

Ambedkar as a Political Philosopher

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Existing studies on B R Ambedkar largely focus on his substantive religious, sociological, political and constitutional concerns, and not on the concepts he deployed for the purpose or modes of his argumentation. His body of work demonstrates that he formulated a number of concepts to take stock of the social reality that he confronted, and/or reformulated existing concepts by critically engaging with the body of scholarship available to him. With regard to the conception of the political, he advanced a comprehensive and consistent design of what it means to live as a public and how best to do so in a setting very different from the West.

There is much in Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's writings and social practices to consider him a philosopher in the traditional sense. His association with certain philosophers such as John Dewey is well known and in his later years, he closely followed the teachings of the Buddha and philosophical schools that claimed to be inheritors of Buddha's teachings. He was familiar with the debates around socialism, particularly revolving around the critique of capitalism that informed the Fabian school. He followed the works of the British idealists very closely, including their interface with German philosophy, and classical Greek thought. He demonstrates critical readings of certain philosophical texts of India—the major Upanishads and the six systems of philosophy,¹ particularly *Samkhya* and Badarayana's *Uttara Mimansa*. He wrote a small treatise on the *Bhagavad Gita*. Among his contemporaries, he closely followed the work of M K Gandhi,² *Sakhya Buddhism* (wrote an introduction to the second edition of Narasu's *What Is Buddhism*), the Theosophical School, and strands of Buddhist thought in Ceylon and Burma. Further, his work is replete with familiarity with the major currents of European enlightenment thought.

His philosophical interest revolved around (i) metaphysical questions such as the nature of the self and being human; relationship of the self with the other; nature and consciousness; causality; human telos; human action and its consequences, etc; (ii) epistemological questions such as modes of and approaches to knowledge; the problem of subject and object; intersubjectivity and communication; truth, interpretation and social practices; the nature of scientific method; and (iii) ethical questions, particularly the relationship between morality and regimes of rights on the one hand, and societal values and human freedom on the other. Certain concerns of political philosophy such as justice, liberty, equality, community, democracy, authority, legitimacy and recognition were his lifelong pursuits. While he approached and formulated the above-mentioned metaphysical, epistemic and moral questions in his own distinct way, the focus of this paper is limited to highlighting certain central concerns of his political philosophy.

Political Philosophy

The term political philosophy has no single connotation; although we do not call everyone who comments on public life a political philosopher. We think that Plato was a political philosopher and in recent years, John Rawls. In modern-day India, some of the thinkers who came closest to being political philosophers were M K Gandhi (Parekh 1989; Parel 2006), Aurobindo Ghose (Singh 2014), Rabindranath Tagore in his

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work “Nationalism” (Tagore 1917: 1996) and *The Religion of Man* (Tagore 1931: 1996), and Allama Iqbal in *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Iqbal 1930: 2003). Gandhi advanced a foundational critique of modernity and proposed a distinct conception of freedom as *swaraj*. Aurobindo Ghosh attempted to reconnect man to his inner self as well as to a distinct conception of nation and the cosmos. Tagore closely associated nationalism with the inexorable march of positivist modernity and saw in it a threat to our sense of belonging, humanity and cross-fertilisation of cultures. Iqbal critiqued Western modernity for its one-sidedness and saw in Islam the possibility of recasting modernity on new foundations.

Political philosophers consider the basic categories or concepts around which we envisage our public life, relate them to one another, and advance arguments defending/refuting a concept(s) on one hand and its relation to other concepts on the other. The evidence for the arguments might be drawn from the mundane, empirical and philosophical stances that encompass a concept. An exercise of this kind lends itself to scrutiny and contestation of the existing positions on an issue, including the modes and processes of undertaking such an exercise. Reasoning of this kind may suggest the desirable and the feasible, or the significant and commendable in public life and policy as well as the preconditions and processes for their realisation. It is important to point out that a robust public life can contribute much for the thriving of political philosophy, although wherever public life thrives there need not necessarily be an engaged political philosophy. In the latter case, public life might be held together through other ways such as customs, authority or power. Political philosophy, of course, draws attention to such realities as the nature of public power, its extent and limitations, modes of its constitution, relation between the rulers and the ruled on one hand and among the rulers themselves on the other, the entitlements of citizens and persons, and what would be a good life to live in common.

Specifically, an exercise in political philosophy may draw our attention to an aspect of public life which we may have been relatively inattentive to and build its interconnections to the basic units constituting our political understanding. Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist philosopher, for instance, draws attention to the concept of civil society or hegemony, which was not hitherto central in socialist political discourse, with profound implications for our understanding of the state, power and political legitimacy (Gramsci 2009: 210–76); or for that matter, John Rawls draws attention to the limitations of utilitarianism and why the pursuit of net aggregate satisfactions of the members of a political community is morally indefensible (Rawls 1972: 22–33 and 184–90). Political philosophy may also propose concepts which throw light on a facet of political reality in very different ways than we are hitherto accustomed to see. Sometimes, it may dwell on commonsense and suggest which elements of it are defensible and reasons for the same. At times, political philosophy might just reconstruct an argument or revisit a concept because the existing versions are simply inadequate. Exercises of this kind involve reordering priorities in the relation

among concepts such as *swaraj*, justice, freedom, etc. and advancing reasons for the same.

In recent years, several political philosophers have raised doubts concerning the universality of political philosophy. While scholars from the non-Christian world have charged political philosophy for being close to the Judeo-Christian frame, others have seen it as upholding an “imperialism of categories.” Scholars from the global South and postcolonial societies have rallied together to explore an alternative/different conception of the political which can speak closely to the experiences or the cultural repertoire of the people of these societies.

Ambedkar’s Political Queries

In this paper, I wish to suggest that Ambedkar either formulated or revisited many a concept and relations across them, with regard to the conception of the political that advances a relatively comprehensive and consistent design of what it means to live as a public, and how best to do so in a setting very different from the West. The questions that he asked were: What does it mean to be human and a citizen? How does one live a tradition? If the modern public is an autonomous sphere made of free and equal members, how to ensure its continuity over time and inter-generationally? Is there a place for religion in our public life and if so, what is the nature of such religion? What is the basis of social cooperation in societies where there are multiple forms and levels of inequalities founded not merely on exploitation but complex modes of oppression? How can diversities founded on distinct conceptions of ultimate ideals and reflected in ways of life as well as specific institutions cohabit a shared public? How do we engage with a sufficiently large group which makes a claim to pursue its distinct ways and conceptions of life? What is the role and limits of power? Some of the central concepts of the political such as power, representation, legitimacy, citizen, democracy, freedom, equality, rights and justice are deeply bound with these questions. While all political philosophers ask these questions or at least some of them, they also ask them in specific philosophical and social contexts. Ambedkar did the same. His philosophical context was the one inaugurated by the enlightenment and his social context was the Indian society in its colonial encounter and postcolonial travails. Much of the attention hitherto has been confined to the context, such as existence of untouchability, decolonisation or plurality of religious belonging, rather than the central political philosophical issues that Ambedkar raised. Often the limited attention extended to Ambedkar as the icon of a social group does not invite attention to the conceptual frame that justifies and orders his concerns on a scale of priority.

There are some methodological problems that we need to attend to while regarding Ambedkar as a political philosopher: He is caught in far too many concerns that a political philosopher would not be generally involved in. Often his modes of presentation, disputation and argumentation are not philosophical but sociological, legal, moral, public policy-driven and even rhetorical. Further, in the national movement in

India several political philosophical questions, such as freedom, human equality and representation, became issues of interrogation on a day-to-day basis making it difficult to distinguish his contribution from those of others. At the same time, it is important to emphasise that while Ambedkar did not engage in a systematic pursuit of political philosophy his writings and practices were informed by it. The concepts that he employed and the relations that he proposed across them demonstrated a remarkable consistency and coherence. Further, while he shared many ideas in common with the anti-colonial thinkers, there is much that distinguishes him from others.

While within the scope of this paper I cannot dwell on an analytical scrutiny of all the themes and concepts that he engaged in, I will deliberate only on two issues: (i) provide an outline of the major concepts that he proposed, and (ii) test the mode of his argumentation by dwelling on an aspect of his theory of social justice.

Central Concepts

Critical review of texts and historiography: Like many other Dalit–Bahujan thinkers, such as Jotirao Phule and Iyothee Thass before him, Ambedkar thought that it is important to reopen the question of interpreting texts and approaches to history. Texts and historiography too are sites of reproduction and contestation of power relations as other domains of social life are. Many of the hallowed texts were replete with selective deployment of evidence, displacement, silence, contradictions, exaggeration, interpolations and heteronomy. They could subvert partisan ends. In spite of such flaws they confidently engaged with cause–effect relations and assumed normative stances. Often the authority of such texts was seldom challenged. He thought that many a time uncritical reading of such texts and their endorsement upheld existing social relations, sustained dominance, and denied people reflective probings into such texts. While this is generally true, in the Indian context, texts have been very efficaciously employed to sustain a ranked social order and uphold the principle of graded inequality. Further, the injunctions with regard to reading and study explicitly excluded large sections of people from any access to the texts, depriving them even of the possibility of participating in public reason.³ At the same time, even hallowed texts contained accounts and reasoning that could be deeply subversive.⁴ Besides there are texts and traditions such as those of Buddhism, which not merely expose the sanctity and truth of dominant texts and traditions but propose alternatives to them as well. A critical reading of *tika* and interpretative engagement with *vyakhyana* texts and traditions was central to Ambedkar's political perspective.⁵ He rejected, in no uncertain terms, a positivist rendering of texts.

Human equality: For Ambedkar, human equality is an overriding principle and his writings advance some of the most complex arguments in defence of this principle: The ethical norm of human equality makes place for worth rather than birth; does not assign people to fixed slots in advance; enables

struggle against dominance, and advances a level-playing field to all against social prejudices (Rodrigues 2005). Ontologically, all human beings, irrespective of race, gender and culture, share certain foundational attributes in common—feelings and sentiments, love and compassion, reason and reflection, solidarity and bonding, and assuming responsibility for their actions—although domination and social codes may tie them down to modes of action that are subservient and acceptable to a social order. Interestingly, none of these arguments and assumptions that he makes, appeal to any divine element as foundational to the human. They all appeal to a set of lexically prior values and assumptions grounded, as far as Ambedkar was concerned, in reason. The significance of equality justifies certain modes of political action: struggle against untouchability, the caste system, colonialism and class domination, and for recognition, dignity and culture. Equality, therefore, is not a unilinear pursuit but an overladen consideration and is clearly tilted towards the worst-off. It is also an encompassing value: the majority are not justified in pursuing a course of action in the name of equality that subjects the rest to unequal consideration. Every consideration extended to people has to justify itself against the benchmark of equality. Ambedkar is very critical of liberal democracy for its inability to institute equality in any meaningful sense, and sometimes thinks that the rise of fascism has much to do with the yawning inequalities in societies subscribing to this political perspective (Ambedkar 1990: *BAWS*, Vol 9, pp 185–88). He finds notions such as equality before law and equality of treatment inadequate to encompass equality, and suggests that equality means treating people as equals by factoring in the entire gamut of social relations they are subject to. He also feels that much of inequality is scripted by assigning people to stigmatised groups, and the voices of such groups and their demands are then made integral to considerations of equality. Natural and social circumstances can also make the lot of many people deeply unequal to that of others, in spite of their efforts. Equality as a level playing field cannot leave people to the whims of such circumstances.

State and democracy: State as an organised power that claims for itself sovereignty can be envisaged as an instrument of dominance but also as a collective resolve for the furtherance of a set of objectives. In the latter sense, Ambedkar thought that the state can be a civilising agency and a resource to undermine dominance. Since all resolutions could prove tentative, state as the collective power and resolve of the society need to be in place to ensure that the collective resolve is in place. It makes Ambedkar inveigh strongly against such propositions as the withering away of the state. The principle that should guard over the state is democracy. Democracy as a way of life charts a course independent of the state, redefining the scope and place of the latter. But democracy also contends against the pervasive presence of power in everyday life and transforms it into self-regulation. Ambedkar attempted to reformulate the idea of democracy, by trying to rescue it from the economic binary of liberal and social democracy, and

proposing it as the only defensible mode of public life appropriate for human dignity and equality. Democracy is not merely an institutionalised arrangement, which of course it is, but the only way of life befitting human fulfilment. It makes people reach out to others, and lets others reach out to them, thereby, bringing collective resources to bear on one's striving. As a way of life it invariably demands that we treat people with respect. Mutual communication and forms of bonding that are constantly renewed and revisited form the nerve centres of any democracy. While democracy has to be institutionalised, in order to endure, particularly in deeply complex and plural societies such as India, he saw it as an open-ended system which defines and redefines itself in the indefinite future (Ambedkar 1982: *BAWS*, Vol 1, pp 57–77 and 94–96).

Need for religion: How does one sustain a social order made of equal and free citizens who elect themselves as a people continuously? What is it that makes them bond together? Rights and constitutional morality are important but in spite of them conflicts might erupt, and they may not provide bonds of solidarity in cases of pervasive social control, or social power concentrated in a few hands. Therefore, a people need to acknowledge themselves as welded together almost in a permanent sense and feel a sense of common belonging, although nothing prevents them from revisiting those bonds afresh. For Ambedkar, the name of such a permanent substratum is religion. He, therefore, affirmed strongly the “necessity for a religion” and quoted Edmund Burke, to say, “True religion is the foundation of society, the basis on which all true civil government rests, and both their sanction” (Ambedkar 1982: *BAWS*, Vol 1, p 76). He rejected the liberal idea that religion is a private affair, but saw it as the anchor that holds a society together. He felt that religious ideals, in general, have a hold on mankind, irrespective of an earthly gain, that secular ideas never have (Ambedkar 1987: “Philosophy of Hinduism,” *BAWS*, 1987, Vol 3, p 23). It never fails to work so long as there is faith in that ideal. To ignore religion is to ignore “a live wire” (Ambedkar 1987: “Philosophy of Hinduism,” *BAWS*, 1987, Vol 3, p 23). At the same time he distinguished between “true religion” and a false one. The former is based on “principles” while the latter appeals to rules and rituals. The former is centred on society and appeals to morality, while the latter is centred on the individual and makes morality an instrument of one's purpose (Ambedkar 1982: “Annihilation of Caste,” *BAWS*, Vol 1, p 47; Ambedkar 1987: “Philosophy of Hinduism,” *BAWS*, Vol 3, pp 67–71). A true religion cannot come in the way of man's search for himself, dwarfing him against a transcendental benchmark (Ambedkar 2003: “Buddha and the Future of His Religion,” *BAWS*, Vol 17, part two, pp 97–108). At the same time, a true religion cultivates responsibility for one's actions. He thought that

A religious act may not be a correct act but must at least be a responsible act. To permit of this responsibility, religion must mainly be a matter of principles only. It cannot be a matter of rules. The moment it degenerates into rules it ceases to be religion as it kills responsibility which is the essence of a truly religious act. (Ambedkar 1982: “Annihilation of Caste,” *BAWS*, Vol 1, p 75)

While Ambedkar generally used the case of Brahminical Hinduism to highlight what a true religion should not be, his understanding on this issue was not merely limited to it. For him, a true religion cannot be a set of fixed beliefs laid down for all times but that which remains open for contestation and renewal. Eventually, he came around to suggest that only Buddhism or more correctly, a reformed version of the same measures up to the criterion of being a true religion.

Cultural question and social relations: Ambedkar did not endorse a position that there are two opposed cultures pitted against each other in India or elsewhere, although culture is widely employed as a mode of dominance and to sustain servility of large masses. Cultures are not seamless entities out there, but ways of life, beliefs, values and institutions that need to be revisited by foregrounding the human and the principles of equality, liberty, democracy and morality. Cultures, like nations, are available for interrogation and are subject to “daily plebiscite” and any attempt to arrest them or lay down its contours could beget institutionalisation of dominance. Therefore, the domain of culture is caught in a distinct order of struggle. Ambedkar thought that power is dispersed across the entire ensemble of social relations. It is manifest in everyday relations either in the way of directing a course of action or simply in the complex structures of everyday life, division of labour, access to resources and opportunities, linguistic usages, signs and symbols. “Religion, social status and property are all sources of power and authority” (Ambedkar 1982: “Annihilation of Caste,” *BAWS*, Vol 1, p 45). In the context of India, caste, for instance, is not merely a matter of status but more importantly, power. Given the differences in social relations across societies, particularly regulative norms and modes of social control, the diffusion of power assumes different forms in them. Any attempt to radically transform power relations has to grapple not merely with the diffusion of power across the different levels of society but has to take the specific context of its articulation into account.

The self and human agency: Implicit in all this is a conception of self, which in many ways is new to modern political philosophising, woven around the concept of self as subject. Ambedkar, taking a cue from Dewey initially and Buddha later, denied any essentialised conception of the self. We constitute ourselves, in a way, in and through the social world that we inhabit, through all the stimulations that we are exposed to and responding to them in turn. A society can enhance or mar the prospects of human realisation. It can condemn people to the netherworld of untouchability or slavery, or open up the prospects of human fulfilment by letting people access its resources as equals and extending support in this endeavour through supports. Above all, there is a celebration of human agency and its transformative potentiality in Ambedkar's writings.⁶ While social relations of oppression subdue and even deny human agency there are familial and community relations, protest traditions such as those inspired by the Buddha, Kabir or Phule, and even *negative sociality* that can prove a

trigger not merely to inspire a person to act but precipitate collective transformative action. In this context, it is important to recall his advice to Dalit activism—"educate, agitate, organise."

Mode of Argumentation

Doing philosophy, and particularly political philosophy, involves constructing arguments that could sustain themselves across all possible attempts to refute them. We can test the way Ambedkar went about forging his arguments by studying the way he makes a case for his distinct conception of representation. Instead of analytically dwelling on this idea, I will try to demonstrate the way he tried to construct an argument with regard to representation as integral to his theory of social justice.

Inadequacy of virtual representation: Quite early on, in his statement to the Southborough Committee in 1919, Ambedkar argued that virtual representation, that is, representation through a general electorate is inadequate to meet the concerns of the marginalised and the disadvantaged (Ambedkar 1982: *BAWS*, Vol 1, pp 243–78). In such a mode of representation, the voice of these communities and social groups may be subdued or even ignored. According to him, the first purpose of representation is "to transmit the force of individual opinion and preference into public action" (Ambedkar 1982: *BAWS*, Vol 1, p 247). When a group or community is denied representation, or denied it in fair measure, then its beliefs and preferences have little bearing in shaping public policy. In India, the untouchables formed such a group. There was an impassable barrier between the touchables and untouchables, and between them there were "no shared bonds of aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge and common understanding" (Ambedkar 1982: *BAWS*, Vol 1, p 255). Therefore, virtual representation can present the case of the untouchables very little. Besides the disadvantaged, and among them particularly the untouchables, have much to gain or lose depending on the kind and extent of representation available to them. The untouchables, for instance, may not have "large property to protect from confiscation. But they have their very person confiscated" (Ambedkar 1982: *BAWS*, Vol 1, p 255). Representation can help them to seek rights and resources to pursue their aims and objectives.

Fair representation for new associations: The idea of fair representation is closely bound up with a concrete context and the social relations in which it is embedded. It is the context which specifies the appropriate modes and extent of representation. There are no ideal-typical models holding good everywhere. The progress of franchise in any society does not lay down a model for other societies to follow. Britain in this regard, Ambedkar felt, cannot be a model for India. There is no guarantee that a limited franchise produces a better government either. Narrow franchise aimed at elite representation may bolster the importance of some communities to the detriment of others (Ambedkar 1982: *BAWS*, Vol 2, p 262). Unlike generally believed, communal representation need not necessarily harden social divisions: it could be a way of dissolving them by bringing together "men from diverse castes who

would not otherwise mix together in the legislative council" (Ambedkar 1982: *BAWS*, Vol 1, p 266) and by creating conditions to beget new forms of associated life. Such associations can threaten "fossilised" ways of life and help dissolve "set attitudes" (Ambedkar 1982: *BAWS*, Vol 1, p 266).

Adequate representation for minorities: He argued that a minority⁷ should find not numerical but adequate representation. But it should not be so preponderant as to dictate terms to the majority. In the context of the Simon Commission and his plea for joint electorate with reservation for Scheduled Castes, Ambedkar argued that minority representation should be of such a magnitude "as would make it worth the while of many a party from the majority to seek an alliance with the minority. If the party is compelled to seek an alliance with a minority, the minority is undoubtedly in a position to dictate. If it is drawn for the alliance, then it is adequately represented" (Ambedkar 1982: *BAWS*, Vol 2, p 362). While giving due consideration to the educational and economic status of minorities, he felt that the actual figure "be the ratio of its population to the total seats multiplied by some factor which is greater than one and less than two" (Ambedkar 1982: *BAWS*, Vol 2, p 363). The lower is the standing of the community, the greater should be its electoral advantage over the rest. If a minority is not protected with "weightage" and adequacy, it will be entirely submerged. Weightage, he felt, could be determined by employing fourfold criteria: numbers, social standing, education and economic strength. While keeping the demographic composition in view, those who are economically and socially backward with low educational accomplishments deserve additional consideration.

Separate electorate for untouchables: For Ambedkar, joint electorate or separate electorate⁸ as modes of representation are not a matter of principle but mechanisms to achieve certain ends. Separate electorates guarantee that a representative enjoys the confidence of the electorate who are his special concern. It is justified in the context when social identities closed on themselves hold on to their particular interests with few prospects of forging stable common interests. If there is homogeneity of interests, then joint electorates with reservation for affected groups seems to be, in his opinion, a better option (Ambedkar 1982: *BAWS*, Vol 1, p 374).⁹ Far from the argument that separate electorate for untouchables, whom he clearly recognised as the bearers of a set of particular interests, will lead to fissures within Hinduism, Ambedkar felt, "social considerations and not religious affiliation is the basis of the acceptance of the electorate."¹⁰ He considered the argument that separate electorates will reinforce anti-national spirit baseless, as every group that demands separate electorate was not anti-national. The demand need not necessarily have religious or communal considerations. However, a majority, according to him, cannot have separate electorate as it would be a permanent domination of the majority over the minorities. When political units are primarily communal, majority-rule based on a community is unjustifiable as it could perpetuate its rule confining other communities to its tutelage.

Social inclusion and public presence: Ambedkar's second argument for preferential representation is based on social inclusion and the significance of public presence. Preferential treatment provides an opportunity to persons and groups who have been hitherto denied social presence and are excluded, to be reckoned in public life. Presence in public life affords an opportunity to actively participate "in the process of government" (Ambedkar 1982: *BAWS*, Vol 1, p 247) and other walks of life. Besides, participation in associated life begets social bonds and stakes. This makes a big difference in certain societies such as India where, he felt, there were no shared bonds of aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge and common understanding and therefore, little "endosmosis" across social groups. As a consequence, "given two candidates belonging to different groups but purporting to represent the same interest, the voters will mark their votes on the person belonging to the same community" (Ambedkar 1982: *BAWS*, Vol 1, 251) or someone they regard as their "man" or "woman." It may result in an entire group or community from being counted out. He felt, untouchable communities suffered the baneful effects of such exclusion the most.

Personal representation: Representation of opinions and preferences alone is not an adequate measure for democracy. It requires personal representation as well. The latter involves "representation of opinions as well as representation of persons." "A government for the people, but not by the people, is sure to educate some into masters and others into subjects; because it is by reflex effects of association that one can feel and measure the growth of personality" (Ambedkar 1982: *BAWS*, Vol 1, p 251). It requires that adequate representatives are drawn from the concerned groups. Territorial representation fails to provide adequate and effective representation to minority groups. Such a situation gets further exasperated if the majority and minorities in that area are relatively stable

made of specific social, religious and ethnic cleavages and looked down upon by the majority.

Necessity of self-representation: Ambedkar also felt that there were some constituencies such as untouchables who could be represented by representatives from those groups and communities only (Ambedkar 1982: *BAWS*, Vol 1, p 256). Illustrating the case with regard to the untouchables, he felt that others did not understand their situation of dehumanisation, subjugation, denial of respect which one man owes to another as a human being and the denial of rights of citizenship that ensues from such a disposition. In such instances, representatives should not merely hail from the concerned group or community but be able to effectively highlight its concerns, monitor them across contending interests and pursue their implementation. Further, such representation should be "in such numbers as will constitute a force sufficient to claim redress." But such cases of exclusive representation, he felt, should be rare and minimum, and need to be given up once inclusive considerations prevail.

Healthy and confident self: Ambedkar's third argument for appropriate representation appeals to the requisites of constituting a human self, sure of itself: opportunities for social interaction afforded through presence are indispensable for the constitution of a healthy and confident self. In interaction with others, a person becomes who he or she is. Valued or degraded understanding of oneself has to do with one's location in such interactions to a great extent. "What one is as a person is what one is as associated with others" (Ambedkar 1982: *BAWS*, Vol 2, p 54). Social exclusion can greatly impair the growth of the human person and communities as has been the case with untouchables in India. Untouchables have been denied their very personhood and consequently the basis of their treatment as equals. They "have their very persona confiscated. The

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socio-religious disabilities have dehumanised the untouchables and their interests at stake are, therefore, the interests of humanity.” What they have been deprived of is something basic that is “incomparably of greater interest than interests of property” (Ambedkar 1982: *BAWS*, Vol 2, p 54). Social interactions treat untouchables as despicable and others try to construct superior selves of themselves on that basis. The former, he says, are like “Plato’s slaves” who “accept from another the purposes which control their conduct.” They are denied their ability to make their choices and consequently, their agency. They are socialised “never to complain” or expect “improvement in their lot” or to expect “common respect which one man owes to another” (Ambedkar 1982: *BAWS*, Vol 2, p 54). The consequence of social dispositions as expressed in untouchability is to deprive its victims from claiming the right of citizenship embodying such claims as personal liberty, equality before laws, liberty of conscience, freedom of opinion and speech, right of assembly, right of representation in country’s government and right to hold office.

Conclusions

I have tried to demonstrate in this paper how Ambedkar went about forging concepts, and setting up arguments with

regard to public life. Taken together, these concepts propose a distinct ordering of political life that at the same time responds to the cultural context of one’s belonging. Unlike the popular perception, Ambedkar does not subscribe to a disembodied modernity¹¹ but proposes a critical interpretative method to read culture and traditions. He argues for a critical retrieval of culture rather than commit oneself to a partisan other. Interactive social relations are the agency that makes us the human that we are, and they set the preconditions for what we can be. The human is humanly engendered rather than by a superhuman being. Invariably, democracy is the essential condition for the fullest development of the human self in such contexts. Democracy demands that equal consideration be extended to everyone and afford them equal opportunity to participate in public affairs. Extending equal consideration may require meting out unequal treatment to people and the latter has to take the concrete context into account. Ambedkar sees religion as the anchor for such a pursuit, but in the process redefines religion truly as this-worldly affair. The test of a true religion is its capacity to enable human self-realisation. Emancipation is a this-worldly affair and the responsibility for the same lies on every man and woman.

NOTES

- 1 The six systems of philosophy are Mimamsa, Vedanta, Samkhya, Yoga, Vaisesika and Nyaya. All of them accept the primacy of the Vedas unlike the Sramanik (Buddhist, Jain, etc) and Lokayata modes of thought.
- 2 Ambedkar’s major work *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables* is one of the best illustrations of his close monitoring of the life and work of M K Gandhi (Ambedkar 1948).
- 3 This theme runs through the writings of Ambedkar throughout (see, “The Annihilation of Caste,” *BAWS*, Vol 1, pp 23–99; “Philosophy of Hinduism,” *BAWS*, Vol 3, pp 3–94; and *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, *BAWS*, Vol 11, 1992). Supportive evidence can be found in secondary literature (Queen 1994 and Rodrigues 1993).
- 4 Ambedkar’s work on the Shudras is an excellent illustration for reading a subversive lineage in the hallowed tradition. See *Who Were the Shudras? How They Came to Be the Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society* (*BAWS*, Vol 7, 1990, pp 1–238). Similarly, the contest between Vashista, the high-priest of the Brahmin establishment, and Vishwamitra, the Kshatriya, who strove to be a high priest through rigorous *tapasya*, recurs in many of his writings.
- 5 Kapil Kapoor’s *Text and Interpretation: The Indian Tradition* provides a useful, although contested, outline in this regard. There are scholars who have located Ambedkar in this interpretative tradition (Gokhale 2008).
- 6 One of his reflective stances in this regard goes as follows: “If time, nature, necessity and so on, be the sole cause of the occurrence of an event, then who are we? Is man merely a puppet in the hands of time, nature, chance, Gods, fate, necessity? What is the use of man’s existence, if he is not free?” (Rathore and Verma 2011: 133)
- 7 Ambedkar considered Dalits as a minority. Anupama Rao (2010) has highlighted this issue forcefully.

- 8 This distinction evoked much controversy in the Indian national struggle, particularly around the conjuncture of the Poona Pact. For the Poona Pact, see Pyarelal (1958); and Ravindra Kumar (1987).
- 9 Ambedkar, however, favoured joint electorate only during certain phases—in his deputation before the Simon Commission; during the Poona Pact and in its immediate aftermath; and during the phase of constitution-making for free India. At other times, he demanded separate electorate in an emphatic way. In the former instances, he saw greater openness between communities with a disposition to reach out to others.
- 10 For Ambedkar, a policy measure is justified by its social bearing and not religious implications.
- 11 This is one such representative comment: “Ambedkar was an unalloyed modernist. He believed in science, history, rationality and above all, in the modern state for the actualisation of human reason” (Chatterjee 2006: 77).

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