away from his previous radical politics (and incidentally away from a potential alliance with the Communists), it is more representative of Ambedkar's rejection of Marxism as an analytical framework to advance political and social change.

By 1948, the Communists started to recognize the problem of caste, but their solution "proposed a confrontation with Ambedkar, denouncing him as 'separatist', 'opportunistic' and pro-British. The Communists remained locked into an analytical framework that minimized the role of caste as a means of social inequity."<sup>238</sup> It also treated 'caste prejudice' as only bourgeois divisiveness. The Communists made no effort to go into the specifics of caste exploitation, and asked untouchables to join the 'democratic revolution' without giving one single concrete programme for fighting caste or Untouchability."<sup>239</sup> The Communists were continually unable to capitalize on this specific type of exploitation simply because they refused to offer a plan to counteract caste.

After Indian independence the Communist party began to fracture. "The growth of constitutionalism resulted in radical splinter parties being formed. Their eventual compromise and moderation indicate that reformism rather than radicalism was the dominant trend of Indian Communists and that radical activities were either turned to reformist ones or were eradicated by state repression."<sup>240</sup> Individually, the Communists

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<sup>237</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 183.

<sup>238</sup> Caste was still considered a separate issue from economic forms of inequity.

<sup>239</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 183.

<sup>240</sup> The first split Mallick is discussing took place in the 1950s resulting in the Communist part of India (CPI) and the Communist party of India - Marxist (CPI-M))

may have transcended caste, ignoring caste distinctions, but as a political movement they never developed a program to confront caste.<sup>241</sup> Instead, they argued that reforming the material distribution of land would resolve the problems of untouchables.<sup>242</sup> Omvedt gives two reasons for the Communists (those not ‘eradicated by state repression’) inability to take caste into account. First, that Indian Communists were largely “a bunch of Brahman boys.”<sup>243</sup> The second reason was that Marxism was “incapable of handling caste and other ‘non-class’ contradictions.”<sup>244</sup> In both cases she is clear that this is historically contingent.<sup>245</sup> The problem was not that the Communist movement originated as Brahman-dominated, but that it remained so.<sup>246</sup>

Despite Omvedt’s broad treatment of the Indian Communist Party’s engagement with caste, there were some Communists who argued for a discussion on the role of caste in India because of its contemporary role in Indian society. By “1944 ... there was considerable discontent within both the ranks and the leadership about the caste system within the party. [However,] EMS rode the storm by arguing that the party should not become the ‘display case of the religions and castes of India.’”<sup>247</sup> Marxism in India remained conservative, taking a narrow approach to the struggles of low-caste peasants and workers within the confines of a class framework of a closed system, not as “a

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Mallick, *Indian Communism*, p 5.

<sup>241</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 182 and Teltumbde, *Anti-Imperialism*, p 33.

<sup>242</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 185

<sup>243</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 183.

<sup>244</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 183.

<sup>245</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 183.

<sup>246</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 184.

<sup>247</sup> Dilip M. Menon, “Being a Brahmin the Marxist Way: E.M.S. Namboodiripad and the Pasts of Kerala,” in Daud Ali, ed., *Invoking the Past: The Uses of History in South Asia*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p 75.

developing science.”<sup>248</sup>

The strict interpretation of Marxism had deep roots in the Indian Communist tradition. S. A. Dange, one of the early Indian theorists on Marxism, wrote in 1921 that “Karl Mark’s book, the ‘Capital’ is to the Bolshevik what the Geeta is to the Hindoo, or the bible to the Christian. Day by day the very inspirer, Karl Marx, is passing into a Mythical Being. Bolshevism has come to acquire a force of religion, and all that inspired unflinching belief, that a religion demands (*sic*).”<sup>249</sup> Bolshevism, as an ‘extremist Marxian’ interpretation, came to inform the foundations of Indian Communism. Dange argued that the Bolshevik “world view [was] based on three things, - economic materialism, surplus value and class war.”<sup>250</sup> Further, Dange advanced a simplistic interpretation of economic materialism; it “simply [meant] that almost all human activity is directed with the motive of economic aggrandisement, that all the mass phenomena of history are determined by economic motives.”<sup>251</sup> Dange left no room for non-material inputs affecting social location. Dange’s interpretation of Marxism was simplistic, lacking nuance that made it applicable to the Indian situation.<sup>252</sup> It is in this sense that Ganguly’s interpretation of Indian communism as ‘vulgar’ applies, not only in regards to

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<sup>248</sup> Ambedkar’s reciprocal response to this closed system will be developed in Chapter Four. Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 185.

<sup>249</sup> S. A. Dange, *Gandhi vs. Lenin*, (Bombay: Liberty Literature, 1921), p 75 from Tapan Kumar Chattopadhyay, “Bolshevism or Gandhism?” in Panchanan Chattopadhyay, ed., *S. A. Dange and the Twentieth Century*, (Kolkata: Progressive publishers, 2002), p 42.

<sup>250</sup> Tapan Kumar Chattopadhyay, “Bolshevism or Gandhism?” in P. Chattopadhyay, *S. A. Dange*, p 42.

<sup>251</sup> S. A. Dange, *Gandhi vs. Lenin*, (Bombay: Liberty Literature, 1921), p 76 from T. K. Chattopadhyay, in P. Chattopadhyay, *S. A. Dange*, p 43.

<sup>252</sup> There were other Communist leaders that developed nuanced interpretations of Marxism, such as M. N. Roy, but simplistic interpretations of Marxism tended to dominate the early development of the Indian Communist Party

Ambedkar's interpretation of Indian communism.<sup>253</sup>

The simplistic interpretation presented by Dange leads directly to the inability of Ambedkar and the Indian Communists to speak directly to each other. The Indian Communists presented a ridged perspective based in a secular tradition that undermined their ability to engage with caste as anything other than an aspect of the social superstructure that would fall away once the economic conditions of exploitation had been eliminated: non-material means of exploitation were secondary attributes of the primary cause of inequality, material inequality.<sup>254</sup> Ambedkar proved more radical than the Communists. Ambedkar recognized that caste needed to be confronted in conjunction with problems of material inequality. In 1936, Ambedkar stated in his undelivered speech to the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal of Lahore that:

the social order prevalent in India is a matter which a Socialist must deal with, that unless he does so he cannot achieve his revolution and that 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, is a proposition which in my opinion is incontrovertible. 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. You cannot have political reform, you cannot have economic reform, unless you kill this monster.<sup>255</sup>

While Ambedkar did not single out the Communists, he was clear that political organizations that did not confront the problem of caste would be unable to pursue their policies of material improvement for the lower classes in India. P. C. Joshi traces the Communists' repeated 'setbacks' to their failure to "combine ... the economic and

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<sup>253</sup> Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity*, p 91. Ganguly's assertion about the 'vulgar' reading of communism in India will be discussed more fully in Chapter Five.

<sup>254</sup> Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity*, p 85.

<sup>255</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936)," *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

political struggles with the theoretical struggle.”<sup>256</sup> Ross Mallick goes further stating that:

the history of Marxist parties has oscillated between revolution and reformist tendencies. The general trend towards reformist policies was offset by radical splinter groups leaving the party to create new organizations ... The ultimate triumph of reformism over revolutionary policies in India is indicative of the political forces at work here and their uniqueness in world politics. Though half of the worlds absolute poor are South Asian, the Communists ultimately failed to mobilize them, and instead came to represent those above the poverty line, [producing] instead a Communist institutionalization of the status quo.<sup>257</sup>

This insight reveals part of the problem that the Communists had when relating to Ambedkar’s movement. Ambedkar constantly challenged the status quo, demanding equal rights for untouchables and even calling for an end to Hinduism, while the Communists failed to recognize the problem that caste represented. When “Dalit issues were taken up [it was] in condemnation of ‘pre-capitalist forms of exploitation’ and ‘feudal bondage’ ... But, the Marxist language ... did not automatically include caste.”<sup>258</sup> As such they were unable to adequately respond to the challenge that caste was a defining aspect of Indian society.

EMS Namboodiripad delineated one of two key Communist commentaries on the role of caste in India. His interpretation of caste was representative of the second and third phase of non-cooperation between Ambedkar and the Communists. EMS was a Communist leader from Kerala, in south India. While his interpretation was specific to

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<sup>256</sup> P. C. Joshi, “Reflections on Marxism and Social Revolution in India” in Panikkar, *National and Left Movements*, p 183.

<sup>257</sup> Mallick, *Indian Communism*, p 2.

<sup>258</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 180. It is arguable that the secular nature of Marxism precluded the ability of Indian Communists to engage adequately with caste. However, the high caste location of many dominant Indian Communists, would also likely have contributed to their inability to engage caste, as the negatives of caste were not as immediate to these leaders as they were to Ambedkar and other low caste and untouchable leaders.

Kerala, there are certain aspects of his interpretation of Marxism that are consistent with trends of the CPI. Dilip M. Menon, in “Being a Brahmin the Marxist Way,” provides insight into EMS’ interpretation of Marxism, stating that:

[a]ll reading happens within a matrix of ideology and cultural determination. This is not, of course, to argue that one must privilege the idiosyncrasies of individual engagement with a text over possible meanings within the text itself. It is, rather, to emphasize that 'misunderstandings' of text, or a body of theory, are a window to an individual's mode of thinking as it grapples with a structured ideology. We can then focus of a notion of ideology as a dynamic, interactive and ingoing activity rather than as a finished intellectual system ... We can begin to look at how individuals make meaning through the 'translation' of ideas in terms of their own concerns, rather than becoming 'transmitters' of a system that has a coherence independent of individual understanding.<sup>259</sup>

EMS interpreted Marxism in such a way that it favoured the development of Brahmanism and caste as a positive development of historical materialism. The caste system “was the marker of the superior economic organization which the Brahmins instituted allowing the shift from one mode of production to another. Just as slavery helped human progress towards a more civilized state in Europe, the caste system played a similar role in its time ... The Brahmin was seen as the prime mover in this system, the ‘one who organized production’ by allocating to each caste a profession.”<sup>260</sup> Thus, EMS used Marxism to justify caste inequality, and give precedence to Brahmins in Indian Society.

EMS was not alone at this time in characterising caste as if it were devoid of all connotations of ritual and social lowliness. It was only as late as 1948, at the Second Party Congress that opposition to discrimination based on caste was officially made a part of the ‘Programme of the Democratic Revolution’. Even then, discrimination against the untouchables was denounced instrumentally as ‘a bourgeois attempt to

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<sup>259</sup> Dilip M. Menon, “Being a Brahmin the Marxist Way: E.M.S. Namboodiripad and the Pasts of Kerala,” in Ali, *Invoking the Past*, p 56. Incidentally, Ambedkar’s interpretations of both Marxism and Buddhism can be viewed the same way.

<sup>260</sup> Dilip M. Menon, “Being a Brahmin the Marxist Way: E.M.S. Namboodiripad and the Pasts of Kerala,” in Ali, *Invoking the Past*, p 73

keep the masses disunited' rather than as possessing a deeper resonance at the experiential level as well.<sup>261</sup>

Caste, even when recognized as a problem by the Communists in Indian society, was not a structural problem to be challenged, but remained an incidental aspect of bourgeois oppression that distracted the lower classes from the 'important' material aspects of oppression.

EMS also interpreted Marxism to justify certain aspects of Brahmin society that he deemed more advanced, including the decline of the matrilineal family in favour of the patrilineal family. EMS used Engels discourse on marriage to justify and celebrate this shift, while failing to recognize that Engels disproved of this change.<sup>262</sup> Brahmin family structure in Kerala had only recently shifted from the matrilineal to the patrilineal. Thus, EMS' support of the patrilineal family structure through Marxist analysis is representative of an attempt to justify the structural change as a necessary 'progressive' development of Kerala's social structure, proving that it was advancing historically, even if that 'historical advancement' was not necessarily a positive change in regards to equality between various groups in line with Marxist theory. EMS argued that castes that shifted to the patrilineal were more advanced than those that maintained the matrilineal tradition in Kerala. "Thus, through this interpretation, Marxism allowed the reinstatement of a role for the Brahmins by putting them at the heart of crucial changes in the organization of the family, a theme with major resonance for a society engaged in an

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<sup>261</sup> Dilip M. Menon, "Being a Brahmin the Marxist Way: E.M.S. Namboodiripad and the Pasts of Kerala," in Ali, *Invoking the Past*, p 74

<sup>262</sup> Dilip M. Menon, "Being a Brahmin the Marxist Way: E.M.S. Namboodiripad and the Pasts of Kerala," in Ali, *Invoking the Past*, p 69



attack on the legacy of matrilineal organization.”<sup>263</sup> However, contradictions remained since “the use of Nambudiri myths along with a scientific approach to history [put the] working classes at the heart of the theoretical exercise [while] in practice exalting the high culture produced by the Brahmins.”<sup>264</sup>

EMS also developed a critique of Buddhism as an older societal form that had to be replaced by Brahmanism and caste. EMS believed that Buddhism represented an older mode of production and social structure. He argued this despite the more egalitarian aspects of Buddhism; historical progress required its demise in the face of new advanced modes of production, namely caste.<sup>265</sup> EMS mirrored Ambedkar’s argument that there was a societal clash between Buddhism and Brahmanism and that Buddhism lost out in this clash. “Buddhism was seen as having arisen in response to the 'subordination of the majority of the people to a tiny minority' despite the 'social advancement' brought about by the division of labour through caste.... The victory over Buddhism of Sankaracharya and the advaita philosophy represented not only the triumph of an ideology but a shift in the relations of production. For EMS, this was a crucial watershed in the history of Kerala ... Buddhism perished because it had to; it represented an older order which may have had greater equality between people as a premise but was tied to a stagnant mode of production.”<sup>266</sup> This interpretation of Buddhism by EMS represents an apparent

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<sup>263</sup> Dilip M. Menon, “Being a Brahmin the Marxist Way: E.M.S. Namboodiripad and the Pasts of Kerala,” in Ali, *Invoking the Past*, p 70

<sup>264</sup> Dilip M. Menon, “Being a Brahmin the Marxist Way: E.M.S. Namboodiripad and the Pasts of Kerala,” in Ali, *Invoking the Past*, p 84.

<sup>265</sup> Dilip M. Menon, “Being a Brahmin the Marxist Way: E.M.S. Namboodiripad and the Pasts of Kerala,” in Ali, *Invoking the Past*, pp 77-8.

<sup>266</sup> Dilip M. Menon, “Being a Brahmin the Marxist Way: E.M.S. Namboodiripad and the Pasts of Kerala,” in Ali, *Invoking the Past*, pp 77-8. Menon goes on to say that “it is curious how the triumph of advaita and the caste ideology are presented as two sides of

contradiction to its role in Indian history, stating that while it rose in response to Brahmanism, Buddhism represented an older social order. This is a contradiction that EMS fails to resolve. Intriguingly, EMS produced this critique of Buddhism without once referencing Ambedkar's development of Buddhism as an alternative to Marxism.

Classical Marxist discourse encouraged reform to protect the rights of woman, especially in the case of August Bebel and Frederick Engels.<sup>267</sup> However, for some Indian Communists, as demonstrated above by EMS, women's current role in Indian society was to be expected by their deterministic interpretation of history. While embracing the mechanism of Engels critique of women's place in society, Indian Communists (with some important exceptions) either ignored or dismissed Engels analysis of women's present role in society as a “world-historical defeat of the female sex.”<sup>268</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter, Ambedkar was aware of the plight of women as early as his academic career at Columbia University. Ambedkar had incorporated and expanded upon the social reform demanded by the Social Conference prior to its dissolution. Advocating for the rights of Brahmin women was not enough and

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the same coin at a time when the contemporary radical critiques of caste whether by Narayana Guru or Swami Vagbhathananda drew upon *advaita* for arguing against caste inequality.”

<sup>267</sup> August Bebel, *Women in the Past, Present and Future* (1879), and Frederick Engels, *The Origins of the Family* (1884). These two works argue for the liberation of women, but that it would be dependent on the end of capitalistic oppression. Patricia Loveridge, “Approaches to Change: The All India Democratic Women's Association and a Marxist Approach to the Woman Question in India,” *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol., (September 1994), p 219.

<sup>268</sup> Frederick Engels, *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1972), p 20. One of the important Indian Communists that objected to the plight of women in India was S. A. Dange in Maharashtra. Dange wrote that the “monogamy of class ridden-society ... becomes a mockery for the women.” Dilip M. Menon “Being Brahmin the Marxist Way: E.M.S. Namboodiripad and the pasts of Kerala” in Dilip M. Menon, ed., *The Blindness of Insight: Essays on Caste in Modern India*, (Chennai: Quadro Press), p 48.

neither was a reorganization of the modes of production, a broader social reform needed to be employed by the nationalist movement.<sup>269</sup>

S. G. Sardesai (1907-1996) was a leading Indian Communist in Maharashtra. He was the nephew of Marathi Historian G. S. Sardesai and appeared destined to follow in his uncle's foot steps until he became involved in the Indian Communist movement in 1928, prior to the Meerut Conspiracy.<sup>270</sup> He helped to organize strikes and political action and was elected a member of the Bombay Provincial Congress Committee and All India Congress Committee in 1938.<sup>271</sup> He was also one of the few Communists contemporary to Ambedkar that wrote about and in response to him.<sup>272</sup> Sardesai's critique of Ambedkar is representative of the fourth and fifth phases of non-cooperation between Ambedkar and the Communists. While, Sardesai was sometimes complimentary of Ambedkar, he rejected the possibility that Ambedkar's movement could accomplish its aims. Sardesai stated that Ambedkar, like Marx and the Buddha, worked to end the "misery and slavery of the oppressed masses."<sup>273</sup> This appears to be a positive analysis of Ambedkar's intentions. However, Sardesai's interpretation of Ambedkar's actions is suspect. In regards to the Poona Pact, Sardesai states that Gandhi and Ambedkar agreed

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<sup>269</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936)," *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>270</sup> Mahapandit Rahul Sankrityayana, "Shrinivas Ganesh Sardesai (1943)" in A. B. Bardhan, et al, ed, *S. G. Sardesai: Patriot and Communist*, (People's Publishing House: New Delhi, 1998), p 3.

<sup>271</sup> Mahapandit Rahul Sankrityayana, "Shrinivas Ganesh Sardesai (1943)" in Bardhan, *Patriot and Communist*, p 7.

<sup>272</sup> Many examples of Sardesai's critiques of Ambedkar were written and published well after Ambedkar's death; as such they represent more of a hindsight critique of Ambedkar than a direct response to Ambedkar at the time of his movement.

<sup>273</sup> S. G. Sardesai, "Gautam Buddha, Karl Marx and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1981)" in Bardhan, *Patriot and Communist*, p 82.

to the compromise to preserve the unity of India and defeat “the conspiracy of the British rulers to divide India under the garb of protecting the interests of the Harijans.”<sup>274</sup> While perhaps an accurate reflection of British intentions, Sardesai failed to recognize the threat that untouchables were under due to Gandhi’s ‘fast-on-to-death’. As discussed in Chapter Two, Ambedkar faced a lose-lose situation. He pragmatically chose the best option for the people he represented.

Sardesai presented a challenge to the Communist critique that Ambedkar was bourgeois and pro-British. He presented the pragmatic reasons that would have caused Ambedkar to support the British. Sardesai acknowledged that Ambedkar was a nationalist. He then stated that:

[h]e was very critical of the current opinion in the pre-independence period that all problems, including that of the untouchables, would get solved with the achievement of national independence. It was because of this consciousness that often he considered British power a ‘third’, impartial force that would concede the just rights of the Dalits, which caste Hindu society had denied them for centuries.<sup>275</sup>

This statement is also a tacit acknowledgment that Ambedkar was right to utilize the possibilities available to him for untouchable uplift and that he was correct in his assertion that independence would not simply solve problems like untouchability. However, Sardesai was also clear that Ambedkar’s self-respect movement and self-confidence movement could not end untouchability, only a “revolutionary land redistribution to the tillers of the soil”<sup>276</sup> promoted by the Communists could end

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<sup>274</sup> S. G. Sardesai, “Gautam Buddha, Karl Marx and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1981)” in Bardhan, *Patriot and Communist*, p 82.

<sup>275</sup> S. G. Sardesai, “Dr. Ambedkar and the Emancipation of the Scheduled Castes (1986)” in Bardhan, *Patriot and Communist*, p 85.

<sup>276</sup> S. G. Sardesai, “Dr. Ambedkar and the Emancipation of the Scheduled Castes (1986)” in Bardhan, *Patriot and Communist*, p 85.

untouchability by forging a common fraternity between untouchables, landless labourers and others. However, this interpretation again overlooks an aspect of Ambedkar's programme to protect the right to education and representation through a detailed, constitutionally mandated affirmative action programme.

Sardesai was critical of Ambedkar's creative solution for removing the personal stigma of untouchability. Sardesai stated that the reality of the mass conversion of Buddhism "was a voice of defeatism. It gave [Ambedkar] and his followers a subjective feeling of liberation, but for obvious reasons, conversion did not alter the attitude of caste Hindus towards the neo-Buddhists by an iota."<sup>277</sup> Here, Sardesai fails to realize that a subjective feeling of liberation was the point of conversion.<sup>278</sup> Ambedkar realized that the liberation of untouchables needed to take into account both social and material changes. Conversion allowed the untouchables to free themselves from the internalized traditions of caste. However, conversion represented only one part of Ambedkar's movement. He sought to form a broad-based political coalition that would confront material oppression in more traditional terms, as evidenced by his formation of the Independent Labour Party and the Republican Party.<sup>279</sup> Unfortunately, the second half of his program was left unfinished when his death.<sup>280</sup> Sardesai concludes that, "ultimately, there can be no emancipation for [untouchables] from social, economic and political oppression except through Marxism."<sup>281</sup> This is a clear dismissal of the conversion phase of Ambedkar's

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<sup>277</sup> S. G. Sardesai, "Dr. Ambedkar and the Emancipation of the Scheduled Castes (1986)" in Bardhan, *Patriot and Communist*, p 88.

<sup>278</sup> B. R. Ambedkar "Embrace Buddhism for Emancipation (1956)" in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 119.

<sup>279</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, p 185 and p 208.

<sup>280</sup> The second half of Ambedkar's program will be examined further in Chapter Five.

<sup>281</sup> S. G. Sardesai, "Dr. Ambedkar and the Emancipation of the Scheduled Castes (1986)"

movement.

After Independence, the Communists and Ambedkar were no longer viable potential allies. Ambedkar was now returning to a less radical political position while forging alliances with the Socialists of the Congress Party resulting in his appointment to Cabinet following Independence as the minister of Law. While the Communists did make some attempts to address the issue of caste, the conservative Marxist approach they employed limited their success, and hampered their ability to grow beyond their representation of upper-caste Indians. Further, despite similar and sometimes overlapping goals, the Communists remained critical of Ambedkar because of his focus on non-material social relationships.

## Chapter 4

### Ambedkar's Utilization of Buddhism: A Project of Emancipation?

The Buddhism of Ambedkar's late writings recasts the central tenets of ancient Buddhism: the reality of human suffering, the availability of relief through self cultivation and compassionate action, and the potential for a liberated society based on equality and opportunity ... He translated the ancient stress on spiritual wisdom, meditation and mindfulness into the modern emphasis on critical reason sharpened through education and science, and the ancient values of generosity, moral striving, and skillful means into the struggle for social justice.<sup>282</sup>

Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism is the most commonly written about aspect of Ambedkar's movement. The majority of the literature tends to treat the act as an end in and of itself. These interpretations isolate the Buddhist conversion from the larger context of Ambedkar's social and political movement, not as a continuation of his thoughtful and deliberate political career.<sup>283</sup> His conversion, at Nagpur in 1956, followed by that of tens of thousands of untouchables, was in different ways, a direct challenge to Hinduism, Brahminical nationalism and the political left. Ambedkar's analysis and restoration of Buddhism represented a separate pillar of his movement that included political and social democracy, while maintaining a strong link to Indian culture and tradition. His interpretation of Buddhism also represented a response to the rigid positions of the Indian Communists. Ambedkar understood that a westernized attack on the congress movement

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<sup>282</sup> Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King, *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation movements in Asia*, (Albany: State University of New York, 1996), p 62.

<sup>283</sup> There are a growing number of exceptions to this statement, but holistic approaches to Ambedkar's work are still in the minority. Gail Omvedt, *Ambedkar: Towards and Enlightened India* is an excellent example of this holistic approach.

was both unwise and unnecessary. He believed that his analysis of Indian history provided him with an indigenous response to the political left and the Brahminization of Indian identity.<sup>284</sup> Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism was distinct and antagonistic to both Brahminical nationalism and the Indian Communists. He recognized the dominant role of religion in Indian political identity. Ambedkar's choice of Buddhism as an emancipatory identity was not a sudden decision. He studied several other possible religions once he decided he was going to formally sever his connection with Hinduism.<sup>285</sup> He developed a Buddhist interpretation that fit the needs of his larger movement, not particularly as a religion, but as a path to self-respect and social mobility. As Christopher Queen suggests above, Ambedkar modernized Buddhism to suit the needs of the time, movement and people he represented and to change their views of themselves within the context of Indian society. Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism was egalitarian and reflected the western liberal ideals that he admired, but did so in a way that both improved on those ideals and gave Buddhism historical precedence over the 'later' developments of western philosophy. He had two goals. First, he intended to provide an alternative to the congress-led nationalist movement and the Indian left. Second, he wanted to foster an alternative cultural identity that promoted self-respect by removing the cultural baggage of untouchability from within the untouchable community.

On October 13, 1935, at the Yeola conference, Ambedkar announced his intention to convert from Hinduism to a yet unnamed religion. He stated that:

It is the inequality in Hinduism that compels me to quit Hinduism ... I had

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<sup>284</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, pp 163-164.

<sup>285</sup> While not a practicing Hindu, Ambedkar did need to break the very real socio-cultural hold that Hinduism had on him and his community, conversion was the means to this end.



the misfortune of being born with the stigma of untouchability; that is not my fault. But I will not die as a Hindu; this is within my power.<sup>286</sup>

This statement was a direct challenge to the growing dominance of Hinduism in the nationalist movement. This statement attempts to both undermine Hinduism through the statement 'I will not die a Hindu' and affirms his power as an individual to remove the stigma. Ambedkar's removal of the stigma of caste was not a gift from well-meaning high caste Hindus but a conscious effort to challenge discrimination and change one's place in society. In this context, conversion takes power from the oppressors by asserting the untouchables' control over their own person.

Further, the idea of mass conversion of the large untouchable population had enormous political implications. Ambedkar's call for conversion came during a growing political polarization based on socio-religious identity between Muslims and Hindus. The conversion of untouchables could have threatened to tip the balance of political power in colonial India if the untouchables converted en-mass to another religion.<sup>287</sup> Conversion to Buddhism did not necessarily equate to a better life. Some believed Ambedkar was leading the untouchables astray, depriving them of hard earned privileges and concessions, and that conversion would change nothing.<sup>288</sup> To this Ambedkar responded that Buddhism offered him something unique.

[I]t gives three principles in combination which no other religion does. All other religions are bothering themselves with God and Soul and life after death. Buddhism teaches Prajna (understanding as against superstition and supernaturalism). It teaches Karuna (love). It teaches Samata (equality). This is what man wants for a good and happy life on earth. These three

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<sup>286</sup> Kadam, *Significance of his Movement*, p 106 from C. B. Khairmode, *Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar*, Vol. VI, p 96.

<sup>287</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, p 166-167.

<sup>288</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Embrace Buddhism for Emancipation (1956)" in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 117.

principles of Buddhism make their appeal to me. These three principles should also make an appeal to the world. Neither God nor Soul can save society.<sup>289</sup>

These key aspects made a conversion to Buddhism more attractive to Ambedkar than continuing to live as a member of society that discriminated based on religious sanction.

Critics of conversion fall largely into two camps in regards to its effects, the 'Congress camp' and the 'leftist camp'. The 'Congress camp' aligned with Gandhian principals of social relations that support the continued existence of the caste system and of the inclusion of untouchables within the larger 'Hindu nation.' The Gandhian group rejected conversion outright, arguing that "religion is not like a house or a cloak which can be changed at will. It is more an integral part of one's self than of one's body. Religion is the tie that binds one to one's Creator, and while the body perishes as it has to, religion persists even after that."<sup>290</sup> The conflict between Ambedkar and Gandhi over conversion broke out immediately after Ambedkar published his intention to leave Hinduism. Gandhi's response was to deny that conversion was a right, or even possible.<sup>291</sup> Ambedkar's counter attack on Hinduism was that "religion must mainly be a matter of principles only. It cannot be a matter of rules. The moment it degenerates into rules, it ceases to be a religion, as it kills responsibility which is an essence of the true religious act."<sup>292</sup> Buddhism, on the other hand, "is based on reason. There is an element

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<sup>289</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Why Buddhism Preferred (1956)" in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 113.

<sup>290</sup> D. G. Tendulkar, *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*, Vol. 4; 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, (Bombay: Publications Division, 1960), p 41.

<sup>291</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, pp 152-153.

<sup>292</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936)," *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>,

of flexibility inherent in it which is not to be found in any other religion.”<sup>293</sup> From Ambedkar’s perspective, Hinduism was a degenerate religion that was inherently inflexible and therefore a poor religion. If this is the case, he suggested, then it was also an unsuitable cultural system with which to construct a society and a new state.

The position of the ‘leftist group’ was that religion obscured the goals of political change by distracting from the goal of material equality. Ambedkar did not have a problem with the ends that the Communists sought. He recognized those ends as akin to his own. However, he questioned both the means to the ends that they advocated and their rejection of caste as an important aspect of Indian inequality. Ambedkar’s interpretation of Buddhism advocated a peaceful means to the goals of social equality. Ambedkar intended to reform the mind, not just the economic superstructure of society, because he viewed caste as a separate though related form of social inequality.<sup>294</sup> Key to Ambedkar’s attempt at reform was his aim to free the mind of dogma and to promote a rational engagement with the world.

Given this context, Ambedkar's announcement carried distinct political and social implications beyond a simple change of religion. In a speech to clarify his position on conversion, during the Bombay conference, May 30-31, 1936, Ambedkar stated that:

[t]here are two aspects of conversion, social as well as religious; material as well as spiritual ... Untouchability is not a short or temporary feature; it is a permanent one ... It is eternal because the high-caste people believe that the religion which has placed you at the lowest level of the society is itself eternal ... You shall remain the lowest level forever ... as long as we remain in a religion which teaches a man to treat another man as a leper,

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April 1, 2008.

<sup>293</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Embrace Buddhism for Emancipation (1956)” in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 131.

<sup>294</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Buddhism and Communism (1956)” in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 140.

the sense of discrimination on account of caste which is deeply rooted on our minds cannot go. For annihilating castes and untouchability from among the untouchables, change of religion is the only antidote.<sup>295</sup>

Since Ambedkar did not believe in reincarnation, the Hindu promise of reincarnation into a higher level of existence is a false promise. The ‘you’ whom he discusses is the collective untouchable community that is oppressed is placated by the same religion that dictates their low status. From Ambedkar’s perspective, this fundamental problem with Indian society was not economic in nature and could not be solved simply by changing the economic structures of Indian society. Hinduism had fostered the social system that had created the cleavages in society, and economic disparity was incidental to the social hierarchy reinforced through religious dogma.<sup>296</sup> Ambedkar did not undervalue the role of economic disparity in society, but believed that caste had created a system that was a division of labourers rather than a division of labour.<sup>297</sup> Since religion fostered the conditions for the division of labourers, then rationally, only a change of religion could overcome the social relations mandated by the religion.

As with the concepts of caste, politics, gender and economics, Ambedkar approached Buddhism critically. His development of Buddhism reflects Aloysius’ statement that “the contours of a new religion of the oppressed begins to emerge in multiple possible ways, contingent upon the overall life-situation, as a new interpretation,

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<sup>295</sup> sic, B. R. Ambedkar “The Path to Freedom (1935)” in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 15-19.

<sup>296</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936),” *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>297</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936),” *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

or selective appropriation, or modification, or even total rejection of the old beliefs.”<sup>298</sup>

During Ambedkar's tenure as law minister, Ambedkar utilized selective appropriation of tradition while developing the Hindu Code Bill. He used the Dayabhaga legal tradition as a basis for the bill.<sup>299</sup> Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism represents another example of this appropriation and interpretation of tradition. Ambedkar took his time to develop an alternative interpretation of Buddhism. While it became clear through the 1940s that Buddhism was a religion to which he had affinity, until the 1950s there was no certainty that Buddhism would be his final choice of conversion. He had explored the possibility of conversion to Christianity, Sikhism and Islam, but found each lacking in various ways.<sup>300</sup> However, Ambedkar did not accept the different vehicles of Buddhism at face value, nor did he feel that the traditional Bhikkhus in India had fulfilled their roles within the Buddhist faith.<sup>301</sup> Ambedkar developed four main critiques of Buddhism that he attempted to answer in *The Buddha and his Dhamma*. These four problems were the mythology of the life of the Buddha, the four Aryan Truths (the four Noble Truths), the nature of the soul, and the role of the Bhikkhus in the propagation of Buddhism. Each of these critiques was as much a critique of traditional religious dogmas as they were critiques of modern political dogma.

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<sup>298</sup> Aloysius, *Emancipatory Identity*, p 7.

<sup>299</sup> The Dayabhaga traditional legal system confers individual heirs' full property rights. Ambedkar chose this system over the “originally proposed Mitakshara system, in which individual claims were subject to coparcenary restrictions.” Despite Ambedkar's use of tradition, orthodox Hindu's continued to criticize the new bill as an attack on “the sacred nature of Hindu marriage.” Previously three bills had been developed to address the issue of woman's rights, two in 1941 one in 1943. All three failed do to opposition from Orthodox Hindus. Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, p 132.

<sup>300</sup> Eleanor Zelliot, “Chapter IV: The Religious Conversion Movement, 1935-56” in Zelliot (2004).

<sup>301</sup> A Bhikkhu is an ordained male Buddhist monastic and live a simple monastic life devoted to meditation. Women are called Bhikkhuni.

Ambedkar's first challenge revolves around the story of how the Buddha came to take *Parivraja* (renunciation). For Ambedkar, "[t]he traditional answer is that he took Parivraja because he saw a dead person, a sick person and an old person. This answer is absurd on the face of it. The Buddha took Parivraja at the age of 29. If he took Parivraja as a result of these three sights, how is it he did not see these three sights earlier? ... The explanation is not plausible and does not appeal to reason."<sup>302</sup> Ambedkar offered an alternative development of the Buddha's story based on his own historical research in conjunction with Pali Buddhist texts.<sup>303</sup> His aim was to make rational and understandable the Buddha's life, without relying on mythology and superstition, even if this meant reexamining a widely accepted Buddhist parable.

The second difficulty is likely the most problematic aspect of Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism. Ambedkar challenged whether the four Noble Truths, or Aryan Truths as he distinguishes them, are actually a part of the original teachings of the Buddha.

This formula cuts at the root of Buddhism. If life is sorrow, death is sorrow and rebirth is sorrow, then there is an end of everything. Neither religion nor philosophy can help a man to achieve happiness in the world. ... [T]he four Aryan Truths deny hope to man. The four Aryan Truths make the gospel of the Buddha a gospel of pessimism. Do they form part of the original gospel or are they a later accretion by the monks?<sup>304</sup>

Despite this apparent disapproval of the Four Truths, some scholars have noted that they have not disappeared in their entirety from Ambedkar's re-imagining of Buddhism. In *Engaged Buddhism*, Queen discusses Ambedkar's interpretation of the Buddha's first

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<sup>302</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Buddha and His Dhamma (1956)," *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>303</sup> Pali texts are among the oldest of Buddhist source documents.

<sup>304</sup> *sic*, B. R. Ambedkar, "Buddha and His Dhamma (1956)," *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

sermon and how the four Noble Truths were modified. He states that “of the Four Noble Truths, the first and fourth – Suffering and Path – appear in recognizable formulations as elements in the first sermon, but the second and third – suffering’s Arising (from mental craving) and Cessation (in Nirvana) – are unmistakably reinterpreted as social teachings.”<sup>305</sup> In *Buddhism and Ambedkar*, Ahir argues that Ambedkar’s “emphasis is on the social gospel of the Buddha.”<sup>306</sup> The purpose of *The Buddha and his Dhamma* is to display “what kind of Buddhism will suit the modern times.”<sup>307</sup> Critics of Ambedkar’s Buddhism, such as Richard Taylor, concluded that in Ambedkar’s interpretation “suffering is still central to the insight of the enlightenment, but it is a much paler insight ... than is usually communicated by the four Truths.”<sup>308</sup> Further, Taylor asserts that Ambedkar’s omission of the second and third truths is “little short of an emasculation” of Buddhism.<sup>309</sup> However, these critiques fail to recognize that the modernizing aspects of Ambedkar’s interpretation of Buddhism required these changes. Ambedkar’s Buddhism is thus not a ‘paler insight’, but an insight on how the world functioned; this makes Ambedkar’s insight more powerful and relevant rather than less, as it could impact on a person's immediate circumstance more profoundly as an immediate critique of their social and economic position. This change to ‘traditional’ Buddhism caused estrangement from some Buddhist organizations, leading some to argue that Ambedkar’s interpretation

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<sup>305</sup> sic, Queen and King, *Engaged Buddhism*, p 55.

<sup>306</sup> D.C. Ahir, *Buddhism and Ambedkar*, (Delhi: B. R. Publishing, 2004), p 108.

<sup>307</sup> Ahir (2004), p 108.

<sup>308</sup> T.S. Wilkinson, “Buddhism and Social Change Among Mahars,” in T.S. Wilkinson, ed., *Ambedkar and the Neo Buddhist Movement*, (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1972), p 58

<sup>309</sup> Wilkinson, “Buddhism and Social Change Among Mahars,” in Wilkinson, *Neo Buddhist Movement*, p 58.

was not Buddhism and would be better classified as *Ambedkarism* or *Neo-Buddhism*.<sup>310</sup>

The third problem, the nature of the soul in Buddhism, may appear to have little to do with the historicity of Ambedkar's movement. However, the existence or non-existence of the soul in Ambedkar's Buddhism relates directly to its applicability as a means to social emancipation. Ambedkar challenged the idea of a mythical heaven (Nirvana) that promised future salvation while doing nothing to prevent current misery.

The Buddha denied the existence of the soul. But he is also said to have affirmed the doctrine of karma and rebirth. At once a question arises. If there is no soul, how can there be karma? If there is no soul, how can there be rebirth? These are baffling questions. In what sense did the Buddha use the words karma and rebirth? Did he use them in a different sense than the sense in which they were used by the Brahmins of his day? If so, in what sense? Did he use them in the same sense in which the Brahmins used them? If so, is there not a terrible contradiction between the denial of the soul and the affirmation of karma and rebirth? This contradiction needs to be resolved.<sup>311</sup>

This challenge called into question the idea that a person must live their place in life to attain a better life in the next cycle. If this is a contradiction, and there is no further cycle, then the promise of the Hindu religion is a false one to pacify those oppressed by the caste system. Religion is then, as Marx says, an opiate for the masses. In place of Nirvana, "the Buddhist goal of liberation, Ambedkar writes of a 'kingdom of righteousness on earth' and describes the Buddha's enlightenment not as the ripening of an individual's cosmic potential but as a simple realization of the plight of others."<sup>312</sup> This is a realization that he found lacking in competing secular philosophies, such as Marxism

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<sup>310</sup> R. W. Taylor, "The Ambedkarite Buddhists," in Wilkinson, *Neo Buddhist Movement*, p 160.

<sup>311</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Buddha and His Dhamma (1956)," *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>312</sup> *sic*, Queen and King, *Engaged Buddhism*, p 57.



as presented by the Indian Communists.<sup>313</sup> Rationally, Ambedkar thought, one must act in response to their world instead of waiting on some unrealized potential.

The fourth problem that Ambedkar outlined was the most function-related aspect of his critique of Buddhism in India. Ambedkar believed that the Bhikkhu is an ideal representative of Buddhist ideology.

On it depends the future of Buddhism. If the Bhikkhu is only a perfect man he is of no use to the propagation of Buddhism because though a perfect man he is a selfish man. If, on the other hand, he is a social servant he may prove to be the hope of Buddhism. This question must be decided not so much in the interest of doctrinal consistency but in the interest of the future of Buddhism.<sup>314</sup>

However, Ambedkar argued that the Bhikkhu had fallen down in their role to live the ideals of and evangelize Buddhism.<sup>315</sup> In response to this apparent abdication of duty, Ambedkar called on all converts to work to spread the word of the Buddha.

Buddhist tradition has not always been favourable to the role of women in the religion or in society. Robert P. Goldman, in “Transsexualism, Gender, and Anxiety in Traditional India,” states that “the early Buddhist literature's dwelling upon the Bodhisattva's revulsion at the sight of the unclothed female body [and] the Buddha's reluctance and pessimism over admitting women to the sangha” are examples of early Buddhist tendencies to be distinctly anti-women.<sup>316</sup> However, others have also pointed

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<sup>313</sup> From Ambedkar's perspective, the Communists were also advocating for some future historical moment, an unrealized potential future that was unsustainable because it was based on violent coercion rather than persuasion and inculcation. Ambedkar, “Buddhism and Communism (1956)” in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 139.

<sup>314</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Buddha and His Dhamma (1956),” *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>315</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “On Past Performances and Future Prospects (1956)” in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 111.

<sup>316</sup> Robert P. Goldman, “Transsexualism, Gender, and Anxiety in Traditional India,”

out how Buddhism offered an early critique of gender inequality as “a philosophy of spiritual equality [with] a notion of atheistic morality as the essence of social and religious duty.”<sup>317</sup> Janet A. Contursi argues that Ambedkar's “new Buddhism accords women equality with men, rejects untouchability and other forms of caste distinctions, emphasizes the importance of rationality, intelligence, and education, and denies the Hindu view of karma that interprets the suffering of Dalits as retribution for their sins in a previous birth.”<sup>318</sup> Ambedkar himself often used the example of the plight of untouchable women in Indian society as reason for why untouchables should leave the Hindu fold.<sup>319</sup> Ambedkar was also a product of his time. There were aspects of his political programme that were restrictive to women, especially in regards to prostitution.

Ambedkar’s Buddhism has had many detractors. Some Buddhists attacked his attempt to analyze and proselytize Buddhism’s most basic teachings as a

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*Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 113, No. 3, (July-September 1993), p 377.

<sup>317</sup> Janet A. Contursi, “Militant Hindus and Buddhist Dalits: Hegemony and Resistance in an Indian Slum,” *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 16, No. 3, (August 1989), pp 447-8.

<sup>318</sup> Contursi, “Militant Hindus,” p 448.

<sup>319</sup> In a telling example, Ambedkar sites the common experience of one “locality in Bombay where prostitutes and whores live. These women who trade in flesh, wake up at about 8 O'clock in the morning and call for the moslem boys who work in the cheap restaurants, located in the Mohallah, 'oh Suleman' they shout, 'Get some 'Kheema' (minced meat curry) and 'Roti' (Bread). He then contrasts this image with woman in his community where “[m]any of the woman ... do not even get a square meal every day. They too can get rich and lead the life of infamy and sin if they so desire but they care more for their honour, for dignity and self-respect.” Ambedkar stated this during the conversion speech in 1956. Implicit in his critique is his conception of prostitution as immoral and low, which makes the perfect juxtaposition with untouchable woman, not engaging in prostitution, and how because of their caste they are treated worse than 'prostitutes and whores' despite their moral behaviour. The venue of the speech, as well as Ambedkar's claims during the speech of equality for all, make clear his intentions that Buddhism, as he has interpreted it, is fostering a place of gender as well as social equality. B. R. Ambedkar, “Embrace Buddhism for Emancipation (1956)” in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 119 and 126.

misrepresentation of Buddhist thought.<sup>320</sup> They rejected Ambedkar's idea of Buddhism as a social system. Further, they were critical of the political message and the 'hate' they argued Ambedkar's Buddhism is based upon.<sup>321</sup> The Buddhist critics would argue that instead of simplifying Buddhist texts, he was tampering with the texts when he "found views ... inconvenient to his own."<sup>322</sup> However, Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism is not as radical as some of Ambedkar's critics suppose. Queen states that "Ambedkar's assertion that man's suffering is caused by class struggle, which is caused in turn by human passions can be considered a new reading of but hardly a radical break from, canonical Buddha-word."<sup>323</sup> Even some well-respected Buddhist scholars suggested that Ambedkar's interpretation was in the spirit of Buddhist doctrine.<sup>324</sup> Recently, Aloysius stated that:

[t]he man and message of Buddha, ever since his rise on the religious firmament of the sub-continent, has been an unfading symbol of the ethical-rational as against the bigoted-hypocritical in human relations. While the Buddha's specific thrust against varna-caste ideology and system is controversial, he clearly stands for those dimensions of thought that are rational, that is, against priest craft, superstitions, ritualism and all forms of religious oppression and for ethical uprightness and transparency in thought and behaviour and compassion towards all, particularly the weak and the oppressed.<sup>325</sup>

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<sup>320</sup> D. R. Jatava, *The Critics of Dr. Ambedkar*, (Jaipur: Surabhi Publications, 1997), p 67.

<sup>321</sup> Jatava, *Critics of Dr. Ambedkar*, p 73.

<sup>322</sup> Jatava, *Critics of Dr. Ambedkar*, p 73.

<sup>323</sup> Queen and King, *Engaged Buddhism*, p 61. Widely accepted and more radical, the Heart Sutra concludes, "There is no suffering, no origin, no cessation, no path, no exalted wisdom, no attainment, and also no non-attainment."

<sup>324</sup> Raosaheb Kasbe, "The Ambedkarian Ideology: A Perspective," in Yadav, *Periphery to Center Stage*, p 78. "A renowned authority of Buddhist literature, Bhadant Anand Kausalayan, concedes that Ambedkar inserted his own thinking into Buddhist doctrine. However, this could never be said to constitute a distortion of the doctrine. He dealt with certain issues demonstrating an independent insight, without doing any harm to Buddhism." Raosaheb Kasbe, "The Ambedkarian Ideology: A Perspective," in Yadav, *Periphery to Center Stage*, p 78.

<sup>325</sup> Aloysius, *Emancipatory Identity*, pp 19-20.

Ambedkar's interpretation emphasized all of these 'dimensions of thought.' In order to accomplish this task, he applied three criteria to traditional and supplemental Buddhist material. These criteria included rationality, social benefit and coherency, and these "may be seen as the proximate answer to critical questions of inclusion and arrangement."<sup>326</sup> Ambedkar's interpretation was not so much a reinterpretation, as it was a modernization to suit the present conditions of social inequality.

In *The Critics of Dr. Ambedkar*, D. R. Jatava states that Ambedkar's Buddhism was not a political statement, but rather "a vindication of the honour and dignity of his own people and liberation from the thralldom of Varnaism and Brahminism."<sup>327</sup> Jatava does not adequately understand the effect of Ambedkar's movement, nor his intentions. Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism was a direct political attack on Brahminical Hinduism, stating plainly that Indian society can be based on liberal ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. He argued that these apparently western ideals were not foreign to Indian history or philosophy.<sup>328</sup> "[E]quality is the main feature of Buddhism. The religion of Buddha gives freedom of thought and freedom of self-development to all ... [and] that the rise of Buddhism in India was as significant as the French Revolution."<sup>329</sup> This analysis of Buddhism also reflected on Ambedkar's critique of Marxism. Ambedkar was critical of the development of the individual in a Communist state. He argued that "the

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<sup>326</sup> Queen and King, *Engaged Buddhism*, p 59.

<sup>327</sup> Jatava, *Critics of Dr. Ambedkar*, p 79.

<sup>328</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Buddhism and Communism (1956)" in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 137.

<sup>329</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "The Rise and Fall of Buddhism in India (1950)" in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 50.

means the Communists wish to adopt in order to bring about Communism ... is violence and killing of the opposed.”<sup>330</sup> He argued that the Buddha's message was persuasion through moral teaching, to 'conquer through inculcation,' to develop a just society.<sup>331</sup> Communism, in his estimation may attain quick results but only by annihilating the opposition, not convincing them of its worth. Ambedkar's Buddhism intended to challenge the dominance of certain political ideologies of Indian Nationalism. Despite what some critics argue, Ambedkar clearly intended a political message.

Ambedkar's Buddhism was a corollary to his development of a social and political democratic ideology. As discussed earlier, from Ambedkar's perspective, neither Congress nor the Communists were able nor willing to develop a political and social democratic ideology; neither were up to the task of social uplift for the untouchables. The Communists rejected parliamentary democracy and Congress did not adequately fight for social democracy. Ambedkar realized that the effects of either of these political ideologies would not allow untouchables to overcome their social inequity. In a speech the day after the Nagpur conversion on October 15, 1956, Ambedkar stated that “if you really want to do something for the uplift of the ‘untouchables’ you will have to produce such people that are able to ameliorate their condition. Merely producing clerks will not do.”<sup>332</sup> He was suggesting that Indian independence, a Communist revolution or even simply education alone could not change the condition of the untouchable, and that a change was necessary in how the individual regards their place in society as well as how

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<sup>330</sup> Ambedkar, “Buddhism and Communism (1956)” in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 139.

<sup>331</sup> Ambedkar, “Buddhism and Communism (1956)” in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 139.

<sup>332</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Embrace Buddhism for Emancipation (1956)” in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, pp 124-5. This comment was directed originally to Lord Linlithgow in regard to the substandard education of untouchables.

society regards the individual.

Ambedkar's movement was an attempt to foster this change. There are four main aspects of Ambedkar's movement: self-respect, social democracy, political democracy and education. The first two aspects of his movement that he developed were self-respect and political democracy. Ambedkar admired both the republican and parliamentary democratic systems for their ability to foster a sense of equality in a society.<sup>333</sup> From the onset political democracy became the most immovable aspect of his political and social ideology. By the late 1940s, he developed four premises upon which democracy rests:

1. The individual is an end in himself.
2. The individual has certain inalienable rights which must be guaranteed to him by the constitution.
3. The individual shall not be required to relinquish any of his constitutional rights as a condition precedent to the receipt of a privilege.
4. The state shall not delegate power to private persons to govern others.<sup>334</sup>

Each of these points challenges the power relations of the caste system, most significantly by focusing on the elevation of the individual over the group, which represented a significant change in the political zeitgeist, invoking the rights of the individual over those of the group.

Self-respect developed through personal experience in the face of discrimination and a conscious political move to define oneself and not be defined by others. Ambedkar advocated that since all people are equal, it was the province of no individual group to

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<sup>333</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Future of Parliamentary Democracy" (1951) in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 80.

<sup>334</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, *States and Minorities: What are Their Rights and How to Secure them in the Constitution of Free India* (1947), *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

perform one hereditary social function.<sup>335</sup> Caste should not define whether a person removed carrion or lead a country. Ironically, the opposition to Ambedkar's self-respect movement argued that by giving up traditional occupations, these groups would deprive themselves of much needed and in some cases lucrative income.<sup>336</sup> Ambedkar's rebuttal was to suggest that if the business was as lucrative as this argument advised, then perhaps the higher castes should have to opportunity to earn the profits.<sup>337</sup> Either way, this critique did not respond directly to Ambedkar's challenge that an individual's self-worth or employment could not be based on group identity.

By the 1930s, Ambedkar realized that political equality did not necessarily equate to social equality. Ambedkar was radicalized away from Congress, realizing that despite his immense education, his caste trumped his ability.<sup>338</sup> Ambedkar's politics started to drift to the political left with the incorporation of socialism into his developing movement. Ambedkar's views on economic organization shifted from traditional liberal economics towards models of state ownership and land redistribution. "To empower both the Dalit and non-Dalit economically, he proposed that the state should be given political power for the regulation and control of both key industries and agriculture ... He called this an attempt to establish state socialism without abrogating parliamentary democracy and without leaving its establishment to the will of democracy."<sup>339</sup> The concept of political democracy was still central to Ambedkar's movement, but he understood that

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<sup>335</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "The Path to Freedom (1935)" in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 16.

<sup>336</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Embrace Buddhism for Emancipation (1956)" in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 118.

<sup>337</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Embrace Buddhism for Emancipation (1956)" in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 118.

<sup>338</sup> Ambedkar, *Autobiographical Notes*, p 30.

<sup>339</sup> Gopal Guru, "The Man who Thought Differently: An Inquiry into the Political Thinking of Dr. Ambedkar," in Yadav, *Periphery to Center Stage*, p 97.

although “in theory they [men] possess equal rights, in practice those rights they exercise or enjoy are necessarily unequal.”<sup>340</sup> He realized that “the formal framework of democracy was of no value in itself and would not be appropriate if there was no social democracy.”<sup>341</sup> According to Ambedkar, neither the Congress nor the Communists were able to adequately address these issues.

Lastly, Ambedkar realized that without education none of these previous core concepts could be properly secured. He stated that “there is a difference between man and animal. Whilst the beast needs nothing save its daily food for existence, the human being who is endowed with the physique and sentient mind has to develop both. Mind must be developed side by side with the body.”<sup>342</sup> Education allowed the rights developed above to be exercised, while giving the individual the ability to defend their social and political rights. Following this plan, untouchables would then have had equal rights and opportunity in Indian society, undermining the political dominance of high caste Hindus.

By the 1950s, Ambedkar’s movement began to embody these core principles. He “accepted Edmond Burke’s notion that religion serves the foundation for society and government: ‘True religion is the foundation of society, the basis on which all true civil government rests and of both their sanction.’”<sup>343</sup> Developing his connection with Buddhism, Ambedkar employed ideas that appeared to depart from secular ideologies of social development and state-craft. “Hinduism ... is founded on the ideologies of

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<sup>340</sup> Gopal Guru, “The Man who Thought Differently: An Inquiry into the Political Thinking of Dr. Ambedkar,” in Yadav, *Periphery to Center Stage*, p 96.

<sup>341</sup> Gopal Guru, “The Man who Thought Differently: An Inquiry into the Political Thinking of Dr. Ambedkar,” in Yadav, *Periphery to Center Stage*, p 95.

<sup>342</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Embrace Buddhism for Emancipation (1956)” in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 121.

<sup>343</sup> *sic*, Raosaheb Kasbe, “The Ambedkarian Ideology: A Perspective,” in Yadav, *Periphery to Center Stage*, p 77.



inequality and injustice leaves no room for the development of enthusiasm. So long as Untouchables continue to slave under the yoke of Hinduism ... they can have no hope, no inspiration, no enthusiasm for a better life.”<sup>344</sup> The religious shift was meant to free untouchables from the ideologies of inequality and injustice while recognizing the central role of religion in the Indian polity. This seeming shift towards a religious ideology was still derived from the four tenets described earlier in this chapter, and though this shift appeared religious it was actually a continuation of Ambedkar’s secular political programme. The point was Ambedkar’s realization; that a social revolution combating non-material and non-secular forces needed to respond directly to those forces.

The rise and growth of nationalist consciousness among upper castes in colonial India was, unfortunately, coupled with the reinvention of Brahminical hierarchical traditions as national Hinduism, and sent the wrong signals to the mass of Indians struggling in their way out of the ideology and actuality of ascriptivity. In this context, Buddhism became a viable religio-ideological option and, indeed, an armour of protection in collective conflicts. This was, in fact, the realisation of those assembled under the charismatic leadership of Ambedkar for mass *Diksha* in Nagpur.<sup>345</sup>

Indian Marxism had been unable or unwilling to challenge the oppression of low castes by the higher castes. Since Ambedkar’s Buddhism offered a means to escape, at the very least the internal stigma of untouchability, to many low castes, Ambedkar’s Buddhism became a viable expression of the desire to progress beyond the social confines of their allotted position in society.

Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism was an attempt to modernize tradition. It was a direct response to both the nationalist ideals of Congress and the political ideology

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<sup>344</sup> *sic*, B. R. Ambedkar, “Embrace Buddhism for Emancipation (1956)” in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 122.

<sup>345</sup> Aloysius, *Emancipatory Identity*, p 22.

of the Communists. It was an attempt to challenge the perceived exclusionary and violent aspects of the ideologies of both groups.<sup>346</sup> As Aloysius states in *Religion as Emancipatory Identity*, “Ambedkar and his movement could be described as ‘pan-Indian national’. Along with the multifaceted and nationwide struggles for social emancipation of the subaltern groups in the specific context of the revitalized and nationalized Brahmanism, Ambedkar too, since the 30s, was discovering and reconstructing Buddhism as an emancipatory religious ideology.”<sup>347</sup> However, Ambedkar’s reconstruction of Buddhism goes beyond the narrow confines of religious ideology. He constructed an emancipatory ideology with secular intent and applicability. Additionally, Ambedkar’s movement filled a void on the political left that the Indian Communists had failed to exploit. He recognized the importance of caste in Indian society, and effectively utilized the growing dissatisfaction with a national identity based on a religion of division and exclusion, and with groups unwilling to recognize the importance of these distinctions as an impediment to social mobility, to advance his movement.

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<sup>346</sup> Ambedkar’s views on the violent and exclusionary aspects of Marxism and the Indian Communists will be explored in Chapter Five.

<sup>347</sup> Aloysius, *Emacipatory Identity*, p 21.

## Chapter 5

### Buddha or Marx:

#### Ambedkar's Views and Response to the Left

We must launch our struggle keeping in view the economic aspects and I am not against this idea. We should progress economically too and endeavour to become independent ... I very much desire mankind to become economically strong.<sup>348</sup>

Ambedkar respected the ideals of the scientific revolution and the enlightenment, and through the development of his social and political movement, attempted to employ the tools of rational investigation. He attempted to engage with the reality of the world with facts rather than faith. The previous chapter outlines the development of Ambedkar's political method and movement in response to Congress and the Indian Communists. Ambedkar was not always antithetical to Marxist theory. He started to engage with Marxism in the 1930s. His embrace of Marxist theory was in recognition of the potential for common cause between workers and untouchables. As such, through the 1930s and early 1940s, his writing and political activities included greater engagement with the Indian Left politically and philosophically. Key among his reasons for engaging the left was his continuing development of a broad based socio-economic uplift movement, attempting to draw support from a large cross section of castes and communities in India, to challenge the nationalist project led and defined by Congress. However, Ambedkar was also cautious when employing Marxism. There were several

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<sup>348</sup> B. R. Ambedkar "Embrace Buddhism for Emancipation (1956)" in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 121. While this quote represents an end point of Ambedkar's engagement with Marxism, it is representative of his views on economic development.

aspects of Marxism that Ambedkar found problematic, especially what he viewed as its undemocratic nature and its inability to confront the non-material roots of social problems. While Ambedkar asserted that he had studied Marxism for sometime, his criticisms are sometimes guilty of gross simplification and misunderstanding. Despite this, he provided succinct analysis of the core concepts of Marxist theory. He recognized that applied Marxism generally organized itself in a thoroughly undemocratic manner. However, he also recognized Marxist theory as a useful analytical tool for understanding the economic structure of society.<sup>349</sup> It was, in part, this dissatisfaction with applied Marxist theory, but also the recognition of its applicable attributes, that led Ambedkar to pursue an alternative to Marxism as a means for 'positive' social change.

Omvedt has become one the leaders in the study of Ambedkar and caste. Omvedt presents a clear and often poignant analysis of Ambedkar's movement and the events that defined his life.<sup>350</sup> She is critical of the rigidity of the Indian communist movement in regards to their interpretation of Marxist theory. "Only class exploitation was seen as having a material base and as being part of the relations [of] production; caste and all other 'non-class' types of oppression ... were seen as primarily socio-religious, in realms of consciousness and material life."<sup>351</sup> Further, she argues that Ambedkar, worked within the paradigm of the time by accepting a materialist and statist approach to overcoming the plight of untouchables.<sup>352</sup> Ambedkar had witnessed what he considered the inability

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<sup>349</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Buddha or Karl Marx (1956)," *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>350</sup> Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, "The Education of an Untouchable," pp 1-19.

<sup>351</sup> Omvedt, "Dr. Ambedkar's Theory of Dalit Liberation" (1994) in Yadav, *Periphery to Center Stage*, p 118.

<sup>352</sup> Omvedt, "Dr. Ambedkar's Theory of Dalit Liberation" (1994) in Yadav, *Periphery to Center Stage*, p 119.

of the reformist approach to overcoming untouchability. Within this context, Omvedt constructs a reasonable analysis of Ambedkar's materialist approach to untouchable uplift. However, Ganguly does highlight an important weakness in Omvedt's analysis of Ambedkar's movement, her apparent inability to reconcile Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism within the materialist context of her analysis.<sup>353</sup>

In order to confront this weakness in Omvedt's work, Ganguly argues that it is necessary to move beyond an analytic interpretation of caste, Ambedkar's movement and the Buddhist conversion.<sup>354</sup> Ganguly's critique of how caste has been interpreted offers several salient points. In particular, her insight into the general structure of the caste system, stating:

both caste Hindu and dalit life-worlds encompass a plenitude of heterogeneous ways of dwelling in late modern India and [that] not all of these can be circumscribed and contained within a secular and rationalist conceptual canon that sees caste in opposition to what is 'truly' modern.<sup>355</sup>

She admits that some of these ways of dwelling are oppressive. However, by including the ways of living of all caste Hindu as different ways of dwelling and belonging in late modern India, she obfuscates the oppressive aspects of caste for low caste Hindus and dalits. While this appears to be an appropriate approach to discussing the existence of caste and its modern permutations, it does not provide an adequate framework for discussing the broader basis of caste conflict and finds yet another means to bypass the “fundamental question of the right to equal security of life itself.”<sup>356</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> Debjani Ganguly, “Buddha, Bhakti and Superstition: A Post-Secular Reading of Dalit Conversion,” *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2004), p 57.

<sup>354</sup> Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity*, p 147-48.

<sup>355</sup> Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity*, p x.

<sup>356</sup> Dilip M. Menon, ed., *The Blindness of Insight: Essays on Caste in Modern India*, (Chennai: Quadro Press, 2006) p ix.

Ganguly views the faith aspect of Ambedkar's conversion as a somewhat uncomfortable complication for the materialist analysts of Ambedkar's movement, and specifically for Omvedt.<sup>357</sup> She argues that the study of caste is trapped in a modern critique that assumes caste's backwardness and oppressiveness. Ganguly presents an analysis of Ambedkar's writings as an instance of “modernity's interlocutor par excellence, as someone who engaged with the meta-narratives of modern Indian historiography on his own terms while blasting open the continuum of Hindu Brahmanic history in a simulation of the act of Walter Benjamin's revolutionary historian.”<sup>358</sup> In order to make this point she focuses on Ambedkar's mythographic corpus, especially *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables*, and various other tracts that focus on Buddhism, the shudras and the ati-shudras.<sup>359</sup> However, these only represent one aspect of Ambedkar's writings and work. Earlier, she states that her analysis is in no way an attempt to displace the material aspect of caste.<sup>360</sup> However, this approach to analysis cannot adequately account for Ambedkar's attempt to adopt a modern and rational interpretation of the traditional to support an alternative modernization project. Ambedkar attempted to construct a complimentary melding between the mythological and the rational.<sup>361</sup> In this way,

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<sup>357</sup> Ganguly, “Buddha, Bhakti and Superstition,” pp 57-58. However, Omvedt states elsewhere that Ambedkar's conversion was, in many ways, a logical result of his historical interpretation: “it was Ambedkar's efforts put into practice the assertion of a unique identity of Dalits, and to project it as a possibility for all of India.” Omvedt, “Dr. Ambedkar's Theory of Dalit Liberation” (1994) in Yadav, *Periphery to Center Stage*, p 135.

<sup>358</sup> Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity*, p 130.

<sup>359</sup> Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity*, p 26.

<sup>360</sup> Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity*, p 10.

<sup>361</sup> B. R. Ambedkar “Buddhism and Communism (1956)” in Ahir, *Selected Speeches*, p 137.

Ambedkar's movement and conversion did not represent either a complete break with the past nor a reactionary application of tradition, rather it is a recognition that while traditions inform the present, those traditions are not static, but are continually recast to suit the present conditions while providing context for the present.<sup>362</sup>

Ambedkar asserted that he was critical of the dominance of Hinduism from a young age. This critique developed from several experiences of discrimination that conflicted with the relatively untraditional childhood that his father's employment in the British army allowed.<sup>363</sup> Ambedkar's education allowed for a further development of doubt of an uncritical acceptance of tradition and dogma. His education at Columbia University appears to have cemented his rationalist interpretations of economics, philosophy and religion.<sup>364</sup>

Ambedkar claimed indebtedness to Professor John Dewey. Dewey's arguments for the continued development of education and political awareness, allowing people to address their own political future, were echoed throughout Ambedkar's work.<sup>365</sup>

Additionally, the social freedoms he experienced in America fueled his cynicism of Indian social structure.<sup>366</sup> His essays during this period demonstrate the early development of his rationalist critique of Hinduism and Indian society. In "Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development (1916)," Ambedkar did not seek to

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<sup>362</sup> An example of Ambedkar's discussion of the role of tradition in modern society can be seen in Ambedkar "Castes in India: Their mechanism, Genesis and development (1916)." This will be discussed below.

<sup>363</sup> Ambedkar, *Autobiographical Notes*.

<sup>364</sup> Eleanor Zelliot, "The American Experience of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1977)" in Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, p 83.

<sup>365</sup> Zelliot, "The American Experience" in Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, p 83.

<sup>366</sup> Zelliot, "The American Experience" in Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, p 83.

attack caste but to present a theory of its origins.<sup>367</sup> Ambedkar differentiates between why a tradition is honoured as opposed to why a tradition is practiced. Ambedkar's explanation of the disassociation between reason and rationale is derived from Enlightenment philosophies. He argues that traditions were "honoured because they were practiced."<sup>368</sup> The rationale for a practice develops after the action "to justify it and give it a moral support."<sup>369</sup> This critique developed further in two directions. First, he used essentialism to approach social and political debate when challenging traditions that composed the dominant national identity represented by Congress. Second, Ambedkar criticised of any philosophy or ideology that selectively addressed the root problems of social and economic inequity. Ambedkar eventually came to see Marxism through this second lens.

Ambedkar used the latter argument during the 1928 and 1929 textile strikes in Bombay. The unions were unwilling to recognize the limited mobility imposed on untouchables by caste. Untouchables were limited to the lowest levels of employment. In industry, they were the lowest paid and had the least skilled jobs. As peasants, the untouchables were more likely to be landless wage

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<sup>367</sup> Zelliott, "The American Experience" in Zelliott, (1996), p 83.

<sup>368</sup> B. R. Ambedkar "Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development (1916)" in Rodrigues, *Essential Writings*, p 251. This essay also demonstrates Ambedkar's early awareness of the difficulties faced by untouchable women regarding their social status, though it remains underdeveloped and compares untouchable women to other women of low status, specifically prostitutes. In this regard, while Ambedkar shows that he recognizes the specific challenge of untouchable women, he is not yet challenging paternalism as he did with the Hindu Code Bill.

<sup>369</sup> B. R. Ambedkar "Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development (1916)" in Rodrigues, *Essential Writings*, p 252. Ambedkar develops this critique initially in relation to endogamy and the traditions related to maintain caste structure and stricture.



labourers, while still required to perform caste mandated tasks.<sup>370</sup> In instances of caste exploitation, Ambedkar's defense of the rights of untouchables came into conflict with his desire to foster class ties across caste boundaries. In the 1928 strike, Ambedkar managed to convince the union to include mobility in its demands. Thus, Ambedkar avoided a conflict of interest between caste and class interests. However, during the 1929 strike, when the Girni Kamgar Union was unwilling to address the issue of caste mobility, Ambedkar dissuaded the untouchable workers from taking part in the strike. Despite the appeal against a strike, Ambedkar felt strongly about supporting the union movement, as long as it remained dissociated from the Communists.<sup>371</sup>

Ambedkar spent the next decade developing his humanist response to both Congress and the Communists. During this period, Congress cemented its dominance as the anti-imperial front, taking even the Communists into its orbit. Ambedkar's fundamental disagreements with both the Congress and the Communists left him increasingly isolated, even as his politics continued to radicalize to the left. From Ambedkar's perspective the fallout from the failure of the Poona Pact necessitated he to attempt to find a new means of challenging casteism and the Communists. In 1935, two events signaled a shift in Ambedkar's political policies: the assertion that though he was born a Hindu, he would not die one (an assertion that led Ambedkar to explore numerous world religions before settling on Buddhism) and the formation of the ILP. These both marked changes in Ambedkar's political and social program.

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<sup>370</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 155 and Kadam, *Significance of his Movement*, p 90.

<sup>371</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 155. Ambedkar argued this in several articles in *Bahishkrut Bharat* following the strike.

From the late 1920s to mid 1930s, Ambedkar's shift away from Congress was accompanied by an increasing political recognition of the plight of workers throughout India. When Ambedkar founded the ILP in August 1936, his specific intention was to form a broad-based party to address the needs of workers regardless of caste affiliation.<sup>372</sup> The ILP supported several leftist policies, especially "the principle of state management and state ownership of industry whenever it may become necessary in the interests of the people."<sup>373</sup> Other policies of the ILP represented demands for general welfare of many different underprivileged communities, particularly compulsory primary education.<sup>374</sup> The ILP's platform did not outline any policies of affirmative action or prohibition on behalf of untouchables.<sup>375</sup> Only a few ILP policies remained rooted in the demands of the Mahar community, such as the reform of the watan system.<sup>376</sup> Zelliott argues that the development of the ILP was in equal "spirit" to Ambedkar's call for conversion two months earlier. Both events were "independent, separatist, intolerant of patronage, determined to build new structures outside the old ways."<sup>377</sup> Despite this intent, some of Ambedkar's compatriots from other untouchable castes, such as S. N. Shivtarkar, were concerned that "Ambedkar failed to allot enough seats to non-Mahars" on the party ticket in the 1936 elections.<sup>378</sup> In general, the ILP was not able to overcome the appearance of a caste party, rooted primarily in the Mahar community.

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<sup>372</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, p 184.

<sup>373</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, p 185.

<sup>374</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, p 186.

<sup>375</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, p 186

<sup>376</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, p 187. The Watan system placed the Mahar at an inferior social level to the rest of the community, allowing caste Hindus to place demands on the Mahar without adequate remuneration or allowing for the needs of the Mahar.

This system has since been abolished

<sup>377</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, p 183.

<sup>378</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, p 100.

While the ILP platform addressed issues of economic inequity, Ambedkar attempted to address social inequity. He argued that institutions such as the watan system were both economic and social, reinforcing economic hardship and the psychology of social inequality.<sup>379</sup> This marks a clear distinction between Ambedkar and Indian Marxists. Ambedkar argued that the Marxists were too rooted in the classic materialist debate when they insisted that structural problems, like caste, would automatically be overcome through changes in foundations of economic relations.<sup>380</sup> Further, he argued that “all the doctrines which Marx propounded had no other purpose than to establish his contention that his brand of Socialism was scientific and not utopian.”<sup>381</sup> Ambedkar suggested, that while Marx's basic premises are sound, India has had a history of class struggle that demonstrated that:

[f]ar from working in a spirit of fraternity the mutual relations of the castes are fratricidal. Class-consciousness, class struggle and class wars are supposed to be ideologies, which came into vogue from the writings of Karl Marx. This is a complete mistake. India is the land, which has experienced class-consciousness, class struggle. Indeed, India is the land where there has been fought a class war between Brahmans and Kshatriyas which lasted for several generations and which was fought so hard and with such virulence that it turned but to be a war of extermination.<sup>382</sup>

Despite Ambedkar's characterization of class-consciousness, he was also aware of the difference between class and caste, and that caste relations impeded the development of a broad class consciousness. He argued that for “Caste to be real [it] can exist only by

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<sup>379</sup> Zelliott, *Untouchable Movement*, p 187.

<sup>380</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Buddha or Karl Marx (1956),” *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>381</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Buddha or Karl Marx (1956),” *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>382</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “The Hindu Social Order: It's Essential Principles (approximately 1948)” in “India and The Pre-requisites of Communism,” *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

disintegrating a group. The genius of caste is to divide and to disintegrate. It is also the curse of caste.”<sup>383</sup> Caste disrupted what might otherwise represent common ground as shared environment, income or oppression. Therefore, Ambedkar argued, in order to address the economic disparities, caste disparities must also be addressed, or the caste disparities would continue to undermine attempts to address economic disparity.

Despite the change in Ambedkar’s politics, he was still willing to work with the Communists. For the first time in 1938, during the textile strike over the “Black Bill,” Ambedkar successfully worked with the Communists towards a common goal.<sup>384</sup> Ambedkar characterized the ‘Black Bill’ as a ‘Workers’ Civil Liberties Suspension Act’. In the Bombay Legislature, Ambedkar made a spirited defense of the right to strike. He argued that the bill would restrict the possibility of any ‘free Union’ developing in India.<sup>385</sup> The strike combined the forces of the Independent Labour Party, the Communists and moderates.<sup>386</sup> However, the socialists and the Royists distanced themselves from the strike. They argued that it was an anti-Congress political strike rather than a strike for worker's rights.<sup>387</sup> Unfortunately, a continued dialog between the Communists and Ambedkar did not materialize. Omvedt argues that a key reason for this was that the Communists did not learn from the ILP message of “an all-round liberation

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<sup>383</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “The Curse of Caste (manuscript date unknown, probably mid to late 1940s)” in “Essays on Untouchables and Untouchability: Social,” *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008. Ambedkar provides a list of some of the castes to demonstrate the shear number.

<sup>384</sup> Gail Omvedt, “Ambedkar as a Human Rights Leader,” *Ambedkar.org*, April 15, 2002 / Commentary, Dalit E-Forum, <http://ambedkar.org/gail/AmbedkarAs.htm> April 1, 2008.

<sup>385</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 199.

<sup>386</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 199.

<sup>387</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 199.

struggle, against caste as well as class and national exploitation.”<sup>388</sup>

In the early 1940s, Ambedkar and the Communists became allies of circumstance but not of substance. After Nazi Germany invaded the USSR, the Communists were forced to change their initial anti-war policy. During this period, Ambedkar argued that it was “the patriotic duty of all Indians,” no matter political allegiance, to resist fascist aggression.<sup>389</sup> This policy led untouchables out of the Quit India movement just as the Communists were forced to support the British due to international events. However this common war effort did not lead to a reconciliation of common cause, as Ambedkar was about to move away from his radicalism of the 1930s.

In 1942, Ambedkar dissolved the ILP and formed the Scheduled Caste Federation (SCF). The SCF’s goal was to unite untouchables, but not to develop a broad workers and peasant alliance. Unlike the ILP, the SCF focused on the specific needs of the untouchables. The SCF was formed in part as a response to the failure of the Cripps Mission to recognize the interests of untouchables.<sup>390</sup> The relatively conservative approach by Ambedkar through the SCF represents a pragmatic realization that independence would soon become a reality.<sup>391</sup> He realized that the socialist ideals of the 1930s must give way to a program to secure the best possible deal for the untouchables.<sup>392</sup> Ambedkar again began to work with Congress, culminating in the writing of the 1949 Constitution. The radicalism that could have allowed for an alliance with the Communists came to an end.

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<sup>388</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 200.

<sup>389</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 217.

<sup>390</sup> Eleanor Zelliot “Learning the Use of Political Means: The Mahars of Maharashtra (1970)” in Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, p 108.

<sup>391</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 218.

<sup>392</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 218.

The lack of a development between the Ambedkar and the Communists does not lay solely with the latter. While Ambedkar did embrace certain aspects of Marxist philosophy, he was also critical of Communism. Initially, Ambedkar was attracted to certain aspects of Marxist theory, but found it lacked humanism.<sup>393</sup> Ambedkar approved of the ends that Marxism advocated, but not the means. Leading up to conversion, Ambedkar attempted to demonstrate how each of these aspects of Marxism was mirrored in Buddhism.<sup>394</sup> This challenge to Marxism was fully developed late in his life, representing the widest extent of his separation from the Marxists. He argued that the ends advocated by Marx contradicted the long term goals of the revolution because:

[t]he means adopted by the Communists are equally clear, short and swift. They are (1) Violence and (2) Dictatorship of the Proletariat. The Communists say that there are the only two means of establishing Communism. The first is violence. Nothing short of it will suffice to break up the existing system. The other is dictatorship of the proletariat. Nothing short of it will suffice to continue the new system. It is now clear what are the similarities and differences between Buddha and Karl Marx. The differences are about the means. The end is common to both.<sup>395</sup>

Ambedkar was positive that no system based on violence and oppression, in this case the oppression of choice, could last long, and thus the Communist revolution was doomed from the start.

Further, Ambedkar argued that Marxism was incapable of dealing with the problems caused by caste. The intricate gradation of rights and disability locked all members of a society in relation to each other.

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<sup>393</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 162.

<sup>394</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Buddha or Karl Marx (1956)," *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>395</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Buddha or Karl Marx (1956)," *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

The higher the grade of a caste, the greater the number of these rights and the lower the grade, the lesser their number. Now this gradation, this scaling of castes, makes it impossible to organise a common front against the Caste System. If a caste claims the right to inter-dine and inter-marry with another caste placed above it, it is frozen, instantly it is told by mischief-mongers, and there are many Brahmins amongst such mischief-mongers, that it will have to concede inter-dining and inter-marriage with castes below it! All are slaves of the Caste System. But all the slaves are not equal in status. To excite the proletariat to bring about an economic revolution, Karl Marx told them: “You have nothing to lose except your chains.” But the artful way in which the social and religious rights are distributed among the different castes whereby some have more and some have less, makes the slogan of Karl Marx quite useless to excite the Hindus against the Caste System. Castes form 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. You cannot, therefore, have a general mobilization of the Hindus, to use a military expression, for an attack on the Caste System (sic).<sup>396</sup>

Ambedkar increasingly felt that Marxism was incomplete and attacked its anti-democratic rhetoric and the violent means of its implementation. This antipathy towards Marxism was based more on philosophical grounds than its application in the Indian context, though he was also aware and critical of its application in Russia.<sup>397</sup>

Ambedkar attacked the members of the Communist movement. He argued that their caste background could interfere with their ability to recognize the problem of caste. He stated that the Communists were “a bunch of Brahmin boys.”<sup>398</sup> The high caste

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<sup>396</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi (1936),” *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>397</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Buddha or Marx (1956),” *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008. “[W]hen the Communism—which is another name for the dictatorship of the Proletariat—came to Russia, it did not come as something inevitable without any kind of human effort. There was a revolution and much deliberate planning had to be done with a lot of violence and blood shed, before it could step into Russia. The rest of the world is still waiting for coming of the Proletarian Dictatorship. “

<sup>398</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 183.

leaders of the Communist party were able to ignore caste because its negative effects were contingent on their place in society. Despite the growth of workers and peasants groups, the Communist leadership “remained Brahman dominated ... a process of transformation (inclusion) did not take place.”<sup>399</sup> Even within a movement that argued for equality, Ambedkar saw evidence that caste discrimination remained.

During the 1950s, as Ambedkar began to develop his Buddhist alternative for untouchables, he also renewed his critique of Marxism. Ambedkar enumerated ten aspects of the original ‘creed’ of Marxism.<sup>400</sup> Of these ten, Ambedkar states that there are four items that have survived the critique of Marxist theory:

- i. The function of philosophy is to reconstruct the world and not to waste its time in explaining the origin of the world.
- ii. That there is a conflict of interest between class and class.
- iii. That private ownership of property brings power to one class and sorrow to another through exploitation.
- iv. That it is necessary for the good of society that the sorrow be removed by the abolition of private property.<sup>401</sup>

Regarding the first of these theses, Ambedkar states that the Buddha and Marx are in agreement. Religion, like philosophy, should function in relation to reality. The two should work to better the lives of people in the present world rather than explore esoteric ideas that distract from moral and social inequities.<sup>402</sup> Further, Ambedkar mined Buddhism to show that the Buddha recognized the existence of class conflict and “that it is the class conflict which is the cause of misery.”<sup>403</sup> Discussing the third point,

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<sup>399</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 184.

<sup>400</sup> See Appendix B.

<sup>401</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Buddha or Karl Marx (1956),” *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>402</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Buddha or Karl Marx (1956),” *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>403</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Buddha or Karl Marx (1956),” *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R.



Ambedkar stated that while the language of the Buddha and Marx were different, misery instead of exploitation, “if for misery one reads exploitation Buddha is not away from Marx.”<sup>404</sup> These three points are fairly straightforward with a rough similarity between Marxism and Buddhism.

The Buddhist comparison with the fourth aspect of Marxism represents Ambedkar’s weakest comparative analysis. Ambedkar suggested that the rules of the Bhikkhu Sangh were the best representation of the idea of the removal of private property in Buddhism. In many respects this is a false comparison between Buddhist philosophy and Marxism. The Bhikkhu represented an ideal, unattainable by the vast majority of the population. Ambedkar stated that these rules were far more rigorous than the rules applied in Russia, but Marx did not call for the abolition of all private property. In the “Communist Manifesto” Marx called only for the “abolition of private property in land and the application of rents of land to public purposes.”<sup>405</sup> The abolition of private property is further defined in *Das Kapital*. Private property is equated with the means of production, not private property in toto.<sup>406</sup> For Marx the problem is not private property but capitalistic private property, i.e. the means of production (land, factories and other implements of production). Austerity for a voluntary few is not the point; it is ending private ownership over the means of production and its generated surplus. Ambedkar’s comparison of the Bhikkhu Sangh to Marx’s call for an end to private capitalistic

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Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>404</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, “Buddha or Karl Marx (1956),” *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>405</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels “Manifesto of the Communist Party (1888)” in Lewis S. Feuer, ed., *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), Pg. 28.

<sup>406</sup> Karl Marx “*Excerpts from Capital: A Critique of Political Economy (1867)*” in Feuer, *Marx and Engels*, p 164.

property represents a major misunderstanding of Marxist thought. In this regard, “Buddha vs. Karl Marx” is more importantly a representation of how Ambedkar interprets Buddhism rather than an example of how he understands Marxism.

There are two competing interpretations of Ambedkar’s engagement with Marxism. The first, postulated by Omvedt, celebrates Ambedkar’s movement for essentializing the role of caste in Indian society while challenging the Left’s dismissal of the importance of Caste.<sup>407</sup> Ganguly, in *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity*, advances a competing conception of Ambedkar’s anti-caste movement. Ganguly attempts to develop an analysis of caste based on “theoretical developments in the field of post-colonial studies.”<sup>408</sup> Ganguly argues that Ambedkar accepted a mechanistic model of base and superstructure derived from a ‘vulgar’ understanding of Marxist theory.<sup>409</sup> Ganguly then postulates two outcomes of Ambedkar’s mechanistic model. The first “was his inability to theorize about the material basis of caste.”<sup>410</sup> The second was his “acceptance that heavy industrialization constituted the economic foundations of socialism.”<sup>411</sup> Ganguly is critical of Marxism’s critique of modern society since “[t]he primary emphasis on class and economic subordination to holders of property relegated issues of caste to the level of the socio-religious, the ideological, the non-material.”<sup>412</sup> Her criticism of Ambedkar’s engagement with Marxism derives from her critique of Marxism. “Even Ambedkar adopted the mechanistic architectural

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<sup>407</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 14.

<sup>408</sup> Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity*, p ix.

<sup>409</sup> Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity*, p 91.

<sup>410</sup> Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity*, p 91.

<sup>411</sup> Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity*, p 91.

<sup>412</sup> Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity*, p 91.

framework of base and super-structure, except that in his quarrels with the Indian communists he sought to reverse it and argue for the importance of addressing the 'superstructural' aspects of the framework first."<sup>413</sup> Ambedkar's acceptance of the base-superstructure analysis of society does not fit within her mythographic reading of Ambedkar's work.

The scientific approach of Marxist theory appealed to Ambedkar's rationalism. He highlighted ten aspects that Marx used to base his assertion of the scientific nature of Marxism.<sup>414</sup> The most important of these theses are:

- ii That the force which shapes the course of history are primarily economic.
- iii That society is divided into two classes, owners and workers.
- vi That this exploitation can be put to an end by nationalization of the instruments of production i.e. abolition of private property.
- viii That this growing impoverishment of workers is resulting in a revolutionary spirit among the workers and the conversion of the class conflict into a class struggle.
- x These factors are irresistible and therefore socialism is inevitable.<sup>415</sup>

These points highlight what Ganguly calls the 'vulgar' nature of Ambedkar's interpretation of Marxism. Essentially that Ambedkar's interpretation of the basic tenets of Marxism lack nuance.

However, from this 'vulgar' interpretation, Ambedkar was able to adequately critique the Indian Communist movement. He succinctly challenged the primary role of economic forces through his examination of the history of caste and religion in India. He argued repeatedly that caste limited the ability of untouchables to advance, systematically enforcing their subservience to other castes and the village. Further, he saw that the

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<sup>413</sup> Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity*, p 91.

<sup>414</sup> See Appendix B.

<sup>415</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Buddha or Karl Marx (1956)," *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

anonymity of industrialized society was a means to counter the impoverishment imposed on untouchables in the villages.<sup>416</sup> While this may represent a vulgar understanding of Marxist theory, it represents Ambedkar's insights into its applications as a useful tool in the attempt to overcome caste hierarchy.

Omvedt provides a rationale for the reason that Ambedkar's critique of Marxism remained vulgar. For Marxists:

[t]he 'class' category provided a marvelous tool for Indian Marxists to interpret what they saw around them within one grand framework of a theory of exploitation and liberation, but at the same time blinding them to other factors in their environment... 'Marxism' was taken in practice as a closed theory, not a developing science. As a result there could be no dialogue with leaders like Ambedkar. Thus, when Ambedkar reacted to Marxism, he reacted to it only as a closed system which at crucial points not simply indifferent but in opposition to struggles of the Dalits. He borrowed themes from Marxism ... but he never took it as a resource for analysis and action.<sup>417</sup>

Ambedkar's response to Marxism in India was vulgar because the interpretation of Marxism by Marxists in India was also vulgar. Ambedkar's interpretation of Marxism represents his continued political practicality. He believed philosophy should function in reality.<sup>418</sup> His challenge to Marxism, logically, reflected the reality of applied Marxism in India. Further, Omvedt, like Ambedkar, argued that Marxism "was and is incapable of handling caste or other 'non-class' contradictions."<sup>419</sup> However, unlike Ambedkar,

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<sup>416</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Mr. Gandhi and the Emancipation of the Untouchable (1943)," *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>417</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 185.

<sup>418</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Buddha or Karl Marx (1956)," *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

<sup>419</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 183. Despite differences in their analysis, Ganguly's and Omvedt's critiques of Marxism are remarkably similar; that the Communists primary emphasis was "on class and economic subordination to holders of property [which] relegated issues of caste to the level of the socio-religious, the

Omvedt forgivingly states that this inability was a result of Marx and Engels lack of familiarity with India.<sup>420</sup>

While Ambedkar recognized the potential usefulness of Marxist philosophy, he also developed a series of arguments against Communism and Marxism. First, he felt that Marxism was undemocratic. Second, by advocating violence as a means to equality, Marxism was contradictory at best and hypocritical at worst. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Ambedkar saw that Marxism could not solve problems that originated from societal stigma rather than economic inequality. Ambedkar investigated an alternative to Marxism in applied Buddhism, attempting to show in the process that Marx's conclusions were neither original, nor adequate to critique Indian society or to develop a movement of social and political equity in India.

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ideological, and the non-material. Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity*, p 91.

<sup>420</sup> Omvedt, *Democratic Revolution*, p 184.

## Conclusion

It is enticing to discuss the possibilities of what might have been if the Communists and Ambedkar had been able to move beyond their differences to work for a common cause. However, this is a history of absence and lost opportunity. Ambedkar and the Communists were not able to work together. They continually rejected each other for ideological, political and sometimes even petty reasons.

Ambedkar drew positive and critical attention from various national leaders for his keen intelligence and sharp critique of the Indian polity. He repeatedly shaped debate over minorities in India and he helped develop the foundations of a modern independent state. His appellation as a ‘modern Manu’ is both ironic and informative of his role in Indian history.<sup>421</sup> To this point, the essential aspects of Ambedkar studies have been dominated by his religious conversion, his role as an untouchable leader and his conflict with Gandhi. His relationship with reform movements not formed within or for untouchable groups, other than those related to Congress, has been largely overlooked. Ambedkar’s role as an untouchable and national leader is no longer an issue of substantive historical debate, though the quality of that leadership may be.

My work builds on Omvedt’s analysis of Communist engagement with Ambedkar and the Communists analysis of caste. I analyze the Communists inability to engage the untouchable community either theoretically and individually, while also analyzing broader political trends that kept Ambedkar and the Communists apart. The Communists had numerous opportunities to attempt to counter caste. However, except for individual cases, the Communists were unwilling to recognize caste as a problem of similar

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<sup>421</sup> Keer, *Life and Mission*, p 434.

importance to economic disparities. They did not recognize that social constructs could be used to forward their political movement as Mao accomplished in China.<sup>422</sup> Instead, Indian communists insisted on working within the confines of a narrow and vulgar interpretation of Marxism and its application.<sup>423</sup> They were unable to take advantage of a large socially dislocated population. Thus, I provide a synthesis of Omvedt's, Ganguly's and Teltumbde's analysis of the communist's engagement with Ambedkar and caste, demonstrating a multiplicity of reasons why the communists failed to engage with either.

Ganguly provides the germ for the analysis of Ambedkar's interpretation of Marxism. Ambedkar's own interpretation of Marxism, though insightful, was often vulgar. His interpretation of Marxism was more often a response to the Indian Communists than a direct interpretation of Marx. Ambedkar continually attacked the lack of advocacy for political democracy by the Indian Communist Party. Ambedkar developed a counter argument, that a just society must include both social and political democracy. However, the most important aspect of Ambedkar's critique of Marxism was that it demonstrated his engagement with the actions and attitudes of the group he was confronting, not necessarily the theoretical position they claimed to represent. Indian Communists offered a vulgar interpretation of Marxism to the Indian Polity, so Ambedkar confronted the vulgar application of Marxism in India, not the nuanced interpretations that were rejected by the Indian Communist leadership. Unlike Ganguly's assertion, Ambedkar's vulgar interpretation of Marxism is valid in this case because it pragmatically recognizes the political reality of the Communist movement in India.

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<sup>422</sup> Teltumbde, *Anti-Imperialism*, p 235 and M. R. Masani, "The Communist Party in India," *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 24, No. 1. (1951), p 28.

<sup>423</sup> Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity*, p 91.

Finally, I examine religion as a means to undermining vertical social divisions, the way that Communism was meant to overcome horizontal economic divisions. One last time, Ambedkar changed his approach to political and social emancipation, but despite this he maintained a continued political action aimed to elevate the political consciousness of the Dalit Community. Buddhism was not meant as an opiate for the masses, but a means to educate about the oppressiveness of the caste system, while simultaneously removing the convert from the internalized shackles of caste hierarchy. This action had a secondary result, namely that it replaced community as the key unit of identity with that of the individual. Buddhism then provided a middle path for political and social democracy.

Through Buddhism, Ambedkar developed a challenge to Congress and the Communists in keeping with his support of the ideals of liberal democracy, while rooting his challenge in Indian tradition. Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism embodied all the aspects of social and political reform he had been advocating during his political career. The key difference was that the tools for emancipation were now put directly into the hands of each untouchable. There was no need for reservations, untouchables would lift themselves and support each other as a separate community, removing the stigma of untouchability from their hearts. Political isolation and competition fostered a search for alternative processes of untouchable uplift, a process that was symbolized by Ambedkar's own Buddhist conversion. Like this thesis, Ambedkar's Buddhism was an attempt to return to the basics of the movement and to provide recognizable choices to those most adversely affected by caste oppression. Unfortunately, Ambedkar died before he could fully implement this last stage of his social and political movement.



## Appendix A

### A Biography of Dr Ambedkar<sup>424</sup>

In the year of 1891,  
On the fourteenth day of April,  
Happiness came to Mohagaon.  
Flags and banners were raised.  
    Sleep, baby, sleep. Sleep, baby, sleep.  
Monday has come,  
Bhimabai's baby is ready to be born.  
Blessed Ramji made a vow for a son,  
Then Baby Bhim was born.  
    Sleep, baby, sleep. Sleep, baby, sleep.  
The baby grew like the moon  
Ramji's house was bathed in light.  
Even though he played in a Dalit hut,  
He became determined to fight injustice.  
    Sleep, baby, sleep. Sleep, baby, sleep.  
See the wanton Brahmins drunk with power.  
Polluting is our touch to them.  
In school Bhim remained apart.  
Alone he took pains for learning.  
    Sleep, baby, sleep. Sleep, baby, sleep.  
After a little education in Satara,  
He went to school in Bombay.  
He studied very hard,  
And passed Matric at sixteen.  
    Sleep, baby, sleep. Sleep, baby, sleep.  
Thanks be to you, King Gaikwad!  
Let the vine of your lineage prosper!  
You helped the cause of the poor and weak,  
By sending my Bhim to a foreign land.  
    Sleep, baby, sleep. Sleep, baby, sleep.  
King Bhim became oh so angry.  
Like a lion did he roar.  
"Why do you torture the Dalits?  
Now I will thrash those villains."  
    Sleep, baby, sleep. Sleep, baby, sleep.  
Seeing the condition of the poor,

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<sup>424</sup> Indira Y. Junghare, "Dr. Ambedkar: The Hero of the Untouchables, Ex-Untouchables of India," *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (1988), pp 106-8. Digital permission: April 8, 2008. Benjamin Dorman, Co-editor, *Asian Ethnology*.

King Bhima boiled.  
He blew the horn of revolt,  
And called the hero in him to work.  
    Sleep, baby, sleep. Sleep, baby, sleep.  
Ambedkar roared :  
“ I'll destroy the kingdom of rich merchants and priests.  
Ending all oppression  
I will raise the banner of equality.”  
    Sleep, baby, sleep. Sleep, baby, sleep.  
He directed the Satyagraha of Chaudar Tank.  
He asked the Hindus for some water.  
Going to Nasik and Poona.  
He fought for the cause of the Dalits.  
    Sleep, baby, sleep. Sleep, baby, sleep.  
When Gandhi became a big national leader,  
The Dalits were faced with the arrival of an enemy.  
He snatched away our rights,  
Claiming he was about to sacrifice his life.  
    Sleep, baby, sleep. Sleep, baby, sleep.  
Bhim became the Labor Minister of Delhi,  
He helped our people by the millions.  
He was a good minister of law,  
And introduced the Hindu Code Bill  
    Sleep, baby, sleep. Sleep, baby, sleep.

## Appendix B

### Ten Key Aspects of Marxism According to Ambedkar<sup>425</sup>

- (i) That the purpose of philosophy is to reconstruct the world and not to explain the origin of the universe.
- (ii) That the force which shapes the course of history are primarily economic.
- (iii) That society is divided into two classes, owners and workers.
- (iv) That there is always a class conflict going on between the two classes.
- (v) That the workers are exploited by the owners who misappropriate the surplus value, which is the result of the workers' labour.
- (vi) That this exploitation can be put an end to by nationalisation of the instruments of production i.e. abolition of private property.
- (vii) That this exploitation is leading to greater and greater impoverishment of the workers.
- (viii) That this growing impoverishment of the workers is resulting in a revolutionary spirit among the workers and the conversion of the class conflict into a class struggle.
- (ix) That as the workers outnumber the owners, the workers are bound to capture the State and establish their rule, which he called the dictatorship of the proletariat.
- (x) These factors are irresistible and therefore socialism is inevitable.

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<sup>425</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, "Buddha or Karl Marx (1956)," *Ambedkar.org*, 2006 / Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit E-Forum, <http://www.ambedkar.org>, April 1, 2008.

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