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Social Inequality and Democracy: The Good Society in Low Caste Voices in Modern India

Valerian Rodrigues

While there has been extensive focus on exploring the nature of Indian nationalism little attention has been paid hitherto to the substantive character of democracy that came to prevail in India. While from early on there came to be expressed a concern on the feasibility of democracy in a country with widespread social inequalities no attention has been paid to the question whether the poor and the socially deprived themselves formulated a design of democracy and, if so, how it departed from mainstream perspectives on democracy in India. This paper argues that one can delineate a distinct and remarkably consistent perspective on this issue that the untouchable and low castes came to formulate, that can be termed as *Dalit-Babujan*, around which large masses came to be rallied over the years, challenging the mainstream understanding of Indian nation and democracy. This perspective came to be elaborated mainly by representatives of the lower castes who refused to confine it as an adjunct of the mainstream secular perspective or the communist movement in India. On all substantive issues this perspective had basic differences with Gandhi and the Gandhians. It was far from being subaltern and considered that the ideas and issues that it highlighted provided a framework to organize the self, society and polity universally and in far more desirable ways as compared to other perspectives at hand.

Babujan, literally »majority people«, means the masses »who have been devoid of humanity in contrast to »a handful who take their pleasure, call themselves superior and live at the cost of the masses« (Omvedt 1976: 4). They are those whose claims and rights are consistently ignored and whose social location tends to condemn them to subservience. The term arose around 1906 within the *Satyasodak* (Search for Truth) movement in Maharashtra. Excluded from *babujans* are »not merely Brahmins but also the educationally advanced castes as well as merchant castes«. The concept has a class content as it »tends to exclude the aristocratic and wealthy among non-Brahmins«, though if the upper classes came from a primarily peasant or poor non-Brahmin caste they may identify themselves »in terms of their social roots« and culture of sentiments as part of the *babujan samaj* (literally, majority community) (ibid.). The term becomes nebulous as we depart from a core set of social strata centrally encapsulated by it. The term that *Satyasodak* movement initially used to

denote those in opposition to bahujans was ›*shetiji-bhatji*‹. *Bhatji* refers to priests/Brahmins. *Shetiji* refers to merchants, primarily as merchant castes but is also used as an occupational title regardless of caste. This movement identified the primary contradiction of colonial society as between non-Brahmin peasant masses and the moneylender-landlord-bureaucratic-intelligentsia network within which Brahmins were dominant. The latter was perceived as the social base of colonialism. Two trends were noticeable within bahujans from early on: The first, an ideologically conservative and upper-class based, that came to be represented by the non-Brahmin movement that spread mainly in Southern and Western India which contrasted non-Brahmins from Brahmins and pitted the former against the latter in the political arena. The second, radical and peasant-based that contrasted the *bahujan samaj* from *shetiji-bhatji* combine. The first claimed the unity of the masses against Brahmins and consequently claimed to represent the community/nation. The contradictions within the community/nation were ignored in the process and no reflective attention was paid to forge internal unity. The second trend admitted contradictions within bahujans, but they were construed as contradictions within people. Jotirao Phule, for instance, distinguished between *Shudras* and *Ati-shudras* (the lowest of the low) but combined them into the united front of *shudratishudras*. He argued that they together faced a common enemy and were subjected to deprivation, humiliation and exploitation in common although the extent of it varied. *Ati-shudras* suffered these indignities the most. But *shudratishudras* shared a common condition and inhabited a world of shared meanings, sentiments and practices.

The term ›Dalit‹ primarily refers to untouchable castes and communities that are struggling to change the prevailing social relations of servility, contempt, deference and ranking. Although the term has been in use earlier the popularisation of the term took place in the 1970s with the emergence of the radical Dalit Panther Movement. Contradictions within an inclusive bahujan category emerged antagonistically to the fore as untouchable politicians came to highlight disabilities unique to them from the second decade of 20th century. Once caste relations were brought to the fore to the neglect of shared ways of life, or the former were seen as basic, they inevitably led to parting of ways. Dalit politics eventually came to spawn an autonomous trajectory with its distinct emphases while those taking their stance on bahujans stressed on issues which were not considered by dalits as central to their concerns.

Therefore while noting the shared concerns in dalit-bahujan thought-current, we cannot ignore the ambivalences, pulls and pressures within it. This paper while noting such tensions, however, suggests that a whole range of normative issues

concerning public life are common across them and the differences and conflicts have to be understood from such a shared understanding.¹

Self-Respect/»Manuski«

The entire spectrum of *dalit-bahujan* thought is strongly evocative of self-respect, captured by terms such as *izzat* in Hindi/Urdu, *siya mariyadhai* in Tamil and *manuski* in Marathi. The movement led by E. V. Ramasamy, popularly known as Periyar, was called Self-respect Movement. *Dalit-bahujan* thought acknowledges that although many aspects of self-respect are context-specific, there are certain larger and universal indicators of respect such as regard to human person qua human and his/her bodily integrity; the distinction between human and non-human and the conception of self-worth ensuing therefrom². It insists that self-respect is prior to other basic human claims and is a precondition to make such claims. Self-respect, in turn, invokes deference to the essential dignity of its claimant and places him/her at a certain level-playing field although in many respects people may be unequal and different. This dignity is manifest when one refuses to crouch before others, irrespective of the goods on offer for such acts and dispositions and disregardful of the deprivation such refusal can bring. In the absence of self-respect people are susceptible to be treated instrumentally as per the pleasure of others. For Periyar, self-respect is man's birthright and must precede *swaraj* or self-government. »Swaraj is possible only where there is already a measure of self-respect.«³

The condition of low castes and untouchables is not merely a denial of self-respect but a constant assault on the same whenever they make their demands. The worst afflicted in this regard are untouchables who are denied any resources through which they can build a positive estimation of themselves. Annihilation of caste and abolition of untouchability therefore become central political concerns of this perspective as they alone would enable their members to make their claims confidently in the public forum and enable them to participate as free and equal members of the citizen-community.

Self-respect in *dalit-bahujan* thought is directed against the construction of a self which seeks to place itself over and above the others in an order of ranking and

1 Such a claim is made in spite of the political antagonism between certain dalit-based parties on one hand and bahujan-based parties on the other.

2 Self-respect is an important theme in contemporary political philosophy and rhymes closely with some of the central considerations of *dalit-bahujan* thought: John Rawls considers self-respect as »perhaps the most important primary good« a rational person seeks (see: Rawls 1973: 440).

3 Quoted in Geetha/Rajadurai (1998: 297).

where active engagement with the world through labour, productive and reproductive, is seen as defiling. It challenges the cultural value that the more removed one is from productive and this-worldly engagements the more ennobled one becomes. Positively it asserts the sensuous nature of the human self which through its associational ties is able to direct itself and shape the world around it.

Self-respect is a virtue closely bound with community and therefore is a public virtue or the virtue of the public place. Dalit-bahujans are deeply critical of exhortations that egg on the socially deprived to pursue their self-respect without considering the resistance of social relations, mores and social institutions towards such a pursuit. Pursuit of self-respect necessarily requires transformation of beliefs and practices which have hitherto treated people with contempt and humiliated them. At the same time self-respect cannot be engendered through the generosity of others. It cannot but be the outcome of the collective striving of those dispossessed of their respect. There is much in this thought that shows contempt towards those who are not prepared to involve themselves in the struggle for self-respect. This was one of the fundamental differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar in their approach to untouchability, a social condition, which both of them recognized as of utter contempt and degradation. Gandhi argued that untouchability has no sanction in the Hindu scriptures. If the upper castes put an end to being disrespectful towards untouchables and made reparation for their past indignities, the requisite milieu for the pursuit of self-respect would be made available to untouchables⁴. Ambedkar insisted on self-effort, destruction of institutions and values that heaped abuse on backward classes in general and untouchables in particular and demanded that social life be based on principles conducive to self-respect.

Dalit-bahujan thought targeted certain texts, thinkers and tendencies for defending and legitimizing denial of self-respect. *Manu-smriti*, the classical text of law, was clearly the butt of ridicule. This text was seen as standardizing and legitimizing the degradation of dalit-bahujans. Annie Besant was to become one of the most reviled leaders among dalit-bahujan writings and speeches as she defended this text⁵ and upheld the superiority of Brahmins over the rest, particularly the untouchables (see: Ambedkar 1945: Ch. I; Geetha/Rajadurai 1998: 6–10, 41, 44).

4 For Gandhi's approach to untouchability, see: Parekh (1989).

5 Annie Besant in *New India*, quoted in Geetha/Rajadurai (1998: 31).

Opposition to Brahminism

Dalit-bahujan thought constructs brahminism as a comprehensive and pervasive ideology. If self-respect is the fundamental striving of this constituency then brahminism is its principal opponent. It saw brahminism as militating against self-respect by its tendency of ranking, where some are considered inferior and others superior, irrespective of their merit and effort; for not relating desert to effort; for circumscribing the compass of striving; for proscribing certain kinds of pursuits and making one's estimate of self-worth equal to one's caste ranking. Besides it constantly strove to breed dependence and subservience. Ambedkar argued, »Inequality is the official doctrine of Brahminism«, and »the suppression of the lower classes aspiring to equality has been looked upon by them and carried out by them without remorse as their bounden duty« (Rodrigues 2002: 146). Self-respect Movement, therefore, saw as its primary objective the destruction of brahminism (Geetha/Rajadurai 1998: 296).

Ambedkar primarily saw the power of brahminism manifest in reproducing a system characterized by graded inequality, and making it almost impossible for the lower sections to overthrow this system. Every rung of the system, except the lowest, had a vested interest in guarding its »superior« self by being contemptuous of those below it. Attempts to reform it from within beget additional social rungs incorporating the reformers rather than undermining the system. He however felt that brahminism as an ideology proposing a set of ideals and justifications has to be distinguished from Brahmins who are the high priests of this ideology. He often used to say »My quarrel with the Hindus and Hinduism is not over the imperfections of their social conduct. It is much more fundamental. It is over their ideals« (e.g. Ambedkar 2002a: 317).

Brahminism invests knowledge and texts in the charge of a distinct and superior stratum and gives to the members of this stratum exclusive authority over them. It has a resilience and capacity to adjust to new contexts and situations, rare to any ideology. Phule felt that although British rule had put an end to »physical slavery«, mental slavery »persists through the Brahmanical texts« (Deshpande 2002: 45). Overall he felt the British rulers had fallen a victim to the insinuations of brahminism. It induced and confined the rulers to mundane pleasures while wielding the controlling and regulatory mechanisms in its own hands.⁶

Brahmins alone do not reproduce brahminism. Everybody who lives by the ideals of brahminism contributes to its reproduction even though he might be an untouchable himself/herself. Phule argued in *Shetkaryacha Asud* that it is all pervasive

⁶ The way Phule addresses The Cultivator's Whip (Setkaryacha Asud) to the Governor General demonstrates such a perception abundantly.

and malleable (Deshpande 2002: 113–190). Dalit-bahujan leaders often suggest that countering brahminism was much more difficult than countering colonial power. It is deeply implicated in the sacral. It brings together a set of interests in congruence with certain norms and justifications upheld by it. However, Brahmins tend to benefit from it, economically and otherwise, as do the different ranks in caste hierarchy all the way down till the last rung. Therefore opposition to brahminism affects the Brahmins materially as it does the upper castes although to different degrees. For dalit-bahujan thinkers brahminism, therefore, is not merely the ideology of rank and status, but is deeply implicated in economic exploitation as well.

Several dalit-bahujan thinkers suggest that brahminism consolidated itself by opposing Buddhism and by appropriating some of its principles and practices as its own. Brahmins arrogated to themselves what was truly the role of a class of wise men in Buddhist society as the traditional custodians of ethical norms and values. They succeeded in setting aside the Buddhist character of Indian culture with Vedic culture. They made deep forays into Buddhist traditions. They adopted the Upanishads which were originally Buddhist creations. Ambedkar felt that several characteristic features of Buddhism were to be embraced by resurgent brahminism, such as, vegetarianism, banning cow-slaughter and moral stances of the *Bhagavadgita*. At the same time Brahmins showed deep contempt towards the Buddhist Sangha and stipulated the basis of untouchability (see: Ambedkar 1948). Periyar argued that one of the characteristic features of brahminism was to poach into thought-currents which may threaten its dominance and appropriate elements of them selectively (see: Geetha/Rajadurai 1998: 318).

The nationalist movement under the auspices of the Brahmins was suspect in the estimation of dalit-bahujans. The latter were quick to note that the Brahmins were proposing a unity at the higher level of the nation without seriously trying to undermine their exclusivity, superiority and rank. They saw such nationalism as another version of brahminism (see *ibid.*: 29–30) now reinforced with the resources available to the former.

Is the way out of brahminism conversion to another religion? The response of the dalit-bahujan movement to this query has been deeply ambivalent. It has, by and large, upheld the right of people to choose their religion. It has often seen such choices as interfaced with respect, dignity and belonging. But scholars such as Iyothée Thass,

»refused any engagement with Christianity and Islam. In his view these religions might help the pariah get out of the clutches of Brahmanism but would not be able to provide them with spiritual and philosophical resources to confront the latter. Such resources, in his opinion, could only be offered by Buddhism which was not alien to the culture of his people« (*ibid.*: 104).

Phule appreciated the work of Christian Missionaries but while not seeing them as an arm of the colonial power he did not seriously pursue the option to Christianity either. Ambedkar waited for long to embrace Buddhism and when he did so he sought a Buddhism that distanced itself from existing Buddhisms.

The distinction between brahminism as an ideology and Brahmins as a social group which *dalit-bahujan* thinkers make is not sustained across their writings and practices, except, probably in Ambedkar. They often collapse the two leading to a great deal of avoidable essentialism and the political consequences flowing therefrom. The equating of brahminism with Brahmins leads to the denial of rights and self-evaluation, avowed ardently by dalit-bahujan thought. Besides identifying brahminism with Brahmins does not let dalit-bahujans to be adequately self-critical of themselves and probe into the brahminism within themselves. It nurtures the vicious circle of identity politics as essentialization of Brahmins rebounds back on all conceivable bonds of the kind.

Recourse to Hermeneutics

Dalit-bahujan thought as other thought currents in Modern India takes extensive recourse to interpretation and sometimes reflectively argues for its necessity. Through appropriate interpretative modes it attempts to undermine the spiritual hold of the Brahmins. A majority of the Dalit-Bahujan thinkers – Jotirao Phule, Narayan Guru, Iyothee Thass, E. V. Ramasamy and B. R. Ambedkar – consider it important to comment on significant texts of the tradition and popular practices.

This turn to interpretation is both subversive and constructive. It attempts to subvert dominant renderings of texts and traditions and proposes readings distinctive of its own. In the process many texts are rejected as insignificant; several others are reordered and the set of criteria employed to rank texts are recast. Interpretation helps in installing meanings and explanations which are seen as reasonable and to outwit theological, scholastic, ritualistic and superstitious renderings of texts and events.

Such attempts to resort to interpretation of hallowed texts and events and subject them to the scrutiny of critical reason is pervasive across dalit-bahujan thought. In *Gulamgiri* Phule casts the avatars in human forms who employ various devices, schemes and strategies to subjugate the *shudratishudras* (Deshpande 2002: 23–100). With regard to brahminical texts this trend of thought not merely attempts to subvert a text but also attempts to demonstrate the depravity and hollowness of the thought and character of Brahmins. At the same time the significance of these texts in constituting a brahminical hegemony is demonstrated. Occasionally one can note

attempts to salvage certain ideas of a text and placing them on an entirely new footing as Ambedkar does with Upanishads or the Sankya (Ambedkar 2002c: 208–216). But by and large mainstream brahminical texts are seen by dalit-bahujan votaries as far too enmeshed in relations of rank and hierarchy, making it well nigh impossible to retrieve them for emancipatory endeavours or strivings of self-respect. One therefore hears the occasional war-cry: »The shastras have to be destroyed« (Ambedkar 2002b: 263–305).

Often dalit- bahujan thought invoked symbols and categories, played around nuances, made dominant categories supple against their rigidified meanings and deployed them for the task in hand. Rosalind O’Hanlon tells us how Phule took recourse to the *Maratha-Kunbi* category for the purpose (O’Hanlon 1985). Recourse to interpretation highlights the centrality of Buddhism as a highly esteemed past. Iyothee Thass argued that in the past the sub-continent was known as Indirar Desam. Indirar was none other than Buddha who had managed to control his five senses successfully. India, according to him, was a transmuted form of the word »varatha«, one of the names by which Buddha was known.⁷ He made elaborate forays into tactics supposedly employed in texts that led to Pariah lowliness. According to him the Brahmins renamed the *aadi* ritual of *Ambigai* as the appeasement of an angry goddess as the Portuguese Missions transformed the *verkanni* cult by installing a figure of Mary, the mother of Jesus, there. *Amman* ritual came to be overlaid with other tales. He re-rendered the entire varna division as prevailing in Tamil country as made of functional interdependence between the vellala, vaniga, arasar and andamar communities pursuing production, trade, rule and wisdom respectively, prior to their cooption into brahminism. Such interpretative engagement was regarded by many of them as indispensable to set up the cultural and normative moorings of their pursuits.

Is there a limit to such interpretations? *Dalit-Bahujan* thought responded in three ways to such a query. When interpretation is pitted against an enemy a prosaic rendering of myths and legends is sometimes rhetorically deployed by it to win an argument and to bring down the high and mighty. Sometimes, as in Ambedkar, certain scholarly arguments already established could weigh in favour of a specific interpretation even against the prevailing traditional reading of a text. But a majority of dalit-bahujan thinkers invoke popular reasoning or practices to reinforce their interpretation. Phule and Periyar are versatile in this regard as they invoke folk practices to support their interpretation.

⁷ Iyothee Thass, *Indirar Desa Charitam*, 2nd ed., Andersonpet: KGF. 1957, quoted in Geetha/Rajadurai (1998: 98).

Historiography

For dalit-bahujan thought persons endowed with reason and associated into a community of law as equals is an essential but not an adequate condition for ensuring continued and enduring bonds of social cooperation. Invoking pre-brahmanical communities or communities outside the vortex of brahminical hegemony is quite central to this discourse and such communities are portrayed as endowed with attributes conducive to the challenges of the present. These communities are envisaged in numerous ways: Masilamani and Iyothee Thass' writings construct Dravidianism as a pre-Aryan civilization spread across the sub-continent which eschewed violence, was pacific in character, forbade consumption of alcohol and adhered to the creed preached by the Buddha. Phule in *Gulamgiri* argues that the ideal rule of King Bali was brought to a deplorable end by the Aryan-Brahmin rule. The Aryan Brahmins established their dominance, by conspiring against the pre-Aryan Kshatriyas and deceiving them. The former even erased the history of the conquered. They constructed their history to gratify and confirm themselves in their dominance. They cheated and co-opted the rulers of the land and made themselves indispensable as ministers, advisers at courts, prophets, soothsayers, medicinemen and law-givers. Except for Ambedkar who makes the brahminical ideology as his central target of attack and not the ethnic moorings of Brahmins, there is a broad agreement among dalit-bahujan thinkers that Brahmins are ethnically a distinct element and do not constitute an integral part of the rest of the community. Dalit-bahujans, including Ambedkar, strive to retrieve a past that does away with brahminical legacies and they feel that they can confidently look to a future only with such a past as their communitarian basis. The search is for a community sans brahminism.

Their historiographical perspective is largely shaped by the concern to demarcate the masses and community from their brahminical entanglement. Iyothee Thass saw the fall of Buddhism and the rise of brahminism as simultaneous events and his text *Indirar Desa Caritham* set about establishing the links between the two. Ambedkar too was to do the same (see: Ambedkar 1987a). Iyothee Thass argued, as was Ambedkar later, that the victory of brahminism brought about a sea change not merely in social relations but in prevalent systems of thought and the normative order (Geetha/Rajadurai 1998: 96). Ambedkar was to describe it as counterrevolution (see: Ambedkar 1987a), almost invoking the imagery of the course of the French revolution. Thass argued that Pariahs were in fact the original Tamils whose religion was Buddhism. Pariah was degraded and his religion was systematically

destroyed when Aryan invaders from the North imposed their rule and culture on the original Tamils⁸.

Phule uses the term *Arya Bhat* Brahmins, sometimes shortened as *Arya* Brahmins or *Bhat* Brahmins, or simply Brahmins to refer to Brahmins and inclusively to refer to the twice-born castes vis-à-vis the Shudras and *Ati-shudras*. He projects the *Arya Bhat* Brahmins as early invaders to India who attempted to subdue the indigenous people through successive waves of attack, deceit and cunningness. In *Gulamgiri* he constructs the different avatars as leaders of Aryans attempting to subdue local population and the valiant resistance that the local communities organized against such invasions. The indigenous people were organized into thickly knit communities with their distinct social institutions, festivities and practices. They were basically egalitarian societies. Phule acts the anthropologist, reconstructing the values and practices that bound peasant communities together which demarcated them from the brahminical values and practices. He sees the varna-system and the caste-based organization of society as the characteristic approach of the *Arya* Brahmins. They defeated the indigenous people, whom they termed *dasyus* and reduced them to Shudras and bade them to serve their victors. Those indigenous people such as the *Mahars* and *Mangs*⁹ who fought valiantly were to be condemned as untouchables.

The various stages of this hisorigraphy which find broad agreement across dalit-bahujan writings are as follows¹⁰: a) the pre-Aryan communities; b) the Aryan dominance with considerable regional variations across India; c) the revolution wrought by the Buddha; d) the counterrevolution against the revolutionary transformation wrought by Buddhism and the marginalization of dalits and other non-Brahmin communities; e) the arrival of Islam to India and exodus of sections of the oppressed to its fold which was seen by the majority of dalit-bahujan thinkers as a rebellion against brahminism; f) the arrival of the British and the hopes and challenges their presence held out.

8 Ambedkar develops a similar argument for the origin of the untouchables in India, see: Ambedkar (1948).

9 Phule attempts to relate »American Shudras« and »Indian Shudras« by adducing similarity in names and customs. The American Shudras were Dasyus who took flight from India when they were attacked by the Aryans through a pathway near China, »now called Bering Strait« (see: Deshpande 2002: 147).

10 Ambedkar, however, does not strongly avow the first stage. He speaks of the Nag people and their tradition but does not dwell on it much. He postulates pre-Vedic tribal communities which suffer disintegration with the consolidation of brahminism.

Positive Reception to Modernity

The ambivalences towards modernity and an attempt to salvage a non-negotiable domain vis-à-vis colonial modernity in the nationalist discourse in India have been highlighted in recent studies (see: Kaviraj 1997; Chatterjee 1995 etc.). While there are philosophical and sociological reflections rejecting modernity that nationalist discourse threw up, although not consistent and epistemologically sensitive always, there is no sufficient reflection that modernity could be anchored on to diverse conceptual mappings (Taylor 1999; Bhargava 2001). Often opposition to modernity was and is not opposition to modernity as such but simply to a particular version of modernity.

Dalit-bahujan thought not merely extends a positive reception to modernity but also upholds a distinctive version of the same, markedly different from that of mainstream nationalism¹¹. Further dalit-bahujan thought regards modernity as a significant advance over the past. The cultural identity which mainstream nationalism formulated was termed by dalit-bahujan thought as deeply oppressive. Dalit-bahujan thought is predisposed towards a more substantial version of modernity spilling into the »inner« cultural domain compared to mainstream nationalism and modernity was seen as helping refurbish the cultural project enormously. This strand of thought does not see modernity as exclusively British or Western although its available versions might have been deeply marked by them. Modernity has a universal import and colonial modernity and the modernity that Brahmins were trying to install in India can be interrogated through it. It is not merely the other but is superior to the principles expressed in existing social institutions. It heralds the triumph of reason, human reason. What is handed down, beliefs and practices, and even experiences are suspect unless they are accounted for through demonstrable and satisfactory reasoning.

Have the British inaugurated another mode of rule or an entire way of life? This was an issue of central importance to dalit-bahujan thought as it was to others. Dalit-bahujan thought acknowledged that British rule has reflectively come to avow the modern project in India with the considerations of colonial rule built into it. In the pre-modern period human thought and practices were caught in myth, superstitions, religious world-views and rituals. Such thought and its corresponding practices led to the marginalization and oppression of dalits and bahujans. Often such modes of domination and exploitation are perceived dialectically in terms of the opposition they provoked. The opposition could be philosophical as in Lokayata or

¹¹ Partha Chatterjee has argued that mainstream nationalism in India makes the distinction between the »outer« and »inner« domains and sees its rationale in upholding the latter (see: Chatterjee 1995: 3–34).

Samkya; moral and religious as in Buddhism; or communitarian, marking off the cultural community from Aryanism/brahminism as in Phule. Ambedkar, however, belittles such oppositions once brahminism became triumphant over Buddhism. He thinks that local communities came to be drawn within the vortex of brahminism with little capacity to mount an effective opposition. Therefore communities of *bhakti* do not enjoy much of a regard in Ambedkar's strategy of emancipation and linguistic communities do not have a pre-eminence in his thought as we find in the self-respect movement.

Dalit-Bahujan thought is not simply counterposed to tradition. Support to modernity did not mean opposition to tradition. Customs and traditions are valid to the extent that they are reasonable. But given the fact that they were intertwined with hierarchy and ranking they were seen as deeply suspect unless it was proven otherwise. Reason, therefore, is subversive: »For every act of independent thinking puts some portion of apparently stable world in peril« (Ambedkar 2002a: 318).

Several dalit-bahujan thinkers construe the beliefs and practices of the bahujans, once they are sanitised from brahmanical intrusions, as imbued with good reason. Jotirao Phule came to valorize a number of customs and traditions prevalent among Bahujans and contrasted them against brahminical ways. The former were projected as reasonable, sustained communities, upheld mutual respect and promoted common good. Ambedkar, however, resorts to Buddha's teachings and practices, rather than customs and traditions, as the very embodiment of reason and constructs the brahminical tradition in opposition. The brahminical tradition is portrayed as promoting hierarchy, ritualism, superstitions, priest-craft, deceit and cunning. At the same time Brahmins are shown as employing modernity for their own aggrandisement to the extent their status is not affected and their hold over the people is not loosened. For Brahmins therefore modernity is of instrumental value while for the dalit-bahujans it throws up resources for their enablement and therefore emancipatory¹².

Colonial modernity, however, is perceived by this thought as enormously strengthening the brahminical order: through modern education and employment opportunities; through the deployment of texts and interpretations that were conducive to it; through the religious policy of the British Raj; valorization of a Brahmin-centred culture; expansion of media and print; formation of political organizations and the construction of a Brahmin centred state-craft. While early nationalist

12 This is a constant refrain in Phule's works. D. R. Nagaraj has argued that the entry of modernity led to the deskilling of people and it primarily affected the artisan classes. While this point is accepted by the dalit-bahujan discourse, it argues that Brahmins came in the way of reskilling dalit-bahujans by employing tools of modernity (see: Nagaraj 1993).

opinion in India attacks the colonial rulers for not being adequately liberal, *dalit-bahujan* thought attacks them for not being adequately modern.

Can reasoning alone beget stable and shared ways of life and avoid the traps of amassing of resources in a few hands and the inequalities it breeds? Dalit bahujan thought sometimes tried to avoid this question by locating reasoning intersubjectively and in the communitarian context. Reasoning is not a technical competence of calculating costs and benefits for oneself but is the capacity to discern what is good and right, together with others. Dalit-bahujan writings therefore constantly employ the dialogic mode of writing. Phule's *Gulamgiri* and Ambedkar's *The Buddha and His Dhamma* are apt examples for the same. Further dalit-bahujans constantly refer to a site of reasoning embodied in lived ways often in opposition to brahminical ways.

Such a reasoning is deeply embedded in the sensuous ways of life as it is in the reflective. Ambedkar constructs the Buddha as the very embodiment of these qualities. Reason is counterposed to the ritualistic and other-worldly ways. It encompasses the joys and sorrows, challenges and setbacks of life. Both men and women are equally pre-disposed to it if conditions are conducive for the same. It is self-corrective and does not need an external source for rectification of wrongs and validation of right ways.

The invocation of a specific modernity with human reasoning as central to it makes dalit-bahujan thought to recommend a number of ways of cultivating and cherishing it. There is an inordinate emphasis on education but not necessarily science and technology. Education is the indispensable means to cultivate one's capacity for reasoning and enables one to make one's own choices. It is able to counter the scheming and deceit perpetuated on dalit-bahujans. One of the constant refrains in this thought is inveighing brahminism against depriving dalit-bahujans from access to education. Ambedkar chastises Mahatma Gandhi for conceding education to dalits but asking them to earn their livelihood by following their traditional occupations. Education also helps people to understand the texts and to subject them to reasoned scrutiny. It buttresses self-respect and enables people to be assertive.

Oppression and Colonialism

There is an argument that Dalit bahujan thought has been soft on Colonialism. Recently G. P. Deshpande has reiterated this argument with reference to Phule: »Phule and his comrades and followers ended up taking softer and softer positions on British Imperialism and ultimately lost ground to the nationalist movement«

(Deshpande 2002: 19). Such a reading makes Deshpande to conclude that Phule's system needs »a new extra input of a theory of imperialism« (ibid.: 20). This criticism against dalit-bahujan thought is not new but has been a major theme in mainstream nationalist discourse.

Phule and other dalit-bahujan thinkers are not less sensitive to the exploitation that colonialism had bred but they felt that it had also brought in its wake resources to undermine that exploitation. They felt that colonialism had reinforced certain structures of oppression in India and it had enormously benefited certain social strata. Phule argued that taxation under colonialism transferred resources from the poor to the rich in the form of higher education whose beneficiaries were Brahmins. It led to »the virtual monopoly of all the higher offices under them (Government) by the Brahmins« (ibid.: 34). He felt that colonial education provided little to enable Shudra students (ibid.: 67). He felt that colonialism has reinforced the position of Brahmins: »Today it is the Bhats again who rule though under the name of the British« (ibid.). He felt that the British did not succeed in putting an end to institutions and customary practices which grossly favoured the Brahmins under the Peshawas (ibid.: 103). It is the peasantry who bore the yoke of colonial dispensation. Besides British colonialism had shunted lakhs of Shudra and *Ati-shudra* employees in various state jobs under the Muslim rulers to agriculture.

Phule does not have the technical apparatus, of theories and concepts, for the analysis of colonial modernity. Equipped with them, Ambedkar was to undertake extensive work on the impact of colonialism on Indian society particularly in his early studies¹³. Ambedkar sees colonialism as a profoundly contradictory phenomenon: On one hand it introduces newer and more intense forms of exploitation; on the other it creates the conditions and resources to undermine not merely colonial exploitation but other forms of oppression as well. Ambedkar and the Dalit-Bahujan movement are acutely aware that given the precipitation of masses in the public arena the colonial regime will not be able to hold out for long. The central question before them was not whether the colonial regime has to be undermined or not, but who will wield power on its ruins?

Positive Disposition to Power

Several writers have noted the prevarications on political power in the nationalist discourse and often it is attributed to the repressive role that state apparatuses came

¹³ For Ambedkar's general outlook on colonialism and its impact on Indian society, see: Ambedkar (1991, 1994); for his consideration of specific issues, see Ambedkar (1923, 1925).

to play under the colonial dispensation. The slide of this discourse seems to be on consent over coercion; civil society over state; legitimacy over rule. Dalit-bahujans think that such prevarications are a typical ailment of the brahminical mind. They attempt to demonstrate that Brahmins are acutely aware of power but since it cannot be reconciled to their status in society they would wish to see power exercised at their behest and in favour of their interests. But given the difficulties in ensuring such control under conditions of mass democracy Brahmins come to directly bid for political power in the name of people while at the same time disparaging power. Controlling or wielding political power, directly or indirectly, has been one of the main ways by which they have protected social institutions which bestow status and privileges on them.

Dalit-bahujans are emphatic that they need to seek power and employ this power to bring about a radical transformation in society. They argue that the basic claims of the oppressed cannot wait the consent and approval of the dominant. Such consent may never come forth and even if it does, may not be on the terms of the oppressed. Ambedkar argued that under the conditions of humiliation in which dalit-bahujans live, to translate their rights into the obligations of others, power may have to be invoked. In Madras Province, Justice Party made its bid for power for the first time under the system of diarchy introduced by the Montague-Chelmsford reforms and employed that power to put in place a scheme of preferential treatment in public employment for non-Brahmins. Kanshiram, the ideologue and leader of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), has called power, *gyuru-Killi* or master-key which enables its wielders to open every lock whether, social, political, economic or cultural (Dubey 2001).

The search for power by bahujans has been perceived by brahminical persuasion apprehensively as leading to personalized and arbitrary exercise of power. While such a criticism has to be empirically validated, there is a significant difference between non-dalit bahujans and dalits in their disposition to political power. Dalits have suffered power rather than ever striven to wield it. Sensitive bahujan thinkers such as Jotirao Phule, Dr T. M. Nair and Periyar, therefore reiterated, over and over again, that the only way bahujans can strive to wield power is by taking along the untouchable communities such as the Mahars, the Mangs and the Pariahs. Ambedkar attempted to ideologically relocate dalits while at the same time stressing the need to learn to appreciate and participate in power directly. Dalits should not suffer power but must learn to wield it and convert it into legitimacy in spite of all the obstacles in such an endeavour.

One of the basic arguments of non-Brahmins has been that unless power was evenly distributed and shared amongst various communities there could not evolve a national community or a democratic polity in India. The principle of communal representation was therefore seen by them as an adjunct of democracy and empow-

erment rather than merely as compensation. While Ambedkar had his reservations about communal representation and preferred representation based on universal adult franchise, expressing the principle »one person one value«, he argued that communities which are ethnically, linguistically and religiously distinct and those that are disadvantaged should find additional representation (see: Ambedkar 1982a, b).

Community and Nation

Mainstream nationalism in India overwhelmingly strove towards wielding a nation together in which particular identities, except probably religious, linguistic and *adivasi* (original dwellers, tribal) will dissolve, sooner or later. Nation was to be the community writ large. Many dalit-bahujan thinkers, however, asserted a sense of belonging retaining distinct markers of identity, culture and language. They argued that dalit-bahujans belong to and participate in distinct cultural domains. Behind an unmarked nationalism they saw the ghost of brahminism looming large. It would be an identity which would have retained the brahminical structures and dispositions intact and further buttressed them with the resources of nationalism. For Periyar, one of the complete expression of political brahminism was Indian nationalism (Geetha/Rajadurai 1998: 320).

Against such a conception of the nation, dalit-bahujan thought advanced a conception of the nation as a community of communities. Every community needs to throw up its internal ways of upholding self-respect and composing the nation. The community so envisaged was described by Periyar as *samadharmic* where rights, claims and responsibilities would be equal and where there existed a measure of shared public and community experience (ibid.: 420–460). Such communities were seen as imbued with their distinct cultural markers. Iyothee Thass in *Tamizham* celebrated the civilizational and cultural achievements of pre-brahminical and Pariah Buddhist people. He argued that »original Dravidian culture« made of these elements was integral rather than divisive, interactive rather than exclusionary and inter-communicative rather than lofty and distant.

Dalit-bahujan approach to caste remained quite ambivalent. On one hand it was acutely aware that caste was deeply implicated in the caste system, into the ranked order of deference, condescension and contempt. On the other, caste had a strong communitarian dimension. This communitarian dimension of caste often facilitated mobilization of communities into struggle and to bring about internal reforms. Therefore we find strident calls for the annihilation of caste on one hand, to enabling all castes to progress on the other. Ambedkar in a famous essay called *Annihilation of Caste* while calling for its rejection, remained deeply sceptical of such an

outcome and felt that the conditions that he suggested for the same were almost impossible to realize.

While being vary of caste, dalit-bahujan discourse suggests that caste can be approached positively in the following three ways: 1.) Only a caste ranked way below in the caste hierarchy, qua caste, is entitled to positive valuation and only on the condition that it is prepared to extend solidarity and communitarian bonds to castes similarly placed. 2.) Such a caste must concede to its own members basic rights and opportunities. 3.) Such a caste must concede to the rights of all as persons, enforce self-respect towards itself from other castes and its members and treat members of the castes superior to it as individuals and not as members of castes.

The significance that dalit-bahujans extend to community makes them partisan to local languages and popular cultures. Phule invokes peasant culture and practices centrally and pits them against the Arya-Brahmin culture. Tamil language and culture became major sites of investment for the self-respect movement. Congressmen in Madras, on the other hand, tried to promote Hindi as the future national language of India (Geetha/Rajadurai 1998: 48–49).

By and large dalit-bahujan thought is highly well-disposed towards the other religious communities and applies the imagery of community to them that they avow to themselves. However, Ambedkar prevaricates on this issue as he sees these communities as inextricably caught in the beliefs and practices prevalent in India and consequently being under the influence of brahminism (Ambedkar 1989).

Irrespective of their other differences, dalit-bahujan thought conceived the nation as a good society where its members, considered as individuals or collectivities, respect one another, protect mutual rights and show concern and solidarity. Self-respecters therefore felt that as long as there is the existence of untouchability all talk of freedom and self-rule is empty. Periyar argued that the liberation of the Shudra was contingent on and would be complete only with the liberation of the Panchama. While he argues that a nation should not be based on religion, caste or race it is still marked by the existence of diverse communities. While the nation is envisaged by this discourse as a site of rights enclosing communities, no serious attention is paid to the possibility of conflicts between communities on one hand and communities and rights on the other, and the modes of resolving such conflicts.

Ambedkar, however, embraced a complex notion of nationalism taking recourse to the ideas of Renan and greatly stressing the role of human agency rather than ascriptive belonging. One's willing cooperation to be part of the corporate bond and the responsibility it places on the other members of such an associated life are central to Ambedkar's conception of nationalism. He argued that race, language, common country etc. create certain predispositions and not necessarily the feeling of nationalism. He distinguished between nationality and nationalism. The former

refers to a consciousness of a kind that marks off a people from others while nationalism is the desire for a separate national existence for those who share such a consciousness. The feeling of being a nationality need not translate itself into nationalism (Ambedkar 2002d) and a nationality may coexist within a nation-state for an indefinite period depending upon the fairness of the kind of treatment meted out to it.

Avowal of Political Values

What should be the normative grounding for the ordering of the polity and for the functioning of its social and political institutions? Dalit-bahujan thought invokes continuously the values of justice, liberty, equality and fraternity for the purpose. The tensions and conflicts that often arise in reconciling between the demands of these values are frequently overlooked and whenever such tensions and conflicts are taken into account their resolution is sought by appeal to human nature as deserving respect. Justice of course is seen as distribution of the fruits of social cooperation, honours, resources and legacies based on the prior assumption that every person is entitled to equal consideration unless qualified by other acceptable norms. The Brahmanical order was seen as undermining such equal consideration and the respect we owe to persons as persons. The fruits and bounties to be distributed are not merely economic but cultural resources and political opportunities as well.

The criteria to be employed in a scheme of distribution of this kind is an issue reflected upon by this thought-stream but it does not centrally invoke Marxist analysis and resolutions to the fore in its consideration¹⁴. Dalit-bahujan thought is acutely aware that justice is denied in the economic market place but the relationship between such deprivation and the subordination/domination wrought by the caste system that assigns social produce as per caste ranking, without any merit and even endeavour of the person, is not adequately considered.

Dalit-bahujan thought notes that caste society places all possible hurdles on the exercise of freedom. Such a denial of freedom particularly affects the untouchables. But the central value that this thought privileges is equality. Equality is not merely equality before law or equality of treatment. Such expressions of equality, while desired, could reinforce inequality, if other considerations of equality do not fore-

¹⁴ Ambedkar, Periyar and others had extensively reflected on Marxist considerations on the issue but not to the extent that Marxism lent itself to: For Ambedkar's consideration of the issue, see: Ambedkar (1987); for Periyar, see: Geetha/Rajadurai (1998: 368ff.). For one of the important Marxist considerations on the issue, see: Lukes (1987).

ground such endeavours. Dalits-bahujans, therefore, by and large, demand that equality of respect and equal consideration be extended to all. It makes them to tilt towards a positive notion of liberty, defence of preferential treatment and avowal of a strong state.

Self-respect movement counterposed *samadharma* to manudharma. The former »assumed equality amongst men and between men and women as a given relation but, more important, it required that that this equality be realized in and through an affirmation of each individual's self-respect« (Geetha/Rajadurai 1998: 420). They declared Buddhism as the oldest *samadharmic* creed. The working class movement was seen as engaged in *samadharmic* struggle (ibid.: 422). Self-respecters launched a critique of the Catholic Church for sustaining hierarchy and caste differences which were not in tune with *samadharma*.

Avowal of equality is central to Ambedkar's line of thought. He saw it as the only reasonable governing principle, allowing a degree of inequality only on entitlements based on one's own effort and not on heredity and social inheritance based on parental care, education and accumulation of scientific knowledge. He argued that selection of individuals »in whose favour there is birth, education, family name, business connections and inherited wealth« would not be the selection of the able but of the »privileged«. He argued that one can get most out of men only by treating them as equals. Equality has a better appeal to reason while inequality seems arbitrary (Ambedkar 2002b: 276f.).

Caste society precludes people from experiencing the joy of rights and the satisfaction of sharing based on rights. Dalit-bahujan thought not merely argued that rights should be made universally applicable and available but be broadened and made more substantial. Temple entry; access to public spaces; untouchability abolition struggles, campaign to secure gender equality, political participation etc were seen as some of the ways of pursuing the same.

Avowal of Civic Republicanism

Inherited authority and the rule of the meritorious and wise is deeply suspect in the perspective of dalit-bahujans although to the extent they are embodied in the shaping of communities of the kind discussed above, they are acceptable. The former are therefore acceptable to the extent and in so far as they have found acceptability in the community. A self-governing political community in which citizens participate as equals to realize the good of both the individual as well as the collective is one of the assertion central to this thought. If rule of law and equality before law are central to the organization of public life, then dalit-bahujan thought thinks that

participation of the concerned is a desideratum for the framing of rule of law. Rule of law is not the dictate of the wise, associated in India with brahminism, nor of customary authority, but a dictate of reason approved by people, after due deliberation, through bodies sanctioned by them for the purpose.

The idea of civic-republicanism is invoked prominently in the writings of Phule and he counterposes it to monarchical authority and brahmanical tradition that came to be instituted in India. Phule thinks that republican tradition had flourished in India once upon a time and laterly had come to blossom in Britain by »mixing republicanism with hereditary lords and kings« which he calls a »wondrous three-some pancake« (Deshpande 2002: 151). He thought that the marginalization of the Shudras, Ati-shudras, peasantry and women is largely due to the decline of the civic republican spirit. The resurgence of the West was due to the blooming of the republican spirit. For Phule, the great virtues of public spirit and heroism are integral to the spirit of civic republicanism.

Dalit-bahujan thought almost universally thinks that revelation and sacred texts do not provide us with principles to organize our public life. The latter have to be based on reasoned reflection and ways of people who wish to set up their life in common. Even the Buddha, for Ambedkar, speaks on grounds of reason rather than authority (Ambedkar 1957).

A strand of thought that runs through the dalit-bahujan thought is the invocation of rule of law and not rule of persons. In a way it seems to be an emphasis out of tune with certain other concerns of this current of thought. Law and customs, often justified in the name of dharma, had upheld the lowly position of dalit-bahujans for ages. However, targeting Manusmriti and contesting traditional body of laws and customs did not result in contempt towards rule of law. If anything it was just the contrary. Dalit-bahujans tended to rally in favour of rule of law, which partly explains the success of constitutional democracy in India and marginalization of tendencies of fundamentalisms of various kind and absence of resort to armed struggle on a vast scale. He felt that in India there is a dire need to instil this republican value of constitutional morality among its citizens, because, »Democracy in India is only a top-dressing on an Indian soil, which is essentially undemocratic« (ibid.: 485).

The demand for representation outweighs the demand for self-rule within dalit-bahujan thought. Conversely there is no meaning to self-rule without representation and participation. Ambedkar was to make the demand for universal adult franchise, irrespective of the considerations of caste, community, gender, level of education and income before the Simon Commission, the first one to do so, as integral to considerations of constitutional reforms in India (see: Ambedkar 1982). The non-brahmin and self-respect movements make considerations of representation and

constitution of public authority on the basis of the participation and approval of the public central to their agenda.

The concept of the citizen, his rights and duties and the need to expand citizenship across the cleavages of caste, class, gender and religion is interwoven with this civic-republican thinking. The clarity in this regard and the distinctiveness of emphasis marks off this thought from all other currents of thought present in the nationalist discourse. Citizenship is marked not merely by rights and the obligation to respect similar rights of others but also in accepting one's share of public duties and responsibilities. It is the citizen-body that formulates the good of the polity through its representatives and through their numerous formal and informal interventions. Phule thinks that republicanism begets civic virtues such as the sense of public duty, public-spiritedness and commitment to safeguard the health of public institutions¹⁵. There is a strong emphasis on freedom as non-domination in dalit-bahujan thought, and freedom conceived as absence of mastery by others. The laws of a good state – a republic – enhance the freedoms enjoyed by citizens. The state in this view is not against civic freedom, rather it could be 'freedom-friendly'. This appreciation of public authority duly constituted with peoples' consent and participation, while being rare in India, was the characteristic mark of dalit-bahujan thought.

Communal Representation and Preferential Policies

For Dalit-bahujans preferential consideration to marginalized social groups, the oppressed social strata, the exploited classes and ill-represented communities and cultures is normatively grounded in their understanding of the human person, moral considerations of justice, issues of rights and representation, understanding and role of state and the significance of communities and cultures. In fact dalit-bahujan discourse is characterized by its refusal to engage with proposals of preferential treatment as an issue of policy delinked from larger normative considerations. In all his major considerations on preferential treatment from *Evidence before the Southborough Committee to States and Minorities* (Ambedkar 1982a), Ambedkar locates his positive proposals in such considerations. A commitment to preferential consideration is a commitment to a set of norms and not merely to certain practices.

Dalit-bahujans think that humiliation and the deprivation of self-respect are the characteristic marks of the social institutions they confront which leave behind

¹⁵ The killing of Julius Caesar by Brutus for violating the republican spirit is extensively discussed by Phule, see: Despande (2002: 151).

long-term impact on the constitution of their selves. They do not think that civil-society institutions on their own are likely to play a major role in restoring this self-respect and facilitate the growth of a confident personality unless such institutions reflectively carry such a commitment. One of the institutions they regard as crucial in this respect is religion. Religion can play a major role in according recognition, a sense of belonging and a sense of solidarity. They regard the role of state ideology too as crucial for the purpose in proposing a set of values and policies and in undermining the hold of those institutions which reproduce humiliation and disadvantage. But all such endeavours can be meaningful for the inculcation of a sense of dignity and purpose if they are products of self-initiative, rather than merely acts of reparation and penance undertaken by others.

Dalit-bahujan thought regards education as a major initiative in this regard. Against the drift towards higher education and general education this conception on education laid great stress on primary education and to an extent on technical education. It also argued for a different kind of education, that which relates itself to the productive and social practices of *dalit-bahujans*. A constant refrain in their writings is that they are, »the toilers, the producing communities, and it was their work which made possible the riches of Indian civilization«. If education can bring these concerns centrally to the fore, the kind of toil they undertake will find recognition too. They stressed their stake »in the land, as being strong, capable men who did not disdain manual labour« (Geetha/Rajadurai 1998: 135). Dalit-bahujans therefore demanded resources for education, to enhance their skills and their labouring capacity wherein not merely their productive ability improves but they are able to enjoy and sustain their productive engagement overtime.

Dalit-bahujan thought argues that a nation-state based on equal rights can reinforce the dominance of social groups situated favourably in the existing social relations by eliciting the consent of the governed to their dominance. Equal rights may lead to the constitution of public authority deeply marked by one or the other dominant social groups. Therefore alongside the existence of equal rights this thought suggested representation of communities that can reasonably and in fair measure be accommodated in the constitution of public authority. The same argument was applied for public employment as well. Phule in fact opined that it might be better to reserve opportunities to Brahmins in public employment in proportion to their population since they had gobbled up a large share of public employment by using the advantages and leverage they enjoyed (Deshpande 2002: 87).

Religion and Morality

To the extent they acknowledge religion, dalit-bahjan thinkers do not regard it as private. The distinction between a public space bereft of religion, and which excludes religion, is not central to dalit-bahujan thought as has been generally the case with mainstream liberal and Marxist strands. Ambedkar felt,

»It is an error to look upon religion as a matter which is individual, private and personal (...) religion becomes a source of positive mischief if not danger when it remains individual, private and personal. Equally mistaken is the view that religion is the flowering of special religious instinct inherent in the nature of the individual. The correct view is that religion like language is social for the reason that either is essential for social life and the individual has to have it because without it he cannot participate in the life of the society.« (Ambedkar 2002e: 225)

Dalit-bahujan thinkers primarily ask the question: What does religion do to us? They see religion as fashioning the bond between people and wielding them into a community. Therefore it is not religion as such that needs to be kept away from the public domain. The issue of concern is the kind of religion that can be reconciled with the demands of community. Some belief-systems and practices cannot be accepted as worthy of religion as they do not meet such a requirement.

Phule conceives his God as a loving father who regards men and women equally. But it is men and women in their association who design appropriate moral and political worlds for themselves and it is the telos they should strive after. He pays no attention to life beyond this world. Ambedkar invested a great deal in his religious quest and was concerned that it should be in tune with the rights-perspective. He argued that religion of the right kind is essential for society. It is the basis for sustaining a vibrant moral life. It is the cement that binds people together. The perspective shaped by religion keeps rights in check while at the same time upholding and nourishing them. He argued that Buddha's teachings eminently embody such a perspective. He attempted to make a distinction between dharma as a distinct set of beliefs and practices and dhamma which is the basis of solidarity and community among people. He felt that social and political life based on rights may not ensure stability overtime and rights might be into irresolvable conflict. Religion as a moral terrain can play a major role in effectively responding to such conflicts and sustaining larger solidarities. Invariably all of them trace a special relation of the oppressed and marginalized to Buddhism, as early as from the time of Phule. Thass argued that Pariahs were in fact the original Tamils whose religion was Buddhism. Pariahs were degraded and their religion systematically destroyed when Aryan invaders from the North imposed their rule and culture on the original Tamils.

Periyar, however, avows atheism. He develops a critique of religion as a worldview that determines a believer's understanding of what is sacred and profound.

Such a worldview ultimately limits the human, qualifies his/her potentialities and retards his/her growth. Priestcraft is inevitably bound up with religion and so are rituals and practices. Periyar and his followers were not merely opposed to the so called Brahmin and Aryan texts and gods. They extended their criticism to *Saiva Siddanta* texts as well such as *Kandapuranam*, *Thirutondar Puranam* and *Periyapuranam* (ibid.: 340). Like Ambedkar they did not think much of the Bhakti movement. They felt that Bhakti and devotion did not »reform priestly behaviour or the rules of caste society« (ibid.: 342). They also developed a comprehensive critique of the political economy of religion. They pointed out the waste involved and the alliance between commerce and religion that it consolidated.

The difference between Periyar and Ambedkar on this issue cannot be easily resolved but the relation they invoke are central to their differences: Ambedkar raises the question of religion in the context of justice and rights while Periyar does so in relation to human reason. For Ambedkar, religion in a secular society is a prerequisite for any enduring and collective pursuit of good life. It elevates baser orientations and provides a better perspective to resolve conflicts and interests. It upholds altruism, making people to reach out to others; it binds people in solidarity and concern; it nurtures and cares; it is oriented towards service; militates against exploitation, injustice and wrongdoing and teaches respect towards others. Ambedkar while thus defending the need for a religion, refuses to entertain belief in a personal God, revelation and salvation.

Conclusion

It is not suggested here that that the themes discussed above, central to dalit-bahujan thought, are exclusive to this current of thought. However, the slope of these ideas and the relations across them were to be worked out differently by dalit-bahujan thought as compared to other currents of social and political thought in India or even elsewhere. It charted the principles of public life differently from others. These are not the only ideas that they considered as significant. There were several other associated ideas such as critique of the culture of masculinity, considerations on rights, citizenship, rule of law and constitutionalism, culture, exploitation, non-violence and protest that they reflected on and reformulated them afresh. What is to be appreciated is the remarkable agreement on what constituted the core issues regarding self, society and polity across this body of thought as a whole and the implications they have for an enriched conception of democracy. At the same time there are significant differences across this thought-current on the substantive con-

tent of these ideas and their relationships, which partly explain the political conflicts bedevilling this constituency.

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