

FROM AMBEDKAR'S IDEALISM TO MAYAWATI'S SYMBOLISM: TRACING THE CONTOURS OF THE DALIT MOVEMENT

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This article briefly delves into history to trace the ideological contours of institutionalized protest against untouchability and the discernible shift towards a quest for a distinct identity in the colonial era, particularly with the emergence of Dr B.R. Ambedkar as its leader. In this context, it then seeks to highlight the recurring themes as well as contradictions in Ambedkar's thought, and assesses how a combination of playing up of these incongruities by vested interests as well as other factors have been successful in preventing the realization of his vision of emancipation. Finally, the paper attempts to elucidate some of the practical manifestations of the perpetuation of self-serving Ambedkar 'icons' by the dominant groups by exploring the origin, evolution, 'principles' and strategies of two vehicles of Dalit mobilization seemingly on opposite ends of the ideological spectrum - the Dalit Panthers Movement and the BSP- and by reflecting on their ultimate outcomes.

Introduction

*"The sun of self-respect has burst into flame-
Let it burn up these castes!
Smash, break, destroy,
These walls of hatred,
Crush to smithereens this eons-old school of blindness,
Rise, O people!"¹*

This poignant piece of Dalit poetry encapsulates but a part of what the Dalit movement in India signifies: a cry of heart-rending anguish at the trauma of birth as a 'lowly untouchable', an impassioned plea for the annihilation of millennia-old institutions of prejudice and bondage, a call for the awakening of the dormant self-esteem of India's "Broken People", and recognition of the revolutionary potential of the oppressed masses- the potential to alter the course of human history.

India is truly a 'land of paradoxes',² not in the least because it has created that elusive creature which we call 'Hinduism'. While Hinduism can indeed lay claim to being an all-encompassing, benign faith, it has perpetuated an abominable version of institutionalized inequality- the caste system. Based on the pollution-purity concept and the *Karma* theory ascribing one's condition to one's own past deeds, Caste has sustained a form of inequity fortified by 'divine' sanction, and hence accepted even by those for whom it preached a sub-human existence- the Untouchables, or the 'outcastes'. India's 'very own apartheid'³ has resulted in the denial of basic human rights to millions below the "pollution line". Dalits have been at the receiving end of historic discrimination- they are denied

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¹ From a Marathi song of the 1970s anti-caste movement. See G. Omvedt, *Ambedkar and After: The Dalit Movement in India* in S. M. MICHAEL, Ed., *Dalit Movement in India: Vision and Values* 293 (1999).

² B. Das, *Ambedkar: Architect Of Modern India* in S. LAL & K. SAXENA, Ed., *AMBEDKAR AND NATION BUILDING* 99 (1998).

³ <<http://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/india/India994.04.hun>> (visited on 25.08.2004).

access to land, forced to work in degrading conditions, and are routinely abused at the hands of higher-caste groups. Education and status remain a distant dream, and theirs is a precarious existence, on the margins of 'human' society.

Though struggles against the tyranny of the caste system are definitely not restricted to the modern era, it is also not wrong to aver that the Dalit Movement truly came of age under the able stewardship of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, an untouchable Mahar by birth, but an intellectual giant by accomplishment. Ambedkar is particularly significant for his determination to carve out a distinct space for the most oppressed and marginalised section of India's society—a conscious attempt to bring those on the periphery of society into the mainstream by creating their 'own' mainstream. It was Ambedkar who galvanized the Dalit masses with his erudition and his multi-faceted assault on the dominant upper-castes. He strove to arm them with political power, to improve their socio-economic, educational and cultural conditions, and to actualize their gradual deliverance from rhetoric to reality, from deprivation to development, from social stigma and suffering to "social respect, solace and equality".⁴

Ambedkar is iconised today, his statues erected in Dalit settlements, his name associated with many institutions and any perceived dishonor to him is likely to lead to violence.⁵ However, 47 years after his demise, the time is ripe to recall the path he set out on, and gauge for ourselves the fulfillment or the negation of his cherished vision—“Liberty, Equality and Fraternity”.

I. The Ideological Context of Dalit Revolt: The Quest for Identity

The Dalit ideology for a just society has been developed by eminent personalities like Mahatma Phule, E.V.R. Periyar and Babasaheb Ambedkar. They developed their vision of society as an 'alternative' to the upper-caste understanding of India.⁶ Hence, we must consider the historical context in which their ideology was synthesized.

In the early stages, unity was achieved by recognizing the autonomy and plurality of the various groups that inhabited the vast subcontinent.⁷ With the rise of modern nationalism in Europe and the political, administrative and economic unification of India by the British, national consciousness began to express itself in the form of social and religious reform Movements. The important issue now was to identify the cultural foundation of Indian society and reconstruct it as a modern nation state.⁸

Two strands of thought emerged:

❑ An Indian Nation built on a rational approach to culture :

The Enlightenment philosophy began to effect the newly Western-educated Indian, giving rise to the “Indian Renaissance”. This tradition vividly described society's degradation and acknowledged the virtues of Western learning, liberal legal and social institutions, and the

⁴ P. Radhakrishnan, *Ambedkar's Legacy to Dalits: Has the Nation reneged on its Promises?*, 26(12) EPW 1911, 1912 (1991).

⁵ N. Pandit, *Ambedkar and the Dalits*, 461 SEMINAR 47, 50 (1997).

⁶ See G. OMVEDT, *DALIT VISIONS: THE ANTI-CASTE MOVEMENT AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN INDIAN IDENTITY*, TRACTS FOR THE TIMES 8 (1996).

⁷ R. Kothari, *Integration and Exclusion in Indian Politics*, 23(15) EPW 2223, 2229 (1988).

⁸ S. M. Michael, *Dalit Visions of a Just Society*, in S. M. MICHAEL, ED., *DALITS IN MODERN INDIA: VISION AND VALUES* 102 (1999).

Western social ethic, thus seeking to herald a total social transformation.⁹

❑ An Indian Nation built on Aryan Vedic Culture:

The Arya Samaj aimed at bringing about social and religious reform through a renewal of early Hindu doctrines, with its favourite dicta: "Back to the Vedas" and "*Aryavarta* for the Aryans".¹⁰

Thus Indian civilization was seen primarily as derivative from Aryan civilization and the caste system was 'lauded' as a means by which diverse races and cultures were subjected to the 'civilizing' influence of the Aryans.¹¹

Mahatma Phule simply reversed this notion, arguing that the low castes, (the Shudras and the Atishudra), were the country's original inhabitants, enslaved by the conquering Aryans who used a caste-based Hinduism to legitimize their power. He believed that ancient Indian history was nothing but the struggle between Brahmins and Non-Brahmins.¹³

The second stage in the development of Indian nationalism emerged in 1885 with the Indian National Congress.¹⁴ The moderate and extremist factions, struggled for its control, with the former standing up for reforms in Hinduism, and the extremists, led by Tilak, glorifying the Vedic Civilisation and opposing any kind of reform.¹⁵ Tilak's objective was the promotion of solidarity among the Hindus, and hence he emphasized the superiority of their religion and encouraged revivalism.¹⁶

As a result of intensifying Hindu-Muslim tension, and the revival of the Hindu Mahasabha, a new militant Hindu organization known as the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh was established, deeply influenced by Tilak. All castes were required to conform to the behavioral standards considered proper by the RSS leaders, which till today, reflect their Maharashtrian Brahmin cultural values.¹⁷ Thus, the idea clearly seems to have been to create a monolithic Hindu hegemony, primarily aimed at an uncomplicated Hindu identity, hence incorporating even the lowest, exploited castes, yet preserving Brahminical values.

Simultaneously, the Gandhian approach to Caste delinked untouchability from the caste system. It held that untouchability was not an integral part of the caste system, and it was possible for an Untouchable to maintain a Hindu identity and yet not bear the stigma of untouchability.¹⁸ Gandhi

⁹ Y. DANILOV & J. AIKARA, CASTE, RELIGION AND POLITICS IN INDIA 77 (1982).

¹⁰ W. ROY SMITH, NATIONALISM AND REFORM IN INDIA 57 (1938).

¹¹ R. O'HANLON, CASTE, CONFLICT AND IDEOLOGY: MAHATMA JOTIRAO PHULE AND LOW CASTE PROTEST IN NINETEENTH CENTURY WESTERN INDIA, 57-59 (1985). This Aryan Theory of race was the most influential common discourse, and European orientalist conveniently used it to assert an ethnic kinship between Europeans and ancient Vedic peoples.

¹³ D. KEER, MAHATMA JOTIRAO PHULE: FATHER OF INDIAN SOCIAL REVOLUTION 120 (1964). He consciously sought to bring together the peasant castes along with the untouchables, in a distinct "common front" against Brahmin domination, hence engendering a separate identity for them. He also reinterpreted sacred religious literature, seeking to locate the struggle of the marginalised castes in history, thus making history purposive. See ROY SMITH *supra* note 10, at 131 and 203-05.

¹⁴ D. EUGENE SMITH, INDIA AS A SECULAR STATE 880 (1963).

¹⁵ T. V. PARVATE, GOPAL KRISHNA GOKHALE 463 (1959).

¹⁶ S. M. MICHAEL, *Polarization of Ganapati Festival*, 33 (1) SOCIAL COMPASS 91, 116 (1986).

¹⁷ ONVEDT, *supra* note 6, at 106. They believe that at the heart of Hinduism lie the noble Vedas and the unique feature of 'our' society is the diverse functional groups (castes). See M. GOWALAKAR, WE OR OUR NATION HOOD DEFINED 89-120 (1947).

¹⁸ ONVEDT, *supra* note 6, at 106.

proclaimed that *Lārsnashram* preserved harmony and encouraged the growth of the soul, and untouchability violated the basic spirit of Hinduism.¹⁹

In the above context, which sought to impose a hegemonic Hindu identity on the downtrodden untouchables, the visions of Periyar and Ambedkar become illuminating. Periyar was convinced that casteism and Hinduism was one and the same thing, and wanted Hinduism as he saw it, to be removed altogether.²⁰ Dr Ambedkar was a revolutionary convinced that the caste system was unjust and immoral. The fight against casteism and untouchability was central to his agenda, and he was vehemently critical of the prevailing contemporary approaches.²¹ His primary concern was to mobilize the untouchables for which the construction of a discrete identity was a pre-requisite. He sought to establish this through historical explorations.²² He further claimed that Buddhism was part of *Bharatiya* culture, hence projecting a conflict between the dominant Brahminical tradition and the Buddhists, thereby cementing the latter's individuality.²³ Thus, the above Phule- Ambedkar-Periyar tradition represents the efforts to construct an alternative identity of the people, based on non-Aryan and low caste perspectives, that was critical not only of the oppressiveness of the dominant Hindu caste society, but also of its claims to antiquity and to being the dominant Indian tradition.²⁴

Herein also lies the import of Ambedkar's legacy- his striving to give a voice to the nameless and faceless- and the imperative of struggling to keep his memory alive and his ideology germane today.

II. The Ambedkar Legacy and the Dalit Movement Today: A Classic Case of Betrayal?

Today, any analysis of the Dalit Movement is impossible without reference to Ambedkar's ideology and aspirations. For a growing number of young Dalits across India, many born after his death in 1956, he has become symbolic of a vision that can be achieved, a vision of freedom from social and economic injustice.²⁵ At the same time, there are many who believe that the Movement is facing a crisis because of his fatherhood, and the overwhelming importance attached to his 'dictates'.²⁶

The author cannot deny that there were inherent contradictions in Ambedkar's thought and beliefs, which provided scope for multiple interpretations- at one time, he admired the proponents of

¹⁹ G. Shah, *Dalit Movements and the Search for an Identity* in M. SAVUR & I. MUNSHI, Ed., *CONTRADICTIONS IN INDIAN SOCIETY* 58 (1995). He called the untouchables *Harjans*, (People of God), once again reflecting the tendency to include them into the Hindu fold.

²⁰ R. HARDGRAVE, *THE DRAVIDIAN MOVEMENT* 17 (1965). Even so, the basic principle of seeking to conclusively segregate the oppressed lower castes from the exploiters remains constant.

²¹ U. BAXI, *Emancipation as Justice: Ambedkar's Legacy and Vision* in MINISTRY OF INFORMATION, Ed., *AMBEDKAR AND SOCIAL JUSTICE* 23 (1994).

²² V. MOON, *DR BABASAHEB AMBEDKAR: WRITINGS AND SPEECHES* 277 (1990). He postulated that untouchables were historically 'broken men,' who settled down on the outskirts of the habitations of settled tribes. They were followers of Buddhism and this, along with their persistence in eating beef, banned by the Vedic tribes, explained the hatred toward them, and their consequent degraded status.

²³ W. N. KUBER, *BUILDERS OF MODERN INDIA: B R. AMBEDKAR* 84 (1997).

²⁴ DAS, *supra* note 3.

²⁵ OMVEDT, *supra* note 6, at 108.

²⁶ D. NAGARAJ, *THE FLAMING FEET: A STUDY OF THE DALIT MOVEMENT I* (1993).

western liberalism, at another time he claimed that communist philosophy was closest to his own, on yet another occasion, he denounced the very basis of Marxism.²⁷ And this is just the tip of the iceberg! However, Ambedkar lived through a turbulent period of Indian history, and his thoughts are heavily contextualised by the dynamics of changing times. While simultaneously trying to build the ideological foundation for the movement, they tend to reflect expediency of survival and his anxiety to maximise the short-term gains for the Dalits.²⁸ Ambedkar was, in fact, history in the making.²⁹

All the same, one must admit, these inherent contradictions in his thought have lent an impetus to attempts to 'iconise' him. It is a fact that what reaches the masses who swear by his name is not the holistic and true picture of 'Ambedkar' but just its fragment, sometimes a distorted fragment, carefully filtered out and amplified by those in control of the dominant discourses. Being essentially a process of simplification of the complex ideologue that Ambedkar was, this involves the playing up of certain facts as per one's own proclivities and propensities.³⁰

However, the author feels that it would be a falsification to state that it is impossible to discern any fundamental, recurring strands of thought in Ambedkarism. Further, certain factors apart from selective representation and self-serving or innocent misinterpretation have either ensured that Ambedkar's ideals are not realized or are no longer tenable. Both factors must be kept in mind, and have been used as points of reference, while assessing the present situation.

III. The Incongruous Fallout of Ambedkar's Advocacy of Buddhism

For Ambedkar, the foundations of religion were essential to life, but they must be judged by social standards, based on social ethics, and must recognize the fundamental tenets of liberty, equality and fraternity.³¹ He was convinced that *Varnashramdharma* was core to Hinduism.³² Buddhism, with its moral basis of equality, justice and all-encompassing humanitarianism, thus attracted him.³³ For these reasons he advocated the spread of Buddhism amongst *all* Indians, not merely the Dalits, as this would facilitate a transformation of society. Further, he believed that religion must be in accord with reason, which for him was merely a synonym for science.³⁴ He stated that there was no place for God in Buddhism as this belief was necessarily rooted in superstition.³⁵

However, Ambedkar's lofty aspirations have seen only partial fulfillment. Though conversion certainly achieved much so far as securing "psychological freedom" from the notion of being a polluting person was concerned, Buddhist converts remained confined to certain castes and geographical regions, and in the absence of any widespread conversion to the religion, Buddhism

²⁷ "The communist philosophy seems to be to fatten pigs as though men are no better than pigs –Men need to grow both materially and spiritually."

²⁸ *Honage to Babasaheb*, <[http:// www.ambedkar.org](http://www.ambedkar.org)> (visited on 24.09.2004).

²⁹ K. IYER, *DR AMBEDKAR AND THE DALIT FUTURE* 5 (1990).

³⁰ A. Telumbde, *Ambedkar in and for the Post-Ambedkar Dalit Movement*, <[http:// <www.ambedkar.org](http://www.ambedkar.org)> (visited on 05.10.2004.)

³¹ NAGRAJ, *supra* note 26, at 25.

³² OMVEDT, *supra* note 6, at 110.

³³ KUBER, *supra* note 23, at 83.

³⁴ KUBER, *supra* note at 81.

³⁵ D. Lokamitra, *Ambedkar and Buddhism*, 26 EPW 1303, 1304 (1991).

itself became sort of 'untouchable' for a while.³⁶ Further, internal social hierarchy among the converts persists, indicating the lack of any kind of transformation in values.³⁷

Also, the neo-Buddhists have in been involved in institutional mechanisms and rituals. It is important to realise that even the Buddha's *Dhamma* whose roots are firmly in the soil of rationality and whose sole *raison de etre* is human suffering, has been mutilated to be its exact opposite by the very followers of the dedicated rationalist Ambedkar.³⁸ In other words, Buddhism has been unable to escape institutionalization as a religion. Ironically, this has seen the elevation of Ambedkar himself to the status of a God. He is seen as the Buddha incarnate who analysed humanity's problems and ultimately prescribed *nirvana*.³⁹

IV. Radical Revolutionary or Pacifist?

Ambedkar has been hailed as a revolutionary who fought against the evils of the system in their entirety.⁴⁰ He wanted a total restructure of Indian society, thereby establishing a true democratic nation based on liberty, equality and fraternity, and this transformation was definitely not limited to the upliftment of untouchables only.⁴¹ His vision for transformation encompassed nationalization of basic industries, nationalization of agricultural lands and leasing it to cooperatives of farmers, irrespective of caste and religion, and compulsory insurance of all adult citizens.⁴² From 1936-42, Ambedkar became increasingly involved with broad economic and political radicalism. He founded the Independent Labor Party, which was projected boldly as the only party with a "true, militant and constructive programme for workers and peasants", and the fight against casteism was taken up as essential for worker-peasant unity.⁴³ He was extremely supportive of the anti-landlord struggle in the Konkan region.⁴⁴ Similarly, he came together with the communists for the textile workers' strike in 1938.⁴⁵

The author agrees that for the redressal of specific grievances, he adopted the path of conscientisation, continuous dialogue and consultations. Struggle with his opponents was seen only as a last resort.⁴⁶ In creating a new social order, he, as a staunch constitutionalist, was seen to have chosen law as an instrument. His revolution was heralded not through war and violence but through

³⁶ G. Shah, *Politics of Dalit Movement: From Direct Action to Pressure Groups* in S. PANDSE, Ed., *AT CROSS ROADS: THE DALIT MOVEMENT TODAY* 11 (1994).

³⁷ B. S. Hantel, *Ambedkar on Hinduism and Social Transformation* in S. LAL & K. SAKENA, Eds., *AMBEDKAR AND NATION BUILDING* 291 (1998).

³⁸ TELTUMBDE, *supra* note 30.

³⁹ TELTUMBDE, *supra* note 30.

⁴⁰ S. K. DHAWAN, *DR B.R. AMBEDKAR: A SELECT PROFILE I* (1991).

⁴¹ HANTAL, *supra* note 37.

⁴² N. Pandit, *Ambedkar and the Dalits*, 461 SEMINAR 47, 50 (1997). The Chavdar Tale Satyagraha of Mahad and the Kalaram temple Satyagraha, were indicative of his capability as a mass leader.

⁴³ See G. OMVEDT, *DALITS AND THE DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION: DR AMBEDKAR AND THE DALIT MOVEMENT IN COLONIAL INDIA 190-200* (1994).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* at 196.

⁴⁵ PANDIT, *supra* note 43, at 199.

⁴⁶ S. Pandere, *Patterns of Militancy in the Dalit Movement* in SANDEEP PENDSE, Ed, *AT CROSS ROADS: THE DALIT MOVEMENT TODAY* 70 (1994).

'democratic means'.⁴⁷ However, what is not emphasized is that his disdain for mass struggle and his choice of political action as the means of achieving his goals was dictated and facilitated both by the particular moment of Indian history at which he found himself and also the social reality of the educationally backward, powerless, economically subservient, regionally dispersed, sub-caste conscious community that he led.⁴⁸ It appears that this pragmatic wariness towards militancy has been utilized to project Ambedkar as a pacifist and a constitutionalist.

V. Ambedkar's 'Real' Stance on Marxism, Materialism and Non-Violence

Given the above context, it is but natural that Ambedkar's 'conflict' with Marxism has generated a great deal of controversy- most of it legitimate, but definitely not completely justified. The fact is that while Ambedkar associated himself with the Marxists for the progress of the labour class, he parted from them as he was rightly dissatisfied with the Marxist insistence that the eradication of poverty and capitalism would automatically eradicate the caste system, it being part of the inconsequential 'superstructure'.⁴⁹ In taking the relations of production as the basis of the 'economic interpretation of history', a clever twist was made to assert the causal importance of social-religious-political factors.⁵⁰ In other words, he saw economic and social oppression as separate structures, taking up cultural change to challenge Hinduism, and socialism as the way to overcome economic exploitation.⁵¹

Yet, in doing so, it would appear to the author that he accepted some of the crucial assumptions of the class framework. He defined the enemies of the oppressed as 'Brahminism' and 'Capitalism', and saw the eradication of caste and untouchability as a precondition for a united working class struggle. His basic goals were the ending of exploitation and oppression, the achievement of equality, liberty, community. It would hence be a falsification to state that Ambedkar did not take cognizance of the legitimate class struggle against capitalism. In fact, he considered the eradication of caste as the first step towards a broader socialist revolution. Towards the end of his life, he was toying with the idea of forming a socialist party to lead mass actions to achieve the alleviation of the Dalits' misery.⁵²

The result of the obsession of segregating Marxism and Ambedkarism, and the denial of their complementing factors has had serious repercussions. Not only has it led to the pre-mature death of revolutionary trends like the Dalit Panthers Movement, as will be elucidated in the next Section, but the conscious bid to keep caste struggles away from the mainstream working class struggles has prevented the total restructuring of society. Since the exploitation of Dalits in the countryside has become a compound of economic and social phenomena, the struggles for its elimination should also be a combination of class and caste dimensions.⁵³ While historically inherited prejudices still shape the conduct of the upper castes with the untouchables, what have aggravated their aggressiveness are the sharpening class contradictions in the countryside, as Dalits are now pressing for the implementation of the declared policy of giving them preference for distribution of land, etc.

⁴⁷ DHAWAN, *supra* note 40.

⁴⁸ M. S. GORE, *THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF AN IDEOLOGY* 214 (1993).

⁴⁹ DAS, *supra* note 3, at 292.

⁵⁰ DAS, *supra* note 3, at 229.

⁵¹ DAS, *supra* note 3, at 338.

⁵² A. ROY, *The Nature of the Dalit question Today* in PENDSE, Ed., *AT CROSS ROADS: THE DALIT MOVEMENT TODAY* 7 (1994).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, at 8.

Further, Ambedkar's stance towards non-violence was also obfuscating to say the least. On the one hand, he had denounced violent Communist means. On the other, he seemed to adopt an extremely pragmatic approach.⁵⁴ To expose the futility of Gandhi's obsession with non-violence, he declared what, according to him, the Buddha said - "to the extent possible, non-violence; if necessary, violence."⁵⁵ The above contradictions were conveniently shorn of their practical attributes when projected to the Dalit masses.

This much publicized opposition to the "vulgar materialism" propagated by the then communists - coloured by the fact that Ambedkar's struggles were in the realm of codes, norms, traditions and institutional practices, and the culmination of his efforts in Buddhism - has led to the distressing paradox that the Dalits, though among the most materially deprived in the world, show utter distaste for the real issues of life while displaying excessive enthusiasm for the emotional issues.⁵⁶ They define their movement as being one for "izzat" (dignity) or "asmata" (self-respect).⁵⁷ Emotionally charging issues like the renaming of universities, desecration of statues are what protests are founded on, at the expense of the basic needs of rural, illiterate Dalits.⁵⁸

That this is yet another self-serving icon perpetuated by ruling elites to keep the masses in check is conclusively proven by Ambedkar's vision of development that emphasized the creation of a modern society of abundance, and was most starkly expressed in his attack on the notion of the limitation of needs.⁵⁹ And in fact, one of his primary attractions to Buddhism later in his life was the fact that it did not ennoble Poverty and that it demanded a life divine attainable here and now - not after death.⁶⁰

VI. The Quagmire of Political Rights and the Need for Power

If revolutionary means for Dalit emancipation are hence effectively ruled out by the dominant discourses, as well as by certain propensities in Dr Ambedkar's thought, then it follows that the focus of attention is shifted to the political realm. Ambedkar is often seen as advocating political equality and civil-political rights for the oppressed as the panacea for all their ills. However, Ambedkar was totally convinced that mere political equality would not suffice, socio-economic equality is also essential.⁶¹ Further, it is definitely true that he defined the problem of the Untouchables as "essentially a political problem of minority versus majority groups."⁶² He hence exhorted the Dalits to capture political power, and to become a "ruling community."⁶³

⁵⁴ OMVEDT, *supra* note 43.

⁵⁵ M. G. CHITKARA, DR AMBEDKAR: TOWARDS BUDDHISM 53 (1997).

⁵⁶ TELTUMBDE, *supra* note 30.

⁵⁷ S. Majumder, *Dalit Politics Gaining Ground in U.P.*, <<http://www.bbcworld.com>> (visited on 18.10.2004).

⁵⁸ P. G. Jogdand, *Dalit Movement: Patterns and Consequences* in S. PENDSE, Ed. AT CROSS ROADS: THE DALIT MOVEMENT TODAY 58 (1994).

⁵⁹ "When the whole world was living in poverty, it is but natural for moralists to preach the gospel of poverty and renunciation of worldly leisure simply because they were not to be had" B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* in DR AMBEDKAR'S WRITINGS AND SPEECHES, VOL I 85 (1979).

⁶⁰ KUBER, *supra* note 23, at 81.

⁶¹ A. M. RAJASEKHARAH, AMBEDKAR: THE QUEST FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE 225 (1989).

⁶² B. R. AMBEDKAR, *ANNIHILATION OF CASTE* 72 (1945).

⁶³ "Political power is the only 'Master-key by which each and every lock is opened.'" See T. Singh, *Why the Dalit Movement has failed in India*, <<http://www.ambedkar.org/bss/failed.htm>> (visited on 21.10.2004).

However, what must be emphasized in today's context is that he conceived of political power as only a 'means' through which liberation, self-esteem and development of one's potential could be achieved, and cautioned that "political power achieved without strengthening its social base, may evaporate without achieving anything concrete."⁶⁴ Influenced by John Dewey, he believed that to enjoy real freedom it is essential to consider the social conditions necessary to the perpetuation of such freedom. Democracy for him was not just a form of political system, but a way of life.⁶⁵

The author feels that in today's scenario, this sanction for achieving power in the name of the oppressed has proven to be the bane for true emancipation. Ambedkar desired the rule of the Dalits, the have-nots. It was however conveniently taken to mean being 'part of the ruling team', by the Dalit leaders. Any pursuit of power, regardless of means, thus became a quasi-sacred obsession for the Dalit leaders.⁶⁶ Further, as will be elaborated in the next Section, political empowerment alone was construed as the ultimate goal of the Dalit struggle, opportunely ignoring his stress on establishing a 'social democracy'.

The culmination of all the above-cited icons is seen in the decay of the political party set up by Ambedkar- the Republican Party of India, into a permanent adjunct of the ruling class, shorn of any radical content. After Ambedkar's death, Dadasaheb Gaikwad- his trusted lieutenant - organized *Satyagrahas* demanding that fallow lands be distributed to the landless, but this was dismissed as 'communist', and hence antithetical to Ambedkarian thought by the RPI.

Further, the desire to seize power at any extent led to the co-optation of the party by the ruling Congress, which Ambedkar had consistently criticized and warned his followers to stay away from. This was justified by asserting that Ambedkar himself had aligned with the Congress and had accepted its support for re-election to the Constituent Assembly (of course neglecting the strategic compulsions behind such a move).⁶⁷ Ultimately, the lack of ideological coherence in the Dalit movement and its leadership's petty-bourgeoisie aspirations of, exacerbated by the ruling class strategy of 'Divide and Rule' led to the fragmentation of the RPI and the weakening of the Movement, with attention being diverted from bringing about any kind of social transformation.⁶⁸

VII. What Ought to be the Responsibilities of the Dalit Elites?

Another contemporary phenomenon in the Movement today is the creation and progressive strengthening of a small, influential Dalit elite, mainly the product of affirmative action and the democratizing process. This elite middle-class has been dominating the Movement, failing to distinguish between immediate and long-term objectives, and is seen to emphasize purely its own short-term gains.⁶⁹ In fact, a section even advocates equality of opportunity and emphasizes merit and competition, hence showing an inclination towards individualism and no connection with or responsibility for the fate of the oppressed sections of their own community.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ GORE, *supra* note 48.

⁶⁵ R. NORTON, *Dewey's revision of Jefferson* in S. HOOK, Ed., JOHN DEWEY: PHILOSOPHER OF SCIENCE AND FREEDOM 28 (1950).

⁶⁶ TELTUMBDE, *supra* note 30.

⁶⁷ IYER, *supra* note 29.

⁶⁸ TELTUMBDE, *supra* note 30.

⁶⁹ JOGJAND, *supra* note 58.

⁷⁰ V. RODRIGUES, *Viewing Dalit Movement: Contending Perspectives* in S. PENDSE, Ed., AT CROSS ROADS: THE DALIT MOVEMENT TODAY 38 (1994).

This has been sought to be justified by reference to Ambedkar's ambivalence on liberal democratic values. Ambedkar had come under the liberal influence of western education, and his philosophy was definitely equally rooted in democratic liberalism, emphasizing as it did, individual freedom along with social equality. Hence, it appeared to many that when he spoke of equality that he seemed to have in mind equality of opportunity, with an emphasis on merit and efficiency.⁷¹

However, the author emphasizes that Ambedkar ultimately stood for "social justice" which demanded that the 'need of the oppressed be given due consideration along with the claims of merit.'⁷² Further, he must be credited for having recognized the danger of "willful amnesia" towards their own past and their duties towards the same on the part of influential groups who had cornered material advantages, and warning against it.⁷³ Hence, this is yet another instance of the exploitation of a conveniently hyped up contradiction within Ambedkarism for the enhancement of elite interests.

VIII. The Desire for Unity Among the Oppressed and the Complete Annihilation of Caste

Ambedkar's real concern in establishing the Untouchables' identity was the establishing of the unity of interests of the sub-castes among the untouchables.⁷⁴ He tried to show that animosity between Dalit sub-castes was the result of permeation of caste-Hindu values among them and warned them that their traditional enmity would be exploited by the caste Hindus. They should forget their differences and fight for a common cause.⁷⁵ Further, he envisaged some broad alliance of SCs with OBCs as a common front against Brahmins, capitalists, landlords and other exploiting classes.⁷⁶

Being enlightened and far-sighted, Ambedkar tried to resolve the problems of Indian society by destroying the caste system in totality.⁷⁷ His focal point of struggle was Brahmanism and not merely Brahmins.⁷⁸ Annihilation of caste and establishment of an egalitarian society were his ultimate objectives.⁷⁹ However, it is evident today this ideal of unity even among the Dalits is far from realized. In fact Ambedkar himself was never able to overcome the politics of sub-caste. It is accepted today that Ambedkar did not enjoy the unstinted support of all the untouchable communities even within Maharashtra.⁸⁰ Further, with electoral compulsions, the mid-1990s have seen in many ways a retreat to caste-based politics, hence the politics of *jati*-identity.⁸¹ The implications of the above are not hard to gauge. Each splinter fraction is routinised and functions as a separate political establishment, making fragmentation endemic.⁸² Another consequence is the vulnerability of these *jati*-blobs to cooptation by the Hindutva Brigade. The recent disputes triggered off within various RPI factions

⁷¹ GORE, *supra* note 48, at 217.

⁷² S. Lal, *Ambedkar and Social Justice* in S. LAL & K. SAXENA, Ed., AMBEDKAR AND NATION BUILDING 64 (1998).

⁷³ OMVEDT, *supra* note 26, at 9.

⁷⁴ GORE, *supra* note 48, at 202.

⁷⁵ N. BUIRA, *Was Ambedkar Just a leader of the Mahars?* 21(2) EPW 429 (1986).

⁷⁶ N. KUMAR, *Dalit and Shudra Politics and the Anti-Brahmin Movement* 35 (18) EPW 3977, 3978 (2000).

⁷⁷ HANTAI, *supra* note 37, at 301.

⁷⁸ KUMAR, *supra* note 76, at 3971.

⁷⁹ B. Sharma, *Teachings of Ambedkar* in S. LAL & K. SAXENA, Ed., AMBEDKAR AND NATION BUILDING: 73 (1998).

⁸⁰ The Mangs and the Chambhars bitterly resent the upward mobility of the Mahars, and believe that this was at least in part due to Ambedkar having concentrated his attention on his own community.

⁸¹ For example, the 'Every Caste a Nation' stance taken by Prakash Ambedkar, of the Bharatiya Republican Party.

⁸² JOGDAND, *supra* note 58, at 57.

on Uddhav Thackeray's offer for an alliance with the Shiv Sena clearly indicate this trend. More disturbingly, the identity politics being imposed by the Hindu right is playing havoc with the basic issues of bread and butter, housing and clothing, which have been relegated to the background.⁸³

IX. The Dalit Panthers: A Sparklet that was not to be

In addition to a growing number of lower-caste-based political parties and human rights movements, Dalits have participated in struggles against the state and the upper-castes since the 1960s to claim their rights; several of these have used arms and have advocated violence. While some Dalit leaders have argued that the fundamental rights of Dalits should be addressed within the constitutional framework, many non-urbanized Dalits have taken the position that their problems cannot be resolved without a militant struggle against those in power.⁸⁴ It is in this context that the rise of the Dalit Panthers must be seen.

*"We don't want a little place in the Brahman galli, we want the rule of the whole land ...our revolution will flash like lightning"*⁸⁵ Thus proclaimed the 1972 manifesto of the Dalit panthers, born in the slums of Bombay, which spread to the cities and villages throughout the country, proclaiming revolt.

There were material reasons behind this phenomenon. The entire world was swept by economic depression after 1965.⁸⁶ Children of the Ambedkarian movement had started coming out of universities in the late 1960s, just to face the blank future staring at them. The much-publicized Constitutional provisions turned out to be a mirage. Their political vehicle, the much-fragmented RPI, was sinking deeper and deeper into the marsh of parliamentarism.⁸⁷ Consequently, many mass movements arose outside the framework of the parliamentary arena. The Dalit Panthers emerged out of the Phule –Ambedkar Movement and sought to relate to the radical Black Panthers Party in the USA in its ideological approach and functioning.⁸⁸

Dalit literature, theater and painting emerged as a rebellious challenge to the very basis of established literature and art. The Panthers opposed atrocities on Dalits directly and aggressively and characterized Dalits who meekly submitted to atrocities as impotents and deviants.⁸⁹ They sought to wage a grand war against the *Varna-Jati* system and the government. A sense of great self-esteem began to emerge. Buddha-Phule-Ambedkar birth anniversaries were celebrated on a large scale. The language and action of revolt spread up to politics. Boycott of elections in some places were a vehicle of the show of their strength.⁹⁰ However, the question on everyone's minds was whether this caste war would turn into a class war.

⁸³ A. Mishra, *Shiv Sena Offer Reveals Cracks in Dalit Parties*, THE TIMES OF INDIA, 6, 25.02.2003.

⁸⁴ < <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/india/India994-04.htm> > (visited on 01.10.2004.)

⁸⁵ "Change of heart, liberal education etc will not end our state of exploitation. When we gather a revolutionary mass, out of the struggle of this giant mass, will come the tidal wave of revolution". See B. JOSHI, UNTOUCHABLE VOICES OF THE DALIT LIBERATION MOVEMENT (1986).

⁸⁶ PANDERE, *supra* note 46.

⁸⁷ TULSIBHIDE, *supra* note 30.

⁸⁸ PANDERE, *supra* note 46, 72.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, at 73.

⁹⁰ DAS, *supra* note 3, at 302.

The Panthers had emerged as a mass symbol of revolt along with the Naxalites, and it was the massive stirring of the Dalit rural poor in village ghettos throughout the country (that was the basis of the 'caste wars') that many hoped would turn in to a class war.⁹¹ In Bihar and Andhra, the rural Dalit upsurge was organized by the Naxalites and economic issues like claiming a share of the village commons, higher wages or simply trying to counter landlords' exploitation were taken up. Naxalism often provided, for the independent-minded Panthers as well as the Dalits in their own organization, an overall language of semi-feudalism for the struggle.⁹² It is obvious, however, that this clear cut leftist stand reflected by their manifesto and programme for action ran counter to the 'accepted' legacy of Ambedkar, although it was sold in his name as an awkward tactic. The author laments that the historical dilemma characteristic of the Indian situation was back in force. The pathos of casteism integral with the Dalit experience essentially brought in Ambedkar, but, for the other contemporary problems of depravation, Marxism provided a scientific framework to bring about a revolutionary change.⁹³ The reactionaries objected to the radical content of the programme alleging that the radical Naxalites doctored the manifesto. The Naxalites on their part never allowed a real Dalit vision to fertilize, and towards the end they couldn't see Ambedkar as more than a 'petty-bourgeoisie leader' and could not even admit the reality of caste as a social institution.⁹⁴

The author does believe that the Panthers deserve credit for attempting the assimilation of these two ideologies for the first time but unfortunately, it proved abortive in the absence of efforts to rid each of them of its obfuscating influence and stress their non-contradictory essence.⁹⁵ It is also undoubtedly true that issues relating to caste struggle and self-respect had been paramount for the Panthers throughout, and they too seem to have fallen for the anti-materialism icon, which placed emotional issues over material ones.

The unresolved caste-class problematic eventually led to a split, leading to the creation of Buddhist and Marxist factions.⁹⁶ The deeper problem however lay in the failure to move towards the kind of total '*social transformation*' that Ambedkar had envisaged. Their rhetoric and most of their theory was borrowed from the Naxalites and were in any case ignored by most of the slum youth.⁹⁷

That the Panthers evoked an unparalleled sense of pride and self-esteem in the collective Dalit consciousness is indisputable. However, beyond militancy, the Panthers hence failed to elaborate a vision for the socio-economic programme for a new strategy to propel the movement forward. Lack of a comprehensive approach and extreme individualism were a serious problem, and basic questions of the exploited were neglected. The decade of the Panthers did not see much being done except listing the simmering problems like implementing reservations, employment, scholarships, and educational facilities.⁹⁸ It thus does not surprise the author that the movement effectively ended

⁹¹ G. Omvedt, *Ambedkar and After: The Dalit Movement in India* in S. M. MICHAEL, Ed., *DALITS IN MODERN INDIA: VISION AND VALUES* 301 (1999).

⁹² *Ibid.*, at 302.

⁹³ TELTUMBDE, *supra* note 30.

⁹⁴ OMVEDT, *supra* note 91, at 303.

⁹⁵ TELTUMBDE, *supra* note 30.

⁹⁶ PANDIT, *supra* note 5, at 49.

⁹⁷ OMVEDT, *supra* note 91, at 304. "We didn't read the manifesto, all we knew-if someone puts their hand on your sister-cut it off!"

⁹⁸ PANDIT, *supra* note 46, at 75.

with the largely symbolic issue of renaming the Marathwada University, and its leadership has gone the RPI way of fragmentation and co-optation.⁹⁹

In a nutshell, the Dalit Panther phase essentially represented the clash of two icons: one, that of a radical 'Ambedkar', as a committed rationalist, perpetually striving for the deliverance of his oppressed people and granting full freedom to his followers to seek the truth. The other is of the staunch anti-Communist 'Ambedkar' who forbade violent methods and advocated the constitutional way for his followers.¹⁰⁰ As it turned out, the radical icon of Ambedkar was projected without adequate conviction.

X. The Bahujan Samaj Party: The Inheritor of Ambedkar's Legacy?

The author believes that the BSP's very origin is reflective of its pro-elite and at best 'reformist' stance today, which has resulted in 'successes' in the very narrow sense of being confined to elite incorporation into state institutions.

The Dalit upsurge that culminated in the creation of the BSP was stirred principally by the upwardly mobile strata among the SCs, who were powerless to secure important postings and proper recognition in government and society.¹⁰¹ A crucial step in this direction was the formation of the Backward and Minority Classes Employees Federation (BAMCEF) by Kanshi Ram, with the chief aim of organizing the elite in the Bahujan Samaj who had benefited from quotas in government service, who went on to becoming the BSP's chief ideologues.¹⁰²

One may recall that Kanshi Ram has never fought shy of claiming to be the true inheritor of Ambedkar's legacy through a series of superficial measures, for instance, the BAMCEF was founded on 6 December, Ambedkar's death anniversary. The organization mobilized government officers on the assumption that their future individual progress was closely linked to the collective standing of the whole group.

The party was unable to establish itself as a forum for all minorities, and has become a base for politicized Dalits, with its core support coming from those castes which have benefited from the state's reservation policies.¹⁰³ Hence, it surprises none that the most remarkable characteristic of the Dalit leaders in UP today is their single-minded pursuit of power. They attach great importance to gaining government positions and measure progress by their groups' share in public life: education, professions and public employment.¹⁰⁴

Kanshi Ram put the matter quite bluntly: "We have a one-point programme: Take power" By contrast, in the 1970's, Kanshi Ram's activities were focused on welfare and reform, but by the late 1970's his strategy underwent a complete change and he no longer believed in the primacy of social

⁹⁹ R. Punivani, *Striving for Social Justice*, THE HINDU, 28.08.2002, 10.

¹⁰⁰ TELUMUKU, *supra* note 30.

¹⁰¹ Z. Hasan, *Representation and Redistribution: The New Lower Caste Politics in North India* in FRANKEL, Ed., *TRANSFORMING INDIA* 156 (2000).

¹⁰² G. Omvedt, *The Anti-Caste Movement and the Discourse of Power* in T. SATYAMURTHY, Ed., *REGION, RELIGION, CASTE, GENDER AND CULTURE* 344, 46 (1996).

¹⁰³ HASAN, *supra* note 101, at 159. For instance, the nucleus of its support comes from the Chamar caste- by far the largest and most politicised lower caste in UP.

¹⁰⁴ G. Omvedt, *Kanshi Ram and the Bahujan Samaj Party* in K. SHARMA, Ed., *CASTE AND CLASS IN INDIA* 163 (1994).

reform, rather it was a share in political and administrative power that would bring about the desired social change.¹⁰⁵

In the author's opinion, what is intriguing and appalling at the same time is the party's blatant propagation of principles which were, according to them, "core" to Ambedkar's thought, to seek sanction for its agenda. The proliferation of certain Ambedkar "icons" has been pivotal to the party's strategy.

Ambedkar is painted as a shrewd politician who could turn any situation to his advantage, who used every opportunity to grab political power to achieve his objective, who saw in political power, a key to the woes of Dalits and therefore exhorted them to grab it *at any cost* (emphasis mine), hence there were no permanent friends or foes for him in politics.¹⁰⁶ He is seen as the person endowed with State authority (as a member of the Viceroy's Executive Council, Law Minister, and Chairman of the Drafting Committee for the Indian Constitution) - the sole source of his power to benefit his people. Of course, his disdain for communism was unequivocal.¹⁰⁷ What is expediently ignored is that Ambedkar *always* had a broader social, economic and cultural programme backing up his political thrust and took positions on all the crucial issues of the day.¹⁰⁸

Ambedkar's attitude towards capitalism and his pragmatic approach to the communist strategy has been stated, but the BSP has never shied away from capitalism. The icon of anti-materialism has also gained ground. For Ambedkar political power was a means, to Kanshiram and the BSP it always appears to be the end.¹⁰⁹ This ideological bankruptcy of sorts is glaringly evident when one reviews the path traversed by the BSP in its meteoric rise to power.

In 1993, the BSP formed the government with the SP, however, on the BJP's urging and due to internal power struggles, withdrew support. Its subsequent alliance with the BJP lasted about 5 months. In 1996, the BSP went to the polls with the Congress. Hence, given the overwhelming centrality of acquiring power in the BSP scheme, it is unabashedly willing to ally with any party, never mind if Ambedkar spent his life in confrontation with Hindu fanatics and the Congress.¹¹⁰

In the 2002 assembly elections, this facet of the BSP under Mayawati became strikingly clear. Mayawati shed much of her old rhetoric against the upper castes and the 'original sin' contained in Manu's treatise on caste and emphasized on a social synthesis, reconciliation. The BSP didn't raise its old provocative slogans taunting the upper castes. In their place came a clear message of reconciliation. The gamble worked, and of the party's 98 MLAs the upper castes constitute the biggest bloc of 32, followed by the backwards – 24.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁵ O. MENDELSON & M. VICZIANI, *THE UNTOUCHABLES SUBORDINATION, POVERTY AND THE STATE IN INDIA* 223 (1998)

¹⁰⁶ An excellent example of this was Mayawati and Advani's joint assertion that the BSP-BJP alliance was not opportunistic but a well-calculated move to achieve the purpose of democracy, *the path of which was shown by Dr Ambedkar* (emphasis mine). See A. S. Bisht, *Rally creates ripple of sorts*, THE TIMES OF INDIA, 29.9.2002, 6.

¹⁰⁷ B. ROY, *Paradoxes of Dalit Politics in Uttar Pradesh*, 29 INDIA INTERNATIONAL CENTRE QUARTERLY 107, 115 (2002).

¹⁰⁸ OMIYOT, *supra* note 91.

¹⁰⁹ TELUMBE, *supra* note 30.

¹¹⁰ HASAN, *supra* note 101, at 158.

¹¹¹ "We cannot come to power on our own - no one can by just appealing to narrow bands of caste loyalty." That is why I am reaching out to all communities." See Sanjoy Majumder, *Dalit Politics Gaining Ground in U.P.*, <<http://www.bbeworld.com>> (visited on 25.10.2004).

This alliance with upper caste and class interests has led to a shelving of the radical pro-Dalit agenda for the time being. Serious land reform had never been on the BSP agenda, and had limited itself to efforts that enabled Dalits to take possession of land. However, after the fall of the Mayawati Government in 1997, even these limited efforts were relegated to the background.¹¹²

To the author's mind, the inevitable fallout of the complete lack of any concrete economic agenda has been the centrality accorded to the politics of symbolism. Though the Dalits may have supported their own elites in the expectation that they would share the spoils of power and wealth once they obtained government positions, the BSP has succeeded in retaining support without necessarily delivering material benefits.¹¹³ It has effectively superseded the welfarist approach of the Congress that stressed material benefits such as jobs, houses and sanitation, and has defined Dalits as a 'community of the humiliated' to be liberated by gaining political power, and not just material gains. Hence, political action has become an important means of affirming their political equality vis-à-vis the upper castes and a way of regaining self-esteem and self-respect.¹¹⁴

Enormous amounts of money and energy are hence spent in the politicization of Dalits, and the politics of symbolism and recognition has taken priority to encourage the growth of their constituency, which includes elaborate Ambedkar Village Development Schemes, erection of statues and renaming districts and streets after Phule, Ambedkar and Shahu Maharaj. It would appear to the author that although gains in self-respect and dignity are important, they make sense when linked to the more tangible promise of political empowerment as well as improvement in economic opportunities.

In this sense, the author feels that it would be correct to say that ultimately, both manifestations of Dalit protest – the radical and the parliamentary- have fallen prey to the hegemonic icon of Ambedkar- the maker of the Indian Constitution, a Bodhisatva, a constitutionalist, a messiah, a savior, an leader of the Untouchables alone, a liberal democrat, a staunch reformist allergic to revolutions and thus, in a nutshell, as the *bourgeoisie liberal democrat par excellence*.¹¹⁵

Conclusion

The Dalit Movement, in its sublime manifestation as the true and deserving heir to the Phule-Ambedkar legacy, was envisaged as a *transformative* social revolution, with its overwhelming agenda of liberty, equality, fraternity, social regeneration, political power, economic philosophy and a cultural renaissance.

So where does all this leave the average Dalit today? That Dalits today are asserting themselves with the confidence that political empowerment brings in its wake, that constitutional and legal measures have given the untouchable a voice to be reckoned with and a share to be envied in the political

¹¹² *Id.* In her book, *Babryan Samaj aur Udaar Rajneeti*, she bitterly referred to apprehensions caused by 'false' media reports about a government move to distribute the land of other castes among the Dalits. "No farmer's land was snatched away for redistribution among the landless. The government only distributed the land owned by it, lying uncultivated and unused."

¹¹³ HASAN, *supra* note 101, at 161.

¹¹⁴ K. Chandra, *Why does the BSP succeed? A case study of the BSP in Hoshinapur*, A Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association of Asian Studies, Washington D.C., March 1998.

¹¹⁵ TELTUMBADI, *supra* note 30.

power structure, that blatant, ill-concealed discrimination, at least in urban centers, is on the wane cannot be denied. All these gains, though highly symbolic have undoubtedly electrified the social standing of *some* Dalits today.

The operative word in the previous sentence however, is 'some'. The economic and social subjugation of untouchables, particularly in the rural areas, persists. Political power to Dalit leaders, as has been amply seen in the BSP case, has not guaranteed that the elected representatives of the untouchables can or will exert themselves to alter existing ground realities.

The quandaries of endemic political co-optation, of the steadily growing chasm between the urbane, educated elite among the untouchables and the masses, and of course the threat of crude, brute force welded by the upper-caste landed gentry in the semi-feudal rural economy are assuming gigantic proportions.

To cite just one example, seventy-five years after B. R. Ambedkar led his Dalit colleagues to Chavdar Talab in Mahad to claim access to drinking water and was greeted with stones while returning, matters do not seem to have changed much for the Dalits of Chakwada village, Rajasthan, and they are to this day barred from bathing at the public pond or entry to Hindu temples.¹¹⁶

'Transformation', then, seems illusory at best. While the appalling present may indeed be attributed to a variety of factors, not in the least to the perpetuation and abuse of certain Ambedkar 'icons', one primary cause for distress, to the author's mind, appears to be the unabated insistence on the supposedly irreconcilable divergence between the categories of 'class' and 'caste' as sites and units for social change. Often, in its 'eternal' conflict with the mechanical stress on economic issues in Marxism, the Dalit ideology, claiming to be Ambedkarite in inspiration, responds with an equally mechanical and one-sided accent on the social, the spiritual and the symbolic. This approach, particularly in contemporary times where rural relations between castes, particularly the OBCs and the SCs are being increasingly defined within the constraints of class struggles, can only be a harbinger of ominous consequences.

Further, as was amply highlighted in the "Bhopal Declaration" by leading Dalit intellectuals, activists and their fellow-travelers, the simplistic prominence accorded to caste and the 'de-casteisation of Indian society' can lead to a complete neglect of the dangers inherent in the new global regime of capital, and the ways in which it is rapidly accelerating the dispossession and the disempowerment of the toiling poor.¹¹⁷ From the point of view of the poor Dalit, the overall problem of capitalist exploitation will certainly remain, whether it is suffered at the hands of a twice born or an untouchable bourgeoisie is immaterial.

Another serious concern regarding redressing disadvantage from above within the framework of caste empowerment has prevented the rectification of class inequalities. This may be because tackling local problems entails a class-based approach to "pressurize the government for implementation of economic redistribution."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ PUNIYANI, *supra* note 99.

¹¹⁷ A. Nigam, *Dalit Politics Enters a New Phase: In search of a Bourgeoisie*, 37 EPW 1190, 1191 (2002). The Declaration primarily seeks the extension of affirmative action to the private sector.

¹¹⁸ HASAN, *supra* note 101, at 156.

From Ambedkar's Idealism To Mayawati's Symbolism

A caste-centric polity cannot hope to achieve this. This paradox reflects a historical dilemma of the Indian situation, where the pathos of casteism overshadows the class issues. Ambedkar and Marx tend to cancel each other. The need to redefine Ambedkar in a holistic and “praxis-oriented integrated manner”¹⁹ has never been as acute. Or else, we must face the stark reality underlying the words of an eloquent Dalit poet:

*“From pitch—black tunnels
They gather ashes,
Floating on jet-black water ..
And reconstruct the skeletons
Of their ancestors ...
There is no entry here
For the new sun.”²⁰*

¹⁹ TALJUMBE, *supra* note 30.

²⁰ V. Rastunkar, *No Entry for the New Sun* in A. DANGLE, Ed., *TRANSLATIONS FROM MODERN DALIT POETRY* 56 (1992).

