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Political Radicalism of Ambedkar's Spirituality

Relevance and Resonance in the 21st Century

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We need to pay close attention to B R Ambedkar's relentless life-long search for a spiritual path and a spiritual homeground for society, which went way beyond his efforts at transforming India.

1 Introduction

We are a nation of hagiographers. As a people, we love to idol-worship our heroes, exaggerating their virtues, minimising their faults. We did this to Gandhi for the first thirty years after Independence and we have done this to Ambedkar over the last thirty years. Paradoxically, this is a truly impoverishing exercise both for the heroes and for us; it eviscerates what we could learn from such undoubtedly great people and makes us all the more poorer for it. In emptying the richness of the journey they undertook, and seeking comfort and solace in the cosy finality of their formulations, we overlook the huge amount we could learn by diligently studying the many terrible struggles they undertook to answer some of the most complex questions of the time, and learn from their difficulties, their mistakes, their false starts and agonising twists and turns and the options they explored and exercised and why.

The two outstanding endeavours and achievements of Ambedkar most celebrated today are the battle for the annihilation of caste and the framing of India's Constitution. Both were truly radical ventures, one challenging the very deep-rooted foundation of Indian society and the other laying the groundwork for transformative changes in every aspect of life in the decades to come. How often do we see it remarked even to this day, that in so many respects, different parts of India and Indian society still remain years behind the radical provisions of the Constitutional frame. It has, indeed, been hard to keep pace with the radicalism of Ambedkar.

But what I am contending is that even more than these extraordinary contributions, it is Ambedkar's insistence on a spiritualisation of human life, which constitutes the truly notable radicalism of his political struggle. To fully appreciate this, we need to pay far greater attention to Ambedkar's relentless life-long search for a spiritual path and a spiritual homeground for society, which went way beyond his efforts at transforming India - they were truly heroic efforts to find the deepest solution for the intractable problem of suffering on earth, for all beings, human and non-human, living and non-living. And for him this spirituality was not something restricted to the personal sphere. Indeed, his spirituality, based as it was on an understanding of the inter-connectedness of all beings on earth, did not allow for a crude separation of the personal and the political. For in his vision, the one was well and truly embedded in the other, with each defining and redefining the other. To put it simply, for Ambedkar, the challenge of social transformation was inextricably bound to the task of inner transformation. One could not happen without the other. This was his most radical contribution. This is also his most forgotten legacy but the one that I believe has the greatest relevance and resonance in the 21stcentury.

2 The Conversion

In October 1956, Ambedkar and half a million of his followers, converted to Buddhism. Less than two months later, only days after he had completed his definitive study of Buddhism *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Ambedkar passed away. His sudden demise, at the relatively young age of 65, a huge a vacuum in this emerging project, left unanswered so many questions on how he would have carried forward this nascent journey.

It is well established that Ambedkar was seriously exploring various alternative ways of renouncing his Hindu faith for many decades before his formal conversion. From childhood, there were strong religious reformist influences in his life. As Vajpeyi (2012) recounts, "Ambedkar named Kabir as one of his three gurus, along with the Buddha and Jotiba Phule. His father was a follower of both Ramanand, who was Kabir's guru, and Kabir himself" (p. 225). But it was at the Yeola Conversion Conference in October 1935 in Nasik that he first made a public declaration of this intent:

Unfortunately I was born a Hindu Untouchable. It was beyond my power to prevent that. But it is within my power to refuse to live within these humiliating conditions. Though I was born a Hindu, I solemnly assure you that I will not die as a Hindu (Government of Maharashtra, 2002, Vol. 18, Part 1, p. 430)

Ambedkar's biographer Sangharakshita (1986) graphically recounts Ambedkar's almost 50-year long engagement with Buddhism ever since aged 16, when he won a book on the Buddha as a prize in school, to his intense studies on the subject, his engagement with Buddhists from and travels to many Asian countries, as also his very serious study of many religious traditions as possible alternatives to Hinduism, and the various attempts to reform Hinduism from within. In the 1920s, he had started the journal *Bahishkrit Bharat*, from reading whose pages we can glean his relentless struggle to arrive at the right religion for the Dalits to convert to and we see how seriously he considered Christianity, Islam and Sikhism as alternatives. As Vajpeyi (2012) recounts:

Ambedkar tested every big and small, old and new religion available to Indians, trawled the texts and tenets of Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians, and indeed made himself an entire career as a scholar of comparative religions alongside his enormously busy public life as a mass leader, a politician, and an intellectual (p.209)

His determination to move out of the Hindu fold was a direct consequence of his life as a Dalit, with all the humiliations, deprivations and depravations, bigotry, prejudice, segregation, abuse and violence, that he, his family and his community suffered, his exhaustive historical and anthropological study of the unspeakable indignities suffered by the "Untouchables", but also through a frustration with the various attempts made by so many social reformers of the past, the failure of his own Kalaram temple entry satyagraha and the stance and work of Mahatma Gandhi and the Congress Party.

This is a well-rehearsed and oft-repeated story. For us it would suffice to recount Ambedkar's debate with Gandhi, so evocatively and faithfully captured in the pages of the *Harijan*. This makes it clear how Ambedkar arrived at his conclusion that it would be impossible for the Dalits to get justice within the Hindu fold.

Ambedkar asked Gandhi:

Why do you restrict the movement to the removal of Untouchability only? Why not do away with the caste system altogether? If there is a difference between caste and Untouchability, is it not one only of degree? (*Harijan*, 11 February, 1933, p.2)

Gandhi replied:

Untouchability as it is practised today in Hinduism in my opinion, is a sin against God and man and is, therefore like a poison slowly eating into the very vitals of Hinduism. There are innumerable castes in India. They are a social institution and at one time they served a very useful purpose, as, perhaps, they are even doing now to a certain extent. . . There is nothing sinful about them. They retard the material progress of those who are labouring under them. They are no bar to the spiritual progress. The difference, therefore, between caste system and Untouchability is not one of degree, but of kind (*Harijan*, 11 February, 1933, p.2)

As highly unsatisfactory an answer as can be imagined and Ambedkar's rebuke was characteristically sharp:

The outcaste is a by-product of the caste-system. There will be outcastes as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of the caste-system. (*Harijan*, 11 February, 1933, p.2)

There is a long discussion among Ambedkar scholars about why he finally chose to move to Buddhism. Many regard, and with good reason, that the proverbial last straw was the lack of support from the Prime Minister for the Hindu Code Bill, drafted in large measure by Ambedkar, which led to his resignation from the Nehru cabinet in September 1951, just a year after the country had adopted the "Ambedkar Constitution". Of course, there is equally strong evidence to indicate that much before this, Ambedkar's mind was largely made up about conversion to Buddhism. As Teltumbde (2018) says

Much before the formal declaration to embrace Buddhism, Ambedkar's attraction to it was quite public. In 1948, Ambedkar republished P. Lakshmi Narasu's Essence of Buddhism. In 1950, Ambedkar wrote his famous essay entitled 'Buddha and the Future of His Religion' in the journal Mahabodhi and indicated the need of a gospel to guide the new converts. The essay was a turning point for Dalits insofar as they now knew Ambedkar's choice

And I fully agree with Teltumbde (2018) that

According to Ambedkar, the real objective of a religion should be the spiritual development of individuals . . Personally, Ambedkar rated the spiritual aspect of religion to be more important than the existential aspect. For the sake of Dalits, he would emphasize the existential utility of religion. . . However, the choice of religion that Ambedkar made in 1956 was quite contrary to this existential

consideration. It appears that his spiritual consideration eventually overwhelmed the existential one.

Ambedkar told his followers in a speech in Agra on the 18th of March, 1956, "Without religion, our struggle will not survive". Nicolas Jaoul (2018) recalls what Ambedkar said in a press conference in Nagpur on the eve of his conversion:

Answering the journalist who asked, 'What about the special concessions ensured by the Constitution to the Untouchable class? They will be no more. What about that?', Ambedkar reiterated that Dalits should become equal citizens rather than claim benefits that would perpetuate their traditional status as Untouchables -'We will get all the concessions ensured for all citizens even after conversion. As of the question of special concessions, why do you worry about that? Whether you wish that we should remain Untouchables all the life to avail the special concessions given by the Constitution? We are striving to achieve Humanism.

3 Ambedkar's Buddha

Even willing to give up so many socio-economic benefits provided by the welfare state as per the provisions of the Constitution he himself drafted, it is abundantly clear then that for Ambedkar, the conversion to Buddhism was motivated by a deeper concern. It was a profoundly spiritual act with potentially revolutionary consequences for not only the Dalits but humanity, as a whole.

Meaningful politics in an unjust society comprises any endeavour to alter the balance of power in favour of the deprived and oppressed. How radical such an attempt is, turns on how far-reaching a challenge is mounted to these structures of power, how comprehensive, how universal and how enduring is the vision of transformation embedded in this politics. Do we get to experience freedom at the deepest level? Or do we continue to remain caught in the endless cycle of desire, fulfilment and lack -- that becomes an eternal source of bondage and unfreedom, even enslavement, more overpowering than any external servitude?

It is this striving that drew Ambedkar to the various religious traditions and finally Buddhism.

As early as 1936, while making a blistering attack on the caste system in his classic work *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar clarified:

I must not be understood to hold the opinion that there is no necessity for a religion. On the contrary I agree with Burke when he says that 'True religion is the foundation of society, the basis on which all true Civil Government rests, and both their sanction. Indeed, I am so convinced of the necessity of religion that I feel I ought to tell you in outline what I regard as necessary items in this religious reform. . you must give a new doctrinal basis to your religion-a basis that will be in consonance with liberty, equality and fraternity (24.1, 24.5)

He reiterated this view 20 years later:

For the religious system although today is unrelated to the secular system, yet is the foundation on which everything secular rests when the secular system cannot last very long unless it has got the sanction of the religion however remote it may be. (Ambedkar 1956b)

Lest there be any misunderstanding, let me hasten to clarify that Ambedkar is not here making a case for a theocratic state. His emphasis is on the fostering of values that would engender a humane society, based on loving kindness, an impeccable Buddhist virtue. The question he asked himself was: what would foster such a society, imbued with these values? And his clear answer was that this requires a process of inner transformation, without which all activism and all social engineering would come to nothing.

He was drawn to the religious traditions because the transformation they seek is more fundamental than the one sought by what one may call the more sectarian movements, each undoubtedly invaluable and extremely challenging in themselves, but finally limited to transforming a specific structure of power, whether based on gender, class, caste, race, region or community. This also helps us understand Ambedkar's rejection of Marxism (which he considers very seriously) and what makes his spirituality so powerfully radical in political terms. Ambedkar's was a ceaseless struggle to arrive at a body of thought that would enable a transformation of the world of sorrow, not only for the Dalits but for all beings on Earth. He was also eagerly committed to the spirit of scientific enquiry. He would persistently question any claim that he found to be humbug. He was, therefore, drawn to both Marx and the Buddha. Indeed, he argues, citing extensively from the Buddha, that there was no fundamental disagreement between Marx and the Buddha on what Ambedkar regarded as the four essential elements of Marxism. But then Ambedkar (1956b) goes on to contrast the means advocated by them:

The means of bringing about Communism, which the Buddha propounded, were quite definite: the *Pancha Silas*, which address that part of the unhappiness of man that results from his own misconduct, the Noble Eight-Fold Path, which redresses that part of the misery which was the result of man's inequity towards man and the doctrine of *Nibbana*, which outlines the *Asavas*, or Hindrances in the way of the Eight-Fold Path.

The main hindrance is the delusion of self. So long as a man is wholly occupied with himself, chasing after every bauble that he vainly thinks will satisfy the cravings of his heart, there is no noble path for him. Only when his eyes have been opened to the fact that he is but a tiny part of a measureless whole, only when he begins to realise how impermanent a thing is his temporary individuality, can he even enter upon this narrow path."

For this we need the *Paramitas*, the virtues to be practiced in one's daily life. The first is *Khanti*or forbearance, the essence of which is not to meet hatred by hatred. As if speaking directly to us as a messenger of love in these hate-filled times, Ambedkar says "For hatred is not appeased by hatred. It is appeased only by forbearance.

Having clearly explained the path of the Buddha, Ambedkar (1956b) goes on to ask: "We must now consider whose means are more lasting. One has to choose between Government by force and Government by moral disposition". And he argues,

The Buddha's way was not to force people to do what they did not like to do although it was good for them. His way was to alter the disposition of men so that they would do voluntarily what they would not otherwise want to do.

Society has been aiming to lay a new foundation which was summarised by the French Revolution in three words, Fraternity, Liberty and Equality. The French Revolution was welcomed because of this slogan. It failed to produce equality. We welcome the Russian Revolution because it aims to produce equality. But it cannot be too much emphasised that in producing equality society cannot afford to sacrifice fraternity or liberty. Equality will be of no value without fraternity or liberty. It seems that the three can coexist only if one follows the way of the Buddha. Communism can give one but not all.

At the same time, Ambedkar (1956c) develops a powerful critique of capitalism:

There are two forces prevalent in Society: Individualism and Fraternity. Individualism is ever present. Every individual is ever asking'I and my neighbours, are we all brothers, are we even fiftieth cousins, am I their keeper, why should I do right to them'and under the pressure of his own particular interests acting as though he was an end to himself, thereby developing a non-social and even an anti-social self. Fraternity is a force of opposite character. Fraternity is another name for fellow feeling. It consists in a sentiment which leads an individual to identify himself with the good of others whereby'the good of others becomes to him a thing naturally and necessarily to be attended to like any of the physical conditions of our existence'. Individualism would produce anarchy. It is only fraternity, which prevents it and helps to sustain the moral order among men. Of this there can be no doubt.

It should be evident then that Ambedkar was very clear that without an inner transformation of the individual, which would nurture a feeling of fraternity among people, social revolutions would remain utterly incomplete and also unsustainable. Force and compulsion, even if moral, would not be able carry change for very long and soon the distortions created by power and the old untransformed values and aspirations would begin to hold sway.

As suggested by Aishwary Kumar (2015), Ambedkar

came in the final years of his life to institute such classical Buddhist concepts as *sunnyata*and *maitri*as the foundation of his insurrectionary politics . . . Authentic responsibility, or shall we say, following the language of *Annihilation of Caste*, "the essence of a truly religious act," is so radically oriented toward justice, so resolutely measureless and opposed to rule or domination, so pure in its love of community, that it might be apprehended only as a void or emptiness of the non-self, that is to say, as the absolute lack of intrinsic self and mastery. Only within the order of ethical comportment and temperament (*sila*), in which one gives oneself unconditionally to a just conduct toward the other, in which one absolves oneself from the desire for self-presence and control, might the awareness of *sunnyata*be nourished. (pp.321, 324)

4 Ambedkar's Buddha Scholars

But this is not how Ambedkar scholars have always looked at his relationship to Buddhism. Many have viewed it merely as an instrumental move to gain political mileage for the Dalits:

Critics like Gail Omvedt see Ambedkar's conversion as purely a reactive mode of mass mobilisation to retrieve them from the hostility of caste Hindus on one hand and on the other the refusal of political groups like the Communist Party to regard caste and religious oppression as distinctly separate from class factors.(Viswanathan, 1998, p.225)

Lynch (1969), in a study of Ambedkar Buddhism in Agra, regarded it as akin to pouring "the new wine of political modernity into the old bottles of religious tradition". Jaffrelot (2006), seeing Ambedkar as a quintessential liberal, similarly argues that Buddhism was an expedient cover for Ambedkar's liberal values, a kind of "secularisation/vernacularisation project". Jaffrelot feels that by speaking of "liberty, equality, fraternity", "Ambedkar selected the values within Buddhism that he had spotted in the Republican doctrine". But in a speech on All India Radio in October 1954, in a series 'My Personal Philosophy', Ambedkar was at pains to emphasise:

Positively, my social philosophy may be said to be enshrined in three words: liberty, equality and fraternity. Let no one, however, say that I have borrowed my philosophy from the French revolution. I have not. My philosophy has roots in religion and not in political science. I have derived them from the teachings of my master, the Buddha. (Sangharakshita, 1986, p. 76).

Scholars of a Marxist persuasion go even further to actually lament Ambedkar's move to Buddhism. Despite all of Ambedkar's efforts to carefully circumscribe his own understanding of Buddhism and clearly connect it to the goal of human emancipation, dogmatic refusal to even consider spirituality as an option in political struggle, has led to a rejection of his Buddhism. As per Teltumbde (2018):

Leftist intellectuals think that it was a retrogressive step to adopt a religious identity in the mid-20th century, to a potentially revolutionary mass of Dalits. It has definitely weakened the movement for justice and equality and dimmed its prospects of achieving genuine social change. Its only impact has been the addition of one more identity, howsoever positively endowed or constructed, to people who already had a surfeit of them. It has thereby contributed to the aggravation of identity conflicts and enhanced the scope for identity politics by vested interests.

Some Ambedkar scholars have gone as far as to call "Ambedkar's embracing of Buddhism an ultimate bulwark against communism" (Teltumbde, 2018, citing Elinor Zelliott). Fitzgerald (1994) and Burra (1997), in their studies of Buddhists in Maharashtra, both paint a rather bleak picture. Fitzgerald concludes that these people practice "the kind of Buddhism which has not really changed anybody or anything very radically" (p.68). Burra finds that people retain statues of Hindu gods and goddesses alongside pictures of Ambedkar and the Buddha and observes a dichotomy between private Hindu practice and public Buddhist practice. Teltumbde (2018) summarises the largely negative verdict:

Unlike the earlier conversions, conversion to Buddhism had a pronounced disadvantage inasmuch as there did not exist any Buddhist community to suppress the Untouchable identity of Dalits. Socio-culturally, Dalits stayed as they were vis-à-vis others. On the contrary, they suffered deprivation on the economic and political fronts as they lost the constitutional benefits associated with their erstwhile identity for nearly thirty-four years. . . It was expected to imbue its adherents with a radical consciousness, marked by solidarity with the oppressed and disgust against the oppressors, the spirit of enquiry vis-à-vis tradition and customs, and so on. It is not clear whether convert Buddhists reflect this consciousness. Educated Dalits, who could be expected to lead the masses in cultural terms, rather reflect disorientation towards individualistic pursuits like vipassana, aspirations for Sanskritization, narcissistic attitudes, obsession with English education, disdain for Dalit masses and self-aggrandizement of various kinds. Ambedkar's dream of making Buddhist conversion a preparatory phase for political revolution gets more and more distant with every passing day.

What is curious is that other work, delivers the opposite verdict. Darapuri (2008) examines 2001 census data to conclude that in terms of sex ratio, literacy rates, female literacy and employment, *Navayana* practitioners have surpassed both Hindu Dalits and Hindus overall and argues that "it is definitely change of religion which has liberated them from the bondage of caste and inferiority complex".

But surely, isn't judging the abiding relevance of Ambedkar's spirituality by the success or otherwise of *Navayana*,like missing the woods for the trees? For Ambedkar was attempting something much larger, which he could never put into motion and none of his followers even tried to: a movement for social transformation, of which an integral part was a profound internal re-engineering, since without a new person, with new aspirations and values, the new society would not come into being.

This is something the great Ambedkar scholar D.R. Nagaraj (1993) was fully able to appreciate and articulate:

Recently, I had a discussion with a radical group working among the untouchables in rural Karnataka. They belong to a group committed to the Ambedkarite model. I also had some first-hand knowledge of the improvement in the quality of Dalit life that they were able to achieve in their villages. Traditional forms of violence against Dalits had almost disappeared from those areas. Right of entry to public places was guaranteed. Rights to the services of barbers and washermen were also assured. Naturally, there was no question of a social boycott. After considering all these achievements, I asked the activists: do you perceive any basic change in the notions of the caste system among caste Hindus? They reflected on the issue for a while and said 'no', they were only scared of the militancy of Dalits. To put it in other words, caste equality of a superficial variety has been achieved in these villages. It stops at that. I am not trying to belittle the importance of this achievement but only trying to point out its inadequacies.

The equality of caste is qualitatively different from annihilation of the caste system. Caste Hindu society (the other) will remain aloof and refuse to change itself. As long as they don't change, the crime of untouchability thrives in many subtle ways. At its heart, caste Hindu society will retain the same old values.

Similarly, is it not clear that so long as we stay committed to more and more consumerism, we will remain entrapped in capitalism? And with the same set of values, are attempts at creating alternatives to capitalism, not bound to fail? Will freedom ever become possible so long as we remain caged in the tentacles of greed? As Ambedkar (1956a) exclaims,

Man is unhappy even though he is in the midst of plenty. Unhappiness is the result of greed, and greed is the bane of life of those who have, as well as of those who have not (p. 98)

Unfortunately Ambedkar died weeks after his conversion to Buddhism and there was no one left to carry forward the unfinished task, in the spirit that would have made it most powerful and fulfilled its revolutionary potential. As Sangharakshita (1986, Chapter 9) recounts, between December 1956 and February 1957, around 4 million people converted to Buddhism. At that point, the code of conduct for the 1957 Lok Sabha elections kicked in and the conversions were halted. After the elections, however, the momentum did not continue. The conversions had, moreover, remained largely restricted to Ambedkar's own Mahar community. Sangharakshita offers many explanations for the petering out of the Buddhist movement: Ambedkar's absence, fear of retribution from militant caste Hindus, reluctance of losing the benefit of reservations and scholarships, conflicts within Ambedkar supporters, lack of follow-up guidance from *bhikkhus*, who gradually returned to Thailand or Sri Lanka, as they had little understanding of the context of Indian Dalits, and few means of support, given the abject poverty of the large majority of their converts.

5 Ambedkar's Pantheon

Despite this, I believe it would be wrong to judge the abiding relevance of Ambedkar's unique message in this way. Given the crisis of global capitalism in the 21st century, the dangers facing the planet due to continued ecological destruction and the enveloping political vacuum, increasingly filled by forces of hate, there is a crying need to re-examine the hope that Ambedkar's spirituality may hold out for life on this planet. It may, therefore, be best to view Ambedkar's legacy within a pantheon of great thinker-activists, who centred their politics and attempts at social transformation, around a spiritual understanding of the world. They brought to bear reconstructed spiritual resources to address what they saw as the key challenges of their own time and context.

These include Gustavo Gutierrez (1973), who saw the Theology of Liberation as

an attempt at reflection, based on the gospel and the experiences of men and women committed to the process of liberation in the oppressed and exploited land of Latin America. It is a theological reflection born of the experience of shared efforts to abolish the current unjust situation and to build a different society, freer and more human. My purpose . . . is to reconsider the great themes of the Christian life within this radically changed perspective and with regard to the new questions posed by this commitment. This is the goal of the so-called theology of liberation.

Paulo Freire (1970), in his path-breaking *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*expresses, in a way, Ambedkar's own dilemma:

It is not to become free that they want agrarian reform, but in order to acquire land and thus become landowners-or, more precisely, bosses over other workers. . . Even revolution, which transforms a concrete situation of oppression by establishing the process of liberation, must confront this phenomenon. Many of the oppressed who directly or indirectly participate in revolution intend-conditioned

by the myths of the old order-to make it their private revolution. The shadow of their former oppressor is still cast over them. (p.46)

And suggests what may be described as an Ambedkarite solution:

In order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity, become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both. This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well . . .Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one. The man or woman who emerges is a new person, viable only as the oppressor-oppressed contradiction is superseded by the humanization of all people. (pp. 44, 49)

When Ambedkar (1956a) cites the Buddha as saying:

Just as the earth does not feel hurt and does not resent, just as the air does not lend to any action against it, just as the Ganges water goes on flowing without being disturbed by the fire, so also you *Bhikkus*must bear all insults and injustices inflicted on you and continue to bear *Maitri*towards your offenders . . .Let the ambit of your *Maitri*be as boundless as the world and let your thought be vast and beyond measure, in which no hatred is thought of (p.168)

He speaks in anticipation of Bishop Malusi Mpumlwana who suffered excruciating torture at the hands of the South African police after he was arrested as an anti-apartheid activist. In the midst of the torture, he had an astonishing insight: "These are God's children and they are losing their humanity. We have to help them recover it." Commenting on such a stance, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his daughter Revd Mpho Tutu (2014) say:

It is a remarkable feat to be able to see past the inhumanity of the behavior and recognize the humanity of the person committing the atrocious acts. This is not weakness. This is heroic strength, the noblest strength of the human spirit. . . Forgiveness is the way we set those interactions right. It is the way we mend tears in the social fabric. It is the way we stop our human community from unraveling.

Ambedkar could also be said to be anticipating Martin Luther King, who formulated brilliantly the relationship between love, power and justice. King questions the legacy of viewing love and power as polar opposites, where love appears as a rescinding of power, and power as a rejection of love. King (1967) argues that "power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anaemic." And this new understanding of power helps King positively formulate the unbreakable bond between love and justice: "power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love".

Love must necessarily take on the larger structures of injustice that stand in its way. At the same time, because love is our weapon, we do not seek to defeat anyone and must try not to end up humiliating those positioned against us. For the struggle is not against persons, it is for transformation of the opponent's view and the system of oppression. And even more for the self-renewal of those who work for change. This is quintessential Ambedkar! As is Nelson Mandela's well-known statement asking his people to fully back the Springboks before the rugby World Cup:

We have to surprise them with compassion, with restraint and generosity; I know, all of the things they denied us, but this is no time to celebrate petty revenge.

This sentiment is reflected in the South African commitment to *Ubuntu* as a governing principle:

In South Africa, *Ubuntu*is our way of making sense of the world. The word literally means "humanity". It is the philosophy and belief that a person is only a person through other people. Our humanity is bound up in one another, and any tear in the fabric of connection between us must be repaired for us all to be made whole. This inter-connectedness is the very root of who we are. (Tutu and Tutu, 2014)

Closest to Ambedkar as a religious political activist would be the Vietnamese Buddhist monk and anti-Vietnam war activist Thích Nh?t H?nh, who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by Martin Luther King in 1967. As also the Christian Buddhist feminist bell hooks. Explaining the turn towards the spiritual in her own political struggles (from Malcolm to King, so to speak), she recently said:

I experienced renewed spiritual awakening, an ever growing awareness of the transformative power of love...As I studied and wrote about ending domination in all its forms it became clearer and clearer that politics rooted in a love ethic could produce lasting meaningful social change. When I traveled the nation asking folk what enabled them to be courageous in struggling for freedom-

whether working to end domination of race, gender, sexuality, class, or religion-the response was love. (hooks, 2013)

Elaborating on her political stance, she says:

If I were really asked to define myself, I wouldn't start with race; I wouldn't start with blackness; I wouldn't start with gender; I wouldn't start with feminism. I would start with stripping down to what fundamentally informs my life, which is that I'm a seeker on the path. I think of feminism, and I think of anti-racist struggles as part of it. But where I stand spiritually is, steadfastly, on a path about love. If love is really the active practice-Buddhist, Christian, or Islamic mysticism-it requires the notion of being a lover, of being in love with the universe. To commit to love is fundamentally to commit to a life beyond dualism. That's why love is so sacred in a culture of domination, because it simply begins to erode your dualisms: dualisms of black and white, male and female, right and wrong. (Tworkov, 1992)

This, then, is the pantheon of spiritual political activists to which, I believe, Ambedkar truly belongs. It is important to clarify here that I do not agree with Ambedkar's rejection of all spiritual traditions other than Buddhism. While I do regard, with Vivekananda and Aurobindo, religion to be one of the, if not the most destructive force in human history, I affirm the validity of all these alternative paths, each one attempting to restate the same fundamental insight in their own inimitable ways. My own inclination is like that of Raimon Panikkar (2010), a Spanish-Indian Roman Catholic priest, a great proponent of what he called "intra-religious dialogue", who once said "I left Europe [for India] as a Christian, I discovered I was a Hindu and returned as a Buddhist, without ever having ceased to be Christian"

The degeneration of religious traditions, which has happened to each one of them without exception, has very much to do with the unholy alliance that has emerged historically between institutionalised religion and the structures of power in society. Which is why a lot of mainstream religious discourse has tended to propose an acceptance of the *status quo* or has been conveniently interpreted as saying so, by the powers that be, in order to buttress their power in many historical situations. This is truly ironic because the founders of these religious traditions were all social revolutionaries of their day, advocating the overthrow of oppressive systems of power. The Franciscan friar Richard Rohr (2018) explains this paradox:

As long as Jesus' followers were on the bottom and the edge of empire, as long as they shared the rejected and betrayed status of Jesus, they could grasp his teaching more readily. Values like non-participation in war, simple living, inclusivity, and love of enemies could be more easily understood when Christians were gathering secretly in the catacombs, when their faith was untouched by empire, rationalization, and compromise.

In 313, Constantine legalized Christianity. It became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 380. After this structural change, Christianity increasingly accepted, and even defended, the dominant social order. The church slowly lost its free and alternative vantage point.

Before 313, the church was on the bottom of society. Within the space of a few decades, the church moved from the bottom to the top, literally from the catacombs to the basilicas. When the Christian church became the established religion of the empire, it started reading the Gospel from the position of maintaining power and social order instead of experiencing the profound power of powerlessness that Jesus revealed.

6. Conclusions

When we examine the dominant values that have animated society in the 20th and 21st centuries, we find Ayn Rand's "virtue of selfishness", imposition of sameness in both McDonaldised global capitalism and totalitarian states (presciently anticipated by Herbert Marcuse), intensifying hatred for excluded minorities, the strident assertiveness of certainty of knowledge and the dominion over Nature (which spans both the Left and the Right). The consequences of these are also vividly before us: the continual crises afflicting global capitalism, a planet in serious danger through the destruction caused by a certain vision of science and technology, as also growing inequality and violence within society. Challenges to capitalism from the Left have sadly met exactly the fate that Ambedkar described and anticipated. The vacuum is increasingly filled by forces of hatred from the Right.

Surely, the time is ripe for a serious reconsideration of the way forward. The spiritual tradition of the Buddha proposes a vision of a deeply inter-connected cosmos, where "you are, therefore, I am". Buddhism, like many other spiritual traditions, teaches that all life is inter-related.

All things, mutually supportive and related, form a living cosmos, a single living whole. By engaging ourselves with others, our identity is developed, established and enhanced. As the 13th century Japanese Buddhist monk Nichiren wrote, 'If you light a lamp for another, your own way will be lit.' We then also understand that it is impossible to build our own happiness on the unhappiness of others. (*Soka Gakkai Malaysia*).

And we see that by ourselves we are incomplete and we need others and partnerships with them to bring true joy into this world. It is truly ironic that Ambedkarite activism has given rise to a "politics of identity" quite different from the one he would have wished for. Working for the *annihilation*of caste, what Ambedkar would have wanted is the assertion of an identity that affirmed the oneness of all existence, in recognition of its inter-dependence and inter-connectedness, beyond the separate self. Only on this basis would we be able to live a life animated by the key Buddhist (and universal spiritual) principles of *karuna* (bearing the suffering of others as one's own) and *upekkha* (cultivating the necessary detachment), without which it would become impossible for us to have the requisite energy to sustain the struggle for change, as also to bring it to a creative fruition.

This organic link between inner transformation of the individual and larger social change postulated by Ambedkar is invariably missing in our politics. As a result, we view conflict as an arena of our victory over the "other." A conflict needs not so much a victory, as a resolution. Indeed, a "defeat" that moves society forward on the moral landscape, that empowers the disadvantaged and sensitises those in power, deepening democracy in the process, could even be preferred to a "victory" that fails to achieve any of these.

A key to moving forward in this direction is to give up the antediluvian unitary and insurrectionist conception of Revolution (with a capital R). The unique appeal of "scientific socialism" was its claim to have discovered the "law of motion of modern society" that definitively predicted the inexorable coming of a new dawn. As Ambedkar argued, this teleology has ended up becoming the chief weakness of Marxism. If change is visualised in these terms, means-ends questions will be run roughshod over and horrors of the Stalinist kind will continue to be perpetrated.

We must also firmly abandon the "victim" mode. Those suffering injustice are not completely constituted by their affliction. Their identity is beyond that constructed for them by their oppressor. But both the dehumanising experience of pain and the utter obduracy of their persecutors, appear to push the oppressed, as Paulo Freire argues, with an apparent historical inevitability, into the language of the tormentor. At the root of this desperation is an overestimation of the potency of violence and a lack of recognition that power is a relationship with an immeasurable and unknowably indeterminate fluidity and vulnerability. The sterility of unidirectional oppositional politics is evident in the presumption that change flows from one direction alone. But there are huge possibilities of visualising change from different vantage points, of flows of knowledge, insight and power from multiple directions. We need a vision of transformation that threads all these potentialities together. But that is a relatively unexplored undertaking, for another day!

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