

THE ETHICS OF B. R. AMBEDKAR (1891-1956): THREE ESSAYS ON HIS PHILOSOPHY OF PRACTICE

Ph.D. Thesis

By
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DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

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THE ETHICS OF B. R. AMBEDKAR (1891-1956): THREE ESSAYS ON HIS PHILOSOPHY OF PRACTICE

A THESIS

*Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Award of the degree
of*

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By

VIVEK KUMAR YADAV



**DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY
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INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY INDORE

I hereby certify that the work which is being presented in the thesis entitled **The Ethics of B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956): Three Essays on his Philosophy of Practice** in the partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY** and submitted in the **DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY, Indian Institute of Technology Indore**, is an authentic record of my own work carried out during the time period from June, 2016 to December, 2021 under the supervision of Dr. Shomik Dasgupta, Assistant Professor, Indian Institute of Technology Indore and (external supervisor) Dr. Bharath Kumar, Associate Professor, Indian Institute of Technology Tirupati.

The matter presented in this thesis has not been submitted by me for the award of any other degree of this or any other institute.

 27-12-2021

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This is to certify that the above statement made by the candidate is correct to the best of my/our knowledge.



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DEDICATION

*I dedicate this thesis to my Mother, Father,
Maternal Grandparents and Paternal Grandparents*

SYNOPSIS

Throughout his life, B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) referred to, and was influenced by, a diversity of intellectual traditions and systems of thought. But he should be understood first and foremost as a philosopher of ethical practice and moral behaviour. At the core of his moral philosophy was a simple but powerful idea: that all members of Indian society have a collective responsibility to be ethical and act against unethical practices.

Ambedkar's was not however a moral philosophy that could be confined within a singular canonical work. Rather, he introduced and developed his ideas in a wide range of intellectual projects: scholarly articles, generic tracts, public speeches, correspondence, and civic protests. For over four decades, he consistently argued that an entrenched, historical caste system lay at the (epistemic) root of most unethical social practices in Indian society; and encouraged his readers, listeners, followers and sympathisers to reject it in its entirety.

Ambedkar did not develop his ideas in a traditional academic setup. Instead, his approach was structured around personal experiences and observations. This can be clearly seen from his autobiographical accounts in *Waiting for a Visa* (c.1937) where he elaborated on the myriad ways in which his everyday experiences of caste had shaped his ideas. It was the experience of untouchability in childhood which had first made him aware of the “indignities” and “discriminations” which his community had had to endure as everyday social realities.¹ Later, as a young man, he would draw on these early experiences as the framing context for his works on ethics and moral philosophy.

In the light of the arguments presented above, the present thesis focuses on the importance of ethical practice in the moral philosophy of Ambedkar,

¹ B. R. Ambedkar, “Waiting for a Visa,” in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches (BAWS)*, vol. 12, (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, [circa 1937] 1993), 670.

by placing him in his own intellectual context. The thesis concludes that he was primarily a philosopher of (ethical) practice. The main aim of this thesis is to critically approach some of the current academic conceptualisations relating to Ambedkar's ideas on caste, human equality and dignity, public conscience and political accountability. Hence, it may not be viewed as a descriptive and exegetical study. Keeping this in view, I would now like to proceed to a discussion on the structure of my enquiry.

In my introductory remarks, I sketch out and develop the methodological template of the thesis. The discussion is foregrounded on an overview of the secondary literature. I discuss the work of: (1) those scholars who adopt a comparative approach by placing Ambedkar in dialogue with other thinkers;² (2) those scholars who argue that Ambedkar's ethics and moral philosophy can be best understood by focusing exclusively on his works on Buddhism;³ and, (3) those scholars who explain his ethics and moral philosophy through the careful interpretation of those conceptual vocabularies which were used/coined by Ambedkar himself.⁴

My thesis does not adopt the comparative approach of placing Ambedkar in dialogue with other thinkers. Instead, Ambedkar is placed in his own context. "Context" primarily refers to the following: autobiographical

² Ramachandra Guha, "Gandhi's Ambedkar," in *Indian Political Thought: A Reader*, eds. Aakash Singh Rathore and Silika Mohapatra (London: Routledge, 2010), 33-38; Ananya Vajpeyi, *Righteous Republic: The Political Foundations of Modern India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). Arundhati Roy, "The Doctor and the Saint," in *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition, B. R. Ambedkar*, ed. S. Anand (New Delhi: Navayana, 2014), 15-179.

³ Christopher S. Queen, "Ambedkar's Dhamma: Source and Method in the Construction of Engaged Buddhism," in *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, eds. Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Beltz (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004) 132-150.

⁴ Gail Omvedt, *Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anticaste Intellectuals*. New Delhi: Navayana Publication, 2008; Gopal Guru and Sunder Sarukkai, *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018); Gopal Guru, "Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's Modern Moral Idealism: A Metaphysics of Emancipation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Philosophy*, ed. Jonardon Ganeri (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017), 737-749. Aakash Singh Rathore, *Ambedkar's Preamble: A Secret History of the Constitution of India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2020).

accounts and observations on Indian society; an education in Economics, Philosophy, Law and Social Science; and interventions in the Indian public sphere on matters relating to contemporary politics. I also disagree with the scholarly argument that Ambedkar's moral philosophy can be best understood by focusing exclusively on his works on Buddhism. I argue instead that the scope of Ambedkar's philosophy is not restricted only to his interpretation of Buddhism. Rather, his moral philosophy also informed the broader *oeuvre* of his works; on caste, untouchability, human dignity, equality and political leadership. In this context, I adopt the methodological approach of those scholars who explain his ethics and moral philosophy through the careful interpretation of those conceptual vocabularies which were used/coined by Ambedkar himself. I will now give the chapter plan of my thesis.

Chapter 1

The first chapter entitled, **The Institution of the Caste system and its Practices: An Ethical Critique by B. R. Ambedkar** is concerned with the development of Ambedkar's ethics in *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development* (1917). *Castes in India* began its discursive life as a paper which was first read out in Alexander Goldenweiser's Anthropology seminar at Columbia University. It was published as a scholarly article in the academic journal, *Indian Antiquary*. Ambedkar employed Anthropological terms such as "exogamy" and "endogamy" to argue that the caste system was not a divinely sanctioned order but a man-made institution which legitimised inequality, discrimination and injustice in everyday life in India. The current literature on Ambedkar's ethics largely ignores the ethical significance of *Castes in India*. For instance, in 1993, M. S. Gore argued in *The Social Context of an Ideology: Ambedkar's Political and Social Thought* that *Castes in India*, "did not deal with at any length with the inequity and the

injustice of the caste system”.⁵ Nearly two decades later, in 2011, Gail Omvedt did not mention *Castes in India* in her landmark work, *Understanding Caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and Beyond*.⁶ In her editorial introduction to *Castes in India* in 2013, Sharmila Rege highlighted the continued absence of any sustained scholarly discussion on the text.⁷ However, Rege’s observation did not have the intended discursive impact, for as Vivek Kumar noted three years later, in 2016; *Castes in India* continues to be overlooked by scholars.⁸

In the context of our discussion above, my study advances three new arguments on *Castes in India*. Each argument is explored in a separate section in the chapter. The first section shows how Ambedkar’s doctoral studies at Columbia University influenced his ideas of the “institution” of the caste system. The second section highlights how his critique of caste transitioned from a mere description of its sociological and anthropological origins to philosophical discussions around human values, human dignity and equality. The third section concludes by arguing that Ambedkar’s moral and ethical critique of caste practices can be considered to be the work of a public philosopher who was concerned with the ethics of everyday social life in India.

Chapter 2

The second chapter entitled, **Caste, Inequality and B. R. Ambedkar’s Universal Claim for Human Equality**, focusses on how, in 1927, Ambedkar championed the cause of human dignity and equality for all through a series of public engagements in the Mahad Movement, the first civil rights movement in India.

⁵ M. S. Gore, *The Social Context of an Ideology: Ambedkar's Political and Social Thought*, (New Delhi: SAGE Publications Pvt. Limited, 1993), 79.

⁶ Gail Omvedt, *Understanding Caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and Beyond*, (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011).

⁷ Sharmila Rege, “Introduction,” in *Against the Madness of Manu: B. R. Ambedkar's Writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy* (New Delhi: Navayana 2013).

⁸ Vivek Kumar, “How egalitarian is the Indian sociology,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 51, no. 25, (2016): 33-39.

The Mahad movement witnessed the coming together of a large collective of like-minded intellectuals, scholars and members of civil society and culminated with conferences on the issue of fundamental rights. The conference participants produced a collective statement wherein they argued that it was morally and legally wrong to deny any individual or social group fundamental rights. In this context, they called for a radical reordering of Hindu society based on the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity. As scholars such as Gail Omvedt, Eleanor Zelliot, Christophe Jaffrelot, Anupama Rao and Anand Teltumbde have argued, the Mahad movement stressed on the vital importance of civil rights and equal access to public facilities as its key objectives.⁹

At Mahad, Ambedkar made a universal claim for human equality and dignity which appeared long before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Out of the many scholars who have referred to Mahad in their work; Teltumbde has provided a detailed exhaustive history of the Mahad movement. However, the importance of Ambedkar's ethics at Mahad has been inadequately emphasized in current scholarship. My chapter focuses on the role of the Mahad movement in contributing to Ambedkar's ethics.

This chapter emphasises the critical importance of Ambedkar's lived experiences of humiliation and its subsequent development into a program of moral action at Mahad. Subsequently, it aims to explore two central questions: first, what was the central focus of Ambedkar's concerns at Mahad? Second, how can these concerns then provide a better

⁹ Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (Delhi: Sage Publications India, 1994); Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 1996); Eleanor Zelliot, *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2004); Christophe Jaffrelot, *Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analysing and Fighting Caste* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005); Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Anand Teltumbde, *Mahad: The Making of the First Dalit Revolt* (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2016).

understanding of his ideas regarding human inequality and equality? The chapter concludes by arguing that Ambedkar offered a distinct anti-caste philosophy and charted out a new path of civic and social liberation by presenting a well-argued case for the critical importance of the ethics of everyday social life at Mahad.

Chapter 3

The third chapter entitled, **B. R. Ambedkar on the Practice of Public Conscience: A Critical Reappraisal**, discusses Ambedkar's conceptualization of "public conscience" in his ethics and moral philosophy. The chapter primarily focuses on his public speech, *Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah* (1943). This speech was delivered to a large audience of Liberal intellectuals in Pune who had gathered on the birth centenary of Mahadev Ranade (1842-1901).

Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah examined the importance (and perceived absence) of public conscience in contemporary Indian thought and practice. Ambedkar consistently stressed the importance of public conscience in relation to questions of justice, moral responsibility, and ethical Public. However, in current scholarship, the category of public conscience has seldom been the subject of academic debate and enquiry.¹⁰ It was only in 2020 that Aakash Singh Rathore briefly discussed public conscience as the "fellow feeling" that Ambedkar hoped to inculcate in Indian society.¹¹

This chapter has been inspired by Rathore's interpretation of public conscience. But I also move beyond the conceptual scope of his arguments. I argue that public conscience has much broader philosophical

¹⁰ For instance, in 2017, Valerian Rodrigues's analysis of the central concepts of Ambedkar political thought did not discuss the concept of public conscience. Valerian Rodrigues, "Ambedkar as a Political Philosopher," *Economic and Political Weekly* 52, no. 15 (2017): 101-107.

¹¹ Aakash Singh Rathore, *Ambedkar's Preamble: A Secret History of the Constitution of India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2020), 109-110.

implications. Public conscience referred to responsibility, justice, and the critical necessity to create an ethical public sphere. Further, Ambedkar consistently presented public conscience as a democratic value in his writings and speeches.¹² Particularly relevant is his unequivocal belief that public conscience would bring about a moral transformation in Indian society through a collective ethical stance against all forms of social oppression. This chapter will conclude that Ambedkar conceptualized public conscience as a method by which a democratic and ethical Indian society could come about and flourish.

Conclusion

Ambedkar's consistent attempts to remove all forms of social oppression from Indian society were a part of an ethical project which aimed to lay the foundations for an equal society. His ethics and moral philosophy envisaged a system of thought which was fundamentally ethical in its nature and scope. Ambedkar presented his ideas on ethics to the Indian public in writings, speeches and civic protests; and appealed to them to engage with the political and social issues of the day. He argued that the Indian public must educate and engage on contemporary unethical social practices, agitate for social action, elect ethical leaders, and hold itself and the political establishment of the day morally accountable. Only then could India develop into an egalitarian democratic nation.

¹² Ambedkar spoke on various occasions for the cultivation of public conscience. See: B. R. Ambedkar, "Do not depend on God or Superman," in *BAWS*, vol. 17, part 3, (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, [1933] 2003); B. R. Ambedkar, "What Way Emancipation," in *BAWS*, vol. 17, part 3 (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, [1936] 2003); B. R. Ambedkar, "Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah," in *BAWS*, vol. 1, (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, [1943] 1979); B. R. Ambedkar, "Hindus and Want of Public Conscience," in *BAWS*, vol. 5, (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1989).

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Jadhav, Narendra. *Ambedkar Awakening India’s Social Conscience*. New Delhi: Konark Publisher, 2019.

List of Publications

1. **Yadav, V. K.**, Dasgupta, S., and Kumar, B., (2020). “All Human Beings are of Equal Status Since Birth”: Caste, Inequality and B. R. Ambedkar’s Universal Claim for Human Equality. *Indian Journal of Human Development*, SAGE Publication, Vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 481-492. doi:10.1177/0973703020974442
Index: Scopus, ProQuest: International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS)
2. **Yadav, V. K.**, Dasgupta, S., and Kumar, B., (2021). “The Institution of the Caste system and its Practices: An Ethical Critique by B. R. Ambedkar”. *IASSI Quarterly: Contributions to Indian Social Science*, Vol. 40, no. 3. pp. 567-580.
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3. **Yadav, V. K.**, Dasgupta, S., and Kumar, B., (2022). “B. R. Ambedkar on the Practice of Public Conscience: A Critical Reappraisal”. *Journal of Human Values*, SAGE Publication, Vol. 28, no. 3, pp.1-9.
Index: Scopus
4. **Yadav, V. K.**, and Kumar, B., (2020). Book Review Article: “Aakash Singh Rathore, Indian Political Theory: Laying the Groundwork for Svaraj”. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, SAGE Publication. doi: 10.1177/2455328X19898453. Index: Scopus
5. **Yadav, V. K.**, and Kumar, B., (2018). Book Review Article: “Ramachandra Guha, Democrats and Dissenters”. *Indian Journal of Human Development*, SAGE Publication. doi:10.1177/0973703017734721. Index: Scopus

Conference Presentations

International

1. Presented a Paper on the topic “Roots of Revolt: B. R. Ambedkar’s Ethical Critique of the Caste System at Mahad”, Warwick Graduate Conference in Political and Legal Theory 2020, organized by Warwick University, U.K. 2020.
2. Presented a paper on the topic “Counting Miscounts in Democratic Politics”, in 10th Annual Seminar of the Bielefeld Graduate School in History and Sociology (BGHS), Organized by Bielefeld University, Germany, July 2018.
3. Presented a paper on the topic “Loosing Dissent in Democracy and its Relevance: A Philosophical Understanding”, in Re-Learning to be Human for Global Times: Culture, Religion and Democratic Values Conference organized by Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, at Banaras Hindu University, December 2016.

National

1. Presented a paper on the topic “The relevance of Philosophy for the 21st century”, in 91st Indian Philosophical Congress, Sanchi University of Buddhist-Indic Studies, February 2017.

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Abbreviations

Abbreviations	Texts
<i>CI</i>	<i>Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development</i>
<i>AOC</i>	<i>Annihilation of Caste</i>
<i>BAWS</i>	<i>Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches</i>
<i>RGJ</i>	<i>Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah</i>
<i>BHD</i>	<i>The Buddha and His Dhamma</i>
<i>THSO</i>	<i>The Hindu Social Order-Its Essential Principles</i>
<i>TIG</i>	<i>The Indian Ghetto-The Centre of Untouchability-Outside the Fold</i>
<i>EBSC</i>	<i>Evidence before the Southborough Committee on Franchise</i>
<i>WV</i>	<i>Waiting for a Visa</i>
<i>POH</i>	<i>Philosophy of Hinduism</i>
<i>HSC</i>	<i>Hindus and Their Want of Social Conscience</i>
<i>VPB</i>	<i>On Village Panchayats Bill</i>
<i>TW</i>	<i>Their Wishes Are Laws Unto Us</i>
<i>WWE</i>	<i>What Way Emancipation</i>
<i>WCG</i>	<i>What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables</i>
<i>MG</i>	<i>Mr. Gandhi and the Emancipation of the Untouchables</i>
<i>FVF</i>	<i>Federation Versus Freedom</i>

Note: All texts of B.R. Ambedkar have been referred from *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, (Vol. 1-17, 1979-2003, Bombay) unless otherwise mentioned.

INTRODUCTION

B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) consistently stressed the value and importance of ethics in everyday life.¹³ As he remarked in a public speech in 1943, ethics cannot be treated as “an idea [that] will take roots *proprio vigore*.” “An idea needs propagation”, he opined, “as much as a plant needs watering”. “Both”, he warned, “will otherwise wither and die”.¹⁴

In my thesis, I will argue that Ambedkar’s insistence on everyday ethical *practice* was a marked feature of his ideas concerning ethics. He also emphasised the importance of cultivating and developing a collective social will to act against harmful, divisive, and unethical practices. He was no armchair philosopher, for he actively supported and led social movements for human equality throughout his life. He was, in that sense, a philosopher of practice. This introduction is divided into two parts- the first discusses the thematic background of the study, while the second outlines the scheme of chapters.

Part one: Thematic Background of the Study

The thematic background of the study sketches out the intellectual genealogy of Ambedkar’s works (the importance of personal experience as a framing context to his ideas of ethics, the methods by which he

¹³ Ambedkar’s earliest appearance as a public intellectual of repute can be traced to his appearance before the Southborough Committee in 1919. He submitted a written statement on rights and equality to the Committee. Later, this statement was published as a political essay- his first published work on contemporary politics. B. R. Ambedkar, “Evidence before the Southborough Committee on Franchise,” in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 1, ed. Vasant Moon, (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, [1919]1979), 243-278. (Hereafter cited as *EBSC*).

Note: *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches* will be hereafter cited as *BAWS*

¹⁴ B. R. Ambedkar, *Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah*, in *BAWS*, Vol. 1, 205-240. (Hereafter cited as *RGJ*). *RGJ* is analysed in more detail in chapter three of this thesis.

communicated his ideas to his audiences and readers, the intellectual influence of his doctoral studies undertaken at Columbia University in shaping his ethical critique of the caste system, and the influence of Indian thought on his moral philosophy), before moving on to his interpretation of “graded inequality” in the caste system and a discussion of the current literature on Ambedkar’s ethics.

An Intellectual Genealogy of Ambedkar’s works

A historical and intellectual context influenced Ambedkar’s ethics and moral philosophy. An essential source material for his ideas on ethics was his experiences of Indian society. As Gopal Guru and Sunder Sarukkai brilliantly argued in *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory* (2018), Ambedkar’s “lived experience” played a critical “epistemological role” in his thought.¹⁵ Guru and Sarukkai show that Ambedkar’s ideas concerning the ethics of everyday human relationships were shaped by the humiliation and discrimination that he had been forced to endure as a child, and even later, as an adult.¹⁶

Ambedkar’s experiences of Indian society were intricately related to his social identity. As a member of a community that had been deemed “untouchable” in pre-independence India, he was aware, from a very young age, that he was being treated differently from others. Consequently, the young Ambedkar was continually puzzled by the behaviour of those around him. Why was he not allowed any access to the drinking water facilities at school? He wondered out aloud.¹⁷ And why was his mere *touch* considered to be akin to a toxic pollutant?¹⁸ His

¹⁵ Gopal Guru and Sunder Sarukkai, *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018), 2.

¹⁶ Guru and Sarukkai, *The Cracked Mirror*, 2.

¹⁷ B. R. Ambedkar, “Waiting for a Visa,” in *BAWS*, Vol. 12, 661-691. (Hereafter cited as *WFV*).

¹⁸ Ambedkar, *WFV*, *BAWS*, Vol. 12, 661-691.

experiences with discrimination can be dated to his school days. As he would later write:

“I did not know what untouchability was till I was asked to sit separately in my school. I did not realise till then it was written in the *Manusmriti* [*Manava Dharmashastra*].”¹⁹

In *The Cracked Mirror*, Guru and Sarukkai quote the above two lines in full, to highlight the importance of their arguments concerning the lived nature of Ambedkar’s thought. They rightly point out that childhood experiences such as these were the intellectual impetus for an adult life devoted to identifying the earliest accounts of the caste system in the *Manava Dharmashastra*, an the Early Indian text.²⁰

According to Guru and Sarukkai, Ambedkar considered the *Manava Dharmashastra* as a text of “formidable cognitive influence” which introduced many critical ideas of the caste system and caste-based discrimination in Indian society.²¹ I agree with Guru and Sarukkai and broaden their ideas by showing that Ambedkar’s rebuttal of the *Manava Dharmashastra* took on various narrative concerns, social issues, and philosophies as his arguments travelled across multiple mediums- from scholarly journals to urgent and immediate contemporary speeches, and examine this argument further one chapter at a time.

In the first chapter, I focus on Ambedkar’s first-ever published work, *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development* (1917).²² *Castes in India* contained an interpretation of the *Manava Dharmashastra*, which took the shape of a cogent and rarefied scholarly analysis, couched

¹⁹ C.B. Khairmode, *Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar*, Vol. 3 (Pune: Sugwa Publication, 1990), 254-255.

²⁰ Guru and Sarukkai, *The Cracked Mirror*, 2.

²¹ Guru and Sarukkai, *The Cracked Mirror*, 2.

²² B. R. Ambedkar, “Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development,” in *BAWS*, Vol. 1, 3-22. (Hereafter cited as *CI*)

in the conceptual framework of Anthropological theory, to argue that the caste system was inherently unjust and unethical.²³ I argue that Ambedkar's use of Anthropology was also a framing device, a narrative strategy, and an attempt to reach out to a particular audience in the United States of America, who were not familiar with the caste system but with Anthropological theory.

One may well imagine that Ambedkar would continue to explain and analyse the caste system in these terms throughout his life, but this was not the case at all. As my second chapter shows, in 1927, Ambedkar would once again refer to the *Manava Dharmashastra* and make it a crucial part of his arguments concerning the caste system. By this time, he was no longer in Columbia, but in India, more specifically at Mahad, in modern-day Maharashtra. This was the year that he spearheaded his first major civic protest, undertaken in two phases and culminating in a conference that called for the end of the caste system and the beginning of equality for all in Indian society. Ambedkar was one of the speakers at the conference. While addressing a crowd of thousands of people, he picked up a copy of the *Manava Dharmashastra* and burnt it before the assembled audience, thereby enacting symbolic destruction of that “cognitive influence” on Indian society once and for all.

For Ambedkar, the burning of the *Manava Dharmashastra* signalled a new dawn for Indian society: one in which all human beings could be considered “equal since birth”.²⁴ In the Mahad movement, too, Ambedkar drew on his own experiences and once again argued that the caste system was inherently unethical, but the method by which he now explained his arguments was radically different. Now the narrative device was no longer Anthropology but protest and social action. After Mahad, Ambedkar

²³ Ambedkar, *CI, BAWS*, Vol. 1, 3-22.

²⁴ Anand Teltumbde, *Mahad: The Making of the First Dalit Revolt* (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2016), 209.

participated in many more social movements and delivered a great many public speeches against caste.²⁵ It is to one of those post Mahad speeches that we now turn.

My third chapter focuses on a public speech, delivered by Ambedkar in 1943, in Pune to an audience of Liberal intellectuals, who had gathered on the birth centenary of Mahadev Govind Ranade (1842-1901). Ambedkar spoke at length on the leadership strategies and politics of Ranade and then interpreted the social impact of the *Manava Dharmashastra* and Hindu scripture on Indian society. Interestingly, he referred to the canonical thinker Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) to explain his arguments concerning Manu (the author of *Manava Dharmashastra*). As he argued:

Long before Nietzsche was born, Manu had proclaimed the gospel which Nietzsche sought to preach. It is a religion that is not intended to establish liberty, equality and fraternity. It is a gospel that proclaims the worship of the superman—the Brahmin—by the rest of the Hindu Society. It propounds that the superman and his class alone are born to live and to rule. Others are born to serve them and to nothing more.²⁶

Ambedkar had not referred to Nietzsche in *Castes in India* or at Mahad. However, the Nietzschean reference would have resonated with his audience; the Liberal intellectuals of Pune, who could be depended upon to be familiar with the nuances of Nietzschean thought. So, the appeal to Nietzsche was a narrative strategy, the framing context for his central argument that the caste system had had a devastating impact on social equality in India. Ambedkar focussed on the untouchables, and he spoke movingly of their plight:

²⁵ Eleanor Zelliot, *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2004), 65-100.

²⁶ Ambedkar, *RGJ, BAWS*, Vol. 1, 218-219.

They have no life of their own to live, and no right to develop their personality. This has been the gospel of the Hindu Religion.²⁷

Ambedkar was not simply using the intellectual platform which had been provided to him to highlight the social problems of the untouchable community. Instead, he was querying the role of philosophy in society. How did Hindu philosophy respond to the issues of the untouchable community? He wondered out loud in his speech:

Hindu philosophy, whether it is Vedanta, Sankhya, Nyaya, [or] Vaishashika, has moved in its own circle without affecting the Hindu religion. It has never had the courage to challenge this gospel. That Hindu philosophy that everything is Brahma remained only a matter of intellect. It never became a social philosophy. The Hindu philosophers had both their philosophy and their Manu held apart in two hands, the right not knowing what the left had. The Hindu is never troubled by their inconsistency.²⁸

Ultimately, this was the main question that Ambedkar grappled with in his works on ethics. Mainly, how could philosophical systems of thought which were otherwise concerned with morality, equality, and peaceful coexistence exist alongside an unequal and violent caste system? He came to the reluctant conclusion that this was only possible because no meaningful and all-encompassing system of ethical thought had ever made much of an impact on Indian society. And perhaps, this was because the caste system as enshrined in the *Manava Dharmashastra* had always prevented the conditions for such an all-encompassing system of ethical thought to ever come about. As Gopal Guru argued in “Bhimrao Ambedkar’s Modern Moral Idealism: A Metaphysics of Emancipation”:

[Ambedkar’s philosophy] goes beyond both the legal and the institutional framework and defines itself in terms of a more comprehensive moral doctrine

²⁷ Ambedkar, *RGJ, BAWS*, Vol. 1, 218-219.

²⁸ Ambedkar, *RGJ, BAWS*, Vol. 1, 219.

that results from the need to evaluate the moral, ethical practices of caste-infected civil society.²⁹

This thesis takes Guru's argument concerning a "comprehensive moral doctrine" as its discursive starting point. I argue that Ambedkar deliberately and consciously chose to refer to diverse sources and address a wide variety of audiences to reach out to as many people as possible while deploying carefully selected conceptual, philosophical, and social vocabularies to engage his audience.

Ambedkar articulated his ideas with diverse audiences in mind. His *oeuvre* is similarly marked by diversity. Some works began their discursive life as invited speeches and were later printed as concise texts. Others were written as short editorial interventions for the vernacular public sphere, while yet others were orally delivered during active social movements for civic action and reports to commissions and committees. Ambedkar seemed to have a marked preference for compact arguments.³⁰ Many of his large, printed texts were not published during his lifetime but only re-discovered many years after death.³¹

During Ambedkar's lifetime, his contemporaries would have recognised him as the author of terse, short texts on politics and society, of fiery speeches, and above all as a man who spearheaded and motivated public movements for equality and ethical practice in the public sphere through his civic protests and social actions. I argue that his interventions in the public sphere, whether through speeches, written texts, or social, civic

²⁹ Gopal Guru, "Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's Modern Moral Idealism: A Metaphysics of Emancipation", in *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Philosophy*, ed. Jonardon Ganeri (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017), 737-749.

³⁰ B. R. Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste," in *BAWS*, Vol. 1, 23-96. (Hereafter cited as *AOC*) *Annihilation of Caste*. Ambedkar's classic rebuttal of the caste system was a compact 73 pages.

³¹ Source: "A Timeline of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Life," a permanent webpage maintained by Columbia University. See: <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealc/pritchett/00ambedkar/timeline/1950s.html>, Last Accessed: October 19, 2021.

movements, was the product of a particular moral philosophy at work: a philosophy of ethics and human equality. A common thread connected all his ideas: he always delved deep into his own experiences in every work that he produced. One must not, however, assume that he only drew upon his personal experiences to frame his ideas, for he also keenly read through the latest research in the disciplines of Philosophy, Anthropology and Institutional Economics while investigating the ethics of caste hierarchies.³²

The previous two decades have witnessed a flurry of scholarly activity on the nature and scope of academic disciplinary influences on Ambedkar's thought. Arun Mukherjee and Scott Stroud have shown that the Pragmatic philosopher John Dewey heavily influenced his ideas.³³ Scholars have not neglected his Anthropological influences either. In 2018, J. F Cháirez-Garza traced the intellectual influence of Franz Boas on Ambedkar's views on social hierarchy, pluralism and the evolutionary theory of human societies.³⁴ He argued that Ambedkar's anthropological reading of the caste system was almost entirely based on a close reading of Boas.³⁵

Ambedkar's intellectual encounter with Anthropology and Pragmatic Philosophy occurred while he was pursuing his doctoral degree at Columbia University. His three year PhD programme included 60 courses

³² Particularly the works of philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952). On the importance of the intellectual context at Columbia, refer to the official webpage hosted by the Columbia University Archives which cites Ambedkar in 1914 opining, "The best friends I have had in life are some of my classmates and my great professors, John Dewey, James Shotwell, Edwin Seligman, and James Harvey Robinson". Source: <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/timeline/1910s.html>, Last Accessed: October 19, 2021.

³³ Arun Mukherjee, "BR Ambedkar, John Dewey, and the Meaning of Democracy," *New Literary History* 40, no. 2 (2009): 345-370.; Scott Stroud, "What Did Bhimrao Ambedkar Learn from John Dewey's Democracy and Education?," *Pluralist* 12, no. 2 (2017): 78-103.

³⁴ Jesús Francisco Cháirez-Garza, "B.R. Ambedkar, Franz Boas and the rejection of racial theories of untouchability," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 41, no. 2 (2018): 281-296.

³⁵ Cháirez-Garza, "B.R. Ambedkar", 281-296.

in Economics, History, Sociology, Philosophy and Anthropology, but the clear majority of his courses were in Economics.³⁶ Unsurprisingly, the primary outcome of his PhD was a detailed and densely argued dissertation in Institutional Economics on the calculation of National Income in India.³⁷ However, what is surprising is the relative lack of scholarly attention to the influence of Institutional Economics on Ambedkar's ideas. This omission is especially glaring when we consider that Institutional Economics was an interdisciplinary endeavour during Ambedkar's time, drawing upon the latest research in fields as diverse as Psychology, Anthropology, Evolutionary Biology and Cognitive Science.³⁸ The discipline was mainly concerned with the social habits and choices of individuals.³⁹ The social activities of individuals in society were, therefore, an essential concern for Institutional Economists.⁴⁰

Prominent Institutional Economists such as Thorstein Veblen and John Commons conceptualised society as an institution moulded out of the everyday habits of individuals.⁴¹ Veblen and Commons argued that imitation almost always played a role in the social habits that an individual cultivated and developed.⁴² Ambedkar also attended the classes of several

³⁶ Source: "Dr. Ambedkar's Courses at Columbia", a permanent webpage maintained by Columbia University. doi: <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealc/pritchett/00ambedkar/timeline/graphics/courses.htm>. Last Accessed: October 19, 2021.

³⁷ B. R. Ambedkar, "The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India," in *BAWS*, Vol. 6, 51-309.

³⁸ Malcolm Rutherford, "Institutional Economics at Columbia University," *Department Discussion Papers 0103* (Department of Economics, University of Victoria, 2001). See also, <https://www.exploring-economics.org/en/orientation/institutionalist-economics/>. Last Accessed: October 19, 2021.

³⁹ Malcolm Rutherford, "Institutional Economics at Columbia; William K. Kapp, "The nature and significance of institutional economics," *Kyklos* 29, no. 2, (1976): 209-232.

⁴⁰ Rutherford, "Institutional Economics", 209-232.

⁴¹ Geoffrey M. Hodgson, "The approach of institutional economics," *Journal of economic literature* 36, no. 1, (1998): 166-192; Geoffrey M. Hodgson, *The Evolution of Institutional Economics: Agency, Structure and Darwinism in American Institutionalism* (London: Routledge, 2004).

⁴² Hodgson, "The approach of institutional economics," 166-192; Hodgson, *Institutional Economics*

prominent Institutional Economists such as John Clark and Wesley Mitchell and undoubtedly encountered such ideas very early on in his doctoral studies.⁴³ In my first chapter, I show that he was so influenced by the ideas of Institutional Economics and social imitation and habit formation that he referred to these ideas to conceptualise a model that would explain how the caste system was able to work as it did through the millennia. The result was his first published article, *Castes in India* (1917).

Formal disciplinary training aside, Ambedkar was also influenced by the writings of modern Indian thinkers. By the end of nineteenth century, colonial India had witnessed a plethora of anti-caste struggles that had emerged in several regions of the Bombay and Madras Presidencies, the princely state of Travancore (Kerala) and Punjab.⁴⁴ It was mostly led by non-Brahmin intellectuals, C. Iyothee Thass, Mahatma Ayyankali, and Jotirao Phule. Phule's method was most radical: he "reinterpreted" the Hindu religious texts, and, as Rosalind O' Hanlon argues, contributed to, "a real caste antagonism within Indian society".⁴⁵

In 1991, Adi H. Doctor traced the ways in which Phule influenced Ambedkar's ideas on caste in "Low Caste Protest Movements in 19th and 20th Century Maharashtra: A Study of Jotirao Phule and B.R.

⁴³ Ambedkar was taught economic theory by prominent institutional economists like John B. Clark (Economics 205: Economic Theory), and Wesley Clair Mitchell (Economics 208: Types of Economic Theory). Source: "Dr. Ambedkar's Courses at Columbia". doi:<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/timeline/graphics/courses.html>. Last Accessed: October 19, 2021.

⁴⁴ For example, in the Madras Presidency, C. Iyothee Thass stressed upon the temple entry for oppressed classes. He rejuvenated Buddhist tradition in south India to counter the hegemony of Brahmanic culture. There were similar movements in Travancore (Today Kerala). For example, movement of Pulayas (untouchables in Kerala) led by Mahatma Ayyankali.

⁴⁵ Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 4.

Ambedkar”.⁴⁶ Doctor’s argument has been reiterated and developed by Gail Omvedt in *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* and Eleanor Zelliot in *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*.⁴⁷

Ambedkar was also influenced by early-modern thinkers, such as Kabir. In his writings, he fondly recalled a social environment during his childhood which was informed by *Kabirpanthi* and revealed that his father, Ramji Maloji Satpal, even addressed small congregations at their home.⁴⁸ Although Ambedkar veered towards Buddhist ideas early in his teenage years and formally converted to Buddhism later in life, early *Kabirpanthi* influences remained an important marker in his thought, or they wouldn’t have made so prominent an appearance in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, his classic text on Buddhist ethics, published posthumously in 1957.⁴⁹ The *Buddha and His Dhamma* proposed that Buddhism’s stress on ethics, equality and egalitarianism made it a more viable alternative to Hinduism in modern India. Implicit in this proposition was a powerful argument for the rejection of the caste system.

⁴⁶ Adi H. Doctor, “Low Caste Protest Movements in 19th and 20th Century Maharashtra: A study of Jotirao Phule and B. R. Ambedkar,” *The Indian Journal of Social Science* 4, no. 2 (1991), 199-222.

⁴⁷ According to Gail Omvedt, Ambedkar was carrying forward anti-caste tradition began by Jotirao Phule. See, Gail Omvedt *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (Delhi: Sage Publications India, 1994) 1-352; Eleanor Zelliot also noted that anti-caste crusaders, Buddha, Kabir and Phule influenced Ambedkar. See, Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 1996), 72; Zelliot, *Ambedkar’s World*, 16.

⁴⁸ B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma: A Critical Edition*, eds. Aakash Singh and Ajay Verma (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), xxv-xxvi. (Hereafter cited as *BHD*)

⁴⁹ Ambedkar, *BHD*, Singh and Verma, xxv-xxvi.

Ambedkar on the Caste system and “Graded Inequality”

In Ambedkar’s view, the caste system was ethically problematic because of its insistence that the moral worth of a human being can be decided at birth. In this sense, inequality was structured into Indian society as human beings were effectively graded in order of their perceived moral worth into a caste system.⁵⁰ In the Mahad movement of 1927, he publicly disagreed with the caste system by declaring, “All human beings are of equal status since birth”, in a speech to the thousands of people who had assembled to hear him at the Chavadar water tank in the heart of the town of Mahad.⁵¹ His arguments against the caste system amounted to an ethical and moral critique of the system itself.

Ambedkar’s ideas were based on his study of four “socially legitimate” constituent hierarchical categories of the caste system: *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra*. He also noted that a fifth category, known variously as *Atishudras*, was also considered an “illegitimate” caste category by their peers in other castes.⁵² Consequently, the fifth category was at the very bottom of the social hierarchy.

The social hierarchy of caste was based on an assumed sense of moral worth. The *Brahmins* were at the top of the hierarchy because they claimed the most moral worth of all the castes, followed by the *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra* (in that order). The assumed moral value of various castes also determined their social status. Social status was broadly divided into three categories: “high”, “low”, and “untouchable”. In this schema, the social status of *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya* and *Vaishya* was

⁵⁰ Ambedkar, *AOC*, *BAWS*, Vol. 1, 49.

⁵¹ Teltumbde, *Mahad*, 209.

⁵² B. R. Ambedkar, *The Hindu Social Order-Its Essential Principles*, in *BAWS*, Vol. 3, 95-115. (Henceforth cited as *THSO*); B. R. Ambedkar, *The Indian Ghetto-The Centre of Untouchability-Outside the Fold*, in *BAWS*, Vol. 5, 19-26. (Henceforth cited as *TIG*).

considered to be “high”. The *Shudras* were allotted a “low” status, and the *Atishudras* were deemed “untouchable” by other castes.⁵³

Since caste hierarchies were also hereditary, an individual’s moral worth and social status were fixed at birth. This had particularly dire consequences for the untouchables as they were now considered polluted, inferior, unworthy of education, wealth, and knowledge.⁵⁴ As a community, they were excluded from the conceptual category of the human. Ambedkar argued that the caste system enabled a discriminatory and unequal social order, utterly antithetical to the very concept of an ethical society.⁵⁵ At Mahad, he publicly questioned the rationale for the caste system by opining that it was inhumane, unethical, and amoral.⁵⁶ This was unacceptable. For him, morality was essentially social and concerned with the ethics of human relations. A society must be moral, he asserted.⁵⁷ Later, he would write in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* that the task of society was to promote “the right relations between man and man in all spheres of life”.⁵⁸

The Mahad movement is today recognised as the first civil rights movement in the world. In its own time, the movement attracted a wide gamut of anti-caste intellectuals and activists, along with much public debate and controversy, for his contemporaries had never witnessed an anti-caste protest made on this scale before.⁵⁹ His argument that the caste system was unethical because it denied the existence of universal human equality became the collective voice of the Mahad movement. However,

⁵³ B. R. Ambedkar, “Philosophy of Hinduism,” in *BAWS*, Vol. 3, 25-26. (Hereafter cited as *POH*).

⁵⁴ Ambedkar, *TIG*, *BAWS*, Vol. 5, 19-26.

⁵⁵ Ambedkar, *AOC*, *BAWS*, Vol. 1, 68.

⁵⁶ Narendra Jadhav, *Ambedkar Awakening India’s Social Conscience* (New Delhi: Konark Publisher, 2019), 84-85.

⁵⁷ Jadhav, *Ambedkar Awakening*, 84-85.

⁵⁸ Ambedkar, *BHD*, Singh and Verma, 168.

⁵⁹ Teltumbde, *Mahad*, 283-329.

this was not the first time that he had articulated an ethical critique of the caste system.

The earliest evidence of Ambedkar's ethical critique of the caste system can be found in *Castes in India* (1917). It presented the caste system as an inhuman and dehumanising system devoted to maintaining the social privilege of the high castes through practices such as sati, forced widowhood, child marriage and social segregation. He concluded that the caste system had produced an unjust and unethical society in India for many millennia. In later writings, he would build upon his conclusions in *Castes in India* to argue that the caste system perpetuated a system of "graded inequality" in India.⁶⁰

On the question of "graded inequality", Ambedkar argued that "the caste system is marked not merely by inequality but is affected by the system of graded inequality. All castes are not on a par. They are one above the other".⁶¹ He took issue with the romanticisation of caste as an idealised division of labour in society.⁶² His research into the dynamics of labour in caste revealed that a critical operational rationale for the system was the ready availability of a cheap source of labour through successive gradations of "labour castes". In this sense, the caste system was not a "division of labour" but a "division of labourers".⁶³

⁶⁰ Ambedkar's writings such as *Evidence Before Southborough Committee* (1919), *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), *Symbols of Hinduism and the House the Hindus have Built* (n.d.), *The Triumph of Brahmanism* (n.d.), *The Indian Ghetto-The Centre of Untouchability-Outside the Fold* (n.d.), *Away From the Hindus* (n.d.), *Who Were the Shudras: How They Came to be the Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society* (1946), *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables* (1948), *Thoughts on Linguistic States* (1955), *Revolution and Counter-Revolution* (n.d.), *The Philosophy of Hinduism* (n. d.) and *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1957) progressively developed the idea of "graded inequality".

⁶¹ B. R. Ambedkar, "Thoughts on Linguistic States," in *BAWS*, Vol. 1, 167.

⁶² Ambedkar, *POH*, *BAWS*, Vol. 3, 25-26.

⁶³ Ambedkar, *AOC*, *BAWS*, Vol. 1, 47.

Ambedkar was also concerned with the rather thorny issue of how caste hierarchies had been legitimised, and the untouchable community, been historically marginalised and subjected to inhuman and unethical treatment in Indian society. He opined that *Dharmashastric* scripture was responsible for normalising social inequality in the caste system. According to him, *shastric* religious norms, rules and practices had falsely “generated the belief” amongst peoples in Hindu society that the caste system was the product of “divine will” and that all castes must consequently “remain separate and distinct”.⁶⁴ He argued that it would not be possible to successfully implement a universal notion of human equality in India if *shastric* ideals and their prescribed “moral prohibitions” towards women, untouchables, the *shudras* continued to be followed in contemporary India. In the final analysis, his writings on the *Dharmashastras* constituted an intellectual challenge to the legitimacy of that system of thought.⁶⁵ We note that his interpretation of *Dharmashastric* literature has been confirmed in recent scholarship, most notably, by Pradeep Gokhale, in his landmark essay, “Re-Understanding Indian Moral Thought”.⁶⁶

Ambedkar was not against the idea of religion. He was, in fact, of the view that religion could play an essential role in “the well-being of the people” by upholding human dignity and equality.⁶⁷ His main concern was with a moral philosophy that would sketch out a clear case for rejecting unethical practices in religion (such as the caste system in Hinduism) in their entirety.

⁶⁴ Ambedkar, *THSO, BAWS*, Vol. 5, 100.

⁶⁵ Ambedkar, *THSO, BAWS*, Vol. 5, 100.

⁶⁶ Pradeep P. Gokhale, “Re-Understanding Indian Moral Thought,” in *Studies In Indian Moral Philosophy: Problems, Concepts and Perspectives*, eds. S. E. Bhelke and Pradeep P. Gokhale (Pune: Indian Philosophical Quarterly Publication, 2002), 27-44.

⁶⁷ Ambedkar, *AOC, BAWS*, Vol. 1, 94.

I argue that Ambedkar's works were primarily geared towards a reappraisal of extant social relations in Indian society. To this extent, he elucidated the ethical responsibilities of all individuals towards diverse social groups in India. However, he also pointed out that his ideas concerning ethics and human equality faced a seemingly unsurmountable social and institutional barrier: the caste system. This was why his early work aimed to highlight the unethical nature of the caste system. It's a concern that also dominated his later writings.

Scholarly Works on Ambedkar's Philosophy

The intellectual scope of Ambedkar studies is vast. The field is densely populated with numerous biographies and archive-based histories.⁶⁸ Scholars have also studied Ambedkar from a variety of academic and disciplinary vantage points, most notably; in gender studies and economics.⁶⁹ Thematic treatments of his works also abound, as his writings have been studied by philosophers of politics, law, and religion.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Dhananjay Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1971); Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (Delhi: Sage Publications India, 1994); Gail Omvedt, *Ambedkar: Towards an Enlightened India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2008); Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 1996); Eleanor Zelliot, *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2004); Christophe Jaffrelot, *Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analysing and Fighting Caste* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005); Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

⁶⁹ Sharmila Rege, "Introduction," in *Against the Madness of Manu: B. R. Ambedkar's Writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy* (New Delhi: Navayana 2013); Shailaja Paik, *Dalit Women's Education in Modern India: Double Discrimination* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

Note: Economists who have worked on Ambedkar include: Sukhdeo Thorat, *Ambedkar's Role in Economic Planning, Water and Power Policy* (New Delhi: Shipra, 2006); Sukhdeo Thorat and Narendra Kumar (eds.), *B. R. Ambedkar: Perspectives on Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policies* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009); Narendra Jadhav, "Neglected Economic Thought of Babasaheb Ambedkar," *Economic and Political Weekly* 26, no. 15 (1991): 980-982.; Narendra Jadhav, *Ambedkar an Economist Extraordinaire* (New Delhi: Konark, 2015).

⁷⁰ Martha Nussbaum, "Ambedkar's constitution: Promoting inclusion, opposing majority tyranny," in *Assessing Constitutional Performance*, eds. Tom Ginsburg, and Aziz Huq (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 293-336.

In this context, I note that his ethics and moral philosophy has been a relatively understudied area. This is the intellectual justification for focusing my thesis on Ambedkar's works towards his ethics and moral philosophy.

Ambedkar has sometimes been seen as a thinker with a very circumscribed view of Indian society, and some scholars doubt whether he can at all be considered to have an ethics and moral philosophy of his own. A typical example of this form of scholarship is K.J. Shah's 1977 essay, *Dissent, protest, and Reform: Some conceptual clarifications*.⁷¹ Shah argued that Ambedkar was not a philosopher but only concerned with the "narrow material interests" of the untouchable community.⁷² Not all scholars would categorise Ambedkar's writings in these terms in this century. However, the view that he was not concerned with ethics and moral philosophy continues to persist. For instance, in 2019, Bhikhu Parekh argued that he did not have a moral philosophy but "heavily relied on institutional mechanisms to protect and promote the interests of the Untouchables and did not fully appreciate the importance of changing the moral culture of wider society".⁷³

In recent years, scholars have assessed Ambedkar's work and thought by placing his ideas in dialogue with the work of other philosophers. For instance, scholars such as Ramchandra Guha, Thomas Pantham, Ananya Vajpeyi and Arundhati Roy compare Ambedkar's thought to the

On scholarship relating to Ambedkar's conversion see: Krishnarao Narayan Kadam, *The Meaning of the Ambedkarite Conversion to Buddhism and Other Essays* (Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1997); Anand Teltumbde, "Strategy of Conversion to Buddhism: Intent and Aftermath," in *The Radical in Ambedkar: Critical Reflections*, eds. Suraj Yengde and Anand Teltumbde (Gurgoan: Penguin, 2018), 219-239.

⁷¹ K. J. Shah, "Dissent, protest and reform: Some conceptual clarifications," in *Dissent, Protest and Reform in Indian Civilization*, ed. S. C. Malik (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1977), 70-80.

⁷² Shah, "Dissent, protest and reform: Some conceptual clarifications", 70-80.

⁷³ Bhikhu Parekh, "Ambedkar's Legacy," in *Conversations with Ambedkar: 10 Ambedkar Memorial Lectures*, ed. Valerian Rodrigues (Delhi: Tulika Books Publication, 2019), 68.

philosophy of M.K. Gandhi.⁷⁴ Apart from Gandhi, Ambedkar's thought has also been compared to Western thinkers such as Walter Benjamin and Alan Badiou.⁷⁵ While the comparative approach has provided new insights into Ambedkar's life and thought, it does not offer adequate discursive space for his moral critique of the caste system. In this schema, Ambedkar's moral philosophy and ethics are never discussed in their context but always relation the ideas of the thinker(s) that he is being compared to. As Dag-Erik Berg points out, the comparative approach "does not correspond well with Ambedkar's core concern with overcoming religion, oppression and the many dimensions of caste-based inequality".⁷⁶ This leads to a related question: has Ambedkar's philosophy been studied in its own context in current research?

Ambedkar's philosophy is not oft studied in contemporary Indian philosophical research. Take, for instance, Basant Kumar Lal's *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* (now in its 12th edition).⁷⁷ Lal's omission of Ambedkar's thought is not an exception. G. Ranjit Sharma's *Trends in Contemporary Indian Philosophy of Education: A Critical Evaluation* avoids any discussion of Ambedkar as well.⁷⁸ Similarly, *Debates in Indian Philosophy-Classical, Colonial and Contemporary* by A Raghuramraju, as well as *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century*

⁷⁴ Ramachandra Guha, "Gandhi's Ambedkar," in *Indian Political Thought: A Reader*, eds. Aakash Singh Rathore and Silika Mohapatra (London: Routledge, 2010), 33-38; Thomas Pantham, "Against Untouchability: The Discourses of Gandhi and Ambedkar," in *Humiliation: Claims and Context*, ed. Gopal Guru (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 179-208; Ananya Vajpeyi, *Righteous Republic: The Political Foundations of Modern India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). Arundhati Roy, "The Doctor and the Saint," in *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition*, B. R. Ambedkar, ed. S. Anand (New Delhi: Navayana, 2014), 15-179.

⁷⁵ Aishwary Kumar, "Ambedkar's Inheritances", *Modern Intellectual History* 7, no. 2 (2010): 391-415; Soumyabrata Choudhury, *Ambedkar and Other Immortals: An Untouchable Research Programme* (Navayana, 2018).

⁷⁶ Dag-Erik Berg, *Dynamics of Caste and Law: Dalits, Oppression and Constitutional Democracy in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 48.

⁷⁷ Basant Kumar Lal, *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishing House, 2020).

⁷⁸ Gurumayum Sharma, *Trends in Contemporary Indian Philosophy of Education: A Critical Evaluation* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2003).

Political Thought, contain extensive discussions of Gandhi's thought but make no mention of Ambedkar's contribution.⁷⁹

The above discussion should not lead us to the conclusion that there has been no scholarly engagement with Ambedkar's moral philosophy. Christopher Queen's works such as *Ambedkar, Modernity and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation* and *Ambedkar's Dhamma: Source and Method in the Construction of Engaged Buddhism* is a case in point. In recent years, Pradeep Gokhale's *The Philosophy of B. R. Ambedkar* has emerged as a significant new philosophical intervention in this area. Queen and Gokhale restrict the scope of their arguments to Ambedkar's intellectual engagement with Buddhism. Consequently, neither scholar considers the early works such as *Castes in India* (1917) and works authored during the course of the Mahad movement (1927) to be relevant to his moral philosophy.⁸⁰

Apart from Queen and Gokhale, a critical philosophical intervention on Ambedkar's thought was made by Valerian Rodrigues in "Ambedkar as a Political Philosopher".⁸¹ According to Rodrigues, Ambedkar's philosophy can be best understood in terms of concepts that were discussed at length in his work, such as state and democracy, human equality, religion, the idea of self and human agency, representation, questions of minorities, and social inclusion. This conceptual approach to Ambedkar's philosophy can also be found in Aakash Singh Rathore's *Ambedkar's Preamble: A Secret*

⁷⁹ A. Raghuramaraju, *Debates in Indian Philosophy: Classical, Colonial, and Contemporary* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007); Terence Ball and Bellamy Richard, eds. *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁸⁰ Queen and Gokhale also do not consider the fact that Ambedkar's moral philosophy was modified according to the intended audience that he had in mind when producing a particular work, either as a printed text, speech or collective civic action. This question is an important framing context in chapter one, two and three of this thesis. Ambedkar's ethics in *Castes in India* and the Mahad movement is the subject of chapters one and two.

⁸¹ Valerian Rodrigues, "Ambedkar as a Political Philosopher," *Economic and Political Weekly* 52, no. 15 (2017): 101-107.

History of the Constitution of India. Rathore identified a new concept in Ambedkar's works: "public conscience".⁸²

Ambedkar developed his concept of public conscience in response to his various engagements with the public sphere (ranging from speeches to newspaper editorials and printed texts). His interventions aimed to persuade Indian society to engage with and reflect on his ideas critically. As Gopal Guru has argued, Ambedkar oft made a case for convincing the public into "seeking truth" through collective social action.⁸³ He also urged the public to evaluate the performance of current political leaders critically.

In conclusion, the current scholarship on Ambedkar's philosophy can be neatly categorised into three main approaches: (1) those who adopt a comparative approach by placing Ambedkar in dialogue with other thinkers; (2) those who argue that Ambedkar's moral philosophy can be best understood by focusing exclusively on his works on Buddhism; and, (3) those who identify specific conceptual vocabularies which were used by Ambedkar and explain his moral and political thought on that basis.

In my thesis, I do not adopt the comparative approach of placing Ambedkar in dialogue with other thinkers. Instead, Ambedkar is placed in his own context. "Context" primarily refers to the following: autobiographical accounts and observations on Indian society; an education in Economics and the Liberal Arts; and interventions in the Indian public sphere on matters relating to contemporary politics. I also disagree with the scholarly argument that Ambedkar's moral philosophy

⁸² The concept of public conscience is also discussed at length in part two of this Introduction.

⁸³ Gopal Guru, "Ethics in Ambedkar's Critique of Gandhi", *Economic and Political Weekly* 52, no.15 (2017): 95-100.

can be best understood by focusing exclusively on his works on Buddhism. I argue instead that Ambedkar's moral philosophy can be better studied by considering a broader *oeuvre* of his works; on caste, human equality and political leadership. In this context, I adopt the approach of those scholars who identify specific conceptual vocabularies used/coined by Ambedkar himself to explain his moral and political philosophy as a methodological template for this thesis.

Part Two: A Scheme of Chapters

My thesis consists of three chapters. The first focuses on Ambedkar's ethical critique of the caste system. The second traces the genealogy and development of his ideas concerning human equality. And the third examines his concept of "public conscience". I also argue his arguments must also be interpreted with careful reference to the materiality of the work (whether as a published journal article, civic protest, or public speech).

Chapter 1

This chapter is concerned with the development of Ambedkar's ethics in *Castes in India*. *Castes in India* began its discursive life as a paper which was first read out in Alexander Goldenweiser's Anthropology seminar at Columbia University. It was published as a scholarly article in the academic journal, *Indian Antiquary*. Ambedkar employed Anthropological terms such as "exogamy" and "endogamy" to argue that the caste system was not a divinely sanctioned order but a manufactured institution that legitimised inequality, discrimination and injustice in everyday life in India. The current literature on Ambedkar's ethics largely ignores the ethical significance of *Castes in India*. For instance, in 1993, M. S. Gore argued in *The Social Context of an Ideology: Ambedkar's Political and*

Social Thought that *Castes in India* “did not deal with at any length with the inequity and the injustice of the caste system”.⁸⁴ Nearly two decades later, in 2011, Gail Omvedt did not mention *Castes in India* in her landmark work, *Understanding Caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and Beyond*.⁸⁵ In her editorial introduction to *Castes in India* in 2013, Sharmila Rege highlighted the continued absence of any sustained scholarly discussion on the text.⁸⁶ However, Rege’s observation did not have the intended discursive impact, for as Vivek Kumar noted three years later, in 2016, *Castes in India* continues to be overlooked by scholars.⁸⁷

In the context of our discussion above, my study advances three new arguments on *Castes in India*. Each argument is explored in a separate section in the chapter. The first section shows how Ambedkar’s doctoral studies at Columbia University influenced his ideas of the “institution” of the caste system. The second section highlights how his critique of caste transitioned from a mere description of its sociological and anthropological origins to philosophical discussions around humane values, human dignity and equality. The third section concludes by arguing that Ambedkar’s moral and ethical critique of caste practices can be considered the work of a public philosopher who was concerned with the ethics of everyday social life in India.

Chapter 2

The second chapter of my thesis focuses on how, in 1927, Ambedkar championed the cause of human dignity and equality for all through a

⁸⁴ M. S. Gore, *The Social Context of an Ideology: Ambedkar's Political and Social Thought*, (New Delhi: SAGE Publications Pvt. Limited, 1993), 79.

⁸⁵ Gail Omvedt, *Understanding Caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and Beyond*, (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011).

⁸⁶ Sharmila Rege, “Introduction,” in *Against the Madness of Manu: B. R. Ambedkar's Writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy* (New Delhi: Navayana 2013).

⁸⁷ Vivek Kumar, “How egalitarian is the Indian sociology,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 51, no. 25, (2016): 33-39.

series of public engagements in the Mahad Movement, the first civil rights movement in India. At Mahad, Ambedkar made a universal claim for human equality and dignity, which appeared long before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Several scholars such as Gail Omvedt, Eleanor Zelliot, Christophe Jaffrelot, Anupama Rao and Anand Teltumbde have emphasised that the Mahad movement stressed the vital importance of civil rights and equal access to public space as its key objectives.⁸⁸ Out of the many scholars who have referred to Mahad in their work, Teltumbde has provided a detailed, exhaustive history of the Mahad movement. However, the importance of Ambedkar's ethics at Mahad has been inadequately emphasised in current scholarship. My chapter focuses on the role of the Mahad movement in contributing to Ambedkar's ethics. It concludes that Ambedkar presented a well-argued case for the critical importance of the ethics of everyday social life at Mahad.

Chapter 3

The third chapter discusses the importance of “public conscience” in Ambedkar's ethics and moral philosophy. The chapter primarily focuses on his public speech, *Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah* (1943). This speech was delivered to a large audience of Liberal intellectuals in Pune who had gathered on the birth centenary of Mahadev Ranade (1842-1901). *Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah* examined the importance (and perceived absence) of public conscience in contemporary Indian thought and practice. Ambedkar consistently stressed the importance of public

⁸⁸ Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (Delhi: Sage Publications India, 1994); Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 1996); Eleanor Zelliot, *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2004); Christophe Jaffrelot, *Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analysing and Fighting Caste* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005); Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Anand Teltumbde, *Mahad: The Making of the First Dalit Revolt* (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2016).

conscience in matters concerning social justice, moral responsibility, and ethics. However, in current scholarship, the category of public conscience has seldom been the subject of academic debate and enquiry.⁸⁹

According to Ambedkar, public conscience refers to responsibility, justice, and deliberation of what constitutes the social good. Further, he consistently presented public conscience as a democratic value in his writings and speeches.⁹⁰ Particularly relevant is his unequivocal belief that public conscience would bring about a moral transformation in Indian society through a collective ethical stance against all forms of social oppression. This chapter will conclude that Ambedkar conceptualised public conscience as a method by which a democratic and ethical Indian society could come about and flourish.

Conclusion

Ambedkar's consistent attempts to remove all forms of social oppression from Indian society were a part of an ethical project which aimed to lay the foundations for an equal society. He envisaged a system of thought which was fundamentally ethical in its nature and scope. Ambedkar presented his ideas on ethics to the Indian public in writings, speeches and civic protests; and appealed to them to engage with the political and

⁸⁹ For instance, in 2017, Valerian Rodrigues's analysis of the central concepts of Ambedkar political thought did not discuss the concept of public conscience. See, Rodrigues, Valerian Rodrigues, "Ambedkar as a Political Philosopher," *Economic and Political Weekly* 52, no. 15 (2017): 101-107.

⁹⁰ Ambedkar spoke on various occasions for the cultivation of public conscience. See: B. R. Ambedkar, "Do not depend on God or Superman," in *BAWS*, vol. 17, part 3, (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, [1933] 2003); B. R. Ambedkar, "What Way Emancipation," in *BAWS*, vol. 17, part 3 (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, [1936] 2003); B. R. Ambedkar, "Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah," in *BAWS*, vol. 1, (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, [1943] 1979); B. R. Ambedkar, "Hindus and Want of Public Conscience," in *BAWS*, vol. 5, (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1989).

social issues of the day. He argued that the Indian public must educate and engage on contemporary unethical social practices, agitate for social action, elect ethical leaders, and hold itself and the political establishment of the day morally accountable. Only then, he insisted, could India develop into an egalitarian, democratic nation.⁹¹

⁹¹ B. R. Ambedkar, “Conditions Precedent for the Successful Working of Modern Democracy,” in *BAWS*, Vol. 17, part 3.

CHAPTER 1

The Institution of the Caste system and its Practices: An Ethical Critique by B. R. Ambedkar⁹²

Introduction

In 1917, B. R. Ambedkar published *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development* (henceforth *CI*). This was a seminal essay and can be read as an important intellectual resource for Ambedkar's ideas on caste and its role in everyday life. In this essay, he described the caste system and subjected it to intense scholarly scrutiny. In the final analysis, he presented an implicit critique of the unethical practices of the caste system. This chapter is concerned with the development of Ambedkar's ethics in *CI*. I argue that his ethics was concerned with how the social institution of the caste system and its practices have led to the emergence of inequalities and injustices in everyday social lives. He assessed the caste system as an institution of human oppression, outlined its core functions and discussed its unethical nature.

CI has only recently become the subject of academic debate and study. For instance, even in 1993, M. S. Gore, in *The Social Context of an Ideology: Ambedkar's Political and Social Thought*, argued that *CI* "did not deal at any length with the inequity and the injustice of the caste system".⁹³ In 2013, Sharmila Rege pointed to the absence of any sustained scholarly discussion on the text.⁹⁴ Notably, Rege offered this opinion in her editorial introduction to *CI*. In 2016, Vivek Kumar noted in his

⁹² An earlier version of this chapter has been published as: Yadav, V. K., Dasgupta, S., and Kumar, B., (2021). "The Institution of the Caste system and its Practices: An Ethical Critique by B. R. Ambedkar". *IASSI Quarterly: Contributions to Indian Social Science*, Vol. 40, no. 3. pp. 567-580.

⁹³ M. S. Gore, *The Social Context of an Ideology: Ambedkar's Political and Social Thought*, (New Delhi: SAGE Publications Pvt. Limited, 1993), 79.

⁹⁴ Rege, "Introduction".

landmark article in the *Economic and Political Weekly* that scholars often overlook *CI*.⁹⁵

The lack of scholarly engagement with *CI* is puzzling, for Ambedkar's analysis of the caste system has a ring of contemporaneity about it. His concern with ethics and equality has ramifications for aspiring to a social world where caste discrimination can be addressed and checked. He argued that caste was not compatible with modern democratic principles and values. His ideas were oriented towards creating observable everyday changes in Indian social life. I take the view that Ambedkar was a philosophically sophisticated thinker and interested in intervening in the contemporary social problems of the day. The conceptual tools that he employed were anthropological, but the implications of his arguments were profoundly philosophical, with an unflinching ethical gaze towards the vagaries of caste.

In *CI*, Ambedkar marshalled an impressive array of social realities and laced it with a blistering critique of the contemporary scholarly ideas of caste. In particular, he took issue with two main ideas: that the caste system was too complicated to be understood; and that it was an authentic representative of Indian social practice. Instead, he proposed a simple anthropological model by which the caste system could be explained. He also insisted that the caste system was only an unethical imposition placed on the majority by a few. He published *CI* so that his views could be read and debated by a wider public. He was, in other words, a social critic who intervened in the public sphere.

Ambedkar argued that the caste system is a product of the gradual institutionalization of belief systems in the Indian society. He marveled at its capacity to endure across several millennia in India by effectively

⁹⁵ Vivek Kumar, "How egalitarian is the Indian sociology," *Economic and Political Weekly* 51, no. 25, (2016): 33-39.

becoming an institution. The “institution” of caste is an important conceptual category in his thought, and his attention to this term is theoretically significant. As the social theorist Anthony Giddens argues, “Institutions are by definition the more enduring features of social life”.⁹⁶ Giddens’ observation also has wider disciplinary echoes. For the Institutional Economist Geoffrey M. Hodgson, “Institutions are the kind of structures that matter most in the social realm: they make up the stuff of social life”.⁹⁷

Ambedkar argued that each individual’s life is constrained under a pre-structured set of social rules. He emphasized that social life in Indian society is primarily structured by the repressive practice of endogamy (in which an individual is forced to marry within their caste and clan). According to him, endogamy was no less than an imposed moral code to control and regulate human relations in the caste order. In this sense, endogamy was a consciously designed programme to create and sustain caste. It regulated human interactions by constructing a set of repressive rules, in which all rights are inherently allocated to only higher caste men, thereby limiting access to knowledge and wealth. In Ambedkar’s interpretation, endogamy had a foundational role in establishing and perpetuating inequality and injustice in Indian society.

Scholars of Indian ethics and democracy have largely ignored Ambedkar’s analysis of endogamy and its role in the formation of an unequal, violent and divisive social world. In this context, we will demonstrate that a reconsideration of *CI* in political theory may help recalibrate the current scholarly discussions on injustice and inequality in India.

⁹⁶ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), 84.

⁹⁷ Geoffrey M. Hodgson, “What are Institutions?,” *Journal of Economic Issues* 40, no. 1 (2006): 2.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section shows how Ambedkar's focus on the "institution" of the caste system in *CI* was influenced by his professional training at Columbia University. The second examines the ways in which his critique of caste transitioned from a mere description of its sociological and anthropological origins in *CI* to philosophical discussions around humane values, human dignity and equality in later works, such as *Annihilation of Caste* (1936). The third concludes by arguing that Ambedkar's moral and ethical critique of immoral social practices can be considered as the work of a public philosopher who was concerned with the ethics of everyday social life in India.

Ambedkar and institution: An intellectual genealogy

In 1913, Ambedkar arrived in New York City to study for a PhD. at Columbia University. Columbia would prove to be a fortuitous choice for the young scholar, as it was in the midst of a debate on the social role of universities. The university would have considerably influenced his views on how institutions of higher learning can recalibrate discussions on ethics, equality and democracy in society.⁹⁸

Prior to his arrival in New York, Ambedkar had been in employment. His employer was Sayajirao Gaikwad, the Maharaja of the princely state of Baroda. Gaikwad had the reputation of being a progressive ruler. It was he who had funded Ambedkar's college education at the prestigious Elphinstone College in Bombay.

Ambedkar's college education had been preceded by years of uncertainty, humiliation and struggle. While at school, he had even been told that he should not aspire to a collegiate education on account of his caste-status.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Valerian Rodrigues, "Introduction," in *Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar*, ed. Valerian Rodrigues (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), 8.

⁹⁹ Dhananjay Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1971), 22-23.

This does not mean however that he did not face caste-based discrimination at college. On the contrary, he witnessed how caste-based discrimination at colleges effected the education that was given to students. He himself was not allowed to study Sanskrit on account of his caste. Upon graduation, he became one of the first from his caste-community to gain a bachelor's degree, a formidable achievement indeed.¹⁰⁰ Later, Ambedkar sought employment with Gaikwad partly out of a sense of indebtedness to the Maharaja for his financial support during his Elphinstone years.

Ambedkar was not happily employed at Baroda. He faced caste discrimination from his colleagues. He was also was not able to secure suitable accommodation on account of the caste prejudices of the local land-lords. He therefore sought a change from Baroda as soon as possible. There was an additional context which may have influenced his decision. His father, Ramji Satpal had died within a few days of his joining the new job at Baroda. Satpal had been an enthusiastic advocate for his son's higher education. As he recalled, "my father felt great turmoil that I should pass my B.A. Before dawn was a good time for study since the mind could be quiet and disciplined. At the time of examinations he used to wake me at 2 a.m."¹⁰¹ After his father's death on 12 February, 1913 ("the saddest day in my life") he began to ponder on the possibilities of continuing his education. A few months later, in June, he came to know about the Gaikwad's scholarship scheme for competent students to pursue their doctoral education at Columbia University. He duly applied for the scheme and was granted a scholarship to pursue his PhD at Columbia. There was however a condition: Ambedkar was required to serve in

¹⁰⁰ Narendra Jadhav, *Ambedkar Awakening India's Social Conscience* (New Delhi: Konark Publisher, 2019), 24.

¹⁰¹ Gail Omvedt, *Ambedkar: Towards an Enlightened India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2008), 5.

Gaikwad's state administration was a fell decade after the completion of his doctoral degree.

Ambedkar's research at Columbia introduced him to the ideas of influential and internationally renowned scholars. As he wrote later, "the best friends I have had in my life were some of my classmates at Columbia and my great professors, John Dewey, James Shotwell, Edwin Seligman [his PhD supervisor] and James Harvey Robinson".¹⁰² Such an intellectual environment had a great influence on Ambedkar. It became the intellectual springboard on which he could test, reappraise, and rethink ideas of India's administration, society, and government.¹⁰³ At Columbia, he attended classes in different subjects. His three-year PhD programme included 60 courses in Economics, History, Sociology, Philosophy and Anthropology. Since the clear majority of his courses were in Economics (29), it is unsurprising that the primary outcome of his PhD was a detailed and densely argued dissertation in that discipline (on the calculation of National Income in India).¹⁰⁴ It is important to note that Ambedkar's thesis was not only a discussion of economic policy but also an argument for accountable government.¹⁰⁵

From 1913-1940, Columbia was the "academic home" of Institutional Economics- an influential school of economic thought focused on "the evolution of social systems and social processes".¹⁰⁶ Ambedkar was taught economic theory by prominent institutional economists like John B. Clark (Economics 205: Economic Theory) and Wesley Clair Mitchell

¹⁰² Source:

<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/timeline/1910s.html>, Last Accessed: November 5, 2021.

¹⁰³ Rodrigues, *Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar*, 8.

¹⁰⁴ Source:

<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/timeline/1910s.html>, Last Accessed: October, 21, 2021.

¹⁰⁵ Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar*, 23.

¹⁰⁶ Rutherford, "Institutional Economics,"; Kapp, "The nature and significance of institutional economics," 214.

(Economics 208: Types of Economic Theory). These two economists, along with Thorstein Veblen, John R. Commons and Walter Hamilton, played a critical role in establishing the discipline of Institutional Economics. The pragmatic philosopher John Dewey was also an important intellectual influence.¹⁰⁷

During Ambedkar's time, Institutional Economics was concerned with two main scholarly enquiries. First, the "nature and evolution of key institutions and their role in the economy"; second, the use of psychology to understand "how institutions shaped the dispositions and mentalities of individuals".¹⁰⁸ The subject itself was an inter-disciplinary enterprise that incorporated insights from Psychology, Anthropology, Philosophy, Evolutionary Biology and Cognitive Science.¹⁰⁹

For our discussion here, the work of Veblen and Commons is particularly important, for they integrated the concept of economic institutions with that of social habits and beliefs. According to Veblen, "institutions are, in substance, prevalent habits of thought, concerning particular relations and particular functions of the individual and the community".¹¹⁰ Hodgson has even illustrated how Institutional Economics was founded on "instinct psychology" and "pragmatic philosophy" and offers a radically different approach to conceptualising an institution through a focus on "habits".¹¹¹ More specifically, this discipline focuses on "how specific groups of common habits are embedded in and reinforced by specific social

¹⁰⁷ Alexa Albert and Yngve Ramstad, "The social psychological underpinnings of Commons's Institutional Economics: The significance of Dewey's human nature and conduct", *Journal of Economic issues* 31, no. 4, (1997): 881-916.

¹⁰⁸ Hodgson, *Institutional Economics*, 6-7.

¹⁰⁹ Source: <https://www.exploring-economics.org/en/orientation/institutionalist-economics/>, Last Accessed: October 21, 2021.

¹¹⁰ Veblen, Thorstein ([1899] 2007), *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, ([1899] 2007) 126.

¹¹¹ Hodgson, "The approach of institutional economics," 167.

institutions”.¹¹² Institutional economists believed that some “habits and routines are trained and imitated [while] other[s] fall out of use”.¹¹³ Imitations push forward the “spread of habit” and ultimately contribute to the “emergence of institutions” which are dedicated to the continuing prevalence of such habits in society. Institutions of this nature are inherently social, for they “foster and underline particular behaviours and habits and help transmit them to new members of the group”.¹¹⁴ Such ideas also inform the deep structure of *CI*.

Ambedkar perceived the caste system from an inter-disciplinary standpoint, consisting of subjects as wide-ranging as Sociology, History, Anthropology, Psychology and Philosophy. Institutional Economics served as the basis of his inter-disciplinary investigation since it was also the subject of his primary training for his doctoral studies in Economics. Interestingly, both Institutional Economics and Ambedkar’s theory of caste conceptualized of human society as that which is organized around invented traditions, social habits, and socio- cultural conventions. According to the Institutional Economist Anne Mayhew, the cultural conditioning of humans is an essential aspect of the discipline. Mayhew opines that “it is obvious that culture is necessarily a creation of people and that this is so even if we also accept that people are creations of their culture”.¹¹⁵ Following Mayhew, I argue that Ambedkar too was interested in how caste was essentially a “human” creation.

CI attempted to formulate an elegantly simple but rigorous conceptualisation of caste. When most scholars asserted that a general theory of caste was impossible, since the phenomenon itself was believed

¹¹² Hodgson, “The approach of institutional economics,” 169.

¹¹³ Hodgson, “The approach of institutional economics,” 175.

¹¹⁴ Hodgson, “The approach of institutional economics,” 180.

¹¹⁵ Ann Mayhew, “Culture: core concept under attack,” *Journal of Economic Issues* 21, no. 2 (1987), 590.

to be too complex and diverse to be theorised, Ambedkar set himself the task of articulating the basic principles, rules and practices of caste. It is the earliest example of his concern that social theory must be informed by the reality of everyday social practices. Theoretically, this concern amounts to an ethics of social practices, written in an accessible (but provocative) language.

Ambedkar published *CI* in *Indian Antiquary* (Vol. XLI, May 1917). The next year marked its first review in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (R. B., 1918). Unfortunately, the reviewer (who is only known to us by his enigmatic initials- R.B.) assessed it as “fanciful” and “confusing” and ominously predicted that it would only “be of interest to Indian students” and not academics.¹¹⁶

I argue that R. B.’s confusion and the lack of academic engagement with *CI* were not due to Ambedkar’s arguments but rather his narrow target audience of the text. *CI* began its discursive life as a seminar chapter in a course on General Ethnology at Columbia (“Anthropology 140”) and reflected Ambedkar’s anxiety that his (North American, male and white) classmates may feel alienated with specifically non-Western forms of social knowledge and hence, contextualized his arguments with examples from courses that they would have studied as part of their academic requirements for a PhD.¹¹⁷

Unfortunately, while publishing *CI* for *Indian Antiquary*, Ambedkar did not introduce any subsequent revisions to the text to enhance clarity, context and readability for a wider readership. Nowhere in *CI* is this more so than when Ambedkar argued that the *entire* structure of the caste

¹¹⁶ R. B. “Castes in India. By Bhimrao R. Ambedkar. *Indian Antiquary*. May 1917,” *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society* 50, no. 3-4 (1918): 622-624.

¹¹⁷ Source: <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/timeline/graphics/courses.html>, Last Accessed: October 21, 2021.

system could be understood as a “human institution”. He pointed out that caste was an “ancient institution” and that institutions survive for a long time. But what does “human institution” mean, exactly? The term mystified R. B., and I would argue that it continues to mystify scholars today. Nevertheless, the first clue to decoding Ambedkar’s intended meaning can be found within the intellectual context of Columbia itself.

Columbia, in the early 20th century, championed Anthropology as an emerging field.¹¹⁸ Ambedkar’s teacher, Alexander Goldenweiser, was one of the most prominent anthropologists of his generation. Following the cultural anthropologist Franz Boas, Goldenweiser attempted to sketch out an evolutionist theory of human societies and show that human society was the product of a plurality of cultural and psychological circumstances.¹¹⁹ The implications of this theory were profound: it meant that ethnic and racial discrimination practices were the product of deeply held cultural biases rather than a historical superiority of any kind.¹²⁰ It is highly likely that Goldenweiser introduced this theory to Ambedkar in “Anthropology 140”, the same course that produced *CI*.

I argue that Ambedkar conceptualized a theory of caste within the discursive paradigm of the evolutionist theory of human society. On the question of race, he theorized that “the population of India is a mixture of Aryans, Dravidians, Mongolians and Scythians” since all these races had intermarried, and their “mixture” created a “homogenous unity of culture” in India.¹²¹ Indians organized their society into “classes” based on their professional choices (for example, the class of all doctors, the class of all teachers and so on).¹²² Ambedkar stressed that the organisation of

¹¹⁸ Cháirez-Garza, “B. R. Ambedkar”, 1.

¹¹⁹ Cháirez-Garza, “B. R. Ambedkar”, 1.

¹²⁰ Cháirez-Garza, “B. R. Ambedkar”, 4.

¹²¹ Ambedkar, *CI, BAWS*, Vol. 1, 6.

¹²² Ambedkar, *CI, BAWS*, Vol. 1, 15.

individuals into classes in society did not, however, prevent anyone from marrying across classes. Anthropologically, this phenomenon was referred to as “exogamy”.¹²³

Unfortunately, an exogamous state of affairs was not to last as classes stopped marrying into other classes. Instead, professional classes began to marry within their class. Ambedkar used the anthropological term “endogamy” to refer to this practice.¹²⁴ In his view, although the Brahmin “class” began endogamous practices, it was through imitation and ex-communication that it gradually spread to non-Brahmins and ultimately led to the institutionalization of caste. Institutionalization survived by practices that were purposefully created to prevent men and women from marrying into other castes (such as restricted marriage, sati, forced widowhood and child marriage).¹²⁵

To Ambedkar, endogamy was inherently violent, for it required a near-constant surveillance on human relationships and social relations. He noted that different castes were forced to live within a strict hereditarily defined social status, a process which he described as an “artificial chopping off of the population into fixed and definite units, each one prevented from fusing into another through the custom of endogamy”.¹²⁶ All this was in the interest of achieving a singular aim: reproductive control. Harsh punishments (such as social boycott) and violence (including death) were meted out to any individual/social group who posed a threat to achieving this aim.

At the beginning of *CI*, Ambedkar had made two ambitious claims; first, that the caste system could be explained as a set of reflexive social

¹²³ Ambedkar, *CI, BAWS*, Vol. 1, 9.

¹²⁴ Ambedkar, *CI, BAWS*, Vol. 1, 10.

¹²⁵ Ambedkar, *CI, BAWS*, Vol. 1, 14.

¹²⁶ Ambedkar, *CI, BAWS*, Vol. 1, 9.

practices, and second, that caste was a “human institution”. Towards the end of this section, we find that he was able to explain the conceptual vocabulary and the reasoning behind both the claims. But a discussion of *CI* is incomplete without considering its ethical significance. This is the subject of the next section.

Ambedkar on the immorality of the caste system: an ethical critique

In *CI*, Ambedkar proposed an alternative reading of social relations in the Indian society: one that was grounded in egalitarianism rather than endogamy. This is conceptually significant. For instance, as Sally Haslanger notes, “social relations” are important to understand the nature of injustice and social harm.¹²⁷ Ambedkar, too was concerned with the question of how social harm had been effectively institutionalized by caste. He argued that, “caste is a society [. . .] based on a wrong [social] relationship” and that the caste-system had effectively emerged as a harmful institution, which legitimized discrimination against certain groups by restrictive mechanisms designed to curtail human association and communication severely.¹²⁸ Such mechanisms violated individual freedom and severely restricted individual choices on how to live.

For Ambedkar, the foundation of the caste system was deeply immoral and unethical, for it promoted violence against particular social groups (such as women, girl-children, widows, and lower castes). To Ambedkar, the problem with the caste system was that it rejected the humanity of oppressed groups altogether by celebrating and emphasizing their active dehumanization. He was very critical that all moral preoccupations of the caste system were restricted to higher caste men. Beyond this group, he opined, the question of moral and ethical behaviour did not apply. Instead, he broadened the moral purview by pointing to the vital necessity of

¹²⁷ Sally Haslanger, “What is a Social Practice?,” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 82, (2018): 9.

¹²⁸ Ambedkar, *AOC, BAWS*, Vol. 1, 89.

developing an ethical discourse for all human life. He called for a new renewed focus on the individual in human society, which could focus on an individual's humanness.

Ambedkar's argument was aimed at those of his contemporaries who held that caste represented an ideal system. He firmly rejected this view by conclusively demonstrating that caste actively obstructed individuals and social groups from communicating with each other. Caste, in this sense, was not only oppressive but also established a view of social life that was, quite simply, wrong.

Ambedkar was a philosopher in word and deed. As Valerian Rodrigues so eloquently put it, his philosophy always consisted of a set of terse questions which were structured into his writings.¹²⁹ Throughout his life, he produced works that would ask: "What does it mean to be a human?"¹³⁰ Indeed, Rodrigues considers questions such as these to be the overarching theme of Ambedkar's writings as a whole. I argue that it is also a worthwhile exercise to examine the degree to which they also apply to *CI* in particular.

The concept of "human" is also at the very heart of *CI*. Arguably, the presentation of caste as a "human institution" indicates that the concept itself may have been the product of human beliefs but not *humane* ones. Ambedkar's point is thus rooted in the ethics of social life and politics. He appears to be pointing out that the caste system is incompatible with contemporary notions of equality.

In *CI*, Ambedkar asserted that endogamy must be replaced with exogamy, for the former cannot be morally or ethically justified. However, he was also aware of the conceptual pitfalls of making such an argument. Simply

¹²⁹ Valerian Rodrigues, "Ambedkar as a Political Philosopher," *Economic and Political Weekly* 52, no. 15 (2017): 101-107.

¹³⁰ Rodrigues, "Ambedkar," 102.

put, Indian society would never agree to forgo endogamy for religious reasons. Ambedkar knew all too well that caste had been philosophised into a supposed divine order in Hindu religious discourse. To dismantle the caste system, he would first have to delegitimize the religious philosophy which sustained it.

That the religious aspect of caste was a central element in Ambedkar's anti-caste philosophy has been demonstrated by scholars such as Meena Dhanda and Dag-Erik Berg.¹³¹ The full implications of the arguments of Dhanda and Berg can be seen when we consider those writings of Ambedkar which appeared after *CI*. For instance, in *Annihilation of Caste* (written nearly two decades after *CI*), he argued that caste the religious basis required to be publicly challenged.¹³² In this context, Gopal Guru has observed that, according to Ambedkar, the institution of caste had been consciously made into a sacred order by its practitioners because an "ideal cannot survive independently on its own [. . .] it has to be raised to the level of sacredness".¹³³ Ambedkar found that once a social institution was declared sacred, there was very little discursive space left to critically reevaluate its ethics. To a lot of people, the caste system appeared to possess a moral value, simply because it was deemed sacred.

In *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar examined the question of why people considered caste as a moral order. He opined that religion had a key role to play on this point. He discovered that religious texts such as the *Dharmashastras* had effectively legitimized caste into a representative of a divine moral order. He wrote that caste-based practices "are merely the results of their beliefs inculcated upon their minds by the *Shastras*".¹³⁴

¹³¹ Meena Dhanda, "Philosophical Foundations of Anti-Casteism," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society. Oxford University Press*, 120, no. 1 (2020): 71-96; Berg, *Dynamics of Caste*, 48-49.

¹³² Ambedkar, *AOC*, *BAWS*, Vol. 1, 68.

¹³³ Guru, *Bhimrao Ramji*, 737-749.

¹³⁴ Ambedkar, *AOC*, *BAWS*, Vol. 1, 68.

Interestingly, the distant discursive echoes of this argument can also be found in *CI*, with its assertion that caste Hindus believe that the caste system was “consciously created by the *Shastras*”.¹³⁵ Such beliefs rendered the caste system immune from social criticism, for it was now “justified on the ground that it cannot but be good because it is [divinely] ordained by the *Shastras*”.¹³⁶ Ambedkar complained bitterly that most Hindus believed that the “*Shastras* cannot be wrong”.¹³⁷ And then, he proceeded to conceptualize his radical moral critique of this system.

To produce his critique, however, Ambedkar would have first had to place the caste system on a different discursive footing. He rightly recognized that its basic problems lay in its immunity from social criticism and set about presenting it as a social system rather than a divinely ordained “natural” order. When seen as an amalgamation of human conventions, practices and beliefs, caste appeared to be a discourse about unequal relations of power, about the forceful legitimization of unethical practices and about a system that institutionalized injustice through willful discrimination. But it was vital to perceive caste in these terms. For otherwise, an ethical critique of caste simply could not be done. One must *know* that such is the ethical perspective that must be developed if one were to be committed to creating social equality in Hindu society. At the root of this idea is an understanding of social knowledge.

Ambedkar was critical of how we acquire knowledge, and more specifically, on the source of our social understanding. He consistently emphasized that caste was based on beliefs that championed an unethical notion of social life. Instead, he asserted that if beliefs were oriented along the lines of an ethical critique, society would then move towards a more determined path of equality. However, beliefs are not always interrogated

¹³⁵ Ambedkar, *CI, BAWS*, Vol. 1, 16.

¹³⁶ Ambedkar, *CI, BAWS*, Vol. 1, 16.

¹³⁷ Ambedkar, *CI, BAWS*, Vol. 1, 16.

but rather justified through repeated practice, social conventions, and norms. In time, unethical beliefs embedded themselves into the deep structure of society itself, making it extremely difficult to recognize and perceive them as unethical. Further, it was very difficult to recognize a set of beliefs as unethical if they had already been deemed as sacred.

Ambedkar's analysis of social relations of domination and oppression is embedded in the immorality of the caste system and its practices. He emphasized that in caste, "there is segregation and isolation in birth, initiation, marriage, death and in dealing with the sacred and the strange".¹³⁸ Caste as an immoral governing principle of social relations appeared to lack the fundamental principle of a good society: the principle of humanity.

Ambedkar argued that caste promoted an amoral and anti-social environment. The very existence of caste was itself the product of a pronounced and deliberate absence of universal ethics of "compassion". In later writings, such as *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1957), he would stress on the importance of compassion in Buddhist ethics, and champion its revival in modern India. But in 1917, that was a discovery was yet to be made.

Conclusion: Towards a Philosophy of Practice

In *CI*, Ambedkar drew upon several conceptual and normative considerations to explain how the caste system promoted and indeed upheld a social life that was unethical and unequal. He rejected contemporary theories that caste may have been a "natural/divine" phenomenon in Indian society. Instead, he believed that caste was a human creation ("human institution"). In this approach, the study *of* caste entailed the study of social practices structured *by* caste.

¹³⁸ Ambedkar, *BAWS*, Vol. 7, 252.

Ambedkar presented caste as an institution that structured unethical practices into its everyday workings and referred to some of the most sophisticated anthropological and sociological concepts of the time, then in vogue at Columbia. For instance, he explained the workings of the caste system through the conceptual framework of exogamy and endogamy. He argued that endogamy was the foundation of the caste system and argued for its abolition. He opined that an endogamous society had not always been a part of India's historical past and hinted that it need not always be a part of her immediate future. Notably, he suggested that the caste system would come to a swift end if Indian society practised inter-caste marriage. In anthropological terms, this referred to replacing endogamy.

Ambedkar's analysis was not only limited to a disciplinary gaze. Rather he envisaged a broader discourse on ethics and social practices in everyday social life. His ideas were based on a conception of autonomy and the freedom of choice. Caste denied many individuals their freedom, and the denial of freedom actively prevented an egalitarian social life from ever coming into being. Caste was structured and ordered around dehumanizing social practices, which forced several caste groups to live in desolate and undignified social conditions that were bereft of ethical, social relations and compassion. This was *CI*'s core argument.

CI was not only meant for an intended readership of University professors and students in Columbia but a wider public that would debate and discuss this work and put his suggestions into practice. A distinct tone of civic activism pervades through the chapter. Ambedkar seemed to prefer that his readers act on his suggestions and practice them. It is in this sense that I argue that the young Ambedkar in 1917 was a scholar who emphasized the ethics and morality of social practice above all else. He effectively outlined a philosophy of practice.

Ambedkar continued to develop his idea of ethics and the caste system throughout his life. In fact, to understand the full implication of his ideas of ethics in *CI*, one also must focus on his later writings, speeches, and actions where he argued that only inter-caste marriage would not be enough to eradicate the caste system. He emphasized that while caste has a definite social origin, it has nevertheless been rendered immune from social critique by Hindu religious texts. From this point of view, he rejected the moral authority of religious texts and practices that glorified caste as an ideal in everyday life. In later writings, he looked to Buddhism for a more effective social critique of Hinduism. Ambedkar's arguments concerning the moral rejection of Hinduism had their roots in the Buddha's philosophy. The Buddha's insistence that one must cultivate ethical, social relations resounded deeply with Ambedkar's ideas on ethics. *CI* contained no references to Buddhism, but the full implications of its critique of the caste system were explored in later writings such as *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1957).

Ambedkar argued that "inequalities" and "injustices" in a caste-based society like India cannot be removed only by legal mechanisms or state institutions. He noted that the everyday social life of an individual was influenced by many social norms, beliefs, and practices.

CI is also significant for current Indian political theory. Current scholarship places no emphasis on the political implications of an endogamous Indian society. As Guru has noted, scholars often have privileged political institutions over the social conditions of human lives, assuming that democracy will be achieved only through fair political institutions.¹³⁹ Following Guru, I argue that such an approach lacks the conceptual apparatus necessary to scrutinise social institutions such as the

¹³⁹ Gopal Guru, "Liberal Democracy in India and the Dalit Critique," *Social Research* 78, no. 1, (2011): 99-122.

caste system and untouchability. It also ignores the fact that a largely endogamous society is one of the key reasons why instances of caste-related injustice and inequality continue to occur in India.

In conclusion, I argue that scholars of Indian political theory urgently require to examine social institutions and their practices (such as endogamy). Whereas political institutions are concerned with categories that bear directly on the explanation of political phenomena (such as political participation, the function of executives and the nature of the state), social institutions have a much broader role in affecting and even deciding an individual's and group's social life, a comprehensive aspect of a democracy. Social institutions constitute and govern our current social life.

Although Ambedkar does not refer to a political context, I am of the view that *CI* can also be seen as a political text. The ethical reading of this text shows that an unethical society cannot produce an ethical, political system. Scholars of Indian political theory can well take note of the *CI* as an important precedent.

CI was a product of a very specific context: the intellectual and institutional environs of Columbia. After graduating from Columbia, Ambedkar left the United States for India. Once in India, he fulfilled his contractual obligation to the Maharaja of Baroda by seeking employment in the Baroda state. Ambedkar was now academically trained in new ideas of state, government, economy and society and he hoped to put his education to some practical use in state administration. Unfortunately, he once-again encountered vicious and bitter caste prejudice, took leave of the state of Baroda and decided to go to Bombay instead.

At Bombay, Ambedkar took up a teaching post at Sydenham College.¹⁴⁰ He taught political economy to the undergraduate students there from 1918-1920. He also published academic reviews of Bertrand Russell's works on public philosophy. (For instance, *Mr. Russell and the Reconstruction of the Society* (1918), appeared in the *Journal of the Indian Economics*.) However, even within the rarefied atmosphere of higher education, he encountered caste prejudice, from his colleagues. This influenced his decision to raise the issues of the untouchable community. In this regard, he authored *Evidence before the Southborough Committee on Franchise* (1919) as a report on the importance of political representation for socially and economically marginalized communities in legislature.¹⁴¹

Ambedkar's *Evidence before the Southborough Committee on Franchise* (1919) was a watershed moment in his career, for it paved the way for his emergence as a public intellectual who intervened on matters relating to caste prejudice, as well as stressed upon the critical necessity of a public discourse around social ethics and human equality in India. In 1920, he began the fortnightly paper, *Mooknayak* (Leader of Voiceless), in Marathi. In the very first issue of *Mooknayak*, he described India as a "home of inequality" and argued that it was not enough for India to become politically independent of colonial rule. Rather, the people of India must also strive for the removal of social, economic and political inequalities and injustices among different caste groups.¹⁴² That same year he attended two All India Depressed Classes Conferences in Mangaon and Nagpur. In Mangaon, he opined that "The principle 'Truth Alone Prevails' is hallow

¹⁴⁰ Gail Omvedt, *Ambedkar: Towards an Enlightened India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2008), 10.

¹⁴¹ Eleanor Zelliot, *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2004), 65.

¹⁴² Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar*, 41-42.

one. For the truth to win, we must continue to agitate”.¹⁴³ The call to “agitate” was a call to action. This was where he found a powerful financial backer for his cause: Chattrapati Shahu, the Maharaja of Kolhapur. Shahu had attended both conferences and had been so impressed by him that he agreed to fund his further education in law and economics from the London School of Economics (LSE) and Gray’s Inn at London. In 1923, he submitted his PhD thesis, *The Problem of the Rupee*, to LSE.¹⁴⁴

Chattrapati Shahu did not only back Ambedkar because he thought him to be a good student. Rather, in Shahu’s view, Ambedkar could potentially become India’s most important national leader, and he was keen to support him. For his part, Ambedkar clearly viewed education and politics as part of the same intellectual project. For instance, he did not complete his PhD in order to take up a teaching position but rather continued with his commitment to the cause of the marginalized communities in India, with renewed vigor.

In 1924, back in Bombay, he founded the *Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha* (Society for the welfare of excluded groups) with a motto, *Educate, Agitate, Organise*. His objective was to mobilise the untouchable caste communities and prepare the ground for their emancipation.¹⁴⁵ While addressing the members of *Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha*, he outlined his role of leadership:

I am going to work hard with complete honesty to ensure an all-round development of the Depressed Classes [...] I would certainly not limit my intellect only to my family and my Caste. I will render them to the benefit of

¹⁴³ Narendra Jadhav, *Ambedkar Awakening India’s Social Conscience* (New Delhi: Konark Publisher, 2019), 47.

¹⁴⁴ At LSE, Ambedkar worked under the supervision of Economist Edwin Cannan who wrote the introduction of fifth edition of Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*.

¹⁴⁵ Krishnarao Narayan Kadam, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and the Significance of his Movement: A Chronology* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1991), 80-81.

entire Depressed Classes, to help them build their social movement and struggle.¹⁴⁶

In 1926, Ambedkar became a member of the Bombay legislative council and actively participated in several council debates concerning the denial of the basic necessities of life to the untouchable communities. In this regard, I outline a brief summary of the sort of problems encountered by members of the untouchable community at the time.

The untouchable communities were excluded from mainstream Indian society. They were denied fundamental human rights in their everyday life such as access to social spaces such as temples, schools, marriages, and other social gatherings. Further, their touch, shadow and sound were deemed as impure.¹⁴⁷ For instance, in the city of Poona, untouchables were not allowed to enter or roam between 3 p.m. and 9 a.m. “because before 9 a.m. and after 3 p.m. their bodies cast too long a shadow, and whenever their shadow fell upon a Brahman [high-caste Hindu] it polluted him, so that he dares not take food or water until he had bathed and washed the impurity away”.¹⁴⁸ They were prohibited from using the public road because “if some high caste man happens to cross him [Untouchable], he has to be out of the way and stand at such a distance that his shadow will not fall on the high caste man”.¹⁴⁹

In 1927, with the help of Ramachandra Babaji More, Anant Vinayak Chitre, Sambhaji Tukaram Gaikwad, Subhedar Vishram Gangaram Sawadkar, Sitaram Namdev Shivtarkar, Surendranath Govindrao Tipnis,

¹⁴⁶ Narendra Jadhav, *Ambedkar Awakening India's Social Conscience* (New Delhi: Konark Publisher, 2019), 64.

¹⁴⁷ Gopal Guru, “Experience, Space, and Justice,” in *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*, eds. Gopal Guru and Sunder Sarukkai (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018), 84-87.

¹⁴⁸ Vasant Moon, “From Dependence to Protest: The Early Growth of Education and Consciousness among ‘Untouchables’ of Western India,” in *Untouchables! Voices of the Dalit Liberation Movement*, ed. Barbara R. Joshi (London: Zed Books, 1986), 16.

¹⁴⁹ B.R. Ambedkar, “Evidence before the Southborough Committee on Franchise,” *BAWS*, Vol. 1, 256.

Gangadhar Neelkanth Saharsabudhe, Bhaskar Raghunath Kadrekar, Bhaurao Krishnaji, Pandurang Rajbhoj, Tanaji Mahadevrao Gudekar, C.N. Mohite, Bhikaji Sambhaji Gaikwad and Govind Ramji Adarekar, Ambedkar organised first civil right movements in India to access water from Chavadar water tank at Mahad, a small town in Konkan region.¹⁵⁰ The next chapter discusses the ethical implications of Ambedkar's actions at Mahad.

¹⁵⁰ For details see, Anand Teltumbde, *Mahad: The Making of the First Dalit Revolt* (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2016), 360-376.

CHAPTER 2

Caste, Inequality and B. R. Ambedkar's Universal Claim for Human Equality.¹⁵¹

“All human beings are of equal status since birth”

- B.R. Ambedkar

Introduction

The importance of human dignity, equal worth and equal status for all has been a consistent feature of international discourse since 1940. Notably, they have been universalized by Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).¹⁵² The universal declaration asserted that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”. It was essentially an attempt to “reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights for men and women and of nations large and small”. Further, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights has also emphasized the importance of human dignity in their charters.¹⁵³ Such ideas can be seen as the institutionalisation of philosophical concepts articulated in human societies ever since the European Enlightenment.

¹⁵¹ An earlier version of this chapter has been published as: Yadav, V. K., Dasgupta, S., and Kumar, B., (2020). “All Human Beings are of Equal Status Since Birth”: Caste, Inequality and B. R. Ambedkar's Universal Claim for Human Equality. *Indian Journal of Human Development*, Sage Publication, Vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 481-492. doi:10.1177/0973703020974442

¹⁵² Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948),
Source: https://www.un.org/en/udhrbook/pdf/udhr_booklet_en_web.pdf, Last Accessed: November 5, 2021.

¹⁵³ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,
Source: <https://www.ohchr.org/documents/professionalinterest/ccpr.pdf>, Last Accessed: November 5, 2021; International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights,
Source: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>, Last Accessed: November 5, 2021.

Apart from the ideas of philosophers, concepts such as equality and human dignity have been enormously influenced by social and civil rights movements in western societies; chiefly, in Europe and North America. Such movements have been very effective mechanisms in claiming equal status for those historically denied their legitimate rights. This process has been very well documented in studies such as Aldon D. Morris & Carol McClurg Mueller, Iris Marion Young, Sally Haslanger, José Medina, and Elizabeth Anderson.¹⁵⁴ However, these studies have not focused on egalitarian movements in non-western societies. This is not because non-western societies could not produce social and civil rights movements of their own. Indeed, the first known civil rights movements in the twentieth century occurred in a non-western society, in India, in 1927. This movement is popularly known as the Mahad Satyagraha.¹⁵⁵ The word “Mahad” is a reference to the location of the movement, a territory that is today known as Maharashtra.

Spearheaded by B. R. Ambedkar, the Mahad movement passed a unanimous resolution on human equality, stating that “All human beings are of equal status since birth and they are of equal status until they

¹⁵⁴ Aldon D. Morris, & Carol McClurg Mueller (eds.), *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory* (New York: Yale University Press, 1992); Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Sally Haslanger, “I—Culture and Critique,” *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, Oxford University Press, 91, no. 1, (2017): 149-173; Sally Haslanger, *Resisting reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Resistant Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Elizabeth Anderson, “Social Movements, Experiments in Living, and Moral Progress: Case Studies from Britain’s Abolition of Slavery,” *The Lindley Lecture*, University of Kansas, (2014): 1-38.

¹⁵⁵ The Mahad movement had two phases. The first phase of movement happened during 19-20 March 1927, which was named as “The Bahishkrut Conference” and the second phase occurred during 25-27 December 1927 called as “Satyagraha Conference”. In this chapter, these two conferences are collectively refereed as “Mahad movement”.

die”.¹⁵⁶ Such an insight is nothing short of extraordinary since it appeared nearly two decades before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Mahad, in essence, rejected the authority of the caste system. By doing so, it broke all ties with this dominant but unequal Indian social institution. According to Ambedkar and his fellow protestors, the caste system was an illegitimate social entity since it relied on the reading of Hindu religious scripture rather than a straightforward assessment of human beings and their inherent worth. According to this discursive schema, an individual’s identity was entirely defined by their caste rather than their personal preferences. In the caste system an individuals’ identity was subsumed to the collective identity of the caste that they happened to belong to. Caste discrimination was thus a collective stance adopted by a specific “higher” caste community. All individuals from “higher” caste communities were effectively authorized by Hindu religious scripture to discriminate against and oppress the “untouchable” caste communities.

Ambedkar rejected the authority of Hindu religious scripture. He argued that scripture not only legitimized the discrimination of the “lower” castes but also authorized the dehumanization (“socio-religious disabilities”) of the Dalits (“untouchables”).¹⁵⁷ “An untouchable was excluded from the Hindu social fold and “bound by the reproduction of the existing order, along with its category of the low and despised”.¹⁵⁸ Instead, he proposed a radical alternative- egalitarianism. During the Mahad movement, he argued that it was the collectively responsibility of members of all castes to reject discrimination and dehumanization.¹⁵⁹ He called for a “moral

¹⁵⁶ Teltumbde, *Mahad*, 349.

¹⁵⁷ “Untouchable” is a term used for those communities which have been historically considered to be outcastes in Hindu society.

¹⁵⁸ Valerian Rodrigues, “Introduction,” in *Conversations with Ambedkar: 10 Ambedkar Memorial Lectures*, ed. Valerian Rodrigues, (New Delhi: Tulika Books Publication, 2020), 11.

¹⁵⁹ Ambedkar, *EBSC, BAWS*, Vol. 1, 256

revolution”, a radical critique of the given “social situation”. He articulated a set of egalitarian demands which confronted contemporary social injustice head-on. He argued for a new basis of society, one that would not deny moral worth and dignity. Unfortunately, Ambedkar and his fellow colleagues’ insights at Mahad have been largely ignored in human rights studies.¹⁶⁰

Scholars such as Eleanor Zelliot, Christophe Jaffrelot, Anupama Rao and Anand Teltumbde have emphasized that the Mahad movement stressed the vital importance of civil rights and equal access to public space as its key objectives.¹⁶¹ Out of the many scholars who have referred to Mahad in their work, the detailed research of Teltumbde stands out for its exhaustive history of the Mahad movement. Teltumbde underscores the uniqueness of Mahad in its organisation and leadership. He demonstrates how Mahad had been inspired by Mohandas Gandhi’s strategies of protest.

Ambedkar’s actions at Mahad was motivated by a deep moral concern for the condition of Dalits. This can be seen as evidence of moral philosophy at work. However, the importance of Ambedkar’s moral philosophy at Mahad has been inadequately emphasized in current scholarship. I argue that Mahad can be seen from an interpretative thematic that is broader and beyond the conceptual scope of a mere political strategy. Instead, Mahad was an attempt at an all-encompassing “moral revolution”. Such an argument recalibrates scholarly discussions on Mahad from strategy to philosophical concerns on human equality and dignity. Critical to this

¹⁶⁰ Dag-Erik Berg, “Foregrounding Contingency in Caste-based Dominance: Ambedkar, Hegemony, and the Pariah Concept,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 44, no. 8 (2018): 7.

¹⁶¹ Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 1996); Eleanor Zelliot, *Ambedkar’s World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2004); Christophe Jaffrelot, *Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analysing and Fighting Caste* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005); Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Anand Teltumbde, *Mahad: The Making of the First Dalit Revolt* (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2016).

process of recalibration is a new understanding of what Ambedkar meant by “moral”.

Ambedkar’s knowledge of “moral” was an inherent discursive product of his lived experiences. “Moral” refers to the transformation, organisation and consolidation of personal experiences into a well-articulated collective action. In Ambedkar’s hands, “moral” was a “collective force” designed to challenge Hindu society’s norms and beliefs. In this sense, an appeal to a collective moral force challenged the current social hierarchies in Hindu society. What was lacking was a firm and dedicated commitment to social ethics. And so, Ambedkar challenged unfair hierarchies with an assertive claim for human equality as *the* essential moral principle.

At Mahad, Ambedkar’s actions were structured around two precise ethical demands: first, all human beings have equal human dignity, and second, no social institution can legitimately dominate or repress an individual or a group. This chapter explores the philosophical implications of Ambedkar’s actions in some detail. It is divided into three sections. The first emphasises the critical importance of Ambedkar’s lived experiences of humiliation and its subsequent development into a program of moral action at Mahad. The second illustrates the distinct place that Mahad occupies in attempting to inaugurate a sweeping moral revolution by accounting for the “epistemic gap” in the discourse of human dignity on the one hand and the quest for social justice on the other. The third explains the uniqueness of Ambedkar’s notion of human equality. The chapter concludes by summarizing Ambedkar’s ethics at Mahad.

Experiences of untouchability: shaping the personal into a program of collective moral action

Ambedkar had a long and dismal series of personal experiences in the decades preceding Mahad. I contend that these would go on to have a defining impact on Ambedkar’s later thought. Experiences of

untouchability had “left an indelible impression” on him.¹⁶² Our argument that his life influenced his thought owes an intellectual debt to the work of Gopal Guru.¹⁶³ Guru’s consistent emphasis on the relationship between humiliation and political action in Ambedkar’s thought has inspired this chapter’s autobiographical approach.

Ambedkar confronted untouchability, and its implied humiliation and discrimination, in childhood. His autobiographical writings recall several experiences on the subject. As a nine-year-old child, he was denied drinking water in the scorching heat of the summer of 1901 on the grounds of his caste status - an “Untouchable”. The episode left an imprint on his memory. Similar experiences occurred later during his teens and at school. Once again, Ambedkar was denied drinking water from the tap. While the children of the “touchable classes” were free to use the tap, he could not, for “unless it was opened for it by a touchable person, it was not possible for me to quench my thirst”.¹⁶⁴ The discrimination continued throughout his adult life while working as a village Patwari (Revenue official) in the Kheda district of Gujarat. He could not “touch the cans for my touch would pollute the water”. Consequently, he wrote, “I had to go without water and the days on which I had no water to drink were by no means few”.¹⁶⁵ Similarly, upon his return from Columbia University (after completing his PhD), he had no access to water in his office despite being the Military Secretary to the Maharaja of Baroda.¹⁶⁶

The above incidents should not be treated as anecdotal. Rather, they can be seen as the evidence on which our arguments concerning the relationship between experience and action rest, for they directly lead to

¹⁶² Ambedkar, *WFOV, BAWs*, Vol. 12, 670.

¹⁶³ Gopal Guru, “Rejection of Rejection: Foregrounding Self- Respect,” in ed. Gopal Guru, *Humiliation: Claims and Context* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press), 209– 225.

¹⁶⁴ Ambedkar, *WFOV, BAWs*, Vol. 12, 670-671.

¹⁶⁵ Ambedkar, *WFOV, BAWs*, Vol. 12, 689-90.

¹⁶⁶ Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar*, 34.

the eventual development of Ambedkar's idea of moral knowledge. The lived experiences of untouchability, the moral wrongs and injustice would prove to be the intellectual backbone of his moral ire at Mahad.

Ambedkar's moral theory was an exposition against injustice. He did not articulate a theory of justice at this stage of his intellectual career. This, however, does not mean that his moral theory was incomplete or inadequate. As Sally Haslanger has argued, "It is not necessary to *know what justice is*, or have a complete moral theory, to engage in critique. It may be sufficient to know that this particular practice or structure is unjust".¹⁶⁷ Moral knowledge can also be developed through participation in unjust social practices. In Haslanger's terms, a first-person moral knowledge" is possible through lived experiences alone.¹⁶⁸ Haslanger herself has drawn on the arguments of J. M. Balkin and Amartya Sen to make her points.¹⁶⁹

Similarly, Paulina Sliwa has also argued that first-hand experiences can translate into moral knowledge.¹⁷⁰ There is, in other words, a well-established discourse community of scholars whose works place Ambedkar's writings on his experiences of injustice in their proper philosophical perspective.

The Mahad movement: towards moral progress

The Mahad movement occurred within a very specific socio-political environment. One simply cannot delve into Mahad while ignoring the context in which it was forged. This must be examined in some detail.

¹⁶⁷ Haslanger, *Culture and Critique*, 166

¹⁶⁸ Haslanger, *Culture and Critique*, 167

¹⁶⁹ Jack M. Balkin, *Cultural Software: A Theory of Ideology* (New York: Yale University Press, 1998), Amartya Sen, "What do we want from a theory of justice?," *The Journal of Philosophy* 103, no. 5 (2006): 215-238.

¹⁷⁰ Paulina Sliwa, "Moral understanding as knowing right from wrong," *Ethics* 127, no. 3 (2017): 521-552.

Ambedkar was interested in putting forward a one-point agenda. He demanded that there should not subsequently be any difference between the “untouchable” and “touchable”. He was referring to a peculiar form of bodily discrimination which was then in existence. The “touchables” consisted of the high castes of Indian society. Their bodies were deemed naturally superior and ritually pure. This provided them with an extraordinary amount of power and authority over the lives and bodies of the lower castes. Under this schema, the Dalits were deemed “untouchable”. Dalit bodies were unfairly categorized as polluted, inferior and unworthy. If the “touchable” classes constructed a language of rights for themselves, they also authored a discourse of denial for the Dalits. Critically for Ambedkar, the Dalits were denied basic human rights in everyday life. He was aghast that the basis of this denial was an irrational and unethical view of the supposed purity of Dalit bodies. For instance, a Dalit’s touch, shadow and sound were deemed as impure. They were thus dehumanized based on everyday practices of untouchability.

Ambedkar himself was agitated with the presence and practice of untouchability. He wrote that untouchability led to “social humiliation, social discrimination, and social injustice”.¹⁷¹ He argued that it was even legalized, noting that it was “an offence for the Untouchables to break or evade the rules of segregation”.¹⁷² There was a political dimension to Ambedkar’s dissatisfaction and anger. In the current circumstances, the Dalits systematically excluded all forms of social and political participation. As he pointed out, the Hindu higher caste would not even have considered the Dalits “citizens” of their society.¹⁷³ This forms the backdrop of the Mahad movement.

¹⁷¹ B. R. Ambedkar, “Away From the Hindus,” in *BAWS*, Vol. 5, 415-416.

¹⁷² Ambedkar, *TIG*, *BAWS*, Vol. 5, 21.

¹⁷³ Ambedkar, *EBSC*, *BAWS*, Vol. 1, 256.

The Mahad movement occurred in a political environment where the discourses around national politics were focused on self-rule, freedom of British rule and issues of caste-based inequalities were not deemed important. Although its scope encompassed the social and political worlds of human equality, it received only marginal support from the ongoing national movement for political independence. Most nationalist leaders had an orthodox view of the caste system. It was only after 1917 that the Congress party even acknowledged the existence of caste-based issues such as untouchability. However, the party chose to remain silent on the question of caste-based social inequality and injustice. Put differently, the national demand for freedom, a fundamental element of a person's autonomy, was not extended to the question of the Dalit's freedom from the caste system and untouchability.¹⁷⁴ In this context, Gopal Guru has rightly pointed to the vital role played by leaders from *Atishudra* (Untouchable) and *Shudra* (labour caste) communities in accounting for the "epistemic gap" in the discourse of social justice at that time.¹⁷⁵

Guru's observations are particularly relevant when one considers them for the views of Mohandas Gandhi, who led the Indian anti-colonial movement. Gandhi was a moderate thinker but unaccountably rigid when it came to assessments of the caste system. In 1916, Gandhi stated, "The caste system is a perfectly natural institution" and opposed any movement against caste.¹⁷⁶ Four years later, in 1920, he continued to uphold (and indeed celebrate) the caste system. Gandhi refused to see the caste system as "a harmful institution" and instead referred to it as "national well-

¹⁷⁴ B. R. Ambedkar, "What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables," in *BAWS*, Vol. 9. (Hereafter cited as *WCG*).

¹⁷⁵ Gopal Guru, "Constitutional Justice: Political and Cultural," in *Politics and Ethics of Indian Constitution*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 233-235.

¹⁷⁶ M. K. Gandhi, "The Hindu Caste System," in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 13, (New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, [1916] 1964), 301.

being”.¹⁷⁷ Note that Gandhi’s views on caste were based on his high caste status, for, unlike Ambedkar, he had no personal experience of untouchability. He could not, therefore, know - what it meant to be an “untouchable”.

In sharp contrast to Gandhi, Ambedkar was putting forward the matter of caste-based inequality and injustices as *the* central discourse in Indian society. In this way, he took the radical step of calling for a break in the mechanism of historical injustices committed against the Dalits and thereby laid the foundation for the principle of human equality.

On March 20th, 1927, Ambedkar led thousands of Dalits to exercise their “civil rights” at the Chavadar public water tank in Mahad. This tank was accessible to all humans and cattle but not to the Dalits. Denying water was a form of humiliation, designed to control and fix Dalit’s social space. To add insult to injury, the Dalits were denied access to water and forced to live far away from the tank (due to alleged ritual pollution).

At Mahad, Ambedkar envisaged the beginning of a new movement for human equality for the Dalits. “We are not going to Chavadar [. . .] merely drink its water,” he declared triumphantly, “we are going to [. . .] assert that we too are human beings like others. It must be clear that this meeting has been called to set up the norm of equality”.¹⁷⁸ He then symbolically drank the water from the tank to emphasise his point. I argue that Ambedkar’s actions amounted to an ethical assertion, designed to provoke and challenge the then current ideas regarding the Dalits and their “moral worth”. Guru has noted that Ambedkar’s actions had philosophical implications. In his words, Ambedkar was calling for:

¹⁷⁷ M. K. Gandhi, “Hindu-Mohammedan Unity,” in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 17, (New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, [1920], 1965), 44.

¹⁷⁸ Arjun Dangle, “Dr Ambedkar’s Speech at Mahad,” in *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*, ed. Arjun Dangle (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1992), 225.

[...] the emergence of an ethically/morally stable social order; a social order that would be permeated by a collective moral good [...]. For him, grasping the truth through action is more important than approaching it through a theoretical operation.¹⁷⁹

Following Guru, I argue that Ambedkar's actions had two critical implications. First, his claim that "we too are human beings" emphasized a critical "truth": that untouchables are human beings but have never had any experience of it because that right has been systematically denied to them. Ambedkar's actions subverted the constructed social relations of "truth" and "power" in Indian society. He used water as a symbol of "moral truth", and by touching it, he challenged the social barriers that had been imposed by an oppressive caste system.

Secondly, Ambedkar's emphasis on equality was not to explain what exactly equality is, *per se*. Instead, he focused on "establishing equality by abolishing untouchability".¹⁸⁰ His approach was that one cannot establish equality without abolishing current social "inequalities". In a social system where the Dalits were placed in an unequal social position and systematically excluded from being recognized as equal members of society and legitimate claimants of an equal social life, Ambedkar put forward his case for recognizing them as equals at Mahad.

I argue that Ambedkar's struggle for equality effectively amounts to an organic interpretation of human society. The Mahad movement was not about the mere denial of water but against the historical domination of higher castes and how their unethical practices had been conveniently cloaked under the normative umbrella of socio-religious norms and rules. As the leader of the movement, Ambedkar took it upon himself to critique

¹⁷⁹ Guru, *Ethics in Ambedkar*, 98.

¹⁸⁰ Teltumbde, *Mahad*, 213.

social practices by making the unethical practices of the caste system all too visible.

However, Ambedkar did not limit the scope of his actions at Mahad to only a blistering social critique. As he argued, “constitutional provisions are not adequate to remove the sources of prejudices; it will remove untouchability in the outer world, but not from inside the house”.¹⁸¹ His argument was more concerned with the social and cultural conditions in which caste discrimination had been normalized and presented as an acceptable standard of morality in society. The Mahad movement was fundamentally about highlighting “inequalities” and “injustices” which forbid equal human recognition and interaction, dignity and self-respect, and human interpersonal associations.

Ambedkar called for the immediate erasure of those social and religious norms which stated that the untouchables had been “born impure”.¹⁸² And this was where the question of equal access to water became important. “Why should they [the upper caste Hindus] prohibit only us [untouchables] from taking the water?” he enquired, and then continued:

[...] Hindus, according to their scriptures, have four *varnas* [social orders] and, according to their customs, five Varnas-Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra and Atisudra. The varna order depicts the first rule in the set of the rules Hinduism prescribes. The second rule of this religion is that these varnas are unequal. One is lesser than the other in descending order. These rules have not only established the hierarchical status of each varna, but they have also fixed the boundaries of each varna to distinguish them.¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ Narendra Jadhav (ed.), “B. R. Ambedkar Presidential Speech, Mahad Satyagraha Conference, 25–27 December 1927,” in *Ambedkar Speaks: Political Speeches*, Vol. III, (Mumbai: Konark Publishers, 2013), 97.

¹⁸² Teltumbde, *Mahad*, 345.

¹⁸³ Teltumbde, *Mahad*, 206.

Ambedkar primarily perceived the caste system in terms of a case where everyday conduct had become religiously inscribed.¹⁸⁴ For example, higher caste Hindus did not recognize the “untouchables” as equals because they claimed that the latter had already been “established as inferior” in early Indian Hindu scriptures such as the *Dharmashastra*.¹⁸⁵

The *Dharmashastras* were early Indian texts on jurisprudence that sanctioned rules, penalties and social codes which were denied an equal “moral status” to the lower castes and to all women. The caste system was effectively formalized in *Dharmashastric* literature. Unsurprisingly the *Dharmashastras* were singled out for criticism in Ambedkar’s work. At Mahad, he even burned the most well-known and authoritative *Dharmashastra* of all - the *Manava Dharmashastra*. He argued that the caste system had been institutionalized, rationalized and legitimated by the *Manava Dharmashastra*. It had even become a part of the social psyche of contemporary Indian society, where caste was considered to be an unquestionable divine creation, whereas it was in fact, a manufactured system that thrived on discrimination and hierarchy.¹⁸⁶

For Ambedkar, burning the *Manava Dharmashastra* was essential because it sent out a message- following Mahad, the Dalits ought no longer accept the validity of any text that contained caste embedded “morals” and knowledge.¹⁸⁷ The Dalits were now in a position to reject their permanent social status as “untouchables”. He was emphatic that untouchability was not the result of divine law in operation but rather a product of an imposed Hindu social order governed by rituals rather than any rational backing. From this view, there was no reasonable ground on which the caste system could be followed.

¹⁸⁴ Dhanda, *Philosophical Foundation*, 74.

¹⁸⁵ Teltumbde, Mahad, 206.

¹⁸⁶ Ambedkar, *POH, BAWs*, Vol. 03, 7-8.

¹⁸⁷ B. R. Ambedkar, *Mahad Satyagraha*, in *BAWS*, Vol. 17, part 1, 27.

Ambedkar's interventions at Mahad were geared towards creating a set of conditions by which his moral philosophy could then be practised. Critical to this concern was the difficult task of converting the intellectual gains from a theoretical critique of the caste system into the viable discursive backdrop from which all members of society could then reasonably hope to aspire to egalitarianism. He trained his philosophical gaze towards the future.

Ambedkar highlighted the various ways in which the caste system excluded the lower castes from knowledge, power, wealth, and social life. He aimed to create an epistemic space where a historically wronged social group could now claim equality. Beneath the actions lay a deep sense of hope – for a just and equal society, the eradication of structural discrimination and the creation of an equal citizen. His actions at Mahad brought the lived experience of the Dalits into the full light of history. But he was not acting alone. His resistance was a part of a large collective movement. In that sense, it was a *collective* resistance. Ultimately, the Mahad movement set a strong precedent for how a movement for social equality could be actualized.

On human equality

Ambedkar's priority lay in a deep concern with the causes of human inequality. He focused particularly on Indian society. According to him, the main cause of inequality was the caste system. He argued that the caste system must be abolished. But he wasn't just making an argument in Mahad. He was setting out a road map for achieving social equality, a plan that would find its fullest expression in Article 17 of the Constitution of India. As Chairman of the Constituent Assembly, he played a critical role in ensuring that the Constitution abolished untouchability.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that Ambedkar's concern with removing inequality only extended to legal safeguards. He argued that equality could only be achieved when the public understood how immoral the practice of untouchability really was. He was foregrounding human equality in moral philosophy. He hoped to bring about a moral revolution in social ethics and belief and lay the epistemic foundations on which a new discourse on human equality could be constructed.

Ambedkar's idea of a moral revolution was based on a critique of the concept of fixed duty in Hindu society. The caste system delineated the duties of all members of Hindu society. Under this schema, the Dalits were also delegated specific duties. However, their duties were very different from all others. They alone would have to perform duties which were demeaning and dehumanizing in their scope, purpose, and intent. It was in this context that Ambedkar would argue for a new language of rights for the Dalits. This language was foregrounded in human equality and expressed in the language of universal human rights.

For Ambedkar, it was vital to reassess the worth and value of a human being in contemporary India. He rejected the caste system's view that an individual's circumstances at birth determined one's moral worth for life.¹⁸⁸ Instead, he asserted that all human beings were of equal moral worth from birth and would be until they die. All individuals, he argued, "possess in degree and kind, fundamental characteristics that are common to humanity".¹⁸⁹ Once seen from this perspective, all human beings would henceforth be considered equal, and the philosophical foundations for an egalitarian society could then be established.

Ambedkar's methods – his focus on social problems of Dalits and the discriminatory nature of the caste system- would find a conceptual

¹⁸⁸ Rodrigues, *Ambedkar as Political Philosopher*, 103.

¹⁸⁹ Ambedkar, *AOC, BAWS*, Vol. 1, 97.

reflection in the works of political philosophers today, particularly of Iris Marion Young. According to Young, to build an egalitarian society, we must first identify and address the injustices faced by oppressed social groups. Young suggests that this can be done by closely studying the specific social situations, institutions and practices.¹⁹⁰ In the same vein, Amartya Sen has also suggested that the political theorists should focus on “advance justice” by “removing existing injustices” rather than “aiming only at the characterization of perfectly just societies”.¹⁹¹ This does not mean that Sen and Ambedkar have made the same argument.¹⁹² At the heart of Sen’s ideas is a very firm belief that individuals only need to be empowered to realize their full potential. Ambedkar, on the other hand, presents a very different view. He argues that if social systems are aggressively discriminatory and institutionally hostile towards any form of social mobility, no empowerment strategies will allow the individual to be equal. It is not only the individual who required to be empowered. Rather it was the caste system that needed to be abolished and replaced with an egalitarian social institution which focused on equal social recognition, equal access to social space and inter-personal associations for all members of society.

Ambedkar was not an institutional philosopher. By this, I mean that he was not based at any university or even a site of higher education. From this point of view, one must approach the difficult question of the philosophical implication of his actions at Mahad. He was agitating for a change, an agitation that was rooted in his moral philosophy of ethics and social change.

¹⁹⁰ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 3.

¹⁹¹ Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2009), ix.

¹⁹² Valerian Rodrigues, “Justice as the lens: Interrogating Rawls through Sen and Ambedkar,” *Indian Journal of Human Development* 5, no. 1, (2011): 153–174.

Conclusion

Evidence of Ambedkar's moral philosophy can be found in his actions at Mahad. He cared deeply about securing equal moral rights for Dalits and made his arguments by throwing light on the unjust and unethical nature of the caste system, which had effectively dehumanised Dalits. He was not only concerned with Dalits but all people who had been discriminated against in human societies. His actions at Mahad were directed towards the swift and immediate removal of all those practices which had created "inhumane conditions" for any given individual, group, or community. By "inhumane condition", he referred to those social processes and behaviours which had led to the gradual dehumanization of the untouchable community. His argument was an ethical critique of the violent power of privilege.

Ambedkar argued that the caste system had effectively institutionalized discrimination and dehumanized the Dalits by condemning them to untouchability. He called for a moral programme by which a new social system could be constructed- one that would not discriminate against anyone but rather actively promote equality. Such a social system would be held together by a society that was committed to ethics and egalitarian practices. Everyone in would then be in a social position to recognize their own intrinsic human identity. In this sense, his actions at Mahad have implications for the question of what it means to human. He asserted that ethics was critical to the making of a human. The knowledge of what it means to be human was hence inherently moral, an idea that I refer to this here as "moral knowledge".

In the current scholarship, scholars have largely ignored the role of Ambedkar's moral knowledge. But, a focus on moral knowledge points to a larger philosophical context: one where an ethical understanding of human life is epistemically indispensable to his political thought. He

developed his ideas from lived experiences of humiliation and discrimination. This also shows the critical relationship between memory, thought and action in his moral philosophy.

Ambedkar's idea of ethics is foregrounded in a belief in the vital importance of collective social action. For him, living a moral life is not only about what one thinks and feels about injustices but what one does to remove such injustices. Ethics has a social purpose. It is a powerful force by which one can challenge and even dismantle an unjust social structure. It was from this philosophical standpoint that he formulated the ethics of everyday life.

At the core of Ambedkar's philosophy of ethics was a rejection of all Hindu social practices associated with the caste system. His call for moral revolutions did not end with Mahad. Instead, he continued to develop his thought. Mahad was but the first of many moral revolutions to come. This does not however mean that Ambedkar was universally applauded for his actions at Mahad. Rather, he was heavily criticized in the newspapers of the time. In response, he launched another newspaper, the Marathi *Bahishkrut Bharat* (India of the Outcaste) in 1927. The newspaper was to undergo two important changes of names through its print run. For instance, in 1929, it was renamed *Janata* (The People); and later, in 1956, it went by *Prabudhha Bharata* (Enlighten India). The question of what forms of discrimination the oppressed classes had to endure thus became as important an area of enquiry in his writings as the question of what sort of an action they required in order to secure their equality.

Post-Mahad, from 1928-38, Ambedkar continued to emphasize the necessity of an ethical and democratic society, and stressed that more caste Hindus must assume the responsibility of removing caste-based oppression in Indian society. He opined that most caste Hindus had not

assumed such responsibilities (with the notable exceptions of Mahadev Govind Ranade and Gopal Ganesh Agarkar).¹⁹³

After 1928, Ambedkar's ethics was concerned with the ethics of the public sphere. His thought was now expressed and developed in civic protests and public speeches rather than academic articles, journals treatises or even the classroom. He was concerned especially with the moral responsibilities of those caste Hindus who were in a position of political power, authority, and privilege. In 1936, eight years after Mahad, he suggested that one consider the possibility of converting into a religion that placed the "moral worth" of a human being at its center and promoted human equality. He actively debated with the prominent Indian political leaders of the day on these matters, and none more so than M. K. Gandhi.

As the de-facto leader of the Indian National Congress, Mohandas Gandhi would have been empowered to successfully campaign against caste system based oppression. Although Gandhi did express some strong views against untouchability and the importance of equality, Ambedkar strongly felt that these were half-hearted and insincere. In 1931, he publicly confronted Gandhi by arguing that the latter's politics was duplicitous- "Had it been sincere", Ambedkar opined, "it would have surely made the removal of untouchability a condition [...] for becoming a member of the Congress".¹⁹⁴ The Congress may have been the single largest political party in India but "it cared more for strength than for principles".¹⁹⁵

Ambedkar did not agree with contemporary Gandhian discourse. In 1932, Gandhi rejected the proposition that separate electorates can be allotted to the untouchables; and fell out with Ambedkar. Although the matter was never settled satisfactorily, the two men publicly agreed to settle their

¹⁹³ Narendra Jadhav, *Ambedkar Awakening India's Social Conscience* (New Delhi: Konark Publisher, 2019), 115.

¹⁹⁴ Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar*, 166.

¹⁹⁵ Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar*, 166.

differences in the Poona pact. Subsequently, Gandhi decided on a new course of action by agreeing to address the question of caste discrimination and untouchability in Indian society. In 1933, Gandhi even founded a weekly newspaper, the *Harijan* (People of God) in which he aimed to change the attitude of caste Hindus through his writings. Ambedkar found the term Harijan to be patronising. He also believed that Gandhi was being politically opportunistic. Take for instance, Ambedkar's views on Gandhi's policy towards Temple entry for all:

Mr Gandhi began [his political career] as an opponent of Temple entry [for untouchables]. When the Untouchables put forth a demand for the political rights, he changes his position and becomes supporter of Temple entry. When Hindus threaten to defeat the Congress in the election, it pursues the matter to a conclusion, Mr Gandhi, in order to preserve political power in the hands of Congress, gives up Temple entry. Is this sincerity? Does this show conviction? Was the 'agony of soul' which Mr Gandhi spoke of more than a phrase?¹⁹⁶

By 1935, Ambedkar had given up on the hope that caste Hindus would ever assume moral responsibility of the necessary abolition of the caste system. This lead him to famously declare in the Yeola conference, "I had the misfortune of being born with the stigma of an Untouchable. However, it is not my fault; but I will not die a Hindu, for this is in my power".¹⁹⁷ His statement created a stir and went to create confusion and division amongst his followers. So, in a few months, he explained his views to his audience and followers in a public speech titled, *Mukti Kon Pathe* (What Path to Emancipation, 1936).

Mukti Kon Pathe was delivered at the Bombay Presidency Mahar Conference. Though his speech was primarily about the questions of

¹⁹⁶ B. R. Ambedkar, "What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables," in *BAWS*, Vol. 9, 125.

¹⁹⁷ Eleanor Zelliot, *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2004), 147.

religious conversion; he also made important argument on the precise moral responsibility of a political leader. According to him, political leaders were meant to be ethical and not hanker after populism. “I consider him a leader who, without fear or favour, tells the people what is good and what is bad for them”, Ambedkar asserted.¹⁹⁸ In this context, he also clarified his ideas concerning Hinduism and ethical behavior in Indian society.

In Ambedkar’s view, Hinduism could not promote the cause of an egalitarian and rational society. That goal could only be achieved if one were to seriously consider the possibility of converting to another religion. The religion that he believed was best suited for the purpose was Buddhism. Ambedkar was aware that his ideas would generate more heat than light. But nevertheless, he persevered, for this is what he believed that ethical leaders must do: “It is my duty [as a leader] to tell you what is good for you”, he told his audience, “even if you don’t like it”.¹⁹⁹ He was however not of the opinion that his audience must decide on the question themselves and not feel compelled to take any decision just because he was telling them that it was an appropriate course of action. “You should not, however, be led away by emotion”, he informed his listeners, “only because I say so”.²⁰⁰ To make the point clearer, he added, “You should consent only if it appeals to your reason”.²⁰¹ He also traced an intellectual genealogy of his ideas concerning the consent of the individual to Buddhist thought. This can be seen in the conclusion of his speech wherein he quoted the Buddha, *atta dippo bhava*, “be your own guide, take refuge in your own reason” and “Be truthful. Always take refuge in the

¹⁹⁸ B. R. Ambedkar, “What Way Emancipation?,” in *BAWS*, Vol. 17, part 3, 146. (Hereafter cited as *WWE*).

¹⁹⁹ Ambedkar, *WWE*, *BAWS*, Vol. 17, part 3, 146.

²⁰⁰ Ambedkar, *WWE*, *BAWS*, Vol. 17, part 3, 146.

²⁰¹ Ambedkar, *WW*, *BAWS*, Vol. 17, part 3, 146.

truth and do not surrender to anybody”.²⁰² In the same year, he also published *The Annihilation of Caste* (1936), a broad-ranging ethical critique of Hindu society and its leadership. At its core, it was a powerful argument for the cultivation of rational thinking and ethical social life in Hindu society.

Ambedkar was convinced that an ethical society could not come about without ethical leaders. On January 29, 1939, he delivered a speech on the subject in *Federation Versus Freedom* at the annual function of the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics Poona, and opined that Indian political leadership currently faced a crisis of moral responsibility. He made his argument by comparing the leadership styles and goals of Mahadev Govind Ranade and Gandhi:

[....] leadership [in India] has undergone a profound change. In the age of Ranade, the leaders struggled to modernize India. In the age of Gandhi the leaders are making her a living specimen of antiquity.²⁰³

Ambedkar further argued that the age of Ranade was “more honest” and “more enlightened” for he practiced what he preached.²⁰⁴ In 1943, he would once again revisit this argument in his speech *Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah*. Here, he would highlight the importance of ethical leadership in Indian society by coining a new conceptual category: public conscience. The next chapter provides a detailed discussion on this subject.

²⁰² Ambedkar, *WWE, BAWS*, vol. 17, part 3, 147.

²⁰³ B. R. Ambedkar, “Federation Versus Freedom,” in *BAWS*, Vol. 1, 352. (Hereafter cited as *FVF*)

²⁰⁴ Ambedkar, *FVF, BAWS*, Vol. 1, 352.

CHAPTER 3

B. R. Ambedkar on the Practice of Public Conscience: A Critical Reappraisal²⁰⁵

Introduction

“[E]very act of independent thinking puts some portion of an apparently stable world in peril”.²⁰⁶ B. R. Ambedkar

This chapter discusses the importance of “public conscience” in B. R. Ambedkar’s political thought. Ambedkar consistently defended public conscience as a democratic value in his writings and speeches. Public conscience refers to responsibility, justice and deliberation of what constitutes the social good. This chapter interrogates his ideas through a detailed textual and ethical reading of his seminal speeches, texts and correspondence. Particularly relevant is Ambedkar’s unequivocal belief that public conscience would bring about a moral transformation in Indian society through a collective ethical stance against all forms of social oppression. This chapter will conclude that Ambedkar conceptualized public conscience as a method by which a democratic and ethical Indian society could come about and flourish.

In 1943, B. R. Ambedkar gave a speech, *Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah*, to a large but hushed audience in Pune. *Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah* (henceforth, *RGJ*) is today considered a seminal work on democracy and political leadership. At its core, it examined the importance (and perceived absence) of public conscience in nationalist thought and practice. The broader philosophical significance of *RGJ* has been largely ignored. For instance, in *Ambedkar as Political Philosopher*, Valerian Rodrigues’s

²⁰⁵ A version of this chapter has been published as: Yadav, V. K., Dasgupta, S., and Kumar, B., (2022). “B. R. Ambedkar on the Practice of Public Conscience: A Critical Reappraisal.” *Journal of Human Values*, Sage Publication, Vol. 28, no. 3, pp.1-9.

²⁰⁶ Ambedkar, *AOC, BAWS*, Vol. 1, 95.

analysis of the central concepts of Ambedkar political thought did not discuss the concept of public conscience.²⁰⁷ In *Ambedkar's Preamble: A Secret History of Indian Constitution*, Aakash Singh Rathore briefly discussed this term. According to Rathore, the concept of public conscience was conditioned upon “fellow feeling purely at the social level”.²⁰⁸ I argue that this interpretation restricts the conceptual scope of “public conscience”. As the chapter will show, Ambedkar consistently stressed the importance of public conscience in relation to justice, moral responsibility, and the social good; while also investing the term with a conceptual vocabulary.²⁰⁹ According to him, public conscience referred to a courageous rejection of oppressive norms in everyday social and political life.

Ambedkar had a very definite view of the individual in Indian society. According to him, an individual became vulnerable to injustice and humiliation on becoming a member of a caste-based group. Caste was effectively a system that was structured around the idea of individual participation in discriminatory social practices. Since caste was allocated to an individual at birth, one had no choice in the matter. Individuals of the lowest caste category, known as untouchables, were expected to endure a lifetime of injustice, tyranny and oppression.²¹⁰ In this context, he strongly felt that the only way forward was to reject the caste system in its entirety and take collective responsibility against social injustice.

Ambedkar's argument regarding collective social action can also be found in contemporary philosophical discourse (such as in the philosopher Iris Marion Young). In “Responsibility for Justice”, Young argues that

²⁰⁷ Rodrigues, *Ambedkar as a Political Philosopher*.

²⁰⁸ Aakash Singh Rathore, *Ambedkar's Preamble: A Secret History of the Constitution of India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2020), 109-110.

²⁰⁹ Ambedkar used this term interchangeably with the term “social” and “moral conscience”.

²¹⁰ Ambedkar, *TIG, BAWs*, Vol. 5, 23.

injustice and social oppression are ultimately the products of a structural social system. They can only be meaningfully addressed if society were to take collective responsibility for eliminating such practices.²¹¹ Following Young, our chapter outlines how Ambedkar consistently conceptualized public conscience in terms of collective social responsibility in various works. Through his long career as a public intellectual, Ambedkar always engaged with (and persuaded) his political opponents to prioritize public conscience. In the process, he challenged his opponents to think critically about their political responsibilities and reflect on their obligations to the public.

For Ambedkar, the rule of law could only be effective if upheld in everyday social life. This is what “public conscience” meant. It was a “conscience which becomes agitated at every wrong, no matter who is the sufferer, and it means that everybody, whether he suffers that particular wrong or not, is prepared to join him to get him relieved”.²¹²

Ambedkar’s phrases, “agitated at every wrong” and “no matter who is the sufferer”, form the core of his ideas concerning public conscience. All members of society, he opined, were morally obligated to be egalitarian. However, he understood only too well that such ideas would not have resonated with contemporary Indian social attitudes and practices. As he argued, Indian society suffered from a discriminatory and divisive caste conscience. His stress on the absolute necessity of public conscience for establishing humanity was apparent on several occasions.

Unfortunately, there has been a distinct lack of scholarly attention on Ambedkar’s ideas concerning public conscience. This has had consequences for the reception of his philosophy and its potential

²¹¹ Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

²¹² Christophe Jaffrelot and Narender Kumar, *Dr Ambedkar and Democracy: An Anthology* (New Delhi: Oxford University, 2018), 228.

significance for protecting any individual and group from the tyranny of social oppression in everyday life. He worried that India was currently an undemocratic society and may remain so even after securing political independence. He frequently reflected on which ideal principles and institutions independent India ought to value and establish. He was concerned with two main questions: what should be the idea of India; and, how best to bring about democratic principles and institutions, given that society is effectively regulated (if not structured) by an inherently undemocratic social system? He asserted that these questions could only be answered adequately if one were to have a firm commitment to the public conscience. Only then could one learn to accept the reality of social oppression and instead build a responsible political system. I argue that Ambedkar emphasized the importance of a responsible political system and the critical need for ethical leadership. An ethical leader would have an important role in successfully appealing to the public conscience of the population so that immoral and unjust social customs could then be soundly rejected and democratic values upheld. In this sense, public conscience was a democratic value.

This chapter is divided into three sections; first, Ambedkar's conceptualization of public conscience; second, his moral critique of contemporary nationalist thought; and third, his ideas concerning moral courage. The chapter concludes by arguing that his notion of public conscience was essentially concerned with the moral progress of Indian society.

Public conscience as a critical response to the tyranny of caste conscience

What constitutes enlightened and ethical society? Ambedkar opined that institutional mechanisms alone were not enough for the task at hand. Instead, he believed that ethical societies come about through the practice

of public conscience. He was emphatic that laws and institutions alone could not make social oppression and injustice disappear. He argued that in Hindu society did not possess any public conscience. Further, the caste system prevented a collective ethical society from coming into being. As he wrote in *Annihilation of Caste* (1936):

The effect of caste on the ethics of the Hindus is simply deplorable. Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible. A Hindu's public is his caste. His responsibility is only to his caste [...]. Virtue has become caste-ridden, and morality has become caste-bound.²¹³

According to him, the caste ethic had such a devastating impact on the social ethics of India that it had almost entirely wiped out any form of public conscience against injustices and discrimination and instead structured and enabled a society which was:

[...] engaged in defending every wrong for the simple reason that they lived on them. They defended Untouchability which condemned millions to the lot of the helot. They defended caste, they defended female child marriage, and they defended enforced widowhood—the two great props of the caste system. They defended the burning of widows [sati] and defended the social system of graded inequality.²¹⁴

“Can such a society hope to survive?” Ambedkar asked his audience in *RGJ* speech.²¹⁵ A similar concern, he made in *Hindus and Their Want of Public Conscience* (n. d.). He argued that caste conscience did not merely bring about a wide range of “indignities” to the untouchables but also resulted in “gross instances of man’s inhumanity to man”.²¹⁶ In *Hindus and Their Want of Social Conscience* (n. d.), he argued that in the absence

²¹³ Ambedkar, *AOC*, *BAWS*, Vol. 1, 56.

²¹⁴ Ambedkar, *RGJ*, *BAWS*, Vol. 1, 221.

²¹⁵ Ambedkar, *RGJ*, *BAWS*, Vol. 1, 221.

²¹⁶ B. R. Ambedkar, “Hindus and Their Want of Public Conscience,” in *BAWS*, Vol. 5, 89

of public conscience, caste Hindus felt “no such thing as righteous indignation against the inequities and injustices from which the untouchable has been suffering”, and the differences between right and wrong had ceased to exist.²¹⁷ Despairingly, he wrote that caste Hindus saw, “no wrong in these inequities and injustices and refuses to budge” and added that such a lack of public conscience “is a great obstacle in the path of the removal of untouchability”.²¹⁸ For Ambedkar, caste morality actively opposed rational thinking and ethical concern, equality and dignity of all human beings. It willfully and deliberately destroyed any possibility of a collective society concerned with the liberation of all people. This system “demoralized” Hindu society, for it actively denied a “sense of moral obligation” towards other social groups.²¹⁹ Ambedkar had substantiated this point in *On Village Panchayats Bill*, arguing that the main reason why Indian society appeared to lack “proper notions of right, of duty, of equity and good conscience” was that the conscience of people was firmly “hidebound by Caste [conscience]” and “prejudices”.²²⁰ According to him, the absence of public conscience was a barrier to India becoming an ethical society. He argued that:

[...] rights are protected not by law but by the social and moral conscience of society. If *social conscience* is such that it is prepared to recognize the rights which law chooses to enact, rights will be safe and secure. But if the fundamental rights are opposed by the community, no Law, no Parliament, no Judiciary can guarantee them in the real sense of the world.²²¹

Ambedkar opined that it would be wrong to assume that rights are automatically respected and upheld by society once they are enacted into

²¹⁷ B. R. Ambedkar, “Hindus and Their Want of Social Conscience,” in *BAWS*, Vol. 5, 99 (hereafter, *HSC*)

²¹⁸ Ambedkar, *HSC*, *BAWS*, Vol. 5, 99

²¹⁹ Ambedkar, *HSC*, *BAWS*, Vol. 5, 99

²²⁰ B. R. Ambedkar, “On Village Panchayats Bill,” in *BAWS*, Vol. 2, 109. (hereafter, *VPB*)

²²¹ Ambedkar, *RGJ*, *BAWS*, Vol. 1, 222.

law. He argued that if a society's everyday ethics is based on unjust social order, even a democratic political system cannot secure the fundamental rights of either an individual or a minority group.

Ambedkar was making a case for a society that had made caste into the bearer of its consciousness. A conscience that was structured and framed by caste, however, did not always bode well for society. For instance, it led to a society which “flouts equality of status and is dominated by notions of gradations” in social life.²²² The argument could not be more apparent: the caste system structured inequality into society by making it the basis of all social organizations and effectively legitimized it. Such legitimization of graded inequality in everyday social life had justified a segregated social life. The prevalence of caste-based segregation in social relations prevented the coming of an all-encompassing social consciousness- a public conscience.

Caste conscience further contributed to an oppressive social atmosphere. In this sense, caste conscience is epistemically significant, for it affected how individuals thought of themselves and their (constructed) social being. An example of this is how caste conscience seemed to approve of ideas of enslavement when it came to the social lives of the lower castes. In this schema, lower-caste individuals were even led to believe that they must accept their enslavement as moral. He consistently argued that a conscious and rational individual, independent from socio-religious customs and norms, would never accept the enslavement of any group of individuals as ethical and called for all Hindus to reject the caste system in its entirety.

The argument was not restricted to the Indian context but internationalist in its scope. In *RGJ*, he also highlighted the social and moral limitations of

²²² Ambedkar, *VPB, BAWS*, Vol. 2, 109.

the United States of America and France constitutions.²²³ The American and French constitutions may have provided fundamental rights to its citizens but had spectacularly failed in ensuring the effectiveness of those rights in everyday life by erroneously assuming that rights are automatically respected and upheld by society on being enacted as law. According to him, only a society that believed in social equality would uphold fundamental rights. “Democracy” in other words “was not a form of government,” but “a form of society”.²²⁴ As he asserted,

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.²²⁵

Ambedkar now put a philosophical question to his audience in *RGJ*: who determines the rights of an individual? No individual could merely be granted rights (even if they are fundamental rights) without the explicit collective consent of society. However, this line of thinking was not without its problems. For instance, an insurmountable barrier against fundamental rights would come up if the clear majority of society resolved to deny them to specific individuals and groups. As he argued, the law could punish a single individual but not “a whole body of people who are determined to defy it”.²²⁶

In *RGJ*, Ambedkar considered the question of legal recourse to the problem of social oppression and found the law wanting. He then took another discursive route by asking his audience to consider the roots of social oppression itself. He argued that social oppression is the direct product of discriminatory majoritarian ideas against specific minority groups.

²²³ Ambedkar, *RGJ, BAWs*, Vol. 1, 222.

²²⁴ Ambedkar, *RGJ, BAWs*, Vol. 1, 222.

²²⁵ Ambedkar, *RGJ, BAWs*, Vol. 1, 222.

²²⁶ Ambedkar, *RGJ, BAWs*, Vol. 1, 222.

Ambedkar opined that India's high-caste political leaders, demanded freedom from colonial rule but ignored the question of the social oppression against the minorities. Ever since his first political essay, *Evidence before the Southborough Committee on Franchise* (1919), he had distinguished social oppression from political tyranny by coining a new concept: social tyranny.²²⁷ He defined social tyranny as a set of circumstances in which the dignity and freedom of individuals and minority groups such as the untouchables were threatened by the caste system.²²⁸ The conclusion was clear: for one's political thinking to be genuinely inclusive; one must confront oppression in society. As he opined in *RGJ*:

Most people do not realize that society can practise tyranny and oppression against an individual to a far greater degree than a Government can. The means and scope that are open to society for oppression are more extensive than those that are open to Government, also they are far more effective. What punishment in the penal code is comparable in its magnitude and its severity to excommunication?²²⁹

By “ex-communication”, Ambedkar was referring to the social segregation, isolation or boycott of an individual and social group from mainstream social life. He opined that social tyranny was even more oppressive than political oppression. Interestingly, this idea has much in common with the views of John Stuart Mill. Mill argued that:

Society can and does execute its own mandates: and if it issues wrong mandates instead of right, or any mandates at all in things with which it ought not to meddle, it practises a social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression, since, though not usually upheld by such extreme penalties,

²²⁷ Ambedkar, *EBSC, BAWs*, Vol. 1, 243-278.

²²⁸ Ambedkar, *EBSC, BAWs*, Vol. 1, 243-278.

²²⁹ Ambedkar, *RGJ, BAWs*, Vol. 1, 217.

it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the soul itself.²³⁰

Like Mill, Ambedkar considered social tyranny to be by far the most significant threat against individuals and minorities. As he argued, social customs and norms can be more oppressive than law because the former is “enforced” by the majority. While describing the effect of the *Manava Dharmashastra* on Indian social life, in *Their Wishes Are Laws Unto Us* (n. d.), Ambedkar argued that the compelling force of an organized people is far greater [oppressive] than the persuasive force of the state.²³¹

Custom is no small a thing as compared to Law. The state indeed enforces law through its police power; custom, unless it is valid, it is not. But in practice, this difference is of no consequence. Custom is enforced by people far more effectively than law is by the state. This is because the compelling force of an organised people is far greater than the persuasive force of the state.²³²

According to Ambedkar, Indian society needed ethical individuals who had the courage to reason and protest. He opined that the practice of public conscience could remove all those oppressive social systems and practices which conflicted with dignity, equality, justice, and liberty and proposed a secular notion of conscience which can be equated with John Locke’s notion of conscience, “governed by the elevation and exercise of human reason” instead of divine or religious notions.²³³ In *Philosophy of Hinduism* (n.d.), he argued that: “all ideal schemes of divine governance [.

²³⁰ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 8.

²³¹ B. R. Ambedkar, “Their Wishes Are Laws Unto Us,” in *BAWS*, Vol. 5, 283. (Hereafter cited as *TW*).

²³² Ambedkar, *TW*, *BAWS*, Vol. 5, 283.

²³³ Paul Strohm, *Conscience: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 34.

. .] must be put on [...] trial” and judged on the principle of discursive rationality in modern democratic society.²³⁴

Ambedkar was of the opinion that Hinduism lacked the discursive space and scope for the development of independent and rational thinking.²³⁵ He had emphasized that “unfortunately they [Hindu leaders] are either a dishonest lot or an indifferent lot when it comes to the question of giving right guidance to the mass of the people”.²³⁶ They compromised the cultivation of rational public. Ambedkar identified rationality and responsibility as the most important principles for the cultivation of public conscience.

Ambedkar on the inegalitarian conscience of Indian politics

Ambedkar emphasized political leaders had a moral responsibility to popularize the ideas of public conscience. He argued that the nationalist leaders had failed to engage with the Indian public against the caste system. This argument was made as far back as 1936 when he argued that the “untouchable question is not *Hindunchya gharchaa prashna* (a private one for individual Hindus); but, it is a national and to go further, it is an international problem”.²³⁷ He developed this idea further in *Mr. Gandhi and the Emancipation of the Untouchables* (1943), where he explicitly appealed to a global audience for justice for the untouchables, arguing that, “The world owes a duty to the Untouchables as it does to all suppressed people to break their shackles and to set them free.”²³⁸

²³⁴ Ambedkar, *POH, BAWS*, Vol. 3, 8.

²³⁵ Ambedkar, *POH, BAWS*, Vol. 3, 8-90.

²³⁶ Ambedkar, *AOC, BAWS*, Vol. 1, 95.

²³⁷ Paik, *Dalit*, 84.

²³⁸ B. R. Ambedkar, “Mr. Gandhi and the Emancipation of the Untouchables,” in *BAWS*, Vol. 9, 389. (Hereafter cited as *MG*).

In Ambedkar's view, it was an unforgivable failing on the part of nationalist leaders to not commit to addressing the root causes of social oppression and divisiveness in society - the caste system and untouchability- but in idealizing them. The political ideas of the nationalist leaders had hence become insurmountable barriers to the formation of a collective sense of responsibility towards the social injustices of the caste system. Consequently, Ambedkar was harsh in his assessment of the contemporary nationalist leadership.

Bhikhu Parekh has argued that; Ambedkar (like Gandhi) did not focus on the moral context of social change. According to Parekh, Ambedkar heavily relied on “institutional mechanism[s]” and “did not fully appreciate the importance of changing the moral culture of the society”.²³⁹ However, we argue otherwise. Ambedkar expressed his concerns about a moral change in Indian society by writing about it and participated in and led public movements against the unethical caste system. Unfortunately, his efforts did not receive adequate attention and support from liberal and conservative caste Hindus.

Further, unlike caste Hindus, he was not considered morally acceptable, as Ambedkar was from an untouchable caste. There is a textual context to this. As Ambedkar noted, early Indian texts such as the *Manava Dharmashastra* actively dissuaded a lower caste person from being a moral teacher for high caste Hindus.²⁴⁰ According to Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai this text has had a “formidable cognitive influence” in laying the groundwork for an oppressive “social consciousness” in modern India.²⁴¹ Unsurprisingly, Ambedkar often criticized the *Manava*

²³⁹ Parekh, *Ambedkar's Legacy*, 68.

²⁴⁰ Gopal Guru, “Is There a Conception of the Exemplar in Babasaheb Ambedkar?,” in *Conversations with Ambedkar: 10 Ambedkar Memorial Lectures*, ed. Valerian Rodrigues (Delhi: Tulika Books Publication, 2019), 208– 227.

²⁴¹ Guru and Sarukkai, *Cracked Mirror*, 2.

Dharmashastra and its sanction of unjust social ethics and practices.²⁴² He also pointed out that most caste Hindus through the ages had considered *Manava Dharmashastra*'s oppressive social practices as evidence of ethical doctrines.

By the 1940s, Ambedkar had become deeply interested in the ideas of the Buddha, and *RGJ* reflected this.²⁴³ For instance, his methods of social critique were like the Buddha's mode of argumentation, for he first identified specific "immoralities" in society and then emphasized the importance of being truthful to remove them. His aim was to create a *Prabudhha Bharat*, an India with an enlightened public.²⁴⁴ This approach had its epistemological roots in the Buddha's idea of *atta dippo bhava* (be your guide).²⁴⁵ Ambedkar was also interested in the Buddha because the latter rejected the caste system and the practice of rational thinking in everyday life.

Unfortunately for Ambedkar, Indian political leaders were more influenced by contemporary Hindu social norms than universal human values expressed by the Buddha and anti-caste thinkers. He was all too aware of this context, for he bitterly noted that "the reasoning faculties" of those leaders who professed the Hindu religion were structured by the inherited biases of the caste system.²⁴⁶ This was why most nationalist leaders implicitly or explicitly ascribed to social unfreedom and oppression and inegalitarian thought. I argue that his harsh criticism of caste Hindus was not without reason, for it was a moral response to those

²⁴² Ambedkar, *POH, BAWS*, Vol. 3, 5-90.

²⁴³ In 1934 Ambedkar built his house in Mumbai and named it *Rajgriha* (Today Rajgir) after the place of a Buddhist educational institute, Nalanda University. In mid-1940s he established many educational institutes and named as Siddharth or Milind. A year after *RGJ* speech, in 1944, he addressed *Madras Rational Society* in Madras and argued that "Buddha was the first person to preach the message of liberty, equality and fraternity in the history of the world". See, Jadhav, *Ambedkar Awakening*, 578.

²⁴⁴ Gail Omvedt, *Ambedkar*.

²⁴⁵ Ambedkar, *WWE, BAWS*, Vol. 17, part 3, 113-147.

²⁴⁶ Ambedkar, *AOC, BAWS*, Vol. 1, 73.

Indian leaders who had failed to demonstrate “righteous indignation” towards the caste system; and persistently ignored questions of social oppression (produced by that same caste system) in public discourse. Some political leaders even justified the case for the continuation of caste because it was a unique part of Indian culture.

Ambedkar’s critique of nationalist thought also went beyond the epistemic confines of the caste system. From the mid-19th century onwards, India had produced a gamut of Hindu intellectuals, thinkers, writers and politicians. By the 1940s, the spectrum of contemporary Hindu thought had diversified and broadened. From Vinayak Damodar Savarkar to Sri Aurobindo, and from Swami Vivekananda to Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Ambedkar’s contemporaries would have read (and been influenced by) many varieties and strands of Hindu political thought. But all these varieties were based on one common intellectual platform: brahminical knowledge.²⁴⁷ As Chinnaiah Jangam has noted, “Ambedkar not only questioned the foundational ethics of [brahminical] knowledge production and consumption but also how nationalist narrative[s] were woven and presented”.²⁴⁸ The prevailing Indian political thought was “epistemologically inegalitarian” Ambedkar followed an anti-caste epistemology and developed a conceptual vocabulary of “self-respect or dignity which seeks to preserve the universal normative aspirations”.²⁴⁹ His ideas amounted to an alternative conception of Indian politics—one that would be shaped by epistemic egalitarianism.

Ambedkar opined that the nationalist leaders of the 1940s were morally inadequate to shape India into an egalitarian and constitutional democratic

²⁴⁷ Gail Omvedt, *Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anticaste Intellectuals* (New Delhi: Navayana Publication, 2008); Ramnarayan S Rawat and Satyanarayana Kusuma (eds.) *Dalit Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Chinnaiah Jangam, *Dalits and The Making of Modern India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017).

²⁴⁸ Jangam, *Dalits*, 12.

²⁴⁹ Gopal Guru, “The Idea of India: Derivative, Desi and Beyond,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, no. 37 (2011): 40.

nation. They had compromised the ideals of public conscience in favour of short term political gains and “hero worship”.²⁵⁰ But what worried him the most was that no nationalist leader was concerned for the political and social future of the untouchables.

Ambedkar suggested the Indian public must critically inquire into the ideas of their leaders so that they are not misinformed of any contemporary political events. The “leader” that he referred to the most was Mohandas Gandhi. He identified an undemocratic idealism in Gandhi’s philosophy by arguing that:

The social ideal of Gandhism is either caste or varna. However, it may be difficult to say which, there can be no doubt that the social ideal of Gandhism is not democracy. For whether one takes for comparison caste or varna, both are fundamentally opposed to democracy.²⁵¹

Gandhi expressed his reservations against untouchability (but not the caste system) in his later years. However, his concern can be read as an expression of personal guilt rather than a case for the removal of the caste system. As Rawat and Satyanarayan have argued, reforming the Hindu social order was never the objective of Gandhian reform.²⁵² On the other hand, Ambedkar expressed the view that collective responsibility was necessary to uproot the social structure of the caste system, the root cause of oppression in Indian society.

Ambedkar argued that an individual who had been brought up with caste conscience dealt with other castes, “either as [...] superior or inferior [...] as the case may be; at any rate, differently from his caste fellows”.²⁵³ The caste system had created a society based on “unequal” and “wrong

²⁵⁰ Ambedkar warned Indian public against hero-worship throughout his political career. This can be observed from his speeches such as: *Do not Depend on God or Superman* (1933); *Gandhi, Ranade, Jinnah* (1943) and *Constitutional Assembly Speech* (1949).

²⁵¹ Ambedkar, *WCG, BAWs*, Vol. 9, 286.

²⁵² Rawat and Satyanarayan, *Dalit Studies*, 9-10.

²⁵³ Ambedkar, *AOC, BAWs*, Vol. 1, 89.

relationships” between people. Such a system could not possibly allow for an individual who “treats his/her fellow social beings as equals”.²⁵⁴

Ambedkar had a similar view on Bal Gangadhar Tilak. Tilak focused on the concept of swaraj (self-rule) as a strategy of anti-colonial resistance. Ambedkar opined that Tilak’s ideas were inequalitarian, for his conception of swaraj was very narrow. For instance, Tilak did not consider either lower castes or women deserving of any social and political freedom.²⁵⁵ He even opposed social reforms in Hindu society because he thought “reform was creating an inferiority complex about Hindu religion and culture”.²⁵⁶ Similarly, when the lower castes demanded separate representation in legislature in 1918, Tilak responded (in a public meeting held in Sholapur) by declaring that “their business was to obey the laws and not aspire for power to make laws”.²⁵⁷ Interestingly, Tilak was not an independent political candidate. Like Gandhi, he was a member of the Congress, the most prominent political party.

Ambedkar argued that the politics of the Congress was not inclusive. He asserted that Indian politicians did not always share even alternative opinions of Congress members. For instance, as far back as 1895, M.G. Ranade had centered his politics around social reform by arguing that it was just as important as political freedom. But even back then, prominent Congress leaders had declined to support Ranade.²⁵⁸

Congress’s political trajectory on the caste and social reform question went even further back than 1895. In 1886, the then President of the Congress, Dadabhai Naoroji, had even announced that “we are met

²⁵⁴ Ambedkar, *AOC, BAWS*, Vol. 1, 89.

²⁵⁵ Prakash Desai, "Nationalist Thought in Modern India: Exploration of the Idea of Freedom," *Journal of Human Values* 27, no. 2 (2021): 99-108.

²⁵⁶ Adi Hormusji Doctor, *Political Thinkers of Modern India*, (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1997), 86-87.

²⁵⁷ Ambedkar, *WCG, BAWS*, Vol. 9, 461.

²⁵⁸ Ambedkar, *WCG, BAWS*, Vol. 9, 7-8.

together as a political body to represent to our rulers our political aspirations, not to discuss social reforms”.²⁵⁹ In 1887, the next President, Badruddin Tyabji, publicly set the agenda to “abstain” from discussions concerning “a particular part or particular community only”.²⁶⁰ In 1889, W.C. Bonnerjee, following Tyabji and Naoroji before him, similarly rejected the importance of the “public discussion of social matters [caste and untouchability]” in his presidential address.²⁶¹ As Gopal Guru pointed out, while nationalist thinkers “tried hard to bury Dalit questions,”; Jotirao Phule and Ambedkar, “dragged the social question from the depths it had reached in public discourse,” through sustained ethical practice.²⁶² The ethical practice with which we are concerned here is Ambedkar’s conception of public conscience.

Ambedkar put several moral questions to caste-Hindus. Had they ever been “fired with a righteous indignation against a moral wrong” of untouchability, he wondered out loud in his writings.²⁶³ But “being fired up” wasn’t enough. A caste Hindu must be “awakened to the sense of putting himself right with God and Man,” as a corrosive and unethical intermediary between both.²⁶⁴ He asserted that the system of caste worked out very well for caste Hindus, for it provided them with a cheap, steady, and efficient supply of labour. Ambedkar queried: “would the caste Hindu ever “agree to give up the economic and social advantages which untouchability gives?”²⁶⁵ And he continued:

²⁵⁹ Ambedkar, *WCG, BAWs*, Vol. 9, 8.

²⁶⁰ Ambedkar, *WCG, BAWs*, Vol. 9, 8.

²⁶¹ Ambedkar, *WCG, BAWs*, Vol. 9, 8.

²⁶² Guru, *Idea of India*, 40

²⁶³ Ambedkar, *WCG, BAWs*, Vol. 9, 197.

²⁶⁴ Ambedkar, *WCG, BAWs*, Vol. 9, 197.

²⁶⁵ Ambedkar, *WCG, BAWs*, Vol. 9, 197.

[...] History shows that where ethics and economics come in conflict [...] victory is always with economics. Vested interests have never been known to have willingly divested themselves unless sufficient force was to compel them.²⁶⁶

In this context, Ambedkar also mentioned several attempts by the untouchables to address their social grievances, which did not get any support from nationalist leaders (including Gandhi). According to him, the responsibility to address issues relating to caste-based discrimination and untouchability must be taken up by upper caste Hindus through a firm commitment to egalitarian social ethics.²⁶⁷

Indian political leaders in Ambedkar's day refused to call upon society to dismantle the caste system. He, however, refused to let his critics set the agenda, for that same year, he also published *Mr Gandhi and the Emancipation of the Untouchables* (1943), where he appealed to a global audience for justice for the untouchables.²⁶⁸

In the same text, he provided a lucid conceptual, moral distinction between the two systems of caste and class. The caste system conceptualized isolation and segregation as a "matter of virtue" whereas the class system did not "make isolation a virtue" or even "prohibit social intercourse".²⁶⁹ Furthermore, "the groups in the class system are only non-social while the castes in the caste system are in their mutual relations definitely and positively anti-social".²⁷⁰ There were significant differences between caste and class, and he was anxious to spell out these for a global audience.

²⁶⁶ Ambedkar, *WCG, BAWs*, Vol. 9, 197.

²⁶⁷ For instance, he argued that "Untouchable cannot do anything to get rid of his untouchability. It does not arise out of any personal fault on his part. Untouchability is an attitude of the Hindu. For Untouchability to vanish, it is the Hindu who must change. Will he change?" See, Ambedkar, *WCG, BAWs*, Vol. 9, 197-198.

²⁶⁸ Ambedkar, *MG, BAWs*, Vol. 9, 389.

²⁶⁹ Ambedkar, *MG, BAWs*, Vol. 9, 424.

²⁷⁰ Ambedkar, *MG, BAWs*, Vol. 9, 424.

Ambedkar argued that the nationalist demand for political freedom was inegalitarian for its restricted views on nationhood to his audience in India. He insisted that the nationalists ignored questions of social segregation and isolation in their imagination of the nation itself. His challenge was ignored by his contemporaries and prominent scholars of political thought in post-independence India. As Jangam has argued, Partha Chatterjee's seminal work, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, has been "implicitly imbued with an elite Hindu Brahmanical worldview that naturally marginalizes and excludes any narrative that runs counter to this ideology".²⁷¹ Chatterjee's, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1993) also failed to acknowledge caste as a dehumanizing system and the role of Dalit thinkers in the "imagination of the nation".²⁷² Similarly, Rathore has noted that Gurpreet Mahajan, and Ananya Vajpeyi, have failed to focus on Ambedkar's critique and eventual rejection of the nationalist idea of swaraj in their conceptualization of swaraj as the foundation of modern Indian political thought.²⁷³

Courage as a moral force of cultivating conscience

Courage was important to Ambedkar. He even argued that the "secret of freedom is courage".²⁷⁴ In his view, upholding public conscience required a courageous commitment to reconstruct human society. As he had noted in 1929, in an event organized by *Bahishkrut Samaj Sewak Sangh* in Chiplun:

My life was threatened if I came here to wake you up to the cause of your misery and shame. Man is mortal. Everyone has to die some day or other. But one must

²⁷¹ Jangam, *Dalits*, 9.

²⁷² Jangam, *Dalits*, 109.

²⁷³ Rathore, *Ambedkar's Preamble*, 35-36.

²⁷⁴ Ambedkar, *RGJ, BAWs*, Vol. 1, 237.

resolve to lay down one's life in enriching the noble ideas of self-respect and in bettering human life.²⁷⁵

Ambedkar's conception of courage was epistemically embedded in an intellectual tradition of anti-caste thinkers in India. While reading through their thoughts and practices, he found a relentless commitment to truth, reason, and concern towards establishing an ethical human life. For example, in *Reformers and Their Fate*, he opined that the Buddha had never compromised his courage for human welfare despite several threats:

Such a life as his [Buddha], demanded not only pleasant manners, sympathy and kindness but firmness and courage. When the occasion required it, he could be calmly severe with those who worked evil for the Order. Physical pain, he bore not only with equanimity but with no diminution of his inner joy. Courage also was needed and was found; as, for example, in the Buddha's calm attitude during Devadatta's various attempts to assassinate him, in facing threats of murder, and in the conversion of the famous bandit in the Kingdom of Kosala, whom all the countryside feared, and whom the Buddha visited, alone and unarmed, in his lair, changing him from a scourge of the kingdom to a peaceful member of the Order. Neither pain, danger, nor insults marred his spiritual peace. When he was reviled, he reviled not again. Nor was he lacking in tender thoughtfulness for those who needed his comfort and support.²⁷⁶

Ambedkar focused on the ethical practices employed by anti-caste intellectuals (such as the Buddha) to develop his arguments concerning courage, equality, injustice and oppressive social systems. He was of the opinion that anti-caste thinkers can be read in terms of an internally consistent school of thought. Such thinkers did not write about social injustice in isolation but as part of public discourse. Further, he self-consciously identified with anti-caste thinkers and deliberately referred to their ideas to develop his critiques of injustice, discrimination and social

²⁷⁵ B. R. Ambedkar, "Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and His Egalitarian Movements," in *BAWS*, Vol. 17, part 3, 11.

²⁷⁶ B. R. Ambedkar, "Reformers and Their Fate," in *BAWS*, Vol. 3, 167.

ethics. In 1956, he formally converted into Buddhism because of its doctrinal emphasis on human dignity and equality and explicit rejection of the caste system.

Ambedkar's focus on the importance of ethical practices has played a significant role in shaping the very idea of a modern and democratic India. His ideas concerning moral courage have also challenged prevailing political, social, and religious beliefs. Importantly for him, courage was not merely a solitary act of protest or disagreement but rather a more comprehensive and systematic rejection of oppressive and immoral beliefs, customs and rules in everyday life. Courage, for Ambedkar, was the moral force by which an egalitarian society could be established.

Courage referred to championing of the rights of the "oppressed" by attempting to remedy historical injustices through public discourse and actions. Subsequently, a courageous individual morally compelled "oppressor" communities to re-evaluate their discriminatory practices and beliefs. Ambedkar strongly believed that all individuals possessed a latent ethical force and evoked it to compel hitherto "oppressive" communities to accept their historical follies and develop an ethical sense of equal treatment towards oppressed social groups. For him, courage is not only about external transformation (the social) but inner transformation (the self) as well.

Ambedkar emphasized that a courageous person should reflect upon their personal "responsibility" and "must learn to unlearn what he has learned". They must have the "courage to rethink and change their thoughts" because "There can be no finality in thinking".²⁷⁷ He strongly argued in favour of critical public reasoning in everyday life. He opined that, "the teachings of Buddha are eternal, but even then Buddha did not proclaim them to be infallible. The religion of Buddha can change according to times [...] If

²⁷⁷ B. R. Ambedkar, "Thoughts on Linguistic States," in *BAWS*, Vol. 1, 139.

you study carefully, you will see that Buddhism is based on reason”. As he noted, for the Buddha, “nothing was infallible, and nothing could be final. Everything must be open to re-examination and reconsideration whenever grounds for re-examination and reconsideration arise”.²⁷⁸ To develop such practices, one must be allowed to live in an atmosphere of free-thinking. He observed, for instance, that the Buddha taught through persuasion and not coercion. He firmly believed that the Buddha’s most significant contribution to social thought was championing the cause of cultivating a moral conscience for ethical living. Following the Buddha, Ambedkar developed his method of ethical persuasion.

Ambedkar’s method consisted of a nearly four-decade-long engagement with the public in numerous articles, books, tracts and speeches.²⁷⁹ He persuaded the public to take refuge in “truth”, “reason” and “responsibility”.²⁸⁰ Despite his long career as a public intellectual, he always made allowances for disagreements. His example would inspire a generation of thinkers and writers by providing an intellectual barometer by which political ideas, ethical principles, personal beliefs and social practices could be assessed, critiqued, discussed and constructed. His writings and speeches were neither acts of accusation or victimhood but pertinacious practices, in dialogue with ethics and injustice in everyday life. His ethical engagement with (high caste) political opponents also reduced the distance between the “oppressor” and the “oppressed” through an evolving platform of public discussion.

Ambedkar’s ideas concerning public conscience through ethical engagement set him apart from his contemporaries. He emphasized the moral responsibility of the public to question an amoral caste system and

²⁷⁸ Ambedkar, *BHD*, 57.

²⁷⁹ Ambedkar engaged with Indian public more than four decades (1919 to 1956) through his writings, speeches and social actions.

²⁸⁰ Ambedkar, *WWE*, *BAWS*, Vol. 17, part 3, 113-147.

hold political leaders accountable. He opined (in *RGJ*, for instance) that Indian society will need to create a space for itself by which it can freely critique its political leaders. He warned that the absence of the said space could lead to the establishment of a political dictatorship in India. He took the broadest possible interpretation of the word “public”. Ambedkar’s public did not only refer to an individual, social group, or caste. The public referred to all of society. If society engages in collective action against unethical practices and holds leaders accountable, he opined, India could evolve into an ethical and egalitarian democracy.²⁸¹

Conclusion

Ambedkar invested the term; “public conscience” with a conceptual vocabulary and a philosophy. Public conscience was essentially concerned with collective social action against an oppressive social and political system. He also urged the Indian public to uphold democratic values (dignity, liberty, equality and fraternity). Democratic values were also the byproduct of the collective rational choices made by Indian society.

Ambedkar urged the Indian public to apply reason while interpreting social and religious texts, customs, and beliefs. He argued that the failure to do so would lead society towards irrational and unethical social practices and dictatorial governments.

Ambedkar was only too aware of the problems of political dictatorship. He noted that nationalist politics had already begun the trend of presenting their leaders as “great man”. But who and what exactly was a “great man”? What qualities defined a “great man”? He even suggested specific moral criteria: a “great man”, he insisted, must have moral characteristics such as sincerity and courage. Such leaders would preside over

²⁸¹ Paik, *Dalit*, 87.

governments actively invested in creating a democratic political space, with due regard for dissent and political opposition.

Ambedkar was staunchly against the idea of one-party governments and firmly believed that these only led to tyranny and “a misdirection of public affairs”.²⁸² Political opposition was necessary. No government could ever be immune from making errors of judgment, and no political party could be allowed to escape criticism of any kind. A powerful collective political opposition could critique government policy and demand transparency without facing the threat of being overshadowed or intimidated into silence.

Ambedkar’s conception of public conscience was a challenge to nationalist thought. He opined that nationalist politics in the 1940s had neglected to consider the context of the caste system and social oppression but focused on gaining political power through the cult of the leader. In his view, this stance was morally indefensible, and he proposed an alternative political philosophy in which social oppression, accountable governance, and social ethics would play an important role. His ideas were constructed on a firm new epistemic footing of moral courage, political sincerity, and commitment to egalitarianism. The point of his philosophy was to conceptualize democracy in India based on human dignity, freedom, and justice in everyday social practices. He championed the case for an India whose public conscience was such that it could rise above narrow caste consciousness and adopt ethical and egalitarian practices in the greater interest of shared humanity.

²⁸² Ambedkar, *RGJ, BAWS*, Vol. 1, 236

CONCLUSION

“Philosophy is no purely theoretic[al] matter. It has practical potentialities. Philosophy has roots in the problem of life and whatever theories philosophy propounds must return to society as instruments of re-constructing society” – B. R. Ambedkar ²⁸³

Throughout his life, B.R. Ambedkar referred to and was influenced by a wide diversity of intellectual traditions and systems of thought. But he should be understood first and foremost as a philosopher of ethical practice and moral behaviour. At the core of his moral philosophy was a simple but powerful idea: that all members of Indian society have a collective responsibility to be ethical and act against unethical practices. His was not, however, a moral philosophy that could be confined within a singular canonical work. Instead, he introduced and developed his ideas in a wide range of intellectual preoccupations and projects: scholarly articles, generic tracts, public speeches, correspondence, and civic protests. For over four decades, he consistently argued that an entrenched, historical caste system lay at the (epistemic) root of most unethical social practices in Indian society. He encouraged his readers, listeners, followers and sympathizers to reject it in its entirety.

Ambedkar’s moral philosophy was structured around personal experiences and observations. This can be seen from his autobiographical accounts in *Waiting for a Visa* (c.1938), where he elaborated on the myriad ways in which his everyday experiences on caste had shaped his moral concerns. The experience of untouchability in childhood had first made him aware of the “indignities” and “discriminations” that his community had had to

²⁸³ B. R. Ambedkar, “Riddles in Hinduism: An Exposition To Enlighten The Masses,” in *BAWS*, Vol. 4, 286.

deal with as everyday social realities.²⁸⁴ Later, as a young man, he would draw on these early experiences in his ethics, equality and human dignity.

In the first chapter of the thesis, I have traced the genealogy of Ambedkar's moral philosophy to his first published work, *Castes in India* (1917). *Castes in India* was a short scholarly article on the caste system, written while studying towards his PhD. in Economics at Columbia University. Ambedkar also attended lectures in history, sociology, anthropology and philosophy during his doctoral research. Some of these lectures had an impact on his ideas on caste. Tellingly, he drew on the latest sociological and anthropological research to clearly and definitively highlight the unfair and unequal nature of the caste system.

Castes in India was the beginning of a lifelong concern. His later writings such as *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), *Symbols of Hinduism and the House the Hindus have Built* (n.d.), *The Triumph of Brahmanism* (n.d.) and *Philosophy of Hinduism* (n.d.) developed its ideas in greater detail. Unlike *Castes in India*, which was intended for a select academic readership, Ambedkar intended his later writings to have a much broader readership and envisaged them to have a socially transformative role by contributing to building an ethical public sphere in India.

Ambedkar was very concerned about the circulation of knowledge and information in the Indian public sphere. In *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), *Philosophy of Hinduism* (n.d.), and *The Hindu Social Order-Its Essential Principles* (n.d.), he argued that the Indian public had been misled into believing that the caste system was of divine origin. The consequences of this had been grave. Not only had the caste system had been allotted the status of religious discourse in contemporary India, but the upper castes had also given themselves the power and authority to legitimize social

²⁸⁴ Ambedkar, *WFOV, BAWs*, Vol. 12, 670.

exploitation. Ambedkar attempted to alter this state of affairs radically. The caste system was a human construct, he argued. Ambedkar was, however, more than just a writer. He insisted that merely writing about the importance of ethics and equality was not enough. Instead, urgent social action was required to achieve this goal.

The second chapter of my thesis focused on how, in 1927, Ambedkar championed the cause for human dignity and equality for all through a series of public speeches and letters and petitions in the Mahad movement, the first civil rights movement in India. The Mahad movement witnessed the coming together of a large collective of like-minded intellectuals, scholars and members of civil society and culminated with conferences on the issue of fundamental rights. The conference participants produced a collective statement wherein they argued that it was morally and legally wrong to deny any individual or social group fundamental rights. In this context, they called for a radical reordering of Hindu society based on the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity instead of the practices of the caste system.

Ambedkar continued to develop his arguments regarding social action and fundamental rights throughout his life. After Mahad, he also grew increasingly convinced that it was not only a reordering of Hindu society that was required but of Indian society itself. For him, the way to do it was through a reinterpretation and reappraisal of Buddhism. In 1935, at the Depressed Class Conference at Yeola, he announced his intention to leave Hinduism.²⁸⁵ The following year, he delivered his seminal speech to the Bombay Presidency Mahar Conference. Aggressively titled, *Which Way Emancipation?* (*Mukti Kon Pathe*, 1936), he requested his listeners to rely on “truth”, “reason”, and “responsibility” while considering the

²⁸⁵ Source:

<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealc/pritchett/00ambedkar/timeline/1930s.html>, Last Accessed: November 5, 2021.

question of conversion.²⁸⁶ In 1950, while participating in the World Fellowship of Buddhists Conference in Candy, Sri Lanka, Ambedkar advocated the importance of rationality in religion.²⁸⁷ That same year, he addressed a large audience at Buddha Vihar in Bombay and argued that Buddhism was based on “ethical principles and teaches how to work for the good and well-being of the common man”.²⁸⁸ These intellectual interventions laid the ideological foundations for Navayana Buddhism, a new moral vision of society. For Ambedkar, this meant that society could now be reordered on the principles of equality and reason than the caste system. His interpretation of Buddhism focused on the vital importance of an informed, conscience-driven Indian public. As such, his engagement with Buddhism was but an example of a more considerable conceptual concern- that Indian society must be invested with a moral consciousness or “public conscience”.

Ambedkar invested the term “public conscience” with a conceptual vocabulary, conceptualizing it as a democratic value. (It would be challenging to achieve fundamental human rights in a democratic government without the practice of public conscience, he opined). He informed his readers that public conscience also required significant moral courage and commitment to be fruitful and socially effective. As he advised his audience at the All India Scheduled Castes Federation Conference (1942), the individual in society must actively strive for the “reclamation of human personality”.²⁸⁹ Further, public conscience referred to society at large and those who aspired to Indian political leadership. In

²⁸⁶ Ambedkar, *WWE, BAWS*, Vol. 17, part 3, 113-147.

²⁸⁷ Narendra Jadhav, *Ambedkar Awakening India's Social Conscience* (New Delhi: Konark Publisher, 2019), 579

²⁸⁸ Jadhav, *Ambedkar Awakening*, 579.

²⁸⁹ Keer, *Ambedkar*, 351.

Do not depend on God or Superman (1933), he addressed the question of unaccountable Indian political leaders who neglected their public duties.²⁹⁰

In 1943, Ambedkar presented a complete account of his ideas concerning public conscience in a public speech on the political views of the late 19th-century Liberal thinker Mahadev Ranade. However, he expanded the scope of the speech to include Mohandas Gandhi and Muhammad Ali Jinnah. The final result was the somewhat awkwardly titled *Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah* (1943).

In the third chapter of my thesis, I argued that *Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah* was a seminal work and outlined Ambedkar's ideas on public conscience and political leadership with clarity and conceptual depth that had not been seen before. Public conscience referred to the following: first, a recognition of the language of rights ("rights", he argued, "are protected not by law but by the social and moral conscience of society");²⁹¹ second, to the collective social responsibility to uphold democracy (he firmly believed that political and legal mechanisms could only become emancipatory if the social system is democratic); third, to a commitment to live an ethical, social life; and fourth, to develop equal respect for the opinions of others and uphold human dignity.²⁹²

Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah was also an exposition of the role of "sincerity" and "moral courage" in public life. Ambedkar argued that the sincere and courageous were those who dedicated their lives to removing immoral and oppressive social practices and championing an ethical life. Included within the scope of this argument were the Indian political leaders of the day. He spoke at length on his perspectives concerning effective political leadership. Political leaders must be ethical and mindful

²⁹⁰ B. R. Ambedkar, "Do not depend on God or Superman," in *BAWS*, Vol. 17, part 3, 88.

²⁹¹ Ambedkar, *RGJ*, *BAWS*, Vol. 1, 222.

²⁹² Ambedkar, *RGJ*, *BAWS*, Vol. 1, 210-240.

of their public duties, he insisted. In his opinion, Ranade was a very effective political leader because of his ethics and commitment to the responsibilities of public office. He warned against the current tendency to deify political leaders as heroes. Ranade had never succumbed to “hero worship” but always worked for societal welfare, he argued.

Ambedkar continued to emphasize and develop his ideas concerning political leadership in the 1940s and 1950s. In 1943, he authored *Mr Gandhi and the Emancipation of the Untouchable*- a searing critique of nationalist politics in India. Two years later, in *What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables* (1945), he opined that Indian politics was moving away from a concern towards social welfare. Both texts argued that leaders and political parties must be publicly accountable and actively invested in Indian social advancement. But as the years went by, Ambedkar grew increasingly convinced that the cult of hero worship was steadily eclipsing the case for political accountability. In 1949, he raised the alarm against “hero worship” of political leaders in his final speech to the Constitutional Assembly. He warned that the current trend of political deification was “a sure road to degradation and eventual dictatorship” in politics.²⁹³

Ambedkar’s concerns with the then-current political leadership also had a social dimension. He opined that while political leaders were technically supposed to promote egalitarian politics and champion the cause of public conscience, patently, this was far from the case. During this period, he also authored texts such as *Hindus and want of Public Conscience* (n.d.) and *Hindus and their want of Social Conscience* (n.d.), where he explained how anti-colonial politics was neither interested in developing a healthy,

²⁹³ B. R. Ambedkar, “B. R. Ambedkar Selected Speech,” 44.

Source: https://prasarbharati.gov.in/whatsnew/whatsnew_653363.pdf, Last Accessed: November 5, 2021.

functioning democracy; nor in laying the groundwork for an ethical Indian public sphere that would hold political leaders accountable.

Although the subject of frequent and vicious political criticism, Ambedkar did not lose hope in the value and validity of his ideas. He continued to agitate for public conscience and ethical politics even towards the final years of his life. In 1952, he delivered a speech on *Conditions Precedent for the Successful Working of Modern Democracy* at the Poona District Law Library, Pune, where he opined that the purpose of the modern democracy is to “bring about the welfare of the people”.²⁹⁴ He also outlined four conditions under which India could have a vibrant democracy. First, social inequalities and oppression in India must end. Second, a strong Indian political opposition must be ever-present to counter any dictatorial tendencies in the ruling party. Third, the Indian state must be committed to achieving complete equality in law and administration. Fourth, the observance of constitutional morality must be held as paramount to all other political concerns, aims and goals. To Ambedkar, the public needed to be informed and educated on the subject of their rights, duties and responsibilities. Only then could an informed public sphere act in a politically responsible and ethically sound manner.

The three chapters of my thesis cumulatively point towards the existence of a hitherto unrecognised moral philosophy in Ambedkar’s thought, whether in speech, text or social action. I propose that his moral philosophy developed around nine key concerns:

- 1) **Ethics:** Ambedkar argued that any understanding of the category of the human in society is incomplete without due consideration to ethics. His moral philosophy aimed to create the conditions by which ordinary human beings could find hope and inspiration for a

²⁹⁴ B. R. Ambedkar, “Conditions Precedent for the Successful Working of Modern Democracy,” in *BAWS*, Vol. 17, part 3, 476.

just and ethical world. For him, the most urgent question was solving the problem of social oppression and restoring human dignity to the social world. He consistently asserted that every human being has a right to be treated ethically and that all members of society must uphold this right. If infringed, the right to ethical treatment must be defended by collective social action.

- 2) **Collective social action:** Ambedkar was not an armchair philosopher. His ideas concerning ethics and social action were the subject of his actions at the Mahad in 1927. He actively protested the inequality of the caste system and called for a peaceful social protest against the prevalence of caste. Mahad was not a fly-by-night protest. Instead, the objective was to initiate a collective moral programme. A new ethical, social system could be conceived and set in motion- effectively, a movement committed to ensuring an equal and moral life for all individuals in society.
- 3) **Living a moral life:** Ambedkar championed the importance of living a moral life. He consistently emphasized that an ethical life consisted of a plan of action by which social injustices could be addressed. His moral philosophy, in that sense, had a social purpose. At Mahad, for instance, his moral philosophy was reconceptualized as a powerful tool by which one could challenge and even dismantle an unjust social structure.

The Mahad movement was not the first instance of such ideas. In 1917, *Castes in India* had presented an analytical account of how dehumanizing social practices such as sati, child marriage, and forced widowhood harmed the intrinsic human worth of individuals and prevented people from living moral lives. Nor was the Mahad movement the endpoint of such ideas. In *Annihilation of Caste*, he examined the question of caste discrimination by

referring to historical and religious texts. He argued that Hindu scripture (particularly the *Dharmashastras*) had historically advocated for harming the moral worth of the untouchables. On this basis, he denounced the authority of those social-religious norms and rules which legitimized unethical practices. He was aware of the social authority of scripture. He wondered at its power to authorize an individual or group to act in impunity without any regard for the category of the human- of dignity, equality, and ethics. Later in life, he would be instrumental in producing the Indian constitution. Here, he would successfully advocate for including the protection of human dignity as a core constitutional principle. As a public intellectual, he consistently confronted nationalist leaders for their ignorance of those social practices that harmed human dignity.

- 4) **Political accountability:** Ambedkar's texts such as *Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah* (1943), *Mr Gandhi and the Emancipation of the Untouchable* (1943) and *What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables* (1945), addressed the case of an unaccountable and unethical nationalist leadership. He challenged the idea that colonial oppression was the only form of oppression in India by drawing attention to broader social contexts such as longstanding oppression based on caste and untouchability. He opined that the nationalists only misled Indian society by misconstruing moral truth. As far as Ambedkar was concerned, the nationalists had only been able to do this because they had conveniently avoided any discussion of the role of the caste system in Indian history- a project which I refer to here as "unjust" history.

- 5) **On historical injustice:** I argue that Ambedkar carefully sketched out the historical context of caste-based discrimination in India in his works. This was consciously and deliberately done to make a more significant claim about the critical necessity of seeking justice against such forms of discrimination in contemporary India. Consider, for instance, his seminal work on the subject: *Who Were the Shudras: How They Came to be the Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society* (1946). The Shudras were first introduced as the clear majority of the Indian population. And then, Ambedkar systematically and carefully accounted for their gradual dehumanisation through norms, codes, sanctions and penalties that were so numerous that they had “no parallel anywhere in the world”.²⁹⁵
- 6) **Untouchability dehumanises an individual:** Ambedkar’s *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables* (1948) attempted to explain the link between dehumanization and untouchability. The untouchables, he argued, were the “third mass of people [Indian society] who are treated as an entity beyond human intercourse and whose mere touch is enough to cause pollution”.²⁹⁶ In a glaring indictment of Indian social practices, he argued that the contemporary “segregation of the untouchables” was morally indefensible.²⁹⁷ Untouchability and segregation only had the effect of “putting impure people inside a barbed wire into a sort of a cage”.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁵ B. R. Ambedkar, “Who Were the Shudras: How They Came to be the Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society,” in *BAWS*, Vol. 7, 57.

²⁹⁶ B. R. Ambedkar, “The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables,” in *BAWS*, Vol. 7, 239.

²⁹⁷ Ambedkar, *The Untouchables*, 266.

²⁹⁸ Ambedkar, *The Untouchables*, 266.

In *The Indian Ghetto-The Centre of Untouchability-Outside the Fold* (n.d.) and *Away From the Hindus* (n.d.), Ambedkar stressed that the injustices of the caste system had continued to the present day. Therefore, his writings on the history of caste and untouchability were intended to contribute and inform public discussion regarding caste. Public debate would only be fruitful when it was backed up by sound scholarship, he opined. In this context, he was very critical of those Indian thinkers and scholars who had neglected to inquire into the origins and practice of untouchability.²⁹⁹

- 7) **Theory of justice:** Ambedkar's writings on ethics; scholarly narratives on history, untouchability, dehumanization; public participation and advocacy of collective social action; and speeches and popular writings against the caste system; ultimately articulated a carefully thought-out theory of justice through social accountability.

For Ambedkar, a theory of justice must consider a historical analysis of existing social inequalities and injustices as its discursive point of origin. This analysis must serve as the backdrop to the contemporary moral quest for equality and justice. His approach to equality was a significant break from the dominant liberal tradition in political philosophy. He argued that the key to achieving justice for all lay in holding individuals and social groups morally accountable for their actions.

Ambedkar consistently stressed that Indian society must hold its members accountable. On this question, he also argued that one needs to understand both the historical and contemporary social

²⁹⁹ Ambedkar, *The Untouchables*, 239-266.

status of oppressed groups to seek and agitate for justice. Every socially repressed group in India has a history. This history must be recovered so that injustices that had occurred and continued can be addressed in the present so that they do not continue. In the final analysis, an awareness of unjust history would lead to a new appreciation for the vital necessity of justice for oppressed groups in contemporary times.

- 8) **On the “right to self-determination”:** Ambedkar’s ideas concerning justice can be observed in *Evidence before the Southborough Committee*, his earliest political essay published in 1919. He argued that Hindu society had progressively relegated the untouchables to the status of a “slave”.³⁰⁰ In this context, he announced his intention to halt and reverse the process entirely by introducing a “right to self-determination”. For the untouchables, such a right would enable them to agitate for and successfully claim that political space and representation historically denied to them. Interestingly, the right to self-determination was not only a right that was conceptualized for the socially oppressed but as a universal category that would ultimately pave the way for equal citizenship in a representative democratic government.³⁰¹

Ambedkar continued to develop his conception of the right to self-determination through the 1920s. In a public meeting at Mangaon in 1920, he protested the current social practice of denying the untouchables any access to adequate housing, schools, sanitation, and public facilities. The untouchables, he concluded, “are not entitled to any rights in social life”.³⁰² In 1924, he again raised the issue in yet another public meeting, Conference of Depressed

³⁰⁰ Ambedkar, *EBSC, BAWS*, Vol. 1, 255.

³⁰¹ Zelliot, *Ambedkar’s World*, 66.

³⁰² Jadhav, *Ambedkar Awakening*, 46.

Classes, at Solapur. He argued that untouchability was “worse than slavery”.³⁰³ Events and statements such as these were the backgrounds to the Mahad Satyagraha in 1927. Standing with a social collective of thousands, he opined that “All human beings are of equal status since birth and they are of equal status until they die”.³⁰⁴

- 9) **On the equality of men and women:** Ambedkar’s ideas concerning an ethical society was also geared towards achieving equality between men and women. In *Castes in India* (1917) and *Rise and Fall of the Hindu Women: Who was Responsible for it?* (1951), he cited a long history of injustice against women in Hindu society. Later, he was instrumental in drafting the *Hindu Code Bills*, wherein he carefully documented the historical evidence of discrimination against women in Hindu society.

Ambedkar’s consistent attempts to remove all forms of social oppression from Indian society were a part of ethics and moral philosophy, which aimed to lay the foundations for an equal society where unethical systems and practices such as caste, untouchability and gender discrimination had no place. His moral philosophy envisaged a system of social thought which was fundamentally ethical in its nature and scope. His commitment to ethics owed their genealogy to personal experiences with discrimination and untouchability. Ambedkar presented his ideas on ethics to the Indian public in writings, speeches and civic protests; and appealed to them to engage with the political and social issues of the day. He argued that the Indian public must educate itself on contemporary unethical social practices, agitate for social action, elect ethical leaders, and hold itself and

³⁰³ Jadhav, *Ambedkar Awakening*, 65.

³⁰⁴ Teltumbde, *Mahad*, 349.

the political establishment of the day morally accountable. Only then could India develop into an egalitarian, democratic nation.

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