5

The Cultural Politics of the Dalit Movement: Notes and Reflections*

Your reputation wasn't false
You grabbed the banyan tree by the roots
Weapons
You didn't take them out just to fill your belly
You unleashed them against injustice
You did a post-mortem on the gods
Satvi, that fate-reckoning goddess,
You cut her nose, snubbed it
You threw the barren tales of heaven and fell
into the gutter
You fucked the 33 crores of cocksuckers without caring
You set the water on fire
The sky came storming down
at your command[1]

*This essay is dedicated to Eleanor Zelliot, who single-handedly brought the attention of the West to Ambedkar and the Dalit movement with her intelligent and committed intellectual work on them.

[1] Namdeo Dhasal, 'Ode to Dr Ambedkar: 1978—Equality for All or Death for India'.

The Beginning of the Dalit Movement: Historical and Metaphorical

There are two ways of capturing the origin of a movement or a phenomenon: one, the historical way of locating the specific point of birth in a single moment or a cluster of such moments. Second, focusing on the moment of metaphorical birth, where the motifs and images that went into the making of a movement surface in a dramatic way. Needless to say, these two approaches may not always coincide. If one believes in the notion of 'origin' even in these difficult days of doubting the very notion of origins, then a historian of social movements has to search for a beginning in terms of factual data. To play on a familiar proverb from India, the origin of a river is usually a dull spot, in striking contrast to the glories it reaches later. So the metaphorical moment is more fascinating than other origins. In the present essay I attempt a synthesis of both methods, since my responsibility is also to familiarize the reader with concrete historical details of the birth of the Dalit movement. I shall also provide a periodization of the different phases of the movement.

Let me begin by defining the word Dalit. It is a category of self-definition of Untouchables in post-Independence India; it signifies a state of radical consciousness and seeks to interrogate and challenge the previous stereotypes that caste Hindu society had employed to describe untouchable as well as near-untouchable castes and communities. The earlier nomenclatures used for untouchables were products of either cultural or administrative condescension, which smacked of patronizing pity—an emotion Dalits detest. I should here refer in particular to the Gandhian category 'Harijan' or people of god, which in fact is questioned and rejected by the use of the term Dalit. The Dalit movement is the politico-cultural expression of a newly self-organized community,

signifying strategies of radical negotiation and protest with both the state and upper-caste civil society.

Three specific epochs in the Dalit movement can be identified in the present century: first, proto-Dalit activism (1900–1930); second, the emergence and consolidation of Ambedkarite paradigms (1930–1972); third, the birth of the Dalit movement, which begins with the birth of the Dalit Panthers movement of Maharashtra in 1972, the movement which in the same decade spread to other parts of the country.[2]

Like all efforts to periodize the active and eventful life of social movements, my attempt too is fraught with several methodological risks. To file a caveat against them, let me offer a tentative definition of the category called 'social movement'. It is I would say the manifestation of the political will of a community, where the community in question itself is partly newly invented and mobilized to influence the shape and course of historical change. In this sense, right from the beginning of the present century, untouchables began organizing themselves as a global community. Interestingly, this process has also involved the cultural politics of renaming several untouchable and near-untouchable castes which mobilized themselves by forging a common memory out of their real and existential experiences. The intricate structure of lower castes, with their local specificity and divergent cultural memories, came to be simplified for the purpose of building a larger alliance across cultural stratification, enabling caste sabhas to build larger coalitions. The colonial practice of the census and its fascination with numbers also played a significant role in the making of caste identities.[3] In order to emphasize its difference with other forms of Dalit politics that emerged later, I call this phase the birth of

[2] Gail Omvedt 1993: 337.

[3] Arjun Appadurai 1993: 314–39.

untouchable activism. But they all do form the beginning of a great tradition of Dalit politics. In this phase of proto-Dalit activism, the confrontational or agitation mode, which constituted the most important trait of the next two phases, was not predominant. In this phase, activism was basically conceived in the gradualist-constitutionalist mode; petitions and dependence on the goodwill and political generosity of ruling regimes were the major forms of activism. Building paths towards social mobility was the primary goal, while interrogating and rejecting the larger value structure of upper-caste civil society was secondary.

In Dalit self-representations of this phase, cultural rage was missing. But the tone of disappointment and sadness over Hindu society was very definitely present. Even this birth of proto-Dalit activism has to be discussed against the background of the larger cultural revolt of the Shudras in the last part of the nineteenth century, which was expressed in the insider-rebellion and gradualist modes. We will have to discuss the emergence of this activism of untouchable communities against the background of the consolidation of a new kind of Shudra identity, which also became known as anti- and non-Brahmin movements of the South and Maharashtra; in many ways these movements provided the model to those groups which constitute the lowest rung of the Hindu social order. The tension between Shudra and untouchable identities also had its beginning here; the articulation of the former had a deep-seated difficulty in accommodating the latter, a major theme which is central to Indian politics even today. Untouchable activism, finally, came into being only with the arrival upon the scene of Ambedkar, a Maharashtra Mahar untouchable. However, the proto-Dalit phase is under-studied in modern Indian history; in this phase, and afterwards too, many other models of lower-caste revolt were active and disappeared only after the decisive victory of Ambedkarism

over other competing discourses to define and shape the identity of Dalit politics. For instance, in order to get an accurate and comprehensive picture of the emergence and consolidation of Shudra identity in general and Dalit identity in particular, we must study the insider culturalist-rebel model of Narayana Guru, the religious reformer of Kerala; the model of Manguram of Punjab; and the South Indian model of gradualism. Only then will we arrive at a deeper understanding of the specific strengths of the Ambedkarite paradigms.

While the major trait of the untouchable activism we are discussing now is its attempt to separate itself from the politics of the grand identity of the Shudras, at this stage let me discuss the commonalities that exist between Dalit and Shudra. By and large, these movements structure their critique of the hegemonic system and the protest against it in the language and categories of the modern and Western-inspired notions of social justice, mobility, and cultural protest. The liberal understanding of the citizen is the guiding spirit of both movements; and, further, they express a firm belief in statist options while defining the path to communal progress and individual mobility. Their relationship with the forces of modernization was one of hope and optimism. In other words, the new historical forms of life and rebuilding of society were seen as favourable to the lower castes. Slowly, both these movements realized—although some among them stubbornly refused to believe—that the new forms of hegemony, namely, modernist-capitalist institutions, had developed a dual mode to deal with the lower castes. First, in this mode new spaces are created for the subaltern castes, spaces which had been denied to them by traditional caste regimes. Upward mobility and progress are presented as not only desirable but eminently realizable goals. But, in complex ways, previous forms of disability and underdevelopment—in terms of

access to several resources and power—are continued, sometimes even aggravated. In fact, the entire discourse and strategies of the Dalit and Shudra movements are attempts to come to terms with this dual mode of colonial and post-colonial realities.

The Emergence and Consolidation of the Ambedkarite Paradigms

Methodologically, I am making a bold proposition in terms of periodizing the birth of Ambedkarism in Indian politics; the year 1933 is important, since this was the year in which an epoch-making confrontation between Gandhi and Ambedkar took place. While Ambedkar had been active since the 1920s in mobilizing untouchables and articulating their demands, it was during his epic confrontation with Gandhi on the tricky issue of separate electorates for Dalits that he defined himself definitively. The entire country took notice of his formidable challenge to Mahatma Gandhi's civilizational leadership. Gandhi described himself as the adopted son of Harijans—the name he gave to untouchables, and thus this was a battle between the adopted son and the son, namely, Ambedkar.

Gandhi went on a fast unto death in Yeravada prison against the demand for separate electorates for untouchables, thereby directly challenging Ambedkar, who had relentlessly championed this idea. Gandhi thought separate electorates would permanently alienate untouchables from the larger fold of Hindu society, which was precisely what Ambedkar wanted. Here lies a battle between two approaches to the question of untouchability and untouchables, which I characterized in chapter 1 as a clash between the modes of self-respect and self-purification, represented by Ambedkar and Gandhi respectively. The Yeravada fast and Ambedkar's response

merit a longer discussion, since together they point to the birth of contemporary Dalit politics. Finally, Ambedkar had to relent, as the entire nation—which means here the public-opinion-manufacturing media—was scared Gandhi would die while fasting. And the implications of that tragic death for the lives of untouchables may well be imagined. So, Ambedkar had to retreat to save Gandhi; but from this encounter it could be said he took birth; or that by his withdrawal was born the Ambedkarite paradigm in Indian politics, with all its specific traits and powers.

I am not trying to offer an evaluative description of the Ambedkar–Gandhi confrontation which facilitated the birth of the Dalit movement. If one notices the contending propositions, a deep irony emerges. Though Ambedkar was talking in the language of modern and liberal democracy, ironically Gandhi had no reason to reject his demand for separate electorates. Given Gandhi's commitment to village democracy, which had practised the idea of community representation—i.e. a defence of the exclusive rights of the people of a community without the intervention of others—why couldn't he understand the traditional nature of the demand? To put it plainly, in the *gram panchayat* of pre-modern times, all castes and communities would send their representatives to the village body. Gandhi was speaking the language of liberal citizenship and Ambedkar the practice of a gram panchayat. Didn't they understand the real nature of each other's position? This continues to be one of the most important enigmas of modern Indian history, an enigma which has conditioned the political theory and practice of the Dalit movement. With hindsight it can be safely said that it was not the correctness or lack of it in the parties involved which caused the birth of the Dalit movement, but the politico-psychological tensions released in the confrontation made the birth of the new politics of Dalits inevitable.

The model of self-purification which Gandhi advocated had no role, or perhaps only a secondary one, for untouchables; the single protagonist it created had to be the upper-caste reformer. Many reformers did wage a heroic struggle against the orthodoxy, risking grave consequences for themselves. But the untouchable was thereby reduced to the status of a passive object in a holy rite of self-purification. Of course, the mode of self-purification could be extended to untouchables too, and it was only a revised version of the age-old and familiar transformation of their everyday life. Integral to such a transformation meant giving up their food culture and religious practices. Naturally, the new Dalit would have none of it; he wanted to be the hero of the drama of his own life. The aura of martyrdom that surrounded the upper-caste hero created a sense of unease in the Dalit, for it could easily degenerate into various patronizing forms of condescension. The new Dalit, in contrast to the Gandhian Harijan, could not tolerate such subtle forms of a denial of self-respect. For him it was better to rebel and shriek in rage than be the passive object of pity. So, Dalit activism began more as a statement of certain forms of psychological revulsion; the questions of entitlement were certainly there, but they translated themselves into a different language via politico-psychological formulations. This phenomenon of the birth of a new Dalit is poignantly captured by Dr Siddalingaiah's Kannada play *Panchama* (The Fifth One).[4] Incidentally, untouchables also are shown as *panchamas*, the people who exist beyond the order of the four varnas. This short play, which has the locale of an interview conducted by a pompous upper-caste officer and his comic-absurd relationship with his interviewees, offers us a typology of untouchables. Some are timid. Some full of self-pity. Some cringe before authority. Allusive and direct satirical references to Gandhian

[4] See also chap. 12 for a discussion of this play.

Harijans gave the play its satirical tone. The upper-caste officer grows from strength to strength; but, then the Fifth One, a youth, turns up—as the last candidate for the job. Right from the beginning he is not interested in the job but in engaging the official in a dialogue; the Fifth One is radically different from the others. He is savagely witty and ridicules the officer. Dramatically, the relationship changes; the arrogant boss becomes scared as the interviewee's rage grows. Finally, the youth beats up the official and leaves, defining himself as a new-generation Dalit. Rage is more real to him than any plea for mercy.

Here, I would like to shift the focus of the narrative from Ambedkar to an ordinary untouchable youth who, incidentally, appears on the stage in the Yeravada fast—a complex event analysed in chapters 1 and 2.[5] I want to suggest that the youth in question marks the metaphorical beginning of the Dalit movement. Let me re-create the major points of the narrative; to get a first-hand account of the entire episode, one should read the reports of the event by Mahadev Desai, who acted as a mediator between Gandhi and the Dalit youth. The metaphorical significance of the story lies in the way Desai records the experience and his comments. If the Dalit movement is born in an act of overdetermined protest against Gandhi, the story of the real event that I am presenting confirms that reading.

On 8 May 1933, a Harijan youth met Gandhi after waiting for several hours; he had come to see the father of the nation to seek help over a scholarship. The battle between Gandhi and Ambedkar had already reached its highest pitch, and the entire country was anxiously watching the outcome. Gandhi had suggested to the boy

[5] [The author recounts this story in several of the essays in this book. Given the varying contexts of discussion within which each recounting occurs, the repetition seems unavoidable.—Ed.]

that he come on 29 May with an orange to mark the break of the epic fast. The irony is not to be missed; he would emerge as the victor after defeating Ambedkar in the war, which was fought through the weapon of a fast. But an orange from the hands of a Harijan youth would signify the end of the battle! Obviously, Gandhi wanted to make a statement couched in a symbolic act shaped by the language of political psychology. Ironically, the Harijan youth—Mahadev Desai does not name him—did not turn up at the appointed hour. Lady Thackersey offered the orange juice to Gandhi to mark the end of the epic fast. What followed is more interesting. The youth told the press that he had come to meet Gandhi but was denied admission. There was, expectedly, consternation in the camp of the Mahatma. Later the youth admitted he had lied. Desai talks about the undue self-debasement of the youth, who refused to take hold of the luck that had appeared before him but had alleged that caste Hindus were responsible for such a sorry state of affairs.

I offer a different reading of the story. By deliberately missing the appointment with Gandhi on that historical day, the unnamed youth had metaphorically begun the Dalit movement. The Gandhian project had no real role for untouchables. It was dramatized in a way which could only mean humiliation and deep embarrassment for the new generation of Dalits. It was an act of self-purification within a section of guilt-ridden Hindu society. The mega-drama which surrounded the fast and the issue on which it was fought, namely, the demand for separate electorates for untouchables, were a source of deep annoyance for the new generation of untouchables. The boy's lie was a truthful act to protect his self-respect, and thus began the strain-filled, necessary, imaginative search for the politics of Dalit identity.

Now we come to the third or the contemporary phase of the

Dalit movement, which has combined the strategies and themes of previous epochs.

Major Themes and Strategies of the Movement

Who die of starvation, who are kicked till
they faint,
Who cringe before others, reaching out to
hands and feet,
Who keep their hands folded, devotees of
those above them,
These, these are my people

Who, treated to fiery speeches,
are scorched and burnt to ashes,
Who, for those who feast on sweets
with God's name on their lips,
Stitch sandals and shoes, these victims of
usurers,
These, these are my people[6]

Let me offer a typology of the different tendencies that exist in the Dalit movement today, which obviously sometimes coexist, though not always peacefully. There are three streams: the Ambedkarite-modernist, the Ambedkarite-Marxist, and lastly the Ambedkarite-indigenist. I cannot do justice to the extreme political and theoretical complexity of these tendencies in this essay due to constraints of space, although the differences are evident in the categories themselves. Note also that these differences account for the creativity, major splits, and petty polemics of the Dalit movement as a whole. Against this background the focus of this essay is on the commonality of theoretical perception and strategies of

[6] Siddalingaiah, 'My People', trans. Sumatindra Nadig.

action that combine divergent tendencies of the Dalit movement. In other words, my task here is to offer a critique of Ambedkarism as it has been formed—the unifying force of Dalit cultural politics. I should also add that this typology is trying to offer a description of tendencies that came into being after the 1970s, and further that these categories are also a reaction to the cultural politics of junior contemporaries and followers of Ambedkar.

The immediate successor to Ambedkar's political legacy was the Republican Party of India (RPI), whose influence was mainly confined to Maharashtra and scattered pockets of South India. Due to its political flirtation with the Congress, the RPI lost much of its credibility in the eyes of a new generation of the Dalit youth of the 1970s. Since then, Dalit activists and ideologues have constantly explored the theme of internal degeneration of the Dalit movement, a phenomenon which reaches dizzying heights in the contexts of repeated splits in the movement. In other words, in the beginning of the contemporary phase of Dalit politics, the Dalit movement had to fight two rivals: the Gandhian mode of tackling the question of Harijans, and the RPI variety of untouchable activism—though the latter was seen as something of a family quarrel. Namdeo Dhasal in his poem 'Ode to Ambedkar: 1978' gives a very powerful expression to the new generation's assessment of Ambedkar's followers:

> Your followers act like false gurus
> They use a loincloth for a tie and babble
> Their heritage is mother-fucking
> Like Yama fucked Yami, they fuck their sisters
> These impotent Arjuns of countless generations—
> all they can do is pop some Virgin's cherry . . .

The core of Ambedkarite politics, which is at the heart of the Dalit movement, is shaped by an overdetermination of several

forces, the two most important among them being the social experiences of Mahars—an untouchable community of Maharashtra—and the anti-Brahmin intellectual tradition started by Jyotiba Phule. In other words, there exists a great deal of Maharashtra-specific cultural themes and political strategies in Ambedkarism. But it achieved the status of global model because of the imaginative way in which Ambedkar universalized it. He chose the themes of social humiliation and the moral emptiness of shastric Hinduism to build a new political community of untouchables and several lower castes. Other models, such as that of Narayana Guru's, could not outgrow their specific social base and become universally available to outsiders.

The most important strategy of the Dalit movement is a coupling of the cultural theory of despair with the politics of hope. It refuses to acknowledge that there exists any living and vital tradition of protest within the framework of Hinduism. It further characterizes the entire history of the Dalits as a tale of humiliation and violence, both physical and mental. The modern Dalit then has to seek his rebirth in a state of fearful loneliness. S/he has nothing to rely upon in his/her immediate Hindu surroundings. Thus the Dalit movement is built out of articulated sections of the culturally, socially, and economically persecuted castes and sects. Ambedkar himself provided the ideological basis for this cultural theory of despair. A scholar of impressive erudition, he dived into the depths of the shastric texts of Hinduism and experienced there a deep-seated apathy, inhuman formulations about life, and endorsements of several kinds of hierarchy which came as a slap upon his humanist face. An impassioned reading of the textual community of Hinduism helped him build a new political community of Dalits which, after his death, mobilized itself as a nationwide movement. At this stage, the intellectual biography of Ambedkar and the ideological topography of the Dalit movement merge together to produce a

rage-filled reading of Indian history and culture. So it is helpful to linger here a while to see how Ambedkar arrived at his critique of Hinduism and its continuing presence in the Dalit movement.

Ambedkar had, right from the beginning of his intellectual life, lost all respect for Hinduism permanently. He hated it. The criterion on which he judged Hinduism had two dimensions to it: one, a worldview of history and society shaped by Western traditions of socialism, liberal democracy, and justice. In fact, the ideas of the American philosopher John Dewey played a significant role in the making of Ambedkar. Against this background, he applied the tests of justice, utility, liberty, and equality to both everyday and textual forms of orthodox Hinduism. Obviously, all were conspicuous by their absence. After examining Hindu texts with care and attention, Ambedkar concludes:

> In equality is the soul of Hinduism. The morality of Hinduism is only social. It is (unmoral) and inhuman to say the least. What is unmoral and unhuman easily becomes immoral, inhuman and infamous. This is what Hinduism has become. Those who doubt this or deny this proposition should examine the social composition of the Hindu society and ponder over the conditions of some of the elements in it.[7]

The second criterion is personal experience, which finds a great deal of resonance among Dalits even today, and his understanding of the collective existential experiences of the untouchable and near-untouchable communities. Let me reproduce from the childhood experiences of Ambedkar himself an incident when he was nine years old. Ambedkar undertook a train journey in 1901, along with his brother, to meet his father who was in the army. When the two kids reached Masur at five in the evening, there was no one to receive them. The stationmaster, who was initially kind because he

[7] Ambedkar 1979, vol. 3 (1987): 87.

mistook them for Brahmins, suddenly felt revulsion once he came to know they were untouchables. Finally, the kids managed to get a cart on the condition that they should drive the cart themselves! The fare was double, the cartman walked along with the cart on the journey; he had earned his fare and saved himself from being polluted. The journey to their father's house was longer than what they had been told by the carter. Around ten o'clock at night the children began crying. They were hungry, and although they had some food with them, they needed water. They approached a toll collector and tried their luck by pretending they were Muslims. He rudely dismissed the boys; let us hear the story from Ambedkar himself:

> The bullocks had been unyoked and the cart was placed sloping down on the ground. We spread our beds on the bottom planks inside the cart and laid [our] bodies to rest. Now that we had come to a place of safety we did not mind what happened. But our minds could not help turning to the latest event. There was plenty of food with us. There was hunger burning within us; with all this we were to sleep without food; that was because we could not get water because we were untouchables. Such was the last thought that entered my mind. I said we had come to a place of safety. Evidently my elder brother had his misgivings. He said it was not wise for all four of us to go to sleep. Anything might happen. He suggested that at one time two should sleep and two should keep watch. So we spent the night at the foot of the hill.[8]

Experiences of this kind can be found in contemporary Dalit literature, and they explain the continuing relevance of Ambedkar for untouchables of the country. This aspect takes us to the most important question of the precise nature of the social experience that has given birth to the Dalit movement. I call it the violence of the caste system, and the movement is shaped by multiple responses

[8] Nanak Chand Rattu 1995: 7–8.

to it. The Dalit movement experiences and understands the working of mechanisms that generate violence, and the major strategies of its struggle are geared to resist these mechanisms. Initially, the new cultural politics of the Dalits is an attempt to respond to certain forms of violence that have their origins in feudal and village society. But the violence of the caste system goes beyond them and is firmly entrenched even in the structures, processes, and institutions of modernity and urbanization. This is one of the great enigmas of history that the movement is yet to work out.

The everyday life of the Dalits and their movement encounter two types of caste Hindu violence: change-resistant and retaliatory. The first is a consequence of the efforts made by Dalits to secure new rights which traditional society refuses to concede. The nature of these new rights is defined in terms of a Dalit's predetermined bid to secure ownership over resources—say, land and water. Usually, the hegemonic village elites are in control of these and cannot tolerate the demands of Dalits' struggle for new entitlements. The other important source of violence, and hence the source of the making of the Dalit movement, is the demand for equal space: the right of entry into and use of temples, restaurants, and public spaces, where they were not allowed earlier. But many a time, even the experience of the city is no better for Dalits. Daya Pawar, a Dalit poet, captures the reality ironically in his poem 'The City':

Here's an interesting inscription:
'This water tap is open to all castes and religions.'
What could it have meant
That this society was divided?
That some were high while others were low?
Well, all right, then this city deserved burying—
Why did they call it the machine age?
Seems like the stone age in the twentieth century.[9]

[9] Daya Pawar 1992: 129–30.

The politics of the Dalit movement is characterized by a dual strategy of consensus and conflict *vis-à-vis* the state. The consensus was about the necessity of social engineering in a certain way, which has notions of justice inbuilt into it; the colonial and the post-colonial states were made to accept such social engineering as an inevitable and necessary model of building a desirable society. Even today the radical strategy of the Dalit movement is to remind the state of its commitment to certain directive principles—these are also inscribed in the Indian constitution—and to expose the self-violation of state apparatuses. In other words, the Ambedkarite practice is to see the state as the agency of change, which also has necessarily to carry out the modernist-emancipatory project, however ill-defined that project. But the duality comes into play, because at another level the Dalit movement sees the state as an expression, at least partially, of upper-caste Hindu civil society, and hence as the agent that needs to be confronted.

To conclude, the future of the Dalit movement is poised at a very crucial stage at the end of the present century; its success means self-dissolution. In a humane, casteless, and egalitarian society there should be no need for any movement of the untouchables and humiliated castes. But the caste system is also a structure of power, entitlements, and authority at multiple levels. If the lowest of the low have organized themselves politically, it is simply politically naïve to believe that hegemonic communities and classes have not responded to the militancy of the former by choosing to ignore them. History does not allow such utopias. At least for the next decade, the Dalit movement will be around. It is also a political necessity.