

Liberating India: Contextualising nationalism, democracy, and Dr. Ambedkar

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Abstract

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) the principal architect of the Indian constitution, and one of the most visionary leaders of India. He is the father of Indian democracy and a nation-builder that shaped modern India. His views on religion, how it affects socio-political behaviour, and therefore what needs to build an egalitarian society are unique. Therefore, this paper attempts to analyse Ambedkar's vision of nation and democracy. What role does religion play in society and politics? This article also envisages to studies how caste-system is the major barrier to bring about a true nation and a harmonious society.

Keywords: India, B. R. Ambedkar, national constructor, nationalism and democracy, caste system, egalitarian society.

Liberación de la India: Contextualizando el nacionalismo, la democracia y el Dr. Ambedkar

Resumen

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), el principal arquitecto de la constitución india, y uno de los líderes más visionarios de la India. Él es el padre de la democracia india y el constructor de la nación que dio forma a la India moderna. Su punto de vista sobre la religión, cómo afecta el comportamiento sociopolítico y, por lo tanto, lo que necesita construir una sociedad igualitaria son únicos. Este documento intenta analizar la visión de nación y democracia de Ambedkar. ¿Qué papel juega la religión en la sociedad y en la política?. Este artículo también contempla estudios sobre cómo el sistema de castas es la principal barrera para lograr una nación verdadera y una sociedad armoniosa.

Palabras clave: India, B. R. Ambedkar, constructor nacional, nacionalismo y democracia, sistema de casta, sociedad igualitaria.

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1. Introduction

There is a chinese curse which says *May you live in interesting times*. We are indeed passing through interesting times. With the rise of globalism and the increased amount of access to unfiltered and untested information, societies are facing change at an unprecedented rate. How does a society absorb such change? Will such a change be for the good of society, leading to progress, or will it be to its detriment? Do we embrace change, open our minds and hearts to new influences, or do we close down ourselves and attempt to preserve an idea of the past which was dominated by prejudices of various kinds? In today's world, we are broadly experiencing the global rise of the forces of nationalism, combined with a populist authoritarian threat to progressive values. This paper is an attempt to look into the deeper issues of a vertically growing society where the wealthier and more powerful become richer and accrue more power, instead of horizontally where wealth and power is shared more equally in society. In other words, how do we bring about changes where everyone would experience equality, liberty, justice, and fraternity? Which are the ways we can help everyone in society to experience the mind in harmony and peace?

Dr. Ambedkar is a unique visionary of our times who exemplified positive social change in modern India not only in theory but in visible practice. The great Indian statesman precipitated a social, political, and spiritual revolution in India on the basis of non violence and egalitarian human values, which positively affected the lives of millions of Indians who were otherwise considered “lower castes” by their fellow Hindus. The effect of his positive peaceful revolution is evident in statistics of census of India (2001), showing the much greater improvement in the social and economic status of those people who participated in the path shown by him.¹ This greatly illustrates the importance of what he meant by a nation based on justice, equality, and fraternity. Ambedkar (2003) saw the constitution, law, non-violence (for him, inspired by the Buddha) as the surest way towards building an ideal society —a “new society”—. He defined such a society in terms of liberty, equality, and fraternity, which for him were not mere political slogans but deep spiritual principles, derived not from the French Revolution but —in his own words— *from the teachings of my master, the Buddha*.²

2. Understanding nationalism

It is only recently that scholars of politics, sociology, history, and anthropology have begun to pay attention to the discourses in nation and

nationalism. They began approaching as a new form of social relations implying a modern egalitarian restructuring of power and related issues in order to understand nationalism. There are now attempts to critically examine nationalism as an ideology or movement expressed in terms of totalitarian power and exaggerated notion of experiencing /owning of national identity. We see that Ambedkar in his time has already tried to wrestle critically with the notion of nation and nationalism. He envisioned it as a broader and egalitarian solidarity accessible to every citizen in India. His interventions are equally interesting as he stepped into the public-political life during the most crucial period of modern Indian history. It was a period that saw the decline of British Colonial power and the simultaneous rise of nationalistic movement to promise a new nation. The inspiration and aspiration to dream a free nation was at its peak, what with rights and liberation promised to every citizen in the country. India was passing through a unique phase woven with complicated currents of various ideologies. The only vital issue of dissension over the firestorm of independence was the appropriation of centralized power that would be released by the receding colonial authority. The question, however took a very dramatic turn in sharing and establishing principles for the future nation, based on freedom for everyone in the country. The transfer of leadership and equitable power-sharing became the ground for a deep existential struggle for a community divided into several castes, and therefore failed to fulfill the promise of building an egalitarian nation. Among the people of India, the privileged classes and castes consolidated to enjoy the fruits of independence despite the fact that it was a collective struggle that saw great sacrifices from all sections of the Indian society. The pain and suffering of unprivileged sections in the society remained unseen and unaddressed, and were conveniently left behind while the privileged classes proceeded with their dream of a shining and developing India. The evolution of power structure therefore clearly empowered only the minuscule upper castes and classes which insisted on monopoly of power, resulting in real exclusion of underprivileged and oppressed social groups. This, needless to say, created a vertical society and economy in independent India which, to this day, remains the cornerstone of inequality and discrimination in the Indian society.

Ambedkar had thought deeply about the roots of an unjust, unequal, and oppressive society. India is clearly a hindu caste dominant society even though other religious minorities are present. This caste-dominant social structure is thus one of the dominant reasons for the existence of an oppressive, violent, and unjust society. Caste is a chronic disease that the

mind of India had for thousands of years as religious practice and still very conspicuous in all sections of the society. The *Vernā-āshrama* (*vernā-system*) is a complex socio-religious model that has emerged again in recent times, rebranding itself as an “ideological weapon” to claim and protect the sanctity of nation thereby manipulating and therefore monopolizing the definition of nationalism into what ruling class want it to be. “Nation”, in spite of its seeming political unity, thus still remain divided, ridden by caste based hierarchies, violence, bigotry, and ongoing discrimination.

Ambedkar, in his speech to the Constituent Assembly on november 25, 1949 warned:

I am of the opinion that in believing that we are a nation, we are cherishing a great delusion. How can people divided into several thousands of castes be a nation? In India there are castes. The castes are anti-national. In the first place because they bring about separation in social life. They are anti-national also because they generate jealousy and antipathy between caste and caste. But we must overcome all these difficulties if we wish to become a nation in reality. Without fraternity, equality and liberty will be no deeper than coats of paint.³

Ambedkar unmistakably saw that one cannot build anything on the basis of caste: no nation, no community, and no culture that would ensure peace and stability to the mind of its citizens. He realized that the roots of caste lay in the mind itself. We will see in the later part of the paper that this notion is intrinsic to the “hindu” religious mind-set, entwined with its powerful allegiance to the concepts of divine origin and a social order as ordained by the gods. Caste thus, leaves no scope for an egalitarian society. History has held ample proof that there would be no room for impartial justice to all sections of the society if it is based on the prejudices of caste and religion. It would only serve the caste privileged and would prevent practices of equality, and as a result no harmony would exist in and between various communities.

Our question however still remains unanswered: how can we build a nation that operates on justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity?

It is universally admitted that nationalism is a unique force in the history of mankind. It is man-made and hence closely related with man’s life, his pride, self-dignity and well-being. It is a force based on deep devotion to one’s nation either by virtue of being its citizen or by choice, and focuses upon the national identity and actions when a nation seeks for

some political solidarity. Nationalism, for Ambedkar, is a matter of both dignity and freedom for the people and for the nation. It is a vital force to be reckoned/imagined with citizen. However, there is a clear difference between the terms: “nationality” and “nationalism”. These are two different psychological states of the human mind. Ambedkar (2008) explains thus: “nationality is ‘consciousness of kind’ which is an awareness of the existence of that tie of kinship,” and “nationalism, is ‘the desire for a separate national existence’ for those who are bound by this tie of kinship”.⁴

While it is understood that there cannot be nationalism without a simultaneous feeling of nationality, Ambedkar (2008) also makes a clear distinction that: “...it is important to bear in mind that the converse is not always true”. The feeling of nationality may be present and yet the feeling of nationalism may be quite absent. That is to say, nationality does not in all cases produce nationalism.⁵ Ambedkar says that:

Thus it is clear that while nationalism and nationality are two different psychological states of the mind, there cannot be nationalism without the feeling of nationality. According to Ambedkar, nationality is a feeling of “consciousness of kind” which serves two ends; on one hand, it binds together those who share it; and on the other, such consciousness of kind helps to transcend all the differences that may sprout from economic inequality and social gradation. Ambedkar distinctly prescribes two conditions where nationality may turn into nationalism. In his view, nationality cannot be fused into nationalism unless: a) there must arise the will to live as a nation, and it must be a dynamic expression of such a will and desire; b) nationality is a social feeling that expresses itself as a cultural home. One must “feel” the nativity and proximity with their culture and traditional practices of the particular society or that of the nation s/he lives (2008: 38-39).

Otherwise as said by Lord Acton (2010): “Nation as a soul as it were, wandering in search of a body in which to begin life over again and dies out finding none”.⁶

In the process of becoming a nation, it is vital that the above two conditions converge. However, the fact remains that progressive and experimental modernism, in spite of paying lip service to the facts of exploitation has remained even worse in practice than foreign colonialist exploitative powers. In Maharashtra the great social reformer Jyotiba Phuley (1827-1890) tirelessly fought for the eradication of untouchability and worked hard—in spite of severe opposition—for the education of *shudrās*, untouchables, and women. Similarly, leaders like E.V. Ramaswamy Periyar (1879-1973) did

not share the Congress enthusiasm for Quit India Movement but remained acutely aware of the need to create a free nation not in forms but in facts. For them, the freedom from casteist exploitation was of the most important task in order to achieve real freedom in the country. They were well aware that without freedom from caste oppression, the suffering and exploitation of *shudrās*, women, and untouchables would continue to be perpetuated by dominant upper castes. Therefore, the forces of decolonization led by the dominant castes and the vision of new India proclaimed by the upper castes could only provide little inspiration to the downtrodden of the country.

It is this deep contradiction that inspired Ambedkar to chalk out a different course of evolution for the downtrodden masses and for the nation. Indian heritage, a matter of pride for few, was the pain and hurt for many. The social struggle to demand and get what was due to them became essential for most of the lower castes in post-independent India. Ambedkar saw no hope for people in the confines of a casteist society. His vision for the future of the downtrodden people, therefore, combined the possibilities of democracy with the promises of an egalitarian and just society. He envisioned leading the country beyond inhuman brahmanical hindu caste-system, while firmly upholding the principle non-violence. His vision for a free India was based on the notions of liberty, equality, fraternity, and justice which he conspicuously enshrined in the preamble of the Indian Constitution.

The acute awareness of casteist exploitation created the need to free *shudrās* and untouchables from the clutches of the caste-system and also to integrate them into fundamental humanism. Ambedkar (1936) was deeply convinced that real reforms could take place through a transformational change in the collective mind-set. It is Hindu religious belief in caste that creates vertical inhuman society. In his philosophy, “man is not for the religion but religion is for the man”.⁷ Religion should always give a scope for the development of self and society. For him, slavery is antithesis to religion. The religion that promotes privilege and pride to a few and oppresses the many is nothing but an epitome of punishment of hypocrisy. His revolution was based on justice, equality, and non-violence. It was meant for peace and harmony among different castes and religions in order to establish true humanity in free India. These were the basic ingredients of Ambedkar’s socio-spiritual imagination.

Indian history is one that has witnessed the long and continuous struggle between *brahmanical* (vedic) oppressive values and *shramanic* (non-vedic) liberating values. Ambedkar recognized the complexity of the

disease of caste, which perpetuates eternal slavery and bondage. He therefore concluded that Hinduism is a religion that defines morality on the basis of caste and not on the basis of humanity.

In his lecture on *Annihilation of caste*, Ambedkar (2007) wrote: “Some people seem to blame Rama because he wantonly and without reason killed Shambuka. But to blame Rama for killing Shambuka is to misunderstand the whole situation. Ram Raj was a Raj based on *Chaturvarnya*. As a king, Rama was bound to maintain *Chaturvarnya*. It was his duty therefore to kill Shambuka, the Shudra, who had transgressed his class and wanted to be a Brahmin... But this also shows that penal sanction is necessary for the maintenance of *Chaturvarnya*. Not only penal sanction is necessary, but penalty of death is necessary. That is why Rama did not inflict on Shambuka a lesser punishment. That is why *Manu-smriti* (Law of Manu) prescribes such heavy sentences as cutting off the tongue or pouring of molten lead in the ears of the Shudra who recites or hears the Veda”.⁸

Dr. Ambedkar (2008) states:

...the creation of the caste system was end and aim of brahmanism. Brahmanism enacted the prohibitions against intermarriage and inter-dining. But brahmanism introduced other changes in the social system and if the purposes underlying these changes are those which I suggest them to be, then it must be admitted that brahmanism was so keen in sustaining the caste system that it did not mind whether ways and means employed were fair or unfair, moral or immoral.⁹

Ambedkar had serious disagreements with Gandhi on the idea of a free and casteless India. According to Gandhi, political freedom came first, followed by social and economic freedom, almost as if the latter was an assured, involuntary outcome. Dr. Ambedkar was of the firm opinion that one must not make a distinction between the “freedom of the country” and “freedom of the people” in the country. To allow this to happen would be to mislead and deceive the nation. He states (1940):

It is entirely wrong to concentrate all our attention on the political independence of our country, and to forget the foremost serious problem of social and economic independence. It is suicidal to imagine that political independence necessarily means all real sided freedom. Not to make a distinction between the freedom of the country and the freedom of the people in the country is to allow oneself to be misled, if not deceived.¹⁰

In other words, what prevented India from being an equal society was the constant perpetuation of socio-economic inequality based on caste. Even Gandhi's idea of free nation called "*Swarāj*," remained anchored in *varnāshrama-dharma* (duties performed according to the system of four *varnas* - social divisions). If the idea of *Swarāj* is anchored in *varnā-vyavastha* (graded four class system) then it will only be the government run by governing class. The government for the people will be what the governing class will choose to make of it.¹¹ Ambedkar made it clear that *Swarāj* will not be a government by the people but it will be a government run by governing class and it will be in the absence of a government by the people. It eventually implies that orthodox caste based social structure in India will prevail even after independence, and such a caste-system will be the greatest hurdle in preventing India from becoming a truly egalitarian society.

3. Complexity of the caste system

If a nation has to exist harmoniously, it needs to be equally represented by all sections of the society; that is possible only when its citizens are economically, socially, and religiously free. Equally important is the fact that there should be liberty in terms of what religion and occupation one may want to follow as long as such practices do not harm others. Among citizens there must not exist an internalized fear or blockade regarding what faith and occupation they may want to follow. There must not be oppression under the name of class or caste. Undoubtedly, Ambedkar had a profound vision for the liberation of oppressed masses of the country which compelled him to push against the ramparts of a graded and unequal society which is based on caste hierarchy. India's caste-system is the curse to its own culture and religion which creates vertical structure of the society. The caste-system above all, is not just a social unequal hierarchical order but also has deep roots in the hindu religion. It is essentially a religious practice which manifests at every level in the Indian life. It is well argued in Ambedkar's celebrated essay —*Annihilation of caste*— that the caste has its roots not in social or in political practices but essentially in religion with divine sanctity. What occurs when caste is supported by religion? Once the caste system is approved by the divine origin and authorized by the sacred texts (*Shāshtras*), who could challenge or change it? In other words, who are the humans to question it? It is not in their power to change or challenge but accept it. Thus the sufferers of this system would remain eternally helpless without any possibilities of liberation from it. They would be the subject to follow the *jāti-dharma*

(caste-duties) from such arrangement. If caste compels humanity to suffer and allows oppressed to go through heinous inhuman practices under the name of divinity, then it would be nothing but the cosmic corruption by religion. Religion therefore would be solely responsible for descending disrespect at the scale of caste hierarchy. As a result, beliefs in such religion cannot repair the structure besides giving it up.

Religion should be the force which deepens the solidarity of human relationships which should bring the citizens together for social unity. In order to bring about a sense of social fraternity and solidarity, Ambedkar accentuated on spiritual unity of the people on the basis of fraternity and humanity (*Mānusaki*, the word he used in Marathi). As long as it is entrenched in caste and casteist practices, no reforms or alterations within hinduism would help to create an egalitarian society. Hinduism, therefore, is based on and supported by inequality among different castes. It teaches and propagates inequality between men and men, and men and women. Caste, in fact, promotes and justifies inequality by leveraging religion. Thus, Hinduism breathes caste and promotes a hierarchical society.

As stated above Ambedkar was deeply aware that slavery is an antithesis to religion. He did not refute the significance of a religion for a society. However, he did prescribe the criteria for religion in modern times:

1. Religion is necessary for a free Society.
2. Not every religion is worth having.
3. Religion must relate to the facts of life and not to theories and speculations about God or soul or heaven or earth.
4. It is wrong to make animal sacrifices to be the centre of religion.
5. Real religion lives in the heart of man and not in the *shastras*.
6. Man and morality must be the centre of religion. If not, religion is a cruel superstition.
7. The function of religion is to reconstruct the world and to make it happy and not to explain its origin or its end.
8. That private ownership of property brings power to one class and sorrow to another.

9. That it is necessary for the good of society that this sorrow be removed by removing its cause.
10. All human beings are equal.
11. Worth and not birth is the measure of man.
12. What is important is high ideals and not noble birth.
13. *Maitri* (loving-kindness) or fellowship towards all must never be abandoned. One owes it even to one's enemy.
14. Everyone has a right to learn. Learning is as necessary for man to live as food is.
15. Learning without character (morality) is dangerous.
16. Nothing is infallible. Nothing is binding forever. Everything is subject to inquiry and examination.
17. Nothing is permanent or *sanatan*. Everything is subject to change. Being is always becoming.
18. The victor has duties towards the vanquished.¹²

Being born in a so called lower caste, Ambedkar's struggle was dual in its nature: a) internal oppression because of caste prejudice; and b) external domination by a foreign ruling authority who also participated in close exchange of power with upper castes. He aspired to liberate the nation from both the domination once the power was released from colonial authorities. He wanted both, political freedom of the country and the socio-economic freedom of the people of the country. Millions were deprived of their basic human rights and were living a life worst than animals because of the caste taboos. At such a time, Ambedkar strived for remedies at various levels including constitutional safeguards. He was keenly aware that Indian society is nothing but a gradation of caste, one that incorporates an ascending order of reverence and descending scale of disrespect. He saw that foreign domination (British Raj) in spite of realizing the necessity of removing some social evils that demented and demonized the lives of lower castes, was indifferent in eradicating the social evils. It was clear that this was because

such intervention in the existing code of social and economic life would give rise to resistance from within the upper caste echelons of power.¹³

Ambedkar equally criticized both Gandhi and the Indian National Congress for not taking any steps to eradicate caste. According to him, the Congress has done nothing besides acknowledging the problem. In a way, mainstream nationalist forces failed to see the vision of Ambedkar for a truly free India. They failed to understand that freedom from alien rule was no more significant and effective unless there is freedom from “internal forms of slavery”. As mentioned before, Ambedkar never separated freedom of the country and freedom of the people: both must go hand in hand. The mainstream Hindu nationalist forces in pre-independent India laid excessive emphasis on political freedom and ignored the fundamental question of freedom of people of the country. In the absence of freedom of the people nationalism became a tool to make privileged or governing classes the ruler for the sake of private interest. This further perpetuated the internal divides which resulted in nothing but disharmony and increased the divide and discrepancy among various castes and communities.

Ambedkar (1925) criticized Gandhi’s remedy to eradicate the caste-system. According to Gandhi, the best solution was that small castes should consolidate themselves into one big caste. “The best remedy is that small castes should fuse themselves into one big caste. There should be four such big castes so that we may reproduce the old system of four *varnās*”.¹⁴

Gandhi became the major force in upholding the *varnā* system in post-independent India. He believed in preserving four *varnā* system in order to maintain the integrated *varnā* hierarchy in hinduism. As he suggests *varnā* means the determination of man’s occupation before s/he is born and there is no liberty to choose occupation according to what s/he wants. One must be honest with the *given* duty by birth based on his *varnā*. According to him, removal of untouchability does not mean Inter-dining or Inter-marriage. It means that the untouchable will be only classed as *shudrās*.¹⁵

This was the reason why India only achieved mere political freedom and not a social, economical, and spiritual freedom. As a result, problems within Indian society remained as they were before independence. The promises of Independence remained unfulfilled. Independence altered nothing except investing political power in the hands of the governing class. But the alteration of Indian society remained ignored. The changes that occurred had to lose the root caste prejudices and needed to stop its execution on the basis of caste and religion. Freedom benefited the oppressed only at a minimal level. In the course of time, the caste-system kept on changing its

colors like a chameleon all the while remaining rigid fixed and unchanged in its body (in its essential character). Mahatmas and religious babas (so called spiritual leaders) came and went but underprivileged, minorities, and that of women remained unchanged.

Modern Indian history has innumerable instances of the tireless fights that Ambedkar has waged against the evils that are prevalent in Indian society. Despite nationalist forces of his time dubbing him as anti-national, his vision remained committed to repairing the odds in Indian socio-cultural life. Mainstream forces failed to understand that the reason for sustained inequality was not merely an economic outcome but also a religious one. Ambedkar even at the risk of his political power challenged the pre and post independent government for this acknowledgement and awareness. Regardless of his true patriotic feelings for the nation, mainstream media and leaders blamed him for not being cooperative to them in the struggle for freedom. It must be also noted that Ambedkar was of the opinion that by ignoring internal slavery in the country, freedom will mean nothing more than the transfer of power from colonial English authorities to privileged governing castes of the country—which would not essentially translate into real freedom of the nation—. He made his position clear by asserting (Ambedkar, 2005:258):

I know my position had not been understood properly in the country. Sir, I say this, that whenever there has been conflict between my personal interest and the interest of the country as whole, I have always placed the claim of the country above my own personal claim. I never pursued the path of private gain... so far as the demands of the country are concerned, I never lagged behind.¹⁶

In India, there were/are “servile classes” and “ruling classes”. The practice of untouchability was more than a social system; it had the added protection of a “divine sanctity” which in turn aided in the perpetuation of slavery thousands of years. Freedom of India would be meaningless if the advocates of freedom ignored the reality of internal slavery in imagining free India. Privileged Hindus invariably belonged to the class of oppressor where they gained advantages by maintaining the existent caste-system. Ambedkar is again proved right, when in time we witnessed that the underprivileged castes would only receive unequal treatment and suffering as maintained by the dominant castes. There was not single evidence that Hindu privileged ruling castes came forward to wipe-out the atrocious and inhuman practice of untouchability and misery of the oppressed.

The governing class in India never had intention of making any sacrifice to eradicate sufferings of poorer or underprivileged classes. Instead of surrendering the pride of being privileged and focusing on private interests in the name of nationalism, the governing class used/is using, rather misusing, the slogan of nationalism to maintain its power to the privileges. The vertical growth of economy and society is a major indicator of caste based oppression and discrimination in the contemporary experience. Ambedkar suspected that if *swaraj* was anchored in Verna system, it would only render privileged castes more powerful and the unprivileged *shudras* and untouchables helpless. He foretold, rightly so, that it is quite possible that the economic advantage of the privileged Hindu by virtue of their position of power would only serve inequality rather than ending the practice of caste system and untouchability.

Further ahead, we see that this stand by Ambedkar (1994) was perfectly in tune with his life mission and what he had declared in 1949, while presenting the final version of the Indian Constitution to the Lok Sabha (lower house of the parliament):

On the 26th of January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality...How long shall we continue to live this life of contradiction? How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life? If we continue to deny it for long, we will do so only by putting our political democracy in peril. We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment...¹⁷

One should not be surprised if Ambedkar's political position posed a real threat to the ideas of nationalism favoured by Gandhi and his followers by intervening on behalf of the underprivileged for their emancipation and real freedom. What is noticeable is that Dr Ambedkar was successful in turning the attention of the nation to an extremely important and fundamental problem which was long neglected in the process of imagining India's real freedom.

4. Diagnosis of the Disease

Ambedkar's criticism of caste and his scrutiny of religion make for a clear diagnosis of India's disease of caste. He identified it as the fundamental source of discrimination and that its roots lie on religion. He held that: "caste in India means an artificial chopping off the population into fixed

and definite units, each one prevented from fusing into another through the custom of endogamy”.¹⁸ Caste never permitted society to be united. It never allowed mutual sympathy to flower among different castes and religions. Caste does not result in economic efficiency; rather it served to demoralize the Indian mind. It only promoted the interests of its own class or caste, which by default shuts out wholesome interaction with other groups. Caste teaches selfish ideals based on greed, hatred, and ignorance. It leads people to experience a lack of fellow-feeling. It kills public spirit and thus cannot produce a selfless ideal in the service of mankind. Any society that is created on the basis of vertical class division is inherently weak and disqualified by default from building a nation. To state boldly, it is the caste-system that is anti-national; it divides people and tears apart the country. It is imperative that we realize and remedy this sooner.

Ambedkar treated nation as a spiritual principle. By struggling with all possible means at his disposal (Constitutional, political, social, economic), he came to the conclusion that only through a radical change in attitude and by rejecting the religion that promotes inequality and slavery can we induce some positive shifts in the social structure. Religion that divides people and oppresses the weaker sections of the society is nothing but a mental sickness, but it must be treated by changing the views about religion and society, the cognitive shift was inevitable.

Through his keen study and analysis of world religions, he discovered that what we need is a notional change. In 1936, in his speech titled *Annihilation of caste*, prepared (but not delivered) for the annual conference of Jāt-Pāt-Todak Mandal of Lahore he hinted thus: “you must take the stand that Buddha took. You must take the stand; which guru Nanak took”. He found the methods of liberation in Buddhism. For him it was a revolution based on equality, peace, and non-violence. For him (Ambedkar, 2003:407):

Equality is the main feature of Buddhism. The religion of the Buddha gives freedom of thought and freedom of self-development to all. It has never taught to achieve salvation by sacrificing animals or any living being to propitiate Gods. Prior to the advent of Buddhism, it was impossible to even think that a *shudra* would get throne. History of India reveals that after the emergence of Buddhism, *shudras* are seen getting thrones. Verily, Buddhism paved way for establishment of democracy and socialistic pattern of society in India.¹⁹

Buddhism for him promotes true liberty, equality, and fraternity. It does not observe caste-system in any form whatsoever and encourages one to take self-responsibility for one's progress. It does not teach liberation based on God or any *cosmic agent* between the God and human, but teaches that freedom can only be achieved by self-efforts. No God or *Bhoodev* (god on earth) can deliver liberation for others. Everyone, irrespective of caste-birth, color, race, and gender are subject to liberation if they make sincere efforts to cultivate a mind without prejudice and hatred. In this sense, he realized and unmistakably recognized that the Buddha is *Mārg Dātā* (way finder/guide) and not *Moksha Dātā* (giver of salvation).²⁰

The teachings of the Buddha never promoted caste based society and advocated *worth* and not birth as the measure of man. Ambedkar acknowledged this deeply and had considered it as the clarion call to create a genuinely equal and free society in ancient India. For him it served as the ultimate inspiration to create a casteless society in modern India. An anecdote worth mentioning here is that of exchange between the first person Buddha encountered after achieving his enlightenment at Bodhagaya, Bihar. Under *Ajapāla Nigrodha* tree, he met a Brahmin called Hu-hunka-Jati. When the Buddha was challenged by the brahmin with the question, "what makes a brahmin", he replied with non-reactive mind that no one becomes pure or noble merely by birth. The Buddha countered the latter's thinking by stating that it is worth and not birth that makes a man a noble person. This was Buddha's very first statement to any unenlightened human being, after attaining his enlightenment. Here we see him emerge as a pioneer of designing a casteless society. He challenged the old paradigms of thinking based on caste-birth and brought forth a new egalitarian vision which excludes none.

In October 1956, almost a decade after the Independence of India, Ambedkar publically embraced Buddhism, thereby opening a window to demonstrate Indian history in a new light for nation. The process of building a "new" India began thus, initiated through a fresh dose of inspiration based on the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, as opposed to the dark and barren clouds of castes that shaded Indian culture until then. The task of rebuilding a "national culture" based on the proud heritage of an ancient Indian past while promoting political and economical liberation for every section of society was a new experience to modern India. It can be said that the Buddhism in the past caused a relief from caste prejudices, and thus could be said to pave way for the establishment of democracy. It also brought about great social and spiritual change. Buddhism had made

such a deep impression on the minds of the masses that people dropped their caste-based, conditioned thinking in favour of a new way of living. It was a distinct experience in sangha founded by the Buddha. Everyone, irrespective of caste and gender, was a member of the sangha and was a subject to equality and liberation. Those who joined the sangha, left behind their caste identity; as the river leaves behind its identity once it merges with the ocean. Buddhism thus provided a model for an ideal society.

Ambedkar (2008) firmly believed that the function of a religion is to reconstruct self and society. A religion must provide an environment to flower human potential at its fullest; its function is to reconstruct the world, to keep it happy, and not to explain its origin or its end.²¹ He considered religion as an integral component of society. He demonstrated that it is possible to bring about changes in a prejudiced society through effecting a notional change, that it is possible to transform the self and the world by transforming the attitude of the mind.

The teaching of the Buddha promotes liberation for all is not merely a theory. Through Buddhism, it became possible to have a new outlook into the nature of society and nature of reality itself. It was proved true when Ambedkar embraced buddhism at *deekshabhoomi* (the ground where he performed the ceremony), Nagpur, the central province of India, on october 14th, 1956. He precipitated a socio-cultural revolution in India on the basis of the Dhamma, affecting the lives of millions of lower castes, people who were formerly considered untouchable by their fellow hindus. When a millions of his followers converted to buddhism, they gained a new confidence in themselves and began to take their rightful place in society. The effects of this revolution are evident in statistics of census of India (2001) that illustrates greater improvement in social and economic status of those who became buddhists, compared to similar castes in which very few conversions took place.²²

Ambedkar (1954) saw the Buddha Dhamma as the way to bring about something like a “new society”. He defined such a society in terms of liberty, equality, and fraternity, which for him were deep buddhist principles, derived not from the French Revolution but as he expressed “from the teachings of my master, the Buddha”.²³

There is liberty, when people are free to live the kind of life they consider best, as long as such a life does not harm or infringe the liberty of others. Equality means that everybody has broadly the same opportunities, at least to begin with, although he was quite clear that not everybody is equal in talent, ability, intelligence, or character; and fraternity—which is perhaps

the area where he has the most interesting things to say—, is an attitude of respect and reverence of each citizen for every other. This is what he (Subhuti, 2010:206) equates with democracy itself when he says: “democracy is not merely a means of choosing a government, but a state of mind, he says”, a fraternal attitude that is ultimately one of *mettā* (a *Pāli* word for loving-kindness) that expresses itself in moral action, *sila* (morality). Society should, he taught, be founded on ethical principles, which themselves are the expression of respect, reverence, and even of *mettā*, or love.²⁴

Ambedkar arrived at his conclusions about the transformative effects of the Dhamma after many years of struggle to overcome the terrible historical injustice of untouchability, to which he himself had been subjected simply by the fact of his birth. Though born into a caste then considered untouchable, he was benefited by the philanthropy of two reformist Maharajas, which helped him in securing an excellent education in the West. He returned to take up a senior post in the administration of one of these princes. However, he soon realised that education was not enough, for he still suffered humiliation and prejudice, the merit of all his Doctorates notwithstanding. He thus realized that “modernisation” alone did not, could not, bring change.

However, even at the pinnacle of personal achievement, he knew that caste discrimination persisted throughout India, much the same as it always had, and that hundreds of millions of people suffered under its inhuman oppressions. When his attempts to effectuate complete equality to women by reforming the hindu family law (through *Hindu Code Bill*) was met with resistance in the Parliament, and government support was duly withdrawn, his disillusionment with the political process as a means of eradicating social injustice was complete. Despite having had done much to manifest a political democracy in India and being instrumental in laying down the legal structure for social democracy, he saw that the old attitudes persisted with a vengeance. The problem, then, he assumed, lay much deeper than laws and constitutions could reach.

As an advocate of equality and a key member of the Constituent Assembly, Ambedkar had tried to promote social harmony through constitutional means. He did have high hopes from the constitutional ways to bring about nation based in liberty, equality, and fraternity. On December 17th 1946, he had declared in one of his most important speeches in the Constituent Assembly that was heartily applauded and cheered:

I know today we are divided politically, socially, and economically. We are a group of warring camps and I may go even to the extent of confessing 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 the world will prevent this country from becoming one. With all our castes and creeds, I have not the slightest hesitation that we shall, in some form, be a united people.²⁵

Clearly, as early as 1951, Ambedkar thought that he had been betrayed and that “his” Constitution would not result in democracy in the absence of a profound reform of Hinduism, the root-cause of the worst kind of inequalities.

Was Ambedkar satisfied with his engrafting of liberty, equality, and fraternity into the democratic script of the new nation? In a reply to a member of Rajya Sabhā (Council of State, the upper house of the parliament of India) Anup Singh, Dr. Ambedkar (1953) retorted: “We built a temple [the Constitution] for a god to come in and reside, but before the god could be installed, the devil had taken possession of it, what else could we do except destroy the temple? We intended it to occupy by the Devas. That’s the reason why I said I would rather like to burn it”.²⁶

5. The liberation: Towards spiritual democracy

By the mid-1950s, Ambedkar had lost hope in the so-called hindu reformers and as quoted above, turned to Buddhism for promoting social change. He considered that religion was “absolutely essential for the development of mankind”. But his vision of religion was over determined by social considerations. He rejected Hinduism because he thought that its rigid hierarchies were co-substantial to that religion, whereas equality was inherent to Buddhism.

The exhilaration in nurturing the dream of an independent India led its leaders to assume that the religious caste practices and communal tensions would automatically disappear from the social fabric of the country. It was assumed that democracy in Independent India would be inclusive politically as well as socio-economically. India paid less attention to what Dr. Ambedkar warned and admonished the nation: to avoid the “era of contradiction” in favour of a healthy society and a democratic nation in the truest sense. It was wrongly deduced by the majority of leaders that political democracy would pave way for the gradual decline of communalism and caste oppression. Absurdly enough, even after seventy years of independence, despite

having made elaborate claims of great progress and development in every sphere, the basic socio-economic relations and power sharing still remains determined by caste and religion to an alarmingly large extent.

Dr. Ambedkar (2016:222) accentuated:

A democratic form of government presupposes a democratic form of society. The formal framework of democracy is of no value and would indeed be a misfit if there was no social democracy. The political never realized that democracy was not a form of government it was essentially a form of society. ...it does unmistakably involve two things. The first is an attitude of mind, an attitude of respect and equality towards their fellows. The second is a social organization free from rigid social barriers. Democracy is incomplete and inconsistent with isolation and exclusiveness, resulting in the distinction between the privileged and the unprivileged.²⁷

What we understand from his vision is that a democracy is not merely a system to form a government but primarily an associated living of conjoint, communicated, experience led with mutual sympathy. A democratic government cannot exist unless the society for which it functions is democratic in its basic form and function. Those who hold the view that democracy is merely a matter of elections seems to be mistaken. Democracy is a system of governance that is based on the quality of unity, principles of equality, and mutual sympathy. It is more than a political machine. In Ambedkar's view, it is even more than a social system: it is an attitude of mind or a philosophy of life.²⁸ He equates a successful democracy with the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Above all, he anchors his thinking of democracy in Buddha's *maitri* (loving-kindness).

...what sustains equality and liberty is fellow feeling. What the French Revolutionist called fraternity. The word fraternity is not an adequate expression. The proper term is what the Buddha called, Maitri. Without fraternity, Liberty would destroy equality and equality would destroy liberty. If in democracy liberty does not destroy equality and equality does not destroy liberty, it is because at the basis of both there is fraternity. Fraternity is therefore the root of democracy.²⁹

The proper expression for what Ambedkar aspired to achieve is neither political democracy nor social democracy, but what can be called a —spiritual democracy— sacred unity on the basis of love. One may render it synonymous in the light of Buddha's teachings: the *dhammic* democra-

cy, since Ambedkar's thinking was strongly influenced by buddhist ideas. He considered the trinity-liberty, equality, and fraternity not as a political principle but as spiritual principles through which democracy provides freedom to an individual to grow to its fullest potential without any forms of discrimination. It is easier to assume that democracy and spirituality are two mutually exclusive concepts and therefore cannot work hand in hand. We tend to assume that such movements preach unalterable spiritual truths that are impossible for the ordinary person to verify. It is often portrayed and perceived as something beyond the reach of human experience. But spirituality need not to be an abstract idea in which human intervention is impossible; and one is left with no other option than blindly following the so called sacred duties or commands. Such an erroneous, one sided view stems from ignorance and sightless mode of thinking, where one has conditioned itself in blind faith on the divine command. Caste is a classic example of such false belief. Caste is deemed divine and hence no human intervention can alter it. It does not exhort that man can potentially be free; rather it asks us to remain eternally enslaved to the divine command. On the contrary, democracy as a spiritual principle breaks the mystery to bring human relations in the realm of the spiritual and act as a solution for aiding an individual to realize his fullest possible potential, which is the only yardstick that one must ultimately be measured against. The real liberation, thus, lies in realizing that humans are essentially spiritual beings capable of seeing through ignorance and therefore capable of attaining liberation. Liberation is not a matter of faith but it is the unmediated direct experience.

Commands and rules evoke fear. *Dhammic* democracy on the other hand, is not based on fear but on mutual sympathy, desire for welfare of each other, and quality of unity. Ambedkar (2016) believed that religion is necessary for the mankind, when religion ends, the society would perish too. He held that "religion must mainly be a matter of principles only. It cannot be a matter of rules. The moment it degenerates into rules it ceases to be religion, as it kills responsibility, which is the essence of truly religious act".³⁰ It is an error to understand a religion as a matter of private and individualistic affairs. It is an equally mistaken view that religion is the following of rigid rules at the cost of human lives. Rigid rules seek unquestioned obedience through evoking fear, which is well proved by the sayings of pseudo sacred texts like *manusmriti* (an ancient legal text among the many *Dharmaśāstras* of hinduism). Religion is not a matter of rules that evokes fear in human mind; rather, it must be deeply anchored in seeing through the ignorance and in human wisdom and compassion. It is not just a matter of faith but must

also aspire to realize the fullest potential of human mind; in fact, realizing truth-itself with direct and unmediated experience. It is a matter of personal transformation where an individual suspends every prejudice to transform his attitude based on obsessed self or community. In other words, there is no duality or difference between “me and you, we and they”, but only feelings of unity and interdependence which lead individuals in perfect harmony. The individual has to have it because without it he cannot participate in the active functioning of society.³¹ The religion which discriminates between human, gives privileges to few, and pain to many and inflicts upon them insufferable disabilities, is not religion. Religion must not produce an unjust social structure; religion and slavery are irreconcilable.

In the context of social hierarchy that sprang from Hinduism and which separates the majority of own fellows under the name of caste; Ambedkar clearly states what religion should not be in his revolutionary criticism. Against the background of his declaration that he would not die as hindu in 1935 at Yeola; he convened a conference on 30th and 31st May 1936 at Dadar (Bombay) and was attended by 35,000 people. At this conference, Ambedkar (2003) delivered significant parameters for religion, what it should be and what it shouldn't be. This address was printed under the title *Mukti Kon Pathe?* (What way emancipation?) where he avows:

The religion which forbids humanitarian behavior between man and man is not religion but reckless penalty. The religion which regards the recognition of man's self respect as sin not a religion but sickness. That religion which allows one to touch a foul animal but not a man is not a religion but madness. That religion which says that one class may not gain knowledge, may not acquire wealth, may not take up arms, and is not religion but a mockery of man's life. That religion which teaches that unlearned should remain unlearned, that the poor should remain poor, is not a religion but a punishment. Do not say: men who treat animals with more respect than human and respect all Brahmins as gods are religious. Do not say: men who feed ants with sugar and let men go without water are religious.³²

This could be the only way to reconcile a spiritual approach to social life with that of the principle of democracy that can be called “spiritual democracy”. This is what Ambedkar (2016) meant while defining democracy as “not merely a form of government but is primarily a mode of associated living... it is essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellowmen”.³³ The nation could be a spiritual principle in this sense. While writing his thoughts on Pakistan or partition of India, Ambedkar quotes

Ernest Renan regarding the creation of nation: “A nation is a living soul, a spiritual principle. Two things which in truth are but one constitutes this soul this spiritual principle”.³⁴

This is where he trades the path differently than others by acknowledging humanity as a spiritual principle and that is a true statement of religion. Considering that the religion of the Buddha gives freedom of thought and freedom of self-development to all, he acted on it in participating with millions of his followers. In 1954, All-India Radio broadcast, he declared (Ambedkar, 2003:503):

Positively, my social philosophy may be said to be enshrined in three words: Liberty, equality and fraternity. Let no one; however, say that I have borrowed my philosophy from the French Revolution. I have not. My philosophy has roots in religion and not in political science. I have derived them from the teachings of my master, the Buddha... He gave the highest place to fraternity as the only real safeguard against the denial of liberty or equality or fraternity which was another name for brotherhood or humanity, which was again another name for religion.³⁵

Finally, Ambedkar's contemplation about the roots of caste over many years concluded that those roots lay in the mind itself. It is notably stated in *Annihilation of caste* that “caste is a notion, a state of mind”. That notion was intrinsically implanted in religious beliefs and interwoven with supernatural powers that decided the social fortune of the people. Nevertheless, his insight also suggested the solution; what he states further: “What mind do, minds can undo”.³⁶ His quest for liberation was aimed to finish the mental sickness and slavery. The new ways he was searching were enshrined in the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, thereby completely rejecting caste discrimination in all its forms.

His spiritual revolution (Dhamma revolution) revived the forgotten values of humanity and had begun after thousands of years have passed since its decay in its own birth land. He (Ambedkar, 1956) gave 22 vows to his followers on the day including: “I thereby reject my old religion, Hinduism, which is detrimental to the prosperity of humankind and which discriminates between man and man and which treats me as inferior”.³⁷ He (Ambedkar, 1956) declared: “I am now free from the hell of the caste and I believe that I am taking a new birth”.³⁸

For Ambedkar, real reform comes about only through a transformation in mental attitudes and outlook on the part of many people in society.

For him, the Buddha Dhamma offers the firmest basis for that change of heart – a change that would express itself in a transformed society that was truly equal, just, and free, underlain by a powerful sense of shared citizenship. He thus embraced the Buddha’s non-violent, liberating, and compassionate-wise path to make India *Prabuddha Bhārata*– Enlightened India.

6. Conclusion

It was Ambedkar alone who had frontally and intellectually challenged both the concept and the abstract reality of nation and nationalism. His elaborated articulation and contemplation not only revealed the breadth and depth of his vision for freedom but also his contribution through critical methods and interpretations that contributed to theory-building itself. It was through continuous confrontation and challenging the mainstream nationalist forces, that Ambedkar opened the eyes of the nation to view reality in the light of liberty, equality, justice, and fraternity. Through such a committed critical engagement, Ambedkar proffered and practiced his coherent and “liberative” theory of nation and society. The privileged classes evolved in a new fashion with complex hierarchical structure with the weapon of caste and to claim nation through their manipulative projection of nationalism. It served few and made many suffer. It is in this context that Ambedkar’s view of nationalism acted as an antidote to the venom of caste hierarchy that was widely spread to weaken the nation. Dr Ambedkar’s systematic expression on nation and nationalism indeed, summed up in compassion and freedom that inspires the country towards a new society.

Ambedkar’s far-reaching vision invites a fundamental change in a socio-rational orientation, one that causes a specific form of consciousness of kind, a much needed social endosmosis, and a breaking down the barriers, leading the society towards social amalgamation and egalitarianism. In other words, it launches us on a journey towards an ideal society. Though historically, it has been found that, it is nationalism which takes precedence over the nation, Ambedkar demonstrates that the nation itself constitutes the very logic of nationalism. He never exaggerated the song of nationalism by coupling it with fundamentalism which results in the suffering of the people who participate in it. For him, real reforms come about only from a fundamental shift in attitudes and outlook on the part of many people in society. In his vision, nation as a new social formation is characterised by a consciousness of fraternity leading towards increasing harmony and non-discriminative social exchanges in all spheres of lives. He considered

this to be true not just for the oppressed castes or underprivileged classes in India, but as the surest foundation for a truly just and harmonious society anywhere in the world.

Notes

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- 3 Constitution Assembly Debates (1994). Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar writings and speeches. Vol. 13, education department. Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, pp. 1217.
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- 5 *Ibidem*.
- 6 Lord Acton (2010). Nationality, critical quest. New Delhi, pp. 17.
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 - 22 Census of India (2001). See <http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011-common/censusdataonline.html>
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