Dialectic of Ambedkarian Praxis

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Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891–1956), India's outstanding polymath in social and political deconstruction, is perhaps the primordial thinker-activist whose philosophy and politics laid the foundation of Basic Social Development (BSD), the primary theme of this article. Ambedkarian praxis is not a panacea to ameliorate global oppression; it's a unique exemplar of social transformation. It's time to rethink and reinvent SD. This postulate is a steppingstone toward a praxeological view of "planetary realism[1]" beyond the anthropocentric kitsch.

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[W]e must make ourselves historical against a mystifying history, that is, *historialize* ourselves against *historicity*," wrote Jean Pal Sartre (1992, pp. xxxii–xxxiii; emphasis mine). "I distinguish historiality from historization." (Sartre, 1992, p. 79)

In other words, historical truth is first of all lived history .... The historical dialectic is first of all a subjective and not an objective one, and historical truth must be pursued from the point of view of those passionately involved in, and even blinded by, history's struggles, not by those who consider these struggles from the point of view, say, military schools analyzing battles after fact in order to determine the correct "strategy and tactics. More generally, opposition between living the dialectic from within versus being acted upon

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[1] A paradigm shift proposed by Gardels, N and Miles, K. Eds. *Noema, 2021, 2*, 7–9.

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from without is a central tension of the Critique and animates the process that moves from from praxis to to the practico-inert and back. (Sartre, 1992, p. xxxiii)

Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, as we will explore, lived history through his "Being," the history of Vedic society. Hinduism, in general, can be seen from two different lenses: one that glorifies hierarchized social institutions and the other that finds "Hinduism as a veritable house of horrors" (as did Ambedkar). Social theory is not objective. Else, inequality (and injustice) would not have been conceptualized based on Vedas. Only after Marxian critical theory (of praxis), the realization of how dialectic helps unravel reality has been subverted by those who have benefited from the caste system, the primordial model of institutionalized oppression.

It's difficult to comprehend how "sapiens" lived in the earliest stage of human society. But scientific facts reinforce a positive view. Anthropologist Richard Lee writes:

Before the rise of the state and entrenchment of social inequality, people lived for millennia in small-scale kin-based social groups, in which the core institutions of economic life included collective or common ownership of land and resources, generalised reciprocity in the distribution of food, and relatively egalitarian political relations. (Lee, 1988, quoted by Harman, 2017, p. 8. https://libcom.org/files/A%20People%27s%20History%20 of%20the%20World%20-%20Harman,%20Chris.pdf)

Anthropologists believe that *Homo Sapiens* are only about 100,000 years old. In "primitive communism," as Marx also believed, hunters and gatherers lived rather no-violently. The evolution of society has been constantly remarkable. The "Neolithic Revolution" (aka "Agricultural Revolution"—about 12,000 years old—perhaps invented the idea of "property" as the man who first declared a piece of land as his own was the true founder of civil society.[2] Likewise, the "industrial revolution" was triggered by forces that brought "Laissez-faire, capitalism, imperialism," world war, mass production, profit, free markets, and human "alienation." Until the 17th century, Aryans, Huns, Persians, Arabs, and Greeks invaded India, but none had ruled India as did the East Indian Company. A predatory Trojan Horse had entered the gate of glory which nourished the British Empire. The industrial revolution was followed by human ingenuity's ultimate innovation: the "military-industrial complex" and its capacity for destruction.

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[2]I paraphrased Rousseau's famous comment on "primitive innocence": "The first man who. Having enclosed a piece of land, thought of saying 'This is mine' and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. How many crimes, war, murders; how much misery and horror the human race would have been spared if someone had pulled up the stakes and filled in the ditch and cried out to his fellow men: 'Beware of this imposter. You are lost if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong to everyone and the earth itself belongs to no one!'" (Rousseau, ([1755] 1964, p. 41).

From primitive to modern to postmodern, humans have attempted but faltered to achieve a longed-for Utopia. The "Rama Rajya" is an example. The glory of the Roman Empire is another example of Europe. The British rulers left India as a deeply wounded, divided, and impoverished culture. Gandhi's nonviolent movement did help, but arguably nothing that it could heal. He did not even celebrate Independence Day, August 15, 1947, in Delhi. Ambedkar boldly tried, utterly failed but generally prevailed: Dalit Buddhist Movement (DBM) is an example of how an oppressed group assumes the reins of power after centuries-old subjugation by its privileged elites. The American, French, Bolshevik, and Chinese revolutions posited similar situations, but there is a cultural difference between the proletariat and Shudras (aka Dalits).

"The Ambedkar Praxis," from my philosophical vintage, is the most radical yet underrated example of a movement that shook the foundations of Indian Vedic culture. Let's first understand and elucidate the idea of praxis. Having worked in the Social Work field in different roles, I realized the fundamental contradictions of an academic discipline that I nearly served for six decades.

One of the most significant postwar developments in sociological thought is its negation of bureaucratized new left, which ignored radical humanization of both system and individual emancipation as a goal and a full stop. This humanistic view of liberatory "praxis" established Marxism as a scientific approach to discovering hope and happiness in the ruins of a war-torn Europe. Populist socialism had alienated humans as the variants of authoritarianism, free-markets, and nationalist ideologies offered little in terms of hope. Critical social philosophy emerged in Yugoslavia during the Fifties. In *Praxis*, a book edited by Mihailo Markovic and eGajo Petrovic (republished and edited by Robert S. Cohen and Mark W. Wartofsky, 1979), Markovic, writes in Introduction:

> "Work becomes *praxis* only when it is freely chosen and provides an opportunity for individual self-expression and self-fulfillment ... Dialectic, thus conceived, became a static and formal method—a set of ready-made, fixed, *a priori* rules that could be applied to any given content, from celestial mechanics to the history of revolution .... The defining characteristics of a social revolution are neither use of violence, nor overthrow of a government and seizure of political power, nor economic copplase of the system" (Marcovic, 1979: xxix–xxxv).

The notion of Ambedkar's Praxis originated after a keynote address that I delivered to honor a thoughtful invitation.[3] My thoughts and reflections on the legendary legacy of one of India's most revered pioneering nation-builders specifically focused on Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar's struggle for (1) independence; (2) human emancipation; (3) affirmative action, and (4) Buddhist consciousness.

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[3]I was invited by the Friends of India Society International (FISI) to give a lecture on Ambedkar's 130th birth anniversary, April 19, 2021.

The idea of social practice emanates from hidden meanings. Gandhi replaced "Bhangee" and "Shudra" with "Harijan"; Ambedkar replaced both by "Dalit," which means "Dalan" (oppressed).

> "The process of emergence of new meaning via 'hints' is basic to Martin Heieggerean thinking," John McCombers (1999, p. 7) writes in Metaphysics and Oppression. "The Origin of the Work of Art make clear, Heiedeggerean disclosure is a sort of a social practice in which faithful attention to the basic words of the past seeks to open up new features" (McComber, 1999, p. 8). But German philosopher Ernest Cassirer asked, "In what sense should we understand the Rigveda, the ancient Hindu scripture, when it says that the cosmos was made from dismembered human form." (Cited by Kirsch, 2021, p. 53)

I contend that Dr. Ambedkar's pioneering radical model offers all necessary elements to theorize social practice as a vehicle of human freedom against systemic institutional oppression, discontent, and dehumanization. My life's work, oeuvre, stands behind this conviction. Structural transformation that Ambedkar formulated, advanced, and constitutionally enforced constitute a unified body of principles that embody the foundation of Basic Social Development (BSD) beyond national and cultural boundaries. Five lakh Dalits followed Ambedkar on October 14, 1956, to the refuge of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. "Ambedkar was the brightest thunderbolt of intellect elicited from the darkest storm of casteism," wrote The Indian Express, a day after I spoke to FISI.

Assumptions, Formulations and Postulates

Assumptions, *a priori*, help formulate theories that lead to generalization. I believe that a universally holistic and egalitarian theory of social development (SD) does not exist. Of course, many scholars from Amartya Sen to David Gil have contributed to the conceptual basis. My modest attempt here is to go beyond a medley of different perspectives, with emphasis, to use Foucauldian expression, is on the archeology of "*daman*" (which means Dalit) as explored by Ambedkar.
   Ambedkar's Praxis, as I seek to formulate, involves:

1. Struggle against oppression, especially for the liberation and freedom of the down-trodden "untouchables" (Dalit) under the hegemonic yoke of the centuries-old Hindu caste system.
2. Representation on various commissions and committees for India's Independence from British rule.
3. Ambedkar's Praxis transformed Hindu culture by renunciation from Hinduism and conversion to Buddhism.

I will briefly analyze the above areas with certain facts that need to be reckoned with humility and respect. Before doing so, let me emphasize what characterizes

contemporary perspectives on SD. Generally, we find literature mainly reflecting a post-war western sense of redemption from the guilt of constructing a Third World. Foreign aid, nation-building, and a host of patronizing projects of sectoral reconstruction mainly constitute the burden of SD. This approach, I submit, is fundamentally flawed because it is: (1) archeologically inept and incomplete; (2) aesthetically, arrogant, and insincere; and (3) pragmatically, both patronizing and unenduring. This will focus on historic-axiological institutional deconstruction, which calls for a structural overhaul to annihilate inequality and injustice that breed dysfunctionality, violence, ignorance, and deprivation within the framework of "culture of poverty" (Mohan, 2011). In sum, my a priori assumptions include: (1) All oppressive practices are embedded in human constructs. (2) No policy, belief, or tradition is God-made. (3) Man-made policy, belief, or tradition is subject to transformational social change. Briefly, systemic dysfunctionality calls for structural transformation to universalize inclusive equality. Achieving egalitarian objectives is neither a romantic fallacy nor a delusion. It is a possible reality if counter-development is foiled byways of human compassion, reason, and justice. The account that follows constitutes the structure of this formative theory.

Ambedkar's Praxis

Ambedkar emerges as the most brilliant exemplar of "existential intervention" (Mohan, 1987, pp. 23–38). Markovic and 's below conceptualization reinforces the Nietzschean notion of "Being" human which, I endorse:

> The term "praxis" refers to both the subjects, the man who acts, and aslothe object, the environment in which he acts and which is transformed by his action. Thus the very fact of dialectal praxis presupposes the existence of a material substratum which is so constructed as to leave space for various alternative models of human intervention (Markovic and Petrovic, 1979, p. 6).

Hegemonic Caste and the Birth of "Untouchables"

It's impossible to critically appreciate the dynamics of the Indian social system without considering Ambedkar's analyses and struggles. To demolish the established caste hierarchy is to demythologize institutional inequality defied by an archaic tradition.

Ambedkar questioned, repudiated, and demolished the foundation of Hinduism. Born Dalit in a Mahar caste, he had lived through all the indignities of an "untouchable." He could drink water only when a Brahmin peon would serve. He later wrote: "No peon, no water." He went home from school, taking his gunny sack. Of 14 siblings, he was the last and the only one who passed High School and went abroad on an 11.26 pounds scholarship granted by a Maharaja. He returned home from America and England as an enlightened radical humanist reformer destined to change India's history and destiny.

He refuted the Aryan invasion theory and maintained that Shudras were of Kshatriya Varna [varna means color]. He agreed with Karl Marx's theory of the exploitation of the poor by the rich and powerful without being a Marxist. He considered culture on par with economic factors that originated caste hierarchies. In 1916, he wrote a thesis on the National Dividend of India and presented a seminar paper to his professor Alexander Goldenwiesers on "Caste in India: Their Mechanisms, Genesis, and Development." In 1936, his landmark Annihilation of Caste was published (Ambedkar 2014). World's most underrated but remarkably brilliant Arundhati Roy wrote its Preface. This foreword is a moral equivalent of Sartre's to Fanon's "Wretched of the Earth."

The Advocate Who Served India

Ambedkar served as the minister of Labor in the Vice Roy's executive council. He brought out Nayak, Bahishkrit Bharat, and equal justice to empower an awakening. In 1932, he opposed the Poona Pact, which intended to create a separate electorate for "untouchables." In 1940, he wrote a 400-page document as Lahore resolution, which provided a framework for the creation of Pakistan. He, however, opposed Article 370, which granted special status to Jammu and Kashmir. He rebuked Sheikh Abdulla in this matter. As chairperson of the Constituent Drafting Committee, he became the chief architect of the Constitution of India. His role as Minister of Law and Justice in Jawaharlal Nehru's cabinet was historically paramount to design and implement an aggressive affirmative action program that has uplifted people of scheduled and backward castes. Many such programs have been abused, but it is not fair to blame Ambedkar for public corruption.

Ambedkar did not oppose India's partition. Many theories explain why the "two nations" theory became the main reason. In his "Shadows of the Great Game Theory: Untold History of India's Partition," Narendra Singh Sarila's diligently researched and documented book (2005) unravels how Winston Churchill played a dubious game to use Pakistan as a pawn—against M.K. Gandhi's Hindu India—to perpetuate colonial interests after the unfortunate partition. I have always regarded August 15, 1947, as the day of India's Balkanization. I have argued elsewhere (Mohan & Backman, 2020) that the partition of India is the most significant event after World Wars, which has impacted geopolitics in a vastly complicated region from South Asia to the Middle East.

It may be noted that Gandhi and Nehru, born in high castes, also tried to abolish untouchability and promoted democratic rights. But they did not suffer the scourges of "untouchability" as Ambedkar did. His pain and suffering were both personal and moral. He used his aesthetical imagination and political skills to achieve something very substantial. While Ambedkar attempted to "annihilate caste," Gandhi and Nehru benefited from it.

Caste and religion have dangerously polarized modern India. The strength of diversity is lost when a Dalit girl is gang-raped with impunity. India's democracy is imperiled when Hindu-Muslim riots regress a glorious civilization into

barbarianism. The banality of this caste behavior is akin to racist violence in America. George Floyd's murder in 2020 and daily police brutalities in the US present analytical similarities between evils of racism and casteism-communalism in the world's two great democracies. "Are we living through another antebellum era?" asks Ackerman (2021, pp. 24–33):

> "The only thing that can tear America apart, is America itself...." "Slavery was the last unfired shot of the American Revolution......." "Slavery permeated every aspect of the South ...." "Slavery exists in our present consciousness as preeminently a moral issue. That wasn't so much the case in the 1800s. For people living then, it wasn't the morality around slavery that enticed them to civil war, it was the economics ...." The financial interests of the relatively small class of stakeholders were the wedge that cracked the whole country. Today, the pandemic has widened the gap between the comfortable and everyone else—to say nothing of the exhaustion, desperation, and disillusion with government it has brought, which are potent fuels for conflict.

The above quotes vividly portray racism in America. They also paraphrase the violent culture of India's castes, religions, and conflicts (see Chaudhuri, 1966). Our DNAs are not much different. While American history is hardly 500 years old, India's rituals of mayhem and mantras are at least 6,000 years old.

The tides of populist nationalism are unfolding subterranean passions in the name of patriotism. Donald Trump, the 45th President of the United States instigated an inflamed resurrection against the Capitol on January 6, 2021, the day that will not be forgotten soon. The vanguards of "Hindutva" are also playing the same pernicious game at the expense of India's future. Ambedkar was posthumously awarded Bharat Ratna in 1990, decades after he passed away on December 6, 1956, aged 65. Even a Nobel Laureate is not enough to honor this man's role as a liberator of the Dalit.

Long before Paulo Freire wrote Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1986), Ambedkar had uncovered and invented these "ousiadic practices." He had launched Dalit Buddhist Movement, which involved mass conversions to Buddhism. He once wrote: "Hinduism is a veritable house of horrors." His renunciation of it marked a threat to the establishment like Buddha had shaken the Vedic tradition. It is believed that many Hindu scriptures were written later to counteract Buddhist challenges against the religious orthodoxies which sustained caste.

Caste did not devolve as Ambedkar had hoped. However, the political seismic plates have shifted. Rightwing reactionary parties —thanks to the degeneration and corruption of the Nehru dynasty —have found the Holy Grail of success in Hindutva as a win-win ticket. Ambedkar's supporters are hopeful that a sensitized version of the Dalit Buddhist Movement will bring all Dalits under the Hindu umbrella, unmindful of the 14 percent of Muslims who are intimidated to go to Pakistan. Ambedkar's praxis, in principle, remains unchanged. But Buddhists themselves are bedeviled by the fires of communal violence in Myanmar.

Caste, class, and religion continually divide humankind. No iron law can be proffered to theorize social development as a panacea. Even in academic circles and governmental affairs, its fissures and contradictions are not that opaque. As a unifying construct, BSD does seem to raise optimism.

Ambedkar launched a transformative movement unrivaled in history: a call for human liberation, an engine of reform and deconstruction of Indian culture. I believe it remains his significant contribution to humankind. Whereas Mao and Che resorted to violent means, he used Buddhism to achieve Dalit utopia. Even a posthumous Nobel prize is not enough to adequately honor him and his legacy. The disambiguation of this star brilliantly shines in the whole galaxy of world leaders. Ambedkar dared to burn Manusmriti (the fount of the caste system. It's time that people begin to rewrite both Manusmriti and Genesis, and this will lead to "Enlightenment Two with a new Social Contract" (Mohan, 2022).

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