

# **Caste Question, Marxism and the Political Legacy of B. R. Ambedkar**

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• Abhinav Sinha

It would be purely tautological to claim that caste is one of the essential characteristic features of Indian social reality. However, at the risk of being tautological I must begin by reiterating this oft- repeated cliché. One of the reasons for that is the recent incidents that shook the conscience of every justice-loving citizen of India and underlined the question of caste with renewed urgency. The institutional murder of Rohith Vemula and some other dalit students in universities across India; the Jat, Maratha and Patel agitations for reservation, Una incident and an unprecedented spurt in the anti- dalit atrocities: all these incidents have brought the question of annihilation of caste to the centre with reinvigorated imminence, though it was never on the periphery. Undoubtedly, any discussion of a radical and revolutionary transformation of Indian society must deal with the question of caste.

It would be a sheer act of self-suggestion if we assume that we are the first ones to attempt to understand the question of caste and its annihilation. Anti-caste movements and anti-caste warriors for centuries have tried to understand caste and have fought against it. Any attempt to understand caste must evaluate these anti-caste movements and anti-caste warriors like Ayyankali, Phule, Periyar, Ambedkar and many more. As Marx had once said, “to be a radical means going to the root of things.” This also holds true in understanding caste system, the positives and negatives of anti-caste movements of past, and proposing the possible path of annihilation of caste today. In other words, “we must begin with the beginning,” to paraphrase Lenin. The first question that we must answer is one that has been answered a zillion times by myriad kinds of people including activists, thinkers, academicians, and philosophers: **What is caste?** I would humbly attempt to present a Marxist understanding of caste in brief and in the process I would make critical comments on some of the major interpretations of caste system too.

To answer the question ‘what is caste’ we must answer the question ‘**how did varna/caste system originate?**’ In my opinion, to understand caste system in its contemporaneity, it is essential to comprehend it historically. One of the main weaknesses of sociological studies of caste is their disdain for a historical view. This positivistic fetish to record the myriad contemporary particularities of caste prevents most of the sociological studies to arrive at a balanced historical understanding of caste system. Therefore, I deem it essential to begin with the question of origin in order to develop a rigorous understanding. Now, this question itself can be subject of a long dedicated discussion but I shall try to present my understanding of the origin of caste system, or, the *varna*-caste system in very brief and in this, I would mostly be following the leading historians, sociologists and anthropologists who have probed this question, while trying to synthesize their conclusions.

### **1. Historiography of Caste: A Very Brief Note**

*Varna*-caste system came into existence in the North-West of the Indian subcontinent and then expanded in the plains of Ganges. In a gradual process, it enveloped different parts of Indian subcontinent in varied forms. This process continued till the early medieval period and to some extent, even later. If we look at the history of *Varna* system or *Varnashrama*, we find the first reference of the word ‘*varna*’ in the tenth *mandala* of *Purushasukta* of *Rig Veda*. This belongs to the latter part of the early or *RigVedic* period.

The description of *varnashrama* in this first reference lacks three essential characteristics of caste system: the hereditary labour division, endogamy and untouchability. The description of *varna* in this first reference resembles more to a labour division and an embryonic class division, as historians of ancient India like D.D. Kosambi, R.S. Sharma, Suvira Jaisawal, etc have shown. We do not find any reference of *jati* (caste) in *Rig Veda*. The first reference of *jati* is found in *Ashtadhyayi* of Panini and then in *Brihatsamhita* of Varahmihir. However, in these sources from around 200 BC, the words *jati* and *varna* have been used interchangeably and synonymously. The first time these two words are used with different meanings is *Yajnyavalkyasmriti* but only once. Thus, till 200 BC the divergence in the meanings of the words *varna* and *jati* had not taken place. This much is clear from the historical evidence that in the *RigVedic* period, the *varnashrama* (*varna* system) was signifying

an embryonic class division and labour division. In other words, **at the time of origin, varna division represented the embryonic class division of the latter part of the early-Vedic society, as Kosambi has rightly pointed out.**

It can safely be said that Historical Materialist analysis of ancient Indian history begins with D. D. Kosambi. According to Kosambi, the first wave of Aryans had settled in the Indian subcontinent before the coming of the Vedic Aryans and they had got mixed with the aboriginal inhabitants including the surviving elements of Harappan civilization. The Vedic Aryans were mostly pastoral nomads and were divided into three social strata: *Brahm*, *Rajanya*, and *Vis*. Famous historian Bruce Lincoln has shown with the example of a number of pastoral societies from around the world that most of the pastoral people had this kind of social stratification and almost all of them had social strata of priests, warriors and common labour. We cannot go into the details of his theory; this much can be said that his claims hold water in the context of the Vedic Aryans too. When the Vedic Aryans came they clashed with these people. They used terms *dasas/dasyus* and *asura* to describe the pre- Vedic Aryans who had mixed up with the aboriginal inhabitants. However, the first usage of the term 'dasa' was not equivalent to its modern meaning, i.e., 'slave'. The way in which the meaning of this term changed actually reflects the history of Vedic civilization and its clash with the early Aryan settlers. For example, the terms 'dasyu' and 'asura' have been used for Indra as well who was the main this-worldly god of the Vedic Aryans; in the beginning, for the other-worldly gods, they used the term 'deva.' However, when the pre-Vedic Aryans who had settled in the subcontinent and had mixed up with the original inhabitants, including the surviving elements of Harappan civilization, were defeated by the Vedic Aryans, the meaning of the terms 'dasa' and 'asura' changed. 'Asura' began to be used for the chieftains of the defeated pre-Vedic Aryans (*dasas*). The term 'dasa' assumed its present meaning, that is, 'slave.' These *dasas* were termed as *shudras*. According to Kosambi, with the emergence of this new *varna* and expansion of Vedic civilization into the mid-Gangetic plains, the four fold *varna* system came into existence: *Brahmana*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra*.

Use of iron started around 7th c. BC which led to clearing of extremely dense forest areas of plains of Ganges and increase in agricultural

production. With increase in the surplus production the class divisions within the Vedic society consolidated. Moreover, with the eastward expanse of Vedic civilization, new tribes were assimilated into the Vedic society mostly through violent and sometimes through non-violent process. According to Kosambi, this assimilation of tribes led to proliferation of castes (*jati*) within the fourfold *varna* system. According to Romila Thaper, the vanquished tribes got assimilated as the lower castes. However, Suvira Jaiswal has argued that the assimilation of tribes into the Vedic society was differential. Often the priests of these tribes got assimilated into the *brahmin varna*, warriors into the *kshatriya varna*, and so on. This very process led to creation of new castes within these *varnas*. Kosambi argues that the subjugation of *shudras* and their use as slaves and servile labour and collusion of *brahmins* and *kshatriyas* to dominate *vaishyas* and exploit and oppress *shudras* towards the end of the Vedic period showed that class society had come into being. **At this stage of development of production system, *varna* was the class division of society.** It had not yet emerged into a system of what Ambedkar had called ‘enclosed classes’ or ‘graded inequality’ because caste endogamy had not emerged.

**S. Sharma**, another leading historian of ancient India builds upon Kosambi’s account and argues that before the advent of iron and consequently sufficient surplus production, the *varna* division signified a social stratification based on labour division, which cannot yet be called a properly developed class society or consolidated *varnashrama*. He provides evidence that hereditary labour division was very weak and in the process of development; *varna* endogamy too was not present and there was no sign of untouchability. Even the hierarchy was not rigid and off-springs of *shudras* and higher *varnas* got assimilated into higher *varnas* without discrimination. However, with surplus production after the advent of iron, these social strata consolidated into *varnas*, which represented the class division of that period. Still, untouchability did not develop at that time.

Between 700 BC and 1st century AD that was the period of the 16 ancient republics and the Mauryan empire, we witness the proliferation of new castes, beginning of caste endogamy and consolidation of hereditary labour division. This process was also characterized by the emergence of the outcastes or the *pancham varna*. However, they did

not become untouchables immediately and untouchability emerged in a process along with the emergence of feudal mode of production from the 1st century AD, to which we will come shortly. B. N. S. Yadav and others has furnished ample evidence of this process. **What is notable here is that the caste/varna hierarchy is altered in this period.** Most notably, the status of *shudras* underwent a change from that of unfree labour class, including slave labour, controlled by *brahmins* and *kshatriyas*, who combined to form the ruling class, into the main agrarian population of free and semi-free peasants. Before that, agriculture was the main occupation of the *vaishyas*. At the same time, the *vaishyas* who used to be the main agrarian *varna* were transformed into the trading *varna*. This was also the period of second urban revolution in the pre-feudal India (first being the urban revolution of the Harappan civilization), that witnessed flourishing trade and commerce. **Evidently, the changes in the varna order were result of the changes in production relations due to advent of iron and increase in surplus production.**

The beginning of Gupta period was marked by emergence of feudal relations. In India, feudalism was not characterized by consolidated serfdom like its European counterpart because the supply of unfree labour was furnished by existence of castes that were out of the fourfold *varnas* and partially by semi-free *shudra* peasants and the so-called *hina shudras*. It is notable that by this time *brahmins* made a distinction between the *hina* (lowly) and *ahina shudras* to make certain forms of manual labour as extremely downgraded. Though untouchability had not consolidated by that time, yet, a sense of repulsion has been expressed regarding the *hina shudras*. The *pancham varna* or the outcastes had proliferated with the assimilation of defeated tribes into the Vedic society with the eastward expansion of Vedic Aryans into the Gangetic plains. The 1st century AD witnessed the beginning of land grants to the beneficiaries of the State. The beginning of feudal relations was marked by ruralization and localization of economy and demonetization. The chief mode of wealth now was land unlike the previous period when it was primarily cattle stock and secondarily land. The Gupta rulers gave land grants to *brahmins* for their priestly services. This led to a change in the character of *brahmin varna*. Till now, it was considered inappropriate for *brahmins* to own land. But now a section of *brahmins* emerged as wealthy feudal landlords also.

In the course of time, the landlord *brahmins* climbed higher in the caste hierarchy whereas the priestly *brahmins* living on alms became downgraded. **Again, as we can see, these changes in certain *varna*/castes and the caste hierarchy was due to the changes in the mode of production and production relations.**

Suvira Jaisawal has shown that *varna*/caste system cannot simply be *reduced* to caste endogamy and hereditary labour division. In fact, all these traits of caste system evolved in a process due to social, economic and political changes. The ritualistic aspect of the caste system was determined *in the last analysis* by the socio-economic developments in the society. Otherwise, the caste system would have been temporally and spatially identical. **Whenever, there was correspondence between new production relations and class dynamics, the caste system became more consolidated and rigid and whenever new production relations and class dynamics were not in congruence with the prevailing caste system and its hierarchy, structural changes took place in the *varna*/caste system.** This does not mean that caste/*varna* are class; rather, except the point of origin, there is a relation of correspondence between them. We will come to this Correspondence theory after a little while. At present, it suffices to say that the historical development of *varna*/caste system and its internal temporal and spatial variations are due to its continuous dialog and dialectics with the class relations, production relations and production system.

Now, let me dwell on the **Correspondence theory** for a while. As we saw, at the point of origin there was an overlapping between *varna* and class. In other words, *varna* represented the class division of early-Vedic society. However, afterwards a relation of *correspondence* developed between them. **Why did it happen?** The reason was the peculiar kind of ideological legitimation of the class hierarchy by the ideologues of the ruling class in the Vedic period. The role of these ideologues was played by the *brahmins* who were also part of the ruling class combine of *kshatriyas* and *brahmins*. This peculiar kind of legitimation can be characterized as **religious-ritualistic ossification of the labour division and class division prevailing in the later Vedic period.** As we have seen, the principal characteristics of caste system, i.e., caste endogamy and hereditary labour division were not to be seen in the *varna* system of the early-Vedic period. These traits developed only

with surplus production, class and state formation and consolidation of patriarchy, as Suvira Jaisawal has rightly pointed out.

Now, every ruling class in the history of world has constructed an ideological justification for the class division and hierarchy as well as labour division. However, in almost every known case, this ideological justification has taken a form that was temporally and spatially temporary and more dynamic; it was not fossilized or ossified in the religious codes as such. In the plains of Ganges, we witness a different and peculiar kind of ideological justification constructed for sustaining the class and *varna*/caste hierarchy by the ruling class in the later-Vedic period. The social class division and labour division was religiously and ritualistically ossified. The ideological device of this ritualistic ossification was Brahmanism, which was based on the idea of purity and pollution. **Consequently, this led to the disintegration of the overlapping between *varna* and class because *varna*/caste divisions assumed a religious, ritualistic and divine aura through religious codification and ritualistic ossification and became *relatively* less dynamic than the class relations.** This ideological legitimation of class relations was bound to develop a higher relative autonomy from the real dynamic class relations in the course of time. This particularity led to a gap between the ossified form of previous class division of a bygone era and the new emerging class relations. **The relation of overlapping was transformed into a relation of correspondence.** This obviously does not mean that caste became completely independent and autonomous of class relations. The relationship of correspondence is evident from the fact that whenever there were radical changes in the production relations and class structure of society, tremors in the old ritualistic hierarchy could be felt finally leading to disintegration, realignment, readjustment and restructuring of castes and their hierarchy, as we saw during our discussion of the history of origin of *varna*/caste system in the preceding paragraphs. All these changes in the ritualistic hierarchy were brought about by the same Brahmanical ideology based on purity/pollution. It can be said that the one relatively consistent feature of caste system is the Brahmanical ideology showing a strong element of continuity, though the social and economic variables have kept changing through ages.

In my opinion, it is essential to understand this relation between

caste and class, that I have called **Correspondence**, if we hope to understand the spatial and temporal changes in the caste system. For example, we can consider changes in *brahmin* and *kshatriya varna*. According to *Brahmin Samhitas*, *brahmins* are allowed to accept gift of things only. However, with the emergence of feudal relations *brahmins* began to receive land grants and emerged as landlord class. Those *brahmins* who continued to depend on gift of things for their priestly services descended in the caste hierarchy. Similarly, the period of 16 tribal republics in North India and Eastern India saw the emergence of *brahmin* rulers. Earlier, it was considered appropriate only for *kshatriyas* and lowly for *brahmins*. We also witness changes in the structure and status of *kshatriyas* with changing socio-economic relations, for example emergence of many new castes within the fold of *kshatriya varna*. These castes had diverse origins. For instance, research has shown that the caste of *rajputs* was formed by a complex fusion of Indianized foreign elements who got mixed with other tribes conquered by them and with people coming from other *varnas*. Later, matrimonial alliances with *kshatriyas* and assumption of higher ritualistic status due to enhanced political and socio-economic power led to their assimilation as a caste within the *kshatriya varna*.

These are examples of few temporal changes in the structure of *varna*/caste system due to tectonic shifts in the class structure of society. Similarly, we come across major spatial changes in the caste system. For instance, if we look at the South Indian caste system (though, there are notable internal variations within the caste system of South India), we find that the two intermediate *varnas*, i.e., *kshatriyas* and *vaishyas* did not exist there. The peasant communities themselves performed the functions of the warrior class. Regional states ruled by peasant rulers emerged when with increasing surplus production, the process of state formation reached a certain level. This ruling class, their kings came from the peasant communities itself. They mostly imported *brahmins* for the legitimation of their rule and the construction of a higher ritualistic status for them. These *brahmins* got mixed up with the local priestly elements and formed the *brahmin* castes in South India. These *brahmins* played the role of construction of the legitimating ideology here also. The peasant kings were designated as *shudra* kings by them, but here they made a distinction between *sat shudra* and *asat shudra* and *sat shudras*; the latter were described

as the ‘protectors of Brahmins’ and equivalent of *kshatriyas*. For instance, *Vellalas* were called the protectors of Brahmins. The poorest agricultural people were included into the *varna*/caste system as *asat shudra* or untouchables. **Why the peasant castes of South India were included into the *shudra varna*?** Because when the caste system reached South India, *shudras* had already become the main agricultural *varna* and *vaishyas* had become the principal trading *varna*. In Eastern India also we do not find the two intermediate *varnas*. For instance, in Bengal. We cannot go in detail of these spatial variations, but this much is clear that **these spatial variations were due to the regional variations in the modes of production and production relations**. The origin and evolution of *varna*/caste system cannot be understood in a rigorous fashion without understanding the Correspondence between caste and class in which the class relations play the determining role *in the last analysis*. Needless to say, class does not and cannot play the determining role in every instance. We will come to this point later in detail. First we need to look at the origins of untouchability.

**The emergence of untouchability is closely linked with the emergence of feudal production relations.** In the earliest Brahminical codes, a distinction was made between *hina* and *ahina shudra*. For instance, in the earliest sources *chandals* were mentioned as a *shudra* caste but they were *hina shudra* caste rather than an untouchable caste. On the one hand untouchability came into existence among those *hina shudras* who were at the lowest rung of the *shudra varna* while on the other hand when some forms of manual labour were declared by *brahmins* as lowly, polluting and repulsive to institutionalise the slavery of those assimilated tribes who used to perform these so-called menial tasks, these castes were described as outcastes and untouchables. This process also has a history. Some castes were included into untouchables later. For example, the caste of tanners and cobblers (*chamakar* or *chamars*) was never described as doing lowly forms of labour in the Vedic sources. On the contrary, it was customary to carry all the material for the Vedic rituals in bags of leather. It was only during the development of feudal mode of production that these castes were described as untouchables. **Vivekanand Jha** has clearly shown that the rise of untouchability was closely linked with the advent of feudalism. The feudal ruling class, in order to make the

exploitation and oppression of the exploited and oppressed castes structural, gave this exploitation and oppression the extreme form of untouchability. Jha shows that it was not the notion of purity and pollution which made certain tasks so inferior that people performing these tasks were declared as untouchables; rather the exploitation of some classes became so naked and barbaric, that the concept of pollution was attached to their occupation and the people in these occupations were declared as untouchables. This can be understood because later it happened in the case of *brahmins* living on alms also. For example, **Declan Quigley** in his book ‘The Interpretation of Caste’ has mentioned the case of untouchable *brahmins* which shows that the status of entire *brahmin* population too was not fixed and impervious to change. **Once again, the Brahmanical ideology performed its function and readjusted the forms of ritualistic ossification and caste hierarchy when new forms of class relations and new modes of surplus extraction emerged.** The development of untouchability can be traced from the 500 BC in embryonic forms and it continued to 1200 AD with the proliferation of untouchable castes.

We cannot go into detail about the impact of rise of monotheistic sects like Buddhism and Jainism on caste system; however, this much must be said that while Buddhism and other monotheistic sects challenged the hegemony of *brahmins* on the level of ideology and critiqued the Brahminical ideology, it failed to pose any serious challenge to the social reality of *varna*/caste system. They caused some tremors in the caste system but also strengthened it in some ways as **Irfan Habib** and others have shown. Habib argues that Buddhism rejected the religious legitimization of the caste system but also accepted the caste system as a reality of the society. For example, certain prejudices existed in these religions against slaves, debt-ridden farmers, and also against women. These were not allowed to take *pravrajya*. Similarly, Buddhism’s insistence on the principle of *karma* and non-violence also proved to be an anathema for the untouchable population because the occupations which were declared as lowly while laying stress on these values were generally the occupations of untouchable castes. Moreover, with becoming a state religion Buddhism declined. Besides, with the emergence of *Vaishnava* and *Shaiva* sects in Hinduism, Buddhism became irrelevant due the fact that these sects showed even more enthusiasm in prohibiting cow-slaughter. Finally,

Buddhism was also suppressed violently by the rise of Brahmanical reaction. However, the Brahmanical reaction succeeded in doing this because Buddhism was not in congruence with the changing socio-economic relations whereas being a remarkably flexible and hegemonic reactionary religion, Hinduism got into step with the new scenario. **Max Weber** for once was more-or-less correct when he remarked that Hinduism is actually not a religion at all in the classical sense of the term because, in general, religion thrives on *dogma*, whereas *doxa* prevails in Hinduism. Ambedkar was correct when he said that the core value of Hinduism is the caste system. This caste system enhances the flexibility of Hinduism. As we can see, Buddhism or other monotheistic sects while posing a challenge to the hegemony of Brahmanism at the level of ideology, accepted the social reality of caste and in a different way accepted the class exploitation also.

**The ideology of caste has given a useful instrument to the ruling classes through all ages.** Even the Islamic rulers did not interfere too much with the caste system. Except *Al Beruni*, no Muslim observer utters anything critical about caste system; Hinduism is criticized only on the basis of idol worship and polytheism, not for its caste system. Even the Muslim rulers found in caste a useful instrument to keep the toiling agricultural population in structural subjugation. As Irfan Habib has shown, these Muslim rulers viewed caste system with a certain kind of jealousy. Since the *Quran* makes distinction only between slave and free man, the Muslim rulers could not co-opt caste in their own way. Still, caste system in practice made successful inroads into the Islamic society. The people from the untouchable and lower castes who converted to Islam came to be known as *kamins*, which means inferior and lowly. This shows the remarkable hegemonic character of caste system and Brahmanical ideology. In nutshell, even during the entire medieval period, the Muslim rulers did not make any attempt to tamper with the caste system as it provided them an instrument to keep the huge agricultural population under structural subjugation. Brahmanism is such a flexible ideology which in all ages and especially in the pre-capitalist societies provides the ruling classes with an instrument to consolidate their rule. It gives religious legitimation to the naked and barbaric exploitation by the ruling classes and assumes the form of ritualistic ossification. Definitely, due to this ideology, there persists a difference between class and caste. However,

a profound correspondence remains between caste and class and any major change in the mode of production and production relations is clearly reflected in the readjustments of the caste hierarchy and structure. The caste ideology remains autonomous from the system of class in a certain sense and this relative autonomy has increased with the decline of economic and political registers of caste with the rise of capitalist mode of production in India after Independence. However, this increased relative autonomy has enhanced the hegemonic character of Brahmanical ideology. We will come to this a little later.

**The impact of British rule on caste system has remained an issue of controversy.** Some like Ambedkar and some other anti-caste reformers have stressed the mainly positive impact of British rule on dalits and so-called low castes, emphasizing the role of western education and military service. However, in my opinion, if we view the role of British rule on the caste system in totality, it did much more to strengthen the caste system and make the status of dalits even more vulnerable politically and economically, principally in two ways.

**First**, the land settlements introduced by the British colonial state. The Permanent Settlement of 1793 and later the Ryotwari and Mahalwari Settlements were actually against the landless dalits. The Permanent Settlement introduced private property in land and made the Zamindars the owner of the land, who almost always belonged to higher castes; the Mahalwari Settlement made the village community the owner of the land and gave it the right to allocate land rotationally among villagers. Now, almost every village assembly was headed by a headman belonging to higher castes. This was reflected in the injustice committed against the dalit landless. Ryotwari Settlement in comparison was the most progressive; however, even Ryotwari did not give land to the dalits but to the upward mobile middle peasant castes that later came to be known as the Other Backward Classes in administrative and legal terminology. **The British land settlements made the landlessness of dalit labourers even more chronic and perennial.** The miniscule possibility of any kind of upward social mobility for dalits was firmly blocked by the British state. **It was not without reason that the high caste landlords and rulers of the princely states throughout remained the most important ally and social prop of the British colonial state. It is not without reason that the most Brahmanical and casteist forces like Hindu Mahasabha**

**and the RSS never fought against the British, rather acted as rats against the revolutionaries and remained the most faithful ally of the British till the end.**

The **second factor** introduced by the British colonial state which led to consolidation of caste system and its politico-judicial formalization was **the rise of the ethnographic state**. The modern bourgeois fetish of the British state to count, enumerate and categorize the bodies to construct a suitable political subject led to myriad forms of surveys, studies and researches of Indian social reality and its classification and categorization according to the governmental principle of the colonial state. From the establishment of the **Oriental Society of Bengal** in 1784 to the beginning of caste-based Census in 1881, the British constantly attempted to create a body of colonial knowledge about India and in the process constructed and re-invented 'the Orient'. A major part of this endeavor was translation of religious texts of Hinduism and Islam with the help of *brahmins* and Muslim clerics. Another major part was the beginning of the Census which for the first time defined, delineated and constructed the juridical entity of 'scheduled castes' which were much more concrete and rigid and impervious to change. These two factors undoubtedly contributed to the consolidation and rigidification of caste system. It is true that the English also introduced Western education for dalits in some provinces; at the same time, Christian missionaries did a lot of educational work among dalits and other oppressed communities in certain areas. However, given the size and extent of the political entity of colonial India, it was miniscule. **Secondly, the British introduced these reforms not for the upliftment of dalits, as Anand Teltumbde has rightly pointed out;** it was a by-product of the colonial creation of a faithful and loyal intelligentsia to man a part of the bureaucratic apparatus of the colonial state. The British recruited dalits to army; however, after the protest from the higher castes and comparatively highly placed upper caste Hindus within the colonial army, the recruitment of dalits was first restricted to non-combatant positions and then stopped in 1890-91. It was resumed briefly during the First and Second World Wars; however, the bias and partisanship of the British state was evident.

Another impact of the British rule was to introduce a few industries, a little bit of urbanization and railways. These steps which signified a limited and regulated capitalist development under a colonial regime,

no doubt, weakened some registers of caste system to a certain extent. Emergence of an urban working class also contributed to this process. Marx had anticipated this development and Ambedkar in his own ways later argued the same. However, if we judge the impact of the British rule on the caste system in totality, there is no doubt, on the whole, it consolidated the rule of the upper castes, co-opted *brahmins* and Brahmanical ideology for their own colonial interests, and made the position of dalits and other lower castes even more vulnerable, not to speak of the historical injustice committed against the tribals by reconstructing a number of them as juridically criminal entities. This criminality was not removed even by the Constitution of India immediately.

During the colonial period also, there were some shifts and readjustments within the structure and hierarchy of caste system which was temporally and spatially differential due to changes in the class structure of Indian subcontinent under the colonial rule. Some castes who played the role of scribes in North and Eastern India rose up the ladder of caste hierarchy. A part of *brahmin* population was urbanized and got into the service of colonial state. The feudal domination of *brahmin* and *kshatriya* landlord class was strengthened even more due to the land settlements and patronization of the colonial state. Due to limited urban and industrial development and railways and also emergence of commercial agriculture in certain pockets certain economic, social and political registers of caste were weakened to a certain extent. Commensal prejudices were also weakened especially in urban and industrial society.

This process continued after Independence when the Indian bourgeoisie adopted a particular path of development of capitalism in India. The Indian bourgeoisie adopted a special Indian edition of Prussian path of land reforms, which allowed the major part of the feudal landlord class to transform itself into capitalist kulaks and farmers. It also facilitated the rise of a class of rich tenant farmers who pursued capitalist agriculture, produced cash crops for the market, exploited wage labour and mechanized their agriculture in a long process, which was accelerated especially after the Green Revolution. **This path kept the dalit landless labourers in perennial landlessness and poverty because there were no radical redistributive land reforms after the Independence.** A part of dalit population migrated to towns and

engaged in urban and industrial jobs in the informal sector. This is still the worst paid part of urban and industrial working class. Those who stayed in villages now form the worst paid part of rural proletariat. It is not without reason that still **47 percent** of agricultural landless labourers are dalits. This share, no doubt, has decreased relatively with capitalist development of agriculture, differentiation of peasantry and depeasantization of a large section of middle peasant castes. However, still they form the largest chunk of the landless labourer population. Similarly, out of total dalit population around 75 to 80 percent are landless. Out of 60 to 70 million child labourers, almost 40 percent come from dalit families. Unemployment rate among dalits is at least double of the unemployment rate among non-dalit population. The same can be said about other human development indices which clearly show the **partial overlapping between caste groups and class groups**. In toto, it can easily be said that majority of dalits still belong to the class of urban and rural working class. According to some non-governmental estimates, around 85 to 90 percent dalit population belongs to rural and urban proletariat and semi-proletariat (whose principal means of livelihood is now wage labour). **However, among the total working class population of India, the share of dalits is less than 30-35 percent.** Another large portion of it comes from the OBCs, mostly middle castes. A small portion of these OBCs has also emerged as the rich farmers and peasants and of late most of the perpetrators of anti-dalit atrocities have come from these well-to-do rich farmers.

Recent decades, especially after the inauguration of neoliberal policies and increased differentiation of peasantry, have witnessed a spurt in the anti-dalit crimes. Almost in 95 percent cases the victims belong to the rural or urban poor and working class dalit families. We can clearly see **the class character of the anti-dalit atrocities. Here it would be useful to note that economic exploitation and social injustice have rarely existed in pure archetypal isolation. Even Marx has shown in 'Capital' that varied forms of social oppression and economic exploitation are almost always intertwined and articulated, when he talks about Irish workers, Black workers, etc.** It can safely be said that they have almost always existed in an articulated and intertwined fashion, one facilitating and giving impetus to the other. **The archetypal categories of economic exploitation and**

**social oppression are socio-economic, political and philosophical abstractions which play the role of analytical instruments. However, exploitation and oppression are seldom found in their archetypal forms in concrete social phenomena. They are almost always mediated, articulated and intertwined. In other words, if we apply this general social scientific rule to the reality of caste and class in India, it can be said that all dalits face social discrimination but target of the most brutal and barbaric forms of social oppression are poor and working class dalits; similarly, all workers face economic exploitation, however, *the excess of vulnerability of dalit workers makes them victim of super-exploitation.* It is true that even the small section of upper and upper middle class of dalits face caste-based humiliation and discrimination; however, those who have become beneficiaries of state, seldom fight against it. This task too lies with a class-based anti-caste movement. We will dwell on this theme later.**

Due to capitalist development, untouchability and commensal prejudices as well as the rigid hereditary labour division have definitely weakened, if not finished. However, probably the most important characteristic feature of caste system since its consolidation has not become weakened, i.e., caste endogamy. Why? **Because this feature is not in contradiction with capitalism.** It makes private property even more sacred than the classical political economists would have desired. It stands in no contradiction to the fundamental logic of capitalist accumulation. Here too, we can see the **principle of Correspondence** at work. This also makes clear that within the ambit of capitalist property relations and division of labour, we cannot hope for the annihilation of caste by liberal reforms. As Gramsci had made clear the bourgeoisie is different from other ruling classes of the past in one important sense. Its rule is based on the concept of hegemony, that is, rule by consent. All of us know that this consent is manufactured by the ruling class through various means like media, education system and other forms of ideological state apparatus. **Consequently, the formal ruling ideology of capitalist ruling class cannot be *openly* religious in character.** The ideology of caste too cannot be the *formal* ruling ideology of the capitalist state because the principle of legitimation of its rule cannot be other-worldly. However, the question of caste system is not linked with the state only. Over the centuries the casteist

mentality and ideology, with the various changes it has undergone, has been made to permeate every pore of the Indian social psyche. The core of this ideology is the hierarchy determined on the basis of purity/pollution, and not a particular caste hierarchy that prevailed during a particular historical era. This casteist ideology functions in subtle forms and does not always require open invocation by the ruling classes. **No capitalist ruling class can draw its legitimation from caste ideology but can use and sustain the caste ideology in two ways as the present capitalist ruling class is doing.** On the one hand, it is used to keep sections of the exploited working masses divided on casteist lines and along with it as an instrument to construct hegemony in its favour. Secondly, different factions of the ruling class in their mutual rivalry for share in the resources (the booty!) and vote bank politics, use caste equations, albeit, rulers of every caste without fail, stand united against the people. **Thus caste ideology despite being formally and juridically separated from the state apparatus, plays its historical role for the ruling class even under capitalism. In fact, due to the correspondence between caste and class becoming more complicated, the hegemonic use of caste ideology by the capitalist ruling class has become even more effective.**

**We must understand that it is essential for caste ideology to remain relatively autonomous if it has to remain really effective. If the caste ideology were to reflect the class division directly, then it would lose all its divinity and aura.** We should not forget that caste ideology is a religious ideology which obtains its authority from religion, through occupational and matrimonial restrictions and on the basis of the idea of purity/pollution, to justify its hierarchy. If we comprehend this, it becomes easier to realise that caste can never fully overlap with class, except the point of origin of *varna*. They can have a relation of correspondence only. Caste ideology from the time of its inception to this day has been providing an enormously powerful instrument to the ruling classes in different forms and fundamentally different ways. On the one hand it keeps the poor toiling masses under structural subordination and on the other it keeps them divided among themselves into so many castes. **It would be Quixotic to expect annihilation of caste within the ambit of capitalism through the benevolence or “affirmative” action of the bourgeois state.** *Varna*/caste system came into existence with class, state and patriarchy and

it can be annihilated only with the withering away of class, state and patriarchy. Only a struggle for classless society can also be a struggle for a casteless society. It needs to be added here that even after Socialist Revolution and establishment of a workers' state, caste will not wither away automatically; perpetual revolution in the sphere of superstructure and continuous revolutionization of production relations will be necessary for that. The caste (as well as class) divisions will wither away in the same proportion that the three great interpersonal disparities, i.e., the gap between mental and manual labour, the gap between industry and agriculture, the gap between town and country, will diminish; and we probably should add a 'fourth interpersonal disparity', the gender disparity to this. Patriarchy has a central role to play in the perpetuation of the caste system. It is essential to fight against patriarchy if we hope to fight effectively against caste. Needless to say, that these struggles will have to be continued on a higher level even after Socialist Revolution through perpetual revolution. Nevertheless, such a revolutionary transformation of the political superstructure and economic base is essential for annihilation of caste; it would be a historical step forward in the anti-caste struggle.

However, from this it cannot be concluded that with revolutionary transformation of capitalist production relations and establishment of socialism, caste will be annihilated automatically as we mentioned earlier, or, the fight against caste can be suspended till such a revolutionary change. **On the contrary, it must be claimed that without a consistent and continuous revolutionary class-based anti-caste movement from today itself, revolutionary organization and mobilization of the working masses necessary for such a revolutionary change is not possible.** It must be reiterated that we need to build a non-identitarian anti-caste movement which has the might to fight the Brahmanical forces on the streets as well. This cannot be achieved on the basis of identity-based movements. We will dwell on this notion later.

First, let me embark upon a discussion of anti-caste movements of past and especially the contributions and limitations of the political legacy of Dr. Ambedkar.

## **2. Anti-Caste Movements before and during the time of B.R. Ambedkar**

There is a long history of anti-caste movements from ancient period to present day. It would primarily be impossible and secondarily be unnecessary to present a comprehensive account of all those struggles. We would content ourselves with a brief discussion of anti-caste movements of a couple major figures before Ambedkar: **Jyotiba Phule** and **Ayyankali** and in very short, **Periyar**. A longer discussion on Periyar too would have been useful but due to limitation of time I intend to focus on Phule and Ayyankali.

Let me make it clear at the outset that I am not discussing the anti-caste movement of Ayyankali because I am speaking in Kerala. I have talked about him in my presentations in other parts of India as well for the simple reason that present class-based anti-caste movements have a lot to learn from Ayyankali. Ayyankali was an anti-caste warrior who fought against Brahmanism not only in social arena but also in economic and political arena. Secondly, he was one of the few anti-caste figures who were radical not only in their social program but also in their political and economic activism. **He was not a reformist, though he might not have been a conscious materialist revolutionary. His movement was a radical movement which transcended the limits of the legality of the colonial state.** It was not bothered by the politico-legal ambits of the system and trespassed it time and again. His movement for the right of Pulayars to walk on public roads led to violent clashes with the Brahmanical forces. The *Cheliyar Riots* and the subsequent violent assertion of Pulayars has rightly been termed as the first armed rebellion of dalits by Anand Teltumbde. Ultimately, this movement succeeded in winning the right to walk along public roads for dalits in 1900 and to admit their children into public schools in 1907. **It is notable that Ayyankali was also the trailblazer of workers' movement in Kerala.** He organized an Association for the Protection of the Poor (*Sadhu Jana Parpalana Sangham*) and fought for the rights of dalits and workers. When his attempt to admit a dalit girl in a school met with violent resistance from upper caste elites, he organized the first strike of agricultural workers who stopped work in lands owned by upper caste landlords. This movement clearly assumed an anti-feudal character also. The strike continued till Ayyankali won the complete removal of restrictions on education for dalits. **Two elements were notable in the movement of Ayyankali: first, the clear anti-establishment character of his**

**movement and his reliance on the power and agency of the people rather than just persuading the State through legal and social advocacy. It was clearly a radical progressive mass movement and the revolutionary anti-caste movements of present have a lot to learn from Ayyankali. In my opinion, one of the leading symbols of present revolutionary anti-caste movements should be Ayyankali, because he was not a conformist or statolator. We must think why Ayyankali was not established as a symbol of dalit revolt and anti-caste movement by the many governments of India? The reason is simple: the system would not accept any figure as such a symbol who was anti-state and anti-establishment, who was not a reformist but a radical.**

Jyotiba Phule was the other anti-caste warrior from whom present anti-caste movements can learn a lot. Phule belonged to the *mali* caste and was educated in a Christian missionary school. He was imbued with the ideas of rationality and modernity. In his early works, especially *Ghulamgiri*, he was pretty much convinced about the liberating role of Western modernity introduced by the British rule. However, towards the end of his life he was slowly becoming critical about the colonial rule. For example, if we read his testimony to the Hunters Commission in 1879, he wonders why the British colonial state is patronizing the Brahmins rather than the dalits and backward classes. Again, in his work the *Cultivator's Whipcord* of 1881, he becomes increasingly critical of colonial state where he goes on to the extent of saying that the blood of colonial officers and a Brahmin is same. In the last three chapters, Phule severely criticizes the British state's policy towards the peasants. Due to this very reason, his disciple Lokhande did not publish these last three chapters of the book in an edition edited by him which annoyed Phule a lot. His hopes with the liberating role of colonial rule were not completely dashed at least till the mid 1880s. However, his trajectory can be comprehended. His approach was becoming more and more critical of the British rule because the role that he had expected the British to play for the upliftment of dalits was actually not being played by the British colonial state, which continued to patronize and ally with the Brahmanical orthodoxy and landlordism. I am yet to read Phule's work after 1881 which are not available in English or Hindi. If the same trajectory was followed, then the last works of Phule must

show much more critical stance towards the British colonial state. It is noteworthy that while he appreciated Western modernity and its vehicle in India, i.e., English education, Phule was also able to see the connection between the policies of the colonial state and Brahmanism. Moreover, Phule apart from persuading the colonial state for reforms for dalits and women, also believed in organizing them. The work done by Jyotiba Phule and Savitri Bai Phule was exemplary. **In my opinion, these two characteristic features of thought of Phule are essential to assess his contribution.**

Periyar was another major anti-caste warrior of modern India. Periyar's philosophical and political thought can be termed as militant materialism. He was a consistent atheist. In analyzing the caste system also, he puts Hindu religion into the dock and makes it clear that militant materialism and atheism are essential to do away with caste system. Without a radical rationalist outlook it is not possible to do away with caste. Though this argument has a grain of truth, the militant but mechanical materialism of Periyar prevented him from seeing the role of the British colonial state in consolidation of the caste system. Periyar appreciated Soviet Union precisely because of its truly secular state which actively propagated the militant materialist and rationalist ideas. However, it must be noted that caste cannot simply be reduced to religion, though it emerges through religious-ritualistic ossification. It is very likely to come across an atheist who is a casteist! So, annihilation of caste is not simply an issue of propagation of rationalism and materialism. Thinking so would be mechanical materialism, not dialectical and historical materialism. However, despite these limitations, Periyar can be called the most consistent radical rationalist among the main anti-caste figures of the 20th century.

### **3. The Philosophy and Politics of Ambedkar**

We must start this discussion with the contributions of Ambedkar. As far as the contributions of Ambedkar are concerned, we can mainly talk about two contributions. First, Ambedkar contributed immensely in creating a sense of dignity and self-respect among the dalit population. No doubt, in this, Periyar, Phule, Ayyankali as well as the Communists also had made vital contributions. However, the particularity with which Ambedkar raised the question of the human dignity, civil and democratic rights of dalits and the respect that he

commanded as a highly educated and knowledgeable figure which also helped him in emphasizing the question with such effectivity, was unique. The second contribution of Ambedkar was that he established the question of caste on the agenda of the national politics of that period in an unprecedented way. One can agree or disagree with the different solutions that he proposed from his testimony to the Southborough Committee to his proposals to the Cripps Mission. However, this much is certain that the emphasis and particularity with which Ambedkar raised this issue throughout his political life was something special. It is true that the communists also had made a special mention of problem of caste on their party forums in the late-1920s. However, theoretically communists could not understand the problem of caste in its historicity and contemporaneity. It would be useful here to make a brief detour and discuss the failure of communists in understanding the problem of caste in its historicity and contemporaneity.

The Communist Party of India at least till the surrender of Telangana, continued to fight for the rights of dalit landless labour in the most radical and revolutionary fashion. The struggle for land and against feudalism naturally and spontaneously assumed an anti-caste agenda because the overwhelming majority of landless labour was dalit. In the experiment of Kisan Mahasabhas as well as the peasant revolts of Punapra Vylar, Telangana and Tebhaga, communists organized dalit labourers and fought against upper caste landlords. Empirically, they raised the issue of caste-based discrimination. However, they failed to study and understand the caste question historically. Consequently, they failed to provide an effective and special political and social program for annihilation of caste and fight against Brahmanical ideology. **However, this failure cannot be understood in isolation.** The communist movement of India was intellectually weak from the very beginning. We are talking about a party which was formed in 1925 and continued to function without a central committee till 1933. In 1933, a provisional central committee was formed but the first general secretary of party was elected only in 1936. And all these things were done due to the friendly criticism from some fraternal parties like the parties of Britain, Germany, China and Russia. Till 1951, the party had no program of revolution based on the concrete study of production relations prevalent in India. When in 1951 the party adopted a program, it was not on the basis of a concrete and

original study of Indian conditions, but on the basis of dialog between a delegation of CPI and a delegation of Bolshevik Party comprising of Molotov and Stalin. The Soviet delegation gave some suggestions and made some tentative remarks regarding the Indian condition on the basis of which CPI adopted a program of People's Democratic Revolution in 1951. However, by that time, the party had become a parliamentary Left party. So the program of revolution was good only for cold storage. For almost 25 years from 1925 to 1950, the communists fought for the rights of landless dalits and made exemplary sacrifices. Those who ask what have the communists done for dalits, need to study history objectively. However, the communists fought against caste only in an empirical fashion rather than on the basis of a scientific and positive understanding of caste system and its history. But this was not due to casteist bias of the party. It is only from the 1950s that we witness conscious opportunism of communist leaders on the question of caste and their surrender against Brahmanical ideology and value system in their personal lives also. This too is an identitarian question that how many dalit leaders were there in the central committee of the party before 1951? Though one can name a number of dalit leaders at state and district levels in the Communist party like R.B. More before 1951, and as far as the Naxal movement is concerned, it produced a number of dalit leaders, but that is not the point. Similarly, in the same vein, one can ask, 'how many working class dalits were there in the leadership of identity based dalit organizations?' Or one can also ask, 'why 146 out of 148 candidates of the ILP of Ambedkar were Mahars?' **In my opinion, all these questions are invalid and miss the fundamental point.** The failure of the Communist movement in India was much broader. Yes, they could not provide a socio-economic and political program for the annihilation of caste. But did they have any program of Indian revolution? Did they have a clear line on the question of gender, nationality, environment and language? No. They took positions on all these questions empirically and in a contingent fashion, without a proper study and understanding of the question. In my opinion, the critique of communist movement should be made in totality and only in that context we can understand the failure of the movement in understanding the question of caste. Otherwise, one can rush to a conclusion that would be an injustice to the communist movement. Let us now return to our discussion on the political legacy of Ambedkar.

Ambedkar arrived on the political scene of India in 1919. However, for the sake of consistency, we must start analysis of the political thought of Ambedkar from his paper 'Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis, and Development' till his death in 1956. First a few words on *how not to critically analyse* the political thought of Ambedkar. A number of scholars and political thinkers have criticized Ambedkar for the inconsistency in his political theory and practice. However, to these critics Ambedkar had replied in his lifetime itself when he said, 'consistency is virtue of an ass.' Secondly, I firmly believe that social scientists should not talk about the question of intent of any political party, person or movement. What matters for a social scientist is the philosophical outlook, politics and class character of any political party, person or movement. In the case of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar too, the analysis must start from the philosophical world outlook of Ambedkar and thereafter we can embark upon a critical assessment of the political experiments of Ambedkar. **It is my proposition that if we understand the philosophical worldview of Ambedkar and see where his theories are coming from, it is easier to make sense of his political experiments and strategies; if we approach the problem from this standpoint, we can see that there is a consistency in Ambedkar which can be called the 'consistent inconsistency of pragmatism.'**

A disciple of Ambedkar, **K.N. Kadam** has rightly said that one cannot understand Ambedkar without understanding Deweyan Pragmatism. Ambedkar himself had once said that he owed his entire intellectual life to John Dewey. His second wife Savita Ambedkar told a scholar extremely sympathetic to Ambedkar, Eleanor Zelliot, that Ambedkar after thirty years of sitting in the class of John Dewey was happy to imitate the classroom mannerisms of John Dewey. There is no doubt whatsoever about the immensely strong impact of John Dewey on Ambedkar. Dewey was one of Ambedkar's teachers in Columbia University along with Seligman, Shotwell and others in the 1910s that was the heyday of philosophy and politics of pragmatism. Dewey was the leading pragmatist philosopher and pedagogue. Before discussing the particular brand of Dewey's pragmatism, it would be beneficial to spend a few words on the historical development of the pragmatist philosophy so that we can contextualize Ambedkar's political thought in a proper fashion.

## **a. Historical Development of Pragmatist Philosophy: A Brief Note**

Pragmatist philosophy originated in the US in 1860s and its foundations continued to develop till the Second World War. Even after that many pragmatist philosophers or philosophers influenced by pragmatism emerged, like **Richard Rorty** and **John Rawls**, however, they built upon the same foundations. Here it is essential to understand that the US was established as a capitalist country. The revolution of 1776 was led by people who were influenced by the ideals of Tom Paine and anti-feudal and anthropocentric, secular philosophy of the Enlightenment. The Declaration of Independence and Declaration of Rights of Man, the two founding documents of the American Revolution reflect these ideals and philosophies. These very ideas had propelled the French Revolution of 1789. However, unlike France, the US did not have a long history of pre-capitalist and feudal mode of production. It was a capitalist nation from the very beginning. The Weberian ‘spirit of entrepreneurship’ could be found in its archetypal and pure form in America. Moreover, America was also an imperialist country from the very beginning and as soon as it came into existence it expanded its imperialist tentacles to Mexico and Latin American countries like Cuba, Nicaragua, Haiti and later many others. America is a huge country and American capitalism had immense potentiality of inward and outward expansion. The westward expansion of capitalism within America continued well into the 19th century. The possibilities of capitalist expansion and accumulation were tremendous and were not going to be saturated for a long period to come. This factor allowed the American bourgeoisie to prevent the contradiction between labour and capital from becoming too sharp for a long time. America was propagated as ‘the land of opportunity’ and ‘the land of freedom’ where every person was free for ‘pursuit of happiness.’ and ‘to get rich.’ Feudal idleness was subject of scorn, disdain and ridicule. The dominant philosophy of the American social life from the late-18th to mid-19th century was determined from the philosophy of Declaration of the Rights of Man and Declaration of Independence guaranteeing the unhindered freedom of ‘pursuit of happiness’ and individualism. Resources and opportunities were abundant due to the special history of America because the potential of geographical and political expansion was immense, preventing the class contradictions from sharpening. Consequently, even the working class was imbued with the ideas of

bourgeois individualism, entrepreneurship and ‘pursuit of happiness’. This ideology was the dominant social philosophy of American life. It was well-reflected in Benjamin Franklin’s ‘Poor Richard’s Almanac’ which ridiculed feudal idleness and parasitism and extolled the spirit of industriousness, entrepreneurship and bourgeois individualism.

During the Civil War, this same ideology came in the garb of Transcendentalism of Emerson who believed that the individual should be free from the baggage of past and should not follow any theory, but should do whatever appears to be practical immediately. The American sayings and idioms like ‘what’s it good for’, ‘whatever works’ and ‘everyone for himself’ reflect the same system of values. We cannot go into detail of transcendentalism here. The process of westward expansion of American capitalism started hitting the fan by 1860s and 1870s when American capitalism was entering into its phase of monopolization.

The process of monopolization entailed the proletarianization and ruination of the class of petty- bourgeoisie, small owners and middle classes. In reaction to this process of monopolization 1880s witnessed the rise of a petty-bourgeois, middle class movement. This movement found its political manifestation in the Populist Party (also known as the People’s Party) guided by the ideas of the first Pragmatist philosophers like **Charles Saunders Peirce** and **William James**. These philosophers represented a nostalgia for the free competition phase of American capitalism when America was still “the land of freedom and opportunity” for everyone. The populist movement did not represent the aspirations of American working class and the poor black population, but the fears of a petty- bourgeoisie faced with the threat of proletarianization. Since the petty bourgeois ideology plagued the working class also, a section of American working class joined the Populist Party. The guiding light of the first pragmatist philosophers were the same ‘Rights of Man’ and ‘Declaration of Independence’ and Emerson’s Kantian transcendentalism. These philosophers were true theoreticians of the social philosophy of American society. The Populist Party declined towards the end of the 19th century, which is the destiny of any petty-bourgeois movement or party: a political bifurcation. The petty bourgeois elements of Populists joined the Democratic Party whereas the working class elements later joined the Communist Party of USA. However, pragmatism continued to be the

reigning social and political philosophy of the US.

The third major Pragmatist philosopher was **John Dewey**. Dewey developed pragmatist philosophy into new dimensions. His edition of the pragmatist philosophy has been given a number of epithets like Instrumentalism, Progressive Experimentalism, Operationalism, etc. It was this Deweyan pragmatism that had a defining impact on the philosophical and political views of Ambedkar. What are the basic tenets of Deweyan pragmatism?

### **b. Characteristic Features of Deweyan Pragmatism**

The first assertion of Deweyan pragmatism is that **there can be no general theory or principle of natural or social phenomena**. In other words, there can be no generalization of any sorts. Pragmatism has a natural antipathy to theory. The reason for this animosity to generalization is that according to Deweyan pragmatism no causation of phenomena is possible. Therefore, what we can do is follow a “scientific” method of observing, recording and on the basis of these develop a tentative idea for immediate action. If this plan of action is validated practically, then one must hold on to it. Otherwise, again make an observation, on the basis of that observation develop a tentative idea leading to a plan of action and so on. As we can see, there is a method fetishism in Deweyan pragmatism coupled with natural antipathy to theory. According to Dewey, there is no need for critical evaluation of previous practice because *past does not create present*, as there is no causation. One can hear the echo of Emerson here. Only pragma, no dogma! No approach, only the “scientific” method of progressive experimentation! Dewey develops this first principle taking inspiration from positivism and empiricism of Hume, Kant and Comte. According to this, there is no gap between phenomena and essence. Dewey himself comments, “There is no history of materiality before human intelligence.” Again, “reality is a domain of ‘pure experience’.” Anyone familiar with the continental and English philosophy from 17th to 19th century can discern the unmistakable impact of Hume and Kant on these statements.

The **second central assertion** of Deweyan instrumentalism is that **any change or development in nature or society is always incremental and gradual**. This theme of Deweyan pragmatism was developed under the influence of Darwin’s evolutionism. As we might recall,

Darwin had once remarked, “there are no leaps in nature.” According to Dewey, there are no leaps in the social or natural development and all change takes place incrementally and gradually. Consequently, there can be no revolutionary change in society; all change in the society must be incremental. As we can see, pragmatism is fundamentally opposed to the very idea of revolutionary change. If we translate the philosophy of Deweyan pragmatism into politics it naturally results in the liberal bourgeois reformist politics of the Fabians and later the Labour Party-type political formations. The impact of these brands of politics on the political thought and practice of B.R. Ambedkar is clear and will be demonstrated later. Here this much shall be added that later research in biology showed that Darwin was wrong about gradualism of evolution and the process of evolution involves a series of gradual development till saturation within the old shell or form and then a rupture, or a leap.

The **third major assertion** of Deweyan Instrumentalism is that, as we mentioned earlier, no causation of natural or social phenomena is possible because past does not contribute to the creation of present. The present is created by the pragmatist endeavors of the individuals of the society. Since, there is no cause-effect relation between past and present, for a pragmatist, it is useless to review or sum-up the failures of past experiments. What one is required to do is start “scientific” observation anew, develop a tentative idea again and on the basis of that derive a plan of action and then plunge into action: progressive experimentation *ad infinitum*.

The **fourth important characteristic** of Deweyan pragmatism is implicit in his idea of Society. What is Society for Dewey? It is not constituted by dialectical relations between different social strata. To view society as divided into different strata based on the access to economic, social and political power, or in Marxist terminology, to view society divided into classes, it is essential to perform a generalization of social relations. However, due to his anathema to causation and generalization, Dewey refrains from seeing society as constituted by social relations, which in turn, are constituted by the logic of contradiction. **For Dewey, society is a ‘collection of disparate groups.’** These groups might include from a trade union, an association of industrialists to a club, a baseball team (!), or a political party. As we can see, Dewey uses the term

‘group’ not conceptually, but in a descriptive and generic fashion. For Dewey, there are no *real* contradictions in the society. All the contradictions exist on the plane of idea, on the plane of perception. So there is no *real* contradiction between capitalists and workers; these contradictions are perceived and can be resolved by the mediation of the ‘Great Mediator’, ‘the Most Rational Agent’. This brings us to the next important characteristic of Deweyan Pragmatism.

The **Fifth important argument** of Instrumentalism of Dewey is that **the State is the most rational actor in society. It is the ‘Great Mediator’**. All changes take place in society on the basis of the action of the state. It is the most important institution of society. Dewey takes cue from the Classical bourgeois theories of the State, especially the ‘Social Contract’ theory of Rousseau and Locke and develops it with pragmatist slant. Since, the State is the most rational actor and the ‘Great Mediator’, all change in the society depend on the (affirmative?) action of the State. Dewey was instinctively against any idea of change from below, based on the collective initiative of the people, or collective agency of the people because it is bound to end up in violence and for Dewey “violence is a waste”. Obviously, Dewey did not see the institution of the State itself as one which perpetuates violence against the people on an everyday basis and he was oblivious to the idea that this institution has a history as an instrument of force and violence. Even the bourgeois state based on the theory of Social Contract came into being as a result of a popular revolutionary process full of violence or at least use of force. However, this violence was justified only against feudalism! The basic liberal bourgeois prejudice of Dewey’s theory of the State is clear. In a (bourgeois) democratic republic, the State is the most rational actor, the Great Mediator and the sovereign and there is no place for, even collective use of force against this institution. All change is contingent on the actions of the State. So, what one must do to inspire this Great Mediator to take progressive action? The intellectuals should influence the State to take affirmative action to resolve the ‘perceived’ contradiction for example between an industrialist and a trade union, or between one social group and the other. The role of intellectual was very important for Dewey as well as Ambedkar.

The **sixth and last important assertion of Deweyan pragmatism** was that there is a need of an ethical and humanist religion in the society.

It is important for the process of **endosmosis** in the society and essential to end isolation. This requires an ethical humanism in the inter-personal relationships in the society. Dewey was sceptic about the existence of God and yet he insisted on the need of such an ethical humanist religion in society for, what he called endosmosis (Ambedkar has used Dewey's idea of endosmosis time and again). Dewey's ideas on religion were explained in his article 'Common Faith' that he wrote in 1897. The State as the 'Great Mediator' cannot resolve all the perceived contradictions at the level of inter-personal human relationships and therefore there must be an ethical humanist shared faith, a religion.

These are the basic tenets of Deweyan pragmatism in very brief. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was a consistent Deweyan Pragmatist. It is essential to understand the philosophical world outlook of Ambedkar in order to understand the different political strategies he adopted throughout the four decades of his political career and also to critically assess the contributions and limitations of Ambedkarite political thought.

#### **4. Political Strategies of B. R. Ambedkar: A Case of Progressive Experimentation or Deweyan Pragmatism in Practice**

In the four decades of his political career, Ambedkar employed myriad strategies and did a number of experiments. However, if we analyse all these strategies and experiments, we can see the method inherent. We can broadly talk about four major strategies that Ambedkar employed at different times and sometimes simultaneously in his political career.

The **first important strategy** was constructing a unitary identity for dalits and the *shudras*. Ambedkar understood that caste system is kind of a 'graded inequality' internalized even by those lower castes who have someone beneath them on the ladder of caste hierarchy. So a *shudra* might be oppressed by the upper castes, yet she would not be willing to break the caste because of the comparatively higher status that she enjoys over dalits. In his lifetime itself Ambedkar had seen even the dalit castes fighting among themselves. For example, there were considerable contradictions between the Mahars and the Mangs as well as between the Chambhar and the Mahars. That is why Ambedkar said that caste is not simply division of labour but a 'division of labourers', though his explanation of how it became a 'division of labourers' is not satisfactory at all. A number of historians

and sociologists and other social scientists have shown the weaknesses of Ambedkar's analysis of the origin and evolution of caste system, which is mostly based on the descriptions in the scriptures coupled with historical speculations and simulations. However, these academicians fail to understand that Ambedkar's academic works are not simply academic works but political endeavors to construct a unitary identity for the dalits and *shudras*. For instance, in his explanation of the genesis of caste in his paper 'Caste: Development, Genesis and Mechanism' and others, he argues that it was endogamy that created caste. Endogamy was the convention of *brahmins*. *Brahmins* did not impose caste system on the society but successfully persuaded the society that their customs, traditions and values were superior. As we can see, this is a circular logic: endogamy created caste; endogamy was invention of *brahmins*; *brahmins* were a caste; but caste was created by endogamy; then who created the caste of *brahmins*? Similarly, in 'Who were the Shudras?', Ambedkar argues that *shudras* were actually *kshatriyas* in the ancient times. Some *kshatriyas* were downgraded by the *brahmins* and converted into *shudras*. The historical evidence for this claim is lacking. We have already discussed some of the leading historians who have written about the *shudras* and the formation of their *varna*. Also, in 'Untouchables: Who were they and How they became Untouchables?', Ambedkar argues that following the conquest of the Aryans, the defeated tribes were peripheralized, subjugated and fell prey to disintegration. These tribesmen became 'the broken men' (*dalit* in Marathi). These 'broken men' became the earliest converts to Buddhism when this monotheistic sect rose to prominence. Soon, Buddhism cornered Hinduism and became the guiding light of a number of *shudra* kingdoms. However, some *brahmin* sects emerged that borrowed the positive teachings of Buddha. A Hindu reaction set in which finally led to the Hindu re-conquest and defeat of Buddhism. However, the broken men, the dalits, continued to be the followers of Buddha and did not let Brahmanical hegemony into their fold. This irked the *brahmins* and led them to cast the dalits as the Untouchables. Now, this explanation of the origin of untouchability cannot be supported by historical evidence. Though the research on the evolution of different dimensions of caste system are still going on, some things have become fairly established on the basis of conclusive evidence. The origin of untouchability cannot be explained away by this simplistic narrative. **However, one must understand that these**

**writings of Ambedkar were primarily an exercise in identity constructions.** The narrative evolved by him clearly shows this. To fight against the 'graded inequality' of the caste system, it was essential to invent an unitary identity which would be able to unite the dalits and *shudras* who together form the numerical majority of Indian society. Gail Omvedt has rightly pointed out that towards the end of his life, Ambedkar was working on a grand theory of caste which was racial-ethnic in character, though Ambedkar had always opposed British interpretations of caste based on race. However, in this theory he argued that much before the Muslim or British conquest of Hindu India, there was Hindu/*brahmin* conquest of Buddhist India. He attempted to build the identity of Ashoka and the Mauryas as Naga kings. It is true that this theory too falls flat on the test of historical evidences. Again, we need to understand the project of Ambedkar here, which is a *political* one; a part of his desperate fight against caste. Therefore, these ostensibly academic writings of Ambedkar on the origin and evolution of caste system must be read as political tracts rather than looking for historical accuracy because Ambedkar was not just an academic, but primarily a political activist and leader committed to the annihilation of caste, whether we agree with this strategy of identity building or not.

The **second strategy** of Ambedkar was in the arena of electoral and social politics. Ambedkar's intervention in the arena of electoral politics starts with his testimony to the Southborough Committee, which had come to India in 1919 to define the electoral franchise on communal basis. It was a precursor of Montford Reforms. Ambedkar represented the dalit community as the most educated person from that community. Ambedkar had returned from the US, though he would leave again for London to continue his studies. In his testimony, Ambedkar argued that the real cleavage of the Hindu society is not between the *brahmins* and non-*brahmins* but between the touchables and untouchables. The untouchables constitute a separate community entitled for communal award. Consequently, he demanded that the dalits be awarded either reserved seats or separate electorate. It is noteworthy that till now Ambedkar considered both these options. Later, when he returned from England, he formed **Bahishkrut Hitkarini Sabha**. BHS was dedicated for educational and cultural reform work among the untouchables. In 1927-8, on behalf of the BHS, Ambedkar presented

a proposal to the Simon Commission. He made a slight change in his proposal *vis-a-vis* his testimony to the Southborough Committee. Here Ambedkar argued that the dalits should either be given separate electorate or reserved seats with universal franchise for dalits alone. The Simon Commission gave its nod to reserved seats but added a caveat. It ruled that in the reserved seats too, the dalit candidate will have to get his competence certified by the governor of the province. This was like denying the right of reserved seats also. Obviously, Ambedkar was irritated with this rider. However, he was against adopting a confrontational approach towards the government and not only the British government but any government because the basic political prejudice of Deweyan pragmatism was that the government/state is the most rational actor of society and all social change depends on the way it thinks and acts. This way can and should be influenced by the intelligentsia by getting into the government service. That is the reason why Ambedkar in almost all of his writings underlines the role of intellectuals. For instance, in 'Annihilation of Caste' he argues that within the fold of Hinduism, caste cannot be annihilated because the intellectuals of the Hindu society are *brahmins* and they will never allow that. The intellectuals are the vanguard of society and making of history is work of the intelligentsia. Similarly, this attitude is clearly visible in the one of the most important episodes of Ambedkar's political life: the Mahad movement, which happened in the same fateful year of 1927. Let us ponder over it for a while.

The first Depressed Classes Conference in 1927 was organized by a group of untouchable leaders led by R.B. More. R. B. More was a young and energetic activist with exceptional organizational skills. The idea of such a conference was incubated in 1924. It was decided that the conference should be presided by Dr. Ambedkar and he should be felicitated for his academic achievements. Ambedkar in the beginning did not agree to be a part of the conference. Anand Teltumbde has cited a number of sources who have given different reasons for that. One was the fact that Ambedkar was not assured about the capabilities of More. When a comrade-in-arms of Ambedkar, Kamlakant Chitre assured him about his capabilities, Ambedkar began to consider his participation. Secondly, the son of Bhai Chitre, S.V. Chitre claims that Ambedkar in the beginning declined to be a part of the conference because he wanted to be a district judge and avoid political activities

that might involve direct action. Teltumbde argues that it is unlikely that Ambedkar declined the proposal on this basis, however, this much was clear that unlike Ambedkar's earlier reform activities, this conference proposed some direct action, which he wanted to avoid. Anyhow, in the end Ambedkar did participate and preside over the conference. Bhai Chitre has written that it was him and another comrade-in-arms of Ambedkar Babu Sahasrabuddhe who persuaded him to accept the proposal.

In the first conference, during his presidential address, Ambedkar reveals his Deweyan pragmatist understanding in illuminating terms. He opines, **"There is another reason also for why I say that the Untouchables should adopt white-collared professions. The government is the most important and powerful institution. The manner in which the government thinks, makes things happen. However, we must not forget that what the government wants, depends entirely on the government employees. The mind of the government is basically the mind of its employees. One thing clearly follows from this, which is that if we want to get something of our interest through the government, we must get ourselves into the government service. Otherwise, the kind of neglect we suffer today will continue forever...Without that they (untouchables) will never attain their state of vigor."** Again in the same address, **"If these educated boys and girls (of untouchable community) had reached the ranks of mamlatdar, collector, and magistrate today, they would have constituted an armoured shelter over the entire Untouchable community. Under its protective cover, all of us would have made progress. But in its absence, we are living under the hot sun and getting scorched. I am fully convinced that unless we create this protective cover over ourselves, we will not achieve our development."** In the same address, Ambedkar argues that the other profession that dalits should adopt is farming. However, for land, Ambedkar did not propose demanding redistributive land reforms from the British government. Rather, he says, **"It may perhaps be difficult for the Untouchables to purchase farm lands. But there are many fallow pieces of land belonging to the forest department. They may be available if they make a request for them."** The conference culminated in implementing the Bole Resolution passed in 1923 by drinking water from the Chavdar Tank. Dalits returning

from Chavdar Tank were attacked by a mob, mostly comprising Marathas, though the violence was instigated by a *brahmin* priest. Dalits, overwhelmingly Mahars, gathered at Mahad were ready to retaliate as they were in thousands and a considerable number of these Mahars had been military servicemen. However, Ambedkar prevented them from retaliation and pursued the course of legal action. Anand Teltumbde has shown in his excellent book 'Mahad: The Making of the First Dalit Revolt' that Magistrate was in town at the time of attack but he did nothing to stop the attack and violence by caste Hindus. He has also cited records of the colonial government to show that the state was not in favor of dalits exercising their civil and democratic rights. The District Magistrate clearly writes in his report that the lower castes cannot and should not expect the support of the government if they assert their rights by direct action.

The experience of public drinking of water from Chavdar Tank prompted Ambedkar to organize a Satyagrah for implementing the Bole Resolution again. In December, the Satyagraha was organized. More than ten thousand dalits, mainly Mahars, gathered in Mahad again. Just before the beginning of Satyagraha, Mahad municipality performed a *volte-face* and ceased its support to the implementation of the Bole resolution. The district administration had modernist-rationalist dilemmas about whether to let the Satyagrahis implement the Bole Resolution or not but in the end it decided not to allow the Satyagrahis. **Because, despite its Western modernity, the colonial state was always driven by the exigencies of the political rule and this prevented it from breaking its close alliance with feudal landlordism and its ideological basis, Brahmanism.** The government supported the attempt of the *brahmins* and other caste Hindus to secure an injunction against the dalits from implementing Bole Resolution by claiming that the Chavdar Tank was not a public water tank, but a private one. The court granted the injunction in one day, whereas, Ambedkar had to fight the legal case to remove this injunction for ten long years! Teltumbde has shown that the colonial state had actually supported the Touchables in getting this injunction. The partisanship of the state was clear.

The second conference began on 25th December 1927. On the first day, *Manusmriti* was burned which was definitely a significant symbolic act of ideological resistance. On the second day, Ambedkar

in his address informed the crowd gathered about the injunction and instructed Mahars not to take their lathis during the Satyagraha, not to disobey any government official and be prepared to go to jail and not plead guilty. The crowd happily agreed. However, Ambedkar continued to inform the crowd about the possible outcomes of the Satyagraha and sacrifices that everybody might need to make. Then the Collector came to the conference and in his address clearly threatened the crowd that though he sympathises with them, yet if they go against the legal injunction, then he will take action against them. Still, the crowd was unmoved **because the very idea of Satyagraha was to non- violently disobey an unjust law.** After that, Ambedkar said that he is not content with the oral agreement of the general body and he made them fill a prior consent form that stated that the participants of Satyagraha are aware of the possible consequences which includes jail or even martyrdom and still want to continue with the Satyagraha. Nobody raised any objection and everybody gave their prior written consent ( in fact, activists started filling up the form; at 3500 forms they stopped because everyone was ready to make any sacrifice). Then Ambedkar held a meeting of organizers to decide and finally decided against doing Satyagraha. In his address to the crowd he said that he was only checking the preparedness of the participants whether they were ready to go all the way or not! Now that he is assured about their resolve and strength, there is no need to use that resolve because it will go against the government. He said, **“If we do Satyagraha today, it would go against the government...the government has sympathy for us. Then why should we put the government in dilemma unnecessarily? Next, you see that the touchable people do not have any sympathy for our Satyagraha...We have to survive through this trap of injustice and oppression. For this kind of survival, we need cooperation from the governement. There is nothing wrong if someone says, doing Satyagraha against the government is not proper while the government is giving assurance of such cooperation.”** Anand Teltumbde has quoted the record of DM of Kolaba of the private conversation with Dr. Ambedkar about cancelling the Satyagraha. This record clearly shows that even before the Collector came to the conference to threaten dalits against Satyagraha and even before Ambedkar made his decision to cancel the Satyagraha known to the core of organizers of the Satyagraha, Ambedkar had agreed to cancel the Satyagraha during this conversation with the DM of Kolaba.

Ultimately, the Satyagraha ended in an anti-climax. The participants were extremely disappointed. To understand these steps of Ambedkar one needs to understand his firm commitment with Deweyan pragmatism. He genuinely believed in Deweyan pragmatism which prevented him from going against the state throughout his political career. **We spent so many words on the Mahad movement because it is exemplary of the political and philosophical worldview of Dr. Ambedkar.** Now let us move forward.

Though Simon Commission had agreed to give reserved seats to dalits (with the certification of competence of candidates by the provincial governor), this meant nothing because the Congress was not part of these negotiations and opposed it. To resolve the deadlock two Round Table Conferences were held in 1930 and 1931. In these round table conferences too, all the parties failed to reach a consensus. Ultimately, the British government gave separate electorates to dalits. However, Gandhi began his fast unto death against this decision of British government in jail in Poona. Finally, Ambedkar accepted Gandhi's formula of 148 reserved seats (mostly with considerable number of dalits votes) rather than 73 separate electorates. Some people have claimed that the reason for this surrender was that Ambedkar feared that if something happens to Gandhi, there will be a violent Brahmanical reaction against the dalits. However, scholars like Christopher Jeffrelot have shown that this was only a distant secondary reason and the primary reason was the fact that far more dalits were standing behind Gandhi instead of Ambedkar.

In 1930, another important incident happened that warrants our attention. Some people from Nashik wanted to start a Satyagraha for untouchable's right for temple entry. They approached Ambedkar for the request of assuming the leadership of the Satyagraha. First Ambedkar declined due to the experience of Mahad Satyagraha and also due to his lack of enthusiasm for any kind of direct action that might lead to confrontation with the government. However, following much persuasion from the organizers he accepted the invitation to assume the leadership of the Satyagraha, which began in March 1930. Around 16 thousand Satyagrahis marched to the Kalaram temple and staged a sit-in dharna outside the closed gates of the temple. The British administration openly took the side of caste Hindus and started threatening the Satyagrahis. Ambedkar tried to appeal to the

governor for intervening as the temple was a public place. However, the governor refused. The collector even refused to meet any of the organizers and even threatened to remove the Satyagrahis. When one of the organizers Gaikwad reported this to Ambedkar, he said, **“My view is not to face a conflict with the government if it can be avoided.”** Again, when in April of the same year on Ramnavami Day a chariot procession was being taken out, Ambedkar went there in person and appealed the Police officers on duty to be impartial when the Untouchables would try to participate in pulling the chariot. However, when the dalits actually tried to do this, the Police attacked them and beat them badly. Ambedkar wrote to the Governor about this issue. He wrote, **“But the immediate cause of the fight was the action of the Police Sepoys, a great majority of whom were caste Hindus, they at once started to assault those Untouchables who were struggling to hold a bit of the rope. The fight was started by the caste Hindu Police who openly took the side of the touchable Hindus.”** Ambedkar went further and clarified beyond any doubt that he is not complaining against the district magistrate and even the British Police officers who were “just performing their duties” but only against the Hindu Policemen. Once again one can see that Ambedkar at any cost wanted to avoid any conflict with the colonial government, even when it was openly clear that the colonial government was siding with the Brahmanical forces. **The strong conviction of Ambedkar in the principles of Deweyan pragmatism alone can explain this.** Those who do not understand it have charged Ambedkar with opportunism and dishonesty. However, these charges are baseless as Ambedkar never did anything in his political life for personal gain or as *quid pro quo*. He did what he firmly believed in.

After the Poona Pact, Ambedkar realized that in the case of reserved seats he must establish himself not as a leader of the Untouchables only, but as leader of broad masses. This led him to establish the Independent Labour Party in 1936. The ILP in its manifesto declared that the working masses of India have two enemies *brahminshahi* (Brahminical domination) and *bhandwalshahi* (Capitalism). The manifesto never mentions dalits separately but as a part of the working masses of India. The economic program proposed by the ILP was akin to the state welfarist and state capitalist (what Ambedkar terms ‘state socialist’) program of the likes of the Fabians and the Labour Party of Britain.

The impact of Fabianism is unmistakable. It calls for nationalization of key industries, but allows for private capital. The ILP presents a liberal petty-bourgeois critique of capitalism and presents the model of a state-regulated welfarist capitalist economy. **However, at the same time in his speeches, Ambedkar makes it pretty clear that caste hierarchies for him were the most important ones and they had nothing to do with access to economic resources, as Christopher Jaffrelot has shown.** In a way, Ambedkar was the first to assert that caste belongs to the Superstructure, if we interpret this claim of Ambedkar in Marxist terminology. It was incorrect when some Marxists claimed that and it was equally incorrect when Ambedkar claimed that. The contradiction in the program of the ILP and the speeches of Dr. Ambedkar are understandable. The ILP was primarily an electoral strategy. **The formation of the ILP was in no way showed inclination of Ambedkar towards Marxism, as some Left Ambedkarites/Ambedkarite Left want us to believe.** In the process of organizing the ILP and during the period of existence of the ILP, Ambedkar initiated many activities involving the working class and also formed an alliance with the Communists briefly. However, all these activities were part of a pragmatist electoral strategy and do not at all reveal Ambedkar's attraction towards Marxism. Had Ambedkar been alive, he would have been the first to vehemently refute this argument. In the provincial elections of 1937, the ILP fared badly. Ambedkar had given 146 out of 148 tickets to Mahars. Even Chambhars were not represented. Only one Mang and one untouchable from Gujarat got the ticket, apart from Mahars. After the electoral debacle of the ILP in 1937, Ambedkar returns to his identity of dalit leader and forms Scheduled Caste Federation (SCF) in 1941-42.

The SCF argued that the dalits constituted a communal minority just like the Muslims and Sikhs and they are not only entitled to separate electorate but also separate territories. The SCF proposed to the Cripps Mission of 1944 that no constitution would be acceptable to them that did not have the approval of dalits. This approval was based on **three major demands**: first, separate electorate for dalits; second, representation of dalits within the executive power (state apparatus); and third, toll taxes for separate dalit villages. The first two proposals are understandable. However, the third proposal was bizarre and showed the desperation of Ambedkar after so many failed

experiments. He wrote to a British official Beverley Nicholas about this demand. He urged that the British must establish separate dalit villages before they leave; this will constitute dalits as territorial majority in these villages, who are presently minority in most of the territories. Ambedkar says in his letter that if the Britishers “allow” that, it can happen; he goes on further and argues that even if the British have to resort to forcible mass scale exodus, they must do it. Obviously, it was an impractical and desperate proposal and was bound to be rejected. The SCF lost miserably in the 1945-46 elections due to two reasons. The SCF had no organizational structure and only a few cadre. It could not field candidates in most of the reserved seats. Finally, it won only two seats. The second reason for the defeat, as Jaffrelot has shown, was the immense popularity of the Congress due to its anti-colonial stance and the collaboration of Ambedkar with the British. After the defeat of the SCF, Dr. Ambedkar was peripheralized in the national politics as he himself admitted later. He was brought back into limelight by the Congress at the insistence of Gandhi. It was a masterstroke of the Congress and especially Gandhi to co-opt Ambedkar. And there is no denying the fact that the Deweyan pragmatism of Ambedkar made him a perfect candidate for such co-opting. Ambedkar was made member of the Constituent Assembly and the chairman of the Drafting Commission. In his speeches, Ambedkar thanked the Congress repeatedly for this gesture, though he himself had written to his lieutenant Dada Saheb Gaikwad that no person with self-respect can ever collaborate with the Congress. **However, this too, was not opportunism.** This again must be explained by the pragmatist outlook and politics of Ambedkar. There is the need to have a critical discussion on the extremely limited democratic character of our constitution also and how it was heavily based on the Government of India Act of 1935, how it incorporated a number of draconian colonial laws; however, the space does not allow that. Nevertheless, this much can be said that Ambedkar was to function in the space given by the state following the political exigencies of the state, which for Ambedkar was ‘the most rational actor’, ‘the Great Mediator’ and not an instrument of class rule. The liberal bourgeois political theory along with its American outgrowth, that is, Deweyan pragmatism, was the guiding thought for Ambedkar. Towards the end of his life, he attempted to return to a broad mass-based party with the idea of Republican Party of India, though it did not see the light

of the day in the life-time of Ambedkar. It is said that in one of his last letters to Dada Saheb Gaikwad, Ambedkar asked him to join the communists if the experiment of the RPI fails. Some people claim that this shows Ambedkar's growing attraction towards Marxism. Again, this claim does not hold water. It was part of a series of experiments in the progressive experimentation of Ambedkar, in other words, just another pragmatist experiment, rather than his inclination towards Marxism. This brings us to his third strategy.

The **third strategy** implemented by Ambedkar was, what Christopher Jaffrelot calls, collaborating with the rulers. This begins openly with the participation of Ambedkar in the Defence Advisory Committee for war effort by the British in order to involve Indian soldiers in the conflict. This council was boycotted by the Congress. Hindu Mahasabha and Ambedkar were part of this council. Later, he was inducted into the Viceroy's council as Member of Labour. **As member of labour, Ambedkar made a number of important contributions.** For instance, he introduced an Indian Trade Union (Amendments) Bill which obliged all owners to recognize a trade union in their enterprises. This step was in full congruence with Deweyan idea of labour-capital relationship. Moreover, he secured reserved seats for dalit students in the technical colleges of London and also secured representation of dalits in state apparatus. This shows the limits of what Deweyan pragmatist method can yield. Whatever could be achieved within this ambit, Ambedkar strove to achieve. Again, when Ambedkar was peripheralized in the national politics and then brought back on to the centre stage by the Congress, he continued his strategy of collaborating with the rulers. In drafting of the constitution, he on the one hand made a number of contributions and on the other made a number of compromises also. On the one hand he tried his best to make the Hindu Code Bill a progressive legislation, tried to ensure right of inheritance for women though the reactionary feudal landlord elements watered down the Bill and Nehru did not support Ambedkar in this contradiction, which irked Ambedkar a lot and later became one of the reasons of his resignation; on the other, in the Constitution, right to live was not included as a fundamental right, Ambedkar argued against confiscation of land without compensation in the case of feudal landlords and princely states, many draconian laws from the colonial period were included in the Constitution. These

contradictions of Ambedkar also can only be understood in terms of his pragmatist politics. He was trying to utilize the space available to him and at the same time his commitment to the idea of private property was unshakeable. That is why he was against confiscation without compensation.

The **last strategy** of Ambedkar was conversion. Ambedkar mentioned conversion for the first time in Jalgaon Depressed Classes Conference in 1927. At that time, he had said that we will try to reform the Hindu religion, but if it is not possible we will leave it. In Yeola conference of 1935, he declared his intention of conversion for the first time. Just before that, some dalits had converted into Islam which prompted the caste Hindus to allow dalits access to some new water wells. However, Ambedkar never considered Islam for conversion. The first religion that he considered was Sikhism. Few people know or remember that this choice was made on the suggestion of Moonje, the leader of Hindu Mahasabha. He urged Ambedkar to adopt Sikhism because by this the dalits will only be leaving the fold of Hindu religion and not Hindu civilization and society. Even Ambedkar made this statement that by this dalits will be repaying their debt to the Hindu civilization and they will remain within its fold because it was advisable **“to have some responsibility as for the future of the Hindu culture and civilization.”** However, two factors changed the mind of Ambedkar. First, when the British government told him that the converts will not get the rights to which the minorities will be entitled, he was taken aback. Secondly, some early converts to Sikhism told him that there is no respite from caste-based oppression in the fold of Sikhism. The Jatt peasants were equally oppressive. Moreover, Master Tara Singh, the leader of the Akal Takht, was against the idea of dalits converting into Sikhism because the Jatt Sikhs would become a minority within Sikh population if all or majority of dalits converted into Sikhism. So Ambedkar abandoned this idea by 1937. He did not mention conversion for many years. Then in 1950s, he came back to this idea and proposed Buddhism for conversion. Though he was influenced by the figure of Buddha from his younger days, but it was in the 1940s that he got more interested in Buddhism. At Buddhism, his search for an egalitarian religion ended, though institutionalized Buddhism itself had become plagued with a number of vices. Moreover, the conversion did not result in the liberation of converts from caste-based humiliation and

oppression. Even Ambedkar understood that mere conversion cannot deliver the Untouchables from caste based oppression. He obviously had the option of materialist and atheistic propaganda just like Periyar. However, in this too he was firm in his Deweyan pragmatism which insisted on the need of religion as an ethical and humanist code for endosmosis in society.

These were the four main strategies of Ambedkar. All these four strategies were driven by the Deweyan pragmatist outlook of Ambedkar. Those who attempt to explain the inconsistencies in the political practice of Ambedkar by personal traits or charges of opportunism, miss the simple point that the question was not of personal honesty or integrity; rather the question was of philosophy and politics of Dr. Ambedkar. Whether you agree or disagree with Deweyan pragmatism, you cannot charge Dr. Ambedkar with opportunism and dishonesty. Within the liberal bourgeois framework of Deweyan pragmatism, Ambedkar continuously strove to work for the cause of dalit upliftment. However, this very framework is not sufficient for annihilation of caste.

## **5. The Need of the Hour: A Class-based Anti-Caste Movement**

We must raise this pertinent question: **can we fight for the annihilation of caste without assuming a confrontational attitude towards the state? Doesn't the state in India have a caste as well as a gender? Wouldn't it be a tomfoolery to assume that the State is an impartial actor, unbiased by class and caste prejudices? Can we expect for the annihilation of caste through the "affirmative action" of the state or social advocacy or by going into government jobs to change the way the government thinks and acts? Is a mere social program enough for annihilation of caste, without having a revolutionary program for political and economic transformation?** In my opinion the answer to all these questions is a resounding 'No'. The reason for that is that **the social superstructure is sustained and defended by the political superstructure.** Even the experiences of the political experiments of Ambedkar clearly demonstrate that Brahmanism had the patronage of the colonial state, despite its dilemmas of modernity and rationality. These dilemmas were also reflected in the debates among colonial rulers, for instance, between the Utilitarians and the Physiocrats. However, ultimately, the policies and actions of colonial government were decided by the economic and political interests of the colonial ruling class. Ambedkar was mistaken when he argued in

‘Annihilation of Caste’ that social revolution always precedes political revolution; he even quotes Ferdinand Lasalle to justify his claim. However, in that quote, Lasalle was actually talking about political constitutions and the real socio-economic power rather than political revolution and social revolution. Lasalle argued and correctly so that the real question of power is not decided by political constitutions but by real socio-economic power. By ‘socio-economic power’ Lasalle meant the real control over the means of production. However, Ambedkar interpreted him in his own way. Anyhow, the real relation between social revolution and political revolution is not simplistic. **It is true that without a certain level of social awakening of the oppressed classes and without the socio-political preparation of the vanguard of oppressed classes there can be no political revolution; however, this too is perfectly true that without smashing the political superstructure which sustains all exploitative and oppressive relationships in the society with force and violence, no social revolution is possible.** Social revolutions cannot be consummated or achieved by the actions of the ‘Great Mediator’, i.e., the State. No where in history it has happened and nor shall it happen. Drawing such a Great Chinese Wall between social revolution and political revolution on part of Ambedkar was only due to his ideological position of liberal bourgeois reformism and Deweyan pragmatism. In nutshell, I intend to iterate and reiterate this simple fact: **Any ideology or politics which prevents the anti-caste movement from going against the state cannot fight effectively against caste.** As shown earlier, social oppression and economic exploitation seldom exist in their archetypal form; they are almost always intertwined and have a symbiotic relationship. Political superstructure ( the State) is the main bulwork and defender of social and cultural superstructure that definitely have relative autonomy. Any political superstructure that serves an economic base based upon exploitation and oppression cannot do away with different forms of social oppression, including the caste-based oppression and the entire caste system because caste is not simply a part of superstructure but also a part of the economic base, as a partial regulator of distribution, labor division, surplus extraction and appropriation of the surplus by different caste factions of the ruling class. Any system based on exploitation will only adapt these forms of social oppression to their specific needs. **That is why, in the long run, the question of annihilation of caste is the question of**

## revolutionary transformation of society.

**However, here is the main riddle: the class mobilization and organization necessary for such a revolutionary transformation is not possible without simultaneously erecting a powerful and effective anti-caste movement.** But of what kind? In my opinion, an anti-caste movement not based on identity. The reason is that the basic logic of identity is *othering*. Any identity formation is based on the process of *othering*. No identity can consolidate itself without at the same time consolidating, in general, other identities and, in particular, the polar opposite identity. **Thus, any identity-based dalit movement, rather than a class-based anti caste movement will defeat the purpose.** In my opinion, need of the hour is a class-based anti-caste movement. As I mentioned earlier, social oppression is intertwined with economic exploitation in a relation of relative autonomy and symbiosis. Almost all dalits face some form of social discrimination at some point of time in their lives, however, the working class and poor dalits are the victims of the most barbaric anti-dalit atrocities. Secondly, all workers are exploited but dalit workers are super-exploited and worst paid due to their vulnerable social location. **Who are or can be the most militant fighters against these atrocities and discrimination?** In my opinion, despite their lip service, the small elite section among the dalit population, *as a class*, is not going to fight radically against this injustice because despite their complaints they have vested interests in defense of the political *status quo*. They will raise a hulabaloo on symbolic issues like the cartoon controversy and naming a university, etc. However, when the killers of Laxmanpur Bathe and Bathani Tola are let go scot free, they do not bother to speak against it. When something like Khairlanji, Mirchpur, Gohana, Bhagana happens their activities never transcend hollow symbolism. Experience has shown that the small elite section among dalits has become navally linked with the system.

It will be the class-based anti-caste movement which can really and radically fight against not only the most barbaric forms of atrocities against dalits but also against the casteist humiliation and different forms of Brahmanism. The political, social and economic priorities of such a class-based anti-caste movement will be decided not by the symbolist discontents of the elites but the the working class and poor dalit population. There should be a specific anti-caste organization and

all progressive mass organizations must have a separate agenda for annihilation of caste.

**What should be the priorities of such a class-based anti-caste movement?** In my opinion, their most important priority should be the fight against the anti-dalit atrocities. That is the form of discrimination faced by the working class and poor dalits. As we have mentioned earlier, almost in 95 percent cases the target of anti-dalit atrocities have been rural and urban dalit workers. 89-90 percent of dalit population is still living in abject poverty in rural as well as urban areas and form an important and most exploited portion of the working class of India. Our class approach should be clear about it and we must organize the workers and youth of all classes to fight against the anti-dalit atrocities. We also must fight against the caste prejudices prevalent among the working masses belonging to non-dalit castes and make them understand that anti-dalit atrocities actually strengthen the same socio-economic system and oppressive apparatus that exploits and oppresses them too.

It is true that all dalits irrespective of their class position face caste-based humiliation at some point in their lives; even Mayawati, Athawale or Udit Raj have to face this (though, often it proves to be a boon for them as it helps them in consolidating their caste vote bank). However, experiences of the past have shown that despite paying lip-serving to the anti-caste agenda, the elite sections of dalit population in general and as a class do not have either the will or the intent to fight against Brahmanism in a radical fashion. The reason for this is the fact that they have become the beneficiaries of the system in certain ways and are afraid that assuming a radical position might jeopardize this status. Therefore, even against the caste-based humiliation of the elite sections of dalits, it is only the class-based anti-caste movement that has the potency and will to fight. For a class-based anti-caste movement this is essential too in order to wage an effective struggle against the hegemony of Brahmanism as an ideology and system of values.

The **second important agenda** is the fight against patriarchy. We know that caste endogamy can be broken by love marriages only. Only in exceptional cases, we can come across inter-caste arranged marriages. In general, arranged marriages are “arranged” with considerations of caste and class in mind. Clearly, the emancipation of women must

become a part of agenda of the anti-caste movement so that women are free to choose their life partners. Only then we can strike a severe blow to the tradition of caste endogamy. It is true this alone will not suffice because the deeply entrenched caste mentality is such that youngsters even in the metropolitan centres do not “fall” in love but arrange love with caste and class considerations in mind. Still, emancipation of women is extremely important to weaken the caste endogamy. And therefore, the question of gender also must be raised along with the issue of caste. The postmodern NGO logic to raise these issues in isolated fashion and along identitarian lines leads all of these struggles in a blind alley. The answer to their logic of “intersectionality” is an integrated class-based approach.

In today’s time, the **third priority** is clear to everyone: the fight against communal and brahmanical Fascism has become an intrinsic part of any anti-caste agenda. The recent incidents in Una and elsewhere have shown that Fascism builds its social hegemony by attacking the vulnerable and oppressed communities by constructing them as the enemy. The basic majoritarian logic of Hindutva Fascism is constructing Muslims and Dalits as the enemy, as the figure of ‘the other’. It is true that the strategy of Hindutva Fascism towards dalits cannot be reduced to this because the RSS has also adopted the strategy of creating a syndicate Hindutva identity for dalits also and co-opting the dalits in the political fold of Hindutva. However, this strategy has its own limitations and therefore ultimately Hindutva politics cannot do without the oppression of dalits.

**Fourth important demand** is making free and equal education for all and employment for all as a fundamental right. It is important to fight against the corruption of bureaucracy when it does not fill the reserved seats in educational sector and government services. It is a fight against corruption and for civil rights of dalits. However, we must not engage in the false binary of support or opposition to reservation as panacea for caste problem. Especially, when there are no new government jobs and since the introduction of neoliberal policies, the government jobs are actually decreasing, there is no point fighting for something which is not even there. The opposition to reservation is mostly plagued with casteist prejudices and those who cry for meritocracy never resist the management quota or NRI quota or privatization. On the other hand, those who believe that increasing

reservation or introducing reservation for new oppressed communities will provide any solution, are either deceived or are deceiving. We have seen how this politics of reservation led to clashes among the dalits and so-called mahadalits, among tribals like Meena and OBCs like Gurjars; some Valmiki dalits have demanded hundred percent reservation for Valmikis in the profession of sanitation work. It shows the detrimental impact of the politics of reservation on emancipatory politics. Fighting for something which does not even exist has only led to further internecine fights among different oppressed communities and breaking the class unity of the working class. So it is essential to understand that support or opposition of reservation is a binary of false alternatives. Rather, such an anti-caste movement should raise the demand for making equal and free education for all and jobs for all as fundamental rights in the Constitution.

**Fifth important priority** of the class based anti-caste movement must be fighting for the right of state housing, free health services, and other civil and democratic rights. The working class and dalits should never leave their claims on their rights as equal citizens of India. This is not only essential for consolidating the fight for the civil and democratic rights of dalits and workers, but also for bringing the system to a point of impossibility by over-identifying with the formal constitutional promises of the bourgeois state and also in raising the level of political consciousness of the common dalit masses.

**Sixth**, such a class based anti-caste movement must engage in extensive and intensive propaganda of rational and scientific worldview especially among the working masses, besides the continuous cultural propaganda against caste. The propaganda against patriarchy forms an important part of this propaganda.

**Finally**, we must fight against the casteist character of the State and the media which is reflected quite often. For example, we still have pages of caste-based matrimonials in all newspapers, which is blatantly anti-democratic and anti-constitutional. However, there is no hue and cry over this. I cannot go into further detail as to what the agenda of a class based anti-caste movement can and should include. The emphasis on class is an approach. This approach might entail different agenda in different regions of India. However, this approach must be clear if we intend to fight effectively against caste.

In the end, I would like to add an caveat. Some people and movements have suggested redistributive land reforms for dalit landless labour, like the movement led by **Jignesh Mevani** after the Una incident. The movement led by Jignesh Mevani achieved one thing for sure: it contributed to take the anti-caste movement beyond the ambits of symbolism and raised a material issue, i.e., the demand for land distribution to landless dalits. However, in my opinion, this is not a solution. Why? For many reasons. First, one cannot demand land reforms only for dalit landless (who form 47 per cent of all landless agricultural population) but for all landless. Not only will it be politically wrong and divisive but also impractical. Secondly, if we distribute land to all the landless in India, every landless will get less than 1.25 hectares. What is happening to the peasants at present who already own 1.25 hectares or less land? They are getting ruined and getting self-exploited, or 'exploited by their own landholding.' Most of these marginal peasants have actually become wage labourers because principal means of their livelihood is not agriculture anymore, but wage labour. **The age of redistributive land reforms is over.** At present, it would be a reactionary and backward slogan.

**In the conclusion,** I would like to say that irrespective of the fact that the communist movement in India could not understand caste in its historicity and contemporaneity, despite empirically fighting against it, we cannot deduce that Marxist analytical method is insufficient to understand the caste question and provide a workable solution for it. In my opinion, it is only the Marxist approach that can and does provide a scientific understanding and solution of the caste question. The problem is that the communist movement in India has remained unable to work out this solution and as a result has fallen prey to opportunistic ideological surrender before the identitarian and pragmatist politics. Some honest revolutionary communists are in the mode of Christian confession and penitence and arguing that Marxism is not sufficient for understanding caste; Marxism is for class struggle and economic exploitation and Ambedkarite thought is for annihilation of caste and social discrimination. Such aggregative logic only shows that these people neither understand economic exploitation nor social discrimination. The question of any revolutionary change in society is primarily a question of understanding the laws of social dynamics, not sentiments.