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Problematic of Indian Untouchability and the Caste System: A critical review of Dalit & pre-Dalit Marathi thought on social reform*

K.V. Cybil**

Abstract

This paper, mostly written using secondary literature in Marathi, looks at how B.R. Ambedkar proposed a theory of the origin of the caste system and also the practice of untouchability. It forms the backdrop to a critique of writings on modern Indian society which approaches the problematic of untouchability by placing its responsibility squarely on the Dalits, such that it becomes a mission to reform their backwardness. A mission that was conceived in the reformist writings of Hinduism in the 19th and early 20th century Maharashtra, it had a critical role to play in the kind of response which Ambedkar came up with. The paper will in a linear sequence try to examine these theories which revolve around the conception of caste system as an inner dynamic of state and society in Maharashtra.

It is a discourse which has continued to emerge under the influence of Marxism thanks to the efforts of people like Sharad Patil and Anand Teltumbde. But what are the implications for the transformations in the trajectory of its growth. Amidst the gains to the claims of knowledge that it makes are there any pitfalls? These will be the main areas of this paper's concern.

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Before I begin my discussion of this and related material used for this paper part of which is in Marathi, I would like to clarify that in my encounter with the language, my interlocutor was Anna Bhau Sathe, who passed away in 1968 and with whom one converses only through his books. Having been a drop-out from school at a very early age and building his oeuvre through a literary career that began in the streets of Mumbai where he also probably learned the first alphabets of the language, I imagine this encounter could not have been more appropriate. By and large for most Dalit writers who never went to school or had the option of learning in any other language than Marathi, their use of the language itself becomes political in a singular way which perhaps also explains part of the reason for its niche as a literary oeuvre in Indian writing today. But I will not make a generic claim about this form of writing here and will only leave it for a larger discussion elsewhere.

Another thing I would like to add in the context of my encounter with Marathi is the unusual dynamics of the language as expressed in the way it empowers Dalit and non-Brahmin modes of expression. This has been pointed out by several authors including Rosalind O Hanlon (2002) in the case of Jotirao Phule, Milind Wakankar (2010) in the case of the Varkari poets or Eleanor Zelliot (1996) in the case of the legendary Mahar poet Chokhamela. As pointed out by Eleanor Zelliot, it is a language which has produced some of the path-breaking traditions in contemporary Indian thought. In the academic and literary circles of Maharashtra today, it is a bit controversial too because of the lurking danger of chauvinism behind the edge of progressive thinking in Marathi. As a matter of fact, there is a wealth of studies available on this including those by Aniket Jaaware (2001) and Veena Naregal (2001). Though not entering the highly differentiated linguistic or discursive aspects of its use, in a tangential way, the position of Dalits with respect to caste in Maharashtra remains the central concern of this paper. For this, I would like to begin with an illustration of the meaning and scope of this language as it communicates to me.

I refer to the contents of a letter written by a female student of fourteen years in the school run by Jyotiba and Savitri Phule in the year 1845 and published in the magazine *Gnyanoday*. An untouchable

herself, she wrote on the state of the Mang and Mahar in the region of Pune to the English rulers of that time. While on the one hand it is cited as the ideal for a pedagogic practice (Rege:2006), it's objectivity and its sharpness of claim is cited as prodigious for a fourteen year old. The letter makes the strongest point in stating that so long as the Mahar and Mang have rights to provide their children, with their own means of giving education things are going to remain pretty much the same. It is also a painful realization of a very young mind about the state of abandon into which she has been pushed by god almighty without a scripture or a faith. She laments why the Mang and Mahar do not have a Bible or the Veda and then asks questions why they should have been kept away from the Vedas. Finding reasons in the erstwhile misrule of the Peshwas she pleads the English government to set things right. In the second part of her letter she writes about the corrected attitude of the Brahmins towards the untouchables under the new regime, especially teaching their children in schools set up for them, but not without a satirical comment on Brahminism that helps the untouchable to educate themselves, but comes down on them heavily for even the minutest failure on their part to assail them as mere Mang and Mahar.

As observed earlier, this paper is written in the form of an introductory chapter to my work on Anna Bhau Sathe and the complex world of politics situated around him in today's Maharashtra. Renowned simultaneously as a Dalit, Mang and also a Marxist writer, lower caste subjectivities and problems arising there from, formed one of the central themes of his work. Although few of his works relate directly to my theoretical debate on the same, it is important to identify the Marxist, Phuleite, Ambedkarite and the Marathi-nationalist influences which formed the backdrop to his writings in order to address the ideology of Dalit and anti-caste movements which play a crucial role in determining the style of this politics.

Caste, Dalits and the Marathi Renaissance

I would like to make a departure with the differentiation between the concepts of Varna and Jati and the consequences thereof with respect to the practice of untouchability. These reflections largely tended

to be an assessment of the failure of the Peshwas against the British and inspired a need for reform amongst the Hindus. It was a debate which started with what is broadly termed the Renaissance in Maharashtra and they speak more of the upper caste self-assessment in the face of colonialism and its consequences. The first thinker of significance here is Lokhitavadi Gopal Hari Deshmukh (1823–1892). Though his later writings have been argued to be inspired by the Arya Samaj movement, the earlier writing of Lokhitvadi, a Brahmin himself, has been treated as of critical importance in its treatment of Varna as different from Jati. Varna for him is a system instituted by god himself and is universal in one way or the other. The Jati or caste on the other hand is a denial of this fate. Yet, it also accrues from god in the form of the Dharmasastras. Inspired by a spirit of reform he wished to compile a single religious text for the convenience of Hindus, in place of the different texts that existed. This would guide them to follow their religion according to the Dharmas or scruples. These scruples were meant to advice them not to take pride in the line of descent or birth in the matter of caste. It is nonetheless appropriate to do so, on the basis of virtue or talent. Eventually all pride in caste should disappear, if at all the system should survive.

Lokhitavadi also claims that of the four Varnas, only three remained in the beginning. These were identified with states-craft, chivalry and commerce. Sudra a later Varna was given all the tasks that remained. Over the years, even though a Sudra could rise to the rank of a Brahmin by high virtue or a Brahmin could sink to the rank of a Sudra because of low virtue, their castes were to remain the same as before. He therefore also thought that marriage between different castes is not a feasible idea. In a way though he abstained from treating caste as a matter determined by birth, he was indirectly welcoming it. He assumed that the state of inter-caste relations have over the years remained unchanged and will do so in future. In fact, it has been argued that under the Peshwas, who were themselves Brahmins in the role of Kshatriyas, there were many who took to different occupations including dance and music but steadfastly retained their Brahminical identity (Gokhale:2006:39–47). Lokhitavadi hence deems that the Brahmins of the present (nineteenth century) need to play a historic role in order to protect both the Varna and Jati. This is by educating

the Hindus about its function in society, and being true to his faith in Brahminism. He also holds that being in the role of pundits or scholars for generations is a historic role given to the Brahmins, because being Brahmins they were always the true representatives of the religion (Ibid.).

Interesting as it may seem, Maharashtra paved the way for the early conception of two competing models or paradigms in the 19th century, one of social change from above and one from below. This comes down to us in the ideas respectively of Lokhitvadi and Phule who were also contemporaries. Jotirao Phule's intervention in this discourse remains path-breaking because he left the weight of scriptures or the scruples behind and established reform of the caste system as the main target of his social agenda. He criticized the stratified Hindu society which was immersed in the faith of its divine sanction and hence had forsaken for itself any path or route for escape from the stagnation. He also identified the fact that it becomes more difficult to change the system because there were those who benefited from it and therefore opposed its change. Phule therefore immensely favoured those who were trapped and given into blind faith in it as the future protagonists of change in the system. Experience—a critically discussed category in current polemic of the caste system (Guru & Sarukkai:2012)—becomes crucial for him as a matter of knowledge.

Jotirao Phule's (1827–90) biggest contribution lies in testing the legitimacy of the scriptures. In a native, ingenious sort of way he put them to a rigorous theoretical examination. He comes with startling results in explaining the genealogy of the people of Maharashtra. He calls them Dravidas or Dasyus who did farming and had an egalitarian life where men and women shared equal responsibilities and enjoyed equal freedom. Migrants or nomadic people from the North West Frontier initially settled down for farming, but eventually usurped the Dravidians of their rule. The new settlers, who called themselves Aryans divided the original settlers into various castes and allotted them specific jobs and places in the hierarchy and claimed that it was all being done in the name of god. He became a staunch critic of the caste system and concluded that those who believe in its trappings will have to remain in search of greater-worldly comfort and pleasure. Only those who

emerge out of it and countenance its reality will be able to wield any form of historic subjectivity.

Phule was not a rationalist or non-believer who in challenging the existence of god defied the social hierarchy he created. On the other hand, he was as much a believer as anyone else, who while challenging the caste system as fraudulent or the work of frauds maintained that there is no reason why god himself should be so unjust as to make society partisan to the interests of the few against the many (Shinde:2006:48–55).

Untouchability, Dalits and Marathi Nationalism

With V.K.Rajwade (1863–1926), the historian who joins issue with these writers by claiming that caste system is peculiar to the Hindus and other societies the world over have already lost it or never had anything similar, we enter a distinctively new phase in this debate. It was the question of racial purity of the Aryans which was at stake for him. He said that at the time of Panini the four Varnas—the Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and the Sudra—existed, but not the Jatis. The system of marriages called the Anulom and Pratilom that allowed for marriages between members of different Varnas led to the formation of several intermediate groups which belonged to none of the existing classifications. In order to protect society from being thus lost to a mixture of classes of people, separate castes were formed and they achieved this particularly by making rules of marriage prohibiting any from outside the caste.

He saw history as history of specific Kulas or ethnic groups and in identifying caste as the specific property of the Aryans or the Hindus stated that it represents the scientific and abundant way in which the early Hindu or Aryan society interacted with the outsiders, by assigning to every new group it came in contact a place proper to it. Purity of the seed, a concept evolved by him was then argued to be the most scientific way for a society to transform itself into a caste. He was in this way a propagator of the theory that it is by birth that a person's caste is determined. In sticking to a purely deterministic way of thinking about caste, he propounds that originally the Aryan society was

comprised of only three Varnas—white Brahmins, red Kshatriyas and the yellow Vaisyas. He founded this classification on a racial ground such that the specialization of these groups in terms of occupation seldom rises for discussion. In the encounter of three-tiered Aryan society with the non-Aryan Sudras who were taken as slaves (not forcibly because it was their natural disposition according to him) it is that the Caturvarnya takes shape. The mixing of races that accrued from this encounter led to the creation of various castes. The new races that accrued from the mixture were the ones to be inspired by the religious movements like Buddhism and Jainism. He claims to follow Nietzsche in asserting the need for racial purity of the caste society. In calling for a universalist creed like that of purity of caste he also finds an ally in him as the only European thinker to be freed from the clutches of its nationalist consciousness.

While he thinks that India is the only country to have preserved the original purity of races, because it is the only country that has preserved the caste system, he is apprehensive of the changes being wrought on it by the latest developments. He was especially critical of the efforts of Sayajirao Gaikwad in educating the lower castes and did not even mention Phule in a book on Marathi intellectuals he wrote in 1913. He advised Sayajirao to strengthen the Brahmin–Kshatriya axis and not to support the Ati-sudras, because he thought the latter would pose a serious threat to the caste system, if educated. Critics have alleged his role as being confined to the upper caste strategies of controlling or reining in the social domain once the suzerainty in politics was already lost to the British (Deshpande: 2006: 90–97). They argue that Rajwade was a product of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, when Brahminical conventions called Gramanya, about eight of them were held in a short time to discuss these strategies. Rajwade was a product of this thinking just like many others including Gopalrao Walangkar who tried to 'scientifically' establish the several shortcomings of the non-Aryans, in being fit for society (Ibid.).

Rajwade is a controversial historian of Maharashtra whose writings have generated different shades of response. If on the one hand, he is criticized as a staunch proponent of the Brahminical wisdom in the ingenuity of Indian society not to be witnessed elsewhere in the world,

on the other hand his observations pertaining to the position of Sudras and women have been controversial (Chausalkar:2006).

Rajwade considered the early Aryan society to have been free of any stratification. They were differentiated on the basis of parents, some in the line of fathers, others in their mothers'. They formed different units or hordes respectively on this basis and addressed themselves as Gana, such that its leader was addressed as Ganpati. There are references to such names in the Rigveda and they indicate both genders. Gradually a colour pre-occupation crept into this division and this was the beginning of the Caturvarnya. It did not have any other basis in the beginning but these superficial racial characteristics. The time of grammarian Panini which is about 1000BC becomes the landmark in the study of this society because that is where it is found mentioned. But by this time the women ruled Ganas had attained a certain form of notoriety as conspiratorial. This form of organization is thence recognized to be on the decline. This was also because at the time of Panini, the Aryan society divided on the basis of colour began to mix with the Sudra. Sudra women were being accepted as wives of the Varna men, rather than the other way around. This shows that women were generally losing in influence. The determination of Varna being fixed on paternal lines, the cross-fertilization led to there being dark complexioned Brahmins and fair-complexioned Sudras. These new races were not accepted into the orthodoxy of the Brahmin society and were absorbed into the cults of the Lokayata, Jainism and Buddhism.

Buddhism launched a social revolution representing them and accomplished the political integration of the different mixed races of people. The time that followed Buddhism in Maharashtra witnessed the effort to establish a caste-society based on village as its primary functional unit. This was also a period of external occupation because Maharashtra was under the rule of different forces from outside. But, the village or Gram which contributed to its basics was to remain unaffected. The differentiation of occupations and an established social order based on it ensured that no one from outside the village had property or trade in the village. The endurance of the village ensured that the economic function of caste was fixed. The colour-based

ordering from which it may be argued to have risen was also eventually forgotten.

Rajwade thinks that the state in Maharashtra was a result of migrations from outside. The original Maharashtrians as he calls them came to this land and settled on the banks of Tungabhadra where they were dispersed into different Ganas. They never formed themselves into any larger political formation and it was always in their destiny to be ruled by outsiders. The Buddhists, Muslims and the British ruled over them such that they endured colonialism for a long time. But these early Maharashtrians merged well with the existing population of the Naga (today's Mahar) giving birth to the Maratha people as one knows them today. The dawn of Marathi consciousness and self-rule had to wait therefore till the period of Shahaji (1602–64), Sivaji (1627–80) and Sant Ramdas (1608–81).

The other region where the early Maharashtrian settled was the north Konkan. This was a region with its own indigenous people comprising of the Mang, Koli, Katwadi, Varli etc. A mixing of the 'original' Maharashtrians with the indigenous population, foreigners like Persians, Arabs and Jews was what followed in the Konkan. Amidst the abundance of rice that grew in the region the population divided itself into different castes and followed a settled life for centuries together. This society that lay stagnant for centuries together, saw a movement in the eighteenth century with the rise of the Peshwas. Apart from these two instances, Maharashtra has never been ruled by Maharashtrians. Rajwade silently maintains that in the larger perspective the indigenous population of Maharashtra never had the genius or ability to form a state.

Rajwade argued that in contemporary times there is a drive towards assimilating all Varnas into one, which has to be resisted. He felt that the Varna society that lies at the root of caste has served the role of assimilating and integrating the indigenous people of India instead of exterminating them like what colonialism did to the people of America and Africa. Even Islam, though successful in converting a fraction of the village population, could not alter the basic structure of caste because it had become an integral function of the village economy. He considered

that preservation of the system is therefore to be left to the people (Bahujansamaj) and in matters of dispute arising due to matters related to it, instead of adhering to the decisions of courts and judges who believe in a single human race or Varna, it is better to listen to the gramsabhas. This was the way out as he contemplated the future of caste.

Regarding the usefulness of caste as a means for preserving purity of line despite inter-racial marriages he says that according to the Smriti, third, fifth and seventh generation female offspring born of a marriage between a Brahmin male and female will revert to the original Brahmin parent's lineage if married to a Brahmin. Although caste and its future seemed to have bothered Rajwade, the question of untouchability does not seem to have affected him at all (Chausalkar:op.cit).

But, there are criticisms of Rajwade still emerging which is different from those erstwhile (for example, Wakankar:2010). Rajwade is not merely a historian, but a historian of grammar who believed that language represents the spirit of the political, especially the spirit of Marathi from the earliest times. Rajwade discovered the most crucial links between Marathi spoken in the 13th century and Panini's Sanskrit (Ibid). He accomplished a legendary retrieval of a manuscript of the poem written by Sant Gnyaneswara known as *Gnyaneswari*. It is a commentary on the Gita and also one of the four key texts that upheld the lower caste mystical religion of Bhakti in the medieval period, otherwise known as the Indo-Islamic millennium (Ibid).

Focusing on his interest to trace a genealogy for the Maratha political awakening against the Muslims and the British, in short to the outsiders, Rajwade concludes that the state or its spirit was always lying dormant within the people of the region, that it required the entry of an external agency to trigger its actual formation. According to him, state is something which is instituted on the frontier of the social. All the time that it was a possibility, it belonged historically as a feature of its language, deep within it only to emerge at the point of encountering the end of the social, or the outsider (Ibid).

The Aryans who entered Maharashtra from Europe comprising the Brahmins and Kshatriyas did not establish a state. Being quite

different from the satiated commercial classes called Vish who peopled the region of Maharashtra, they subjected them to some kind of rule who then became the Dasa. Here Dasa means for Rajwade, a tax-payer and not a slave because the new regime established by the Aryans did not envisage a state or a relationship such as the one between Raja (the king) and *Praja* (the subject).

Rajwade now becomes relevant more due to his revealing the meaning of the text *Gnyaneswari* than his analysis of it in terms of the medieval axis to the modern awakening of Hindu or Maratha nationalism (Ibid). The continuity postulated between Panini and the *Gnyaneswari* manuscript that Rajwade discovered stops best at being an adoption of the new lens used by Indologists to study language, phonetics. In this Rajwade was also inspired by a German philologist called Pischel who had studied Prakrit. This text helped Rajwade reveal the several similarities of Old Marathi with Prakrit language. But the language of *Gnyaneswari* presupposes, notwithstanding its being a dialogue between man and god (Arjuna and Krishna) that god is always prior to it (Wakankar:2010). This means that despite the connections evident between Sanskrit and Prakrit it is not merely a continuation in spirit of this antiquity but a representation of a more absolute anteriority, which is also systemic, the manifestation of a Dalit religiosity of encounter with a hidden and historically prior god (Ibid).

When Rajwade analysed the retrieved manuscript of the *Gnyaneswari* he found evidences for the early militarization of the Hindu society in response to the Islamic millennium that was inaugurated in Konkan with the conquest of Alauddin, i.e., around the time the poem was written (13th century). It emerged as a model for him to the creation of a state to be based on Kshatra-dharma or the warrior ethic, a trait preserved since the very beginning in the people of Aryan origin. But in arguing that the inception of the idea of the state happened at the core of Marathi as a language, Rajwade failed to see the specific religiosity of the Varkari tradition of which the poem/text formed one of the main pillars. The texts of the Varkari tradition demonstrate the religiosity, devotion or deification of the Vithala of Pandharpur which exceeds the relevant systems of knowledge established since antiquity, i.e., the Vedas or the Upanishads (Ibid).

The phonology thought to play a key role in the tracing of the history of a language by Rajwade was not to be so effective a method in order to understand the *Gnyaneswari* because it, the *Gnyaneswari*, is inhabited by a certain interiority structured within a system which is not so readily given to analysis by a form of historical grammar suggested by Rajwade. This is most evident in the works attributed to Kabir, legendary Bhakti poet and saint who used Islam to question the idea of caste in a rebellious manner. The Bhakti and the Varkari tradition share similarities in this respect. This has often passed the notice of scholars, because of the secular, urbane and modern readings of the Bhakti texts. Such readings, undertaken to invent the modern in the pre-modern, have despite fifty years of affirmative action only strengthened identitarian politics (Ibid.).

What is of greater significance is to try and understand a text like *Gnyaneswari* from the vantage point created by the Dalit and the non-Brahmin movement that has speculated on a historical enemy called Brahminism and a primary antagonism between the Dalits and the Brahmins despite the presence of Islam or the long experience of the Indo-Islamic millenium. This can be reached only through putting to a critical reading the way Bhakti texts have been analysed by the nationalist scholarship. For example, Dharamvir, a contemporary Dalit critic, is pitted against Hazariprasad Dwivedi whose work inaugurated the assimilation of Kabir into the national popular in the 1920s. There is something irremediably and irretrievably secretive about these texts which make them objects of special interest for the nationalist critic. Rajwade's search for the initial pangs of Maratha state in *Gnyaneswari* is also similar (Ibid.).

The radical involution of the Yogic subject in these texts, on the other hand is taking them back to a period beyond the origin of history as it exists in the nationalist imagination. This is allegorical or repetitive in a mechanical sense, to the effect that the meaning it creates is like a hall of mirrors for the nationalist subject. It is endlessly alluring, but equally secretive. But this repetitiveness is also the reaching out to a religiosity before the beginning of any historical religion. For the Dalits, it is embedded in the rites of mourning of the Kapalika, a sect long lost in antiquity never to have been retrieved historically by the sciences

of man even during the time of colonialism. This is a Dalit inheritance which is free of the ethical practices of value judgments of Hinduism and is also a specific way of claiming hegemony over the social, i.e., without making any claims to a statehood. These texts, including *Gnyaneswari*, which convey the sense of justice in the mourning of the Kapalika in their allegorical, repetitive verses of a god, who is the other who will have come but for his demise, and hence the mourning, are the Dalit texts of hearsay which are crucial to the modern struggles for Dalit empowerment, the *Gnyaneswari* being no exception (Ibid.: 92–124).

Rajwade, who comes across as a nationalist inadvertently thrown into the antiquity of Dalit religiosity while trying to derive a grammar for *Gnyaneswari*, elsewhere renounces most of Bhakti poetry alleging that its other-worldly spirituality hampered the growth of the Maratha spirit. This notion of a Maratha spirit invented by him along the lines of Hegelian *geist* is embodied in the poetry of Ramdas who eulogized (Deshpande:2007: 131) the dispensation of Sivaji as the true representative of Maharashtra dharma in combining spirituality with political prowess. Significant here is also the fact that Ramdas did not belong to the Varkari tradition and was a devotee of Ram and his political philosophy was also situated around protection of cows and Brahmins. Rajwade saw in Ramdas the right attitude to be adopted to combat Muslim invasion, which was also one of the guiding factors in his study of the *Mahikatvadi Bhakar* and *Gnyaneswari* (Ibid: 126–151).

But if the power of Sivaji did accrue from such a definition of Maharashtra, Dharma is contestable in the light of Phule's writings which saw him as a champion of the peasantry (Maratha, Kunbi, Sudra, Ati-Sudra), as separate from the priests (Brahmins). Contemporary Dalit critiques of a revivalist understanding of the Maharashtra dharma or Sivaji interrogate the Muslim-hatred or Brahminical source of inspiration for his struggles. Sharad Patil (2005) for example argues that it was the small state of the African-Islamic expatriate ruler Malik Amber of Aurangabad who served the model for Sivaji in organizing the state with the help of the lower caste peasant groups. If not for such a crucial alliance of the non-Brahminical castes, the regime of

Sivaji also would not have become phenomenal as nationalist historians argue them to be. There is a reluctance to grasp this point despite the self-evident Islamic underpinnings to the nature of authority Sivaji should have enjoyed as seen in a Powada written by balladeer Amar Sheikh. There is reason here to argue how Dalits view Sivaji as a rebel not merely against the Muslims, but other Maratha chieftains and the British and the Portuguese as well (Deshpande:2007).

But the failure or lapse in making such a claim becomes glaring, when Ambedkar is reproduced as a future vanguard of the Maratha spirit who for reasons of a fear of a rural or local elite of Maratha-Kunbi castes dominating the Dalits, dissented from the cause of a unified Maharashtra (Ibid.: 202). This can lead to conclusions that the untouchables to the extent they form a conglomerate of castes with the Brahmins and Marathas succeed in preserving an identity which is linked to state formation within the regions. This raises the question whether they can be successful, when it comes to achieving these ends by themselves. But, the discussion of the role that caste plays in the new wave of state formation in India will have to be left for a different paper.

Untouchability, Dalits and Reform

As we move on from Rajwade to another contemporary thinker on the problematic of untouchability, we come to V.R. Shinde (1873–1944) who was a crusader against its practice, while also a theorist of Indian society. He was so influential a figure in Maharashtra during the time of the national movement, that one finds it very strange that Rajwade excludes his name from the list of history makers in Maharashtra along with that of Jotirao Phule (More:2006:139). In fact, More (Ibid.) considers him the first thinker to conceptualize the problem of untouchability not merely in Maharashtra, but all of India. He coupled observation—for which he made visits to various parts of the country—with his ideas before formulating the problem as such. The world of scholarship around him was more given to thinking on lines of culture, language or race about history. Shinde broke this trend by calling such thoughts, which were based on the myth of the Aryan race, the 'idols of cave' (a Platonic imagery for illusion). He felt the

need for a socio-economic approach to the past focusing on untouchability as an institution and untouchables as a population who were brought into that condition. Having been a student of theology at the Manchester, he brought a radically new perspective into it by making it inter-disciplinary in searching the root cause of the problem. His book *Bharatiy Asprishyetecha Prasn* adopts an etymological study of the untouchable castes, but not restricting it to the question of language, but also to livelihood and other significant aspects of their history that made them untouchables. He deals with at length at least 25 of them, from various parts of the country with whom he spent periods of two months to a year studying the different dimensions of their condition as untouchables. The book in itself is a result of 30 years of observation and research.

Regarding the origin of the institution as such, he deviates from the prevalent opinion shared by scholars such as Rajwade and politicians like Tilak who thought that it was instituted by Manu to curtail mixing of races. Instead he formulated that it was the corrupt administration of the Hindu rulers that resulted in untouchability. He claims it to be as recent as the arrival of Muslims in India, when the Hindus seized the opportunity to castigate the Buddhists as lower castes.[1] Shinde's hypothesis comes close to that of Ambedkar, with the only difference that whereas Shinde holds the three Varnas— Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaisya—responsible for this, Ambedkar holds the Brahmin alone responsible. It gradually spread from areas which were exposed to Muslim aggression in the west to Bengal in the east and Madras, the south of India. Linking the formation of caste and untouchability to the villages in Maharashtra and deriving from the facts of ownership of land, he observes how the different landowning castes like Mahar and Mang were gradually alienated from the land and then goes on to claim that caste system as such can only be understood to be a result of political, social and economic reasons and not a derivative of the

[1] Interesting it may seem, this observation of Shinde is ably supported by both Wendy Donniger and Gail Omvedt (2003) when they point out that the word *pasanda* in Sanskrit was used to address both Buddhists, Muslims and also lower castes at one point of time. Not to mention that a slight variation of the word derived from Persian, *pasmanada* is used by lower castes among Muslims to represent themselves.

Caturvarnya. Untouchability is founded more on the loss of land or occupation and competition with other castes than on the basis of Varna-inspired hatred for other castes. He divides the land of India into three categories according to the social formations—Punjab and the North West, Bihar, Bengal, Orissa etc. & Dravidian land. The Brahmins and the Kshatriyas excommunicated the Buddhists who refused sanctuary to the Hindus in the 12th century, after the Islamic invasion. These were the original untouchables who were then overthrown by the Hindus. The south is an exception to this rule. Here the practice of untouchability preceded the Muslim invasion. For example in Malabar, the Nambutiri Brahmins had established their rule even before this invasion, so much so that its practice took on a more ferocious face. While much of the former Buddhist and Jain population were integrated into the village organization of the Aryans as Balutedars in the north, they suffered a worse fate in the south where they were subjected to a state of slavery. Thus Shinde argues that though Buddhism and Jainism do refer to caste, they do not make mention of untouchability like Manusmriti because it was not of any direct use to them.

Here a contrast may be drawn with the ideas of Rajwade and Shinde who had very different views on the question of untouchability. If for Shinde, it was a practice to be abolished by eliminating the caste system, Rajwade held that the untouchables were to be reformed by incorporating them into the nobler rungs of caste. The loss of purity by inter-marriage as observed earlier could be rectified for the lower castes by marrying their daughter in the third, fifth or seventh generation into the original or pure line of the Brahmin father. This was a devise invented by the early caste society, and little relevant today, yet for Rajwade this remains the only way of bringing about the reform (More:2006:143). For a contemporary debate, this can mean only one thing, which is that the untouchables must have the desire to purify themselves in order for reforms to have force. Shinde in fact alleges that, he does not find it surprising that Rajwade despite his scholarship gets counted amongst the many writers who write histories of individual castes inspired by a desire to establish their purity.

Recently, there are explorations into the relevance of Shinde's essay *Bhagwat Dharmaca Vikas* as a representation of the rise of a Dalit

practical reason which belongs to not of any religion of the present, but of one yet to come (Wakankar:2010:174). Both Phule and Shinde represent crucial figures in a Dalit re-awakening by linking themselves to the Varkari tradition of which Tukaram (Kunbi), also a non-Brahmin like Phule (Mali) and Shinde (Maratha) becomes an inspiration. This is not to forget that the whole of Varkari tradition with its four major saints—Gnyaneswar (Brahmin), Namdev (Simpi), Eknath (Brahmin) and Tukaram—constitute the tradition of Dalit hearsay of which Kabir also becomes a representative. These poets coming from non-Brahmin and Brahmin castes, representing a non-Brahmin tradition were non-Dalits. How then does caste subalternity represent Dalit hearsay is the question (Ibid). Shinde's thoughts have been brought to focus in the contemporary debate in Maharashtra opened by commentators like R.C. Dhere (1984: *Vithala ek Mahasamanvaya*) and Dilip Chitre (1990: *Punha Tukaram*) for locating the subalternity of the Dalit outside of the Dalit tradition. This alternate tradition is that of the Lok, i.e., forms such as Lokparampara, Loksahitya etc. It is in exploring what constitutes the historicity of this Lok that there is a turn to Shinde for an answer, because there is a tension between the Lok and the Dalit traditions which Shinde's above cited work resolves (Ibid).

It is the analysis of the god Vithala of the Varkaris that assumes importance for a folk historian like Dhere who equates this worship with the Lok or the folk which is the provenance for the mainstream traditions of Bhakti in Maharashtra. But this Lok is not the religious folk that assemble in pilgrimages at the Vithala shrine in Pandharpur. It is rather, a pre-historic assemblage of devotees who individually can and do will the deity into existence (here the Dhangar pastoralists whose original deity the Vithala is supposed to be). The Abhangas or couplets of Tukaram which contemplate Vithala signify the god, who is prior to Krishna or the deity as the Vaishnavite religion has established Vithala. Instead this god is a luminescent face of that original god to be willed into existence granting aggrandizement to the devotee. It is a religiosity prior to religion per se. Shinde gives the outlines of this religiosity in his work *Bhagwat Dharmaca Vikas*. Shinde here gives the possibilities of establishing a new *Bhagwat Dharma* not as a new religion or creed, but of a practical reason, still to come (Ibid: 174).

Untouchability and Marxism

In our perusal of the problematic of untouchability and the Varna-Jati division in India, we next come to Dharmanand Kosambi (1876–1944) who was renowned as a scholar of Pali and also a practicing Buddhist. Kosambi's propositions were quite original although he borrowed from Rajwade the interpretation of the word Dasa as givers. But he identified the Dasas or the original inhabitants of the Indus valley as the rulers of the area, later subdued by the migrating Aryans spearheaded by the mythical Indra and converted into slaves. A class differentiation very similar to the Varna system into Brahmins, Kshatriya and the Vaisya existed prior to the advent of the Aryans according to Dharmanand Kosambi. With the institution of slavery, trade of slaves also became common and hence a proliferation in their numbers. This led to the creation of a new class of people, the Sudras who attended to the listless tasks of the Varna-based society. Kosambi anticipates Dumezil (1988) when he says that before the Aryans there existed two kinds of Brahmins, one the priestly class and two, the ruler class. The warrior-like Aryans displaced the ruler class and established themselves in their place, but did not manage to significantly alter the structure of the hierarchy or the leadership of the Brahmins.

Dharmanand Kosambi used a historical materialist approach towards the study of his subject. Unlike his contemporaries Tilak or Rajwade he did not find it compelling to preserve or protect the Varna or Caste system for nationalist or reasons of Swaraj. He also did not restrict his analysis to the study of Vedic texts, but augmented it with Jain and Buddhist literature. He supported the heterodoxy of the Sramanik tradition as opposed to the Vedic tradition and opened new debates on ancient India (Kelkar:2006:151–58).

Damodar Dharmanand Kosambi (1907–66) who followed in the footsteps of his father to become a self-trained Marxist historian was intrigued by the absence of a working class in the history of India (Nene:2006:293–307). The reason as he presumed it to be was the caste system. In his researches he discovered that the four-fold division of the Caturvarnya was comparable to that of Iran and there was nothing peculiar in it to the Vedic religion. In fact he claimed that in its diffuse

form it can be detected even in the civilization of the Indus valley. The Rigveda with which it makes actual debut, proved to be the interaction of two distinct races of people—the Arya and the Dasa. This interaction was not one-sided where the Aryans were the victors and the Dasas the losers, but one of mutual give and take. The priestly class especially was one such, which emerged out of the Dasa. The Rigveda mentions several conflicts between the Brahmin and the Kshatriya, the most famous of which is between the Brahmin Vasishta and the Kshatriya Viswamitra. This conflict is enough proof for the fact that non-Aryans donned the role of priests. Though the aboriginal population of the Dasa made valuable contribution to the Arya society in the formation of its priestly class, its own poor majority was enslaved and gradually formed the foundation for the four-fold classification of the Rigveda.

Damodar Kosambi as a Marxist historian is one who analyses Caturvarnya as a form of class society which was founded on an economic base, for economic reasons and historically lived its life for the reasons of its economic value. But there are some serious omissions which he makes with respect to the practice of the class relations in the Varna society. This turns on the question of slavery, especially trade in slaves. For him the inadequate growth of trade and commerce in this society had ensured that there would be no human or slave trade. The Sudra who were ordered into any form of activity or even killed at the whim of their masters, were not treated as commodities to be traded in. In short he draws a distinction between the ancient society of India and that of Greece or Rome, though in both places slavery was widely practiced.

Though the initial times were one of conflict between the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas according to the Vedas, the gradual evolution of the society reveals that the Brahmins emerged in strength and undisputed power with respect to their mastery over the rituals, especially those of the sacrifice. The representatives of the Dasa such as Vasishta of the Rigveda gave away to the more puritanical forms as Brighu-Angiras of the Atharvaveda. A class society comfortably settled in agriculture was its mode of production.

The next stage in the process of economic transformation was the growth of commerce and trade. This saw the emergence of a new

class—the Vaisya—and a gradual eclipse of the Brahmins in the social formation. It also entailed waning of sacrificial rituals which demanded killing of animals. The new class was more tuned to peace and discouraged an ethic of violence. This in turn paved the way for the arrival of a new religion like Buddhism. Buddhism engaged primarily with the towns and could not influence the economy of the villages, still suited to only agricultural activities. The spread of Buddhism to the east and south were realized through the trade channels opened by the merchants.

The village-oriented economic formation ensured the survival of the Brahmins as a class from the challenge thrown to it by Buddhism. The gradual accumulation of surplus in the villages and the creation of ever more villages by clearing forests and bringing more populations, including the tribal ones into agriculture ensured the continuation of a Brahminical hegemony. Yet the new populations being added to the society found its expression in the form of new occupations, which were all distributed in the non-specialized class of the Sudras. This led to the formation of guilds and an entirely new social formation began to assume shape within the Carurvarnya system, being the caste system by which it is addressed today. The historic Balutedari arrangement of Maharashtra is cited by Kosambi in this respect which settled the rights of 52 castes with respect to claims of land in the villages.

The strain of Marxist thinking on caste has several shades to it, with several Dalit and anti-caste intellectuals subscribing to it in their own ways. There have also been the likes of S.A. Dange, a Communist himself who made substantial contributions in this regard. The oeuvre of Marxist thought as a critical inheritance can be seen in the works of someone like Sharad Patil for instance. For the time being, we leave this discussion here so as to be resumed later.

Untouchability and Hindu Nationalism

Untouchability formed one of the crucial vectors of thinking about the caste system because it was disconcerting not merely to the liberal or left nationalists like Gandhi and Shinde, but also equally to the more radical ones like Savarkar. While justifying caste system on the lines

of the *Gita* that it was to be based on the Chaturvarnya according to which it is *gunakarmavibhagasa: srishtam* or created according to the distribution of individual's virtues and actions, Savarkar says that the system became decadent once the institution of untouchability in the form of *roti* and *beti vyavhar bandh*, or the exchange of food and women was stopped amongst the castes (Palsikar:2006:179). It is true that Savarkar never took the effort to study at length what these two words—*gun* and *karm* or virtue and action—meant in ancient society. Yet, if there was anyone from amongst the Hindu nationalists who assessed caste as one of the reasons for the decadence of society it was Savarkar. In this respect his thoughts were much unlike any of his predecessors including Tilak and Rajwade. For instance, there is still wishful thinking in Maharashtra that, if instead of organizations like the Muslim League, ones like the Muslim Satyashodak Samaj had represented the Islamic cause in India, the understanding of Savarkar also would have been entirely different (Nawalgundkar:2006:173). Savarkar saw very clearly that the caste system is not merely a creation of the Brahmins, but a disease afflicting the entire Hindu society. The one factor Rajwade assumed to be the most progressive aspect of it, i.e., its affinity towards the formation of ever new castes in the form of intermediate or sub-castes, Savarkar saw as its bane. This is the phenomenon which has spread the system of untouchability associated with caste and brought about the downfall of Hindus through the initiation of a set of beliefs and practices steeped in superstition. In a nutshell he argued that it was the association of caste with birth and not virtue or action, which was the reason for its downfall. That it was an ingenious system of ancient society which brought rich dividends in terms of all aspects of society notwithstanding, its association with birth has brought it to a fait accompli where the only way out is its annihilation.

Savarkar's essays on caste annihilation were published only in the year 1968 and have little takers for it even today as is evident from the climate of opinion surrounding the philosophy of a Hindu nation. Further the binaries that have been already put in place of Savarkar as an enemy of reform and a champion of militancy blocks any breakthroughs in research on this account. For example, J.P.S. Uberoi draws a very innocent contrast between the militancy of Savarkar which

strengthens the idea of a state and the Satyagraha of Gandhi which is a spiritual union with god and placing society over and above the state. But, the Savarkar in the background is someone who hated Gandhi from their first meeting in London in 1908 and evolved a theory of the Hindu state "with scarcely a thought for society or reform, let alone for pluralism and Hindu-Muslim unity" (Uberoi:1996:vi). In fact, the time spent in Ratnagiri from 1925–35, when banned from holding any office or political activity of any kind, Savarkar was engrossed in reform especially aimed at caste in Hindu society. It so happens that the kind of reforms he began overstepped even Gandhi's ideas and engaged with promotion of inter-caste marriage and commensalism. If at all Savarkar is to be found fault with, then it is on account of refusing to acknowledge in response to Ambedkar that the set of problems faced by the untouchables are specific to them and not easily reducible to that of a Hindu nation. Strangely, on this issue one finds Savarkar and Gandhi on the same position. Yet the difference which persists between the two will be on the fact that, when Gandhi accepts the guilt of caste Hindus in perpetrating an unjust social system on the lower castes, Savarkar is of the opinion that even the untouchables are themselves to blame for their position as much as the caste Hindus. But he does not at the same time think of them as capable of politically handling or changing their situation. The reform in his case was as much as in the case of almost every other contemporary—from top to down and not from bottom to top.

In repudiating caste as determined by birth, he does not also repudiate that there are differences by nature amongst the human beings. He seems to assert that on the basis of such differences determined by principles of evolution of species a system of social differentiation is still possible. In fact he even thinks it is a way out of the chaos brought in by the caste system in order to return to the virtue-based distinction of the Caturvarnya. The new procedure is also aimed at protecting the purity of the species, through lifting the veil of caste, but bringing in the science of genetics. Caste distinctions though very well-established can never be proven to be the result of scientific thinking. Instead they have been shown to be based on myths and legends. But, with respect to Savarkar's understanding of science itself, there can be disputes because he does not accommodate many of the basic

theories and findings of the 1920s which had questioned theories of racial supremacy to be a scientific fact.

But the question still persists, how does Savarkar's caste annihilation programme become different from those of his contemporaries like Gandhi and Ambedkar? The main difference lies in that in looking at caste and related practices of decadence he only saw the external effects and sought merely superficial reasons for it. He failed to see the inner formulae that guided its practical application in his haste to fortify Hinduism against its enemies, including Christians and Moslems. It may also be seen that if caste were to be followed minus its superstitions, i.e., according to the distribution of *gun* and *karm* then it appears that it should help the cause of Savarkar's *Hindurasthra*. When it comes to the imagination of a nation free of pollution, by reinstating the canons of Vedic society based on Caturvarnya, Savarkar joins the ranks of many others including Gandhi, with the only exceptions to this list being Phule and Ambedkar.

Before concluding on Savarkar, I would like to draw attention to an essay he wrote in 1950 after the adoption of the Constitution where he becomes uncannily the devil's advocate and why it is so frivolous on our part to reduce him to a position of Hindu militancy. In this essay titled *Janmjat Asprusyatela Mrutyulekha* or the death warrant for Birth-Based Caste Untouchability, he says the Constitutional position on the ban of untouchability is intriguing to him. He asks, if an untouchable who is prohibited from using a village water tank, gets access to it means untouchability has gone. What if, not everyone drinks the water from his hands. Can then one say it has really gone. So the problem lands squarely in the area of annihilation of caste differences and not prohibition of untouchability. Savarkar as usual pushes the argument of inter-caste marriages for dissolution of caste. But what is more important for us is how he explains the real problem of untouchability which is that it is a matter of ignorance and self-torture *adanipanacha traga* (Palsikar:2006:197). The way things are today one should doubt whether that feeling of tortuous ignorance has not found ways and means to convert it into forms of violence against the untouchables which fill the columns of the country's newspapers every now and then to the horror and dismay of what is supposed to be a

totally unsuspecting audience. Not surprisingly, the few who still find such a cause desirable are restricted to the Ambedkarites, but for a different set of reasons from that of Savarkar as it was always. For the majority of the Gandhian nationalists, including the liberal and the left factions of it, in any case, the annihilation of caste has never been an issue.

Untouchability in a Social Science Problematic

The problematic of untouchability thus enters a labyrinth the more one approaches it. It is one thing as seen from the outside and an entirely different thing from the inside. But the more interesting insights gained from a study of it can still lead us only towards the question of reframing humanity from the *Dalit* point of exclusion where Ambedkar contemplated its many faces.

Before we come to that we also consider an entirely different perspective in Irawati Karve (1905–1970), one of the academicians, a social anthropologist who brought in some drastic changes to the conception of untouchability (Sastri:2006:277–92). She repudiated the theory that caste emerged out of the Caturvarnya. Not merely that, she also denied the claim that the Varna was a racial category indicated primarily by the colour of skin. Before the three-fold Varna as a classification brought in by the Aryans, caste did exist in India. There is not enough evidence to prove this fact, because from scriptural evidence the initial mention to be obtained is that of *manusmriti*. Yet the composition of society, especially Hindu society if we look at it today, it becomes clear that what is identified as castes were formed not in relation to a stratification determined by trade or occupation, but as distinct marriage groups. It is the classification according to marriage that determined the formation of caste. According to Karve, what is most often addressed to as in common parlance indicating a specific trade, for example *kumbhar* is only a caste-cluster. If one probes deeper inside it is revealed that the *kumbhars* are divided into several lineages according to the function of alliance. It is these relations that identify a caste according to Karve and not the occupation. She also denies the theory of earlier thinkers like Rajwade or Kosambi that sub-castes emerge out of castes which later get merged into the

original castes. She maintains that sub-castes are the real castes almost like little nations and the caste itself, a caste-cluster.

With Iravati Karve this discourse in Maharashtra enters a qualitatively different domain. For Karve, caste gets detached from both untouchability and the concepts of purity and pollution in such a way that she deems it insignificant to an understanding of the functioning of caste. They have been of importance only since the coming of the missionaries, colonial administrators and the reformers. Caste per se has nothing to do with it and is to be treated as a *jamat* or a marriage group, with distinct linguistic, regional overtones. Karve was particular that caste as such did not have any racial overtones. She tried to settle the issue of caste as one of cultural diversity and did not indicate the direction in which research is to be oriented in order to arrive at specific details about questions of political participation. She saw that at the level of politics even if it implied a unification, the cultural diversity of castes have to be maintained at any cost. If this unity was not one of a religious kind with caste as an essentially Hindu institution is one of the questions she left unanswered leaving it for others to grapple with.

Caste, Untouchability and the Laws of Imitation

Ambedkar espoused his views primarily through essays directly on the subject from 1916 to 1948 under various titles prominent of which is the 1916 work on genesis of castes, 1936 work on annihilation of caste, 1946 work on the Sudras and the 1948 work on the untouchables. The most relevant thing about Ambedkar's research if it can be summarized in the words of Raosaheb Kasabe (2006:230–40) is that it asks if the *Purushasukta* of the Rigveda is the scriptural proof for creation of castes, where is the proof for the creation of man. This is a question only partly answered by Ambedkar and that too by way of adopting a distinct approach to the study of caste, which did not require him to have a theory of man.

With respect to the formation of castes, Ambedkar goes along with most of his predecessors including Rajwade in maintaining that the Indo-aryan society initially comprised only three classes or Varnas—Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaisya. The fourth class emerged

out of the Kshatriya of the solar race. He claims that a few members or families of this lineage revolted against the Brahmins, perpetrated atrocities on them, that they refused to perform the *Upanayana* for them. As a result, they fell below even the Vaisyas in the hierarchy and came to be called the Sudras, as the fourth Varna.

Ambedkar introduces an entirely new dimension to this debate by repudiating the theory of an Arya–non-Arya conflict presupposed by most historians to be the basis of the Vedic literature. He looks at the conflicts mentioned in the Vedas between the Arya and Dasa as an inner conflict amongst the Aryas. It does not have any racial basis and can only be at best considered as having a linguistic one. He gives an example also to substantiate this. The king Sudas mentioned in the Veda is neither of these, but is the guarantor of Viswamitra in his fight with Vasishta. Linguistically there is also continuity in the name that he gives to the slave caste Sudra, a position to which he is brought into for opposing the hegemony of the Brahmin priest Vasishta and supporting the Kshatriya priest Viswamitra. Ambedkar also cites portions from the *Mahabharata* to prove that there were Sudra kings who performed sacrifices and gave gifts to the Brahmins. Historically it was a later phenomenon that they got demoted and became polluting for the Brahmins.

But was this conjectural event of a conflict amongst the Aryans, betweens the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas, also responsible for the formation of castes? No. Ambedkar while deriving the formation of the Caturvarnya though gives direct evidence from the scriptures and the epics to prove his point, in describing the growth of caste system throws open a challenging new dimension for social scientists. To begin with he denounced individualism as a possible theoretical modality for understanding caste. French social and anthropological thought on India inaugurated by the likes of Senart and Nesfield found a good reception in him. But in writing about caste, he knew that he was asking for trouble because the origin and history of caste, an institution peculiar to India is also the history of the fragmentation of society and bound to rake up controversy. Yet he found the atomistic conception of society to be wholly unacceptable and proceeded to identify himself with the history of society as one of class struggles. But this method was

drastically improvised by him as to make a hypothesis of fundamental significance to Indian society, that caste is essentially an enclosed class. The struggles and conflicts which have taken place in India, also indicate a history of class struggle among other things. Yet this history has a different trajectory of its own. The most important difference is that whereas the class societies elsewhere gave rise to individualism in society, caste as an enclosed class never allowed this process.

In India what allowed this enclosure is the regulation of marriages. The classes which practiced exogamy, once they turned to the practice of endogamy created caste. The first class to enclose itself thus, i.e., by superimposing endogamy on exogamy was the first caste. The priestly class of Brahmins were the first to begin this process. It imposed restrictions on women, by prescribing rules on courtship as widowhood or sati, child marriage and on men by encouraging *brahmacarya* or the power of chastity. Essentially the aim was to balance the ratio of males to females in the caste, so that an equal opportunity of sexual union is promised to all. If we read Gabriel Tarde, who expounded the laws of imitation, we can find the sociological basis of Ambedkar's hypothesis. Tarde says quoting Vico that the Roman Plebians were assimilated to the Patricians through imitation. The Roman Plebians began by demanding not the right of contracting marriages with the patricians, but of contracting marriages like those of the patricians (Tarde:1903:348–49).

Ambedkar repudiated the divine sanction of castes as well as the theory that caste developed out of a social dynamic of its own. To the latter he put the question: Why was it peculiar to India if it was a social dynamic in itself? He did not distinguish the social processes of class formation in India as unique or different from elsewhere. The four classes plus other classes including the artisanal ones continued to emerge in India as elsewhere until the Brahmins by themselves decided to break off from the rest and create a community of their own.

But how was it that a phenomenon peculiar to the Brahmins become generic to the society at large? Ambedkar's answer was that society in India was imitative. He calls it infection of imitation taking a cue from sociologist, Gabriel Tarde. Imitation was at the foundation of a

new set of relationships with the class which is imitated. Its gradual spread implied that this class rose in ranking and in its emergence confined the other classes also into specific castes by marking ways or prescribing rules by which individuals who did not follow the rules of imitation were excommunicated.

That, caste grew as an institution according to the laws of imitation also means that its processes as a social phenomenon cannot be explained away with the help of laws explaining historical change. It brings in more crucially a factor of indeterminacy or unpredictability with respect to the freedom of imitation (Ibid.: 36). What perhaps the current commentators of Ambedkar like Anand Teltumbde fail to understand is this vision of freedom with respect to change implied in his theory of caste which led him to formulate it on the basis of the laws of imitation. Even laws of sociological change often taken-for-granted by most social scientist, including political scientists, like Gopal Guru for instance when he argued that hierarchically ordered spaces are governed by the laws of Sanskritization (Guru, Sarukkai: 2012: 79), skip to see the logic of imitation that Ambedkar had imputed to hierarchy.

Sociology is a discipline taking considerable interest in the marginality of position with respect to subjects who are approached as untouchables or Dalits. The premises upon which it is based are deeply entrenched in discourse of oppression, discrimination, deprivation or backwardness all of which evince an eschatological characteristic linked to the entrapments of an ideological nature, be that of the Left or the Right. From as far as we know, from our review of literature, Savarkar, Gandhi and Shinde who represented different ideologies of their times, still converged on this position, i.e., the marginality of untouchables for the reasons cited above. Ambedkar's espousal of this theory by Tarde is extended here to include a post-colonial critique of the idea of nation and society from a Dalit perspective. Interestingly the central concern of this problem is that of dealing with the fifth caste or the unclassified millions who comprise the body of imitation in the nation considered as a republic.

Repetition according to Tarde is one of the functions taken absolutely for granted by scientists and social scientists alike in their

craze to build history after the convention of discoveries and inventions. The actual task of a social scientist to be able to predict social facts require them to conceive of the facts as not unique in themselves, but repetitive over a large scale of humanity and civilization. Tarde argues that the social sciences, especially Sociology has taken a lead over other faculties in bringing this reality closer to knowledge than any of the rest. The evolution of species built upon series of operations of a biological nature was always guided by accumulated collective instincts of imitation over large epochs of time. The historic evolution of species is no exception either because all activities deemed to be culturally irreducible and distinct marks of identity for various groups, eventually fall into diverse series of repetitions without which their marks will be erased from society. For Tarde, a "nation itself is only an accord of traditions, customs, teachings, tendencies and ideas which have spread in different ways through imitation" (Tarde:1903:71).

The formation of nations as conglomerates ironing out differences amongst populations was to eventually end in the formation of empires according to Tarde. He did not believe like Tocqueville that the transition from monarchy to democracy was irreversible. Tarde prophesied the formation of great empires in Asia, Europe and Africa in 1903 which would but then disintegrate into new fashions. But then a point would be inevitably reached where our tendency to imitate will be hemmed in and also our tendency to socialize. Our world as he saw it then is waiting for this turn for our descendants, a new society engendered from a sense of misanthropy which will live on the strength of the distinctive traits of our individuality to beget the aesthetic life or the finest fruit of our social life and "all men would come to have a share in it—a rare and imperfect condition at present" (Ibid.: 393).

Early political philosophy had its origins according to Tarde in that moment which comes "when, from having copied the superior in everything, in thought, in speech, in prayer, in dress, and in general methods of life, the inferior inspires him with the irresistible feeling that they both belong by right to the same society " (Ibid.: 349). This is the moment of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle for the West. But Tarde was obviously not predisposed to act as the advocate of Tocquvellian democracy as the be-all and end-all of human existence. He certainly

gave importance to the linking of the social body to the physical one and the ways and means by which it will be accomplished. His prophecy of a misanthropic future which is a remarkable idea to be considered in the present, especially in the light of the Foucaltian critique of Kantian Enlightenment and its influence on the Human Sciences, can actually help us understand the influence his theory may have had on Ambedkar.

Ambedkar is a lone by-stander amongst the scholars who thought about ancient India or its people. He dissented with those who thought of the Hindus as a distinct set of people, if not race, had a culture unique to themselves and from the very earliest times lived in India. For him no class of people is an original inhabitant of this land because as such the question of originality itself does not emerge. There have been different classes which later transformed into different castes and in feudal times got entrenched further in an economic function of supply of labourers etc. In the reproduction of society on a sub-continental scale, the Brahmins had once donned the role of innovators by inventing caste which has since evolved into a repetitive function. What future will it bring is not even in the hands of Brahmins to decide. The new classes that emerge in demand of new freedoms to imitate caste, be they the Chrsitians, Muslims, Sikhs or Buddhists bring new dimensions to its condition. More than a matter of uniqueness, identity, singularity and numbers which colonial administrators transformed it into caste has assumed the plasticity of mechanical reproduction, alterity, plurality and infinities in the post-colonial era. This is the scenario Ambedkar addressed and sought distinctive methods to comprehend. One proof of this can be gauged from his work as a journalist or the way he co-ordinated information on atrocities against untouchables from all over India to be reported in the press as well as the councils of Viceroy and Commons. Its accuracy and precision can be challenging to social scientists and enthusiasts of human rights and freedom of expression, even to the present day.[2]

[2] See 'Untouchables or the Children of India'a Ghettos'. *http://www.ambedkar.org/ambcd/22B.Untouchables%20or%20the%20children%20of%20India's%20Ghetto%20PART%20II.htm* accessed on 18-08-2013.

Ambedkar's study of the role played by imitation in the making of the caste system delivers its results not merely with respect to caste formation but also with relation to beef-eating and untouchability. Ambedkar (1948) substantiates using sufficient evidence that the Brahmins consumed beef remorselessly during the Vedic times and were forced to abandon it in the face of the challenge posed by Buddhism which forbade the killing of animals for eating. But when Brahmins slowly changed to vegetarianism and the non-Brahmins followed suit by imitating them, why did not the Dalits do so? The reason he says was starvation, for the meat of the dead cow could not be substituted with anything for the Dalits as they had no resources to livelihood like the settled castes or tribes. But is it a sufficient enough reason? No, as Ambedkar himself says in footnote to the very sentence that in the case of Mahars, because of reform movements this position has been reversed, such that far from eating the carcass they now refuse to lift it from the village, a traditional duty awarded to them since the days of the Bidar Sultan in the form of '52 Rights' (Ibid.:127). Even these Rights which they were granted against the wishes of the Hindu villagers was operating within the framework of the larger paradigm of taboo by which the Brahmins had legislated eating of the flesh of freshly slaughtered cows a sacrilege.

Ambedkar here also uses Durkheim to illustrate how eating of cow turned into not merely a crime, but a sacrilege that lowered untouchables to the depths of pollution and profanity in the caste society. Yet he finds the grounds for such sacrilege to be unfounded because it makes exceptions to two possible conditions. One is, if the Dalits ate beef before the ban on the killing of cow how could it become sacrilegious and two is, if they found it sacrilegious why did they never give up eating beef in the wake of its ban. It was evident to him that the restrictions of purity/impurity made little sense to an understanding of untouchablity.

That the distinctions of purity/impurity or sacred/profane do not hold in explaining the cause of untouchability is shown by Ambedkar elsewhere (Ibid.:138–39). Citing evidences from the scriptures he argues that impurities can be polluting only on ceremonial occasions whereas untouchables can always pollute and also that impurities can

be polluting only for the Brahmin whereas untouchables can pollute all. Ambedkar then goes on to argue the most captivating point that untouchability is not related to impurity at all and that the classes of people mentioned as impure in the scripture are not identical with the classes of people identified as untouchables today.

Then pointing out the fact that the Chamars are the only group of people who can be found in the list of impure people in the Smritis and the list of untouchables prepared by the Government he surmises that the Chamars who were impure in the Smritis became untouchables because of beef-eating. In other words, like with the Chamars beef-eating was used to demarcate a number of castes as untouchables, and this became a permanent feature transmitted by birth. It was the Gupta kings of the 4th century AD who brought in laws banning the consumption of beef and since they were a dynasty that served the interests of the Brahmins and had come to power after the killing of the Maurya king Brihadratha, Ambedkar deduces the spread of untouchability and also the decline of Buddhism from this time (Ibid.:144–45).

After Independence, this critical debate on the origin of caste society may be said to have subsided. From among the Dalits, there is not a thinker who gave it another dimension like the way Ambedkar achieved. But the anti-caste movement continued to produce new thinkers in this framework that it is still a current debate in the Dalit movement. In Maharashtra this is particularly so, because of the long tradition of non-Brahminism emerging stronger in the face of surnames amongst the Marathas and the Dalits pointing to a common origin. This has in its turn resulted in the production of many organizations including the century-old *Somvamsiya Mitr Sabha* which was a Dalit organization founded to protect the interests of Dalits tracing their lineage to the *Somvamsa* of Kshatriyas. It is to this backdrop of a movement that Ambedkar's hypothesis that the Sudras were Kshatriyas once made its impact. Its more recent echoes can be heard in the writings of Sharad Patil.

Dalits and the Anti-Caste Movement in Contemporary Maharashtra

Sharad Patil's arguments come closest to George Dumezil, although to compare them is an adventure in itself, the reasons for which are made clear eventually. Patil's approach is different from the comparative method of Dumezil (to be discussed later) which brings together so many different kinds of people under the rubric of the Indo-European. True, they both analyse the same scriptures, and both their researches are premised on the scientific understanding of these texts, but Patil's vision is programmatic in so far as it is clubbed to the ideology of Marxism and contemplates the annihilation of caste as a historic event. Notwithstanding this, the logic that he implants into the scriptures garnered from the connections he makes with the Indus valley civilization gives it the edge over Dumezil in substantiating that the Vedic society was not divided along the lines of caste, but gender.

He begins his arguments claiming that Kshatra is a name for women. The Indus valley was a society ruled by women. Men were only considered as begetters or agents of reproduction and it is them who were called Brahmins. He cites the union of the Kshatra Lopamudra and Brahmin Agastya from the Rigveda which gave rise to the two Varnas. The Indus people knew of only two Varnas. Women were the rulers of the Varna society. The Ganas as they were then called and who were settled along the Indus began farming and they called the farmland Rashtr and invested their first ruler Nirvritti with the title Rashtri. During the time of the festival, she distributed the harvest in equal measures to the two Varnas and Kulas making up the Gana and thence she came to be also called Devi. Deva was a later derivative from this word. The sacred institution of Rashtr was thus formed with the blessings of the Devi and Deva from the non-Aryan society.

Farming on the Indus basin brought the third Varna into the Gana ruled by Nirvritti. As a lord of the earth she represented black *tamas* and as the ruler of the Gana she represented red or *rajas* and as the lordess of the basin she was also representative of the white or the *satvik*. The Varna society was dominated by women and they represented all the three Gunas and men none.

To overcome drought the Gana performed rituals for the union of the mother earth and the lord of skies to bring rain. Nirvritti began the festival of orgy followed by her marriage with Brahmin to bring the rains and replenish the harvest. But to let this Brahmin grow meant destruction of the crops and hence in his prime youth every four years he was sacrificed as the *Purushmedha* and then treated to the *Krishimaya* as described in the *Purushasukta* indicating better crops. The victim was then cut into four and sixteen pieces according to the cycles of moon. In the pre-Aryan two-Varna society of the Indus basin, women were the rulers and the sacrificers. The initial sacrificer according to Patil is Rashtrdevi (in place of Dumezil's Varuna) and the officiant or the guarantor of reproduction Nirvritti (in place of Dumezil's Mitra). Patil thus assumes this female-dominated two-Varna model to be the inspiration behind the male-dominated Caturvarnya of the Purushasukta. In other words, he was responding to the propositions of Savarkar that it was the creation of god or that of Rajwade that the Varna system was brought here by the Aryans.

The last in the line of the female rulers of the Indus valley was Usha. She kept a community of slaves or Dasa. But Dasa meant two things—member of a different Gana, and an agrestic worker. There is mention of the word Sudra only once in the Rigveda, but of Dasa several. Patil now investigates how the institution of Dasa emerged.

The spread of agriculture in the Indus valley meant a good crop every year. With this came the use of livestock in farming. The control over agriculture gradually began slipping into the hands of men who also managed the livestock. There is mention in Atharvaveda of the Brahmin even as a buffalo according to Patil. But, cow was still being used to denote the earth-mother. This initially led to the growth of matriliny, by which instead of the female, the male in the eldest line inherited the mother's property. There were still only two Varnas and the inheritor of the Rashtri's property came to be called Rajrshi. The surplus being good, the sale and purchase of goods by barter came to be slowly instituted. The exchange of goods made way for the sale or traffic of men. Just like the quadrupeds, the bipeds also came to be bought and sold in the market.

It is difficult to reduce the meaning of the word Dasa in Sharad Patil to merely a slave (Wakankar:2010). One is because it was the prisoners in inter-gana wars or conflicts who were first called to surrender before the victor Rashtri or the Rajrshi declaring "I am your dasa". After this they were forced to give up their life. So willingness to give one's life became the condition for becoming the Dasa of a Gana. The prisoners of war inducted into agrestic work constituted the first *dasa varna*.

This three-tiered Varna system was initially built up on the basis of matriliny. Whatever the Varna of the mother, the offspring inherited that. She could have had the child from a male of any Varna. Vyasa who was a Brahmin, had Vidur born to him from a Dasi who became a Sudradasa, and Vidur when begat a child from Kunti, a Kshatriya, the child Yudhishtir went into the Kshatriya gana.[3]

The Aryans who entered India brought in new modes of farming. If farming was called Sindhuvaktra in the Indus times, the Aryans called it Indravaktra. They built temporary dams on the river and fire, one of their main deities swallowed huge patches of the jungle and cleared huge amounts of fallow lands for farming. But the patrilineal Aryans were slow in adapting to the Varna system. Their initial Brahmins were all non-Aryans. Vasishta was a non-Aryan. Of the seven sages who begat the different Gotras of Brahmins, save for Visvamitra the rest were matrilineal and non-Aryan. Still they had not mastered the technique of farming, or getting rains by consummating the sacred marriage of Brahmin and Kshtra and gradually started losing ranks. The lesser efficient and less courageous of them who slowly trickled from amongst them began a new Gana by themselves and called themselves Vish or the precursors of the third Varna Vaisya. They defeated the Sudra Gana on the banks of the Sarasvati and made them slaves to build the fourth Varna, Sudra and completed the patrilineal Varna system.

[3] Patil argues Vidur to be the father of Yudhishtir on the basis of evidence provided by Iravati Karve in her book *Yuganta* which came out in 1967 (Patil:2005:15)

The patrilineal Varna system transformed women, slaves and their children into property. The benefactors of the three-tiered Varna system were all made victims of the four-tiered Varna system. It then instituted *upanayana* or the sacred thread ceremony and tightened its control over the settlements. The Sudras were excluded from the ceremony and here Patil raises serious objections to both the Right and Left theoreticians of caste who claim that caste system is inclusive of dissent. He points out with examples how the intolerant system finished off its "enemies" of which the Buddhists formed the major chunk.

The patrilineal caturavarnya could not make an even progress over the entire sub-continent since the very beginning. Patil says that even during the time of *Mahabharata* areas of Punjab, Central and south India were under the rule of matrilineal Rajrshis. The epic refers to all non-patrilineal tribes as Nirvritya or the name given to them in the Vedas. Gatotkach was a matrilineal Rajrshi who gets killed by Karna a patrilineal Rajrshi in the *Mahabaharata*. Krishna who in the battle was an ally of the deceased still says that Karna guarded the dharma in his assassination. Krishna could not hide his deeper loyalty though his comrade was slain in war.

Gradually the patrilineal Varna system went on the decline and the rule by Rajrshi also declined. The murder of Kamsa by Krishna in order to set up the first oligarchic kingdom with only two classes, Ksahtriyas and Dasas, is an important turning point in his understanding of the caste society. The Sangha Gana or the oligarchy which thence came into being spread fast so much so that Mahavir and Buddha were both descendants of these oligarchies. But the oligarchies which were consumed in the plenty-fulness of riches indulged in celebrating their strength in giving shape to architectural marvels to host the fraternity of rulers. They did not pay much attention to the work of the slaves which built these marvels and hence met with tragic deaths exemplified in that of Krishna who died of an arrow shot by mistake at him by a slave. This was the initial breakthrough for the end of slavery which in process of time slowly disappeared with the oligarchies.

Buddha's time saw insurrections of slaves. In the slow fading away of slavery in new states like Magadha, a new class such as those of

traders or Shettys showed up. They began paying the Dasa/slave an annual income for farming their lands. Buddha preached very strongly in favour of fair treatment of the slaves. Buddha in fact led a revolution bringing down slavery and heralding feudalism. Slave labour now became feudal labour.

The Varna system also gave away to caste system. Patil says the regret of Kautilya that the lands which belonged to the Sanghagana was now lying scattered amidst villages with no headmen means the Sudra were the new leaders of farming. Citing Panini for whom neither Sudra nor the artisan castes were untouchables in the village, Patil says by the time of Kautilya, the Sudra and former slave castes started living outside the village and were untouchable. Untouchability hence was a result of the feudal system. If the dharma of the Varna system was premised on the Sruti, the caste Dharma was based on Smriti. The caste system cemented all relations of the members of the caste—economic, affinal, proprietary and even natal—relationships in a rigid fashion. Any dissent could invoke an excommunication and the individual would lose all of these. Both the Varna and caste were social formations that did not allow expansion beyond a point because they were enclosed by taboos of different kinds and hence they perpetrated a lot of violence on the lower castes/Varnas. Caste society was one of slow deterioration for the arts, sciences and thought in India till the time of the arrival of the Turks and Moguls. They substituted the Kshatriya and Brahmins with themselves. Because they also came from a feudal system, the caste system remained unaffected. In the long run the conquerors got Indianised and entered the caste system in various ways. The Sudra-Atisudra sought refuge from feudalism in the Bhagavat worship and fought to improve their material conditions.

Colonialism inherited most of the feudal relations in India, kept them intact, and brought capital into the country which made the system semi-feudal. There were large scale land usurpations circumventing the peasants into the hands of the *zamindars*. It resulted in the Deccan riots. The British brought in reformers to assuage the farmers and make the transfers appear legal. In 1898 M.G. Ranade wrote that the adventurous Maratha and impatient Kunbi castes will lose their status to the clairvoyant Brahmins and economical Banias in the near future.

This was the moment which created Phule who resolved to organize the peasantry to fight the caste system dominated by the Brahmin and the Bania. The 21st century saw the gradual assimilation of the non-Brahmin movement into the ranks of the Congress. The only exception to remain was that of Ambedkar who in 1936 declared to the Socialists and the Communists that without changing the caste system in India, no revolution is possible. In Independent India caste made its constituency in the form of vote banks. Patil concludes on the firm belief that without a radical transformation of the semi-feudal, caste-class situation in India, no change is possible. His effort is towards a synchronization of Marxist–Phule–Ambedkarite thought in that direction (Patil: 2006: 294–307).

Dalits and Anti-caste Thought at the Intersections of Disciplines

Sharad Patil's formulations are of immense significance to Humanities and Social Sciences because it answers many questions unattempted or unanswered by scholars like Dumezil. Even Dumont has generated so much interest, thanks to his sensitive approach to mythology which also comes mostly from Dumezil. It is a parallel interest, mythological, that we see in Sharad Patil too with the difference that it is Phule-ite and indigenous sociology or history.

Georges Dumezil (1988) who did extensive researches into the mythology of the Indo-Europeans was among the first to point out that the Vedic civilization had its striking resemblance with the mythology of the Greco-Romans, the Celts, the Germanics and the Iranians. The link between gods Mitra and Varuna in the Vedic invocations is what leads him to conclude in this manner. While such examples are numerous to be drawn from the comparative mythology of the Indo-Europeans, in India it reflected the earliest signs of social hierarchy, of Mitra as the source of contractual authority, of law and friendship and Varuna as the source of executive authority, of power and at times terror, but both sovereign in their own ways. For Dumezil, the social hierarchy of Indians is formed from the opposition of this cluster to a third class of Vaisya, which opposition is also resolved as Dwija to be established further in opposition to the Sudra (Ibid.:65). Dumezil does give clues to Ambedkar's own hypothesis that from this oppositional or dual

mechanisms that worked initially, the Brahmins were the first to break off and give themselves the name of a caste (Ibid.:66). Even though Dumezil who suggested that a Hegelian form of historic syntheses will be most useful to study the caste system rather than a linear historiography and in a way proved inspiring later for Dumont, his analyses stops with the four Varnas at best, or he does not consider a class of people called Dasa or what is the meaning of the word in the Veda. Certainly much more needs to be known from the paradigm of Indo-European mythology which is comparative at best, but not so thoroughly a manner as to have emerged with any findings on slavery as a common institution in both.

In fact there are shades of a Brahminical–non-Brahminical thought division reflected even in Dumezil when he contrasts the ritualistic religion of the Vedas with the incantatory religion of later times. What Shinde claims to be a result of the Bahagavat religion or what Wakankar (2010) calls *Daivatikarana* or deification is certainly not one of the traits of the Vedas. But Dumezil tries to establish the contrary "the religion of the Vedic era is rich in individualized gods, most inherited from the Indo-Iranian community, some from the Indo-European community" (Ibid.: 60). In fact, Dumezil seems to be arguing this point very strongly in order to avoid all attempts to establish religion of the Vedas as some kind of magic (Mauss) when he says, "the notion of sraddha, we doubtless should accept that it was already animated by movements of 'piety', 'devotion', 'faith', even at a time when the ritualists were reducing it to nothing more than an almost purely technical attitude within an almost impersonal form of worship" (Ibid.).

It is again with Dumezil that we arrive at the doorsteps of the most contemporary of non-Brahminical critiques of the caste system in Maharashtra, Sharad Patil. It is indeed a very difficult task to pin down the comparative linguistics of Dumezil to the historical Sociology of a Marxist like Sharad Patil. But it is the fact that Patil was a painter once who was drawn into the study of the scriptures and epics and went on to devise his own theories about Hinduism which invoked a lot of reaction from other Marxists that gave it its particular place in the Dalit and the anti-caste movement in Maharashtra. But such biographical details apart, the nucleus of a theory that Patil worked on was something

which Dumezil held as the basis of Indo-European sovereignty. This was related to the coupled nature of the notion of sovereignty expressed in the form of Mitra-Varuna or Savitr-Bhaga to take the Indian examples of Dumezil. Now does this coupled nature comprise a feminine element or not is the question. As observed earlier, it is the same couple that eventually emerges into the Brahmana-Kshatra of the caste system. Dumezil's guess is that it does and with examples from the scriptures he shows that it is Varuna or the Kshtara element of it that denotes the feminine. It is this nucleus of Dumezil's formulation that becomes the basic ground for Patil to begin his work. It is a connection that we must dare to make here to arrive at the larger picture of sociological thought in India.

Nonetheless Dumezil was quite convinced of the usefulness of the duality principle in sovereignty only with respect to the first three classes or estates, the Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaisya (1988:179). This is to say that he did not find it a universal or cosmic principle like in the case of the yin-yang symbolism of China. This is an observation with serious consequences for the class of people identified as Sudra, as well as the rest. What to make of them is not an easy proposition from the work of Dumezil, because it nowhere speaks of one crucial dimension of this mythology which is related to slavery.

Louis Dumont's conception of the relationship between the Brahmin and Kshatriya as one between power and status can be seen in Sharad Patil although it is approached from a different angle, i.e., of the marriage between earth-mother Kshatri and her male consort, Brahmin or the victim of the earliest, pre-Aryan sacrifices. Whether this can be factually supported or not remains a moot question, so much as most of our understanding about Vedic India can only be speculative, because of the looming presence of the still unknown Indus civilization in its background. Despite this shortcoming, scholarly pursuit in understanding of society in the ancient world has brought inventive minds together on unified conceptual apparatuses like in Dumont and Patil. But even more interesting is the significance with which Charles Malamoud (1996) comes up with an understanding of Nirtti (or Nirvritti), the feminine divinity of the Vedas.

For Malamoud who focuses on sacrifice as the binding theme of Brahminism, Nirtti is representative of all principles antithetical to the *Rta*[4] or the organizing principle of Brahminical sacrifice. She resembles all the gaps or holes to be filled in the earth before the ground is cleared for the sacrifice. In that she also represents the earth, she is also a Varna (a colour) that represents evil (Ibid.: 56). This evil has its source in Indra whose guilt on the slaying of the Brahmin Visvarupa, flowed down into the holes of earth. So a vigil is constituted against Nirtti who is representative of evil not merely in relation to Indra, but also in general instances like that of dice-play (an ancient agrarian planting-harvesting ritual of the Indus valley and not a game according to Patil), women and sleep. Sacrifice for the Brahmins meant abstinence from dice-playing, love making and even sleep on the very first day of the sacrifice (Ibid.:57).

Malamoud's observations on the Vedic sacrifice are important also because it brings out the many gaps in its explanation. It deals with "human attitudes towards void or emptiness which are harder to grasp" (Ibid.:57). Nonetheless, he decides eventually in favour of Brahminism by claiming that "it is to the credit of its liturgical texts that they highlight these fundamental constraints" (Ibid.:57). Then he reverts to the discussion of the role of Nirtti in the ritual of the Soma sacrifice. After arguing that the sacrificer bargains with the vendor of the plant Soma used for the ritual and then measures it with Slokas and also in silence to rule out the possibility of any gaps in the organization of the ritual, he says that he bundles the plant in a piece of cloth which will be closed from all four corners, but leaving a small finger's breadth of gap at the top to facilitate the passage of Prana or the last breath of Soma. The strangulation of Soma or the act of bundling (Amhas), the choking and constriction is associated with Nirtti. It is the noose of Nirtti that the sacrificer unbinds and lets the Prana out. The early agrarian rites in which Brahmin consorts were sacrificed by Nirvritti as argued by Sharad Patil is a close approximation here because it was Nirvritti as mother earth or the ruler of land that held the noose which killed the victim (Patil:2006:295).

[4] *Rta* is the vedic equivalent of dharma for post-vedic India (Malamoud: 1996:67).

It is important here to bring back Ambedkar into the argument because as noticed earlier, he criticizes the Purushasukta of the Rigveda as a later insertion into the Vedas in order to substantiate the creation of the four castes in Hinduism. But, he does not dwell upon the Vedic theory of the origin of man itself, which also gives a crucial insight into the nature of the Vedic and pre-Vedic society. Malamoud (1996:59–61) brings us the symbolism of the Agnicayana ritual which is a story of the creation or the begetting of the universe and all creatures within it by the self-sacrifice of the Prajapati the creator himself. But even here before the golden statuette of the Purusha or Prajapti in his form as the Brahminical version of the primordial man is placed in the centre of the sacrificial altar, to propitiate the god Agni, heads of five sacrificial victims are kept at its base which include those of a horse, a ram, a bull, a goat and a man. Of course the idea it conveys is that the sacrificial progenitor or/and the original sacrifice is prior to the actual man and in his imitation it is that the human beings learn to sacrifice. But even in the creation of Prajapti or in his reconstitution into life after his self-sacrifice, which is an act of the gods and not of men, earth symbolism plays a significant part indicating the looming presence of the pre-Vedic life in the literature of the Vedas. The oblations of the gods for the reconstitution of Prajapti are processed in fire into the bricks (istaka-ista=oblation and ka=cooked). So the reconstituted Prajapti remains in part human, mortal and part earth, immortal. The Agnicayana ritual repeats the same acts by men. This is to bring our argument back to Sharad Patil who held that the earth mother was the first sacrificer and the first sacrifices were rites of consummation of the marriage of the earth mother with the sacrificial victim or the Purusha for the reproduction of nature and its resources, especially through rains.

Of the several points that Malamoud dwells upon which is of importance to us, the one mostly so is the distinction that he draws at least on two points about the organization of collectives in the Vedic and the post-Vedic period. One of course, as already pointed out is that he contrasts sacrifice and its conduct (*rta*) as the essential principle of Vedic life with dharma as the principle in later Brahminism. Two, and even more interesting is the category of debt that he contrasts with the Karma or the principle of post-Vedic society (Ibid.:99).

Malamoud classifies three types of debt which are to be repaid in a person's life time of which the first is debt to the Rsis/sages offered in Vedic studies, second is debt to the gods which is offered in sacrifice and third is debt to the fathers (Ibid.:96). He also cites the importance or privilege with which a son, especially the eldest son is born and reared into personhood in the Vedic society from various sources. In many ways his observations are exemplary, though he complicates the picture slightly by bringing in the example of Kadru and Suparni from the *Taittireya Samhita* to show how Suparni recovers her person which she had mortgaged to Kadru through her son who steals soma from the gods and ransoms the gods for regaining her person (Ibid. :103). He cites the verse spoken by Kadru persuading Suparni to ask her son to set her free by demonstrating it as a universal truth that "that is why (to obtain their own deliverance) parents have children"(Ibid.:103). This is indeed a rare example because in none of which follow the example is taken of a mother being set free of her debts by a son. Sharad Patil (1982:17–21) does a sociological reading of the Kadru-Suparni myth to show the first moieties to arise out of a horde-like existence of the Vedic society. He uses it to further show his point that the tracing of lineage exclusively on the father's line was started only with Vyasa and his *Mahabharata*. The lineage of the mother continued to evolve alongside this even though much diminished in strength when compared to the Vedic times.

Malamoud has also been of interest to Indian scholarship on Europe that has important bearings on the study of the origin of caste (Choudhury:2013). It is the European concept of debt locked in a relationship ranging from examples in theater (ancient Greek of the Periclean democracy where a liturgical form of debt was in existence) to number (of the medieval Christianity in the form of tithe paid by every single individual to the church, where it became fiscal) and event (of post-revolutionary France, its people who tried to govern themselves as a debt to be paid to the event that gave birth to it and rendered it sovereign). Problematizing the sovereignty of the debt or the remainder is a philosophical question of modern democracies and even more so, because the remainder numerically is always a function of multiplicities and not of the one or the being (Ibid.: 173–77). These are two interrelated portions of Malamoud's thesis—Brahminical

theology of debt (Malamoud:1996: 92–109) and the Brahmanic concept of remainder (Ibid.: 7–23) which assumes significance.

What should be of interest to us is that if in Europe the Christian notion of a fiscal debt has gone on to take the form of a generic debt owed by the people at large to what is called the nation, in the wake of its revolutions, in India such transitions by comparison if ever happened are yet to be explored. One thing which can be claimed to be true in both instances is the atemporal universality of debt itself, which creates a void that serves as the organizing principle for multiplicities in the course of ethical action (Choudhury:2013). It is interesting to see how a hereditary function assimilated in the individual in the form of a debt of generations as the Brahminical theology presupposes it, becomes social, national and even global in its representation for Europe (Ibid.). But, when we consider the Kadru-Suparni myth and of sons inheriting their mothers' debts (a convention Brahmins never allowed), as cited by Malamoud one is always cautioned by the presence of wholesome arguments like those of Sharad Patil, which places the entire myth in a better light. True, Europe has always been a crucial point of reference in challenging existing paradigms to approach the study of caste. But, they have emerged not in isolation but with very striking complements from the Indian side, which often goes unacknowledged.

Untouchability as a Focus for New Theory

Before we conclude, we return to Ambedkar and this time through a recent debate that was opened up on the theoretical perception of unotuchability (Sarukkai in Guru & Sarukkai: 2012). Its novelty lies in that it does not approach untouchability from the point of backwardness, as it was initially looked into by the reform movements—a spirit shared by today's social scientists too—but in a philosophical approach citing that in the Western tradition the untouchable is the law itself, if not the incomplete freedom before the law (Ibid). By contrast, in India as a matter of social practice the untouchable has become an object, another body or person (Ibid.: 181). By objectifying the untouchable what the Indian tradition does is to transform non-touch itself into a sense, which is comprised of a set of objects that cannot

be sensed (Ibid.:182). The untouchable hence becomes that sense on which the sense of touch is placed or as has been argued, "without the notion of the untouchable, there is no way to unify all these phenomenological actions as belonging to the sense of touch" (Ibid.:182).

But, if one takes the question of salvation from untouchability, while it is true that Biblical references become a model of salvation wherein several sicknesses are cured by Jesus by healing through touch and even a dead person is brought back to life in a similar way, in translating the same into the Indian context one falters because to generalize by saying that touch is the healing sensation by which the untouchable is salvaged from the state of non-touch cannot be true here (Ibid.:183). This is because in the Indian context, the untouchables remain forever in the state of untouchability and are never touched. While the reasons for this can partly be derived from the defiling occupations the untouchables are engaged with, one stumbles also on the fact of heredity that keeps the untouchables as untouchables.

Heredity or untouchability transmitted by birth is the one basic fact with which Ambedkar identified the problem of the Indian caste system. He had already pointed out that it is the nature of transmission of untouchability that characterizes the Indian case. One should recall here that imitation which Ambedkar thought was at the root of the caste system, is initially transmitted hereditarily till it becomes socially transmitted. Its imitative potentials are such that instead of healing which is a model derived from Christianity (Ibid.), in Hinduism it becomes a fashion which consumes not merely the Brahmins, but the entire society.

It may still be pointed out that Brahmins are also untouchables at times (Ibid.). In the case of certain Brahmins called Acharyas, it is even transmitted hereditarily. But there is a difference that if in the case of the untouchables it is due to pollution, in the case of Brahmins it happens because of a heightened sense of purity. While "there are some social and political reasons that might explain this phenomenon" (Ibid.:193) its metaphysical consequences need not be ignored. There is ground here for disputing Dumont's claim that it is the binary of

purity–impurity that defines the caste system, by suggesting that it is the Brahmin who invented untouchability and became untouchables initially before choosing to transfer it to the untouchables, whose bodies could be used as supplementary to the writing of the originary presence or essence of the meaning of untouchability known only to the Brahmins (Ibid.).

Ambedkar was aware of this fact—of untouchability amongst the Brahmins—but he saw it merely as temporary and not permanent. Besides he had rather clearly put it, that it was the transmission of untouchability by birth which kept the unotuchables as if in a state of permanent impurity. Further, Ambedkar clearly points out that the untouchables as a class belonged to none of the four Varnas and only to a fifth one, if at all such a class existed (Ambedkar:1948:143). Ambedkar could not have endorsed that the untouchables amongst themselves are devoid of this taboo or that in its metaphysical essence it belongs only to the Brahmin or that only in physical supplementation to the Brahmin does the untouchable become untouchable (Sarukkai in Guru & Sarukkai:2012). Such formulations are innocent of treating the untouchables as an egalitarian community and does not face up to the criticism of caste society raised by Ambedkar as one of graded inequality, whereby every caste on the social ladder is bound to feel superior to its inferior caste so much as it submits itself to the higher ones. Whether at the top or the bottom, the only possibility of revolting against the system was to create new castes by replicating the old.

This is also a critical point for Sociology which in its angst to identify with marginals, for all times considered itself a subordinate to the more epistemologically grounded disciplines like history or philosophy or has jumped into the act as it has predictably always done with simple, impressive solutions like participant observation to challenging questions of epistemological importance for humanities and social sciences. The only way out of this dilemma for the humanist and social scientific disciplines and for Sociology itself from its position of self-ridicule is to reclaim its veritability through more challenging theories. The reference goes back to Gabriel Tarde who Ambedkar found the lone theorist impressive enough to assign meaning to the caste system and subsequently to the practice of untouchability, in absolutely sociological, but pan-ontological terms (Ambedkar:1948:102).

A way suggested by this look at society will be to see relationships as monads,[5] which interact and reciprocate mutually, but remain individuals in the final analysis. Only a theory born out of sociological models can be a way out even for science, because according to Tarde, science was bending heavily under the weight of its own history and the burden of inventions, that it was losing track of repetitions which in fact has been the impulse that drove humans and animals. Experience also in this respect can only be understood to mean those experiences born of relationships which maintain an integrity not to particular individuals, selves or subjects but to a play of inter-subjectivity born out of a mingling of all these. Such experiences are all deviations from the routine of sleeping, waking, eating, breathing, drinking etc. all of which are experiences, but obviously never counted by anyone as such. It is the experience of a relationship as if life depended on it, which is to say figuratively, a parasitic experience where one is never alone and in constant interaction with its host, i.e., society, system or structure however one puts it at large which counts for the individual. Dalit experiences indeed are beacon lights in this respect (Guru in Guru & Sarukkai:2012). Because for a change, the narratives of Dalit men or women about their experiences often tend to be reproduced as authentic in the works of upper caste authors. This instinct to imitate the lower castes in expressing one's own grief or pain stems from the fact that, a point is reached where the upper and lower castes have come to realize that they are indeed not different from one another. This is a real state of affairs and not one of mere simulation or mimicry though a result of it (Ibid.:125). From a Dalit point of view to paraphrase Ambedkar in the context of his observations on the emergence of the caste system it is possible to say that the Dalit perception of it is one of incompossiblity of reality, as it is composed in itself (Tarde:2012:77). Starvation as Ambedkar (1948) claims is probably one such. Relationships or the repetitive cycles of human interactions are necessarily parasited on such incompossibility because in a reality given

[5] Primitive families would have copied one another without uniting together; they would have remained as much aloof from, if not as hostile to, one another after every act of borrowing as they were before it, like the monads of Leibnitz, which reflect but do not influence one another (Tarde:1903:332).

to an individual's composition there can be no need for society. Eventually in a strife towards that very end to the state where there is no given-ness of society, where human relationships spread sans objections of taboo is perhaps one of its futures, if we were to believe Tarde. This elimination of society from a future scheme of things, I argue had formed an impression on Ambedkar, being the reason he wrote provocative books, such as annihilation of the caste system, at a point he was himself unsure what he was going to substitute it with. But now we know it was the possibilities of this incompossibility of the reality, because of which individual compositions must differ really (Ibid:78), was the condition that Ambedkar faced which prompted him to take the radical steps he took.

Conclusion

There is very little to be written by way of conclusion because this is a preliminary step to a larger discussion to follow in the light of the life and works of Anna Bhau Sathe. But as a preface to an understanding of the context of Dalit scholarship in modern India, it may be said that caste becomes a crucial vector of analysis. To say this much is just to state the obvious. But my point was to show how or why it is so and to show what necessities were produced in its wake, so as to alert the scientific disciplines for the study of man. In bringing the world of Dalit thought closer to the sciences what I have tried to reveal is the hidden point where theory has augmented research on the situation of lower castes rather than leave it to the mercy of empirical formulations of media, state and agents of policy. This required a reprisal of the question of untouchability in a historical retrospect and that too mainly with respect to ideas. The reasons for the choice of Marathi itself as a site for its formative debates, are more than that can be explored in the ambit of this essay. This fact notwithstanding, it cannot but be admitted that this essay finds its fulfillment in having opened doors to the problematic of untouchability as conceived in a language in which its universal and particular, theoretical and empirical concerns were initially sketched.

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