

B.R. Ambedkar and the problem of his Eurocentrism

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Abstract: *This paper elaborates on the Eurocentric features of Bhim Rao Ambedkar's social and political thought through a close consideration of three of his most important English-language writings. They are concerned about his thinking about overcoming caste, Dalit freedom from colonial rule, and the preconditions of democracy. In drawing attention to this aspect of Ambedkar's thought, the paper suggests the indispensability of Eurocentrism to the articulation of his political-ideological commitments. Such a relationship offers an occasion to reconsider the generally disapproving assessments of this intellectual phenomenon.*

Keywords: B.R. Ambedkar, eurocentrism, caste, anti-casteism, Dalit Studies, colonialism, democracy

I

Based on a close reading of his acclaimed and undelivered speech *Annihilation of Caste*, key portions of his book *What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables*, and his address *Conditions precedent for the successful working of democracy*, this paper seeks to illustrate the Eurocentric features of the anti-caste polymath B.R. Ambedkar's thought. Such characteristics are most pronounced in his references, his identification of ideas, and his desired future for Indian society and polity. In tracing the European referents of his thinking, the paper seeks to re-evaluate the generally pejorative connotation of eurocentrism in much recent commentary and to suggest the indispensability of the intellectual habit to important dimensions of Ambedkar's social and political thought and attendant efforts to overcome caste.

In seeking to draw attention to this dimension of Ambedkar's writings, this paper attempts a modest contribution to the recently burgeoning scholarly discourse on his intellectual history and formations. It does not imply, however, that his thinking can be reduced to a Eurocentric imagination. Indeed, Ambedkar's deep engagement with Buddhism as a source of emancipatory ideals has received considerable attention and is the obvious

counterpoint to the analysis pursued here. Yet, in trying to focus scrutiny on Ambedkar's eurocentrism, the paper aims to bring to the reader's notice an aspect of his thinking that is yet to provoke substantial remark. Based, as it is, on writings that span a fairly considerable portion of Ambedkar's adult life, the paper contends that such intellectual tendencies constituted a quite distinct and sustained strain in his thinking on a range of subjects.

Ambedkar's fealties to eurocentrism thus extend an opportunity to reconsider the critique of such intellectual commitments. While not mounting a defense of eurocentrism per se, this paper will raise the question of what is at stake in the wholesale eschewal of the ideals routinely associated with the ideological mode. If one is to take the inspiration Ambedkar drew from the history and ideas of Europe to inform his own aspirations seriously, one must equally grapple with the thorny question of their deep and intrinsic value to articulations of emancipatory politics in the context of colonial and postcolonial India's caste society. Indeed, the project of provincializing Europe is not one with which Ambedkar's own can be easily reconciled.

II

Etymologically speaking, the word annihilation refers to the act of reducing to non-existence, and is derived from the 1630s Middle French annihilation, or directly from Medieval Latin *annihilationem*, a noun of action from the past-participle stem of *annihilare* "reduce to nothing." One is not aware why B.R. Ambedkar chose this particular word to grasp his vision of overcoming caste, a problem made all the more irksome given that he nowhere elaborates on the term at length in his speech. Yet the choice is surely telling not merely due to its provenance, but for the political imagination, it brought into being. What did he mean by the annihilation of caste? In investigating this question, I hope to demonstrate that Ambedkar partook of a necessity and profoundly Eurocentric imagination in developing a resolution to that problem that should give us pause. This is in part because eurocentrism has come to be regarded in much recent discourse as tantamount to an unpardonable intellectual shortcoming, but also because its resources have been found wanting in their capacity to adequately understand non-European locations.¹ On the contrary, I intend to suggest that it was precisely the eurocentrism of Ambedkar's thought that enabled him to mount such a thorough-going critique of the workings and consequences of India's social hierarchy.

Annihilation of Caste has justifiably come to be recognized as a manifesto, of sorts, of Ambedkar's thought. It was to have been delivered to the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal of Lahore in 1936, but the invitation was retracted on account of the fact that the organizers believed its contents to have been much too incendiary. The address was intended as a response to Sant Ram's, secretary of the organization's request that Ambedkar elaborate on the proposition that, 'It is not possible to break Caste without annihilating the religious

notions on which it, the Caste system, is founded'.² Ambedkar came to advocate the wholesale reorganization and reconstruction of Hindu society to achieve this end.

The opening of his speech is framed by the tension in force within the early Indian National Congress party between the necessity of political reform and against social reform in colonial India. As Ambedkar opines, those on the side of the former won out, if but temporarily, and mistakenly. This is how he puts the matter: 'That political reform cannot with impunity take precedence over social reform in the sense of reconstruction of society is a thesis which, I am sure, cannot be controverted'.³ It is here where he turns to the first in the long series of European points of reference to flesh out this point. Ambedkar resorts to Karl Marx's friend and co-worker Ferdinand La Salle to help establish his claim that the makers of political constitutions must take account of social forces. Following a brief comparison with the conditions that had led to the recently declared Communal Award in British India, he then turns to the history of Irish Home Rule, and subsequently the history of Rome, to support his contention that the making of constitutions cannot ignore the problems arising from the prevailing social order.

Reversing the sequence of causality, he proceeds to assert that, 'generally speaking History bears out the proposition that political revolutions have always been preceded by social and religious revolutions'.⁴ To support his view, Ambedkar invokes the religious reformation of Luther as a precursor to the emancipation of the European people. He dwells on Puritanism as a source of political liberty in England, the foundation of the new world, and the war of American Independence. While he also turns to the social and religious revolutions initiated by the prophet Muhammad, Buddha, the saints of Maharashtra, and Guru Nanak in defence of his view that social transformation precedes political revolution, the vast majority of his points of reference in this respect, is drawn from the history of Europe. What such invocations of European history suggest is a peculiar kind of eurocentrism – one that assumes the analytical coevality of different regions of the world, with the European past as nonetheless an important and exceptional template offering crucial and exemplary historical principles.

After proceeding to extensively narrate the 'tiresome tale of the sad effects which caste has produced'⁵ to his audience, Ambedkar turns to identify the constructive aspects of his address: namely, to what ideals a caste society should, in his view, aspire. It is here, that the eurocentrism of his views is especially pronounced: 'If you ask me, my ideal would be a society based on Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. And why not?'⁶ Ambedkar's privileging of the slogan of the French revolution as the basis of political ideals is significant not only merely because of its origins, but because he would undoubtedly have been aware of a variety of contending alternatives, including those he would go on to articulate later in his life. So, what did he perceive of value

in these principles, in particular, bearing in mind, of course, the specific subject against which they gained salience?

Ambedkar could not imagine any objection to a fraternity or what he understood as social endosmosis or democracy. An ideal society consisted of this 'mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. It is essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellowmen.⁷ Concerning liberty, Ambedkar intended the 'effective and competent use of a person's powers,⁸ or the freedom to choose one's profession. He contrasted such a definition of liberty to slavery or a state of society as with the caste system where some were compelled to pursue certain prescribed callings which are not of their choice but thrust on them by others. As for equality, Ambedkar conceded that this was the most contentious aspect of the slogan that he would have adopted, given the inherent inequalities that characterized men. Yet, the ideal was desirable not only from the point of view of the good of the social body to get the most out of its members but from the perspective of the statesman who 'must follow some rough and ready rule and that rough and ready rule is to treat all men alike not because they are alike but because classification and assortment are impossible'.⁹ As I will suggest later on, these principles came to inform the practical measures he proposes for the annihilation of caste.

Ambedkar subsequently turns to social reformers like the Arya Samajists and their defence of Chaturvanya, or the division of society into the four classes of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. Here again, we see the critical influence of his invoking the contrasts with European history and society. Countering the necessity of the four labels, he asked, 'If European society honours its soldiers and its servants without giving them permanent labels, why should Hindu society find it difficult to do so is a question, which Arya Samajists have not cared to consider.¹⁰ Likewise, when considering the question of why the majority of people tolerated the social evils to which they had been subjected under the system of Chaturvanya, Ambedkar returns to Europe to draw out the differences:

"Why have there not been social revolutions in India, is a question which has incessantly troubled me. There is only one answer, which I can give and it is that the lower classes of Hindus have been completely disabled from direct action on account of this wretched system of Chaturvarnya. They could not bear arms and without arms, they could not rebel. They were all ploughmen or rather condemned to be ploughmen and they never were allowed to convert their ploughshare into swords. They had no bayonets and therefore everyone who chose could and did sit upon them. On account of the Chaturvarnya, they could receive no education. They could not think out or know the way to their salvation. They were condemned to be lowly and not knowing the way of escape and not having the means of escape, they became

reconciled to eternal servitude, which they accepted as their inescapable fate. It is true that even in Europe the strong have not shrunk from the exploitation, nay the spoliation of the weak. But in Europe, the strong have never contrived to make the weak helpless against exploitation so shamelessly as was the case in India among the Hindus. Social war has been raging between the strong and the weak far more violently in Europe than it has ever been in India. Yet, the weak in Europe have had in his freedom of military service his *physical weapon*, in suffering his *political weapon* and in education his *moral weapon*. These three weapons for emancipation were never withheld by the strong from the weak in Europe. All these weapons were, however, denied to the masses in India by Chaturvarnya."¹¹

Ambedkar's gesturing to the aforementioned features of European society works as a foil against which his understanding of Chaturvarnya acquires greater meaning. It is as though his understanding of caste society in India is necessarily mediated by what he perceives as its antithesis in Europe. Ambedkar was clearly not burdened by the postcolonial anxiety of comparison with the history of that region, rather, such analytical moves proved essential to his overall task of developing a critical understanding of how caste had tragically stunted the potential dynamism of and freedom within Indian society.

Ambedkar is ultimately skeptical about the possibilities of destroying caste, and by extension, the religion of the Hindus, even if he does conceive of plausible avenues for doing so. He clarifies that while he condemns a religion of rules, this by no means implies a lack of necessity for a religion per se: '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".¹² Ambedkar favors a religion of principles and outlines a series of reforms— all centered on the norms of the Hindu religion— that would bring about a new doctrinal basis consistent with 'Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, in short, with Democracy'.¹³ For him, this implied a complete break with the past, a radical transformation in the notions and values of life: 'It means a complete change in outlook and in attitude towards men and things. It means conversion... it means new life'.¹⁴ Although not put in precisely those terms, one might argue that Ambedkar was in fact calling for the Europeanization of Indian society.

Critics of eurocentrism contend that comparing European societies, histories, and theories to non-Western ones commits violence to an adequate and true understanding of the latter. The argument often proceeds that doing so unduly privileges Europe as a normative ideal, against which the characteristics of non-Western societies are perceived as a lack, or deviation. Furthermore, it is argued that Eurocentric world-views by virtue of their close affinities to colonial contexts are inherently suspect and dubious

perspectives. As I have suggested, Ambedkar, in his *Annihilation of caste*, seems blissfully indifferent to such concerns. Rather, Europe functions for his chosen task of elaborating what he meant by the annihilation of caste as a crucial reference against which the norms of caste are apprehended as social evils. Far from being unthinking, however, as critics of eurocentrism often allege of its operation, Ambedkar seems entirely deliberate in his choices.

The considered nature of Ambedkar's analytical commitments raises, in my view, a provocative conundrum for his readers and those concerned with the problem of eurocentrism alike. Namely, how does one make sense of the affirmation of European ideals by one committed to the abolition of caste in the context of colonial India? Ambedkar's thinking with Europe appears to offer a retort to critics of eurocentrism that their objections are seemingly misplaced if not irrelevant when it comes to the project of transcending caste. One might even go further to suggest that the critique of eurocentrism cannot but partake of an implicit defense of caste, if the desired objective is an authenticist and autonomous rendering of Indian society and its norms. If Ambedkar's eurocentrism was integral, and not simply accidental to his understanding of the defeat of casteism, analogous fealties can be detected in his thinking on freedom from colonial rule.

III

Thus far, we have seen the considerable degree to which European thought influenced Ambedkar's reflections on overcoming caste and the ideals from which he took inspiration to this end. I now turn to arguably his most potent critique of his arch nemesis, *What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables*, and in particular, the chapter titled 'A Plea to the Foreigner' to sketch how Europe functioned as an important counterpoint in these considerations as well. Initially published in 1945, *What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables* was a lengthy treatise that sought to systematically dismantle the commonplace view that had gained ground following the first provincial elections of 1936/7 that the Congress adequately represented the Dalits of India. In Ambedkar's view, his disaggregating analysis of the election results in this book 'proves beyond the shadow of doubt that the Congress captured all the seats reserved for the Scheduled Castes and that the Independent Labour Party was a failure, is a wicked lie'.¹⁵ He sought to demonstrate how the Congress had utilized the joint-electorate under the terms of the Government of India Act of 1935 to effectively muzzle and contain any independent tendencies amongst Scheduled Caste voters, and to artificially ensure their representation by the Congress party.

At a crucial point in this text, where Ambedkar's turns to confront what he terms 'the real issue'¹⁶ – namely, whether or not the

untouchables are a separate element in the national life of India— he engages in a series of juxtapositions with his understanding of European society in order to scaffold his claim that they indeed are, and that this separation must find reflection in the political safeguards to which Dalits ought to be entitled in the ongoing constitutional process. Ambedkar responds to a series of arguments against such safeguards among which he included the following: 'One such argument is that there are social divisions everywhere, not merely in India but also in Europe; but they are not taken into account by the people of Europe in framing their constitutions. Why should they be taken into account in India?'¹⁷ He initially concedes that in European or American society there do indeed exist groups associated together in various ways and for various purposes. He includes those of blood, language, classes differentiated by rank and status, religious associations, political parties, industrial corporations, criminal gangs, among other forms of affinity. Yet, he continues: 'But when the statement goes beyond and says that the castes in India are not different from groups and classes in Europe and America it is nothing but an errant nonsense. The groups and classes of Europe may be the same as the caste in India to look at. But fundamentally was (sic) are quite different. The chief distinguishing feature is the isolation and exclusiveness which are the hall-marks of the castes in India and which are maintained as a matter not of routine but of faith none of which characteristics are to be found in the group or the class system of Europe or America'.¹⁸

Ambedkar thus posits that while Europe or America need not take into account the facts and circumstances of their social organization in framing their constitution, 'India cannot omit to take account her Caste and Untouchability'.¹⁹ And he elaborates on the matter as follows: Ambedkar argues that, 'In Europe, the possibility of counteracting mischief arising from a group seeking to maintain "its own interest" does exist. It exists because of the absence of isolation and exclusiveness among the various groups which allows free scope for interaction with the result that the dominant purpose of a group is to stand out for its own interests and always seek to protect them as something violate and sacred gives way to a broadening and socialization of its aims and purposes. This endosmosis between groups in Europe affects dispositions and produces a society which can be depended upon for community of thought, harmony of purposes and unity of action. But the case of India is, totally different. The caste

in India is exclusive and isolated. There is no interaction and no modification of aims and objects'.²⁰ For Ambedkar, the possibility of counteracting mischief arising from a group seeking to maintain 'its own interest' in India does not exist, as it does in Europe, which in turn explains his understanding of the absolute necessity of political safeguards for Dalits in Indian constitution-making.

As we have seen, as with other dimensions of his thought, Europe functions as privileged site of what Ambedkar terms social endosmosis against which he contrasts the rigid hierarchy of India's caste society. It is as though his understanding of India's social forms and inequalities, and how they ought to be negotiated by its emerging political structures, is necessarily mediated through his social-theoretical imagination of Europe. One might certainly object to the actual substance of his version of Europe on the grounds of historical veracity – historians of Europe might not recognize his version in their own accounts – but this would be beside the point. As should be clear by now, Ambedkar definitely regarded European society, politics, and history with a determinedly idealized angle of vision that enabled him to not only critically grasp India's past and present but also to articulate prescriptions for policy adequate to the particularities of that state. It is in this sense that one might regard Ambedkar's eurocentrism as an essential component of his overall critique of India's society. For his project, eurocentrism became a powerfully enabling analytical gesture. The chapter from this book that he consciously addresses to the outsider – 'A Plea to the Foreigner: Let Not Tyranny Have Freedom to Enslave' – provides arguably some of the most compelling evidence of this observation.

The chapter in question elaborates a robust critique of the reasons why foreigners– by which Ambedkar primarily intends European and American observers– have been deceived and misled into believing that Congress as an organization is fighting for the freedom of India. In his view, they fail to make the distinction between the freedom of a country and the freedom of the people in the country. As he put it, 'The question whether the Congress is fighting for freedom has very little importance as compared to the question for whose freedom is the Congress fighting'.²¹ Probing the reasons behind this oversight and relative indifference to the question, Ambedkar mounts a profound critique of 'the wrong notions of self-government and democracy which are prevalent in the West and which form the stock-in-trade of the foreigner who takes interest in Indian politics'.²² His objections

proceed by way of what may be considered critical eurocentrism, in distinction from the generally affirmative moods surveyed above.

Ambedkar asserts that 'Western writers on Politics' have argued that all that is required for the realization of self-government is the existence amongst a people of what Grote called constitutional morality. Further, they believe that what is necessary for the realization of the ideal of democracy, namely, government by the people, of the people and for the people, is the establishment of universal adult suffrage. Ambedkar contends that he has 'no hesitation in saying that both these notions are fallacious and grossly misleading. If democracy and self-government have, failed everywhere, it is largely due to these wrong notions'.²³

There were a great number of reasons for the error of these views. Ambedkar included the 'incontrovertible fact that in every country there is a governing class grown-up by force of historical circumstances, which is destined to rule, which does rule and to whom adult suffrage and constitutional morality are no bar against reaching places of power and authority and to whom the servile classes, by reason of the fact that they regard the members of the governing classes as their natural leaders, volunteer to elect as rulers'.²⁴ Second, 'they fail to realize that the existence of a governing class is inconsistent with democracy and self-government and that given the fact that where the governing class retains its power to govern, it is wrong to say that democracy and self-government exist unless democracy and self-government are regarded as mere matters of form'.²⁵ Third, 'they do not seem to be aware that self-government and democracy become real not when a constitution based on adult suffrage comes into existence but when the governing class loses its power to capture the power to govern'.²⁶ Fourth, 'they seem to overlook the fact that while in some countries the servile classes may succeed in ousting the governing class from the seat of authority with nothing more than adult suffrage, in other countries the governing class may be so well entrenched that the servile classes will need other safeguards beside adult suffrage to achieve the same end'.²⁷ Finally, 'they seem to pay no heed to the fact that given the existence of the Governing class what matters most in the consideration of any scheme of democracy and self-government is the social outlook and social philosophy of the governing class, for so long as the governing class retains its means to capture the power to govern, the freedom and the well-being of the servile classes must depend upon the social outlook, the social conscience of the governing class and its philosophy of life'.²⁸

Ambedkar's critique of commonplace notions he believed foreigners had imbibed and accompanied their interest in contemporary Indian politics thus rested on the overwhelming power and prejudice of the governing class over

the servile classes in India that he would go on to illustrate in subsequent portions of the chapter. This was why he urged foreigners to ask, 'For whose freedom is the Congress fighting?' Yet, even as he objected to the assumptions that in his view guided 'Western writers on politics', this was not accompanied by the wholesale rejection of the West as a source of important comparison and contrast for Indian affairs.

Rather, Ambedkar proceeded to 'compare the attitude of the governing class in India with the attitude taken by the governing class in other countries in times of national crisis such as we are passing through in India today'.²⁹ He turned to revolutionary France to observe how the governing class 'voluntarily came forward to give up its power and its privileges and to merge itself in the mass of the nation'.³⁰ Further on, he would assert the singularity of India's governing class compared to other countries of the world, stressing, once more, the presence of social endosmosis that he earlier identified with Europe, and the absence of the same in India. Indeed, this was principally why the servile classes of India demanded the safeguards against the enormity of the political power of the governing class. Ambedkar put it, again, with reference to Europe: 'The reservations demanded by the servile classes are really controls over the power of the governing classes. Even in European countries, there is a demand for control over the powers of certain classes of society. There is control on producers, distributors, money-lenders and landlords. If the necessity for controls over the power of certain classes is admitted in countries where there is much greater homogeneity and identity of interests than there exists in India, a foreigner should not find it difficult to appreciate. The reservations do no more than correlate the constitution to the social institutions of the country in order to prevent political power to fall into the hands of the Governing class'.³¹ Europe thus remained the privileged site of comparison even when it came to the ultimate and burning issue of explaining the necessity of political safeguards for the Dalits of late colonial India.

In the closing section of his chapter addressed to foreigners, Ambedkar directly confronts his imagined audience on the important distinctions about freedom he has introduced. 'But what annoys most' he says, 'is the attitude of the leaders of the British Labour Party, heads of radical and leftist groups in Europe and America, represented by men like Laski, Kingsley Martin, Brailsford and editors of journals like the *Nation* in America, and the *New Statesman* in England championing the cause of the oppressed and suppressed people. How can these men support the Congress pass one's comprehension?'³² He continues, to pose a series of rhetorical questions designed to draw attention to the harmful effects of the Congress as representative of the governing class in India upon the servile classes. As he puts the matter: 'As everyone knows, the Congress is only fighting for national liberty and is not interested in political democracy. The party in India who is fighting for political democracy is the party of the Untouchables who fear that this

Congress fight for liberty, if it succeeds, will mean liberty to the strong and the powerful to suppress the weak and the down-trodden unless they are protected by constitutional safeguards. It is they who ought to receive the help of these radical leaders. But the Untouchables have been waiting in vain for all these years even for a gesture of good-will and support from them'.³³ Even as Ambedkar criticized them, it is clear that his own moral compass was directed precisely at eliciting their sympathies for his own cause. As he would ask pointedly later on, 'is it not the duty of radicals to keep in touch with their kindred in other parts of the world to encourage them, to help them and to see that true democracy lives everywhere?'³⁴ Ambedkar's plea to the foreigner was in essence the desire for British and American radicals to extend their solidarities to the political movement which he headed, as opposed to blindly vesting their interests in the Congress' own.

One of Ambedkar's final points in this chapter was that not all struggles for freedom were of an equal moral significance due to the differences between their respective motives and purposes. In order to illustrate the claim, he reached towards the history of England yet again: 'To take only a few illustrations from English History. The Baron's Rebellion against John which resulted in the Magna Charta could be called a battle for freedom. But could any democrat in modern times give it the same support which he would give – say to the Levellers' Rebellion or to the Peasant's Revolt in English History, merely because it could logically be described as a battle for freedom? To do so will be to respond to a false cry of freedom'.³⁵ In drawing such parallels between the histories of England and India, he sought to appeal to the better democratic sentiments of his intended readers to overcome their uncritical embrace of the Congress and to value how the political concerns of Dalits in late colonial India were those most faithfully aligned with the causes of freedom and genuine political democracy. In reaching for such comparisons, Ambedkar further evidenced his commitment to an intellectual practice in which, as this paper has sought to demonstrate, he was deeply immersed.

IV

Conditions precedent for the successful working of democracy is an address Ambedkar delivered to members of the Poona District Law Library on the 22nd of December, 1952. Albeit brief, it contains some of his most pregnant remarks on democracy, a subject especially dear to him for reasons adumbrated above, and more specifically, an identification of several of its ideal preconditions. As with his thought on abolishing caste from Indian society, I hope to show how his analysis of the subject was deeply indebted to a European, and to a degree, American, set of repertoires. Unlike *Annihilation of Caste* however, with this speech, there is not a single mention of any Indic thinker or tradition as a source of influence on his knowledge about the chosen theme. This is significant, for the absence suggests that Ambedkar saw little in the history

of India that could meaningfully speak to the matter at hand, even more so, given the institutional and newly independent political context in which he spoke. The complete silence on Indic knowledge-forms thus throws his eurocentrism into even starker relief.

In contextualizing the subject of his speech, Ambedkar outlines three preliminary observations: that democracy is always changing its form that the nature of democracy changes even within the same country and that democracy undergoes transformation in its purpose. Where he draws his examples is illustrative. For the first, he turns to Athenian democracy, and for the latter two, he speaks on the history of democracy in England. When Ambedkar comes to define the concept, he resorts to those meanings proposed by the British journalist Walter Bagehot in his work on the English constitution, and Abraham Lincoln from his Gettysburg address. Here again, we observe the Eurocentric moorings of his political imagination. Ambedkar's own definition, which he regarded as far more concrete than those he had considered is revealing, especially given his observations about the relative absence of revolutions in the Indian past: 'a form and a method of government whereby revolutionary changes in the economic and social life of the people are brought about without bloodshed'.³⁶

The second condition Ambedkar identifies for the successful function of democracy is the existence of an opposition, for, in addition to the veto on power providing by elections, there must be those within parliament to effectively challenge the government of the day. Tellingly, he does not perceive such an agent as a meaningful force in contemporary and independent India. He states, with evident dismay, unfortunately, 'in our country all our newspapers, for one reason or the other, I believe, it is the revenue from advertisements, have given far more publicity to the Government than to the opposition, because you cannot get any revenue from the opposition. They get revenue from the Government and you find columns after columns of speeches reeled out by members of the ruling party in the daily newspapers and the speeches made by the opposition are probably put somewhere on the last page in the last column'.³⁷ By sharp contrast, he proceeds to invoke the practice of parliamentary democracy in England: 'But do you know that in England not only is the opposition recognized, but the leader of the opposition is paid a salary by the Government in order to run the opposition. He gets a secretary, he gets a small staff of stenographers and writers, he has a room in the House of Commons where he does his business'.³⁸ Likewise, he continues, such an arrangement exists in Canada. In both countries, he avers, 'democracy feels that there must be someone to show whether Government is going wrong'.³⁹ Presumably, his wish was for such practices to be adopted in India as well.

Equality in law and administration is the third of the conditions on which Ambedkar elaborates, by which he means impartiality towards members of

the governing party and otherwise alike. He cites approvingly the abolition of the so-called spoil system in the United States of America, which was a practice whereby when a particular party came to power, it removed all employees employed by their predecessor. Similarly, he lauds the system in place in England, where 'in order that administration should remain pure, impartial, away from politics and policy, they have made a distinction between what is called political and civil offices'.⁴⁰ Remarkably, Ambedkar reaches back to the late-colonial period to offer a positive example: 'Such a thing at one time did exist in our country when the British were here'.⁴¹ During his tenure in the Public Works Department, the secretary of Lord Linlithgow, Viceroy of India, approached him to name an institution or work in his memory. Ambedkar consulted his own secretary, a 'European', who replied in the negative. Returning to his present, he continued with regret: 'Such a thing at any rate in this country to do would be quite impossible. For any officer to say something which is contrary to the wishes of the Minister is, to my mind, utterly impossible. But in those days it was quite possible, because we too in India like Great Britain had made that wise decision that administration must not be interfered with by the Government, and that the function of the Government was to lay down policy but not to interfere and not to make any discrimination. This is very fundamental and I am afraid we have already departed from that and may completely abnegate and abolish the thing we have had so far'.⁴² Ambedkar's extolling of British and British colonial administrative practices as against those he observed in independent India conveys, in no unclear terms, his sense of the superiority of the former over the latter.

The fourth condition that Ambedkar posits is the observance of what he terms constitutional morality. As chairman of the drafting committee of the Indian constitution, one might have expected him to be sanguine towards the accomplishment of that lengthy and arduous task. But he was not. 'Many people seem to be very enthusiastic about the constitution. Well, I am afraid, I am not. I am prepared to join that body of people who want to abolish the constitution, at any rate, to redraft it. But what we forget is that we have a constitution which contains legal provisions, only a skeleton. The flesh of that skeleton is to be found in what we call constitutional morality'.⁴³ As was his wont, Ambedkar's illustrations of the principle came from the history of the United States of America, and England. He recalled how George Washington was reluctant to stand for the presidency for a second time on account of the rejection of hereditary authority. While he indeed stood for a second term, when he was approached once again, 'he spurned them away'.⁴⁴ Such fealty to the principle was clearly at odds with what the contemporary prime minister of India would go on to do – serving for nearly the first two decades of independent India's existence. He also turned to the history of parliamentary democracy in England to observe as follows: 'If you read English history, you will find many such illustrations where the party leaders

have had before them many temptations to do wrong to their opponents in office or in opposition by clutching at an issue which gave them temporary power, but which they refused to fall a prey to, because they knew that they would damage the constitution and damage democracy'.⁴⁵ Although he does not explicitly state as much, one might reasonably infer that he found the due respect for this principle lacking in India.

The next condition Ambedkar notes as necessary for the function of democracy is the absence of tyranny of a parliamentary majority over the minority: 'The minority must always feel safe that although the majority is carrying on the Government, the minority is not being hurt, or the minority is not being hit below the belt'.⁴⁶ Yet again, Ambedkar observes the contrast in this respect between England and India. As he puts it: 'This is a thing which is very greatly respected in the House of Commons'.⁴⁷ By way of example, he invokes the aftermath of 1931 elections, when the Labour Party emerged with a mere fifty members out of six-hundred and fifty. Yet he had never heard of a single instance of complaint from this small minority that they had been denied their due rights of speech, opposition, or the making of motions. By contrast, he drew his audience's attention to what was afoot within the Indian parliament. Even as he admitted to being less than pleased with the number of motions the minority issued forth: 'All the same, you must have noticed that there is hardly any motion, whether of adjournment or censure which has been admitted for the debate. It surprises me considerably. In my reading of the English parliamentary debates I have very seldom come across a case where a demand for adjournment has been refused...'.⁴⁸ Ambedkar's juxtaposing parliamentary practices in India to those in England once more reveals his preference for the latter over the former.

The last two requirements that Ambedkar outlines concern what he terms the 'functioning of moral order' and 'public conscience'. He complains that theorists of democracy have not addressed the question of moral order at any great length, and that the only person to have done so, was Harold Laski who 'categorically stated that the moral order is always taken for granted in democracy. If there is no moral order, democracy will go to pieces as it is going now probably in our own country'.⁴⁹ Ambedkar was clearly skeptical of the trajectory democracy was taking in India in his own time. As for public conscience, he meant 'conscience which becomes agitated at every wrong, no matter who is the sufferer and it means that everybody whether he suffers that particular wrong or not, is prepared to join him in order to get him relieved'.⁵⁰ The most arresting of the examples Ambedkar chose came from South Africa where whites had joined the struggle of Indians against that regime. 'Recently, I have been reading that a large number of young boys and girls belonging to the white race are also joining the struggle of the Indians in South Africa. That is called "public conscience"'.⁵¹ Yet, when he looked at India, he found such sentiment lacking. Ambedkar elaborated as follows: 'I do not want to shock you, but sometimes I feel how forgetful we

are. We are talking about South Africa. I have been wondering within myself whether we who are talking so much against segregation and so on do not have South Africa in every village. There is; we have only to go and see. There is South Africa everywhere in the village and yet I have very seldom found anybody not belonging to the scheduled class taking up the cause of the scheduled class and fighting, and why? Because there is no "public conscience".⁵²

The greater import of Ambedkar's speech was to warn against a sense of complacency he presumably detected on account of the departure of the British from India and the passage of the constitution that provided for a democracy. As he reminded his audience of the work ahead: 'Let me warn you against this kind of smug feeling that with the making of the constitution our task is done. It is not done. It has only begun. You must remember that democracy is not a plant which grows everywhere. It has grown in America. It has grown in England. To some extent, it has grown in France. Yes, these are examples by which we can take a certain amount of courage to ourselves to see what has happened elsewhere'.⁵³ As we have seen throughout the preceding passages, the ideals upon which he drew as examples of conditions precedent for the successful working of democracy were almost exclusively drawn from those of western nations and more specifically, that of the departed imperial power, as against the various shortcomings, lacks, and absences, he saw in the young democracy of India.

Ambedkar's eurocentrism with respect to his thinking on the preconditions of democracy cannot be easily dismissed or explained away as solely a function of his educational background or unexamined assumptions. For with him we have a thinker deeply and resolutely convinced of the value of western practices and their worthiness of emulation in India. He ended his speech, for instance, with the following plea: 'You ought to consider whether we ought not to take some very positive steps in order to remove some of the stones and boulders which are lying in our path in order to make our democracy safe'.⁵⁴ He clearly believed the effort was worthwhile, irrespective of the original source of these practices. Ambedkar appears to be saying that European thought, to modify a phrase initially coined by Dipesh Chakrabarty, was entirely indispensable and wholly adequate to the conditions obtained in India. His was seemingly unrepentant and unapologetic eurocentrism, precisely because of the immense and unconditional value, he saw in European practices of parliamentary democracy for a country like his own. In a sense, it was immaterial that they originated in Europe, due to the fact that he evidently believed that they were the surest basis on which democracy could be nurtured and strengthened.

V

We have observed at some length then, the depth and diversity of Ambedkar's

invocations of the history and ideas he associated with Europe or the West in his conceptualizing how to overcome caste and casteism, the need for adequate Dalit political representation at a crucial juncture in India's struggle for freedom, as well as the preconditions of democracy in India. His thinking with Europe largely positions that entity as the fount of ideals from which he draws inspiration for articulating an emancipatory vision for India's society and politics. In doing so, Ambedkar comes across as remarkably unmoved by the proposition that non-Western societies ought not to be judged according to criteria devised in and by the occident. He partook of none of the postcolonial disquiet regarding eurocentrism. Indeed, as I have suggested, such gestures constituted a characteristic feature of his analysis of different aspects of the Indian ecumene that he would wish transformed.

What can early twenty-first century readers make of what I have called Ambedkar's eurocentrism? Undoubtedly a certain degree of embarrassment may accompany this realization in some quarters. For from the vantage of a not insignificant swathe of India's postcolonial thinkers, Ambedkar's unrepentant privileging of Europe would be a most unfortunate, if not condemnable intellectual trait. One imagines that they might see his eurocentrism as but the ventriloquism of his colonial upbringing, a regrettable feature in an otherwise valuable, critical, and accomplished oeuvre. Yet, such a stance, in my view, would underestimate why his affinity to European thought is meaningful, and significant.

Ambedkar's deliberate and at times, critical, eurocentrism ultimately urges us to reconsider the cost of rejecting or jettisoning the influence of European intellectual precedents from the critique of Indian society. For as should be clear by now, it was largely by bringing to bear the intellectual resources of Europe upon the kind of society he perceived in India, that he was able to mount his eviscerating criticisms of the norms and practices of casteism in his time and propose alternatives to the same. In retrospect, it is remarkable that in the cases considered above, the place of Indic thought occupies so very slender a place as a source of freedom. In his insistence that Europe is a barometer for India, the tremendous intellectual courage he exhibited might serve as both inspiration and lesson for those who remain committed to such critique.

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