

## TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE NATIONALISM IN INDIA: CAN IT BE DONE?

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### Abstract

An inherent difficulty in the study of Indian nationalism is the lack of an effective theory that is inclusive of the depressed and socially excluded classes into the nation. The concept of nationalism, in the Indian context, becomes meaningful only when looked at beyond the overarching relationship between the elite national leaders and the people, and the mutual relationship among different segments of society is taken into account. Overcoming these differences is integral to Indian Nationalism for it to have any lasting accountable meaning to the people of India. B.R. Ambedkar today is primarily known for his contributions to the emancipation of the untouchables (*dalits*) and the lowest castes of Indian society. This article intends to show that his contributions to Indian society extend beyond just being a militant *dalit*. Ambedkar developed a normative pattern through which a diverse and plural country like India could survive together and further, provide for an Indian Nationalism that could in its very nature be inclusive of the very diversity it sits upon.

**Keywords:** Indian nationalist, Ambedkar, India, inclusiveness

One of the weaknesses of Indian Nationalism is that it does not have an effective theory to ensure the inclusion of the depressed and socially excluded classes into the nation. 'Inclusiveness' is the catchword in the current political and economic discourse, following the "11th Plan"<sup>1</sup> prescription to incorporate those who have remained outside the margins into the mainstream of development. This is a confession of the failure of democratic governance, on the one hand, and of caste-class partisanship and religious differences in the process of nation building, on the other. It also testifies that a substantial section has not yet come under the 'benevolent' umbrella of the nation. In a highly differentiated society, inclusiveness is indeed a process which takes place in many ways, some of them are: politically through common struggles, socially by overcoming internal social barriers and culturally by identifying a common past by invoking indigenous cultural consciousness.

The attempt at inclusiveness is riven with internal contradictions, which account for the complexity, weaknesses and limitations of the inclusive process and tensions within nationalism. The concept of nationalism, in the Indian context, becomes meaningful only when looked at beyond the overarching relationship between the elite national leaders and the people, and the mutual relationship among different segments of society is taken

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into account. Overcoming these differences is integral to Indian Nationalism for it to have any lasting accountable meaning to the people of India.

Inclusiveness, therefore, is a necessary strategy of nationalism, even with contradictory interests finding a place in it. The aim of nationalism was not limited to the attainment of freedom but, had to lead to the creation of a qualitatively different society, devoid of caste and religious antagonism. Nationalism in India is to be conceived as a combination of political freedom and social emancipation.

What nationalism sought to achieve was togetherness. The very first session of the Indian National Congress (INC) recognised it by identifying its purpose as providing a platform for people to come together. What brought people together were political struggles and public agitations. The various streams within the movement with different strategies and modes of struggles were efforts to ensure their rightful inclusion in the nation. People, however, consisted of diverse groups, castes, classes and religions with widely differing interests. What was conceived as nationalism, therefore, was bringing the people together, regardless of the differentiations. Although the anti-colonial sentiment ironed out some of these differences and interests, they were so diverse and sharp that the national movement, functioning within a liberal framework, was not able to find an effective solution. Therefore, India emerged not only impoverished due to colonial exploitation but also socially divided.

That India was economically backward was not surprising, but the fact that nationalism did not succeed in ushering in social and cultural solidarity left a deep scar. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, architect of the Constitution, underlined this failure in 1949: "We must make our political democracy a social democracy as well. Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy... What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognises liberty, equality and fraternity as the principle of life ... On the 26th of January 1950 we are going to enter into a life of contradiction. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life, we will have inequality."<sup>2</sup> While pointing out the political success of the movement by which 'people' became members of a nation-state with democratic rights, Ambedkar was conscious that nationalism did not succeed in creating inclusiveness in the social, cultural and economic domains.

Ambedkar today is primarily known for his contributions to the emancipation of the untouchables (*dalits*) and the lowest castes of Indian society. But I intend in this article to show that his contributions to Indian society extends beyond just being a militant *dalit*. Ambedkar developed a normative pattern through which a diverse and plural country like India could survive together and further, provide for an Indian Nationalism that could in its very nature be inclusive of the very diversity it sits upon.

Early 20<sup>th</sup> century Indian thought about nationalism can be grouped into roughly four camps, each promoting a version of either Civic or Cultural Nationalism: A) Hindutva or Hindu nationalism; b) Secular Democratic nationalism; c) Non-Brahmin readings of nationalism and finally; d) The Muslim reading of nationalism. Ambedkar's intervention in this milieu is especially interesting, as he expressed a worry in most of his writings about the particularly ascriptive nature of nationalism. The evident reason behind his 'worry' was Ambedkar's lifelong intellectual and political battle with the Hindu caste hierarchy. As we know, Ambedkar's rise to political and social fame in India was his determined

effort to transform the hierarchical structures of Indian society for the restoration of equal rights and justice to the untouchables.<sup>3</sup>

Ambedkar argued that till the time the general conceptions of Indian nationalism were streamlined to be an idea that would a) unify the diversity of the Indian populace and b) free India from British rule; he felt that the Indian populace would not be really free. He argued that even though Indians achieve *Swaraj* (Independence), the existence of the caste system would still keep a large part of the Indian population enslaved. Ambedkar spoke out against the various forms of nationalism dominant at the time. He believed Hindu nationalism had an egocentric view of the socio-cultural world. Egocentric, primarily because it enforces a central world view where the caste system is the primary ingredient preventing any real representation of interests of the lower caste Hindus. The communist-secular-social varieties of nationalism present in India at the time had, according to Ambedkar, ideologues similar in background to that of the Hindu nationalist movement, that is, they belonged to the Hindu upper caste and were myopically ignorant to the problems of the untouchables and lower caste Hindus.

Consequently, Ambedkar argued for the removal of the caste system and proposed a society based on equality, rights and various other democratic institutions, ensuring above all, that each individual would have equal opportunities to follow his own path in life to the extent that there would be no discrimination based on birth, creed and religion. The nationalism born out of such an egalitarian society would therefore be much more inclusive of the diversity existent in India at the time. Such egalitarian visions were of enormous appeal to various lower castes, untouchables and religious minorities in India who had historically been kept out of the processes of self-determination in India.

Ambedkar's contribution to the development of the idea of nationalism owes a great deal to the writings of Ernest Renan, especially drawing from Renan's influential essay "What is a Nation?". In this essay, Renan takes the route of affirming that one belongs to a nation by the exercise of one's free will alone. He argues that a nation is summed up by a tangible fact – consent, the clearly expressed desire to live a common life, a nation's existence is a daily plebiscite. The nation now is conceived of as a political entity and not a deterministic cultural one as many of Renan's opponents had stated. Renan argues that "A nation is a spiritual principle"<sup>4</sup>. This means that the nation is the expression of the free will of the individuals, their agreement to live together. Renan argues that if one uses the past as justification, one is condemned to an infinite regression, which leads to the absurd. Not only does the individual choose his country freely but the nation itself is nothing but the result of a free decision a 'daily plebiscite'. It arises from the right of populations to decide their own fate. Renan clearly does not see the nation as a race. Instead he sees the nation as a voluntary consent of its subjects.

However the passage from individual expression to collective will creates a lot of logical and ethical problems: a) no nation is merely the creation of a multiplication of desires and b) that an individual decision does not suffice to make someone French, or German or Italian.

Recognizing the above problems Renan paradoxically adds a second criteria, that of a common past. He says, "A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the

present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form. Man, Gentlemen, does not improvise. The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice, and devotion. Of all cults, that of the ancestors is the most legitimate, for the ancestors have made us what we are. A heroic past, great men, glory (by which I understand genuine glory), this is the social capital upon which one bases a national idea. To have common glories in the past and to have a common will in the present; to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more-these are the essential conditions for being a people. One loves in proportion to the sacrifices to which one has consented, and in proportion to the ills that one has suffered. One loves the house that one has built and that one has handed down. The Spartan song—"We are what you were; we will be what you are" -- is, in its simplicity, the abridged hymn of every *patrie*<sup>5</sup>."6

He argues here that it is this common past (as he puts it "shared memories") that will create the social capital from which a truly inclusive and accountable Nationalism could be created. Though Renan seems to have resolved the political criterion of creating a nation (the political criterion being free will or plebiscite avoiding the danger of patriotism leading to chauvinism); the cultural criterion for creating a nation, 'a common past', or 'the spirit of a nation' is seen in a very egocentric manner.

This spiritual necessity of reading the past, of defining what is to be commonly considered 'genuine' glory is the cause of trouble that could lead to a nationalism based on such a past being ethnocentric and deeply chauvinistic. The question now is- Can nationalism become inclusive of the very diversity it sits upon in India? Ambedkar shows us a possible way.

Ambedkar recognised concerns facing the collective consciousness determined by a supposed cultural memory, that is, the problems of chauvinism and majoritarianism. In the preface to his book on *Pakistan and the Partition of India*, Ambedkar looks to analyse the Muslim League's demand for a separate nation and uses Renan's arguments as tools for the analysis. But Ambedkar differs from Renan in a certain key area, and I quote:

"What is a nation? Tomes have been written on the subject. Those who are curious may go through them and study the different basic conceptions as well as the different aspects of it. It is, however, enough to know the core of the subject and that can be set down in a few words. Nationality is a social feeling. It is a feeling of a corporate sentiment of oneness which makes those who are charged with it feel that they are kith and kin. This national feeling is a double edged feeling. It is at once a feeling of fellowship for one's own kith and kin and an anti-fellowship feeling for those who are not one's own kith and kin. It is a feeling of "consciousness of kind" which on the one hand binds together those who have it, so strongly that it over-rides all differences arising out of economic conflicts or social gradations and, on the other, severs them from those who are not of their kind. It is a longing not to belong to any other group. This is the essence of what is called a nationality and national feeling."<sup>7</sup>

It is quite clear that Ambedkar's working definition of nation and nationalism has great similarity to Renan's, but Ambedkar recognises the uncomfortable co-habitation, "the

double edged sword” of Nationalism which is simultaneously “the feeling of fellowship” and “anti-fellowship”. The cultural criterion of creating a nation, the criterion of a common past, is dependent on what portions of the past are considered important to the nation and what portions are not. This reading of the common past, (the critical building block of a nation) can be majoritarian, egocentric, chauvinistic and exclusive. In the book Ambedkar seeks to analyse whether there is a feeling of fellowship or anti-fellowship between Hindus and Muslims. As it turns out, Ambedkar argues that there are no real bases for feelings of oneness between Hindus and Muslims. The perceptions of both communities are seen only through particularistic prisms of their specific religions, histories and so on. Let me forego going into the details of the book in this paper and come to Ambedkar’s conclusion, which is- the only way to resolve the problem of partition was by a Renan-like community wise plebiscite where the Muslims would be asked where they would prefer to be, in India or Pakistan. This is an interesting step that Ambedkar takes for it provides the individual with a ‘potential’ freedom to choose and write his own story of the nation, an idea that was not particularly popular in other forms of Indian nationalism.

As I pointed out earlier in this article, Ambedkar criticised much of the varieties of Indian Nationalism. Ambedkar argued that Indian nationalism was mostly looked at through the prism of religion, that is, brahminical caste-based ideas. If man is determined by the past, then Indian Nationalism would become dangerous, in promoting an ethico-moral climate that justifies the caste hierarchy as well as other harmful kinds of ascriptions thereby promoting feelings of anti-fellowship.

To get over the problem, Ambedkar sought to re-imagine the cultural dimension of India by introducing Buddhism as a socio-cultural framework that would form the social base upon which true, rights-based, inclusive nationalism would develop. Such a re-imagining does not mean the enforcement of Buddhism as a religion, but something far more insightful.

Ambedkar developed his religious discourse on two levels. At the first level, he explained the historical growth of religion from savage to civilised society using a socio-historical perspective. He explained how through historical development, religion came to occupy a central place in governing the moral and social affairs of the people; and then how the scientific revolution shattered the foundation of theology as the core/ prime organising principle of society. Ambedkar mentions further that secular morality replaced religious morality in modern times. The important point to remember here is that Ambedkar argued that it is not religion that constitutes social order/social life, instead it is - morality.

According to Yashwant Sinha, Ambedkar, in fact, had a negative view on religion. To quote from Sinha, “Religion, according to Ambedkar works as both a social force and a motive force. As a motive force, it inspires the individual to act upon an event to rise above ordinary conditions, to withstand difficulties and accept failure with some sense of detachment and importantly to guide the moral conscience. As a social force, it offers the community a sense of purpose. It provides for a sense of community and social security. It operates as a balancing and counterbalancing force and thus works as a source of power.”<sup>8</sup> This meant that if the religion was devoid of a sense of morality (As Hinduism was in its practices of the Caste System)<sup>9</sup> it would become a blind and dangerous force that would disrupt the social fabric which is a precondition for the survival of the individual as a social being. Sinha argues further that morality without collective sanctions was impotent

and incapable of shaping the moral conscience of the people. It is merely a thought having no relation with social reality. Ambedkar believed that religion was in fact, in the modern era, reduced to a mere dogma. Religion did not see critical inquiry as important and provided a false consciousness. Religion was actually devoid of principles and morality.

Ambedkar therefore felt it futile to situate morality in some new religion as most Nationalists' and religious reformers did at the time. Instead, Ambedkar preferred to locate morality in the modern state by way of adopting a democratic constitution guaranteeing liberty, equality and fraternity to the people of India. This is the prime reason why Ambedkar attached so much significance to creating a democratic constitution in India. He believed that the state with its collective sanctions would enforce liberty, equality and justice in the society, thus strengthening the moral foundation of society. Ambedkar advocated that by introducing the rule of law, by guaranteeing liberty and equality through the mechanism of the constitution, and by promoting social justice through the instrument of the state, it would be possible to institutionalise morality. With this arrangement, morality would have its collective sanctions and thus work as a potent force in maintaining healthy relations between individuals. The state would therefore, become the supervisor to see to it that the various rules were being followed.

Ambedkar was not convinced enough to stop just yet. He was aware of the limitations of a state as an agent for promoting equality and distributing social justice. The state could not be the sole repository of morality, why would people really listen to such a state, or worse, majority groups might use the state to serve their own interests at the cost of other minorities. Ambedkar observes, "The idea of making a gift of fundamental rights to every individual is no doubt very laudable. The question is how to make them effective? The prevalent view is that once rights are enacted in law then they are safeguarded. This again is an unwarranted assumption. As experience proves, rights are protected not by law but by the social and moral conscience of the society. If social conscience is such that it is prepared to recognise the rights which law chooses to enact, rights will be safe and secure. But if the fundamental rights are opposed by the community, no Law, no Parliament, no judiciary can guarantee them in the real sense of the word. What is the use of fundamental rights to African-Americans in America, to the Jews in Germany and to the untouchables in India? As Burke said, there is no method found for punishing the multitude. Law can punish a single solitary recalcitrant criminal. It can never operate against the whole body of the people who are determined to defy it...Social conscience... is the only safeguard of all rights fundamental or non-fundamental"<sup>10</sup>.

The course Ambedkar set himself was then to the question of how this social conscience could be generated in view of the fact that religion was getting divorced from morality and the law and state were inadequate instruments for promoting morality (it must be remembered here that morality for Ambedkar was simply composed of the concepts of liberty, equality and fraternity). Indeed, the nationalism built up from the state devoid of social conscience would in effect be egocentric or chauvinistic and so, detrimental to the plurality within the Indian nation. Ambedkar then posits that a re-imagination of the very fabric of Indian social culture is required. It is at this juncture that Ambedkar introduces the idea of *dhamma*, but not in the purist sense of it being a religion or dharma.

Ambedkar posits that *dhamma* could be the guiding principle of social conscience. According to Ambedkar, to maintain purity of life, to live in *nibanna*, to give up craving,



to believe that all compound things are impermanent, and to believe that *karma* is the instrument of the moral order, is *dhamma*. Ambedkar explains what *dhamma* is not. He argues that *dhamma* is not a belief in God, in the soul, in sacrifice, in the infallibility of books, that is, *dhamma* is not a belief in anything transcendental. By this elimination, he argues *dhamma* to be *sadhamma*, must promote *prajna*, *maitri* and *karuna*. It must pull down all social barriers and promote a sense of equality.<sup>11</sup> If such a doctrine of *dhamma* is internalised and practised, it would lead to the promotion of a social conscience and such a social conscience will secure morality more effectively than the institution of religion or that of the state. Morality in consequence is not situated in religion or the state but in the day-to-day activities of the individual. *Dhamma* is in consequence a social action or praxis. This re-imagination of socio-cultural conscience goes much beyond the limits of fraternity exercised in modern day society.

The above re-imagination of the very social fabric of India provides for the creation of a system wherein the individual is seen as a self-determining agency, where there is the faith in the reasonableness of man, and importantly where there is the enshrinement as well as the strengthening of democratic rights and institutions. What is striking in this scheme of things is that from such an atmosphere very real agencies and institutions can be created that would provide for a system of checks and balances against the egocentric and exclusive character that is inherent in Nationalism (for after all, Nationalism is based on the society it sits upon). And, as a result open up Nationalism to erstwhile ignored communities, untouchables included.

Buddhism in effect, rather than being a mere religion of sorts, in Ambedkar's mind, came to mean a re-working of the social fabric of India. His conception of *dhamma* acting as the medium of relationships between individuals in society would permit the 'political arena' formed within such a system to become more inclusive and representative of the different struggles of identity and difference a Nation would have to face.

Apart from the above, there is one more important use of Buddhism as it is related to nationalism. As we all know, nationalism requires certain symbolic representations. This is necessary as the symbols and mnemonics provide bonds between people. The symbols available in India at the time were however deeply entrenched in various levels of India's religious and cultural milieu. Others were obviously too foreign or perceived as such. In their place, Ambedkar proposed various symbols from the ancient Indian philosophy of Buddhism (for instance the Asoka Chakra) that could provide a 'baggage-free' corpus of symbolic representation necessary in the creation of a unified nationalism able to be in its very character to be inclusive of all communities.

## Conclusion

Lord Desai in his book *The Rediscovery of India*<sup>12</sup> argues that the central trouble with the constant fracturing of the Indian polity with various nationalist demands has been that the starting point of most of India's national movements has been the necessary need to show that India has been a timeless political unity. This has resulted in a situation where Unity actually overrides diversity. The search for unity in India has led to huge tensions, social as well as political, several times over, in various parts of the country. But what holds this entire grouping of different peoples together? This can be attributed to what is common between all Indians - citizenship, a rule of law, Fundamental Rights and various other

institutions that treats the Indian as an individual sans community or religious affiliation. This common legal and constitutional system can be controlled by the very people it sits upon because it is formulated through an institutionalised democratic process. An experience like this has never existed in the past in the Indian subcontinent. It provides the ability for the people to govern themselves through the state. But the major question is whether this system of state and constitution functioning through a democratic process is enough to help bind India together, to help provide a social cohesion through which plurality and difference can be readily represented. Does it provide enough room for the representation of differences into the larger story of Indian Nationalism? Can the state provide the moral repository from which representation of differences be made possible. It doesn't seem so if one considers the various issues of naxalism, Maoist rebellions, linguistic determinism, North Eastern exclusion from mainstream India and so on.

I think no single person can possibly write this story, this story must be written by people itself. But what can be ensured is the process through which the content of the national story is embedded. The emphasis is not in the story itself but rather the process of ensuring that the story written or being written is able to represent and be accountable to its people. But this process cannot do its task without the willing participation and moral conscience of the people. What is needed even below the democratic process (willing participation) is a social process. A process of 'conscience' that in removes the individual from interacting with others through the prism of religion, ethnicity, race etc to one where social interaction is thoroughly secularised. In such an atmosphere the democratic process inclusive of the state and rule of law would reach its full effectivity. In turn through the above 'effective' process, a story of nationalism will be able to be written by the people themselves – one that is able to include the plurality of interests existent within the nation. Ambedkar's move to Buddhism as form of social ethics that governs social interaction was an early and innovative approach to provide for an 'effective social process'. Of course his ideas are moralistic and this gained him a certain notoriety, but more so, a greater sense of popularity in the Indian political scenario. This strong moralistic prescription found great favour with untouchables and *dalits* that on his death 3 million people converted to Buddhism, and till today he has been the mentor for academics theorising about the ways in which to include the margins of Indian political society.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan 2007-2011 passed by the Planning Commission of India. See Planning Commission of India website, <http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/planbody.html>

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in James Massey, "Dr. Ambedkar's Vision of a Just Society," in Mohamed Shabbir (ed), *Ambedkar on Law, Constitution and Social Justice*, pp.168-69.

<sup>3</sup> Ambedkar has a large number of writings dealing with untouchability. Some of them are 'Castes in India, their Mechanism, Genesis and Development', in Moon, Vasant, (ed), *Babasaheb Ambedkar's Writings and Speeches* (BAWS) Vol. 1. Writings dealing with the caste system and its implications are included in BAWS, Vol. 3, Vol. 5 has writings that deal with the social structures and the movement of the untouchables. The approach of the Indian National Congress and Gandhi towards the Untouchables is discussed in BAWS, Vol. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Renan, Ernest. 'What is a Nation?,' in Eley, Geoff and Suny, Ronald Grigor, (ed) 1996, *Becoming National: A Reader*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 80.

<sup>5</sup> *Patire* is the French word for Homeland or country of origin.

- <sup>6</sup> Renan, *ibid.* pp. 41-55 and pp. 52-54.
- <sup>7</sup> See, <http://www.ambedkar.org/pakistan/>, Ambedkar, B.R., *Pakistan and the Partition of India*, Chapter 2, "A Nation Calling For A Home", Paragraph 6.
- <sup>8</sup> Yashwant Sinha, "Situating Religion in Ambedkar's political discourse" in Surendra Jhondale and Johannes Beltz (ed) 2004, *Reconstructing the world: B.R Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 73.
- <sup>9</sup> Ambedkar scrutinised Hinduism on the basis of the principle of Justice. He defined justice as another name for liberty, equality and fraternity and asked: Does Hinduism recognise these three concepts. Ambedkar's answer was in the negative. Ambedkar concluded that Hinduism was devoid of any sets of principles that would guide the moral conscience of the individual. It is therefore incapable of providing the ground of morality on which a sound egalitarian system could rest. See Ambedkar BR 1987, *Riddles in Hinduism*, Vol.4, Mumbai: Government of Maharashtra, Education Department.
- <sup>10</sup> Ambedkar, BR 1989, 'Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah,' *Writings and Speeches*, Vol 1, Mumbai: Government of Maharashtra, Education Department, pp. 205-40.
- <sup>11</sup> Ambedkar, BR 1974, *Buddha and his Dhamma*, Mumbai: Siddhartha Publication, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, pp 215-221.
- <sup>12</sup> Desai, Meghnad 2009, *The Rediscovery of India*, New Delhi: Penguin.