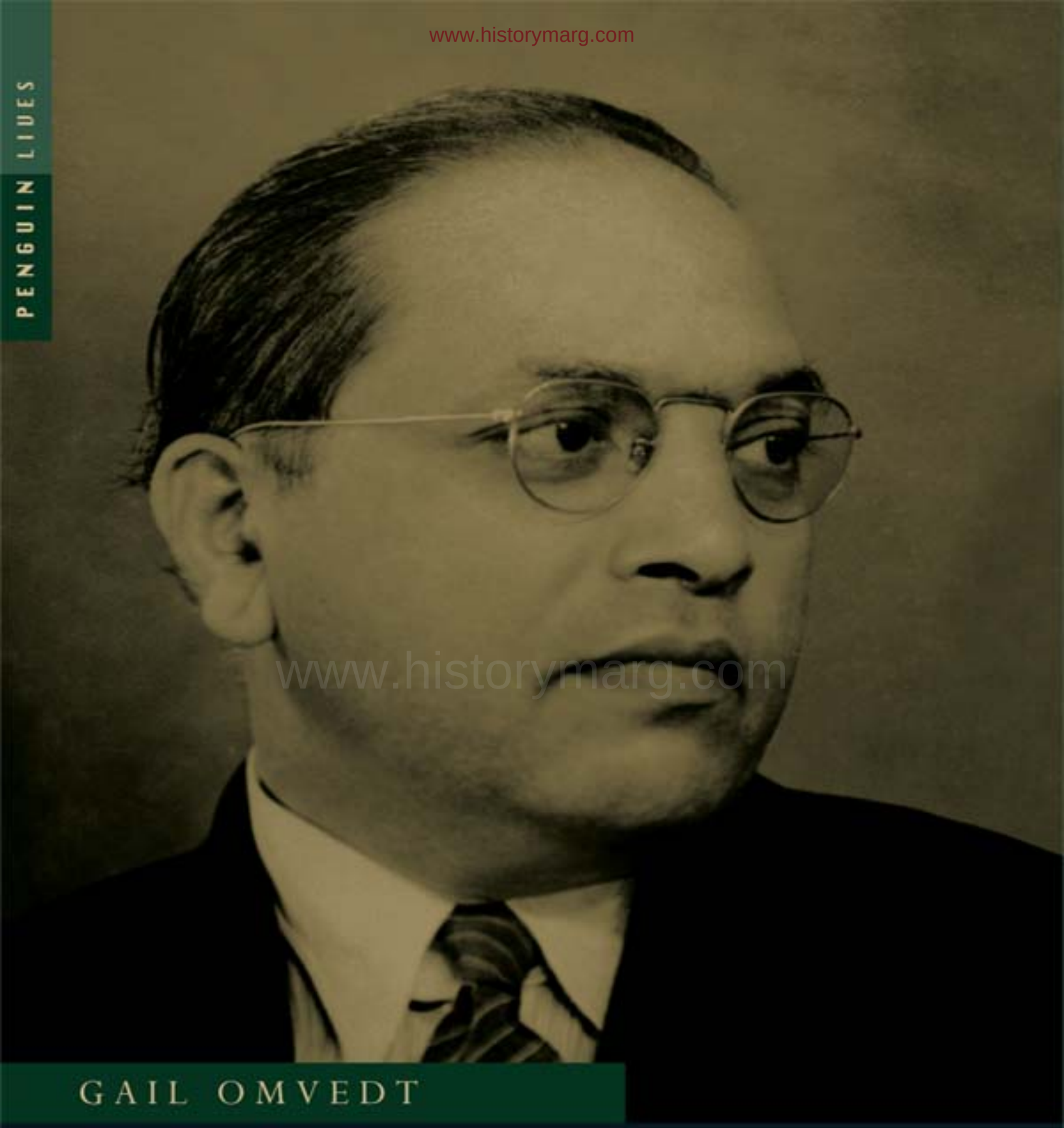
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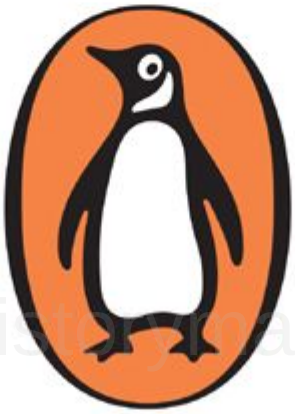


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AMBEDKAR

Born in Minneapolis, USA, Gail Omvedt is an Indian citizen. She has an MA and Ph.D in sociology from the University of California, Berkeley. She has been living in India since 1978, settled in Kasegaon Village in southern Maharashtra, with her husband, Bharat Patankar, and other members of an Indian joint family. She is currently a Senior Fellow at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.

Among her numerous books focusing on social and economic issues are *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste* (2003), *Dalit Visions* (1995), *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution* (1994), *Reinventing Revolution*: *New Social Movements and the Socialist Tradition in India* (1993) and *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Maharashtra* (1966). She has also collaborated with Bharat Patnakar in translations from the Marathi into English.

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To Prachi, and all the young generations of Indians, Indian-Americans and other Americans who are learning to see Ambedkar as one of the greatest leaders of modern India and to struggle for the overcoming of caste and Brahmanism

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Introduction

There are undoubtedly more statues of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar in India than of any other historical person of the last millennium. They have been raised in every village, on crossroads, in every Dalit urban residential area and in front of educational and governmental institutions throughout the country. They show a stocky man, usually dressed in a western suit and tie, holding a book under his arm. The book represents the Constitution of India. Following the overthrow of the socialist regime in Russia, which brought with it the upsetting of statues of Lenin, and the downgrading of Mao in China, the number of these statues throughout India and elsewhere represents the major monumental memorial today to a leader of the downtrodden.

Such statues have played a major role in political assertion in recent India. Their raising has represented a claim to pride and public space. Their opponents also take them as such and express their hostility to Dalit assertion by putting 'garlands' of chappals around such statues—actions which have often led to severe rioting and police firing. With all of this, it is clear that in the 'politics of flags and statues', Dalits have placed Ambedkar at the top of the world.

At the same time, the depiction of the Indian Constitution symbolizes the fact that Ambedkar was not simply a Dalit leader, not even a leader only of all caste-oppressed. He was a national leader—in a different sense from the well-known elite nationalists who led the struggle for freedom from British colonial rule. Ambedkar's nationalism was expressed in all his life's work, in the programmes of his various political parties, in his political decisions, in the many books and essays he wrote on problems of caste, of Muslims and minorities, of Pakistan and of women and in his role in the construction of a democratic independent India. He played a major role in the construction of Indian planning, in the formation of irrigation and energy policies, and his work in setting up colleges and educational institutions

represented the efforts of all anti-caste leaders to win education as a tool of liberation. Following his work in chairing the committee to draft the Indian Constitution, he became law minister in the first cabinet after independence whose most famous activity was guiding the Hindu Code Bill as a charter of women's rights in free India. All this represented a nationalism that was not simply the winning of political independence but of 'nation-building', the creation of social equality and cultural integration in a society held enslaved for so long by the unique tyrannies of caste and varna ideology.

Today the name of Gandhi still resounds through the world as a force of peace and non-violence. Yet what Ambedkar represents, the rising of India's oppressed and exploited and the herald of a new age of equality and rationalism, is beginning to catch the imagination of African-Americans and other racially oppressed groups, Japanese ex-untouchable Burakumin, Buddhists in Asian societies building a 'liberation theology' within the framework of their traditional religion and seekers everywhere looking for a new model of liberation.

Within India, Ambedkar is often contrasted to Gandhi, an opposition that is symbolized in their sculptural depiction. Gandhi, in loincloth and often with a spinning wheel, represented an identification with India's poor that romanticized the traditional Indian village and its spiritual stagnation. Ambedkar's 'western' image symbolizes a claim by Dalits to the heritage of the ages, a rejection of Brahmanic and other forms of narrow cultural nationalism and a modernism that even today represents the height of India's Enlightenment tradition. If Gandhi was Bapu, the 'father' of a society in which he tried to inject equality while maintaining the 'Hindu' framework, Ambedkar was Baba to his people and the great liberator from that framework. But Dalits rightfully protest against a comparison that links Ambedkar only to Gandhi; they see him as a world figure, one best compared to Marx. While Gandhi fought for freedom from colonial rule, Ambedkar fought for a broader liberation from exploitation and oppression. In his own words, like Marx he was not simply a philosopher reinterpreting the world but a leader of those who wanted to 'reconstruct the world' by abolishing exploitative social structures. This orientation to social

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transformation is expressed in a famous song by Annabhau Sathe, a Dalit writer who was a lifelong member of the Communist Party of India: 'Strike a blow to change the world, so Ambedkar told as he left …' Where Ambedkar differed from Marx was in his emphasis on the role of non-'class', non-economic structures in the process of exploitation, in posing the importance of spirituality, ideology and consciousness both in maintaining slavery and winning freedom. For him the answer was found in Buddhism, but whether or not one agrees with this, the issues remain central to all liberation movements.

The story of how this man rose from the poorest of India's 'untouchable', downtrodden masses to become an acknowledged shaper of independent India and a symbol of rationalist liberation in a new millennium is one that we will try to tell in the following pages.

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One

'Without education … Shudras are ruined'

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The Education of an Untouchable

Without education knowledge is lost; without knowledge development is lost; without development wealth is lost; without wealth Shudras are ruined.

—Jotirao Phule (1890)

Master of arts and doctorate in economics, Columbia University; master of science and doctor of science in economics, London School of Economics and Political Science; barrister-at-law, Grey's Inn, London. For anyone to attain so many degrees is impressive, but for an untouchable, born in a small rural town in a colonial country at the end of the nineteenth century, it is even more so. This superior education helped propel Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar to the leadership of a growing movement of India's downtrodden. The coincidence of several factors contributed to his success: the openings for mobility provided by British colonial rule, the help of a few progressive and far-sighted, wealthy and upper-caste social reformers, sacrificial support from his family and his own sheer grit and determination.

Much of these personal strengths came from his family. Ambedkar was born in Mhow, a small town in central India, on 14 April 1891 to an untouchable family in military service. He was a member of the Mahars, one of the largest untouchable castes of India, its ubiquitousness in Maharashtra marked by the saying 'Where there's a village, there's a Maharwada'. Mahars were village servants who performed hereditary duties for the headman, higher political overlords and the dominant groups of the village. They held small allotments of land in exchange for these services, and they were also agricultural labourers. In parts of the state, especially in eastern Maharashtra, they sometimes had larger holdings, and a few became wealthy farmers and even landlords. In both Bombay and Nagpur Mahars provided a good proportion (about 20 per cent in Bombay, 40 per cent in Nagpur) of labourers in the burgeoning textile mills of the colonial period.

Dalits in Maharashtra also had a military tradition dating to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Mahars and Mangs (the other large untouchable caste of the region) were among the martial races of India, serving as common paiks or soldiers and occasionally as squadron leaders. Sometimes they were made heads of forts or guard posts. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the British recruited such untouchable communities extensively for the Indian army, which gave them access to resources and association with new standards of life. Ambedkar's grandfather Maloji had been in the army, and his father, Ramji, born in 1848, became a subedar-major in charge of a military school in Mhow. Recruitment of untouchables was brought to an end in 1893, as the theory of 'martial races' began to exclude untouchables, feeding into increased caste consciousness. But by that time the seeds of change were sown.

The Mahars also had religious-cultural traditions that linked them to the wider traditions of rural communities and expressed their equalitarian and liberatory aspirations. Some were Varkaris, followers of the cult of Vithoba, the main bhakti movement of Maharashtra; some were Mahanubhavas, members of an even older equalitarian movement. Out of the community rose wandering mendicants of various kinds, often articulating their own synthesis of the Brahmanic, non-Brahmanic and Muslim traditions found in the country. Ramji was a follower of Kabir and observed the prayers and rituals of the Kabirpanthi sect. He was a vegetarian and teetotaller. Another uncle, a sannyasi of the Gosavi sect, had predicted in a surprise meeting with Ambedkar's parents in 1879 that their family would produce a great man who would relieve the oppression of their people.

Ramji and his wife, Bhimabai, had fourteen children. Seven died in infancy, a common fate of the time. The fourteenth, named Bhima and called by the diminutive Bhiva, was the focus of the family's hope for greatness. He was a spoiled and much beloved child. As he grew, he quickly gained a reputation for rambunctiousness and frequent fighting with his schoolmates. He showed a total unwillingness to admit defeat in any games. This belligerence and stubborn determination continued throughout

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his life. Though he was often cautious, he could also be overwhelmed by emotion, and he always played to win.

Shortly after Bhiva's birth, the family moved to Dapoli in Ratnagiri district and then to Satara in 1894 when Ramji got a position as storekeeper in the public works department. There his youngest son first studied in a camp school and then entered the first standard of the English-medium government high school in 1900. Here he was registered as Bhiva Ramji Ambedkar. Behind the name lies a story.

The family name was Sankpal, but Ramji decided to avoid its low-caste connotation by using the name of his ancestral village. This is a common practice in Maharashtra, where all names ending in 'kar' indicate a place. The village was Ambavade, and so the boy's name should have been Ambavadekar. His teacher at the camp school, however, was a Brahman named Ambedkar. While this man neglected his teaching duties to manage a shop, he showed great concern for the children, and the young, bright Bhiva was a favourite of his. To relieve the boy from walking a long distance back to his home, he provided him a daily lunch. It was in his honour that the boy's name was registered as Ambedkar. In later years this teacher wrote Ambedkar a warm letter when he became a delegate to the Round Table Conference, and when he met him again in 1927, Ambedkar honoured him as a guru. Thus one of the most famous names in modern Indian history came from a man who was a negligent teacher but a good person.

However, it was Bhiva's father rather than any teacher who was responsible for his education. 'My father felt great turmoil that I should pass my BA. Before dawn was a good time for study since the mind could be quiet and disciplined. At the time of examinations he used to wake me at 2 a.m.' (Khairmode 1968, 1: 59). Ramji himself could write English, Marathi and the Modi script well, and his fierce concern was that his son should not only pass but pass with distinction. Bhiva at first ignored his studies and was careless about exams, but once the family moved to Bombay in 1904, where he could access books of all kinds, he became interested in reading. Ramji prodded him to work, and used his pension to

buy almost any book his precocious son demanded. When this small sum was finished, he would run to his sister, ask for her jewellery and pawn it to buy more until the next instalment of his pension came and he could redeem it.

Bhiva and his brothers had never experienced untouchability in their earlier military homes, but in Satara they got their first experience of caste discrimination. Bhiva and one other untouchable student were forced to sit separately; no barber could be found to cut their hair; and when he wanted to study Sanskrit, he learned it was banned to untouchables. He could only choose between English and Persian.

In 1904 Ramji lost his position and shifted to Bombay. Keeping both sons in school on only his pension became impossible, and so the elder son, Balaram, took a job in a factory. Bhiva continued his studies at Elphinstone High School, where he got concessional fees. He had no student friends, and most of his teachers ignored him. The boy spent much of his time reading in a nearby garden. One beneficial outcome of this was that these long studious hours were noticed by a distinguished reformist scholar, Krishna Arjunrao Keluskar, then principal of Wilson High School, during his own visits to the garden. Keluskar introduced himself, and for long afterwards he remained an important supporter.

In 1905, at the age of fourteen, Bhiva's marriage was arranged to Ramabai, who was nine years old. In 1912, a boy, Yashwant, was born to them. This first son was the only one to survive, though four more children were born between 1913 and 1924.

In 1907 Bhiva got his matriculation degree. This was an achievement for an untouchable boy, and a congratulatory meeting was held, presided over by the non-Brahman political leader S.K. Bole and attended by Keluskar. Knowing the family's poverty, Keluskar arranged a scholarship from the state of Baroda, one of the largest princely states in India. Its ruler was a progressive Maratha, Sayajirao Gaikwad. With this, Ambedkar joined Elphinstone College, and in 1913 he passed his BA examination in English and Persian. There too he had little contact with his fellow students. Around

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this time, his childhood nickname was dropped, and he was identified as Bhim in the college yearbook.

In January 1913, Ambedkar decided to take up service in Baroda to show his indebtedness to the maharaja. His decision provoked a quarrel with his father, who wanted him to stay in the more open atmosphere of Bombay. Ambedkar persisted, but on reaching Baroda, he found that his father had been right about Gujarat's greater casteism. He could find no residence except for sleeping quarters in the Arya Samaj office, and he had to dine in the distant untouchable quarters of the city. Nor could he find useful employment. No department wanted to take him, and he was shifted around without being given permanent work. Finally, hearing of his father's death, he returned to Bombay.

Rather than go back to Baroda, he argued his case before the maharaja in Bombay. He responded with an offer of a scholarship to study at Columbia University in New York City. He had decided to sponsor a number of students there and, on the basis of Ambedkar's excellent English, selected him.

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In July 1913, then, Bhimrao departed for his first major experience with higher education in a world centre. He left a family of some ten to twelve people, scrapping to survive on the earnings of Balaram, who worked as a common labourer.

In New York Bhimrao experienced a scintillating new openness. With untouchability meaning little to Americans and Indians there, he discovered the joys of student companionship. For a while, he enjoyed himself. He spent his days seeing dramas, playing games like badminton and learning new sports such as ice-skating. Finally, remorse overtook him, and with a new sense of responsibility, he turned to his studies. He spent his spare time reading voraciously and scrounging in second-hand bookstores. At Columbia he studied the social sciences, primarily economics. He was a student of America's most famous philosopher, John Dewy, but it was under the guidance of Professor Edward Seligman, an economist, that he was awarded his MA in 1915 and submitted his dissertation for his Ph.D in 1916.

New York also brought his first contact with a prominent Indian nationalist. This was Lala Lajpat Rai, who was touring the United States on behalf of the Indian Home Rule League of America to recruit support for anti-British struggles. Ambedkar attended several meetings of Lajpat Rai's organization, becoming friendly with its members, but debated with them the problems of caste. He argued with Lajpat Rai that the nationalist movement was neglecting issues such as untouchability. Lajpat Rai's response that these issues could be taken up with vigour once freedom was won did not impress Ambedkar. Though the two remained on friendly terms, he ended his participation in the organization's activities.

In 1916, on finishing his degrees at Columbia, he decided to go to London. He wanted to earn a barrister's degree, another basis for economic self-sufficiency, but because of the academic orientation of his scholarship, he also proposed to obtain a degree in economics there. His Baroda scholarship had expired and when the Diwan refused an extension of two years, he appealed to the maharaja himself. Without waiting for a reply, he left for London, landing without any money in his pocket, travelling ticketless on the train and convincing the people with whom he was to stay to pay for the carriage that brought his luggage. Two days later a letter arrived awarding him a one-year extension. With this he registered at Grey's Inn for his barrister-at-law degree and at the London School of Economics and Political Science for an MSc. (Economics) and doctorate in economics. Within the year he had the outline for his proposed dissertation on the 'The provincial decentralization of Indian finance', but a further extension of his scholarship was refused. He was forced to return to India, his ambitious studies halted by poverty.

However, he had come out of this first period of stay abroad with two completed publishable writings. One, an essay on 'Castes in India: Their mechanism, genesis and development', was written in 1916 for a Columbian University seminar and published in *The Journal of Indian Antiquity*. A larger work was the Ph.D thesis in economics, published in 1927 as *The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India*.

In return for the scholarship, Ambedkar had signed a bond for a period of service in Baroda state. This he began—and again encountered extreme manifestations of casteism. He found quarters in a Parsi boarding house but had to live under an assumed Parsi name. Work was no better. Brahman clerks and subordinates were rude and talked openly against him; they kept their distance and literally threw papers on his desk to avoid any contact. When he tried to join the club where officers congregated, he was told to sit in a corner away from anyone else and not to take part in any games. Nor could he find satisfaction in his work. Though designated 'military secretary' to the ruler, he had no clear assignment. He met rebuffs with defiance and occasional harsh rejoinders, just as unwilling as the child Bhiva to admit defeat in any encounter or game. In the hostile atmosphere of Baroda he could find no friends and retreated into the solitary pleasures of reading by devouring social, economic and political literature in the library.

The unbearable conditions reached their height when a group of angry Parsis, discovering his identity, besieged his boarding house, determined to beat him up. The owner expelled him from his home. Finally, on 17 November 1917, he left the state for good.

Now the question of earning arose. Applications to the government were met with silence; there was no concern to employ this much qualified untouchable graduate—indeed, there may have been some fear about his nationalist sympathies. Rounds to private companies also drew a blank. Hopes of earning from his writings proved unrealistic. Finally he got a two-year position as professor of political economy at Sydenham College, which he held from 11 November 1918 to 11 March 1920. After scrimping and saving Rs 7000 of his own and with a gift of Rs 1500 from the maharaja of Kolhapur, he returned to London to complete the formalities for his doctoral degree.

Ambedkar lived in London for three years, on minimal funds and maximum determination. It was a life of abstinence, staying in a boarding house, rising at 6 a.m., leaving immediately and sitting in libraries from their opening to closing, going through his books. Among other Indian

students, who mostly enjoyed the life of theatre-going and freedom from family responsibilities, he made a unique reputation for seriousness at studies. But two new experiences arose for the young man—one emotional and personal, the other nationalist and political.

A close relationship developed with the daughter of his second landlady, Fanny Fitzgerald. She worked at the India Office, took notes for him on various subjects, probably provided him with some financial help, and kept his books for him when he returned to India. No evidence of his own feelings exists, but it is clear that she was in love with him. Later he referred to her as 'F'. Around the mid-1950s, after the death of his wife, Fanny developed some expectations of marriage, and one Indian newspaper published a report in 1935 that he had married an 'English widow' during a trip to London. Ambedkar, talking later of this relationship, asserted that women had no role in his life and his emotional attachments (he mentioned two, a Mahar fruit seller from Nagpur and an Indian teacher of English) were cause for only regret. In England, he claimed, he had to spend his time studying to prepare himself to confront the great leaders of Indian nationalism in debate. Yet the correspondence was carried on for almost twenty-five years (Khairmode n.d., 2:65–67; 1998b, 7:53–59).

He also became involved in Indian student life until it led to a political clash. He began to attend the Students Union in which various students read essays before the group. Ambedkar's essay on the 'Responsibilities of a representative government in India' sparked a heated controversy, until the well-known political scientist Professor Harold Laski ended the debate with the remark that the ideology reflected in the essay had too much revolutionary politics to be appropriate for a student group. After this Bhimrao began to get the reputation among other students as a revolutionary, even a propagandist of the Russian revolution, and all avoided close contact with him. He returned to his deep interest in books, frequenting both bookstores and libraries. He wanted a library of his own, like the impressive private collections he had seen in New York, and once bought a complete set of yearly reports of the East India Company on the Indian economy from 1700 to 1858. As a result, by the middle of 1921 he

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found himself in severe financial difficulties. It may well be that it was at this point that Fanny Fitzgerald provided important help. There is no record of any other resource of which he could avail himself.

His DSc. thesis also led to controversy. Seventeen months after his MSc. thesis was accepted in June 1921, he submitted the 'Problem of the rupee' for his doctoral thesis. It was expected to take four or five months for approval, and in the intervening period the intrepid scholar had decided to use his time to get a degree in Germany; he had begun a study of both German and French. When he got approval from Bonn University, he left for Germany, and then, in the middle of 1923, came word from his supervisor, Professor Edwin Cannan, that his London examiners had refused to approve his doctoral thesis. The reason was political—too much criticism of British policy, too much of a departure from orthodox thinking on international exchange. Finally he agreed to drop some portions of his dissertation and revise the conclusion and returned to Bombay in April 1923. He sent the revised thesis in November 1923 and was informed by telegram that he had won the degree.

Returning home, Ambedkar confronted the problems of setting up household, with his wife and child as well as his sister-in-law and his nephew to take care of. He wanted to begin law practice and registered at the Bombay High Court in 1924. Unable to afford an office near the court itself, he finally opened one at Damodar Hall in Parel with the help of contributions from friends. It took months to get a single case, from a Mahar, though interestingly enough he also got some supporting work from a nephew of Lokmanya Tilak. Caste Hindus were reluctant to give him cases, and, as before, he could get no support for his ambitious plans for writing volumes on the economic history of India. He finally got a part-time job teaching commercial law at the Botliboi Accountancy Institute to support himself, and also earned some supplementary income as an examiner for Bombay University. His habits of book-buying continued, and constantly distressed his hardworking wife Ramabai, struggling to survive on the small allotment he could afford to give her. But with an office,

library and constant gatherings of Mahars and other friends, his life began to take shape.

Then personal tragedy struck. A third son was born, and Ambedkar was more delighted with this child, named Rajaratna, than with any other, spending happy hours playing with him. But in just over a year the boy died of double pneumonia, to the great distress of the parents. Ambedkar later wrote

> There is no use pretending that I and my wife have recovered from the shock of my son's death and I don't think we ever shall. We have in all buried four precious children, three sons and a daughter, all sprightly, auspicious and handsome children … My last boy was a wonderful boy the like of whom I had seldom seen. With his passing away life to me is a garden full of weeds (Khairmode n.d., 2:104).

Ambedkar's early economic writings show him as an imaginative and careful analyst within the framework of neoclassical economics. *The Problem of the Rupee,* published in 1923 in England at the time of a struggle between nationalists and the British government over the exchange rate, was a scathingly critical analysis of British currency policy over the years. Ambedkar showed that within an open economy India could compete well at the global level, noting that Indian exports and manufactures gained at the expense of the British during the period of the low rupee. *The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India,* published in 1925 also in England, critiqued imperialism within a liberal framework, but was submitted to Americans who cared little about attacks on British policy. It showed how British fiscal policy had impoverished India through irrational taxation methods, through a land tax that prevented agricultural prosperity and heavy customs and internal excise duties that injured its industry. It was clear, he argued, that the British government was running India in the interest of British manufacturers.

Most significantly, he asserted that the government was not acting against social evils. The British 'could not sympathise with the living forces operating in the Indian society, was not charged with its wants, its pains, its cravings and desires, was inimical to its aspirations … [T]he Government of India dared not abolish the caste system, prescribe monogamy, alter the

laws of succession, legalize intermarriage or venture to tax the tea planters'. It would be social causes, he proposed, not economic ones, that would lead to nationalist revolt: improving roads and constructing canals would be of no use since 'any people … will sooner or later demand a government that will be more man a mere engine of efficiency' (Ambedkar 1989, 6:233–34).

Two articles published in 1918 in the *Journal of the Indian Economic Society* showed the general trend of his social-economic drinking. One, a review of a book by Bertrand Russell, showed Ambedkar as a firm developmentalist and a believer in progress. He rejected the 'quietistic' view of life of traditional India and the principle of limiting needs, which was later to be identified with Gandhism. Attacking the supposedly 'moral' critique of the love of money and worldly goods, he argued that 'at a time when the whole world was living in "pain economy" … and when the productivity of human labour was extremely low … it is but natural that moralists should have preached the gospel of poverty and renunciation of worldly pleasures only because they were not to be had' (Ambedkar 1979, 1:489–91). He saw growth in production and consumption as part of the development of humanity, leading to variation. He did not agree with the notion that property itself was evil: 'The trouble … is not with property but with the unequal distribution of it' (Ambedkar 1979, 1:489–91).

The second article, 'Small holdings in India and their remedies', dealt with the backwardness of Indian agriculture. Small holdings were indeed an evil, he admitted, but whether a holding was 'large or small' depended not on absolute size but on proportion to other factors of production. From this point of view, Indian farmers who owned only the most meagre of equipment for production (such as ploughs, carts and bullocks) had holdings that were uneconomic because they were too large. Agricultural production was inefficient, too much land was lying idle and the entire economy was maladjusted. It was the high pressure on the land that was the evil, and this in turn was due to the lack of industrialization. The development of non-agricultural production—industrial growth—was thus the main solution to the problems of Indian agriculture. It was clearly a 'non-Gandhian' conclusion, but consistent with Ambedkar's whole

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approach: the future of untouchables, indeed of all the Indian poor, did not lie in the villages but in the development of an urbanized and industrialized modern economy.

Ambedkar's formal education was over. It was strikingly different from the 'brahmachari' period of Brahmanic tradition, where attachment to a guru's household provided both authority and relief from all worldly wants, where family responsibilities did not exist and learning could be undertaken in an atmosphere of serenity and freedom. Rather, it was a period of struggle, of a need to ensure some earnings from the beginning both for his own and his family's survival and of fierce determination. His period of education was not only in the scholarship of the world but also in social experiences of poverty and caste discrimination. And his awareness of the importance of education was not simply an individual discovery; it echoed one of the most famous sayings of a man he later was to call one of his gurus, Jotirao Phule, who saw education as linked to development and prosperity almost as India's famous economist Amartya Sen was later to stress.

With education in Bombay, New York and London, Ambedkar had gained entry to the world's treasury of social and economic thinking. Few among even the wealthier circles of the nationalist elite had his breadth of scholarship, not to mention collection of degrees. He had undertaken his study as a Promethean fight to seize the gold of learning, as a resource not simply for personal achievement but to use in the fight against the oppression of India's untouchables. The meaning of the western suit in all the statues and pictures of Ambedkar is simply this identification with the heritage of the world.

His was also an education in the meaning of poverty. The struggle for survival started early. Ambedkar and his family shared the fate of common Indians in a period when the average lifespan was in the twenties. The early death of his mother, after giving birth to fourteen children of whom only seven survived, his elder brother's death after working as a labourer to maintain the family, the death of four of five of his own children—all of this showed the effect not simply of disease but of living conditions that must

have included malnutrition, overcrowding and lack of sanitation. This was a different experience from that of the nationalist elite. Gandhi may have travelled third class on trains out of conviction, but Ambedkar did so out of necessity. Nehru and his companions may have been able to give up their government jobs or connections with government institutions such as courts because they had the assurance that wealthy, often landlord families could continue to support the rest of their relatives. People of low caste and poor background like Ambedkar, who were the main earning supporters of their families, could not afford this. They had to assure economic survival as a prerequisite for taking part in the nationalist movement. While criticisms exist today of 'middle-class' Dalits, and Ambedkar himself was attacked as a 'petty bourgeois' by the left of his time, it is clear that the meaning of 'middle class' was and is different in the case of Dalits.

Finally, caste was a pervasive experience. Much has been written on the assault on personality that colonialism involved, the personal humiliation and exclusion from social intercourse. Ambedkar himself experienced some discrimination as an Indian and colonial, and expressed his own nationalism. But these were minor compared to the experiences of untouchability. Very probably due to the army background of his family, he suffered less from the psychological internalization of humiliation than most Dalits. His father and mother both came from army families, and could escape the humiliations of low castes within the traditional village system. Certainly, they instilled in their son a sense of ambition and self-confidence. But once the family had moved to the mixed community of Satara, the experiences of discrimination began. Such discrimination—being forced to sit separately, unable to study the courses he wanted, ostracized by other students and unable in a city like Baroda to find a place to live and work respectably—was experienced as an outrage and not as an expected part of a long-ordained place in society. It became clear to Ambedkar that such caste discrimination was all-pervasive, that it involved both economic cost and personal humiliation and that this prejudice extended from the lowliest villages and urban slums to the most sophisticated arenas of Indian life. Untouchability, and the cultural-religious

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force that generated it, became the defining framework of his life and its eradication the focus of his career.

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Two

'We are against Brahmanism but not Brahmans …'

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Beginning the Fight for Dalit Human Rights

It was clear from his youth that Bhimrao Ambedkar would be a leader of his community. Not only were there the extravagant prophecies of greatness made by his mendicant uncle but his father had also pushed him in the direction of 'social service'. The young Bhim had expressed this aspiration himself, arguing to the maharaja of Baroda that he hoped to combine a career of employment in the state with social service and academic writing. So highly educated a member of the untouchable community would take a position of leadership. Thus in the 1920s, when Ambedkar returned from London to take up a life of earning, he inevitably turned his attention to politics.

It was a period when India was ablaze with social turmoil. The nationalist movement was taking on new vigour with the leadership of an unlikely South-Africa-returned lawyer named Mohandas Gandhi. A working- class movement was surging, fuelled by a new doctrine fresh from revolutionary triumphs in the old land of tsarism. And, finally, though less organized, searching for leadership and ideology, and sporadic but ever-stronger, movements of the caste-oppressed were rising. Along with the Marxists and nationalists, Dalits and non-Brahmans throughout India were stirring and turning to direct political assertion as the Montagu–Chelmsford reforms opened up possibilities of empowerment, promising opportunities for them if they could only gain political support to prevent upper castes from monopolizing political and economic positions.

Dalit movements had been going on throughout India since the nineteenth century. Dalits had fought for education, for gaining wastelands for cultivation, for temple entry and, above all, for access to public space and the use of roads and public transport. They had gained patronage from various social reform organizations and from Christian missionaries. In Maharashtra the Dalit movement won support and inspiration from the Satyashodhak Samaj, founded by Phule in 1875. It also had an additional cause, as demobilized Mahars began to agitate for re-entry into the army.

With some resources—a little land, a base in the textile mills, jobs as cooks and butlers for Europeans, meagre pensions from the army—they generated caste and sub-caste associations everywhere. Mahars were the first in Maharashtra to organize themselves. Activists even in small towns like Ahmednagar fought to get drinking water from public tanks. Gopal Baba Walangkar, a pensioned soldier from Ratnagiri, led intense campaigns and petitioning against the closure of military service. Shivaram Janba Kamble, a butler in the Masonic hall in Poona, organized conferences, movements and petitions in the area from 1903 to 1930.

After 1917-18 the nationalist movement also began to turn to taking up the issue of untouchability. With the Second World War coming to an end and the Montagu–Chelmsford reforms stimulating a new assertion of Dalits and non-Brahmans, the old position, symbolized by the social conservativism of Lokmanya Tilak's slogan of 'political reform before social reform', was no longer viable. The first resolution on untouchability was passed in the 1916 Congress session in Calcutta. Organizations like the Hindu Mahasabha also began to concern themselves with the issue.

In Maharashtra the most powerful social reform organization was the Depressed Classes Mission led by an upper-caste Maratha scholar and social reformer, Vitthal Ramji Shinde, and backed by the Brahman reformers of the Prarthana Samaj. Shinde, a supporter of the Congress, had founded the Depressed Classes Mission in 1906, focusing on education and the propagation of a reformed Hinduism. He was also a major opponent of the Non-Brahman Party in Maharashtra, attempting to bring Marathas into a Congress-oriented political front. Thus Shinde's educational efforts were linked to drawing untouchables into the Hindu political and cultural framework.

The direction of upper caste reform efforts was shown by three Asprushyata Nirvaran (Untouchability Relief) conferences held in 1917 and 1918 by the nationalists. The first had intended to draw in Ambedkar by a resolution felicitating him, but he had left for Baroda and the meeting had to be held in his absence. A resolution at this conference called for backing the joint proposals for reform made by the Indian National Congress and

the Muslim League, though this motion was opposed by the most important Dalit present, G.A. Gavai of Nagpur. Gavai was a Hindu-Mahasabha-oriented Mahar, who later was to become a major opponent of Ambedkar. In a second meeting held in Bombay in March 1918, the organizers opposed Dalit conversions. A third meeting in May held in Bijapur was attended by Mahatma Gandhi, who himself strikingly made the point that a resolution on untouchable support for Congress efforts had no meaning since no one responded to his request for all actual untouchables present to identify themselves. Thus none of these efforts could claim to be representative of the untouchables themselves.

The growing non-Brahman movement became a stronger contender for untouchable support. The Satyashodhak Samaj spread throughout much of rural and urban Maharashtra after 1910, with the powerful support of the maharaja of Kolhapur. It propagated the rejection of caste and Brahmanic authority, and identified Shudras and Ati-Shudras (non-Brahmans and Dalits) as original inhabitants enslaved by oppressive Aryan invaders. This 'non-Aryan' theme had wide appeal, with the non-Brahman movement in Madras Presidency seeing non-Aryans as Dravidians and Aryans as northern invaders. It was also adopted by most of the Dalit movements of the 1920s, which began to define themselves as 'Original inhabitants' — Adi-Dravidas, Adi-Andhras, Adi-Hindus and Adi-Dharmis.

By 1917 non-Brahmans everywhere began to mobilize politically. This gave rise to the Justice Party in the Madras Presidency and in Maharashtra to the Non-Brahman Party.

The patron of the Maharashtra movement, Shahu Chhatrapati, the maharaja of Kolhapur, was not himself an adherent of the Satyashodhak Samaj. As a descendant of Shivaji, he claimed Kshatriya (and thus, in the language of the time, Aryan) status, but he was fervently anti-Brahman. Initially provoked by the refusal of his family priest to use rituals recognizing his Kshatriya status, he turned against the entire Brahman elite's nationalist establishment. This led to an all-around programme of reforms, which aimed to bring non-Brahmans into the administration of the state and provide them with education and economic opportunity. In 1902,

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while on a tour of Europe, he issued a government order for the recruitment of only non-Brahmans into state service until they formed 50 per cent of the posts. This was the beginning of the reservation system in India. Untouchables were part of these reforming efforts. Shahu sponsored a hostel for them in Kolhapur city and helped them set up small businesses such as tea shops. He also struck a personal blow against untouchability by stopping for tea there when he returned from hunting trips and forcing his proud hunting companions to do likewise—a remarkable action in the early twentieth century. *

The fierce attacks on casteism and Brahman dominance of the movement may have appealed to the young Ambedkar, but the relationships he formed with leaders like Shahu also had a social base. Shinde and his Depressed Classes Mission antagonized Ambedkar by their apparently bland assumption that they could represent the interests of untouchables; they made no effort to take him or other untouchable leaders into their confidence when they were formulating demands. Nor was there any effort to share food with untouchables. In contrast, Shahu was not only willing to take tea and food from them but also understood the need for autonomy. Shahu met Ambedkar in 1920, when he made a donation to support a bimonthly, *Mooknayak,* which Ambedkar was to supervise and which would be managed by a young graduate, D.D. Gholap. (The paper ran only for a year or so.) He sponsored a two-day conference at Mangaon in Kolhapur state on 19 and 20 March 1920 felicitating Ambedkar. At the conference Shahu said that previously he had also alienated himself from Dalits, but from this time he intended to behave with full equality and humanity. He also provided monetary support at crucial times, as with Ambedkar's second trip to London.

Perhaps as important was a personal rapport established between the two leaders from the beginning. They could meet as equals, in spite of considerable differences in their social and economic conditions, and discussed the problems of caste and Brahmanism in a way that didn't seem possible for Ambedkar with the elite social reformers. Whatever the qualitative difference between the humiliation that Shahu experienced in

being treated by his family priests and the Brahman elite as a 'Shudra' and the bitter discrimination Ambedkar had to confront, they still shared a common experience of caste discrimination. In spite of the occasional help from Brahman supporters throughout this early period of Ambedkar's life, he seems to have found more of a 'social' meeting ground with non-Brahmans. His own traits of stubbornness and a fierce determination to win were given more scope by the way in which Shahu could couple his patronage with scope for autonomy.

Ambedkar's first political act brought him into conflict with Vitthal Ramji Shinde. This was with regard to giving testimony before the Southborough Commission, which had been set up after the Montagu–Chelmsford reforms to tour India and survey the opinions of Indians on the franchise. With regard to untouchables, Shinde and Chandavarkar, as the most well-known social activists working on the issue, were invited by the government, which did not seem to feel a need to seek any direct untouchable testimony. Shinde's proposals called for a franchise for untouchables wider than the general one but still limited to those with fourth standard education. Ambedkar submitted his memorandum on his own, calling for separate electorates with eleven untouchables to be selected by vote (with a much lowered franchise) from delineated constituencies in Bombay Presidency; these would then choose one representative to the Legislature. Thus, the two memoranda from Maharashtrians were the most important ones on Dalit issues laid before the committee.

Ambedkar followed this up with a direct attack on Shinde. Along with Shahu Maharaj, he travelled to Nagpur for a three-day 'All-India Conference of the Boycotted' (Akhil Bharatiya Bahishkrut Parishad). Here Ambedkar pushed for a resolution against Shinde, arguing that Shinde's proposals would leave untouchables under the domination of the upper castes. Even after this Ambedkar continued to campaign against Shinde's leadership, and when resistance to autocratic behaviour within the hostels arose from some of the Dalit students, he supported them. Shinde ended up retiring in some disillusionment from his efforts for the uplift of untouchables.

More sustained organizing began with Ambedkar's return from London in 1923. People of the community gathered at his house constantly; the demand for taking up action programmes was growing. On 9 March 1924 he took the first step by forming the Bahishkrut Hitakarni Sabha, with himself as president of the managing committee and with distinguished supporters such as Sir Chimanlal Setalvad, K.F. Nariman and others on the board. The term 'bahiskrut', which had been used by a small organization in Akola district in 1920, was perhaps the first effort by untouchables themselves to find an appropriate nomenclature. Its stated objectives were to spread education, improve economic conditions and represent the grievances of the Depressed Classes. The sabha started a small library in Parel and, with a grant from the municipality, a hostel for Depressed Class students in Sholapur. It also began to hold rallies and conferences throughout the Marathi-speaking areas.

Through the Bahishkrut Hitakarni Sabha, Ambedkar emerged as a mass organizer. He proved to be a powerful speaker, rationally expounding Dalit problems but at times being emotional and impulsive. Khairmode (1958, 2:99, 144–45) gives an example of a meeting in Satara at which a Brahman speaker, Soman, criticized untouchable requests to be taken into government service at a time when the national movement was calling for boycott of official positions. Ambedkar rose and turned on him, savagely and relentlessly attacking the hypocrisy of Brahmans who had monopolized the bureaucracy for so long and were objecting on nationalist grounds now that Dalits were beginning to get some education.

At the same time, untouchable issues were beginning to be put forward in the Legislative Council. S.K. Bole, a member of the Non-Brahman Party from the Konkan, moved a bill opening up public places to untouchables, which was eventually passed, though without mention of temples. Similarly, a bill was brought by the untouchable representative, D.D. Gholap, to abolish the Mahar Watan—the first shot in what was to be a protracted struggle on this issue. Watan lands were those traditionally held by Mahars in exchange for their village services; the British had ratified the

lands at lower than usual revenue rates while continuing to extract the unpaid services.

In 1926 Ambedkar was appointed, along with Dr P.G. Solanki, a Gujarati untouchable leader, to the Bombay Legislative Council. It was the beginning of a long, distinguished, articulate career as legislator that would continue until his death. He participated vigorously in council debates; when he confronted hostile questions—which was often, given his provocative (to the orthodox) speeches and interruptions—he was always ready with a reply. Once challenged by nationalists to remember that he was 'a part of the whole', he replied, 'But I am not a part of the whole, I am a part apart!'

Meanwhile, the first great mass struggle of untouchables was about to begin. It focussed on the issue of water rights—the most basic human need but one which was nevertheless denied to those considered to be polluting. The setting was the small town of Mahad in the Konkan, where the municipality had already passed a resolution proclaiming its tank open to untouchables. Links to Bombay were strong here, with many Dalits and caste Hindus migrating to work in the textile mills. Ambedkar had both a Dalit base and several supporters among progressive caste Hindus, particularly the Kayasthas (Chandraseniya Kayastha Prabhus or CKPs as they were known in Maharashtra). These included Anantrao Chitre, a CKP activist of the Bahishkrut Hitakarni Sabha; Surendranath Tipnis, another CKP leader who was president of the municipality; and G.N. Sahasrabudhe, a Brahman of the Social Service League led by the Bombay labour leader N.M. Joshi. Chitre and Tipnis were later to be elected members of the Legislative Assembly from Ambedkar's Independent Labour Party, while Sahasrabudhe went on to become editor of Ambedkar's weekly *Janata*, which he founded in 1930.

On 19 and 20 March 1927 the Bahishkrut Hitakarni Sabha sponsored a Kolaba District Bahishkrut conference in Mahad. On the second day, Anantrao Chitre unexpectedly proposed to move to the tank and drink the water. 'As decided beforehand I threw a bombshell,' he reported. The enthusiastic crowd of 1500 surged forward, went to the tank and began to

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drink. As the news spread throughout the town, angry caste Hindus began to gather and, fearing a further 'onslaught' on the temple, they attacked, beating up many of the offending untouchables. Subsequently, a purification ceremony was held by Brahmans.

This incident and the rioting and resulting police cases resounded throughout Maharashtra. Mahad now became a focus of a campaign that roused the Dalit community throughout the state and won publicity in India as a whole. Ambedkar announced a satyagraha conference in December to establish the right to water and also established the *Bahishkrut Bharat*, a bimonthly journal of eight to twelve pages that came out until September and then continued at irregular intervals until 1930. It was published from an office in Damodar Hall, with Ambedkar dictating most of the material to a team of enthusiastic students. It reported support meetings and discussions of the Mahad programme and of the Mahar Watan Bill—the most important issue pending in the Assembly—and it covered all kinds of meetings of untouchables or 'bahishkrut' gatherings, as they were known at the time, as well as the 'untouchability removal' programmes of the Congress. Furthermore, it reported on political events of varying kinds and discussed religious and cultural issues.

Bahishkrut Bharat's writers criticized the shuddhi (purification) movement of the Arya Samaj, noting that while the original idea had been to use shuddhi to create an Arya Samaj purified of caste, now the destruction of caste was forgotten and the goal became simply to bring more and more people into the Hindu fold. There was friendly but sharp criticism of non-Brahman and Satyashodhak activities. Significantly, one point centred on a demand raised by Dinkarrao Javalkar and Keshavrao Jedhe, then emerging as the young militant leaders of the movement, that no Brahman be allowed to take part in the forthcoming satyagraha. Ambedkar replied that their movement was not against Brahmans as such but against 'Brahamanic religion', which included those non-Brahmans involved in it. He summarized the differences by saying that 'we are against Brahmanism but not Brahmans, whereas they are against Brahmans but not Brahmanism' (*Janata* 29 July 1927). Finally, reports of religious conversion, especially to

Islam, and discussions of its necessity were held, with Ambedkar significantly announcing in bold type in his own article, 'We have to consider whether the Hindu religion is our own or not' (*Bahishkrut Bharat* 29 July 1927). Various temple entry movements—including one in Amraoti—were reported, and the Mahar Watan Bill was discussed extensively.

By 23 December 1927 tremendous interest had been aroused in the Mahad tank issue, and some 10,000 to 15,000 Dalits gathered under a pavilion decorated with a photo of Gandhi. Then the district magistrate issued an injunction against using the tank. Ambedkar decided to honour this, and prepared another symbolic but powerful act: a plan to burn the *Manusmriti,* which had been established as the traditional law book of Brahmanic Hinduism. The resolution to burn it was a multi-caste one, moved by the Brahman Sahasrabudhe and seconded by the Chambhar leader P.N. Rajbhoj. It was burned on the night of the first day of the conference. On the third day of the gathering, a militant procession was held with slogans shouted in the name of the Bhakti saints, Gandhi, Agarkar and Shahu Maharaj. On the same day Ambedkar held a separate meeting with the women, who were attending in large numbers. He began by telling them to leave aside the heavy silver jewellery used by the lower castes and dress as upper-caste women did, leaving no markers to indicate caste. He concluded with the advice to educate daughters as well as sons. Mahad from this time on became an important centre of Ambedkar's organizing efforts; a base of activity that had enthusiastic untouchable participation and important cooperation from a team of upper-caste leaders.

This targeting of one of the sacred 'shastras' of Hinduism linked the right to equal use of public space and facilities with the religious discrimination from which untouchables suffered. The 1920s had seen an increased consciousness about untouchable rights; temple entry movements were being proposed, though the major struggle at the Guruvayoor temple in Kerala centred simply on the rights of untouchables to use the road crossing in front of the temple. This Gandhi had helped engineer a compromise on, while E.V. Ramasamy 'Periyar' emerged as a hero of the struggle. A struggle over the Parvati temple in Pune and then over the Rama temple at

Nashik also began at this time. Ambedkar, however, did not get involved directly in any of these efforts, though he was the formal leader of the Nashik satyagraha, but instead focussed on secular citizenship rights and on actions implying to most the rejection of Hinduism itself. The issue of *Bahishkrut Bharat* published at the time of the Mahad conference had in fact contained a sharp critique of Gandhi's effort to maintain untouchables within the fold of Hinduism.

At the same time, Ambedkar did not accept the interpretation of caste in terms of Aryan conquest. Nor was he willing to fully condemn 'Hinduism', but was reading extensively during this period, buying books on the literature of the Bhakti movement, Tukaram and Dnyaneswar, and studying writings of social reformers. In this area as everywhere autonomy was the theme—his interpretation was to be his own, worked out through his own effort, his own study, his own experience. He may also have been working through the tradition of devotionalism symbolized by his father's participation in the Kabirpanth, becoming aware of the way in which Kabir's radicalism was absorbed within a Brahmanical framework.

His other activities continued. In 1925–26 two politically significant cases were taken up in his legal practice. One was the defence of *Deschace Dushman,* a fiery anti-Brahman booklet written by Dinkarrao Javalkar. In it Javalkar attacked Lokmanya Tilak and Vishnushastri Chipulunkar in provocative, vituperative language as 'enemies of the country', while holding up Gandhi as a positive alternative. Jedhe and Javalkar, along with two other non-Brahman activists, lost the case. Ambedkar took up the appeal and won their release, arguing bias on the part of the original judge who had agreed with the depiction of Phule as a pseudo-Christian. In another case, Ambedkar joined the victorious defence of *India and China* written by Philip Spratt, one of the British Communists who had come to India to build the Communist movement here. This case was also won.

In 1926 Ambedkar also gave evidence before the Royal Commission on Currency and Finance and published a booklet on the rupee—pound exchange rate. This analysed the effects of devaluation on different classes

in India and argued for a relatively low value to the rupee. Ambedkar's economic capacities were now being recognized by the British government.

As a member of the Bombay Legislative Council, Ambedkar emerged as a powerful voice. His most important bill was on the Mahar Watan, which continued as an issue for decades. The Mahars traditionally had village duties as one of the twelve balutedars, or village servants, for which they received various perquisites and small allotments of land. The British regime used the system, assigning the land to the Mahars with revenue payments that were reduced from the normal rent. Mahars were thus forced to perform for bureaucrats all kinds of free labour, in unspecified numbers and at unspecified hours. With non-Brahman support, a similar bill against the Joshi Watan had passed, ending the legal sanction behind the traditional payments given to village priests. The only reason for the British government to oppose the Mahar Watan Bill was clearly because the cost of the labour involved would have been far too much for them to pay directly. The Mahar Watan was in fact a prime example of the way British colonial regime could exploit a feudal type of surplus appropriation for its own use, and it resisted changing it until the end.

Iin September 1927 Ambedkar gathered a group of caste Hindus, Christians and untouchables to form the Samta Samaj Sangh, campaigning for intercaste meals and marriages. Little came of this. Efforts at intermarriage proved of no avail, when the one potential Maratha candidate for a marriage with a Mahar girl did not turn up, but the organization also made hesitant attempts to promote Vedic ceremonies among untouchables, perhaps evidence that at this point Ambedkar was not ready to fight all forms of Hinduism.

The 1920s ended with the Simon Commission and proposal for round table conferences to create a new constitutional framework for India. The Congress was boycotting the commission, and in a powerful nationalist wave, the Muslim League and even the Justice Party of Madras also boycotted it. But Ambedkar and other Dalits (urged on by Periyar in Tamil Nadu) were determined to testify. In all, eighteen organizations of untouchables came before the commission. Ambedkar's long memorandum

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was submitted in two parts at the end of May 1928, and his testimony on behalf of the Bahishkrut Hitakarni Sabha was given on 23 October. His memorandum called for provincial autonomy and adult suffrage and rejected community- and caste-based electorates even for Muslims. He argued that Muslims, untouchables, Anglo-Indians and non-Brahmans should get reserved seats, and he asked for a 140-member council for Bombay Province, of which thirty-three would be Muslims and fifteen untouchables. He also called for representation in public services. In the emotion-laden atmosphere of nationalism, the students in his law class walked out in protest. In stark contrast, his Dalit supporters described his memorandum as a 'manifesto of untouchable rights'. Thus the 1920s closed with the fight for Dalit human rights and a growing organizational and vocal opposition to the spokesmen of Indian nationalism, prefiguring greater conflicts to come.

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Three

'Gandhiji, I have no homeland'

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The Round Table Conferences, the Poona Pact and Nationalist Dilemmas

One of the great failures of the Indian nationalist movement is that it took place so much at odds with the assertion of Dalits and other oppressed castes. This need not have happened. Ambedkar, after all, had taken his very name from a Brahman schoolteacher and had numerous upper-caste friends. His instincts were fundamentally nationalist. His orientation to development and economic issues had similarities with those of Nehru and the leftists, in spite of his critique of their neglect of caste. He even expressed some hope that Gandhi's desire to combine social issues with political concerns would help the untouchables. Yet the Brahmanic Hindu framework of Gandhi's concerns led to a major clash with Ambedkar.

Ambedkar's modified scepticism about the Congress turned into bitterness with the events of 1930–32, and at the centre of this was Mahatma Gandhi. This period saw the Round Table Conferences, Gandhi's opposition to separate electorates for untouchables, bis fast in protest against the Ramsey MacDonald Award and the setting up of the Harijan Sevak Sangh as the main Congress-sponsored organization working with untouchables.

On 8 August 1930, in preparation for the First Round Table Conference, Ambedkar called an All-India Depressed Classes Conference in Nagpur. Resolutions at the conference demanded immediate dominion status, rejected the Simon Commission report and asked for adult suffrage with safeguards for untouchables that included representation in legislative councils (through reserved seats if there were adult suffrage) and reservation in public service. This approval of reserved seats with a general electorate contrasted with the demands of other Indian untouchable leaders, who at that time were asking for separate electorates.

Ambedkar's presidential speech elaborated on these themes. He argued forcefully that the multiplicity of castes, races, religions and languages

could not come in the way of India's readiness for independence. His eloquent and scathing indictment of imperialism attacked Britain for the impoverishment of India and for doing nothing to lighten either the burden of untouchability or the exploitation of peasants and workers. Finally, his reference to 'capitalists' and 'landlords' and his characterization of the Congress leaders as 'feudalists' indicate the growing influence of socio-economic radicalism on his thinking.

The 1930 speech shows Ambedkar as a nationalist. His nationalism was one in which independence from British rule was a precondition for creating an egalitarian, caste-free society. This nationalism, like that of Phule, Periyar and other leaders of the anti-caste movement, centred mostly on issues involving the construction of the nation as a democracy, not just on the transfer of power to Indians. It can be described as 'nation-building'. His unique contribution was to give this concept a fully modernist thrust—the society he wanted was democratic and rational, embodying Enlightenment values, expressed in the French Revolution trinity of liberty, equality and fraternity. British colonial rule was an obstacle to this. Still, it was less inimical to untouchables than to elites, who suffered the immediate loss of power. The low castes, however, had gained concrete benefits from the opening up of education and employment. Themes such as the 'destruction of our culture' and calls to defend tradition could have little appeal to those who had suffered from the dark side of that tradition. Thus Ambedkar's attitude towards the British was more of a tactical one; as he said later, while they were his enemies, so were upper-caste nationalists, and 'we cannot fight two enemies at once'.

The position was symbolized by Koregaon, a village outside Pune, where Ambedkar began to hold yearly rallies. Here, on 1 January 1818, the British had fought a decisive battle against the Peshwa's forces. The British erected a memorial to the Indian soldiers in the British army who had died during the battle, and of the forty-nine names recorded on this, twenty-two were Mahar. In his rallies Ambedkar said succinctly that Mahars had brought the British to power in India and that Mahars could drive them out. The implication was that the battle would not be undertaken to restore anything

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like the hated caste-feudal regime of the Peshwas. The symbolism of Koregaon was powerful. Many Maharashtrian Dalits still describe it as the first battle in the untouchable liberation movement, and even today, masses gather at Koregaon every year.

In October 1930 Ambedkar departed for London along with M.N. Srinivasan of Madras as representatives of India's untouchables to the First Round Table Conference. They were given an enthusiastic send-off in a meeting of 10,000 activists and volunteers presided over by the Chambhar leader S.N. Shivtarkar and with a rousing speech given by K.A. Keluskar. At the conference, Ambedkar participated in several committee meetings, always presenting well-articulated arguments. He gave most attention to the Federal Structure Committee, where he argued for a strong central government, noting that a government had welfare functions to undertake—mainly those for such oppressed groups as the untouchables—as well as those of defence and minimal administration.

He was unequivocal in arguing that the political power needed by untouchables could only be won in the framework of an independent India. In his opening speech on 20 November 1930, he restated the themes of his Nagpur speech.

> The bureaucratic form of Government in India should be replaced by a government which will be a Government of the people, by the people and for the people … The Government of India does realize the necessity of removing the social evils which are eating into the vitals of Indian society and which have blighted the lives of the downtrodden classes for years. The Government of India does realize that the landlords are squeezing the masses dry and that the capitalists are not giving the leaders a living wage and decent conditions of labour. Yet it is a most painful thing that it has not dared to touch any of these evils … We feel that nobody can remove our grievances as well as we can, and we cannot remove them unless we get political power in our own hands. No share of this political power can evidently come to us as long as the British Government remains as it is. It is only in a Swaraj constitution that we stand any chance of getting the political power in our own hands … We know that political power is passing from the British into the hands of those who wield such tremendous economic, social and religious sway over our existence. We are willing that it may happen (Ambedkar 1982, 2: 503–04).

But his arguments for a unitary state and adult suffrage with reserved seats and safeguards for untouchables remained a minority position. The Round Table Conferences would end by shaping the 193S Government of

India Act, which constituted 'India' as a federation of provinces and left princely states as autonomous units, undemocratic constituents of a democratizing country. Suffrage was slightly expanded, but still only qualified 30 million people to vote, and left responsible government at the provincial level highly qualified by the residual powers given to British-appointed governors. In spite of earlier commitments to the Depressed Classes, separate electorates were given only to Muslims and Sikhs.

On his return from the first conference, Ambedkar was again met by an impressive delegation of the Samta Sainik Dal. Before he left London, he had purchased a printing press. The British secret police reported a visit of his to the *Daily Worker* office, but the Indian police replied that he must only have been seeking help for the press and that he was on the black list of both Indian and English Communists. This press was to be used for *Janata,* which remained Ambedkar's weekly newspaper throughout most of his career.

The first conference was followed by the Congress calling off its Civil Disobedience movement and a pact between Gandhi and Lord Irwin, then Viceroy of India, resulting in Gandhi's appearance at the Second Round Table Conference with all the prestige of the national movement behind him. It was this that led to a full-scale confrontation between Gandhi and Ambedkar, both claiming to be the real representative of India's untouchables.

Ambedkar had his first personal meeting with Gandhi in August 1931 in Bombay. It was an uncomfortable one. When Gandhi talked about what he had done for the sake of social reform, Ambedkar responded angrily that 'all old and elderly persons always like to emphasize the point of age' and accused the Congress of giving no more than formal recognition to untouchables and wasting the funds allotted for the work. He concluded, 'Gandhiji, I have no homeland.' Gandhi replied that from his reports, 'I know you are a person of sterling worth.' Ambedkar retorted, 'How can I call this land my own homeland and this religion my own wherein we are treated worse than cats and dogs, wherein we cannot get water to drink?' Later, in a discussion with his secretary Mahadev Desai, Gandhi admitted,

'Till I went to England, I did not know he was a Harijan. I thought he was some Brahman who took a deep interest in Harijans and therefore talked intemperately' (Keer 1990, 165–68). This reaction was revelatory of the stereotypes about Dalits that Gandhi held. Ambedkar was called to meet Gandhi a second time in London on the evening of 26 September, before Gandhi's appearance at the Minorities Committee. In spite of initial feelings of futility, he elaborated his position for three hours, while Gandhi, spinning, listened mutely. Gandhi's failure to reply contrasted with his discussions with Jinnah and disillusioned Ambedkar, who saw Gandhi's behaviour as 'Chanakya niti', an attempt simply to gauge the position of an irreconcilable opponent.

Exactly how irreconcilable the positions were became clear during their confrontation at the conference itself. Speaking to the Minorities Committee on 8 October 1931, Gandhi called for its adjournment on the grounds that no compromise could be reached and suggested that informal consultations would solve the 'communal problem'. Since he had already agreed to separate electorates in his talks with Jinnah, the 'communal problem' was clearly that of the untouchables.

After this speech, Ambedkar and Gandhi faced each other with emotion and eloquence, each claiming to be the spokesperson for the untouchables. Ambedkar stressed empowerment and political protection of the Dalits. Gandhi, on the other hand, argued in a paternalist vein, 'What these people need more than anything else is protection from social and religious persecution' (Ambedkar 1982, 2:661). When the Minorities Committee failed to reach a consensus, Ambedkar responded to Gandhi's implication that as a government appointee he could not be considered a true representative of untouchables, arguing that, 'I have not the slightest doubt that even if the Depressed Classes of India were given the chance of electing their representative to this Conference, I would all the same find a place here' (Ambedkar 1982, 2:661). He denied Gandhi's claim that the Congress represented the untouchables by noting that there was little evidence of that anywhere in the Congress.

Gandhi went on to make an emotional plea for his claim to represent untouchables.

> The claims advanced on behalf of the Untouchables, that to me is the unkindest cut of all. It means the perpetual bar-sinister … I claim myself in my own person to represent the vast mass of the Untouchables. Here I speak not merely on behalf of the Congress, but I speak on my own behalf, and I claim that I would get, if there was a referendum of the Untouchables, their vote, and that I would top the poll … I would rather see that Hinduism the than that Untouchability live … I say that it is not a proper claim by Dr Ambedkar when he seeks to speak for the whole of the Untouchables of India. It will create a division in Hinduism which I cannot possibly look forward to with any satisfaction whatsoever … I cannot possibly tolerate what is in store for Hinduism if there are two divisions set forth in the villages. Those who speak of the political rights of the Untouchables do not know their India, do not know how Indian society is today constructed, and therefore I want to say with all the emphasis that I can command that if I was the only person to resist this thing I would resist it with my life' (Ambedkar 1982, 2:663–64).

Here, Gandhi was speaking in religious terms, not for Indian interests; as a Hindu and not a 'national' leader. Further, he was identifying Ambedkar's claims for empowerment with a separate identity for Dalits at the village level—just as Muslim claims for separate electorates were being admitted in terms of their religious identity. It was characteristic of Gandhi that throughout his life he resisted any implication that Dalits had a separate identity from the assumed community of Hindus.

The question of untouchable representation broke up the Second Round Table Conference. It ended in stalemate. All the Indian representatives returned, and both the Congress and Ambedkar attempted to rally the support of the untouchables for their position.

Most of the known Dalit activists in the country supported Ambedkar's position, and most continued to do so throughout. For instance, Swami Acchutanand of Uttar Pradesh, founder of the Adi-Hindu movement that argued for an original egalitarian community on which conquering Aryans imposed their caste system, toured to rally support. Hyderabad Dalit leaders, heading a strong, if often factionalized, movement, also did so. But M.C. Rajah, the dominant Dalit spokesman of the Madras Presidency and a member of the Central Legislature who had originally called for separate electorates, changed his position. He joined B.S. Moonje of the Hindu

Mahasabha, who had also originally supported separate electorates. Now Moonje argued that separate electorates did not necessarily mean that untouchables constituted a non-Hindu community; it would see them as similar to Sikhs who the Mahasabha considered Hindus but who had been granted separate electorates. Now the new Moonje—Rajah pact supported joint electorates. It claimed the backing of Rajah's 40,000-member Depressed Classes Association and had the support of G.A. Gavai of Nagpur. (Gavai's support, however, had little mass base, which became clear when he could do little to counter an oppressive gathering called by Ambedkar at Kamptee, near Nagpur, on 7 May 1932.) Ambedkar then made another trip to London at the end of May, lobbying with members of the British Cabinet for his position. The result of all these manoeuverings was to swing British support towards Ambedkar, and Ramsey MacDonald's Communal Award given on 16 August 1932 provided for separate electorates for untouchables as well as Muslims and gave them seventy-eight seats in the Central Legislature, along with a double vote, one in the general electorate and one in the separate electorate.

In opposition, Gandhi announced an indefinite fast, beginning on 20 September. While Gandhi presented this protest as an attempt to arouse Hindus against the 'sin' of untouchability, his focus was clearly against a separate identity for Dalits. In a statement sent on 15 September to the Bombay government, Gandhi stated that his fast, which 'was resolved upon in the name of God for His work and, as I believe in all humility, at his call', was 'aimed to statutory separate electorates in any shape or form, for the depressed classes'. It was thus a fast directed against Ambedkar.

A flurry of activity took place as Congress leaders lobbied for their position, arranging meetings of Dalit groups to support joint electorates and consolidating caste Hindu support. The pressure on Ambedkar became intense, since Gandhi's assertion that separate electorates would divide caste Hindus and Dalits in every village was now, ironically, likely to be proved murderously true if he should die in protest against these. On 19 September a large meeting of 'Hindu and untouchable leaders' was called in Bombay, bringing together Ambedkar, Rajah and P. Baloo (the cricket

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player) with Madan Mohan Malaviya, Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, M.R. Jayakar, Sir Chimanlal Setalvad, C. Rajagopalachari, B.S. Moonje and A.V. Thakkar, Gandhi's main disciple in untouchable relief work. Ambedkar was faced with a situation in which there was no alternative but to surrender, and a final agreement, the Poona Pact, was hammered out between Sapru and Ambedkar, and they signed it on 24 September. Gandhi then broke his fast. There was a fairly emotional meeting, with Ambedkar making a conciliatory speech that Gandhians described as a 'change of heart'.

The Poona Pact replaced separate electorates with reservation in joint electorates, but it provided for a primary election in which four untouchable candidates would be selected. The winner would be elected from among these in a second general election based on joint constituencies. In further compensation for the loss of separate electorates, the number of seats given to untouchables was nearly doubled (from seventy-eight to 148) to better approximate their proportion of the population. Ambedkar expressed himself as satisfied, especially since the proposal for a primary election appeared to allow untouchables a significant voice of their own. Gandhi went on to propose the setting up of a special organization, a kind of Anti-Untouchability League.

Within a short time, however, the warmth of the consensus was lost. By February 1933 Ambedkar had begun to change his mind about the system of primaries. Untouchable candidates, he felt, could not afford two elections; further, it would not give them any greater voice in the final outcome. He began to agitate for a formula that would require the winning candidate to get a certain percentage of untouchable votes even in the general constituency. Differences of opinion were also emerging on issues regarding the removal of untouchability. Ambedkar believed that temple entry was a very minor issue but that social and economic issues—including entry to public services and access to facilities like water—were the most crucial. By 1932 the satyagraha at the Kalaram temple in Nashik, which Ambedkar's lieutenants had been leading, though he himself had never personally participated, was suspended. Ambedkar was also beginning to take an interest in peasant issues, seen in a Kolaba District

Peasants Conference held in 1934. As far as caste itself went, he wanted no half-measures: the system itself should be destroyed. It was over this that the major differences arose.

Ambedkar had very clear ideas about how the proposed Anti-Untouchability League should operate. In a letter of 14 November 1932 to A.V. Thakkar ('Thakkar Bapa', who was to be Gandhi's nominee as head of the organization), he argued that instead of 'concentrat[ing] all efforts and resources on fostering personal virtue by adopting a programme which includes items such as temperance, gymnasium, cooperation, libraries, schools, etc.', the league should 'concentrate all its energies on a programme that will affect a change in the social environment of the Depressed Classes'. Then he outlined a three-fold effort including struggles for civil rights—access to water, schools, admission in village squares and public conveyances—that would bring about a 'social revolution in Hindu society' (Ajnat 1993). He also called for campaigns for equal opportunity by opening up employment and programmes of social intercourse in which caste Hindus would accept Dalits into their homes as guests or servants.

Ambedkar's letter was ignored, never even acknowledged. Instead, in a new inspiration, Gandhi declared that untouchables should be known as Harijans. The name meant 'children of God' with a Vaishnavite implication.* The league was named the Harijan Sevak Sangh. Ambedkar's demands for significant untouchable control over the new organization and for a focus on annihilating caste were ignored. Control was to be in the hands of caste Hindus, on the grounds that since untouchability was a Hindu sin, they had to take the initiative in changing it. Gandhi, as a supporter of an idealized version of Varnashrama Dharma and quite aware that many members of Congress were supporters of much sharper versions of caste exclusiveness, wanted its focus to be limited to issues of untouchability. The well-funded Harijan Sevak Sangh sprang into action with campaigns focusing on patronizing upper-caste Hindus working in Dalit slums and promoting cleanliness, abstinence from alcohol and meat-eating and other Brahmanic virtues—exactly the focus on personal virtue against which Ambedkar had argued. Furthermore, Gandhi stressed that the most important item on the

league's agenda was temple entry because it symbolized the religious equality of untouchables, or, rather, the ending of the sin of untouchability within Hinduism. Gandhi even renamed his paper *Young India* the *Harijan*.

Ambedkar and other Dalits protested time and again against the term Harijan. Even the pro-Congress organizations run by Dalits themselves kept such names as 'Depressed Classes League'. 'Dalit', the term used to translate such names into Hindi and Marathi, became prevalent about this time. But it was not until the 1970s brought the militant upsurge of youth movements such as the Dalit Panthers that it became generalized. 'Harijan' remained the dominant designation for Indian untouchables.

The issues involved in this Gandhi—Ambedkar standoff were immense. Ambedkar stood for a more universalistic position than Gandhi. He argued throughout the Round Table Conferences for adult suffrage and a more unitary constitution in which the powers of the states would be minimized. He and other Dalit leaders asserted that separate electorates for Muslims were more dangerous than those for Dalits. An article in *Bahishkrut Bharat* in 1929 criticized the Nehru Report, a major scheme outlining the Congress's proposal for Dominion Status. Ambedkar argued that 'by giving political concessions to Muslims the country will be ruined, but Brahmans won't …. [B]y giving concessions to non-Brahmans the country won't be ruined but Brahmans will be destroyed' (*Bahishkrut Bharat* 18 January 1929). He concluded that Moonje and the Hindu Mahasabha, who originally supported separate electorates, were more progressive than Gandhi. It may be that in the end Dalits failed to win separate electorates simply because they had less independent mobilizing power than Muslims. Nevertheless, as Ambedkar saw it, the Congress's acceptance of separate electorates to Muslims but not Dalits was not simply partisan but Brahmanic.

Gandhi's position and his championing the cause of 'Harijan uplift' work within the Congress added to his stature as a national leader. He made Harijan work a part of the Congress's programme, a commitment to reform that gave a certain benevolent aura that helped the Congress gain a base among Dalit voters. It also had important organizational results. Along with

khadi, it provided an action programme to occupy Congress volunteers in 'constructive work' when the waves of anti-British struggle were at a low, maintaining a national network of cadre.

But Gandhi's entire approach was paternalistic, as was perhaps to be expected of caste Hindu reformism. He rejected Ambedkar's claim to represent untouchables as a separate group because he believed that they were an inseparable part of his main community. This community was not really the 'Indian nation', because he did not apply the same criteria or the same emotion to Muslims, recognizing that Muslims had to be integrated into an Indian national community by a very different process. Why not untouchables? Because, to put it most starkly, for Gandhi they were already an inseparable part of the community *as Hindus*. It was because he wanted to keep untouchables as part of a Hindu community that he strongly refused separate political representation. In sum, he envisioned the Indian nation as being constituted of religiously defined communities.

Gandhi was thus a Hindu nationalist in his own way, one who saw being a Hindu as a crucial national feature. It pervaded his praxis, his politics, his defence of an idealized Varnashrama Dharma, his evocation of 'Ram Raj' as the ideal India. Gandhi could not separate his political leadership from his understanding of himself as a Hindu. While he maintained his right to interpret the Hindu scriptures in any way he wanted, he took for granted their sacredness. The interpretation of Ram as an ideal ignored the reality that the story in fact depicted a feudal patriarchal king who sacrificed his wife to the needs of rule and, more important to Dalits, kills the Shudra ascetic Shambuk to save the life of a Brahman. Similarly, the interpretation of the *Gita* as a manifestation of non-violence ignores the reality that its purpose is to convince Arjun to go to war.

At a personal level also, the fast represented a failure of non-violence. In fact Ambedkar posed a unique problem to Gandhi's whole non-violent methodology. Ambedkar was not a colonial ruler whose inner guilt or suppressed psychological tendencies made him vulnerable to universalistic and moral appeals; he was a leader of the most oppressed group within Indian society, and one who was perhaps uniquely free from the sense of

shame injected into most untouchables by orthodox Hinduism. Gandhi could also not appeal to a genuine latent identity with Hinduism. What was left was only external pressure: though directed against Ambedkar, the pressure that came through the fast-to-death was one brought by Gandhi's caste Hindu followers—the fear of a wide village backlash against Dalits. As a result, this fast at least genuinely represented a kind of moral blackmail, and it was this that undoubtedly made Ambedkar's own bitterness so strong. While a huge and energetic involvement with the work of 'untouchable uplift' and temple entry followed on Gandhi's part, he never had a personal reconciliation with Ambedkar. His later comments, especially at the time of his conversion, reveal his own sense of bitterness.

Later, in *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, Ambedkar unleashed a bitter polemic on how the electoral system set up by the Poona Pact meant that the untouchables elected in reserved seats would be controlled by the caste Hindu majority who voted them into office (Ambedkar 1990, Vol. 9). The Poona Pact remained a symbol of caste Hindu domination. In the 1980s, the rising Dalit leader Kanshi Ram, beginning a career, targeted it with demonstrations on 24 September as inaugurating the chamcha age, the era of dependence (Kanshi Ram 1982). While his Bahujan Samaj Party sought to overcome this by uniting Dalits and other Shudra castes, the issues of electoral representation remain. In multi-caste constituencies with only one winner, it is the majority group that decides which Dalit candidate is elected. At the very least, this put severe limits on the ability of Dalits to operate within the framework of a high-caste-controlled party system.

The attitude towards caste was only a part of the deep-seated differences in Gandhi's and Ambedkar's socio-economic visions. Gandhi was anti-industrial and idealized a romanticized village India, where people had limited needs and happily worked in their traditional occupations. To Ambedkar, villages were 'cesspools' that harboured caste oppression and social and economic backwardness. This had been clear since his earliest article on smallholdings in agriculture. Speaking on a village panchayat bill in the Bombay Legislative Council on 6 October 1921, he argued that it was

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a ‘very dangerous system … I have not the slightest hesitation in saying that [these rural republics] have been the bane of public life in India’ (Ambedkar 1982, 2:106). This was, he said, because their ‘local patriotism’ left no room for national identification or civil consciousness. For the Depressed Classes, village society meant dependence. In contrast, it was the urban, industrial society hated by Gandhians that represented a way out for Dalits.

With these major differences, the confrontation between Ambedkar and Gandhi did not end with the Poona Pact and the new upsurge of untouchability work in the Congress. Rather it surfaced inevitably once again over the issue of religious identity when Ambedkar and his followers vowed to give up Hinduism.

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Four

'I will not the a Hindu!'

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The Conversion Shock

Ambedkar had not begun his political career with a focus on religion or a concern with rejecting Hinduism. His dedication to study was focussed on economic and social issues. His earliest essay on caste, written in 1916, did not analyse it as irrevocably linked to Hinduism; it argued that Manu had only justified a system that had previously come into existence. Ambedkar's family was conventionally religious and he himself had a rather light-hearted attitude to some of the ritual requirements of a traditional life cycle. For instance, when he invited Mahar students for the first celebration of his father's *shraddh* or death memorial, he had Ramabai serve them mutton for dinner on the grounds that this was what they missed most from home. Conventions also seemed irrelevant to him at Ramabai's funeral ceremony, when he wanted her dressed in a white sari rather than a traditional green one since this was her favourite colour. There is also not much evidence from his early years of any great turmoil on religious-philosophical issues, of questioning the existence of God or of defiance of traditional religious ideas. He did not see religion as greatly relevant.

He made this clear to all. While he had taken a nominal leading role in the satyagraha unleashed against the Kalaram temple in Nashik, the actual organizing was done by his lieutenant, the energetic B.K. 'Dadasaheb' Gaikwad. After the initial march, Ambedkar did not take part directly in the satyagraha, and on 5 March 1934 in a letter to Gaikwad he wrote

> I did not launch the temple entry movement because I wanted the Depressed Classes to become worshippers of idols … or because I believed that temple entry would make them equal members in and an integral part of Hindu society … [but] only because I felt that that was the best way of energizing the Depressed Classes and making them conscious of their position (Ajnat 1993, 55–56).

Instead of simply becoming part of the existing structure, he felt Hindu society and Hindu theology needed 'a complete overhauling' and the Dalits should 'concentrate their energy and resources on politics and education' (Ajnat 1993, 55–56).

Religion, however, had become interwoven with Indian national identity in a distorted form as a result of processes taking place under colonialism. Though the Congress was making an effort to appear as a secular, multi-religious body, an all-pervasive construction of Hinduism had begun in the nineteenth century. In fact, before the colonial period, 'Hindu' did not designate a religious identity but was a reference to the area east of the Indus River, which became known as 'Hindustan' or 'Al-Hind'. The term 'Hindu' was rarely used in a religious sense, even under Muslim domination. Though conflicts clearly existed between Muslims and those following Brahmanic caste systems, these were most often seen in ethnic terms—as frequent references to 'Hindu-Turk' illustrate. But a powerful nationalistic reinterpretation began under colonialism. The broadening of the old Brahmanic religion, with an insistence that all the sects had their unity in a kind of Vedanta, that they all flowed from the fount of the Vedas, emerged as an ideology adhered to by almost all upper-caste intellectuals. Reformers argued that the worst aspects of caste and patriarchy had not been known in the Vedas and were against the 'Shastras'; their organizations proclaimed their loyalties to ancient Vedic traditions in their very names—Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, Prarthana Samaj. When they debated with the orthodox, they did so arguing from the same scriptures. The definition by V.D. Savarkar, considered a major founder of the Hindutva philosophy, that a Hindu was 'someone who accepted India as his holy land and his fatherland' made explicit what almost everyone assumed. Hinduism was in a unique sense a national religion; logically, therefore, Muslims and Christians were foreigners, perhaps descendants of Indian blood but followers of alien religions.

The divisions within the nationalist elite were not over this identity but over how to link it with politics. Those who eventually mobilized within such organizations as the Hindu Mahasabha wanted a direct link, with India defined as a 'Hindu nation'. Those who began to formulate a 'secular' identity projected India as made up of 'communities' of religions (Hindu, Muslim, Christian, etc.) and the Congress as an organization representing all of them. Nevertheless, they did not challenge the way in which the

Hindu identity was being presented. This was seen in Gandhi's assumption that untouchables were 'Hindus'. And even in Nehru's presentation of Indian history in *The Discovery of India,* which half-heartedly justified caste as a harmonious social system and described the Vedas as the origin of Indian culture, seeing Hinduism emerging from the time of the Magadha Empire as a nationalistic reaction to Alexander's invasions. It was only within the framework of the more radical wing of the non-Brahman movements, and the emerging Dalit movements that a more thorough cultural challenge to the growing equation of Indian and Hindu began to take place. Dalits generally disassociated themselves from the new Hinduism. And, after the events of 1930–32 made it clear to Ambedkar that this meant an ongoing subordination, he began to question even more radically the religious identity itself.

But as these issues began to preoccupy him in the years immediately following the 1932 events, turmoil and tragedy dogged his personal life. His law practice never provided him with adequate financial support, and in spite of supplementing it with teaching first at the Botliwala Institute and then from 1928 as a professor at the Law College, he found it hard to manage. His expenses on books and dedication of time to the movement remained the despair of the women who were trying to manage his family life. In later years he would lament that he had neglected the health of Ramabai and his son Yashwant, who was afflicted with rheumatism. He frequently vowed that one day he would earn enough to send them to London for treatment. But this changed little of the reality of family illness. On 26 May 1935 Ramabai passed away at the age of forty. Ambedkar was left bereft and in some despair. The provincial elections were forthcoming, and it was expected that, with both the Justice Party in Madras and the Non-Brahman Party in Maharashtra fading, the main contender would be the Congress, with only the Muslim League offering some opposition. Thus he began to broach the notion of quitting politics. The *Times of India* even published news of this impending political retirement on 25 July 1935.

But rather than leave politics, he engaged himself more fully On 12 October 1935 Ambedkar had been called to Nashik for a felicitation

ceremony organized by Dadasaheb Gaikwad. In accepting this, he urged Dalits to become self-reliant, to stand on their own feet and not to depend on him—and then remarked that they had got nothing from Hindus and that there seemed little use in staying in the Hindu religion. At a rally that night he gave a public call for conversion; a resolution was passed declaring that with no results from the two big satyagrahas going on under Ambedkar's leadership—the Kalaram temple satyagraha at Nashik and one at Mahad for the right to water—it was time to end them. Untouchables should become autonomous (swatantra) from those regarded as 'touchables' and win their own rights. The next day at a Bombay Presidency Depressed Classes conference in nearby Yeola, called a Dalit Vargiya Parishad in Marathi—one of the first recorded uses of the term 'Dalit'—he proposed a resolution for conversion before an enthusiastic crowd of 10,000, and declared, 'I was born a Hindu and have suffered the consequences of untouchability. I will not die a Hindu.'

Strikingly, Gandhiji responded two days later through a press statement. He called Ambedkar's rejection of Hinduism 'unbelievable … especially when untouchability is on its last legs … Religion is not like a house or cloak which can be changed at will'(Gandhi 1973, 62:376). Gandhi was constantly concerned with the issue from then on. He reiterated the idea that Ambedkar and others who were talking of mass conversion were treating untouchables as a mindless herd under their control. On 22 August 1936 he wrote in the *Harijan,* 'One may hope that wc have seen the last of any bargaining between Dr Ambedkar and *savarnas* for the transfer to another form of several million dumb Harijans as if they were chattel' (Gandhi 1976, 63:267). In a letter of 7 September to Jugalkishor Birla, he referred to Ambedkar's conversion as one done 'at a stroke of the pen and without the Harijans being consulted' (Gandhi 1977, 64:18). Finally, on 6 November, Gandhi depicted Dalits as mindless followers when he wrote C.F. Andrews that 'the poor Harijans have no mind, no intelligence, no sense of difference between God and not-God. It is absurd for a single individual to talk of taking all the Harijans with himself. Are they all bricks that they could be moved from one structure to another?'

But this mistook the reality. Although Ambedkar's 'religious turn' may have been a big change for him, for Dalits the move was no spur-of-the-moment decision and it was not a case of blindly following a leader. Many conversions to Islam had come by low castes being attracted to a religion of equality. For Christian missions also, very often conversion was a collective movement of low castes seeking self-respect. As one booklet published in 1936 by a missionary pointed out, 'The news had been coming for some years past, of so many village groups of untouchables asking the nearest church or mission for a teacher, that it has been impossible to meet the demand' (Khairmode 1998a, 6:79). Such mass Dalit conversions, often of whole villages or regional groups, were social movements for human rights. The enthusiastic response to Ambedkar's statement shows the way in which the issue was a fulcrum of thinking. To some extent it divided the Dalit community, with many important leaders opposing conversion and many of the traditionally minded reluctant to take a radical step. But it fit the mood of large sections of youth emerging in the struggles of the movement.

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A period of hectic activity followed. Ambedkar toured Madras in December 1935. There he met N. Shivraj, a man about his age and a Justice Party member of the Legislative Council born in a well-to-do Buddhist family who had been part of the earlier Dalit-based movement led by Pandit Iyothee Thass. He also heard reports there of discrimination against Dalit Christians. Shivraj was invited to preside over the Maharashtra Untouchable Youth Conference held in Pune on 11 and 12 January 1936, which supported the call for conversion. The necessity of gaining explicit community backing then inspired a Bombay Provincial Mahar Conference from 30 May to 2 June, presided over by B.S. Venkatrao of Hyderabad, and attended by 25,000. Christian, Muslim and Sikh leaders were present, and a wave of interest in Islam, especially of the modernist variety, was shown by youth wearing fez or Turkish caps. Ambedkar's speech on the occasion was published as 'Mukti kon pathe?' (What path to liberation?) in *Janata* on 20 June. It covered exhaustive reasons why Dalits could no longer remain within Hinduism, and among them was a reply to the Gandhian idea of hereditary religion.

> To remain in a religion because it is ancestral is only suited to a fool. No thinking man can take such a policy. Remaining in a situation in which one finds oneself fits an animal; it cannot satisfy a human being. The difference between humans and animals is that animals cannot progress. Humans can.

Following the main conference, a meeting of sants—Mahar renouncers following the Varkari, Kabir and other traditions—was held in which the gathered sadhus cut their knotted hair, shaved their beards and threw away the costumes and implements of their traditions. Patitpavan Das, a sadhu Dalit leader of Wardha district in eastern Maharashtra, later organized a similar conference at Amraoti, which saw the burning of Hindu scriptures and idols.

The sants' rally was followed by one of nearly opposite composition. Kamathipura in Bombay was the centre of prostitution, carried on mostly by Dalits who had been channelled into it through what is known as the devadas custom—they were *muralis, jogtins* and dedications of girls to god and thus turning them into sacred prostitutes. These women held a meeting in June after the large conference and decided to call Ambedkar, claiming that they too were considering conversion. Ambedkar agreed and a meeting was held at Damodar Hall on 16 June. Yet when Ambedkar proclaimed that their profession was a shame to the Mahar community and that they must leave it, there was an uproar, and the women poured into the streets, cursing and yelling. Apparently, their main hope had been to convince Ambedkar to use his influence to protect them from police harassment. The meeting aroused one of the earliest debates on prostitution, with most caste Hindu reformers criticizing Ambedkar for ignoring the severe economic constraints that drove women to this profession. Ambedkar, however, believing in self-respect over economic constraints and their ability to choose and act, refused to see the women simply as victims. In this, he had wide support from other Dalits.

Reaction to the conversion announcement by leaders of varying religious groups was one of excitement. Processions of Christian, Muslim and Sikh notables to his house in Dadar began. Widespread debate broke out among Hindu groups. Interestingly enough, a position of open support for

conversion to Sikhism was taken by Dr Moonje of the Hindu Mahasabha. In a letter to M.C. Rajah in June 1936, Moonje declared that 'if Dr Ambedkar were to announce his decision that he and his followers are prepared to embrace Sikhism in preference to Islam and Christianity and that he shall honestly and sincerely cooperate with the Hindus and Sikhs in propagating their culture and in countering the Muslim movement for drawing the depressed classes into the Muslim fold', they would support conversion to Sikhism and listing of the 'neo-Sikhs' among the scheduled castes (Khairmode 1998a, 6:147). Ambedkar responded that Muslims and Christians had access to tremendous financial resources that the Sikhs did not have, and so if Hindus wanted the untouchables to help Hinduism by not going into a 'foreign' religion, then they should help the Sikhs in removing their financial disabilities.

Moonje's position was consistent with an emerging Hindutva line that defined Indian-originated religions as part of Hinduism. Taking up Sikhism was thus not a conversion in the true sense; it was a change of panth, not of dharma. But Rajah strongly disagreed, replying in July 1936 to Moonje that 'communal migration', as he termed it, of Depressed Classes would simply create a Sikh—Hindu—Muslim problem. Following Gandhi's line, he argued that this was all a matter of 'political manipulation' and that such mass conversion neglected the 'spiritual' aspect of religion. Gandhi was quick to use this, writing in support to Rajah on 26 July and stating that the removal of untouchability from Hinduism was a 'a deeply religious duty' (Khairmode 1998a, 6:154). With regard to Sikhism, he only agreed if Sikhs themselves accepted that they were part of Hinduism and gave up their separate electorates.

Here Gandhi was following the orthodox line. Within the Hindu Mahasabha group, its spokesman was Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya. For this group, traditional Hinduism was sufficient and could be purged of caste, and they were not ready to accept Sikhism as a substitute. From 21 to 23 October 1936, in the eighteenth session of the Hindu Mahasabha in Lahore, the Shankaracharya as president put forth his position of supporting conversion to Sikhism if that was what untouchables desired. On the second

day delegates from Uttar Pradesh led by Malaviya were refused recognition as representatives, and a scuffle broke out, with those supporting Malaviya walking out of the conference. Sikh spokesmen at the conference offered to welcome Dalit converts, saying, 'We beseech you to save the Depressed Classes from embracing either Christianity or Islam, for we cannot tolerate the idea of their adopting any foreign religion' (Khairmode 1998a, 6:160). Divisions within the Hindu Mahasabha itself were thus being sparked by Ambedkar's call for conversion.

The interest in Sikhism continued for some time. Ambedkar developed associations with activists at the Sikh Mission and a khalsa college was planned in Bombay. In 1935 Ambedkar went on a trip to Europe financed by the Sikhs. He spent time in London consulting experts about the effects of conversion on reservations, and in Rome he got a design prepared by architects along neoclassical lines for the college. He also had his last visit with his friend 'F', Fanny Fitzgerald.

As part of the interest in Sikhism, a 'team' of sixteen was sent to Amritsar on 25 September 1936 for religious training. Of these their leader, Barve, and a couple of others converted on their return and began to wander propagating the religion. However, differences of opinion developed between Ambedkar and his Sikh friends, possibly over the issue of control of the conversion process and the institutions being created, and he broke his connections with them.

Another interesting series of events took place with regard to Buddhism. Among the prominent individual converts of the time was Dharmanand Kosambi, whose son was to become a famous Marxist scholar. Kosambi met Ambedkar in October 1935, and immediately afterwards went to discuss the issue of conversion with Gandhi. Ambedkar, he told Gandhi, was close to Buddhism, and asked for funds to build a Buddhist vihar in Parel. Gandhi immediately turned to Jugalkishor Birla, sitting nearby, who presented Kosambi with a cheque for Rs 17,500. Out of this came plans for a 'Bahujan Buddhist Bihar' in Parel. But an initial meeting was broken up primarily out of rivalry between two Chambhar leaders, Sitaram Shivtarkar, who was taking part in the meeting, and his opponent Balkrishna

Deorukhkar. In any event, nothing came of the Bahujan vihar, perhaps because Ambedkar was not ready to throw his support to anything financed by Gandhian money.

Finally, the issue of conversion again brought Ambedkar into fierce debate with Gandhi. In December 1935 the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal, an organization devoted to the abolition of casteism through intercaste marriages, invited Ambedkar to the Punjab to deliver a lecture. The organization had been founded in the 1920s by Sant Ram (1887–1988), a Punjabi low-caste man, with the support of some prominent Arya Samaj leaders. However, when Ambedkar sent a copy of his presidential speech in April, it aroused an interorganizational conflict, and he was asked to make some changes. The correspondence carried on for nearly three months, until finally Ambedkar said that they should invite someone whose speech they approved of. He finally had the speech printed himself. The English version of 1500 copies quickly sold out; and Tamil, Gujarati, Marathi, Hindi, Punjabi and Malayalam translations were made within a few years and widely circulated, with Sant Ram himself publishing and translating the Punjabi version. The second edition was published with a reply by Gandhi reprinted from his weekly *Harijan* and a rejoinder by Ambedkar. And, so strong was the essay, so controversial the issue—along with Ambedkar's appearance at a Sikh conference around the same time—that the invitation to speak was withdrawn.

This essay, 'The annihilation of caste', was a bold declaration of war on Hinduism. Its basic point was simple. In India the greatest barrier to the advance of the untouchables was Hinduism itself. Property, wrote Ambedkar in response to the socialists, was not the only source of power; religion and social status also could, at various stages in history, generate power. India needed not an economic revolution, but a social-religious one.

> The political revolution led by Chandragupta was preceded by the religious and social revolution of Buddha. The political revolution led by Shivaji was preceded by the religious and social reform brought about the saints of Maharashtra. The political revolution of the Sikhs was preceded by the religious and social revolution led by Guru Nanak (Ambedkar 1979, 1:44).

Notably, this differentiated ‘reform’ from ‘revolution’. A famous essay by M.G. Ranade in the nineteenth century on ‘The rise of the Maratha power’ had argued that the movement—referring to the Varkaris such as Tukaram and Dnyaneswar, plus the very different politically oriented revivalism of Ramdas—had prepared the foundation for nationalism in Maharashtra. Indeed, sants such as Tukaram and Cokhamela represented a radical anti-caste voice in the social life and literature of Maharashtra. Ambedkar had engaged in a good deal of reading of the literature of this sant tradition during the 1920s. Not many written notes on this have survived, but his formulation in ‘The annihilation of caste’ indicates that in the final analysis he saw the Varkari tradition as reformist, not revolutionary, allowing low-caste protest to be absorbed into Hinduism.

What then was needed? Hinduism itself had to be questioned because it supported chaturvarnya, the main source of India’s social evils.

> You must … destroy the sacredness and divinity with which Caste has become invested. In the last analysis, this means you must destroy the authority of the Shastras and the Vedas … You must take the stand that Buddha took. You must take the stand which Guru Nanak took. You must not only discard the Shastras, you must deny their authority, as did Buddha and Nanak. You must have courage to tell the Hindus that what is wrong with them is their religion—the religion which has produced in them this notion of the sacredness of Caste (Ambedkar 1979, 1:69).

This was not only an assessment of Hinduism but an assessment of Buddhism and Sikhism: at that point he considered these to be the only two indigenous religious traditions that had defied Brahmanism in a fundamental way. His thinking was clearly shifting away from solutions of conversion to Christianity and Islam to the resources offered by Indian tradition.

Gandhi’s reply came in an article in the *Harijan*. As a defence, it claimed simply that untouchability was not an essential part of the Hindu scriptures. Gandhi insisted that reason and spiritual experience were tests for accepting anything as the word of God, but saw nothing essential in the scriptures as traditionally defined to object to on the basis of his reason and spirituality. He was free with his reinterpretations, but was never ready to renounce any of the traditional scriptures, not even Manu, or to say forthrightly that

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sections of these were wrong. Most significantly, in defending Hinduism, he also defended an idealized version of caste.

> Caste has nothing to do with religion … it is harmful to both spiritual and national growth. Varna and Ashrama are institutions which have nothing to do with castes. The law of Varna teaches us that we have each one of us to earn our bread by following the ancestral calling. It defines not our rights but our duties … [I]t also follows that there is no calling too low and none too high. All are good, lawful and absolutely equal in status. The callings of a Brahman —spiritual teacher—and a scavenger are equal, and their due performance carries equal merit before God and at one time seems to have carried identical reward before man … Arrogance of a superior status by and of one Varna over another is a denial of the law. And there is nothing in the law of Varna to warrant a belief in untouchability. (The essence of Hinduism is contained in its enunciation of one and only God as Truth and its bold acceptance of Ahimsa as the law of the human family.) (Ambedkar 1979, 1:83).

Thus Gandhi reiterated not only his belief in the four varnas but also in svadharma, following the traditional caste duty, whether as a Brahman, farmer, craftsman or scavenger. It was a position that was unacceptable to militant Dalits, and Ambedkar rejected it.

For his part, after the conversion announcement, Ambedkar was in no particular hurry. It is fairly clear that he had no inherent attraction to Christianity or Islam, though he saw them as having vast resources to offer Dalits. But a change of religion would have to be a process, one that would start not only with him, but with the choices of the masses of the community—in this case, primarily Mahars, the group he was most sure of carrying with him. His early inclinations towards Sikhism and Buddhism were clear from his 1936 article and from his speech at the Mahar youth conference where he made reference to the saying of the Buddha ‘be your own lamps’ as a guide to self-reliance. He had also named his house after Rajgriha, the capital of Magadha where the Buddha had done most of his preaching. But he was not a man to make choices lightly. The decision inaugurated a period of study, both of the Hindu scriptures to clarify beyond a doubt their role in the oppression embodied in the caste hierarchy and then of Buddhism.

After 1932 Ambedkar never considered Gandhi a true reformer, but rather a defender of caste-bound Hinduism, a romantic idealizing India’s villages and seeking simply a continuation of the status quo, dressed up a

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bit, but without fundamental change. He pronounced his verdict in harsh terms in a 1939 lecture on ‘Federation versus freedom’. ‘In my mind there is no doubt that the Gandhi age is the dark age of India. It is an age in which people instead of looking for their ideals in the future are returning to antiquity’ (Ambedkar 1979, 1:352).

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Five

'Against capitalism and Brahmanism'

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Years of Class Radicalism

Bhils, Gonds, Dravids, their Bharat was beautiful.
They were the people, the culture was theirs, the rule was theirs;
The Aryas infiltrated all this, they brought their power to Bharat
And Dravidians were suppressed …
Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, all became owners
Drinking the blood of slaves, making Shudras into machines.
The Brahmans, Kshatriyas and banias got the ownership rights …
Congress, Hindu Mahasabha, Muslim League, are all agents of the rich.
The Independent Labour Party is our true home …
Take up the weapon of Janata,
Throw off the bloody magic of the owners atrocities.
Rise workers! Rise peasants! Hindustan is ours,
Humanity will be built on labour,
This is our birthright.

—Kamalsingh Baliram Ramteke,
Janata 21 June 1941

The enthusiastic mass response to Ambedkar's renunciation of Hinduism not only kept him involved in politics but also drove him further in the direction of radicalism. This was to become an all-encompassing, socio-economic radicalism. In 1936 he formed his first political party to represent the Dalits' cause directly in the forthcoming elections. It was not a party with a specific caste but rather one with a working-class identity: the Independent Labour Party (ILP).

Its programme, published in *Janata,* was a social democratic one, as advanced as any socialist programme of the time. It accepted the 'principle of state management and ownership of industry wherever it was in the interest of the people', and it promised to 'amend or alter any economic system that was unjust to any class or section of the people'. It promised to bring legislation to regulate the employment of factory workers, including fixing their work hours, making payment of adequate wages and providing bonus and pension schemes. It promised a general scheme of social insurance. It also proposed legislation 'to protect agricultural tenants from the exactions and evictions by landlords in general and in particular the tenants under (a) the khoti system and (b) the taluqdari system', that is, the

forms of zamindari prevalent in the Konkan region of Bombay and the Vidarbha region of the Central Provinces (*Janata* 8 August 1936).

Ambedkar's swing to class radicalism had been forecast in 1930 in his speech at the Depressed Classes Conference in the change of name of his biweekly from *Bahishkrut Bharat* to *Janata*. Published regularly from then on, under the editorship of G.N. Sahasrabudhe, *Janata* began to feature lead articles with large headlines targeting the atrocities of capitalists and landlords. Articles covered not only Dalit conferences and meetings but also working-class strikes and peasant uprisings, which were occurring with more regularity. Poems illustrated the radical thrust of the Dalits' aspiration in a combination of class and anti-caste rhetoric.

The growing presence of the socialist and communist left in India's workforce underlay this political evolution. Marxism had been a subject of commentary and debate among the Dalit political cadre from the beginning, seen in articles in the *Bahishkrut Bharat* and *Janata* that analysed Marxist theory and communist policy. There was also pressure for radicalism from the Dalit base itself, for the Mahars were primarily tenants, peasants and workers. Many dedicated working-class activists rose from these, such as L.N. Hardas of Nagpur, who organized beedi workers and campaigned as an ILP candidate until his early and tragic death at thirty-five. A radical position appealed not only to such men and women but also to a group of young caste Hindus who began to associate themselves with Ambedkar.

In the August 1937 elections the ILP put up eighteen candidates in Bombay Province, twelve in reserved seats and six in general seats. Fourteen candidates were put up in the Central Provinces. Fifteen men were elected in Bombay—one Matang, one Holar, three Kayasthas and ten Mahars. At the national level, the Congress took the majority of votes in 1937, with 711 of 1585 provincial election seats and absolute majorities in five provinces. It won eighty-one out of 138 reserved seats nationally. Yet in the regions where Dalits were organized in their own parties, they succeeded in shutting out the Congress in the reserved seats. In Bombay Province the Congress won only five of the reserved seats, almost entirely in non-Marathi-speaking areas. In the Central Provinces, of nineteen seats,

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the Congress again won five, in Hindi-speaking areas. In Bengal, where the Namshudras and Ragvanshis had begun to mobilize and formed an alliance with the Muslim Krishak Prajak Party, the Congress could win only six of thirty reserved seats. In the Madras Presidency, however, where the untouchables remained disorganized and the Justice Party weakened, the Congress won twenty-six of the thirty seats. Although the elections represented an overall victory for the Congress, the results showed that the other political forces still held considerable sway. In particular, while the non-Brahman movements in both Bombay and Madras showed signs of weakening, Dalit and Muslim mobilization was rising. For instance, in Bombay Province the ILP was now the main opposition party.

Party winners also showed the nature of Ambedkar's support base. Among caste Hindus, the predominance of Kayasthas was striking. They would become the main group of Ambedkar's upper-caste supporters. As a literate, educated and fairly well-to-do community, they were opposed to Brahmans who traditionally considered them Shudras. (Among the well-known pamphleteering supporters of the non-Brahman movement was Keshavaram Sitaram Thakre, whose son Balasaheb Thackeray became the leader of the semi-fascist Shiv Sena in the late twentieth century.) Ambedkar continued to have a few lifelong Brahman friends and supporters, but they were exceptions rather than the rule.

Similarly, the list of victors showed that the ILP was fundamentally a Mahar-based party. Mangs (Matangs), the other large untouchable community in Maharashtra, were poorer and more backward; they produced few activists and little mass backing for the movement. The other major untouchable group, the Chambhars (leather-workers) were, unlike the Chamars of North India, a relatively small group in Maharashtra and a bit better off. Generally, their living quarters were considered 'inside the village', as opposed to those of Mahars and Mangs who were 'outside the village'. Ambedkar had numerous Chambhar supporters, but they remained individualistic and wavering. The earliest, Sitaram Shivtarkar, was controversial among Ambedkar's Mahar followers and left after the conversion slogan. Another Chambhar leader, Balkrishna Deorukhkar

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(1884–1947), was a rival of Shivtarkar and joined the ILP only after the latter left Ambedkar. The most important Chambhar activist was P.N. Rajbhoj (1905–84), who joined the movement at the time of the Bahishkrut Hitakarni Sabha, was attracted by Gandhi and went to the Congress for a period before returning to Ambedkar for good in 1942 at the time of the Scheduled Caste Federation (SCF).

Almost every region in India has two major and competitive Dalit castes, and almost everywhere the social base of the Dalit movement was established among the larger and more economically and educationally advanced of these. The Chamars in North India, Malas in Andhra and Paraiyas in Tamil Nadu provided support and leadership for the most militant organizations, in contrast to their traditional rivals, often smaller, poorer and less organized. These, for instance the Chuhras in the North, Mangs/Matangas in Maharashtra and Madigas in Andhra, were attracted in reaction to the Congress or (especially in later periods) Hindutva organizations.

The class identity of Ambedkar's new party became clear when the fight against the khoti landlord system in the Konkan heated up and produced one of the major peasant mobilizations of colonial India. Five of the elected members of the ILP came from the Konkan, and two of them (Anantrao Chitre and Subedhar Ghatge, a Mahar) had been active in the Mahad satyagraha. The Konkan was one of the two areas in Maharashtra and the only part of Bombay Presidency still dominated by a landlord system. In this it was characteristic of the wet coastal areas of India. In the dry inland areas of peasant cultivation, which characterized most of Maharashtra, ryotwari systems prevailed. The khot landlords of the Konkan were Marathas and Chitpavan Brahmans, a widespread and wealthy caste which had its origins in this region. The tenants were Mahars, Kunbis and some other peasant castes such as the Agris. * In the 1920s the first anti-khot legislation was introduced by S.K. Bole, an Agri leader of the Non-Brahman Party, and by the early 1930s tenants began to organize with vigour. An anti-landlord struggle took place in the Konkan in the early 1930s, when Chitre along with a local Kunbi leader formed a peasants'

union, and it was declared illegal in 1932. When this ban was lifted in 1934, the third session of the Kolaba District Peasants Conference was called on 16 December, and Ambedkar presided over it. Then in 1937 struggles again heated up, and Ambedkar toured the Konkan to organize meetings of khoti tenants. The 19 February 1937 edition of *Janata* reported a delegation of these peasants meeting Ambedkar to ask for abolition. Ambedkar replied that he would seek it but the Konkan peasant class must not beg from Idiots and tyrants and rather join in militant struggle. He added that they must counteract the false propaganda of khots and the Congress that the landlords were their protectors. In fact, he declared, the Congress was the supporter of shetjis, bhatjis, sawkars and zamindars.

In September 1937 Ambedkar tabled his first legislation after the elections, a bill for abolition of the khoti system. This was accompanied by the first march of peasants to Bombay. Shamrao Parulekar, a CKP member of the ILP elected from the Konkan, and Chitre joined in leading this march and they, along with the Gujarati peasant leader Indulal Yagnik and Communist organizer S.A. Dange, were the main speakers in the final rally. The Communists then joined Ambedkar in his campaign and held large rallies, including one of 3000 peasants waving the red flag at Chari on 17 October and featuring Communist activists such as B.T. Ranadive and G.S. Sardesai. Unity with Kunbis was heightened when a Kunbi leader joined the movement at the end of the year, with the slogan *Adi potoba mag Vithoba* (First our stomachs, then God), to stress unity. Meetings of 10,000 to 15,000 peasants were then held. Ironically, citing the god of the egalitarian Varkari tradition as a symbol of the caste hierarchy that must be put aside illustrated why Ambedkar was increasingly turning anti-Hindu: even anti-caste Bhakti movements, including the Varkaris and the Kabirpanthis, had been absorbed into the defence of orthodoxy.

The climax of this organizing was a march of 20,000 peasants to the Bombay Council Hall on 12 January 1938. It was one of the biggest of the colonial period, comparable to the figure of 15,000 claimed at the All-India Kisan Congress rally in December 1936 during the Faizpur session of the Congress. Slogans included ‘Destroy the *khot* system’, ‘Crush *sowkar* rule’

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and ‘Long live Dr Ambedkar’. Ambedkar himself presided over the rally, and the speakers included Chitre, Yagnik, D.V. Pradhan, another important CKP associate of Ambedkar who was organizing municipal workers, and two Communists. Ambedkar’s speech illustrated his growing radicalism.

> Really seen, there are only two castes in the world the first that of the rich, and the second that of the poor. Besides that there is a middle class. This class is responsible for the destruction of all movements (*Janata* 15 January 1938)!

He went on to argue for organization and for awareness that the Congress was supporting the wealthy. Then he made one of his major declarations of sympathy for Marxism.

> I have definitely read studiously more books on the Communist philosophy than all the Communist leaders here. However beautiful the Communist philosophy is in those books … the test of this philosophy has to be given in practice. And if work is done from that perspective, I feel that the labour and length of time needed to win success in Russia will not be so much in India. And so in regard to the toilers’ class struggle, I feel the Communist philosophy is close to us (*Janata* 15 January 1938).

The qualification regarding social issues became clear when, on 12 and 13 February 1938, Ambedkar called a Depressed Classes workers conference at Manmad, the railway centre of Maharashtra. Noting that this was the first meeting of Dalits as workers, he explained that ‘social grievances are grievances under the load of which our very manhood is crushed’. Hence there were two enemies of the working class in India: Brahmanism and capitalism. He charged his critics on the left with failing to admit Brahmanism as a target. ‘By Brahmanism I mean the negation of the spirit of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity …. [I]t is rampant in classes and is not confined to the Brahmins alone, though they are the originators of it’ (Khairmode 1998b, 7:88–90). Nor was opposition to Brahmanism simply a matter of gaining social rights, such as inter-dining and intermarriage. Ambedkar cited citizenship rights and economic opportunities as the two major social structures of Brahmanism. Millions were denied the use of public wells, conveyances, roads and restaurants, though all of these were maintained out of public funds. Economic opportunities were also stratified in terms of caste. For instance, Dalits could not be clerks, although Indian Christian, Anglo-Indian and caste Hindu non-matriculates were regularly

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employed in that capacity. Likewise, Dalit railway workers remained gangmen and were rarely employed as porters because porters often worked as domestic servants, and in railway workshops they were not admitted as mechanics. He concluded noting that Marx had never seen class as a decisive factor in social equality, and that in Europe nationality continued to divide workers just as caste did in India. He urged the workers to support the only political party standing for their interest, the ILP (Khairmode 1998b, 7:91).

In fact, almost without exception the left movement in India philosophically and systematically neglected caste. The Communists considered it an issue that would be automatically resolved in the fight for socialism and characterized Ambedkar as a 'petty bourgeois misleader'. The socialists also treated caste as secondary. Nehru provides a prime example. He wrote about feeling annoyed with Gandhi for having chosen as a focus for his 1932 fast the incidental issue of separate electorates, though he later marvelled at the way it energized people. Nonetheless, he continued to believe that the basic question was economic: untouchables were a landless proletariat. In reply to a question about caste in an interview on 4 February 1936 in London, he said, 'Take the depressed classes, they really are the proletariat in the economic sense; the others are the better off people. All these matters are to be converted into economic terms, and then we can understand the position better' (Nehru 1975, 7:108–09). Later, in his presidential address to the 1936 Lucknow Congress on 12 April, he declared, 'For a socialist [the problem of untouchability presents no difficulties] for under socialism there can be no differentiation and victimisation' (Nehru 1975, 7:182). So deep was this conviction of the primacy of economics over all other forms of differentiation such as caste, gender and ethnicity that it is no wonder that Ambedkar became increasingly suspicious of Indian socialists.

The neglect of caste issues had its theoretical foundations in the philosophical assumptions of Marxism, and Ambedkar took this issue up in an article in the *Janata*, originally written in 1936 and reprinted in 1938 as a front-page article. He attacked the base superstructure analogy of Marxism.

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> The base is not the building. On the basis of economic relations a building is erected of religious, social and political institutions. This building has just as much reality as the base. If we want to change the base, then first the building that has been constructed on it has to be knocked down. In the same way, if we want to change the economic relations of society, then first the existing social, political and other institutions will have to be destroyed.

He went on to argue that to build the strength of the working class, the mental hold of religious slavery would have to be destroyed; thus, eradicating caste was the precondition of a united working-class struggle (*Janata* 25 June 1938). Destruction of caste was taken as the main task of the 'democratic stage' of a two-stage revolution. The article severely criticized the Congress socialists (who at this time included the Communists and whose policy was to bring the left within the Congress) and Nehru, arguing that the fight against untouchability would have to be built without their help. Both articles and poems published in the *Janata* (such as the one cited at the opening of this chapter) illustrated the combining of anti-caste and class radical themes.

Ambedkar's movement-level alliance with Communists took another turn during a major industrial dispute. In an effort to check the growing influence of Communists and other radicals, the Congress ministry of Bombay Province introduced an Industrial Disputes Bill before the legislature. This bill, the first of many 'Black Acts' against the working class, made conciliation compulsory and, under very ill-defined conditions, strikes illegal. With an eloquent defence of the right to strike 'as simply another name for the right to freedom', Ambedkar took the lead in condemning it. In one of his several speeches against the bill, he argued on 15 September 1938 that 'it should really be called the Workers Civil Liberties Suspension Act' because '[u]nder the conditions prescribed by this Bill there is no possibility of any free union growing up in the country'. He went on to call it a 'bad, bloody and brutal' piece of legislation (Ambedkar 1982, 2:232).

Shamrao Parulekar, an ILP member who was about to join the Communist Party and who had attended a conference of the International Labour Organization in Geneva and returned to India on 8 September 1938, called for a one-day strike. Ambedkar then announced that the strike would

be organized by the ILP's executive committee. The council of action formed for the strike included the ILP, the Communists and moderates, while socialists and Royists disassociated themselves from it on the grounds that it was an anti-Congress political strike.

Held on 7 November, the strike was a historic event for the Bombay working class. Leaders of various organizations took part in mobilizing workers, with Ambedkar supported by his 2000-strong Samta Sainik Dal. Their efforts culminated in a public rally of over one lakh addressed by Dange and Ambedkar. There was total participation of Dalit workers, including not only those among the most militantly organized textile workers but also Dalit municipal workers. The event turned violent, and clashes with the police left 633 workers injured and two dead, including a Mahar member of the ILP, Bhagoji Waghmare. Their sacrifice was hailed afterwards in Ambedkarite *jalsas* using the *tamasha* tradition, which had first been made a radical cultural weapon by the Satyashodhak movement. In Bombay, Ambedkar joined a procession and meeting organized by the Communist-Party-led labour unions in honour of the dead workers. Speakers stressed that the two had died in a struggle that would not end without the establishment of workers' rule.

The ongoing contentious issue was Mahar watan, which brought Dalits into renewed conflict with the British government. They demanded the transfer of watan lands into ordinary ryotwari holdings, on which the owner would pay land revenue but have full control over the land, while any services they performed would be for wages. The government refused their demands, citing cost as the reason. One estimate was that it would cost Rs 30 lakh for the labour performed by the Mahar watandars. Throughout 1939-40 Ambedkar organized meetings of Mahar and Mang watandars and threatened militant anti-government struggles if there was no response.

With some electoral and mass movement success behind him, Ambedkar turned to the task of building a broad political front that would be an alternative to the Congress. This meant looking to Dalit movements in other parts of India, to non-Brahman trends everywhere, to Muslims and other

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minorities, and to autonomously rising working-class and peasant movements.

In western India the effort was hampered by the fact that the non-Brahman political thrust in Bombay Province was dying away as young leaders like Keshavrao Jedhe and Dinkarrao Javalkar led a movement into the Congress. *Janata* carried an editorial on 9 October 1937 against this break-up, lamenting the lack of great leaders as in the days of Phule and Shahu Maharaj. Ambedkar felt that the non-Brahmans were being politically naive. In a speech on the memorial day of the Mahad satyagraha, he said, 'Mahars have now become conscious; speaking of Maharashtra only, only the Brahmans and Mahars understand politics' (*Janata* 30 March 1940). The Marathas would become slaves of the Congress, he predicted. Finally, he was quoted in the *Bombay Sentinel* of 14 July 1942 as saying that the Non-Brahman Party had in it the germ of the great principle of democracy: '… [B]y breaking up the party the non-Brahmans have committed political suicide' (Government of Maharashtra 1982, 252–53). Now in its strongholds of Bombay and the Central Provinces, with the Non-Brahman Party gone, the ILP was more or less politically isolated.

At the national level things were slightly different. Though the Congress had emerged from the 1937 elections with 711 of 1585 provincial Assembly seats and absolute majorities in five provinces, its dominance was not unchallenged. Opposition parties included a number of regional Muslim-based parties such as the Krishak Praja Party in Bengal, which was allied with the Namshudras, the main Dalit group of the region, as well as the Unionist Party in the Punjab, which brought together mainly both Hindu and Muslim Jat farmers and had won the support of Mangoo Ram's Ad-Dharm Movement. Furthermore, peasant movements were developing outside the Congress's control.

The natural ally on a national scale would have been the non-Brahman movement in Madras Presidency, the Justice Party. This was the most powerful opposing party in the country for a long time, and its ideology was in many ways similar to Ambedkar's, but its influence was faltering in the 1930s. A new party, the Self-Respect Movement of Periyar (E.V.

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Ramasamy), was rising from outside the party and emerging as a vigorous force friendly to Ambedkar. A 1931 editorial in Periyar's paper *Kudi Arasu* had condemned Gandhi's opposition to separate electorates, and members of the Justice Party and Self-Respect Movement held protest meetings at that time and passed resolutions asking for implementation of the Communal Award. Periyar himself came to Bombay in January 1940 after leading a successful anti-Hindi agitation, and he held meetings in the Tamil-speaking settlements of Dharavi, a large slum area of Bombay. There he argued that Brahman domination had kept the masses under religious, economic, political and social subjugation and that the way out was to create a separate Tamil Nadu Province. Periyar held talks with Jinnah and Ambedkar at this time.

Yet in Madras Province itself alienation was growing between the untouchables and non-Brahman majority castes. Periyar could get little Dalit support. M.C. Rajah was still the most influential leader, while Ambedkar's supporters N. Shivraj and T.S. Srinivasan had little mass base of their own.

Ambedkar also showed interest in the rising kisan movement in the country. The *Janata* ignored efforts by Jagjivan Ram to form a Bihar State Agricultural Labourers League to counter the Bihar Kisan Sabha and reported on the kisan movement instead. At the end of December 1938 Ambedkar had a dramatic personal meeting with its leader, Swami Sahajanand, to discuss the Congress's position. Sahajanand believed that peasants needed an independent class organization and should join the Congress as a broad anti-imperialist organization. This was the basic Communist–socialist line of the time. Ambedkar tried to counter it by saying that the Congress was only bolstering the interests of capitalists and others, while its support to the 'Federation' proposed in the Government of India Act of 1935 was undemocratic.

Ambedkar wanted to build up an anti-Congress front on the grounds of opposition to Federation, that is, to project a more democratic structure for independent India. He put forward his position in a speech, 'Federation versus freedom', to the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics in Pune

on 29 January 1939. He stressed the undemocratic nature of the proposed federal structure, which kept paramountcy, that is, relations with the princely states, as a reserved subject and left the princes with inordinate powers. He criticized the Congress for a lack of any clear policy regarding the structure of an independent India, noting that at the Second RoundTable Conference Gandhi 'was so busy getting the British to recognize him as the dictator of India that he forgot that the important question was not with whom the settlement should be made but what would be the terms of the settlement.' Gandhi, said Ambedkar, 'forgot that he was attending a political conference and went there as though he were going to a Vaishnava Shrine singing Narsi Mehta's songs' (Ambedkar 1979, 1:281–353). To Sahajanand and other pro-Congress mass leaders, Ambedkar argued that if Congress opposed the federation, then he would support the party; he also offered his support to Subhas Chandra Bose if he broke away from the Congress to form an independent party that opposed the constitutional proposals. This was an attempt to build a radical democratic front that would be an alternative to the Congress.

The main obstacle to the growth of such an alternative national front in India was the Communist Party itself. The Communist and socialist left should have been natural allies of Ambedkar, given their agreement at the time on working-class and peasant issues. However, few of the left's upper-caste leaders appreciated or understood the reality of caste oppression, and the strong economic focus of Marxism consolidated the leaders to see the problems of Dalits and non-Brahmans as separate issues, with these 'cultural' issues decidedly secondary. They could understand nationalism within a Marxist framework but not caste. The socialists had been in the Congress from the beginning. The Communists, however, oscillated. By the late 1930s, reacting against their earlier policy of 'class against class' which had characterized all non-Communist political forces as reactionary, they had swung to support the Congress as the major 'anti-imperialist front' in India. Thus they set themselves the task of bringing all the working-class and peasant organizations and activists under their influence into the Congress Socialist Party (CSP). Because the CSP was officially a part of the

Congress, this meant entering the Congress and giving up attempts to form workers' or peasants' parties. In Tamil Nadu in 1936 this meant bringing many young radicals out of the Samadharma [socialist] Self-Respect League, which they had organized and Periyar supported. In Maharashtra they could not shake the organizational base of the ILP, but they could deprive it of a cadre. Overall, the Communists' policy left Ambedkar and the Dalit forces he represented isolated, unable to do anything to build a front to counter the Congress. Just as Gandhi was Ambedkar's main opponent in the nationalist movement, so the Communists proved to be the undoing of Ambedkar's effort to transcend the Congress.

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Six

‘We can be a nation, provided …’

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War, Peace and Pakistan

Slowly, as the world headed into the Second WorldWar, the class struggles of the 1930s began to fade, their place taken by the national solidarity in the face of war and religious-communal solidarity. India was increasingly seen as a country constituted not by contending castes or classes but by widely differing religious communities, and increasingly this depiction was becoming a reality, with differences turning into conflict and contradiction. As contention between Hindus and Muslims increased, the idea of the creation of Pakistan, a pure homeland, became a beacon of hope for Muslims.

Casting its shadow over all global conflicts was the mighty confrontation taking shape between the fascist and democratic capitalist nations. In the face of a growing nationalist movement and Japanese aggression threatening its eastern borders, the question of the role of India in the looming battle began to preoccupy the political leadership. The Congress wanted to take advantage of Britain's need for India as a base for military action and financial help. Most in it wanted to ignore war needs altogether and simply fight for independence. A few, like Nehru, argued ineffectually for conditional support to the anti-fascist war effort. Outside the Congress, followers of the still-revered Subash Chandra Bose actively took the support of Nazi Germany and Japan to mobilize an armed struggle. Communist policy veered according to the situation of the Soviet Union. After Stalin's pact with Hitler, the Communists characterized the war to be one between two sets of imperialists and urged the Congress to militant opposition. Once Germany attacked, however, the party declared the fight to be a 'people's war' and openly supported the British. These oscillations left them with little credibility in India. Those in the Congress, including Gandhi, who wanted to solely focus on their own struggle, gained the upper hand.

In September 1939 Viceroy Lord Linlithgow proclaimed a state of war between India and the Nazi forces. Though the Congress was invited for

discussions with the British rulers, its demands for a significant transfer of power before the war were not met, and the Congress ministries in the provinces resigned in protest on 22 December. Their resignation sparked Hindu-Muslim antagonism, for the Congress ministries had thoroughly alienated Muslims in the regions of their dominance, and Jinnah, the unlikely, suave leader of the Muslim League, responded by declaring the day of resignation a 'Day of Deliverance' from Congress tyranny. Ambedkar quickly announced his support, and ILP activists took part in the celebrations. The mood was the same among Dalits elsewhere, not only in Bengal, where they had a political alliance with Muslims, but also in the Madras Presidency, where M.C. Rajah announced that Dalits supported the move.

Ambedkar himself had no hesitation in supporting the war effort. This followed what had always been his position regarding the nationalist movement. Although he believed independence would provide the only political framework within which oppressed groups could get real power, he was more concerned with what kind of nation would come to exist afterwards than with the process of gaining independence. He saw the war against fascism as a life-and-death democratic struggle. For him, an independence coming on the basis of Britain's defeat by fascists could never lead to any true equality.

It was with regard to Pakistan, and not questions of caste, that he was doing his most intense political thinking of the time. 'I was the philosopher … of Pakistan,' he was to say later. He wrote a lengthy book first published in 1940 as *Thoughts on Pakistan* and republished as *Pakistan and the Partition of India* in 1946 (reprinted in Ambedkar 1990, Vol. 8). This was his first major essay in social history and philosophy. In it he put the issue with analytical sharpness and a logic that led to the conclusion that the creation of Pakistan was inevitable, not because states had to be based on religion but because the developing political mood of Muslims made it so. Moreover, it would be in the interest of not only Muslims but also Hindus, since the alternative of autonomous power to Muslim-majority regions would make a centralized state impossible. He presented the argument

dialectically, first giving the Muslim case for Pakistan, next the Hindu case against it, and then analysed the arguments in a tone of neutrality. Among the points he discussed were the communal composition of the army and its significance in an independent country, a subject avoided by almost everyone else.

But the question that pervaded the analysis was the definition of nationalism. In the strict sense, he argued, India could not be called one nation. It is true, Ambedkar noted, that in the time of Hsuan Tsang, the famous seventh-century Chinese traveller, Punjab, Sindh and Kashmir and even Afghanistan were classified as part of India. Muslim invasions, however, had changed this irrevocably. First, destruction and forcible conversion had left a bitterness between Hindus and Muslims so deeply seated that a century of political activity under colonialism had not assuaged it. Second, 'the deep deposit of Islamic culture over the original Aryan culture in this north-west corner of India' was decisive; compared to it, 'the remnants of Hindu and Buddhist culture are just shrubs' (Ambedkar 1990, 8:65). If culture was to be the basis of a nation, as the Hindu nationalists avowed, then they must concede that Muslims had every right to demand a national political framework in the areas of Islamic cultural hegemony. The predominance of Hindu culture ten centuries earlier could not determine the present. The India of today was indeed one of widely different religious and cultural identities with a history of some conflict.

Ambedkar, however, did not believe that nations had to be necessarily based on a common religious-cultural identity; there were in fact several examples of multicultural nations. 'If Muslims want to be a different nation, it was not necessarily because they have to be but because they want to be.' He noted, 'The view that seems to guide Mr Jinnah is that Indians are only a people and that they can never be a nation' (Ambedkar 1990, 8:353). Nevertheless, he argued that a people could grow into a nation. It was a question of choice, and he did not see separatism as a good choice. A Hindu Raj along with a Muslim Raj could not be a solution 'since Hinduism is a menace to liberty, equality and fraternity' (Ambedkar 1990, 8:358). But the strength of Hindutva was also a function of reaction to Muslim political

assertion. If Muslims did not press their political identity but instead emphasized common cause with the majority of Hindus, they could maintain the unity of the nation. Ambedkar cited as examples the case of most Indian provinces between 1920 and 1937, when Muslims worked for reforms with non-Brahmans and Dalits. Thus rejection of the Brahmanic claim to hegemony could be the basis of unity for the majority of people including the religious minorities, non-Brahmans and Dalits.

But given the Muslims' stubborn demand for Pakistan, Ambedkar argued that it should be conceded; the alternative could only be freezing Muslim and Hindu communal identities in the political framework of separate electorates and provincial autonomy that would be necessary to keep Muslims in India. Muslims, however, should concede to Hindustan the Hindu majority areas of Punjab and Bengal. Once Pakistan was created, the Muslims in India would have no motivation for a separate political identity and would make common cause *with* Dalits and lower-class Hindus. This would also take away much of the basis for a Hindu Raj.

In his analysis of Islam, Ambedkar tended to exaggerate the violence involved in the Muslim presence in India. He also neglected many elements of common and synthetic culture, both the political symbiosis worked out by Mughals and Rajputs and the more mass-oriented teachings of the Sufis and sants. He was not very sympathetic to Islam, and later his book would be used by Hindutva forces, though only by distorting his overall arguments. By this time he was coming to believe that the destruction of monasteries during the early Turkish Muslim conquests was the final factor responsible for the disappearance of Buddhism in India. This does not mean, however, that he saw Muslim conversions, even forced conversions, in the same way that the Hindu nationalists did. Along with much of the non-Brahman movement, he had a different perspective on conversion because he was convinced of the discrimination and oppression involved in Hindu culture and its caste hierarchy. This perspective had been put most forcefully by Jotirao Phule in his 1883 *Shetkarya Asud*. Phule argued that some centuries ago the Muslim rulers 'becoming compassionate to the lakhs of Shudras and Ati-Shudras, had forcibly made them into Muslims,

liberating them from the snare of the Arya religion, and taking them with them as Muslims, made them happy' (Phule 1991, 288). Like some Hindu nationalists, Ambedkar believed there was forcible conversion of low castes by Muslim conquerors, but unlike them, he saw this as a benefit for the converted indigenous Muslims. Most of the non-Brahman leaders in fact accepted the idea that Islam had mainly spread in India as an equalitarian alternative to the oppressive caste hierarchy of Brahmanism.

Interestingly enough, this first long analytical essay on social history by Ambedkar showed no reflection of the economic theory of history that he claimed to have found so useful on economic issues. Rather, he ignored economics to stress cultural and political factors. The resulting work, though leaving out economic interests and class divisions within the religious groups, was still a nuanced approach that assessed conflicting claims to national ideals in relation to a sociocultural reality.

Although reviewers perceived *Thoughts on Partition* as an argument in support of the creation of Pakistan, Ambedkar saw the issue as essentially open-ended. He summarized his position in February 1940 when he noted that he disagreed with both the Congress's position that India was a nation and the Muslim League's that it could never be a nation: 'My confident hope is that we can be a nation provided proper processes of social amalgamation can be put forth' (Government of Maharashtra 1982, 31).

The notion that an Indian nation was not an immutable reality but a project that had to be consciously undertaken was unique at the time. As Ambedkar noted, it contrasted both with the growing fundamentalist Muslim assertion that Islam provided the basis for their nationhood and with the Congress's faith that India was already a nation, a faith that rested essentially on unstated assumptions that made the Hindu identity, deriving from the ancient Vedas, the foundation of national identity. The Hindu Mahasabha was putting the case for a Hindu Raj most forcefully, but the underlying assumptions were accepted by a majority of Congressman (Omvedt 2002). Even in the *Discovery of India* Nehru, who sought to be sympathetic to Islam and recognize its contributions to Indian culture, saw the process and resulting synthesis as within the framework of a Hindu-

Brahmanic culture that was ultimately defined as including caste and the Vedas as the earliest books. Whereas Buddhism was universal, Nehru suggested, Hinduism had emerged as a kind of national religion. But Nehru, looking to economic development as the crucial factor, offered no way to consciously build feelings of a common national identity.

In contrast, Ambedkar's position that the nation was still to be created, that it had to be a conscious, thought-out process, drew much from the thinking of the non-Brahman movement. Phule too had initiated this when he had written in his posthumously published *Sarvajanik Satyadharma Pustak* that

> Due to the false self-interested religion of the Aryans, the cunning Arya Bhat-Brahmans consider the ignorant Shudras to be inferior; the ignorant Shudras consider the ignorant Mahars to be inferior; and the ignorant Mahars consider the ignorant Mangs to be inferior … since marriage and social relations are forbidden among them all, naturally their various customs, eating habits, and rituals don't match each other. How can such a conglomerate of 18 grains be united to become a "nation" of integrated people (Phule 1982, 407)?

Thus Ambedkar saw the process of creating a nation as linked to a thorough critique of the Brahmanic aspects of Indian tradition and a recognition of non-Brahman contributions, such as those of Buddhism, as a basis for religious plurality. This was a position that would have required Muslims and elite nationalists to radically modify their stands.

But there was no sign of such a broad nation-creating process in the 1940s. The Congress was not ready to challenge varnashrama or Brahman social dominance in any fundamental way; nor were Muslims showing much interest in the positions of the anti-caste movement. They failed to understand that the Hindu dominance to which they were reacting was enveloped in a Brahmanic framework which identified India as Hindu in its most ancient cultural core, and that stamping Islam (and Christianity) as alien religions was related to the varnashrama structures which oppressed the low castes. In the resulting absence of a process of nation-building, Ambedkar began to see the creation of Pakistan as inevitable. He believed that it was possible, while the nation was still in the process of being created, for two different religious communities to live together in the same nation. In *Thoughts on Pakistan,* he cited many examples of the coexistence

of different religious and linguistic communities. Nevertheless, he noted that Muslims were demanding so many safeguards and such a large degree of provincial autonomy in any united India that a strong central government would be impossible. In 1955 he would make a series of proposals before the SCF executive committee for Muslim safeguards and a degree of provincial autonomy that would allow a united India. But he probably did not have much hope that they would be accepted.

The war and growing alienation between Hindus and Muslims in India during the 1940s provided the framework in which Ambedkar and other Dalit leaders attempted to assert themselves. In March 1942, amidst the growing Japanese threat in Asia, Churchill appointed a new mission headed by Sir Stafford Cripps to bring about a negotiated political settlement in India. The Cripps Mission put forward proposals that would keep British power for the present but offer India dominion status and a constitutional assembly after the war. Both the Congress and the Muslim League rejected it. Dalits also rejected it, becauses there was no mention of Dalit representation or separate electorates. Ambedkar and M.C. Rajah were among the Indian representatives who meet Cripps on 30 March to argue their case, and on 3 April they sent a joint letter protesting against the lack of representation and demanding separate electorates. The proposals, they said, ‘are merely to place [the Depressed Classes] under an unmitigated system of Hindu rule’ (Khairmode 1998c, 9:107).

Following the failure of the Cripps Mission, the Congress declared its Quit India struggle in August. For over two years the country was enveloped in serious turmoil. Mass struggle was a testimony to the inability of the British to hold on to India and to the claim of the Congress to represent the most significant number of conscious and mobilized Indians. Yet it also left unresolved the most serious issue facing the construction of an independent India, namely Pakistan. Now the country was irrevocably split.

In spite of Dalit assertion, the British were not ready to grant the Dalits separate electorates, but they did recognize Ambedkar’s qualities as a political and economic thinker, and they appreciated the significance of the

caste issue. On 2 July 1942 Ambedkar was selected as one of the Indian members of the Viceroy's newly expanded Cabinet, and he was given the portfolio of labour. He departed for New Delhi, finding a house on Prithviraj Road and furnishing it with the help of his American missionary friend, Mildred Drescher. She was a close friend who lived in Bombay and had provided a refuge for him in her home when he visited the city and wanted to avoid being besieged by political supplicants. Now, with her help in setting up a household in Delhi, he was to take his place in the national political arena.

Politically, the events of the period led to a major change for the Dalit movement as a whole. The ILP's broad class alliance had not borne results. The British were questioning how Ambedkar could be a representative of the scheduled castes when he did not have a specific scheduled caste organization behind him. Therefore, Ambedkar held discussions with Dalit leaders in Delhi and decided to wind up the Independent Labour Party. A third session of the Depressed Classes Conference was called in Nagpur in July 1942. The main conference took place on 18 and 19 July, and women and the Samta Sainik Dal held separate meetings on 20 July. The conference was chaired by N. Shivraj of Madras, because Ambedkar was a member of the Viceroy's council and so his direct political participation was ruled out.

On 18 July, 75,000 people gathered in Nagpur. Guard duty was provided by Ambedkar's youth organization of volunteers, the Samta Sainik Dal, founded at the beginning of the 1930s. By the 1940s, it had spread throughout the Marathi region and its Nagpur organization had found an enthusiastic leader in Waman Godbole, who established branches throughout the city. The youth paraded in red shirts and khaki pants, with golden belts for the leaders of the platoons and companies, a design chosen by Ambedkar. It was with reference to these mobilized volunteers that Ambedkar made his famous statement 'Goats and sheep are sacrificed, not tigers'. The militant Mahar youth in the Samta Sainik Dal were determined to be tigers.

The organization formed at the conference was named the Scheduled Caste Federation. Whereas the earlier ILP had carried a red flag, now the young volunteers sang of the blue flag of the SCF.

We will give our life for the blue flag.
Millions will bow before the blue flag.

Whatever Bhim wants, we will do.
We will see our blood flow for the blue flag!

Unlike the ILP, the SCF took shape as a genuinely national party. It drew on the organizational accomplishments and emerging leadership of Dalit movements that flourished in the major provinces of India in the 1920s. Important representatives of almost every province came to Nagpur. From Madras came leaders like Shivraj. From Bengal came Jogendranath Mandal, emerging as the most effective leader of the large Namashudra group. He returned to Bengal to organize the SCF there. From Hyderabad came all the factions of the divided Mala-based Dalit movement, including B.S. Venkatrao, a fairly wealthy contractor in the public works department and a powerful speaker, and J. Subbiah, who was to be Ambedkar's most reliable lieutenant in Hyderabad. A new group came from Uttar Pradesh, most of them men who had been inspired by the Adi-Hindu movement of Swami Acchutanand. It was from this period that Ambedkar's movement widened to northern and north-west India. Finally, in Maharashtra itself, the entire team from western Maharashtra under Dadasaheb Gaikwad and the Vidarbha leaders arrived, with the Chambhar leader P.N. Rajbhoj quitting the Congress to support Ambedkar. The only major leader missing was M.C. Rajah.

Different provincial political characteristics were reflected in the different political tendencies of these representatives. Above all, the Hindu–Muslim divide had a varied impact on Dalits in various parts of India. While Ambedkar himself and most northern leaders were cautious, those from heavily Muslim areas, especially Hyderabad and Bengal, were influenced by the call for a Muslim–Dalit alliance. Mandal and Venkatrao were pro-Muslim. Venkatswamy ended up supporting the demand for an independent

Hyderabad state, while Jogendranath Mandal's close relations with Muslims resulted in his becoming the first head of the Pakistan Constituent Assembly until, disillusioned, he returned to India and died a poor man. But all these developments were in the future. In 1942, the SCF was clearly emerging as a powerful voice of Dalits throughout India.

The conference took some important decisions. Its delegates found the proposals of the Cripps Mission unacceptable and protested them. They also declared that no constitution would be acceptable to the scheduled castes unless it recognized that they were 'distinct from the Hindus and constituted an important element in the national life of India' (Khairmode 1998c, 9:122). They called for financial provisions for primary and advanced education, for representation in public services and government, for separate electorates and for rural restructuring. 'So long as the scheduled castes continue to live on the outskirts of the village, with no source of livelihood and in small numbers compared to the Hindus, they will continue to remain untouchables and subject to tyranny and opposition of the Hindus and will not be able to enjoy free and full life' (Khairmode 1998c, 9:124). Thus a radical change in the village system should include the establishment of separate villages on cultivable government land as a step towards local economic and political autonomy.

The 1942 Nagpur conference marked the beginning of a new era of organizing. While the class radicalism of the ILP had been given up, the national scope of the SCF indicated a new stage of the Dalit movement in India as a whole. Movements that had begun independently in various provinces were now coming together and asserting their presence to help the Dalit movement emerge in the face of staunch Congress opposition as an autonomous force at the national level. And Bhimrao Ambedkar was their acknowledged and sole leader.

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Seven

'The law of Manu … replaced by the law of Mahar'

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Shaping Independent India

With the SCF firmly established and his residence secured, Ambedkar began to emerge as one of the important, if controversial, political figures of the capital. Journalists began to visit him. Some were hostile like the pro-Gandhi Louis Fischer, who scathingly wrote of him in a 1946 book as 'the bitterest man I met in India', adding that he was 'anti-Gandhi, pro-Pakistan and the most pro-British Indian I encountered' (Khairmode 1999, 8:17). In contrast, American journalist Beverly Nicholls described him as 'bulky, dynamic. Very charming manners, but nervy … Seemed to be on his guard, as though ready to parry taunts from all directions. Well after all it's only to be expected' (Khairmode 1999, 8:33). Ambedkar was clearly not only as controversial as ever, but his old trait of always being ready to take on a verbal fight remained. He exercised it in all his discussions in the parliamentary councils and assemblies. Frequently interrupted, often by unfriendly comments, he responded in kind. With these skirmishes punctuating his calmly reasoned arguments, even in parliament, he was succeeding, almost single-handedly, in keeping the issues of caste and untouchability in the public eye.

He was gaining recognition as a writer and prominent critic of the Congress. This was propelled with the publication of his second major book in June 1945, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables* (reprinted as Ambedkar 1990, Vol. 9). He had written it primarily while he was in Bombay, working at the home of Mildred Drescher, and she had arranged an American edition, titled *People at Bay*. The Indian edition was, strikingly, dedicated to his old London friend 'F'. The book was a bitter attack on Gandhi and on the Congress policy which won him immediate publicity not only in India but worldwide.

The establishment of the SCF was followed by a lull in political action. Ambedkar left the organizational work to his lieutenants. In Maharashtra, Dadasaheb Gaikwad served as his second in command. However, when Gaikwad became a recruiting officer during the war, his place was taken by

one ‘Madkebuwa’, or Ganpat Mahadev Jadhav. He was unpopular, and youth working under him revolted due to lack of pay and what they considered his bad behaviour. Some attempted to raise a ruckus during one of the SCF meetings. This was the beginning of factionalism that would result in the breakup of the party after Ambedkar’s death. On his part, Ambedkar periodically expressed his dissatisfaction with the rising generation of educated youth, and in 1956, writing to his secretary Nanak Chand Rattu he complained that the ‘educated few … have proved to be a worthless lot, with no sympathies for their downtrodden brethren … Not one of them is prepared to do social work’; they were, he said, ‘fighting among themselves for leadership and power’ (Rattu 1997, 93).

The formation of the SCF meant that Ambedkar had to give up all attempts to build any broad united front or engage in mass struggles on general working-class or peasant issues. This was not due to lack of desire but to the necessities of the times. With independence on the way and with politics revolving around the standoff between the Muslim League and the Congress, Ambedkar had to focus on gaining political rights for Dalits within whatever structure was formed for an independent India.

Aside from his responsibilities as labour minister, which were considerable, Ambedkar found time in Delhi for his extensive research and writing. His reading was shifting to ancient Indian history, examining particularly the relationships between caste and Brahmanism. His efforts resulted in several unpublished manuscripts and two major books, *Who Were the Shudras: How They Came to Be the Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society* (published in 1947) and *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables* (published in 1948; the two books were reprinted together as Ambedkar 1990, Vol. 7). Ambedkar also took part in labour conference and saw to one immediate programme of Dalits—promoting re-entry in the military. The exclusion that had been imposed in the 1890s was again being challenged, as Ambedkar took up the cause and managed to establish three Mahar battalions.

Meanwhile, Pakistan continued to be the major issue haunting India. Ambedkar returned to the question in a speech before the executive

committee of the SCF on 6 May 1945, 'Communal deadlock and a way to resolve it'. In it he opposed the idea of a constituent assembly, which had been part of the Cripps proposals, on the grounds that untouchables were excluded from it. Instead he proposed a united India that provided representation to all three major communities (Hindus, Muslims and untouchables) in the executive and separate electorates with generous representation for minorities in the provinces. Provinces were to be grouped so that the Muslim-majority areas, mainly in what was later to become Pakistan, would be together.

This was close to what would be the final proposal of Cripps in the last Cabinet mission, but it was never seriously considered. The Muslim League continued to demand Pakistan while Gandhi was now insisting that Pakistan could not be formed except on his dead body. Events, though, were moving inexorably towards the formation of Pakistan, and in the process Dalits were being marginalized. With the 1942 agitation now well in the past and with the aim of reaching some understanding in the forefront of everyone's mind, Congress leaders were released from jail and Lord Wavell, Viceroy since 1943, began discussions with Nehru, Gandhi and Jinnah. These were about forming a central government with the two main parties, and an all-party meeting was called for October 1944. With this background, Bhulabhai Desai negotiated with Jinnah on behalf of the Congress. They formulated a plan to join the central government in which only the two parties would be represented, though provision was made for communal representation. When the Wavell Agreement was finally signed, Ambedkar and six other members, including liberals, dissented. The SCF sent a statement of opposition to the prime minister when it appeared that a proposal would be accepted that would give the untouchables only one seat.

While these political negotiations were going on, Ambedkar undertook a major initiative for Dalit education. He had long envisaged a college oriented to Dalits; the original idea for the Sikh Khalsa College in Bombay had been part of this. In 1945 he drew up proposals for the Peoples' Education Society and got a promise of Rs 6 lakh from the government. The diwan of Baroda state, however, refused an appeal for a grant of Rs 11

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lakh. Nevertheless, the society was established in July 1945, and in April 1946 the Siddhartha College of Arts was founded. The Milind College was later established in Aurangabad.

During this period Ambedkar was also taking part in the beginnings of India's irrigation policy. His ministry included not only the labour portfolio but also irrigation, power and other public works. On 3 January 1945 he addressed a joint meeting of representatives of the Central, Bengal and Bihar governments in Calcutta on the issue of flood control. A disastrous flood of the Damodar River in 1945 had led to the setting up of what was to become the Damodar Valley Project. Ambedkar projected his plan as modelled on the Tennessee Valley Project. He then set up the central waterways, irrigation and navigation committee, with Dr A.N. Khosla, a noted engineer, as its first chairman. Ambedkar was also involved in the planning of the Hirakud Dam in Orissa. For all these he projected his conception of the role of 'big dams' in the development of India, which were to be multipurpose projects that would include irrigation, electricity generation and water transport. As part of the Viceroy's council, he was also involved in the earliest post-war planning, as a member of the reconstruction committee and head of the subordinate irrigation and electricity committees. Here he had full scope to develop his views on the significance of industrialization and the roles of electric power and irrigation and to give a thrust to the overall economic planning of independent India (see Thorat 1998 for the only full study of this period).

Then came the general elections of March 1945, the first Assembly elections held in India since 1937 and the first in which the SCF was fighting as a party of Dalits on an all-India basis. They revealed a stark division along religious lines. The Congress swept the general constituencies, the Muslim League captured nearly all the Muslim seats, but the SCF could not make a showing. Almost all the SCF candidates lost, except for two in Madras and Punjab. There were numerous reasons for this. For one, the Congress was inclined to brook no opposition and aggressively projected itself as the party of independence, and in many areas this aggression included slander, intimidation and violence. In

Nagpur, for instance, the young activist Vasant Moon described how all the Dalit polling booths were placed in caste Hindu wards. There, where the SCF was the only political party daring to oppose the Congress, militant resistance took place, including flag marches of the Samta Sainik Dal. The heated atmosphere before the elections saw hatred being whipped up against Dalits, with slogans like *Maharo ke rakth piunga!* (We will drink the blood of Mahars!) and wall writings branding Ambedkar a traitor. All this led to the eruption of what became known as 'Mahar–Hindu' riots. The Mahars, led by their tough wrestlers and the squads of the Samta Sainik Dal, made a good showing. Songs that later emerged as part of a growing cultural movement recall this period in proud boasts, such as 'Ask the brave Shivaji how we fought' and 'We killed their young men one by one'(Moon 2001).

Besides the violence, though, and the general gerrymandering, Ambedkar's analysis showed how the electoral process itself had aided the Congress victory. According to the provisions of the law resulting from the Poona Pact, primary elections, in which only Dalits voted, were supposed to be held in constituencies where there were more than four Dalit candidates. These were held in only forty constituencies out of 151 and were designed to select four candidates. In Bombay Presidency, SCF candidates had polled 28,489 votes to 5333 of the Congress and won five of twelve seats, compared to three by the Congress. In the Central Provinces, their other strong area, they had polled 8685 votes to 1131 of the Congress and won eleven of twenty seats to five by the Congress. In Madras they also did well, polling 30,199 to the Congress's 27,838 votes and winning twenty-four seats compared to Congress's ten. In Uttar Pradesh, finally, a relatively new area of organizing, they polled 3093 votes to 4101 and won five of twelve seats compared to four by the Congress. In Bengal the greater number of seats was captured by independents. Overall, the SCF won fifty-one seats compared to thirty-eight by the Congress out of 168, and polled 91,595 votes compared to 1,03,449 by the Congress and 1,19,273 by independents. It was not a bad showing, and it was clear that the SCF had considerable strength in Bombay and the Central Provinces and was a major force in

Madras Presidency. Meanwhile, in Bengal the independently organizing Namshudras and other Dalit groups were also resisting absorption into the Congress.

Ambedkar's objections to the Poona Pact—that even with reserved seats caste Hindu votes would dominate in general constituencies—were clearly vindicated. It was obvious that even if there were primaries, the Congress candidates just needed to make a showing by becoming part of the four-candidate panel and then would win with the help of caste Hindu votes in the general elections. The overall result was that India was moving towards independence with two of its large minorities, Muslims and Dalits, feeling left out.

The election results showed that Dalits continued to be shut out politically. Lord Wavell's plan was for the executive council to be made up of Muslims chosen by the Muslim League and Hindus chosen by the National Congress, which would include Dalits. The untouchables were no longer treated as an independent political force. Cripps remarked that the SCF had 'failed in the elections and we could not artificially restore its position. The Depressed Classes will, of course, have their full representation through the Congress-affiliated organization' (Khairmode 1998c, 9:85). Thus a ministry was announced on 16 June, which included five Congress members, five League members and five minorities; Jagjivan Ram represented the untouchables. Jinnah protested that this actually meant one more Congress representative and responded by nominating Jogendranath Mandal. Ambedkar welcomed this, with the reservation that it did not represent a true autonomy, because Dalits were now being divided among and dependent on the powerful political parties.

On 25 and 26 August 1946 in an executive committee meeting of the SCF, Ambedkar responded to the defeat by announcing the launch of a national-level satyagraha in the Congress's provinces. Thousands courted arrest, most militantly in Nagpur and Pune. In addition, Ambedkar continued to lobby, travelling to London in November 1946 to meet Winston Churchill and other leaders. This time he had the sympathy of the Conservative Party, a contradiction to his general labour orientation but one

which grew out of the fact that the Labour Party identified with the type of socialism represented by the Congress, which tended to exclude non-class issues.

For the same meeting Ambedkar wrote a memorandum on the issues related to the constitution, the communal problem and the rights of scheduled castes. Published a year later as *States and Minorities,* this was as much an economic manifesto as a social one. It proposed a United States of India without right of secession. It called for separate electorates, separate village settlements and strong measures against social boycott of untouchables and put forth a programme for what Ambedkar called 'state socialism', the nationalization of basic industries, and the nationalization of land and its organization in collectives. This manifesto marked the height of his economic radicalism. It had a strong section on fundamental rights, including the clause 'nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty and property without due process of law', but noted that the power of capitalists could not be called a promoter of freedom. He wrote, 'Obviously this liberty is liberty to the landlords to increase rents, for capitalists to increase hours of work and reduce rate of wages.' State socialism, it argued, 'is essential for the rapid industrial development of India' (Ambedkar 1979, 1:410–12). Ambedkar called this 'state socialism' because it was to be written into the constitution and be beyond the power of Parliament to change.

Among various constitutional proposals, this was an attention-getter. Ambedkar was thus not only present when the Constituent Assembly began its meetings (for he was elected from Bengal after he lost in Bombay Province) but he was a potential star, a person of controversy and considerable reputation. On 13 December 1946 a resolution for independence had been passed in the Assembly. Nehru proposed it, and after an exchange between M.R. Jayakar and Shyam Prasad Mukherji, Ambedkar was asked to speak.

Although the nationalist leaders must have been prepared to listen to him with trepidation, his actual comments were encouraging and inspiring. He began by reiterating his position in *States and Minorities*, expressing the

wish that the declaration of objectives had gone further to support a socialist economy and nationalization of industry and land. He also noted the lack of any statement regarding fundamental rights. Then he expressed his desire for a united India: 'I know today we are a group of warring camps and I may go even to the extent of conferring that I am probably one of the leaders of such a camp. But Sir, with all this, I am quite convinced that given time and circumstances, nothing in this world will prevent this country from becoming one' (Khairmode 1998c, 9:219). This statement evoked cheers and applause, as did his expressed hope that Muslims would one day see that a united India would be better for them. To keep the Muslim League in a united India, though he himself preferred a strong centre (applause again), he argued once again that grouping, that is, division of provinces into sections that would include the separate majority areas of Muslims, would be necessary (Khairmode 1998c, 9:221–22).

This speech helped change the attitude of Congress leaders like Nehru with regard to Ambedkar. Ambedkar was opposing partition, he was speaking up for a united government, he supported a strong centre and his left sympathies were well known. Whatever claims that the Congress might have made to be the sole representative of untouchables, however thoroughly the SCF had been defeated in the general elections, it had established its base firmly in the Marathi-speaking areas, in much of the Tamil-speaking areas and even in parts of Uttar Pradesh. Leaders like Nehru and Sardar Patel recognized this fact. The SCF's considerable mobilization power, not to mention the voting pattern of Dalits themselves, was clear to political leaders. With this background, when barrister M.R. Jayakar resigned his position in the Constituent Assembly from Bombay Province, Nehru and Sardar Patel suggested Ambedkar's name to fill the vacancy in July 1947. Thus Ambedkar came to the Constituent Assembly with the Congress's support. On 29 August he was made a member of the drafting committee elected for the constitution, and then he was chosen as its chairman. Thus when the draft Constitution of India was presented for approval on 4 November 1948, it was done by an ex-untouchable.

It was about this time that an important event occurred in Ambedkar's personal life. He had been going to the clinic of Dr Madhav Malvankar in Bombay for treatment of diabetes, a heart condition and high blood pressure. In January 1948 during one of these visits he renewed his acquaintance with Dr Sharda Kabir, an assistant to Malvankar. The relationship became amicable, and on 15 April 1948 the two were married, his wife taking the new name (a custom in Maharashtra) of Savita. Ambedkar now had both a companion and a home nurse. While his health problems remained, Savita found, just as Ramabai had, that there was no way to control her husband's tendency to overwork, but she did provide him much-needed companionship.

Indeed, he had warned her about this in a couple of letters to her mother prior to their marriage. In one written on 1 January 1948, he gave a penetrating and rather eloquent self-description.

> I am a difficult man. Ordinarily I am quiet as water and humble as grass. But when I get into a temper I am ungovernable and unmanageable. I am a man of silence. There is a charge against me that I don't speak to women. But I don't even speak to men unless they are my intimates. I am a man of moods. At times I talk endlessly, at other times I do not utter a word. At times I am very serious. At times I am full of humour. I am no gay person; pleasures of life do not attract me. My companions have to bear the burden of my austerity and asceticism. My books have become my companions. They are dearer to me than wife and children (Rattu 1997, 204).

This marriage has continued to be controversial among his followers and is one of the remaining puzzles of his life. Many of them hated Savita, even blaming her for Ambedkar's death; some defend her. As far as the overall community is concerned, while Ramabai continues to hold the position of beloved wife for all Maharashtra followers of Ambedkar, a very striking response is found in songs written by Dalit women: 'I'm Baba to the community, so who should I marry?' It is not so surprising, according to them, that he had looked to a Brahman woman as a wife! There was also a song about his supposed English friend, now known not as 'F' but Lucy.

Thus it was with some apparent stability in his personal life that Ambedkar took part in the process of the making of the Constitution. His membership in the drafting committee and his later induction into the Cabinet were recognition of his considerable skills as a constitutional

lawyer and as leader of the untouchables. Much emotion is involved in assessing his work on the Constitution. Many credit him as the father of the Constitution, hailing him as the modern Manu who gave India a new and democratic regime. Some of these go further to argue that any changes in the Constitution would be an affront to Ambedkar. At the other extreme are the critics, often vituperous, who downplay any independent role by him, citing his later statements when he called himself 'simply a hack' to emphasize that the Constitution had emerged out of a long process that was mainly guided by Congress politics and that, even at the level of drafting, the main role had been played by the bureaucratic adviser, Sir Benegal Rau. Perhaps the most intelligent and balanced view is that of Nehru's biographer Michael Brecher, who described Ambedkar as the chief architect, or more correctly, the field general of the campaign for a new Constitution (Brecher 1959).

In drafting the Constitution, there were often stormy debates on countless controversial issues. On all of these Ambedkar expressed his opinion, moderated the discussion and pushed for a consensus. On crucial issues such as the need for a strong centre, his position was similar to that of the Congress leadership. With regard to scheduled castes, he won what he wanted by and large in terms of reservations in public service and reserved seats. Moreover, he helped gain facilities for a group defined as 'socially and educationally backward classes', leading to the issue of reservations for 'OBCs' (roughly, the former Shudras) that would arise again and again in the following years. There was no longer any talk of separate electorates, but then it had always been Ambedkar's position that if there were adult suffrage and safeguards, reservations would suffice.

Before his final speech on the Constitution, given on 25 November 1949, numerous members of Parliament paid him accolades. Some, including the non-Brahman leader Keshavrao Jedhe, made the inevitable comparison between Ambedkar and Manu, heralding a new era for India. H.J. Khandekar, another Maharashtrian, said, 'I call this Constitution the Mahar Law because Dr Ambedkar is a Mahar and now … we shall have the law of Manu replaced by the law of Mahar and I hope that unlike the law of Manu

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under which there was never a prosperity in this country, the Mahar law will make India virtually paradise' (Ambedkar 1994, 13:1201).

Ambedkar's speech described the committee's immense work completed in a relatively short period of time and gave credit to Rau, other members of the drafting committee and the chief draftsman, S.N. Mukherjee. He noted that there were only two major condemnations of the Constitution. These were by the Communists, who wanted nothing to do with parliamentary democracy, and the socialists, who wanted unlimited powers to nationalize or socialize all private property and overthrow the state. To the socialists, he pointed out the scope for change, and he quoted the famous statement of Thomas Jefferson which argued for the right of every generation to revise a constitution on the grounds that one generation had no right to bind succeeding generations, 'for this would mean that the earth belongs to the dead and not to the living'. Ambedkar endorsed this as absolutely true. In his view, the Constitution had no seal of infallibility (Ambedkar 1994, Vol. 13).

He went on to argue that in the new democracy both violence and satyagraha as methods of social change must be given up. Even more inimical to democracy, he noted, was the tendency of Indians to make gurus into semi-divine beings. *'Bhakti* (hero worship) in religion may be a road to the salvation of the soul, but in politics *bhakti* is a sure road to degradation and eventual dictatorship.' He went on to argue that the new Indian society must be based on social democracy, a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity. Although he perceived liberty as necessary for individual initiative, Ambedkar was more concerned with equality and fraternity. Equality had been largely absent in Indian society, and as long as the contradiction between equality in political life and social inequality remained, democracy was in danger. 'We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment,' he proposed, 'or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which this Assembly has so laboriously built up' (Ambedkar 1994, 13:1216). He was to repeat this statement later in speeches, reaffirming the need for social and economic equality.

Finally, he reiterated his theory about the development of India as a nation. India was in reality a nation in the making, not a nation as such. 'The sooner we realize that we are not as yet a nation in the social and psychological sense, the better for us … For only then we shall realize the necessity of becoming a nation and seriously think of ways and means of realizing the goal.' India's anti-social caste system made the realization of liberty, equality and fraternity so difficult, much more so than in the United States. He noted that political power in India had long been the monopoly of a few, while the many are not only beasts of burden but also beasts of prey. But these downtrodden had now become impatient to govern themselves. He explained that this 'urge for self-realization in the downtrodden classes must not be allowed to devolve into a class struggle or class war' (Ambedkar 1994, 13:1217–18). To avoid this, the establishment of equality and fraternity was necessary.

This speech was a climactic moment in Ambedkar's life. He went on to be named minister of law in the new Cabinet, but his work on the Constitution gave him an indelible place in the country's formation. For Dalits, the modern Manu has been a symbol of progress, of the step forward for independent India.

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Eight

‘Building a palace on a dung heap’

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The Post-Independence Years

The slaughter of Partition wrote in blood the cost of the inability to resolve the dilemma of Hindu–Muslim relations. India began its life as an independent country with a shadow hanging over it, one that was bound to affect Dalits as well as others. Dalits in fact were being increasingly caught in the middle of the Hindu–Muslim conflagration. Among refugees from Pakistan were large numbers of untouchables. The Pakistan government was reluctant to allow them to leave, since they provided menial labour as well as cleaned latrines and swept, tasks which it felt would be hard to find others to do.

Even when the untouchables could escape as refugees, they were oppressed by the Hindu and Jat Sikhs of East Punjab. Although Ambedkar carried on a correspondence with Nehru in December 1947 to try to win them justice, little changed. The untouchable refugees could not get land for settlement in villages since it was assumed that they were landless. They were rehabilitated in Delhi itself, but in kaccha houses, and they were much worse off than other refugees. Caste Hindu and Sikh refugees were settled in well-built houses in the city or given land in villages.

In Hyderabad another tense situation developed. It was the largest princely state in India, its ruler an autocrat who conceded little to popular democratic aspirations. Here, though, there was a centuries-old Deccani culture, which had in fact given birth to the first form of 'Hindi/Urdu' or Hindustani. The population included a number of Dalits, some of whom turned to Islam. The Dalit movement in this state was strong but factionalized. Its base was primarily the Malas, the Telugu-speaking equivalent of the Mahars. The more educationally backward Madigas were slower to mobilize, and when they did so, they kept aloof from the Malas and tended to support the Congress and a Hindu identity. Mahars from the Marathi-speaking areas of current-day Marathwada were also slow to mobilize and did so independently from the Hyderabad leadership.

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Of the rambunctious Dalit movement, though all had attended the SCF's founding meeting in 1942, many fell away, leaving J. Subbiah to become the organization's leader. He proved to be flashy and assertive but not very good at organization-building. Another important leader, B.S. Venkatrao, a wealthy contractor who had been president of the Mahar conference supporting conversion in 1936, tended to associate with Muslims. It was a militant activist who was part of the Deccani Muslim culture, Shyam Sunder, who became the leader of the pro-Nizam group. The Nizam had been giving concessions, most notably grants of wasteland to Dalits, which proved a source of attraction in the Marathi-speaking Marathwada region, where Congress was dominant and lacked the radical orientation of the pro-Communist group in Telangana. Shyam Sunder's group supported independence for Hyderabad and convinced Venkatrao to join them. Ambedkar, however, opposed this. In November 1947 he issued a call.

> The Scheduled Castes of Hyderabad should under no circumstances side with the Nizam and the Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen. Whatever the tyranny and oppression which the Hindus practice upon us, it must not warp our vision and swerve us from our duty. The Scheduled Castes need freedom, and their whole movement has been one of freedom … [Thus] they cannot support the Nizam (Government of Maharashtra 1982, 350).

But Dalits in Hyderabad were caught in a pincer of growing violence between Muslims and Hindus. By 1948, as Muslims began to arm themselves throughout the state, atrocities against Dalits by the extremist Razakars were being reported. Ambedkar, with Rajbhoj and Shivraj, as president of the SCF, toured the state in January 1948, starting from Aurangabad and Nashik. The Congress then endorsed military intervention, the 'Police Action'. This should have provided the basis for the establishment of a democratic regime, but the caste Hindu peasants who had fled and then returned directed their fury against their most helpless opponents, the Dalits, while the army stood by. There were numerous reports of brutal attacks by caste Hindus, who charged the Dalits with siding with the Nizam. At the heart of this was the land issue—the land which Dalits had been given by the Nizam and which the caste peasants were trying to grab back. Rajbhoj then toured the region, working with the

Marathwada secretary of the SCF, B.S. More, to report on the situation. Finally, in January 1949, Ambedkar made another tour. He was met by large crowds of Dalits at every railway station, including a huge rally of one lakh in Aurangabad itself. Marathwada Dalits may have been slow in organizing, but now they were militant. The land issue then developed into one of the first 'land satyagrahas' in independent India, and it was organized by the SCF.

While all this was going on, Ambedkar continued his research and writing. He had earlier written *Who Were the Shudras: How They Came to Be the Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society,* dedicated to Jotirao Phule. It analysed the position of the non-untouchable 'low castes' in Indian society. He then took up the question of Dalits in *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables*. This had been written in 1947 and was dedicated to the Dalit sants Nandnar, Ravidas and Cokhamela. He continued to work on his analysis of ancient Indian conflicts and the origin of caste. His drafts are collected in 'Revolution and counter-revolution in ancient India' (published in Ambedkar 1987, 3:1514—37). His evolving position was one that differentiated him from most of the theoretical work on caste done up to that time.

Ambedkar was never interested in the 'Aryan theory', which formed the framework by which so many Indians—following the European leads—interpreted caste, explaining varna divisions as resulting from the conquest of indigenous inhabitants by Aryan invaders. This had become the favoured position among Dalits too. Following Phule, they had 'turned the theory on its head' to depict the original indigenous society as one of equality and prosperity. This was an essentially racial theory that Ambedkar refused to endorse. He opposed it most strongly in *Who Were the Shudras,* where he denied that there was any racial difference and that Aryans came from outside India, citing lack of evidence in the *Rig Veda*. This book described the Shudras originally as an Aryan tribe, in conflict with Brahmans and finally degraded by being denied initiation rites. However, even here the ethnic distinction between Aryans and non-Aryans was admitted when he noted that the 'low-class Hindus' of his day were of a 'different stock',

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racially different from the original Shudras of the Indo-Aryan society (Ambedkar 1990, 7:10). Then, in *The Untouchables,* he took a more agnostic position on the 'Aryan question', asserting that it was not known whether the term 'Aryan' was indicative of race. This work tended to accept the existence of two racial groups, describing the Nagas—spread all over India at the time, with their own distinct language—as being equivalent to the ancient Dravidians. The difference between the South and most of the North, according to Ambedkar, was simply that the northerners had eventually accepted Aryan forms of language. However, though the Nagas fascinated him and he saw them as ancestors of Mahars in Maharashtra, he continued to argue against the racial theory of caste. There were untouchables in every province, and they were not significantly different from Brahmans of that province in terms of physical characteristics. He could not accept the Aryan theory as an adequate explanation of caste. His argument that 'caste is not a racial division but a division of races' echoed his denial of the traditional Marxist interpretation that saw caste as a reflection of a social division of labour. As he asserted in his 1936 essay 'Annihilation of caste' and in other publications, 'caste is not a division of labour, it is also a division of labourers' (Ambedkar 1979, 1:47).

In his effort to work out a full theory, seen partially in the notes of 'Revolution and counter-revolution', he stressed the ideological conflict between Brahmanism and Buddhism as the main dialectic of Indian history. Early Aryan society was tribal and backward, but Buddhism represented a revolution that was backed by the Mauryan emperors. The counter-revolution came with the establishment of the caste system, proclaimed by Manu and heralded with the revolt of the Brahman feudatory of the Mauryas, Pushyamitra Shunga. This involved the degradation of Shudras and other low castes and of women. It was a theory that gave primacy to political and ideological factors in the processes of Indian history. In explaining untouchability specifically, Ambedkar established a Buddhist connection. He argued in *Who Were the Untouchables?* that untouchables were defeated tribes or 'Broken Men' who lived outside the villages of the more victorious tribes and, since they were mostly Buddhist and refused to

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give up their religion, they were subjected to the worst forms of degradation by Brahmans. To combat the appeal of Buddhism and its scathing critique of animal sacrifice, Brahmans took up vegetarianism and made beef eating the greatest symbol of pollution, though they had originally been the biggest beef-eaters. This then became the symbol of degradation for broken men living outside the village, that they continued to eat beef as a major source of food. Untouchability itself, he concluded, became established between the fourth and sixth centuries AD: 'Untouchability was born some time about 400 AD … out of the struggle for supremacy between Buddhism and Brahmanism which has so completely moulded the history of India and the study of which is so woefully neglected by students of Indian history' (Ambedkar 1990, 7:379).

Contemporary concerns were also a subject of analysis. At about the same time as he published works on the origins of caste a small booklet on *Maharashtra as a Linguistic Province* was published. It had been his statement submitted to the States Reorganization Commission in October 1947. It argued that Bombay must be a part of Maharashtra. Later, in *Thoughts for Linguistic States,* published in 1955 (reprinted in Ambedkar 1979, 1:99–l27), he took the position that while states should be created on a linguistic basis, large states, including Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, should be broken up. 'One state, one language' did not imply 'one language, one state', which was an 'absurd formula' with no precedence. The requirements of efficient administration and the often differing needs of different regions suggested the advantage of smaller states, while from the point of view of Dalits, it would give local Dalit communities a slightly greater advantage in facing the numerically powerful dominant peasant communities. In regard to the Marathi-speaking areas, Ambedkar suggested four states; three would be based on the major regions of western Maharashtra including the Konkan, Marthwada and Vidarbha, while for the fourth, he suggested making Bombay an independent 'city state'. The essay also referred to the North—South social division of India, to the fear southerners had of being dominated by the large states of the Hindi-

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speaking North, which was backward in comparison to the progressive South.

The most controversial and public of Ambedkar's activities in the turmoil of the early independence years, though, was his effort to get the Hindu Code Bill passed. This piece of legislation was in many ways a culmination of women's social reform efforts that had been going on since the colonial period. Under traditional Brahmanic law as it was applied in British courts —often at the cost of more liberal customary laws of the lower castes— women had no right to divorce, could be forced to live with their husbands and had very few rights of inheritance. They could not legally control money or open bank accounts under their own names. Since the 1930s there had been legislative efforts to remedy this resourceless position of women, in particular to give them rights of divorce and inheritance. The government had appointed a Hindu Code Committee in 1941, which proposed two bills for this. However, they failed due to adamant opposition from the orthodox. A revised bill was submitted in March 1943, and after the first discussions in Parliament they were sent back to an experts committee chaired by B.N. Rau and under the guidance of Ambedkar as law minister. In the preparation of the new bill, Ambedkar made some changes in the draft, notably by taking the Dayabhaga traditional legal system, in which individual heirs have full property rights, as the basis for the reformed law rather than the originally proposed Mitakshara, in which individual claims were subject to 'coparcenary' restrictions. This orientation to individual rights was consistent with his overall philosophy.

The new bill was submitted on 16 August 1948. It was to have a difficult history. For three years it remained pending under contentious debate, with the orthodox attacking it by proclaiming the sacred nature of Hindu marriage. Marriage and the family were declared as the true foundation of Hindu society, and dissolving a marriage would ruin a society that had endured for millennia. Women who supported the bill were attacked as 'far too aggressive', as women 'who have recourse to gawdy and gorgeous saris … [and] paint themselves'. One traditionalist asked if laws would be made to require husbands to cook. Opposing the bill, Shyam Prasad Mukherji

threatened that if the bill were passed the whirlwind would come. He attacked the maladjustment of the sexes in western countries and argued that any changes must be voluntary (Ambedkar 1995, 14, bk 2:891, 1002). Outside Parliament, the orthodox mobilized in morchas and demonstrations, especially in Delhi and Calcutta. One morcha was of sadhus, at which Shantabai Dani, a young woman lieutenant of Ambedkar, remembers Ambedkar telling the demonstrators, 'I don't understand why you sadhus are concerned with inheritance' (Interview, Shantabai Dani, 3 January 1976).

The bill came up for its final reading on 18 September 1951. The debate dragged on, with days spent arguing over a single clause. On 20 September Ambedkar made a long speech responding to the criticisms, asserting that the argument about the unchanged nature of Hindu society and its survival meant nothing. Rather, he pointed out, the question was of the quality of what had survived. The new marriage system proposed was not, he said, an imitation of the West but was based on the values of liberty, equality and fraternity found in the Constitution. In contrast, he said, the 'sacramental marriage' of the traditionalists 'is polygamy for the man and perpetual slavery for the woman' (Ambedkar 1995, 14, bk 2:1161). Following this, he was heavily attacked in the press and accused of insulting Hindu ideals such as Ram and Sita. Apparently, to change Hindu social legislation was even more of a sin for an untouchable than to be part of the drafting of the Constitution.

The bill finally failed. Nehru, who had vowed to support it, never issued a whip and was clearly unable and unwilling to bring the traditionally minded members of the Congress into line. This was the final straw for Ambedkar, who was ailing and disgusted with the government in any case. On 10 August he wrote Nehru saying that he was thinking of resigning and that the failure of the new Hindu Code Bill confirmed his decision. He submitted his resignation on 27 September and gave a statement in Parliament on 10 October 1951. The bill's failure was one of a multitude of reasons behind his resignation. Among these were the fact that he had wanted to head the Planning Commission and not simply the law ministry.

He accused the government of the continuing neglect of the scheduled castes. He referred to India's foreign policy, saying that friendship with China had led to alienation from the United States, which he, in contrast to Nehru, considered closer as a democratic power. In regard to the always controversial issue of Kashmir, he suggested its partition, with Muslim areas given to Pakistan.

But it was the Hindu Code Bill that was the main issue of contention, and he concluded his letter of resignation and speech with a statement about its importance that rings strong even today.

> The Hindu code was the greatest social reform measure ever undertaken by the Legislature in this country. No law … in the past or … the future can be compared to it in its significance. To leave inequality between class and class, between sex and sex which is the soul of Hindu society untouched and to go on passing legislation relating to economic problems is to make a farce of our Constitution and to build a palace on a dung heap (Ambedkar 1995, 14, bk 1:1325). *

It was a striking image. It suggested that the economic radicalism shown by the emergence of a planned, state-directed and substantially state-owned economy was not matched by social radicalism. In Ambedkar's view, Nehru had yielded before the Brahmanic Hindu orthodoxy of the members of Parliament. The image of the dung heap was also a reversal of the old base-superstructure imagery of Marxism; now it was patriarchy and caste—'for class and class' here clearly had a caste reference—which constituted the foundation, while the building on it represented economic relations. Just as significant, perhaps, was his reference to foreign policy, which seemed to indicate a growing alienation from the socialist countries. This was clearly fuelled by China's takeover of Tibet, the major Buddhist country to the north of India.

All of this lay in the background of a rethinking of his economic policies, which became clear in the manifesto issued by the SCF for the January 1952 elections. There was no mention in it of socialism, very little of state-owned industries. There was a call only for nationalization of insurance. Instead, regarding Indian poverty, the stress was on economic growth. Prohibition was denounced as sheer madness on the grounds that taxation

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could be a major source of revenue. Ambedkar viewed economic policy on a pragmatic basis.

> The policy of the Party is not tied to any particular dogma or ideology such as communism, socialism, Gandhism … [T]he Party will be ready to adopt any plan of social and economic betterment of the people irrespective of its origin and provided it is consistent with its principles. Its outlook on life will be purely rational and modern … (Khairmode 2000a, 10:153).

The organization of industry would 'not be bound by any dogma or pattern'. A decision whether to keep an enterprise or nationalize it (make it part of the 'public sector') would be made depending on whether such nationalization was possible and essential; there would be no 'preconceived pattern'. This insistence on pragmatism and an effective developmental policy was new, but Ambedkar continued his concern for welfare and industrialization. In agriculture, the manifesto supported mechanization, with equipment to be provided by the state; it urged the establishment of large-scale farms on a collective or cooperative base and demanded that untouchables be given lands that were classed as 'waste' or 'fallow' wasteland. This continued Ambedkar's negative attitude to peasant cultivation. The manifesto supported linguistic provinces. It stated that in making electoral alliances priority would be given to parties representing the backward classes and the scheduled tribes; if necessary the SCF would change its name to the Backward Classes Federation to represent OBCs. (In a sense, this was a forecasting of the policy adopted by the Bahujan Samaj Party in the 1980s.) No alliances in the forthcoming elections would be made with the Congress, with communal parties or with the Communists. The manifesto suggested that the party should develop into something like the British Labour Party, which had also been the inspiration for the ILP, but in a more ideological incarnation.

During the election campaign, though the SCF allied itself with the Socialist Party, Ambedkar stressed again that this was for electoral purposes only, that he followed no 'ism'—that realism and rationalism were the basis of the party's programme. His growing tendency to centre on democracy rather than socialism was evident also when, on 22 December 1952, he

delivered a speech on parliamentary democracy for the District Law Club Library at Poona. Before this he had reviewed a copy of an old essay by John Dewey on the subject. He stressed as preconditions for democracy equality before the law, a moral order in society, the functioning of a public conscience and the lack of glaring inequalities in society. His thinking on international issues was elaborated in a 26 August 1954 speech in the Rajya Sahba in which he again attacked the pro-Russian policy of the government, saying communism was 'like a forest fire! It goes on burning and consuming anything and everything that comes in its way' (Khairmode 2000b, 11:103). He took his primary examples from the Soviet Union in eastern Europe, but also referred to allowing 'the Chinese to take possession of Lhasa'. Tibet, after his Kathmandu visit and the growing concern with Buddhism, may well have been on his mind.

All these speeches, manifestos and lectures represented a clear retreat from his earlier argument for an economic pattern of state socialism. He was still concerned about state action, as evidenced by his interest in the Planning Commission, but his reiteration that there would be no dogma, no preconceived pattern, indicated a conscious break with Marxist economics. He was, in other words, becoming a social democrat. His writings and speeches suggest that this process was connected with his growing inclination towards Buddhism. In fact Marxism had its strength as a totalitarian doctrine; take away the 'religious' aspect of this, the totalism, and it is susceptible to what is otherwise called 'revisionism'. In any case, Ambedkar was comparing Marxist thinking with Buddhism, and the comparison was inevitably going to affect his views on economic organization too.

In 1956 Ambedkar addressed the World Buddhist Conference in Kathmandu on 'Marxism versus Buddhism'. This talk reflected an unpublished essay entitled 'Buddha or Karl Marx' (published in Ambedkar 1987, 3:441–62). In it he outlined the propositions of Marxism—including class conflict, exploitation, and nationalization or abolition of private property—as a solution to human ills or dukka. He noted that many of the propositions had been demolished by logic and experience. Still, he said, a

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'residue of fire' remained. This included the concept of class conflict, private property as the basis of exploitation and the necessity for the abolition of private property, and the notion that 'the function of philosophy is to reconstruct the world'. In the rest of the essay he made it clear that he no longer saw nationalism as the form of abolition; rather, the voluntary communism of the Bhikku Sangh was a better substitute. He retold one of the early *suttas* of the basic Buddhist scriptures, the *Cakavattisutta* of the *Digha Nikaya,* in which a kingdom falls for lack of providing wealth to the destitute. The story suggested that the welfare functions of the state were crucial. But he also stressed the emphasis on householders (private individuals) acquiring wealth legitimately and justly. Ambedkar's reading of the Pali texts, which give a good deal of respect to merchants and to the acquisition of wealth and to the enjoyment of that acquisition as long as it was done honestly, was clearly having an impact on his overall economic thinking.

He concluded the essay with a reference to the need for liberty, equality and fraternity.

> The French Revolution was welcomed because of its 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 … It seems that the three can coexist only if one follows the way of the Buddha (Ambedkar 1987, 3:462).

Buddhism was, in other words, leading Ambedkar to a more pragmatic approach to economic organization, an approach reflected in the manifesto of the SCF for the 1952 elections.

Electoral success, however, continued to elude the party. The SCF won few seats. Rajbhoj and B.C. Kamble were elected to Parliament and the Bombay Legislative Assembly respectively, but no others won. The magic of the Congress as the winner of independence still carried the day. However, it would not be until the 1957 elections, when the SCF (in its new form of the Republican Party of India) contested as part of the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti, a broad alliance with the left parties aiming at constituting a separate state of Marathi speakers, that it would win a

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substantial victory. But this was to come after Ambedkar's death. In 1952 both Socialists and Dalits fared badly. Ambedkar himself lost in his stronghold of Bombay, blaming the defeat on the Communists. Indeed, the voting bases for the Communists and Ambedkar were in the same area of Bombay—the textile mills, where Dalits and OBCs had long settled and laboured. Ambedkar took the case to court in January 1952, charging electoral fraud against the Communists, headed by S.A. Dange. The argument was simple: in the electoral system of the time, reserved constituencies were lumped with general constituencies, and voters had two votes, one for each seat. There were 78,000 invalid votes, half of these for Dange, and Ambedkar claimed that Communists had propagated against him that voters cast both their votes for one candidate, which was illegal. Although he lost the case, Ambedkar's anger was not assuaged. He continued to hold a seat in Parliament, as a member of the Rajya Sabha, but this meant an ongoing dependence on the Congress.

Nevertheless, internationally his importance was increasingly recognized. In June 1952 he won another honour—an honorary doctor of law degree from his old alma mater, Columbia University. He went to the United States, also visiting a hospital for his continuing health problems. The citation listed his degrees and described him as 'a framer of the Constitution, member of the Cabinet and of the Council of State, one of India's leading citizens, a great social reformer and a valiant upholder of human rights' (Khairmode 2000a, 10:280). Whether such human rights would be implemented in an independent India, whether the dung heap underlying the building of a society of social justice would be cleared, was still uncertain.

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Nine

'Buddham sharanam gacchami'

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The Final Years

As independent India moved into the future, claiming to implement a socialist pattern of society without decisively resolving the issues of its caste-ridden, patriarchal society, Ambedkar was increasingly moving towards Buddhism, the religion he saw as a liberating force.

There were, however, a number of issues that also preoccupied him as the decade of the 1950s moved on. Most important were the future of Dalit political formations and the question of Maharashtra as a linguistic province.

The question of political representation was one of transforming the SCF into a party with a broader thrust. While the party had clearly gained a national presence, its form had not been one chosen by Ambedkar. His earliest ideal, represented in the Independent Labour Party, had been a party based on Dalits but putting forward a programme in the interests of all the poor; it had in fact appealed to a section of non-Dalit voters also. It was only because the government had demanded evidence of his representativeness of untouchable interests that he had formed a party limited to Dalits. Now, with some of the demands of Dalits won, at least in regard to reservation, and with the necessity of competing politically in open electorates based on adult franchise, the issue of broadening the party emerged once more. This was also related to a general movement towards giving a transformative, wider scope for Dalit leadership in independent India. With Ambedkar moving towards a broader identity on all fronts, it was natural that he should propose to broaden and transform his political party too.

The heritage he decided to associate with was a democratic one rather than a socialist one, another confirmation of the change in the direction of his political and economic thinking. The new party would, he said, be founded on the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, but it would no longer have the militant working-class identity that the earlier ILP, with its red flag, had claimed. Instead, Ambedkar chose a name for the party that

symbolized, for him, the end of slavery in the United States—the Republican Party, the party of Lincoln. The Republican Party of India (RPI) would be one with a broadly social democratic programme, but one directed against forms of caste enslavement that still existed in India. While in terms of cadre it was and would remain an incarnation of the old SCF, a party almost entirely of Dalits, its broader aspirations were now clearly identified with all oppressed sections of society. The RPI was formally established only after Ambedkar's death, but its basis was the outline that he had provided.

The other pending issue was that of linguistic states, particularly Maharashtra. Demands for establishing states on a linguistic basis were rising in India, spearheaded by the demand for a Telugu-speaking state, and in 1953, in the charged atmosphere following the death during fasting of an old Congress activist, Ambedkar spoke in the Rajya Sabha in support of this demand. By 1955-56 Marathi-speakers were forcefully demanding Samyukta Maharashtra with Bombay included and, again, Ambedkar gave his support. His earlier suggestion for four Marathi-speaking states was now moot and the movement for a united Maharashtra was getting impressive mass support. Ambedkar was staunchly against the Congress proposal to constitute Gujarati- and Marathi-speaking states but keep Bombay city separate, as a bilingual Bombay state. This, he said, given the context of Gujarati capital and a largely Marathi working class, would be nothing more than making Bombay a 'Maharwada of Gujarat'. Ambedkar took part in major mass rallies for a united Maharashtra, and after his death the Republican Party formally joined the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti, a broad alliance that included mainly leftist parties. This helped it to achieve its first significant electoral victories, in both the state legislature and the Lok Sabha in 1957.

Nevertheless, in the face of all the other preoccupations, in spite of continued ill health and pressures of writing, it was above all the question of religious conversion that was foremost in Ambedkar's mind. By the 1940s Buddhism was beginning to seem an inevitable choice for Indian Dalits.

At one level this was the culmination of a long trend of Dalit collective inclination to Buddhism. While India had seen individual upper-caste conversions to Buddhism from the rediscovery of the religion as a major part of India's heritage from the nineteenth century onwards, the first mass revival of Buddhism had been led by a Dalit. This was Pandit Iyothee Thass of Tamil Nadu, who had sought out Colonel Olcott of the Theosophical Society in Madras and then went to Sri Lanka to meet the great Sri Lankan monk Anagarika Dharmapala and other Lankan Buddhists. He and his followers then established the Sakya Buddhist Society in 1901. The name came from the Buddha's Sakya clan, who were believed by Iyothee Thass and his followers to be the ancestors of the Tamil Paraiyas. For the followers of Iyothee Thass, then, the turn to Buddhism was actually a return to the ancient religion of Dalits. Other Dalit leaders in the 1920s had also shown an inclination to Buddhism. These included Bhagyareddy Varma, the distinguished first-generation leader of the Hyderabad Adi-Hindu movement, and Acchutananda of Utter Pradesh, who pioneered the Adi-Hindu movement there and believed that sants like Ravidas and Kabir were in fact propagating a form of Buddhism. A turn to Buddhism was also discussed among Kerala Dalits and OBCs in the 1920s, though in the end the Vedantic approach of Shri Narayana Guru prevailed.

In 1940 Ambedkar republished Laxmi Narasu's important survey, *The Essence of Buddhism*. This gave a modernistic interpretation of Buddhism, denying karma as rebirth and emphasizing the social aspects of the teaching. As Narasu (1993, 32) wrote

> Physiologically considered, an individual reincarnates in his progeny, and his physical karma is transmitted to them. Ethically considered, the psychic life of an individual cannot be separated from the psychic life of the community of which he is a member.

This social and moralistic interpretation of Buddhism given by Narasu and other Sakya Buddhists prefigured Ambedkar's later interpretation in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. Ambedkar also began to write articles in the *Janata* elaborating on the meaning and significance of Buddhism.

Buddhism was an improbable choice in view of the criterion that many thought was important in the 1930s: the need to be associated with a

financially and organizationally powerful community. Though Buddhism was a religion that had a world presence, it had no effective presence in India; the southern Sakya Buddhist Society had died away in the 1920s and had nothing to offer Dalits in terms of resources. However, these early concerns with the resources that Dalits could gain from conversion were now much less relevant to Ambedkar. Dalits had shown by this time a fair amount of power on their own to generate organizational strength and some funding. In this context, Buddhism had something else to offer: as the major Buddhist community in India, Dalits could shape the future of the religion in the land of its birth.

At the same time, there was something like a groundswell in favour of Buddhism in various Dalit communities, especially in Maharashtra. Vasant Moon's autobiography, *Growing Up Untouchable in India* (2001), gives something of the flavour of this in Nagpur. Militant, educated youth, rejecting their identity as 'Harijan' and ready to engage in street fighting against caste Hindu bullies were spearheading a cultural renaissance. They were challenging the old customs, refusing to participate in Hindu festivals and smashing the idols that represented to them a religion of slavery. They confronted and debated with traditional buwas, babas and sadhus, and many of these were brought into the movement. The educated youth started libraries and sought out the few upper-caste Buddhists in the area, calling them for lectures and organizing discussions. By the 1950s this collective turn towards Buddhism was becoming clear.

Throughout this period, even after his resignation as law minister from the Union Cabinet, Ambedkar maintained his Delhi residence. His health continued to be bad. He suffered from diabetes, rheumatism, high blood pressure and frequent and severe leg pain. In spite of all this, he continued to keep long hours, often writing late into the night.

His study now focussed on Buddhism. In his search for the original texts, he began to learn Pali, putting together a dictionary, rewriting the definitions from an existing dictionary and giving Marathi and Gujarati word equivalents. From 1949 he had been propagating Buddhism in private discussions. In 1950 he published an article in the *Journal of the*

Mahabodhi Society entitled 'The Buddha and the future of his religion', which argued that Buddhism was a religion for the whole world: 'If the new world which be it realized is very different from the old must have a religion and the new world needs a religion far more than the old world did then it can only be the religion of the Buddha' (Sangharakshita 1986, 71). In December 1950 he attended the World Buddhist Conference and in July 1951 he formed the Bharatiya Bauddha Janasangh, which became the Bharatiya Bauddha Mahasabha in May 1955.

Ambedkar's arguments for Buddhism as an appropriate religion centred on its morality and rationality. The 'new world', as he noted, needed religion-as-morality which Buddhism was the supreme example of just as the tumultuous society of the first millennium BCE had. It was a world in turmoil, one with tremendous potential for economic development, but with increasingly visible poverty and backwardness haunting those who could see this poverty posed against the prosperity and power of an elite world—a world facing massive psychological and spiritual concerns brought about by the processes of change, social movements, wars, fascism, the Holocaust and nuclear destruction. The promises of economic development themselves were so enveloped in commercialism and technological 'fixes' that the need for moral grounding was clear. It was the morality represented by Buddhism rather than socialism that Ambedkar was looking to for a solution.

In 1954, during a trip to Burma, Ambedkar made a proposal for sponsoring a campaign for Buddhist conversion in India. Speaking on 19 July to the Buddhist Sasana Council of Burma, he argued that the ground was fertile in India: in the birthplace of the religion, where the Buddha was already known, if only as an avatar of Vishnu, people were receptive. But he cautioned them against repeating the mistake of the Christian missionaries who had begun with a focus on Brahmans, thinking that others would then follow. Instead, the focus from the very beginning should be on 'the lower classes … Untouchables and the backward classes.' And a simple 'Buddhist gospel' that summed up the vast Buddhist literature had to be prepared.

But the Burmese were not willing to sponsor this, and Ambedkar was ready to undertake it on his own. He thus began writing a book intended as a simple, eloquent and rationalistic Buddhist gospel. Ambedkar was not about to give Dalits a conventional version of Buddhism. The introduction to *The Buddha and His Dhamma* cites four crucial areas in which he found normal interpretations of Buddhism unacceptable. These included the idea that Siddhartha left home after seeing a dead man, a sick man and an old man, the idea of rebirth, the notion that 'all is sorrow' and the usual form of the Buddhist sangha as an organization apart from society. His statement about dukka (suffering or sorrow) sums this up. In rejecting the four noble truths, he writes, 'This formula cuts at the root of Buddhism. If life is sorrow, death is sorrow and rebirth is sorrow, then there is an end of everything … The four Aryan Truths are a great stumbling block in the way of non-Buddhists accepting the gospel of Buddhism' (Ambedkar 1992, 11 :ii). He wanted, in other words, a religion that was clearly not world-rejecting, but was this-worldly in the sense of providing a morality that could have the potential of 'reconstructing the world' on a basis of liberty, equality and fraternity.

In the rest of *The Buddha and His Dhamma,* he proceeded to offer this understanding of Buddhism. While rejecting karma as rebirth and transmigration, he reinterpreted it to mean a moral law in which all actions had consequences, though these were not necessarily to be borne by any particular individual but would work themselves out at the social level. He called this by the Pali term of 'kamma' to distinguish it from the Brahmanical idea of 'karma'. Again, Siddhartha was depicted as renouncing his home not on a religiously motivated quest provoked by seeing sickness, old age and death, but to avoid a war of irrigation waters between the Sakya and Koliya clans (this in fact drew on an ancient story found in the Jatakas). And when this conflict was resolved, he determined that rather than return home, he would go on to solve the larger problem of conflict and clashes within society.

'The problem of war is a problem of conflict. It is only part of a larger problem. This conflict is going on not only between kings and nations but

between nobles and Brahmans, between householders, between [friends and family members] … The conflict between nations is occasional. But the conflict between classes is constant and perpetual. It is this which is the root of all suffering in the world. I have to find a solution to this problem of social conflict' (Ambedkar 1992, 11:57–58).

The issue is posed almost as if Siddhartha were seeking a solution to the problem dealt with by Marxism in terms of exploitation. Indeed, Ambedkar's understanding of dukka saw it almost in terms of exploitation, social suffering. In any case, instead of finding it in collective revolution and socialism, he found the answer in moral and psychological enlightenment. This theme is repeated in Ambedkar's definition of 'nibbana' in terms of three ideas: 'Of these the happiness of a sentient being as distinction from the salvation of the soul is one. The second idea is the happiness of the sentient being in Samsara while he is alive … The third idea which underlies his conception of Nibbana is the exercise of control over the flames of the passions which are always on fire' (Ambedkar 1992, 11:234). This control over the fire of passions and emotions is the basis for collective human control over social life, and it is depicted as the basic factor in the Buddha's Enlightenment. It is this that he sets out to preach, and just to underline its this-worldly approach, Ambedkar describes the first five listeners as responding with the words 'never in the history of the world has salvation been conceived as the blessing of happiness to be attained by man in this life and on this earth by righteousness born out of his own efforts'(Ambedkar 1992, 11:130–31). While almost all of the book (and all of the Buddha's own teachings) is taken from actual Pali suttas, this response of the first followers appears to be an addition of Ambedkar's, designed to stress the moral nature of the Buddhist dhamma. In the same way, he spends a good deal of effort contrasting Buddhist 'dhamma' from the Brahmanical caste-ridden 'dharma'.

This was, in part, providing Buddhist answers to Marxist questions. It was clearly a rejection of collectivistic materialism: psychological and moral solutions were stressed. Yet it was different from the purely spiritual orientation of the traditional forms of Buddhism, including Theravada. The

goal, as Ambedkar put it, was reconstruction of the world, a goal that he had held from very early in his life. But the answers of Marxism no longer held much fascination for him. Buddhism did, but it was a reinterpreted Buddhism, a kind of psychological materialism. In distinguishing between 'dhamma' and 'religion', Ambedkar argued that for traditional religions, morality was secondary and derivative; to Buddhists, dhamma was morality, though it was a sacred morality, necessary to bind society together. This basic insight provided a framework for the book, Ambedkar's manual of Buddhism, which included a collection of stories of the Buddha, his disciples and his teachings drawn from the major Pali scriptures. The stories emphasized how followers, both men and women, came from all communities and all levels of society; they emphasized the wisdom of the Buddha and the difference of his teachings from Hinduism; and they emphasized rationality. On questions of interpretation, Ambedkar wrote, reason was to be the guide, for the Buddha 'was nothing if not rational'. It was a form of Buddhism that could be justified by scholarly research, but it awakened some antagonism from existing Buddhist orders, particularly the Hindu-dominated Mahabodhi society.

These were relevant only in terms of the larger Hindu society. When the book was ready, in mid 1957, Ambedkar wrote a letter to Nehru asking for government support of Rs 20,000 for publishing it. Nehru wrote in reply that he could not manage it, but was forwarding the book to S. Radhakrishnan, at that time heading a committee that had been formed to commemorate what was considered the 2500th anniversary of the Mahaparinibbana. Radhakrishnan's own interpretation of Buddhism, seen in his translation of the *Dhammapada,* had emphasized its similarity to Vedanta and the teachings of the Gita, and *The Buddha and His Dhamma* clearly did not fit into this. The antagonism to Buddhism within orthodox Brahmanism, which had only been partially masked by the effort to reinterpret it as part of Hinduism, was made clear by the refusal to publicize any other interpretation.

But Ambedkar and his followers no longer had many expectations from the political leadership. Preparations continued for their own public

acceptance of a new religion, so long announced, so fervently hoped for by many and opposed by others. The auspicious date of 14 October was chosen. Ambedkar had originally announced that the ceremony of 'dhammadiksha' would be held in Bombay, which was from where he did much of his organizing. But a delegation from Nagpur, led by the militant organizer of the Samta Sainik Dal, Waman Godbole, put forward the case for that city with great persuasiveness. Nagpur, in contrast to Bombay, he argued, had a historic connection with Buddhism; it was an ancient centre of the religion. They had a site, four acres of land acquired by a sympathizer, and they could provide an organization that would protect Babasaheb from the Hindu reaction that they feared.

Who would preside over the ceremony? There was no existing organization adequate for that in India. The Mahabodhi society was famous, but it had also become monopolized by traditional-minded Hindus: as the English bhikku Sangharakshita, meeting Ambedkar in Bombay, reported, the Mahabodhi society was headed then by the Jan Sangh leader Shyam Prasad Mukherji. Ambedkar decided that the oldest Buddhist monk in India at the time, a Burmese living in a monastery at Kusinagara, would be the one to give him diksha, the vows of Buddhism.

The final ceremony was a huge one and it demonstrated not simply Ambedkar's hold over his people but a massive emotional commitment to entering into a new faith. People poured into the grounds from villages and towns all over Maharasthra, dressed in their finest white clothes. By the week of the ceremony four lakh men, women and children who had formerly been considered untouchables had virtually taken over the city. Before the huge crowd, Ambedkar took diksha. Sangharakshita also reports that he was at first unwilling to take the third of the traditional three 'refuges' (in the Buddha, the dhamma and the sangha) which identified a person as a Buddhist. He had been a strong critic of the existing sangha, feeling that it should become an organization dedicated also to social service, and undoubtedly reacting against the casteism unconsciously shown by the Sinhala monks and the Indian monks—mostly of Brahman origin—he had met. However, he relented (Sangharakshita 1986, 136–37).

Then he turned around and, in an unprecedented gesture, himself administered the vows to his followers. He added an additional twenty-one vows that involved renunciation of all aspects of Brahmanic Hinduism. Following his guidance, the massive crowd renounced the worship of Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Ram and Krishna, and vowed not to follow the shraddh ceremony, but instead to obey the precepts of Buddhism, not to lie, not to steal and not to drink alcohol. Dalits in their collective oath dedicated themselves to a new life, taking refuge in the Buddha, dhamma and sangha from the hierarchies and atrocities they had experienced under Hinduism. It was the climax of a career of studying, political action and all-around leadership of one of the most oppressed populations of the world, the untouchables of India.

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Conclusion

Dr Ambedkar and the Freedom Struggle of Dalits

Less than two months after the huge conversion ceremony, Bhimrao Ambedkar was dead, found on the morning of 6 December, slumped over the papers he had been working on late at night. His death was followed by an outpouring of grief as great as the mobilization of hope that had appeared with the dhammadiksha. Dalits throughout India but especially Maharashtra wept as if it were their own father who had died, and people from all over the world sent their tributes.

Ambedkar left behind him a massive collection of notes and books on a variety of themes. His project of writing on the Bhakti sants of Maharashtra was never even begun, but his unfinished manuscripts, including 'Revolution and counter-revolution in ancient India' and 'Untouchables: The Children of India's ghetto', were extremely significant. In his last studies he was projecting an alternative sociocultural history of India. As in a Marxist interpretation, his would emphasize conflict and contradiction; but in contrast to Marxism, this would be seen in primarily ideological-religious terms, the mortal conflict between Brahmanism and Buddhism.

Ambedkar's life had spanned the first part of the twentieth century and all the decisive phases of India's freedom struggle. However, he had fought for a correlated but different freedom struggle, one for the liberation of the most oppressed sections of Indian society. This was a liberation movement wider and deeper than that of fighting colonialism, focusing on the kind of new nation that was to be built. This struggle did not emerge in a vacuum; it was the zenith of protracted and widespread movements of those classified as 'Shudras' and 'Untouchables' in the traditional hierarchy. Many 'organic intellectuals' rose from among the Dalit-Bahujan masses to give voice to this struggle and to theorize it—men like Jotirao Phule, Iyothee Thass, Periyar, Mangoo Ram and Acchutanand. More than the well-known upper-caste intellectuals of colonial India, these were the true modernizers, the

heralds of a new Enlightenment. It was understandable that Ambedkar, emerging from the lowest section of India's caste-oppressed to gain an education that few could equal, would take a stand not as a proponent of a revitalized, Vedic and Vedantic-centred tradition but of revolution, the revolution of 'liberty, equality and fraternity' proclaimed first in the French Revolution and gradually sweeping the world. It was even more striking that he could find the roots of this in India itself, in the message of the Buddha proclaimed thousands of years before.

His freedom fight, the freedom fight of Dalits, had many aspects. It began with the simple demand to drink water from a public well, just as Dalits earlier had fought for simple rights of using public roads, transport and schools. Legislatures and municipalities had been passing resolutions for some years making the facilities open to all, but these had been ignored. Ambedkar's movement to implement the claim to the source of all of life's nourishment, which was also a movement to constitute public space as truly public, met with resistance from the orthodox and was transformed into a cultural challenge when Dalits and caste Hindus under his leadership burned the *Manusmriti,* the ancient Brahmanic code that was the cultural-legal symbol of caste slavery. And this challenge to Brahmanic tradition led Ambedkar, in spite of his own nationalism, in spite of his own initial hopes in the new leader, into an overall confrontation with the most famous name in India's national movement: Mahatma Gandhi. From the time of the Round Table Conference to Ambedkar's proclamation in 1935 that 'I will not die a Hindu', the politics of this confrontation resounded throughout India.

The confrontation was not with an openly traditionalist leader of the Congress, but with someone who had the image of a reformist, someone who sought to identify with India's poor and to overcome the division between social reform and political reform that had existed up to then. Yet, as it turned out, Gandhi's reformism did not satisfy Dalit aspirations precisely because it was rooted in the framework of a Hinduism that did not challenge the roots of varnashrama dharma. Gandhi gained inspiration from the Vaishnavite Bhakti movement, but without the true burning for equality

that had characterized the most radical Bhakti sants, people like Kabir, Ravidas and Tukaram, who had rejected priestly rituals and hierarchy as well as Muslim orthodoxy. Gandhi's Vaishnavism was rather the milder, orthodox form found in the Gujarati Vallabhaite movement. It meant that never until the end of his life did he denounce even the most extreme expressions of caste inequality found in the Brahmanic scriptures. He proclaimed his faith in a superficially modernized varnashrama dharma that included the affirmation of 'swadharma', the idea that children should follow the professions of their fathers. This he sought to qualify with the values that all occupations should be equally respected. This in turn was linked to his anti-industrialism and his romanticization of traditional village society and its social system as one of harmony and stability. The idea of Ram Raj symbolized this in terms that the most illiterate Indian could understand. For Dalits, though, Ram Raj meant a regime that had persecuted untouchables like Shambuk who had tried to step out of their place. Dalits of the modern world, following Ambedkar, were determined to leave their place, even to destroy it.

This confrontation would not have been so important if Gandhi had only been acting as a leader of Hindu society, but he claimed the leadership of the nationalist movement, and with all of his concern for Hindu—Muslim unity, he projected his religious identifications on that movement. Gandhi, as many Congressmen, could not separate his Hinduism from his nationalism. India's nationalist movement was thus taking shape under the shadow of what is today called the 'Hindutva' ideology, a more or less conscious Hindu nation. It was forerunners like Savarkar who proclaimed Hinduism as the national religion of the Indian subcontinent, but Gandhi himself did not take so different a position when he fervently argued that untouchables should not convert to an 'alien' religion. His way of establishing unity with Muslims was through affirming the religious needs of each, and in doing so continuing the assumption that India was made up of religious communities.

The confrontation between Gandhi and Ambedkar was thus not simply a confrontation of two idiosyncratic leaders but of two deeply divergent

conceptions of the Indian nation itself. It was this perspective that Ambedkar was seeking to develop, which his unpublished manuscripts and a few completed books such as *Who Were the Shudras*? were beginning to outline.

Ambedkar's organizing began with economic radicalism. He took up the issues of tenant farmers and workers, allying with Communists in major strikes and in fighting landlordism in the Konkan. The flag of his first party, the ILP, was red like theirs. He took his left phase quite far, to the point of looking for inspiration to Marxism for his economic policy, which he described for some time as 'state socialism'. Yet in the end he found Marxism inadequate, not only because of its neglect of ideological and cultural issues and most importantly its total blindness to caste in the Indian context but also because it was not sufficiently democratic. Towards the end of his life he was moving towards an economics of a liberal social welfare state, with planning, with a focus on industrialization, but with a strong emphasis on pragmatism, using competition to fuel the growth of the economy and of the state to ensure social justice. Though he proclaimed clearly his differences with Marxism, its stamp remained on him all his life, even on the way he interpreted Buddhism. His similarities with a more orthodox Marxism continued to be a profound concern for economic development and industrialization as the way out of poverty. This remains the most crucial dividing line from the Gandhian vision whose romanticism attracts so many in today's world.

With his breadth of economic and cultural analysis, Ambedkar should have stood in the forefront of the men whose ideas shaped India. Yet he is barely admitted into their ranks. With the failure of a broad political alliance, in spite of his many writings and policies on the crucial issues of the time, from the question of Pakistan to that of the economic structuring of independent India, Ambedkar has retained a place in the collective memory of India primarily as the leader of India's untouchables. With his movement no longer a political threat to Congress dominance, his leadership qualities could be recognized and used when he was made chair of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution, and then law minister

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in the first cabinet of independent India. But this was a failure of the broader transformative project that Dalits and non-Brahmans had sought to project for the new nation, a failure which in the end laid the way open for a renewed and often ugly and brutal growth of militant Hindutva forces in independent India. Ambedkar's words, when he resigned after the failure to pass a reformed law for marriage and inheritance, the Hindu Code Bill, eloquently capture what has characterized much of the growth of independent India: 'building a castle on a dung heap'. What he considered the dung heap was of course the cultural and social inheritance of varnashrama dharma against which he posed the Enlightenment values of liberty, equality and fraternity. The fight remains.

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* This incident was related to the author by Shankarrao Kharat in 1975.

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* He later argued that an untouchable had suggested this term.

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* Partly because of the land situation, the distinction between Marathas and Kunbis was sharper in the Konkan than in the inland areas of Maharashtra.

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* It should be noted that here Ambedkar was using 'class' to refer to caste, as was frequently done at the time and in the Constitutional debates themselves, e.g. 'Depressed Classes', 'Other Backward Classes'. Later this ambivalent use of the term in the pre-independence period was used to argue that reservation for 'OBCs' should include economic criteria.

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