Low Caste Protest Movements in 19th and 20th Century Maharashtra: A Study of Jotirao Phule and B.R. Ambedkar

ADI H. DOCTOR

This paper seeks to focus on the study of low caste (*dalit*) protest movements in 19th and 20th century Maharashtra with particular reference to Jotirao Phule and B.R. Ambedkar. For various reasons, which quite possibly include caste prejudice and the dominance of scholarship by Brahmans, this area of study was neglected by scholars. Another factor responsible for the neglect is the fact that *dalit* leaders took little or no part in the freedom struggle, the struggle to drive the foreign ruler out, but were more interested in protesting against high caste hegemony and exploitation, at times even seeking the active support of the British.

Pre-19th Century Society and the European Impact

To analyse the 19th century low caste protest movements with particular reference to the most articulate leader in 19th century Maharashtra, Jotirao Phule, a brief look at 19th century Indian society and the European impact on it, is necessary.

Traditional Hindu society comprised four varnas or classes of people based on their 'gunas' or natural qualities. At the top of the hierarchy were the Brahmans who, because of their ritual purity, were entitled to officiate as the priests of the community, while at the bottom were the Shudras whose ritual impurity equipped them only for lowly and menial tasks. In between were the varnas of the Kshatriya or warrior and the Vaishya or merchant. However, in 19th century Maharashtra the bulk of the people belonged to the agricultural castes and were known as Kunbis, a generic

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term used to describe all those who worked on the land. In terms of varna they were treated as belonging to the Shudra class. While it is true that some of the bigger land-owning Kunbis considered themselves as belonging to the Kshatriya varna, majority of the ordinary Kunbi families accepted the varna status of the Shudra. Jotirao Phule hailed from the Mali-Kunbi caste which ranked as Shudra in the four-fold varna scheme.

Before the rule of the East India Company, Maharashtra was ruled by the Peshwas who had come to replace the Maratha descendants of Shivaji. The Peshwas considered themselves as upholders of Brahmanical culture and sought to strictly uphold the values of ritual purity which formed the basis of the superior status of the Brahmans or priests. Quite expectedly they came down heavily on the few attempts at upward mobility made by some of the low castes. Bajirao II, a Chitpawan Brahman, distributed large sums of money to Brahmans to help them carry on their tradition of learning, but did little to spread literacy and education among the low castes and this was in keeping with the prevailing Hindu values which sought to make people live in accordance with their varna.

The East India Company and the advent of European missionaries brought for the first time widening educational opportunities.[1] Schools and colleges to which all could have access were opened in spite of the open resentment expressed by the Brahmans (Leaderle, 1976: 125).[2] The missionaries, especially of the Free Church of Scotland and the American Mission, set up schools, seeing in the low castes, a fertile ground for their proselytising activity. They emphasised how the Hindu religion had deprived the lower castes of their rights in matters relating to religion and education. They portrayed India as a loser in the race for human advancement and higher civilisation thanks to its orthodoxy, and its self-seeking priesthood. This idea preached by the missionaries was also echoed in James Mill's *History of British India*. For Jotirao Phule and others who attended these schools, the Company rule naturally appeared as opening up new opportunities for their own advancement and for fighting high caste oppression, which could just not have been dreamt of earlier.

The 1830s and 1840s also witnessed the emergence of a new periodical press, in English and Marathi, which was the creation, in part, of the protestant missionaries, and in part of the English-educated Hindu reformers. In 1832 Bal Shastri Jambhekar launched the first Anglo-Marathi newspaper *Darpan* (Mirror) from Bombay. However, the most successful Marathi newspaper of the 1850s and 1860s was the one launched by the missionaries, known as *Dnayanodaya* or the Rise of Knowledge.

[1] For the role of the missionaries and Hindu society in mid-19th century Western India see O'Hanlon, 1985: Ch. 3.

[2] Even as late as 1857 when the separate Sanskrit department of Pune College was abolished, the old Pundits declined to teach Sanskrit to other castes and had to be transferred to the Marathi Translators' Department.

The missionaries in particular highlighted the discrepancies and contradictions within Hindu beliefs and expressed humanitarian concern for the social consequences of some of the Hindu beliefs and practices. They thereby did much to convince the more reflective and sensitive Hindus that their society was morally inadequate. The missionaries contrasted their idea of God as the very principle of purity and the source of moral government exercising the same authority over all human beings, with the Hindu belief in a large number of gods many of whom could commit harmful acts against men and hence had to be propitiated with the help of Brahmans. The missionaries also attacked the inculcation of the spirit of acceptance and the notion that religious merit lay primarily in obedience to the dharma (duties) of a present social position, itself determined by past karma or deeds. The *Dnayanodaya* highlighted the cruel and senseless religious practices, like hook swinging in the services of the God Khandoba and the religious prostitution of the *maralis* and *vaghayas*. The *Dnayanodaya* argued that God being pure and holy could in no way be pleased by such practices. The missionary newspaper also attacked the evil social consequences of a system based on ascriptive values and stressed the social benefits that would arise from rejecting ascriptive values. It pointed out how many great and eminent Europeans were men of humble origin. Missionary Nesbit wrote a pamphlet *The Brahmin's Claims* in which he compared the Shastric statement of Brahmanic privileges and powers with their real human weaknesses in order to expose the hollow nature of their claim to superiority. The missionary propagation of human, spiritual and social equality considerably influenced the low caste leaders' view that the caste system was a deliberate conspiracy of the Brahmans to enjoy social privileges.

Another strategy adopted by the missionaries to undermine the legitimation of Brahman superiority was the large-scale publication of the sacred Vedas and their circulation among the masses. The idea was to demonstrate that the Vedas were mere simple descriptions of the worship of the elements and had little connection with the nineteenth century popular Hinduism which bestowed privileges on the Brahmans. The demand of low caste radicals for an authoritative Hindu text, after the Christian model, which would be available to all and act as a guide to conduct, was the direct result of missionary propaganda.

At the same time, it is significant to note that while the low caste radicals vehemently denounced popular Hinduism and its institutions, they rejected Christianity and refused conversion. Instead they expressed a religious world-view, which was remarkably non-sectarian and spiritual, based on the belief in a unitary creator as the ultimate source of moral authority for human society. This was the result of two factors: the first was the great Hindu tradition itself, the *Advaita* tradition; and the second, the religious and social ideas of the 18th century European Enlightenment. The rejection

of traditional religious hierarchies, the re-examination of the claims of revealed religion, the concern for the natural and political rights of individuals in society and the idea of social progress, encouraged during the period of Enlightenment influenced Hindu reformers in particular. The assault of European radicals on the inconsistencies and superstitions found in the Bible, made it seem to Hindu reformers that the cause of moral advancement and material progress would be better served by adopting the belief in a more universal creator and in accepting a more substantial role for human reason, than by accepting Christianity.

Under the dual impact of Western education and missionary propaganda, the reformers began to question the priesthood which they now began to perceive as unnecessary intermediaries between God and believers. They also began to question the faith in religious texts which they perceived as failing to stand the test of human reason. They blamed Hinduism (its popular 19th century version, as distinct from *Advaita*) for having produced stagnation in society and for having impeded the growth of the rational faculty and individual freedoms.

Nineteenth Century Protest

The *bhakti* saints and poets of the 17th century such as Kabir in North India and Tukaram in Maharashtra had also criticised Brahmanism, but their protest was of a very different order. Tukaram, for instance, exhorted his followers to reject the idea that salvation lay in reading holy books, fulfilling caste obligations, and making gifts to Brahmans. He preached that it was not caste superiority that made a man holy but simply love of God with a pure heart and such a man can belong to any caste, and can even be an untouchable.

Though Phule was acquainted with the *bhakti* reformers[3] his protest was of a very different order. First, Phule's protest was more secular and rational. The *bhakti* saints never confronted and refuted religious values that emphasised the caste hierarchy and the religious pre-eminence of the Brahmans. They never directly questioned or openly challenged the need for and position of the Brahmans as ritual performing mediators between Hindus and their Gods. Second, while the saints essentially provided individual solace to low caste believers, Phule for the first time tried to transcend individual appeals and mobilise the low caste community at large. Finally, unlike the saint-poets, Phule invoked the concept of public interest in opposing existing Hindu beliefs and institutions. For Phule the

[3] Phule was acquainted with the criticism of the *bhakti* (devotional) poets and saints of the North and West. He and his friends used to gather every Sunday at Tukaram Pinjan's shop where Dnyanagiri Buva used to read to them from Kabir's Bijak book verses, which among other things, described the selfishness and evil conduct of the Brahmans.

idea of the good of the community as a whole took precedence over religion.

Phule's Attitude to British Rule

In his early years Phule came under the influence of anti-British Brahmans. Under their influence he even learnt *Dandapatta*, a style of native fencing with staves. However, this influence was short-lived. Two factors led to this change, his acquaintance with the writings of Thomas Paine and his own personal experiences of the harsh realities of Brahman discrimination.

In his book *Slavery* (1873), Phule speaks of how he was in fact introduced to Paine's work by some anti-British Brahmans in Pune. These Brahmans had sought to use Paine's argument to urge on Phule the necessity of all castes uniting to win back the control of political affairs from the hands of the British. Phule, however, decided to make a closer study of Paine for himself and soon realised the potential for radicalism of a very different kind in Paine's writings.

At about the same time Phule had an unpleasant experience regarding the touch-me-not attitude of the Brahmans. In 1848 he was invited to the marriage party of a Brahman friend. In the procession he was recognised by some orthodox Brahmans as a mali and a Shudra and ordered to leave. When a profoundly upset Phule narrated the incident to his father, the latter rebuked him for having acted unwisely and then went on to narrate how the greater degree of social liberty enjoyed by the low castes was a recent phenomenon and how if he had committed the same misdemeanour before British rule, he would have incurred the harshest punishment under the Brahman Peshwas. His father's narration of the general social disabilities, humiliations and discriminations the low castes and untouchables were subjected to made a deep impression on young Phule. In the same year Phule visited the American Mission School for Low Caste Girls in Ahmednagar and shortly thereafter resolved to shift his attention (from hostility to the British) to badly needed social reforms of Hindu social and religious practices. His own schooling at the Scottish Mission School (1841–47) where he had got accustomed to a greater degree of social freedom and had not experienced caste barriers, must have only served to heighten Phule's sense of resentment and made him see foreigners in a different light.

In *Slavery* Phule admits that he is no longer interested or impressed by the patriotic appeals of some Brahmans to all Hindus to unite and drive out the British. In fact he began to see the progressive stance adopted by the Brahmans as merely a cloak to continue their dominance and preserve the traditional religious hierarchies. 'If the ancestors of these progressives and learned men had really understood the meaning of patriotism', Phule writes, 'they would not have written essays in their books in which their

own countrymen, the Shudras, were regarded as lower than animals (Phule, 1969a: 135–36).[4] Quite obviously Phule regarded British rule as less of a violation of man's natural rights than conventional Hinduism.

This did not mean that he never criticised the British. He often accused them of setting up an administration comprising incompetent Englishmen and corrupt Brahmans and asserted that the price for this had to be paid by the poor and helpless cultivators. He particularly accused the Brahmans in the education and agricultural services of denying legitimate benefits due to the illiterate peasants.

Phule's Strategy to Mobilise Shudras

Phule showed remarkable imagination and creativity in his attempt to mobilise the Shudras. First, he projected the Brahman as the villain of the piece, responsible for the present plight of the Shudras. Second, he made education of *dalits* the cornerstone of his strategy and tirelessly worked for spreading education among them. Finally, he sought to project a new collective identity for all the lower castes in Maharashtra. He sought to bring together the Mali-Kunbis and the Mang-Mahars into a single community of the oppressed.

The Brahman as the Villain of the Piece

Time and again Phule presents the Brahman as the villain solely responsible for the plight of the low castes and for the oppressive caste system. One play in which such a portrayal of the Brahman comes out most forcefully is 'Traitya Ratna' written by Phule sometime in 1855 but first published in 1979 in the journal *Purogami Satyashodhak* (April-June).[5] The principal characters of the play are a poor cultivator and his wife, a Christian missionary and Phule himself who makes interventions as the commentator. The plot is simple. The Brahman priest visits the pregnant wife of the cultivator and cautions her against an unfortunate conjunction of the zodiac which can destroy her unborn child. The only way to ward off the danger is to propitiate the God Maruti and feed a large number of Brahmans. The cultivator and his wife incur a heavy debt in order to give the feast to the Brahmans. The Brahman is not only portrayed as a cunning rascal who plays on the ignorance and credulity of the simple peasant, bu also as heartless and unscrupulous. During the feast the Brahman keeps the peasant couple waiting in the hot sun and when it is over spares the tired, exhausted and hungry couple only a few left-overs. Shortly thereafter, the cultivator and his wife come across a Christian missionary

[4] For English readers O'Hanlon, 1985, is perhaps the only and most authentic work on Phule drawing on both the published and unpublished sources in Marathi.

[5] See O'Hanlon, 1985: Ch. 6: 122–28 for a summary of the tract 'Traitya Ratna' which O'Hanlon translates as 'The Third Eye'.

preaching by the roadside and enter into a discussion with him. As the missionary explains the true nature of God as kind and good who could never have willed the inhuman caste system and explains how he cannot be found in idols, the cultivator's anger grows and he comes to understand how he has been fooled, cheated and robbed in the name of propitiating the idol of Maruti and planetary forces. The play ends on the happy note of the cultivator and his wife realising their folly and resolving to educate themselves at Phule's own night school.

What the play brings out clearly is not only the fact that the Brahmans, acting as the guardians of Hindu beliefs and institutions, exploited and robbed the ignorant low caste people, but also the existence of a conspiracy on the part of the Brahmans to deliberately keep the Hindu masses ignorant and illiterate. Phule's endeavour in the play (as also in his other writings) is to show how the Brahmans conspired to use the doctrines of *karma*, *dharma* and the ideas of *varna* and *jati* not only to exploit and plunder the low castes but also to keep them permanently backward. The commentator urges the Malis and the Kunbis, the Mangs and the Mahars to cease fearing the Brahman and to no longer fall a prey to his conspiracy, for now, God has sent the English into this country to revoke the disabilities which the Brahmans had imposed on the Shudras.

In *Priestcraft Exposed* (Phule, 1969b: 50) which is a collection of ballads or pavadas, Phule depicts the miserable dependence of the Kunbi on the Brahman priest at every stage of his life. He narrates how the Brahman priest plunders the poor and ignorant Kunbi at the time of birth in the family, at the time of his marriage, at the time his daughter reaches puberty and when the Shudra builds his house. The picture that emerges is of a simple and hardworking peasant who earns by the sweat of his brow only to have the crafty priest loot him at every stage. In a short ballad entitled 'Brahman Teachers in the Education Department', Phule tells us how Brahman teachers discriminate against low caste students; how they repeat lessons and explain them well to the high castes and punish them judiciously; whereas in the case of other (low caste) children, they strike them with their fists, twist their ears sharply, and in general treat them such as to make them run away from school. Phule also narrates how Brahman school teachers send misleading reports to the Education Department regarding the aptitude of the children of cultivators, portraying them as unfit for higher studies, and accuses the British of taking no interest in the education of low castes. In Phule's colourful language, 'When a blind man grinds the corn, the dogs eat all the flour'.

In *Slavery* Phule makes a more frontal attack on the 'Brahman Priest' and the 'Village Kulkarni' (the village clerk-cum-accountant also a Brahman) as exploiters. Phule's condemnation of the Brahman and the Kulkarni and his equation of them with the heartless money-lenders, was to later influence the non-Brahman ideologues' portrayal of the 'Brahman and the banya' as the real enemies of the low castes.

A crucial aspect of Phule's strategy for the uplift of the Shudras was to free them for their dependence on the Brahmans for rituals and education. Thus he urged friends and relatives to arrange marriages in their families on the basis of the qualities of the prospective bride or bridegroom and not on the advice of the Brahman priest or astrologer. Likewise, he urged the British to train the Malis, the Kunbis, the Mahars and the Mangs to become teachers and appoint them in schools.

Phule's belief in a deliberate and well planned Brahman conspiracy to oppress and keep backward the low castes as well as his portrayal of the Brahman as a villain appears more polemical than historically true. But then, Phule, it must be remembered, was using the conspiracy theory as a political and ideological weapon.

Education as the Key to Reform

In 1848 Phule established his first school for girls belonging to the low and untouchable castes in Pune. Phule's father turned him and his wife out of the house when Phule refused to give up his scheme, and in violation of traditional caste taboos undertook the task of teaching himself and also encouraged his wife, Savitribai (who had been coached by the social reformer K.S. Bhavalkar) to do so. The Daksina Prize Fund Committee gave him a meagre grant of Rs. 75 per month and since this was woefully inadequate Phule had to rely mainly on his friends and the generosity of a few European administrators for contribution and help. For his untiring services to the cause of female education among the low and untouchable castes, Phule was publicly honoured by the Bombay government with Major Thomas Candy, Principal of the Pune College, presenting him the traditional pair of shawls.

In 1853 Phule formed a 'Society for Increasing Education Among Mahars, Mangs and Others'. His close friend and colleague, Sadashi Govande was made the President while Valavekar and Paranjpae were appointed Secretary and Treasurer respectively. The Society established two schools for untouchables and arranged for lectures to be given to the Mahars and the Mangs of Pune explaining the benefits of education, in these schools.

Phule's radicalism, however, was not fully shared by others particularly the Brahman members of the Committee and soon a rift developed between Phule and the others. His Brahman colleagues were unable to accept Phule's contention that the Brahmans were solely responsible for the educational backwardness of the low castes. But perhaps the more serious cause for the rift was the fact that while the Committee thought that the lower castes should be given education only in the basic skills of reading and writing, Phule wanted them to be given complete education so that they could decide what was good and what was bad for themselves (Phule, 1969a: 141).

Phule waged his ideological war against Brahman domination in the field of education on two fronts. First, he urged the education and employment of the lower castes in schools as teachers, and in administration so that the stranglehold of the Brahman elite could be broken. Till such time, he preferred Englishmen to Brahmans as educators and administrators because of their more secular and liberal outlook. Second, he made it a point to convey to the British administration his feelings about the designs of the Brahman employees. Phule blamed the Brahmans for trying to impress on the British that the low castes had neither any liking nor real aptitude for education. He suggested that every village school should be compelled to have a certain proportion of children from the Mali-Kunbi castes and if it did not then the school should be closed.

The Human Rights Argument

As part of his strategy to fight Brahman domination Phule also made use of the Natural Rights argument. He was deeply influenced by Thomas Paine's philosophy and it was thanks to Paine's influence that Phule argued that all men enjoyed certain natural and inalienable rights which every just society must recognise. Even when a society did not recognise such rights, Phule contended, they existed as moral imperatives. In *Slavery* he condemns Hinduism for its violation of man's natural rights and argues that God has given the Shudras, the Ati-Shudras and other people the freedom to enjoy equally all the things of the earth. He accuses the Brahmans of seeking advantage only for themselves, of writing 'false books' in God's name, and of trampling on the rights of all other men. He thanks the English rulers and the missionaries for making the low castes aware of the fact that they are human beings just like the Brahmans and worthy of all forms of rights. But Phule does not merely stop at condemning the Brahmans for depriving the lower castes of their due rights; he proceeds further to construct a religious ethic in which God is viewed as the creator of all men equally and whose explicit command is that the benefits of the earth be equally shared by all men.

In September 1873 Phule founded the Satyashodhak Samaj (Society for the Dissemination of Truth), a non-political body (the fourth rule of the Samaj forbade discussions on political issues), whose declared objective was to make amends for the neglect of Natural Rights of men, especially of the Shudras over the past centuries. It sought to restore their rights and also take remedial action for their misery. In fact, one of the vows, the members were required to take was to worship only 'our Creator' and honour 'the pure rights' that have been given by the Creator to all men by rejecting the belief that some men are born inferior and by refusing to treat any one as inferior. Each member was also required to give education to his children so that 'they may understand their rights'.

Since the Samaj viewed education, especially English education, as vital not only for providing occupational skills but also for the intellectual emancipation of the low castes, educational activities figured prominently in its agenda of action. Phule had hoped that the Samaj would take the lead in establishing the Shudras as a new moral community worshipping a Supreme God and taking into its own hands the conduct of all ceremonies thereby dispensing with the Brahman priest. That the Samaj members did not always go along with Phule's radicalism is a different story. Those members who actually came forward to perform marriage and other ceremonies without the involvement of a Brahman were a small minority.

Attempt to Create a New Identity for the Shudras

Phule sought to change the identity of the Shudras and Ati-Shudras in Maharashtra from that of low and 'unclean' castes to that of an oppressed community. He adopted a three-pronged strategy for this purpose. First, he sought to re-write history correctly explaining the true position and the past of the Shudras. Second, he made Shivaji, the popular Maratha warrior, the symbol of low caste aspirations. Finally, he tried to rally the Shudras round pre-Aryan Gods like Khandoba and the good Daitya King Bali.

Using History to Create a New Identity

According to Phule, the most important stories of popular Hindu mythology were actually the distorted reflections of the ancient struggle between the Brahmans, who originally came from some region beyond the river Indus, and the Kshatriyas, the original inhabitants of this land, who came to be called kshatriyas by the invaders because they lived in 'kshetras' or fields.

Phule explained how the mythological accounts of the ten incarnations of Vishnu and Parshuram's extirpation of the kshatriyas from the earth were deliberately distorted versions of the actual historical conquest and defeat of the natives. Phule devotes the first nine chapters of *Slavery* to reconstructing the past and reinterpreting the 10 incarnations of Vishnu in historical terms.[7]

According to Phule, the Aryans first attacked in small boats that moved in water like fish or 'masa' and hence the nickname of the first Aryan leader to attack the Kshatriyas came to be 'Matsya' (the first incarnation of Vishnu). Brahman writers distorted this historical event in the *Bhagwat Purana* to say that Lord Vishnu emerged from a fish. The second time the

[6] Phadke, 1979, contains an account of the activities of Phule's colleagues.

[7] The following account draws from the free translation of Ó'Hanlon, 1985.

Aryans attacked, they came in larger boats which were slow moving and resembled the tortoise in movement. This event was distorted in the *Bhagwat Purana* as the second incarnation of Vishnu. The *Purana* describes Vishnu as emerging from a tortoise to recover things of value lost in the deluge. And in this way Phule goes on to give his unique explanation of the third, fourth and fifth incarnations of Vishnu as the boar Varah, as the man-lion Narasinha, and the dwarf Vaman, respectively. Varah, Narasinha and Vaman were incarnations, Vishnu took in order to deliver the world from the tyranny of the Daitya or demon kings who were historically the defeated Kshatriya rulers.

Then breaking with the conventional Hindu accounts of the incarnations, Phule describes the next leader of the Aryans to be Brahma. Brahma has a central place in Hindu mythology with the Brahmans claiming that they came from his head, the Kshatriyas from his arms, the Vaishyas from his stomach and the Shudras (servants of the other three) from his feet. The Vedas are also claimed by the Brahmans to have come from Brahma's mouth. Phule debunks all these stories as deliberate distortions by cunning Brahmans to fool the masses, and reinterprets Brahma in an ingenious way. After Vaman died, the Aryans had no significant leader, says Phule, and hence a cunning and avaricious Brahman clerk by the name of Brahma, who first invented the art of writing on palm leaves, got a chance to take over. Brahma, says Phule, composed little poems like those of the Parsis (Phule is obviously referring to the Avesta and the Gathas of Parsi Zoroastrians) which along with a few magical incantations, popular in his days, he put down on palm leaves and this (according to Phule) gave birth to the subsequent belief that the Vedas came from the mouth of Brahma. Taking advantage of the death of the native King Banasira, Brahma invaded his kingdom of 'kshetra' and after defeating the inhabitants (Kshatriyas) sought to permanently humiliate them by reducing them to the position of Shudras by debarring them from education (reading Sanskrit texts, etc.).

Parshuram, the sixth incarnation of Vishnu, Phule goes on to tell us, succeeded Brahma as the head of the Aryans. It was at this time that the small group of Kshatriyas, still left unconquered, attacked Parshuram 21 times. The Aryans called them the 'maha-ari' or the 'great enemy' and described them as a demon race ('daitya') who had rebelled against the Gods. Parshuram's historical defeat of the 'maha-ari' is mythologically described as the wiping out of the Kshatriya race from the face of the earth. However, the historical fact, says Phule, is that the banished 'maha-ari' were reduced to such misery and poverty that in order to survive they even had to eat the flesh of dead animals. Thus were born the Mahar and Mang communities whom the high castes consider unclean or untouchable because they eat dead animals' meat. Since the brave ancestors of the present day Mahar and Mang communities were the valiant last resisters,

the Brahmans marked them out for the most severe punishment. Thus they were forced to wear a black thread round the neck as a sign of identification and were to be treated as Ati-Shudra, people whom even the other Shudras could not touch.

Shivaji the Symbol for Reconstructing a New Identity

In June 1869 Phule published his ballad on Chatrapati Shivaji Bhonsale (Phule, 1969c: 6–30), the 17th century Maratha warrior. While the ballad undoubtedly extolled the exploits of Shivaji, it also powerfully served as a rallying point and a symbol for instilling a sense of pride and creating a new sense of identity among the various lower castes of Maharashtra, Shudras and Ati-Shudras alike. The ballad represented the Shudras and Ati-Shudras as the forgotten descendants of the heroic race of Kshatriyas of ancient India, led by the mythical Daitya King Bali. Phule draws a parallel between Shivaji and the mythical King Bali as the leaders of the lower castes against external oppressors. In the 'pavada' (ballad) on Shivaji, Phule attributed Shivaji's success to the skill of his Shudra and Ati-Shudra armies rather than to his Brahman ministers. The Kshatriyas (non-Brahman lower castes) are projected by Phule as not only the tillers of the soil but also its protectors in times of war and as the rightful leaders of Maharashtrian society and representatives of its traditions.

As part of his strategy to use Shivaji as a symbol for uniting the lower castes against Brahman domination, Phule inserted an imaginary episode. Shivaji's mother, Jijabai, takes young Shivaji into the garden and narrates to him the story of his ancestors, the Kshatriyas of pre-Aryan India. She explains how the country's weakness before the Muslims was due to the previous Brahman persecution of the martial races. She narrates how the forefathers (pre-Aryan Kshatriyas) lived happily on the land till they were destroyed by Brahma and Parshuram, thereby weakening the country and paving the way for its eventual conquest by the Muslims. Shivaji's anger, the ballad tells us, against the Muslims rises when he realises that this is the second time his country is being made to suffer in this way.

Khandoba and Bali as Rallying Points for 'Shudra' Unification

As part of his strategy to unite the Kunbis and the Mahar-Mang communities and to create a new common identity for all lower castes of Maharashtra, Phule sought to make them rally round the pre-Aryan God Khandoba and the Daitya King Bali.[8] The gods Mhasabo, Bahiroba and Martand (all non-Aryan Gods) were also made the central figures round which Phule sought to unite all the non-Brahman castes.

[8] In *Slavery* Phule portrays King Bali in historical terms as the greatest ruler of the original Kshatriya community. King Bali subsequently appointed Khandobas for each village.

For Phule, Bali is the symbol of oppressed humanity. Hence he had little difficulty in seeing all great historical figures who struggled and fought for human rights as 'other King Balis'. In chapter 10 of *Slavery*, Phule speaks of Christ as another King Bali who stood up for the lowly and the simple peasants, for the lowest of the low. Similarly, he claims that the Buddha belonged to the same tradition of valiant resisters of injustice and oppression. He even describes George Washington and the Frenchman Lafayette as the disciples of King Bali.

Conclusion

Phule rejected the popular Hindu belief in a golden age of the Aryans, called the Vedic age. Whereas Sanskritists like Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Dayanand Saraswati had argued that the glorious Aryan Vedic culture had degenerated over the centuries, Phule claimed that the real golden age was the pre-Aryan era when noble kings like Bali ruled over the Kshatriyas who knew no caste system and who lived amicably as equal citizens of the land. In this regard Phule went a step further than the missionaries. The missionaries had only published the Sanskrit texts in the vernacular in order to demystify Brahman culture and its claims to superiority. Phule in contrast wanted to destroy Brahman authority by exposing their past fraudulent deeds and how all their activities and actions (including the writing of so-called sacred literature) were all aimed at establishing the hegemony of the Brahmans over the rest of the population. He was not interested in 'sanskritising' the low castes, obtaining for them the right to don the sacred thread or recite Sanskrit texts hitherto denied to them. Though his immediate goal was to unite the non-Brahman castes in a broader community of the oppressed 'Marathas',[9] his long-term objective was to obtain for them their rightful place as the true sons of the soil and re-establish the egalitarian pre-Aryan age under their political leadership.

The 20th Century Protest: Ambedkar's Politics

The low caste movement which Phule started in Western India continued with leaders like Vithal Ramji Shinde, Shivram Janba Kamble and

[9] However a contradiction does seem to creep into Phule's writings when he also accepts the fact that the Ninety-Six High Caste Maratha Families who consider themselves as Kshatriyas of the Aryan stock, had come from Iran. But then (perhaps with the view to gain their support for the broader cause of Maratha unity) proceeds to argue, rather ingeniously, that they came as friends and lived as brothers with the original Kshatriyas. In this way he sought to unite the High Caste Ninety-Six Maratha Families with their claims to an Aryan ancestry, with the rest of the Kshatriyas whom he had described as the inhabitants of the 'kshetras' (fields) and whom the invading Aryans had reduced to the plight of the Shudras and Ati-Shudras.

Gangaram Krishnajee but on a lower key. The centre stage was occupied by Brahman reformers, like Ranade, Gokhale, Karve and others who attracted nation-wide attention by their call for widow re-marriage, abolition of child marriage and the custom of dowry, etc. The Brahman reformers, however, were mainly concerned with attempts to reform the Hindu family and with reinterpreting the Hindu scriptures in the light of modern exigencies and reason. The important point to note is that, unlike Phule, they made no frontal attack on the Hindu social system and its institutions and, in this sense, failed to symbolise the basic radical character of the *dalit* protest movement. The one crusader who took up the cause from where Phule left off was Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar (1891 to 1956). Like Phule, Ambedkar revived the attack on the ideological basis of the Hindu social system and its institutions.

Early Attempts to Gain Equality within Hinduism

The background and upbringing of Ambedkar differed from that of Phule. Born at Mhow (Madhya Pradesh) as the 14th child of a headmaster, Ambedkar belonged to the untouchable Mahar community of Ratnagiri district in Maharashtra. Helped by the Maharajas of Baroda and Kolhapur (both well-known champions of social reform) he went abroad for his education and took his Ph.D. from Columbia, D.Sc. from the University of London and Bar at Law from Greys Inn. He returned to India with self-confidence, and faith in parliamentary democracy as the means to achieve socio-economic emancipation.

This fact partly explains Ambedkar's early attempts to gain equality for the low castes within Hinduism. Thus we find appreciative references to Hindu scriptures in his early writings (Keer, 1962: 342). In 1927, Ambedkar justified the Mahad Satyagraha on the basis of the teachings of the *Gita* which he claimed were acceptable to both touchables and untouchables. On the basis of the *Gita*, he formulated the law: 'Non-violence whenever possible; violence wherever necessary'.

Ambedkar's Radicalism After 1935

Two events in Ambedkar's life changed his early attitude and hope of winning equality for the untouchables within Hinduism. The first was the conference of the classes held at Mahad (Maharashtra) in 1927. During the conference the members decided to put to test the resolution of the Bombay Assembly declaring all public places open to untouchables by proceeding to the town pond to drink water. Their march was violently resisted by the high castes and they were forced to abandon the plan. So taken aback and upset was Ambedkar by this incident that at the next Depressed Classes Conference he publicly burnt the *Manu Smriti*, the

book of sacred laws written by Manu, the Great Hindu law-giver. The second event was Ambedkar's open clash with Gandhi (during 1930–32) on the issue of reservations or separate electorates for the untouchables. During 1930–32, Ambedkar vigorously campaigned for separate electorates for the untouchables.[10] But when in 1932 the British conceded the demand in the famous 'Communal Award', Gandhi began his fast unto death (in Yerawada Prison) protesting against the Award. Gandhi's contention was that the Award would drive a permanent wedge between the high castes and the untouchables and take the latter out of the fold of Hindu society. Fearful of the fact that he may be considered responsible for the death of the fasting Mahatma, Ambedkar capitulated and signed the Poona Pact. Ambedkar who, thanks to his Western education, had come to pin high hopes in legislative guarantees of rights, could never forgive Gandhi for this. The clash with Gandhi not only shook Ambedkar's faith in the legal method of redressing grievances, but also convinced him of the futility of striving for equality within Hinduism. Hinduism, Ambedkar now opined, would never reform on its own and the untouchables must fight their battle for equality alone.

A New Militant Ideology

In the evolution of a new militant ideology, Ambedkar was much influenced by Kabir and Phule. He describes Phule as the 'Martin Luther of Maharashtra' and hails him as 'the greatest Shudra of modern India who made the lower classes of Hindus conscious of their slavery to the higher classes and who preached the gospel that for India social democracy was more vital than independence from foreign rule' (Ambedkar, 1946: V). Both Phule and Ambedkar saw the necessity of using the British presence to first establish social democracy without which political democracy would have meant going back to the pre-British state of subjugation and degraded living for the *dalit* classes. Unlike the Brahman reformers, Phule and Ambedkar sought to overcome the limitations of the liberal reformist movement by consciously opting to identify with the masses and by working for their political organisation. Ambedkar was convinced that Hinduism would not reform easily and that only an untouchable leader could lead the untouchable masses who would have to fight their battle alone.

Attack on Ideological Foundations of Hinduism

Ambedkar's attitude to Hinduism changed radically after 1936, the year in

[10] Strangely in 1945 Ambedkar was to refuse to the aboriginal tribes similar representation which he had demanded for the Scheduled Castes and Minorities on the ground that they were yet to develop the political capacity which was necessary to exercise political power for one's good.

which he published his *Annihilation of Caste* (Ambedkar, 1971).[11] In this book Ambedkar condemns hereditary priesthood and describes Hinduism as being merely a religion of rules, customs and taboos and not an ethical religion. He condemns the *Gita* as 'a political book' and 'a compromise of all errors', which is only interested in raising the Brahmans to a superior position.

Ambedkar claimed that his purpose in researching into and reinterpreting the sacred books was to make the Hindus aware that 'what goes by the name of sacred books contains fabrications which are political in their motive, partisan in their composition and fraudulent in their purpose' and that it was the doctrines contained 'in their sacred books which are responsible for the decline and fall of their country and their society' (Ambedkar, 1946: XVII–XVIII). In the book *Who Were the Shudras*, Ambedkar confesses,

> firstly, I claim that in my research I have been guided by the best tradition of the historian who treats all literature as vulgar—I am using the word in its original sense of belonging to the people—to be examined and tested by accepted rules of evidence without recognising any distinction between the sacred and the profane and with the sole object of finding the truth. If in following this tradition I am found wanting in respect and reverence for the sacred literature of the Hindus my duty as a scholar must serve as my excuse. Second, respect and reverence for the sacred literature cannot be made to order. They are the result of social factors which make sentiments natural in one case and quite unnatural in another (Ambedkar, 1946: XIX).

One may not approve of the harsh language used by Ambedkar, but it cannot be denied that the possibility of revaluing values remains open only when the institution is not invested with sacredness. In *Annihilation of Caste* Ambedkar bemoans the fact that a critical consideration of beliefs is a virtue rarely to be found in Hindus and attributes this to the fact that 'Rationalism as a canon of interpreting the Vedas and Smritis is absolutely condemned by Manu' (Ambedkar, 1971: 98–99).

Ambedkar holds the doctrines of *sadachar* (good conduct) and *prayaschitta* (repentance) as being responsible for the destruction of the critical faculty among Hindus. *Sadachar* simply equated good behaviour with the observance of ancient custom; while *prayaschitta* or the doctrine of repentance implied not only compromising with the unethical and the immoral, but also non-application of reason (Ambedkar, 1971: 102).

The high caste Hindu reformers did reinterpret the Hindu scriptures but

[11] *Annihilation of Caste* was written as an address to be delivered at the Annual Conference of Jat-Pat-Thodak Mandal (Association for the Uprooting of Caste) at Lahore in 1935. Ambedkar was unable to deliver the address but subsequently got it published.

it was in the tradition of 'rational theology' and 'higher criticism'. They never rejected the sacred books as Ambedkar did. Their attitude at best was melioristic, while that of Phule and Ambedkar was radical and revolutionary.

Attack on the Caste System and its Reform

Ambedkar's most bitter criticism was directed towards caste and the caste system as claimed to be sanctioned by the scriptures. He dismissed the view that the caste system was devised by the Hindu law-givers in accordance with the principles of natural division of labour. Since the notions of predestination and heredity were crucial to caste, it was essentially an unwarranted and an unnatural division of men into watertight compartments (Ambedkar, 1971: 91). Caste taboos regarding marriage and interdining, he held had not only demoralised the Hindus but had also prevented the emergence of a Hindu consciousness and a Hindu society by killing the public spirit. Even virtue had become caste-ridden and morality caste-bound (Ambedkar, 1971: 70). Ambedkar also blamed caste for the pernicious practice of *sati*, enforced widowhood and child marriage. These customs had emerged among the Hindus primarily in order to solve the problem of surplus men and women in caste and to maintain endogamy.

To break the caste system Ambedkar suggested the abolition of hereditary priesthood, arguing that any person who claimed to be a Hindu must be eligible for becoming a priest. To become a priest, the Hindu must pass an examination prescribed by the state. The state should also limit the number of priests and prescribe a code of ethics and conduct for them (Ambedkar, 1971: 106–7). Other measures Ambedkar suggested included the preparation of one standard book of the Hindu religion which would be acceptable to all Hindus and a civil code which would enable free consenting adults to marry any partner of their choice.

Ambedkar warned the *dalits* against being lured by the self-proclaimed tolerance of the Hindu faith and its *bhakti* tradition. While it is true that the *bhakti* saints allowed men of all castes to become their followers and themselves never observed caste taboos, they never attacked the caste system as such. Ambedkar correctly realised that *bhakti* would sap the revolutionary zeal of the *dalits*. He described the cult of devotion as 'the opium of helplessness'. Ambedkar wanted the *dalits* to struggle for their rights; rather than adopt the *bhakti* cult which meant following the line of least resistance.

Reinterpreting History

Another aspect of Ambedkar's militant ideology was his reinterpretation of history to suit his ideological purpose of instilling a sense of pride,

equality and unity among *dalits*. In his book *The Untouchables—Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables* (1948), Ambedkar adopted what can only be termed as the romantic view of history in sharp contrast with the rational view which he adopted in his assessment of the Hindu religion.

In *The Untouchables* Ambedkar argues that in the early centuries of the Christian era, there was continuous tribal warfare. Tribes were not completely annihilated, but defeated and routed, 'broken into bits'. These 'broken tribesmen' roamed in all directions, rootless and poor. It was these broken men, argued Ambedkar, who were made to live outside the villages of the settled tribes, who became 'untouchables'. Ambedkar discarded the racial theory and the theory of filthy occupation as untenable explanations for the practices of untouchability and cited the fact that there was no untouchability during Vedic times to support his argument. He was of the view that it was most likely that the practice of untouchability had emerged sometime in AD 400 and was born out of the struggle for supremacy between Buddhism and Brahmanism. In *Who Were the Shudras*? Ambedkar claimed that the Shudras were in fact one of the Aryan communities of the solar race and belonged to the Kshatriya varna. However, because of the continuous feuding between the Kshatriyas and Brahmans, the latter refused to perform the 'upanayana' ceremony for the feuding Kshatriyas who as a result became socially degraded, below the rank of the Vaishyas, and thus was born the fourth Shudra varna.

Ambedkar thus differed from Phule in regard to the origins of the Shudra or untouchable class. Whereas Phule considered Shudras the original natives and described Brahmans as foreigners/invaders, Ambedkar describes them as part of the original Aryan community. However, like Phule, Ambedkar debunks the divine origin of caste, the varna theory which claimed that the Shudras were born from the feet of Purusha. Through this 'romantic' interpretation of history, Ambedkar, at one stroke sought to give the untouchables a place of pride in India's past and at the same time provide a rational explanation for their despised state. The plight of the untouchables was thus neither due to past karma nor present behaviour and their life style was an accident of history.

Social Democracy Must Precede Political Democracy

Ambedkar was not a freedom fighter in the sense in which Tilak and Gandhi were. This was because in Ambedkar's ideology, social democracy had to precede political democracy or self-rule. For Ambedkar, as for Phule, the tyranny and oppression of a caste-bound society were far greater and more extensive and oppressive in the daily lives of people than an alien government. He, therefore, was totally opposed to the extremists who put political freedom (or freedom from the British) above all else. In

1944 he quite unambiguously asserted that 'attempts to uplift my community rather than win swaraj for the nation is my goal' (Kuber, 1973). Ambedkar argued that rights must exist first, before power is set up and claimed that it would be a grievous error to reverse this order of precedence (Ambedkar, 1943: 23). Rights are protected by social conscience and if this is not created first, they will exist merely on paper and in law books. Ambedkar felt that the militant nationalists were not aware of the numerous implications of their demand for self-government. They particularly failed to realise (according to Ambedkar) that democracy was much more a form of society than a form of government. A democratic society, in his view, implied two features: an attitude of the mind, an attitude of respect and equality towards all fellow citizens; and a social organisation free from rigid social barriers (Ambedkar, 1943: 33–34). Ambedkar was convinced that should political freedom come prematurely, it would simply result in the establishment of communal majority rule. In 1919, while giving evidence before the Reforms Committee, Ambedkar pleaded with the British government that 'arrangements should be made whereby the hardship and disabilities entailed by the social system' are not 'reproduced and perpetuated in political institutions' (Government of India, 1919: 729–39).

Ambedkar did not believe democracy to be the most suitable system for all. In 1938 he had claimed that he was no believer in democracy as an ideal that could be pursued 'in all circumstances and in all climes'. In Ambedkar's perception democracy was inconsistent with the presence of suppressed classes in society. Given the Indian circumstances, Ambedkar felt that 'an enlightened autocracy' would do India more good than a democracy. The fear of Hindu high caste domination powerfully coloured Ambedkar's attitude to the British. He was critical of the British for not doing much to abolish untouchability and for the upliftment of the Scheduled Castes, but he refused to fight the British on the ground that his struggle was against the caste Hindus, and the British government should not be antagonised. In fact when he felt that the British would leave the country without safeguarding the interests of the Scheduled Castes, he threatened that he would be forced to take recourse to outside help to save the community from the impending calamity of naked Hindu raj (Rajasekhariah, 1971: 212).

The same fear of a caste-ridden society made Ambedkar prefer a non-parliamentary executive (Ambedkar, 1947: 26) and oppose Gandhi's insistence on Panchayati raj, a system of government in which maximum power would vest with village panchayats or village local bodies. He described villages as dens of corruption, factionalism and casteism.

Ambedkar believed that a nation implied 'a social feeling of oneness', a feeling of 'kith and kin'. He held that the Muslims had this feeling and were therefore a nation, but that since the Hindus were only conscious of their

caste and lacked 'deep spiritual sharing', they were not a nation (Ambedkar, 1949). He, therefore, preferred to speak of 'the people of India' rather than of an Indian nation.

Independence from Congress and Hinduism

As with the passage of time, Ambedkar found he was not able to make a powerful dent on orthodox Hinduism, he gradually swerved round to the belief that the only dignified course now left for the *dalits* was to become independent of the Hindus and the Congress (which Ambedkar indentified as the party of high castes). He insisted on a complete overhaul of Hindu society and Hindu theology before the *dalits* could consent to consider themselves an integral part of Hindu society. Realising that without political power and political rights the battle of the *dalits* could never be won, he endeavoured to organise them independently of the Congress and Hindus.

In 1936 he organised the Independent Labour Party and began hectic preparations for the elections slated in 1937 under the newly-enacted Government of India Act of 1935 which, for the first time, had set up a federal democratic polity in the country. Ambedkar hoped to win seats at least in rough proportion to the *dalit* strength in the general electorate and thereby become independent of Congress paternalism. The party had a fairly radical socialist programme. Ambedkar was convinced that the lot of the economically downtrodden could not improve unless the state played a key role in economic transformation. He, therefore, advocated state management and ownership of industry, establishment of land mortgage banks, marketing societies and producers' co-operatives and the abolition of the *watan* system which bound the Mahar to his plot of land in the village by virtue of his hereditary duties. He also advocated the abolition of the *khot* and *talusari* land rent systems. He believed that the only effective solution to the problem of the Scheduled Castes lay in making agriculture a state industry.

Unfortunately for Ambedkar, the Labour Party failed to make any impression with the general electorate. He could get the majority of the reserved seats (11 out of 15), but the Congress won the rest and came to dominate the Legislative Assembly. The Congress of course did not accept any of the measures proposed by Ambedkar's party. Ambedkar now came not only to distrust the Congress as a party but also its economic and social platform. These developments led him in 1942 to form an exclusive Scheduled Caste party—the All India Scheduled Castes Federation. In its manifesto the party stressed the need for the Scheduled Castes to seize economic and political power in their own hands. Its principal demand, however, was for separate electorates for Scheduled Castes. The Federation too failed to achieve its goal. Ambedkar made a final attempt to unite

dalits by forming the Republican Party in 1956, shortly before he died. This time he sought to reinforce the political effort with the religious by launching the movement of mass conversion of *dalits* to the Buddhist faith.

The desire to use religious conversion as a strategy to fight high caste oppression first struck Ambedkar in 1935 itself, when he had declared that he could not help being born a Hindu but he could ensure that he did not die a Hindu. In 1936 he had even called a conference of *dalits*, near Nasik, to discuss conversion. An estimated 10,000 *dalits* attended the conference. After debating the pros and cons of conversion to different faiths, he finally opted for the Buddhist religion. He preferred conversion to Buddhism because he wanted to take care that 'conversion will not harm the tradition or the culture and history of this land'. In the book, *The Buddha and His Dharma* (Ambedkar, 1957) Ambedkar gave some idea of the new faith he wanted the *dalits* to embrace. In *dharma* there would be no place for prayers, pilgrimages, rituals, sacrifices. The cardinal principles of *dharma* were *prajna* (understanding as against superstition and supernaturalism), *karuna* (love), and *samta* (equality). There would be no castes and no claims to infallibility. The main objective of *dharma* is to emancipate suffering humanity.

Ambedkar preferred embracing Buddhism to Marxism and considered it superior to Marxism. In his view Buddhism contained the Marxist doctrine of exploitation in its elaboration of the concept of *dukka* (suffering or pain). Again, like Marxism it was against the institution of private property. The distinct superiority of Buddhism over Marxism, however, lay in the methods it advocated, viz., persuasion, moral teaching and love. These Ambedkar considered to be ethically of a higher order than the notions of class war and class struggle.

Ambedkar and Gandhi

Ambedkar's antagonism towards Gandhi was not only of a personal nature, it also stemmed from two very different temperaments and radically opposed world views.[12] By birth and upbringing he was very different from Gandhi. Belonging to the Mahar untouchable community, he had seen and faced economic deprivation and suffered caste prejudice all his life. In contrast, Gandhi belonged to the Bania caste and had never experienced economic deprivation or humiliation except at the hands of the whites in South Africa and the British. His disapproval of untouchability (though not of the caste system) grew out of his moral concerns. It, therefore, naturally lacked the edge of anger and sense of urgency that were so much more evident in Ambedkar.

Ambedkar was a learned individual acquainted with the rich tradition of

[12] For Ambedkar on Gandhi and Gandhism see, Ambedkar, 1970.

social reform in Maharashtra. He was well informed about the protest movement of Shudras led by Jotirao Phule and other non-Brahman radicals. No such radical reform tradition was available in Gujarat from which Gandhi could draw inspiration, though he did display in ample measure the typical Vaishnavite moral fervour.

Ambedkar and Gandhi were both lawyers by training. But their attitudes to law were very different. While Ambedkar had full faith in law and sought to exploit it fully as an instrument for reform, Gandhi claimed he had no use for it and instead preached moral regeneration on a voluntary basis. Again, both condemned immoral rituals and superstitions; but Gandhi did so remaining within the confines of Hinduism, believing in *karma*, the doctrine of rebirth and the *chaturvarna* (four caste) system. Ambedkar attacked untouchability by rejecting these ideological foundations of Hinduism. While Gandhi saw untouchability as a grotesque distortion of Hinduism, Ambedkar condemned it as an integral part of the Hindu religious doctrine. An impatient Ambedkar was willing to ally himself even with the alien government to redress the grievances of *dalits*, something which Gandhi (who patiently sought to reform the high castes) just could not accept. Little wonder then if Ambedkar described Gandhi as a hypocrite who wanted to keep the *dalits* within the Hindu fold to the detriment of their rights.

The differences in the world-views of Ambedkar and Gandhi may be summed up thus: Gandhi's world-view was rooted in morality. He prized the qualities of self-abnegation and mercy. He was indifferent to political arrangements and economic mechanisms. He favoured the village community rather than the individual as the prime social unit. In contrast to Gandhi, Ambedkar's world-view, thanks to his study of the history of the social reform movement in Maharashtra and his economic and legal studies in the UK and the USA, was deeply rooted in the Enlightenment. He trusted the instruments of the state and law to bring about socio-economic change and chose to be guided by reason rather than by faith, placing the individual at the very centre of the social order.

Ambedkar and the Indian Constitution

Though a critic of the Congress and Gandhi, when the day dawned near for independence, Nehru invited Ambedkar to join the Constituent Assembly (CA) as its Chairman and later made him Law Minister in his first Cabinet.

Changed circumstances, particularly the fact of partition, and the views of the other members of the Constitutent Assembly did not permit Ambedkar to get his way in respect of all his ideas. Thus he was not able to get the CA to agree to declaring agriculture a state industry with a view to solving the problems of the Scheduled Castes, nor was he able to win separate electorates for them. Nevertheless, the Constitution does bear the

impress of Ambedkar's ideology. Reservations for Scheduled Castes were provided for in legislatures and government services. Untouchability was constitutionally abolished and its practice made a penal offence. Thanks to Ambedkar's distrust of villages and his bias for 'an enlightened autocracy', the Constitution paid only lip service to village panchayats by mentioning them in one of the Directive Principles, while at the same time establishing a federal system with a strong unitary bias. In the Constituent Assembly debates Ambedkar stressed the need for a strong centralised government not only to protect the new born democratic state but also to protect the minorities, especially the Scheduled Castes and Tribes from local village tyranny. Ambedkar's constitutional stress on a separate and unitary judiciary (also stemming from his experience of the tyranny of the village panchayats and village courts) is fully reflected in the Constitution which treats the individual rather than the village or group as the unit of government.

Conclusion

A study of the low caste protest movements in Maharashtra shows significant change from Phule to Ambedkar. The first obvious difference between the 19th century (Phule) and 20th century (Ambedkar) protest movements is that whereas in Phule's time the Brahman was portrayed as the single principal oppressor, to Ambedkar all caste Hindus were supporters of the oppressive caste based system. Second, whereas Phule attempted and in some measure succeeded in creating a broad distinctive 'Maratha' identity which sought to unite the Kunbis and the Mahars alike, this attempt did not appear to Ambedkar as giving the central place to the Scheduled Castes. To this extent Phule's dream of a united community of Shudras and Ati-Shudras remained unfulfilled.

However, two points were strikingly common to Phule and Ambedkar. Both emphasised the view that for India, social democracy was more vital than mere independence from foreign rule. Both attached more importance to social reform than to political agitation, and believed in the mass mobilisation of the downtrodden unlike the high caste reformers who preferred to lead liberal reformist movements. Phule and Ambedkar were greatly influenced by the memories of caste tyranny to appreciate the progressive trends and forces already at work in their times. Besides, the movements led by them resulted in strengthening the caste consciousness of the Scheduled Castes, a result which is in strange contrast to the objective of the movements launched by them which was against caste itself.

Adi H. Doctor
Department of Political Science
Goa University
Goa 403 005

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