

Ambedkar and the critique of caste society

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Although less well known than Gandhi and Nehru, Ambedkar occupies a unique position in India's collective imagination. Father of the Constitution and virulent critic of the caste system, he remains today a key figure for the *Dalits*, who have a hard time finding their way into the official narratives of the struggle for independence.

In France, there are generally only two figures who are remembered in connection with the struggle for Indian independence: Gandhi and Nehru. Our fascination with these two personalities surely reflects our tendency to obscure the complexity of Indian society in order to recall only certain picture postcard images, such as those reflecting Gandhi's ideology of non-violence. This narrative of India's national independence also conceals the persistence of strong social, cultural, linguistic and geographical cleavages. In particular, India's caste society did not vanish with independence; far from it. Focusing on Ambedkar, a figure often neglected in spite of being crucial in the eyes of a large part of India's population, allows us to understand better one part of the complexity of the stakes in the struggle for independence.

A lawyer and a politician, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar left a deep impression on Indian society for at least three main reasons: he had a major influence on drawing up the Constitution of India; he introduced persons regarded as "untouchables" into the centre of Indian political life; and, finally, he initiated a renewal of Buddhism in India. He was also the author of a very fine body of writings, the impact of which on Indian society is surely as great as that enjoyed by the writings of Gandhi or Nehru, even though the sociological profile of his readers tends to be very different. Indeed, dependence on Ambedkar's work is most influential

on the contemporary Dalit movement¹, affecting its political, social and artistic dimensions. However, although he continues to be an essential figure in India, the "Father of the Indian Constitution" is often relegated to a subordinate level in narratives of the period of the struggle for independence, which, written from a western point of view, are almost exclusively centred on the issue of emancipation from the colonial yoke. Revisiting the role played by Ambedkar allows us to see the complex, non-linear relations among the national consciousness, social structures and religious beliefs that infuse Indian society. Ambedkar represents another vision of independence, partly defeated but still enduring, based on radically questioning the Hindu and hierarchic character of Indian society.

Entry into the political struggle

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (often known as "Babasaheb")² was born April 14th, 1891, in Mhow, in Madhya Pradesh, a state in the centre of India. He was the fourteenth child of a family of the Mahar caste, a caste originating in Maharashtra, whose traditional functions included in particular cleaning up the carcasses of dead animals, and who were regarded by most Hindus as "untouchables." Because his father served in the British army and lived in a garrison town, Ambedkar was able to benefit from easier access to education.³ His intellectual qualities were quickly spotted by his teachers, one of whom brought him to the attention of the Maharaja of Baroda, who financed his studies at the prestigious Elphinstone College in Bombay, then at Columbia University in New York. He eventually obtained a doctoral degree in economics from the London School of Economics in 1922. On returning to India he became a member of the bar in Bombay, and there set himself up as a barrister.

His law practice in Bombay quickly flopped: a victim of caste discrimination, he could not find any clients to defend, so he started down the path of militant action. In 1924 he

¹ The term Dalit comes from Marathi. It means "broken and oppressed". It was first used by the Arya Samaj, the movement for the reform of Hinduism, and Ambedkar in the 1930s to refer to the members of former untouchable castes. However, the term has only been widely used since 1973 when the Dalit Panthers published their manifesto. Initially eminently political as it implied a combative attitude, the term Dalit is now used to refer to all former untouchable groups (who are still practical victims of untouchability).

² The biographical details in this article are drawn principally from the work of Christophe Jaffrelot, *Dr Ambedkar. Leader intouchable et père de la Constitution indienne*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2000. In addition to the best-known works published by Ambedkar himself, equally recommended is a compilation of his most important texts on social exclusion in India and the politics of the struggle against it, by S. K. Thorat and N. Kumar (eds.), *B.R. Ambedkar: Perspectives on Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policies*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2008.

³ The Mahars, who had for a long time been recruited into the army of the Maratha Empire, were able to parlay this long experience into entering the British army in large numbers. Enrolment in the British army constituted a veritable springboard for the social elevation of this group.

launched the *Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha* (Association for the Victims of Ostracism), the primary purpose of which was to abolish the exploitative system of *baluta* that determined the Mahars' recompense in kind, and to help Mahars get their rights respected. In fact this association took on the task of helping all of the "untouchables," so it also represented other castes (in particular, Dhors et Chambhars). Its motto, still famous, was "Educate, Agitate, Organize."

In this period, Ambedkar engaged in more non-violent action, to assert the rights of "untouchables" to enter temples and to draw water from wells traditionally reserved for so-called "superior" castes. In 1927, accompanied by several thousand people, he drank water from a reservoir (Chowdar Tank) theoretically open to "untouchables" but access to which was denied to them in practice. During the second conference of Mahad, December 25th, 1927, this symbolic transgression was followed up by a powerful speech calling for the total abolition of the caste system. However, not before 1937 did the courts hand down a judgement declaring free the access to the Mahad reservoir.

Along with his militant activity, Ambedkar continued very regularly to produce theoretical and political texts on the issue of caste. As early as 1917 he published a report on that issue first presented during a seminar at the University of Columbia, and he pursued this kind of activity to the end of his life. His writings very quickly showed he had distanced himself from the strategy of sanskritization (that is, imitation of the practices of the Brahmin castes, in particular vegetarianism), which up to then had constituted the only means available to the lower castes to climb the ladder of ritual caste purity; and had embraced a radical rejection of Hinduism, in favour of the egalitarian individualism that characterizes western democracies.

Arm wrestling with Gandhi

From 1919, when Ambedkar gave evidence to the Southborough Committee (responsible for redefining the electoral franchise in the framework of the constitutional reforms of the Government of India Act of 1919), up to 1927, when the British authorities appointed him to the Bombay Legislative Council, Ambedkar steadily developed a case for separate electoral systems, in which only the members of the "depressed classes" (the term used at this time to designate the people called "untouchables") would vote for candidates who themselves would come only from the same "depressed classes". In 1930 and 1931, Ambedkar

restated this case during two "Roundtable Conferences" that he participated in. The British Prime Minister, J. Ramsay MacDonald, responded favourably to this demand in August 1932 in the Communal Award, to be followed by the Poona Pact in September.

But this decision immediately led to a strong reaction from Gandhi, who, fearing that it would endanger Hindu unity, began a fast that he threatened to maintain to the death. Gandhi remained attached to the idea that the integration of Indian society should be realized through affiliation – necessarily hierarchic – to a system of castes which alone are in a position to guarantee the social, economic and ritual interdependence of their members. The position of Gandhi, for whom untouchability was "the cancer of Hinduism," is distinct from that of Ambedkar, in that Gandhi thought that neither the caste system nor, obviously, Hinduism was intrinsically bad. In a conversation with Patel, one of the main leaders of the Congress party, two days after he began his fast, Gandhi, in a way that remains singular, went so far as to make an argument that reveals high-caste prejudices and a strong mistrust of Muslims and "untouchables": "[The untouchables] do not see that a separate electorate will create the kind of divisions among the Hindus that will lead to a bloodbath. Untouchable thugs will join with Muslim thugs to kill Hindus of caste. Have the British not thought of all that? I think they certainly have."⁴

The showdown lasted several days. Ambedkar was finally forced to give in and to accept Gandhi's alternative proposal of a system of reserved seats in which only members of the "depressed classes" would be elected, but by an electoral college open to all electors in the constituency. Yet in no constituency did the "depressed classes" amount to a majority.

The creation of political parties

In 1936, Ambedkar created his first political party, the Independent Labour Party (ILP), meant to be a party going beyond simple class affiliations, and defending the interests of all Indian workers. Conscious of the need to broaden his social base, Ambedkar tried to set himself up as leader of the "working masses". During the elections of 1937, his party managed to win twelve of the fifteen seats it contested. However, the contradictions of this party, which claimed to represent all workers but whose majority consisted of militants from "untouchable"

⁴ Cited by C. Jaffrelot, *op. cit.*, p. 112. For further light on the opposition between Gandhi and Ambedkar, see E. Zelliott, "Gandhi and Ambedkar. A Study in Leadership," in J.M. Mahar (ed.), *The Untouchables in Contemporary India*, Tucson, The University of Arizona Press, 1972.

castes, quickly became apparent, and Ambedkar was forced to replace it with the Scheduled Castes Federation. As indicated by the organization's change of name, this also signalled a change in the political strategy of Ambedkar, who intended to refocus on the issue of caste. Distancing himself from Marxist rhetoric and from the denunciation of capitalism, Ambedkar chose to retreat to the hard core of his electoral base. However, the elections of 1946 were a bitter defeat for the new party, Ambedkar being unable even to keep his own seat.

During the Second World War, Ambedkar maintained strong support for the British, while the Congress party preferred to withdraw from political institutions in order to denounce the involvement of India in a conflict that did directly concern it. Hoping much from his support of the British, he thought that they had done more than any Indian party towards the emancipation of the "depressed classes".⁵ This cooperation had the consequence of reinforcing his hostility to the Congress party, and for a long time exposed him to the accusation that he was a traitor to the nation, an anti-national or a pro-colonial.

Father of the Indian Constitution

Despite Ambedkar's defeat in the elections of 1946, the Congress party, which wanted to present itself as the nation's unifier, turned to him, and Nehru, following Gandhi's request, named him Minister of Justice. Even more importantly, Ambedkar returned to the Constituent Assembly and, having impressed many of the Congress party by his mastery of the law and by the compromise solutions that he proposed, was named head of the committee responsible for drafting the Constitution. Thus Ambedkar could defend in the Constituent Assembly the political principles that he had absorbed during his studies in the United States and England. In particular he proposed putting into place a British-style judicial system, thus opposing a centralizing dynamic to the option supported by Gandhi, who was in favour of a decentralization of power down to the village level. He had great influence throughout the drafting of the text, and with a considerable amount of diplomacy and political skill he

⁵ The role played by the British in the issue of caste was highly ambiguous. On the one hand, the constant and essentialist use that they made of caste categories in their management of the country reinforced and rigidified the social reality of this institution (see especially Bernard S. Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1987; and Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind. Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001); on the other hand, the British very early on sought to develop the education of the lower-caste and they were the first to introduce a system of quotas in the representative system (see Christophe Jaffrelot, "Inde: l'avènement politique de la caste," *Critique Internationale*, no. 17, October 2002, <http://www.ceri-sciencespo.com/publica/critique/article/ci17p131-144.pdf>). But it is above all the egalitarian values that Ambedkar took to have been the main contribution of the British: he hoped that their consolidation would afford protection against the "Hindus of caste."

managed to marginalize the influence of Gandhi's positions. As a result, the Constitution, promulgated on January 26th, 1950, carries a strong imprint of Ambedkar, who ensured the codification of fundamental rights and the guarantee of state involvement in social reform: untouchability was abolished, and every form of discrimination prohibited.

However, Ambedkar did not manage to impose his wish for the adoption of a western-style civil code. His plan for a civil code for the Hindus (the Hindu Code Bill) raised questions about many customs directing Hindus' private life (particularly in marriage, divorce, equality of the sexes, inheritance and property law) and sparked off numerous criticisms in the Assembly. Nehru, who thought that this law was necessary for the modernization of Indian society and who had assured Ambedkar of his unwavering support on this point, in the end gave in to pressure both from the more traditional fringes of the Congress party (and in particular from Rajendra Prasad, President of the Constituent Assembly, who had become President of the Indian Republic), and from the very powerful mobilization of numerous Hindu associations. In fact, this project provoked deep disquiet among those who feared that the law would too radically upset the Hindu social order. Having been repudiated, Ambedkar sent his letter of resignation on September 27th, 1951.

Conversion to Buddhism

After this reversal, Ambedkar declared himself disgusted with politics, even though he did not completely retire from public life. He took part in the first general elections of independent India in 1952, but did not manage to get elected to Parliament. The following year, he lost another by-election. In 1956, just before his death, he laid the foundation for a new party, the *Republican Party of India* (RPI).

But above all Ambedkar dedicated most of his energy to another project. In 1935, he had publicly vowed that he would not die a Hindu: for him, Hinduism, though the religion he was born into, meant the domination of caste. After having explored different possibilities, his choice was for Buddhism, because of its egalitarian dimension, as he asserted on October 3rd, 1954, in a radio interview:

My social philosophy can be clearly summed up in three words: liberty, equality, fraternity. But don't go saying that I have taken my philosophy from the French Revolution. That's not the case. My philosophy is rooted in religion, not in political science. I took it from the

teachings of my master, the Buddha.... My philosophy comes out of a mission. I must work on behalf of conversion.⁶

So Ambedkar converted to Buddhism at Nagpur, on October 14th, 1956, the day of the Hindu feast of Dasahra. Several hundreds of thousands of people from "untouchable" castes journeyed in order to convert at the same time as Ambedkar. Ambedkar died soon afterwards, on December 6th, 1956. His cremation was the occasion for another mass conversion.

Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism, however limited in terms of political effectiveness, was certainly the act of his life that best reflected the imprint that he left on Indian society. By this choice that symbolized a complete break from Hinduism, Ambedkar entered into a process of struggle and resistance to the power constituted by Hinduism and the caste system. He knew how to demonstrate and to disseminate the idea that resistance to Hinduism must occur at all levels of existence: on the level of political institutions, naturally, but also on the level of religion. Ambedkar was certainly aware that breaking with Hinduism meant comprehensively upsetting things: this act modified social interactions, the relation of one's body with those of others, the relation to ideology, the relation to work – in short, the relation to power in all its most intimate dimensions.⁷ No "untouchable" who decided to break with Hinduism could escape the practical, daily constraints of that choice, and to manage this leap into the unknown, the figure of Ambedkar established itself as the benchmark model *par excellence*. His portrait occupies a place of honour on the walls of many Dalit homes and Ambedkar remains the major exemplary figure for a great many Dalit families.

Guy Poitevin is undoubtedly the author who has best objectivized the importance of this absorption of the figure of Ambedkar into the Dalit system of representations. By his work on the songs of the peasants of the Mahar caste grinding flour (what he calls "the millstone songs"), he has managed to make clear the way in which the figure of Ambedkar has inserted itself into a language – Marathi – and into a daily cultural practice – millstone singing. The interesting thing about Poitevin's work is that it shows that this representation of Ambedkar "does not have as its ultimate referent Ambedkar and his work as a social and political phenomenon in itself, for the singers to make into an object of reflection and

⁶ Quoted by Jaffrelot, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

⁷ Indeed, there were numerous implications of conversion. Renouncing Hinduism immediately modified the relation with members of superior castes in the village and entailed the often difficult abandonment of former Hindu religious practices that had given a rhythm and structure to daily life. This effort at brutal deculturation necessarily gives rise to numerous questions about what attitude to take towards forbidden things and taboos that involve submission to the Brahmanic order.

knowledge, or the material of a plea for social transformation, namely a rewriting of history so it will be an 'authentic' narrative by subservients" (p. 340). Quite the contrary; for Poitevin these efforts at representing Ambedkar consist in the embodiment of a quest for self-knowledge by the Dalit consciousness: "The representation of Ambedkar replaces the function of a mirror. By displaying and objectifying in the imagination the portrait of Ambedkar that it had drawn *to keep the memory like a deposit of happiness in the bank* (as one of the songs puts it), consciousness reaches out to recognize itself as it would like to be."

Through using the figure of Ambedkar, the Dalits thus initiate an imaginary recapturing of their own identity. So one better understands the constant concern accorded by Mayawati – prime minister of Uttar Pradesh and director of the Bahujan Samaj party, the most important Dalit party in India – to build (especially during her fourth term starting in 2007) multiple statues of Ambedkar.⁸ Today, the struggle against the domination of caste, whatever form it takes, still cannot be carried on without bringing in the figure of Ambedkar.

An invitation to rethink the postcolonial question in India

The influence of the figure of Ambedkar on India's collective imagination is similar in many ways to that of the figure of Gandhi, and it is not surprising that the clash between Ambedkar and Gandhi also continues to leave its mark on Indian society. The imprint of their clash comes out in a particularly bitter way when one makes an effort to combine the question of caste with reflection on postcolonialism in India. Indeed, the question of caste almost automatically requires taking some distance from binary concepts such as the one that opposes the culture of the colonized to the culture of the colonizer, a mode of representation that is found in certain postcolonial analyses. Indeed, the Dalit movement, like Ambedkar himself, maintains an ambiguous relation with the memory of the British presence in India. The symptoms of this ambivalence of memory are numerous and can sometimes take extreme and unexpected forms. Thus the Dalit essayist Chandra Bhan Prasad has now defended Macaulay's "Minute on Education", a recurring target of the most traditional postcolonial critique.⁹ In this "Minute on Education", Macaulay, a member of the Governor-General's Council, declared the wish "to form a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English

⁸ On the issues surrounding the construction of statues of Ambedkar, see Nicolas Jaoul, "Learning the use of symbolic means: Dalits, Ambedkar statues and the state in Uttar Pradesh," *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2006, p. 175-207.

⁹ C. B. Prasad, *Dalit Phobia. Why Do They Hate Us?*, New Delhi, Vitasta, 2006.

in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect", and in consequence he proposed promoting the spread of a quality education in English to Indian economic and cultural elites.

However, this position, at once nostalgic and polemic, is not restricted to a few essayists and polemicists; other authors occupying less marginal positions in the academic world also highlight the Dalits' difficulty in finding their place in the Gandhian – or even in the Nehruvian – narrative framework of the struggle for independence. The work of the sociologist Hugo Gorringer shows in particular how the most underprivileged Dalits sometimes construct their social identity and their emotional attachment to the nation around a position that is very critical of the Indian nation-state, even though that nation-state embraces the purpose of transcending identities that are "narrowly segmental", such as caste.¹⁰ In a very similar perspective, though with decidedly stronger words, M.S.S. Pandian defends the idea that all discourses about the "modernity" of postcolonial Indian society lead to chasing the question of caste out of the public sphere.¹¹ Discourses about postcolonial India, as products of a "superior caste" habitus, will thus display a tendency to make caste invisible.

Such criticisms thus make it necessary to link the issues of caste and of the Dalits' social identity to the production of a postcolonial way of thinking in an independent India.¹² But they also compel us to raise questions about the origins of that critical perspective. Numerous answers to these questions can be found in the life and work of Ambedkar

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¹⁰ H. Gorringer, "The caste of the nation: Untouchability and citizenship in South India," *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 42, 1, 2008, pp. 123-149.

¹¹ M. S. S. Pandian, "One step outside modernity: caste, identity politics and public sphere," *Sephis-Codesria Lecture No. 4*, Amsterdam/Dakar, Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, 2001 (<http://www.sephis.org/pdf/pandian.pdf>).

¹² For profound reflection on the question of the connection between caste and postcolonialism, see Debjani Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity: Notes on a Postcolonial Hermeneutics of Caste*, London, Routledge, 2005.