

SECULARISM, MODERNITY, NATION:  
An Epistemology Of The Dalit Critique

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**Introduction**

A few clarifications regarding the title of this paper need to be made the very outset. What do I mean by the ‘Dalit Critique’ of modernity? Is there a body of writings by the Dalits that we may call ‘a critique of modernity’? At least in the manifest sense, there isn’t one. However, it is the argument of this paper that such a critique does exist – if without a name, or in a different name. A critique of modernity is an ‘absent presence’ in a large body of Dalit writings which we need to extricate in order to be able to appreciate many of the more problematic aspects of the Dalit relationship to radical-secular politics.

The second clarification concerns the very overused term ‘modernity’. In a sense, it may be incorrect, strictly speaking, to talk of a dalit critique of *modernity*, if by that term we simply mean modern development, Science and Reason. However, as I will argue, these implicit critiques do interrogate the two great artefacts of political modernity in India – secularism and the nation. Dalit politics embodies a dogged resistance to the binaries set up by modern politics in the era of nationalist struggle and subsequently in the contemporary moment. It refuses to get incorporated into either term of the binary of nationalism/colonialism and secularism/communalism. It represents in its very existence, the problematic ‘third term’ that continuously challenges the common sense of the secular-modern. This resistance to these categories of modern politics is, at its core, a resistance to the very universalisms that characterize the emancipatory discourses of modernity which placed at their very centre, the abstract, unmarked citizen – Universal Man – or the equally abstract ‘working class’, as *the subject* of history. Dalit politics in my reading is

deeply resistant to both the ideas. In parenthesis, we may note The ‘neglect of minority cultures’ inherent in this idea, as Vernon Van Dyke and Will Kymlicka argue, ‘has deep roots in the Western political tradition’ and was the dominant common sense of both liberal and marxist traditions throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To be sure, there were ‘countervailing’ arguments in favour of minority rights too, but they were the marginalized tendencies; hegemonic traditions continued to stand in favour of such abstract notions of citizenship that recognized only *national identity*. Democratic constitutions, when they did stipulate against discrimination on grounds of race, community, religion etc. did so too with the individual citizen in mind. It is also worth pointing out here that a critique of *abstract unmarked citizenship* does not entail a critique of the notion of universal citizenship. In fact, I would argue, it is precisely to make the latter more meaningful that the idea of a citizenship that is exhausted by the ‘bilateral relationship between state and individual’, is sought to be critiqued, so that the third party, that is the community can also be recognized as a rights-bearing subject.<sup>1</sup>

The third clarification relates to the use of the term ‘epistemology’. I use the term here to refer to the fact that what we can extricate as the Dalit critique represents a resistance to some of the key political and theoretical *categories* of our modern political discourse – not merely a ‘political difference’ of opinion on strategy or tactics. In a larger and deeper sense, the term also refers to the fact that in its emergence – both during the anticolonial struggle and now – the dalit critique presents a challenge to the central diremption instituted by modernity, that between *the subject and the object*. Dalit histories, Dalit accounts of the past, like feminist ones, raise a fundamental question about the possibility of the ‘knowing subject’ who stands outside the so-called object whose history she writes and about whom this subject ‘produces knowledge’. The centrality it accords to the experience of caste oppression, the insistence that ‘authentic’ knowledge about the Dalit can only be produced by a Dalit breaks down the subject-object dualism in a profound way. That no Dalit histories could be produced till Dalits themselves started writing their own history – much like the feminists – points to a deeper problem with academic histories written from the distance of a scientist, ever unable to share the experience of oppression. In what follows, I will talk not about the Dalit experience but about what the knowledge produced by Dalit scholars has to say to us as

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<sup>1</sup> See Will Kymlicka (ed. 1997) *The Rights of Minority Cultures*, Oxford University Press, Oxford. See also Derek Heater (1999) *What is Citizenship?*, Polity Press, Cambridge. The term ‘bilateral relationship’, in this context has been used by Heater. P. 115

‘academic scholars’(unmarked, of course), and what it has to say to the believers and practitioners radical-secular politics.

We have seen in the last two decades, but more specifically since the anti-Mandal agitation, how the entire upper caste discourse, by speaking the language of ‘merit’, ‘efficiency’ and even ‘class’ and ‘economic deprivation’, successfully repressed the category of caste. The unspeakability of caste, I will argue, however, was not simply a matter of the casteism of the upper castes; it was also a result of the modernist discomfort with non-secular and ‘retrograde’ categories that really provided the overarching rationale within which the discourse of the upper castes took shape. In the recent past, however, especially in the post-Mandal commission period, the secularist has discovered the ‘secularity’ of ‘caste’, particularly of the Dalit movement. The fact that it was the irreducibility of caste divisions that actually turned out to be the rock against which the project of Hindutva seemed to flounder, made the category of caste respectable. The problem however, is that while gestures towards the ‘radical and secular’ potential of caste are routinely made by the secularists, there has been little attempt to theorize the question of caste and its possible ‘secularity’. It was backward and retrograde when the hegemony of secular-nationalism was unchallenged; it is radical and secular, now that bad days are here and the need for all kinds of allies is pressing. In the process, the politics of the Dalit movement is never sought to be understood on its own terms. In this paper, I will try to explore the theoretical implications for a radical secular politics, of trying to understand the existential dilemmas of Dalit politics.

I will begin by posing the problem with reference to two recent essays by Sumit Sarkar. In his book, *Writing Social History*, Sarkar devotes an entire chapter, “Identity and Difference: Caste in the Formation of the Ideologies of Nationalism and Hindutva” to the question of ‘caste’. Here, as in the earlier paper, “Indian Nationalism and the Politics of Hindutva”, he confronts the problem of what he calls the “historiographical silencing” and “elisions of the category of caste” (Pp. 292-3) and the “*very obvious links* between such silencing and the priorities of mainstream nationalist history writing”<sup>2</sup>(emphasis added). In the above chapter, Sarkar takes the instance of the “text-book understanding” of “late colonial history” which in his view, is still largely “*grounded on the assumption that the entire meaningful world of political action and discourse can be*

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<sup>2</sup>“Indian Nationalism and the Politics of Hindutva” in Ludden, David (ed. 1996) *Contesting the Nation - Religion, Community and the Politics of Democracy in India*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, Pp. 292-3; and *Writing Social History*, (1997) Oxford University Press, Delhi, chapter 9.

*comprehended through the categories of imperialism, nationalism and colonialism...*”<sup>3</sup>(emphasis added). In other words, Sarkar suggests that the elision of the category of caste, in historiography, is not merely an oversight: it is a *silencing* that is entailed by the illegitimacy bestowed on it by the very structure of historiographical discourse. It is, or has been, illegitimate to talk of caste *as a category* in the writing of nationalist history precisely because in it the only legitimate actors were the forces of imperialism and nationalism. In the world of political action, one could only be either a nationalist or an imperialist stooge. In arguing so, Sarkar points to an aspect of the politics of knowledge that will concern us in this essay: the way in which the categories of thought and knowledge shape the very possibilities of political action. However, Sarkar only points in that direction; he does not lead us there. One would imagine that the ‘very obvious reasons’ that he refers to above, would lead him to deploy his analytical skills in laying bare the structure and assumptions of nationalist thought which *rendered caste silent*. But that is *precisely what he does not do*. The thrust of his argument on the contrary, pushes in a very different direction, which is best understood by following him part of the way through his polemic with the historians of the Subaltern School. We need not go into the details of that debate here but it is instructive, for the purpose of posing our problem, to follow the main lines of his argument.

Sarkar, continues:

“Less obvious, and therefore more worrying, are some recent tendencies that seem to be *reproducing that silence* (emphasis added) precisely through what is accepted by many as the most radical and chic critique of all such nation-state projects. The burden of this critique is no longer class or even elite domination, but the alleged root of the modern or postcolonial nation-state in Western, Enlightenment rationalism, successfully imposed on the Third World by colonial cultural domination. *The logical corollary of this total concentration on the critique of colonial discourse is that only movements or aspects of life demonstrably free of such Western or rationalist taint can be given the status of authentic, properly indigenous, protest, resistance and culture.*(emph. added)<sup>4</sup>

The *logical* connection between the critique of colonial discourse and the search for authentic/indigenous traditions is, of course, merely asserted, never demonstrated. As a matter of fact, it can be argued that the two are logically distinct questions: the object of the critiques of colonial discourse is colonialism, while protests and resistances whether supposedly ‘tainted’ by ‘rationalism’ or not, form the object of a very different history and need not at all be affected by the former. However, to proceed with Sarkar’s argument: The result of this connection, he says, is that “(I)t then

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<sup>3</sup> Sarkar (1997) p. 358

<sup>4</sup> Sarkar (1996) p. 292

becomes difficult to study with any marked sympathy, not only the history of the traditional Marxist left, but also figures like Phule or Ambedkar or the many movements that have tried to extend the rights of lower castes and women by selectively appropriating elements from Western discourses and even on using colonial state policies as resources”.<sup>5</sup> Sarkar goes on to characterize this “deafening silence” of the “bulk of subaltern studies historiography “in these areas” as symptomatic of the general disease.

However, as Sarkar himself indirectly admits, this is certainly not an elision that is peculiar to the hardcore of nationalist historiography and something *simply reproduced* by the Subaltern historians due to their ‘obsession with colonial discourse’. Let me quote a long footnote from his chapter in the above book, where he makes a kind of self-interrogation:

“ My own writings can provide some telling examples. *Modern India* (Delhi, 1983) probably gave more space to caste movements than did most other surveys of late colonial history. *I notice now* (emph. added), however, that I had kept on using phrases like ‘false consciousness of caste solidarity’ and ‘sectional forms’ of expressing ‘lower class’ discontent, even while presenting sympathetic accounts of movements like Phule’s Satyashodhak Samaj. *I have been going back recently to some of the early twentieth century Bengal material which I must have had a look at while writing my Swadeshi Movement in Bengal* (New Delhi, 1973). *Caste seems now to have been quite a central theme: it had figured only marginally in my doctoral dissertation and subsequent work.*”<sup>6</sup>

Interesting here, is the suggestion that not only was nationalist historiography guilty of eliding caste, the only other serious alternative to it in India, namely, marxist historiography too, suffered from the same distorted vision. Caste, which *seems now* to Sarkar, *to have been then* ‘quite a central theme’ had appeared only marginally - if sympathetically - in his own writings of that time. Despite having given more space to caste than many others, his work too continued to see it as the ‘false consciousness’ of a ‘sectional’ form (a *section?* of the nation? the class?) Isn’t the delegitimization of caste already accomplished in this understanding? If the thing called caste had occasionally been given space in any kind of history writing, it was simply because it kept irrupting shamelessly onto the political stage. It appeared therefore as a matter of deep embarrassment - when it did. If that be the case, can we really avoid the suggestion that the ‘elision of caste’ may have stemmed from reasons not really *all that obvious* (like the upper caste character of nationalism, as Sarkar seems to suggest)<sup>7</sup> but could have something to do with the modernist-universalist desire to ‘transcend’ narrow

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Pp. 292-293

<sup>6</sup> Sarkar (1997) fn. 3, p. 359

<sup>7</sup> Later in his book, he does suggest precisely such a sociologicistic explanation when referring to the resort by nationalists of all hues to a now lost glorious past (now Hindu, now ‘secular’) as the civilizational

‘sectional’ identities?

I will just add two more instances here to buttress my point, before I go on to elaborate it. Nehru mentions, in his autobiography, his reaction to Gandhi’s announcement of his fast from Yervada prison, protesting against Ramsay Macdonald’s grant of a separate electorate to the ‘Depressed Classes’. Reacting from Dehra Dun jail, Nehru expressed his great annoyance with Gandhi

“for choosing a side-issue for his final sacrifice - just a question of electorate. What would be the result on our freedom movement? Would not the larger issues fade into the background, for the time being at least?...And was not his action a recognition, and in part an acceptance, of the Communal Award...After so much sacrifice and brave endeavour, was our movement to tail off into something insignificant?”<sup>8</sup>

Nehru’s deep embarrassment is evident in his expressions like ‘a side-issue’, or ‘something insignificant’. Nehru in fact, describes the ‘emotional crisis’ and the bouts of ‘anger and hopelessness’ that Gandhi’s decision threw him into. In the same passage, Nehru then goes on to say that he felt angry with Gandhi for “his religious and sentimental approach to a political question”, leaving us in no doubt that what irked him was the ‘irrationality’ of Gandhian discourse. We now know that Gandhi stood then on the wrong side of the divide, from the Dalit/ depressed classes’ point of view; that it was his stubborn Hindu upper-caste self that resisted their attempt to find separate representation. Yet it was to his credit that he alone among the nationalist leaders of the Congress, grappled with the question of bringing them into the anticolonial movement all his life, though all his moves were quite insensitive to the lived experience of the Dalits.

My second example: E.M.S. Namboodiripad in his *History of the Indian Freedom Struggle* comments on the Poona Pact and the great clash of the titans, Gandhi and Ambedkar thus:

“However, this was a great blow to the freedom movement. For this led to the diversion of the people’s attention from the objective of full independence *to the mundane cause of the upliftment of the Harijans*”.(emphasis added)<sup>9</sup>

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foundation of nationalism. He says that, on such occasions, “it becomes difficult - even for a Nehru writing his *Discovery of India* - to resist the further slide towards assuming that that unity, after all, has been primarily Hindu” and adds: “The slide was made easier by the undeniable fact that the bulk of the leading cadres of the nationalist and even the Left movements have come from Hindu upper caste backgrounds”. (1997:363)

<sup>8</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography*, p. 370

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Gail Omvedt (1994) p. 177. It is worth noticing that for reasons just the opposite, the Dalits too see the Poona Pact as a disaster – not of course to the ‘freedom movement’.

What finds expression in both Nehru and Namboodiripad here is precisely a *modernist discomfort* with the category of caste and as I will try to demonstrate later in this paper, their argument is clearly drawn from the arsenal of anti-imperialist nationalism rather than from that of an upper caste position.

There is another issue that arises from Sarkar's passage above: why is it today that caste has suddenly become visible and more importantly, a legitimate object of left-radical discourse - including that of historiography? In other words, why is it that when, after a gap of twenty years, the same historian confronts the same material, s/he discovers the centrality of a theme that had, on the first visit, seemed so marginal? Can we read this as a result of the other larger transformations that have taken place in recent years - transformations that mark the present conjuncture? To be more specific, I read in this passage the idea that the relationship of the historian/scholar to the 'material' or archive is always mediated by the external world *of the present*, forcing her into endless re-readings, reinterpreting 'facts', and restructuring her vision to be able to 'see' those 'facts'. That many of us today can see what we were hitherto unable to, in that case, is no mere individual achievement. A fundamental restructuring of our vision has taken place in the last decade or more, which enables this re-visioning. And this restructuring of our cherished intellectual frameworks has been forced by developments from the outside. One of these developments, is what I will term, altering somewhat a Foucauldian expression, the *insurrection of little selves*. For, this insurrection of little selves marks a global crisis of modernity and its great project of realizing the emancipation of Universal Man - embodied in the abstract citizen, unmarked by any identity. This project, we realize today, was meant to be achieved by erasing and repressing particular identities. In India, this crisis has been coeval with the crisis of the nationalist imaginary and the nation-state. With this 'insurrection of little selves', the Dalit has emerged – not merely as the *object* whose history 'we' secular historians and scholars can now write, but as the *subject* who writes her own history. It is this emergence of the Dalit as the subject-object of another history – one that falls outside the reckoning of secular/nationalist historians that we must now deal with. In other words, we must begin to deal with Dalit history *not as an adjunct to, or a part of, a history of nationalism and secularism*, merely reiterating its supposed 'secularity', but as the voice that demands recognition in its own right. As I will argue later in this chapter, if the early Dalitbahujan assertions in the personalities of Ambedkar, Periyar, Iyothee Thass, and such others, resists the incorporation into the nationalist narratives, so does the present Dalit movement resist the bid to assimilate its voice into that of secularism. If we listen attentively to the voices from within, we can hear precisely their refusal – despite heavy investments in the modern

– to be willing parts of the two great artefacts of our modernity namely, secularism and the nation. I will therefore argue that, belonging as it does to this instance of crisis, both the manner and the moment of the emergence of the new Dalit assertion, direct us to read it as a critique of modernity.

This may sound strange because in the entire manifest discourse of the leaders of the Dalit and more generally, non-Brahmin leaders, modernity appears as the liberator from the tyranny of the past Brahminical order. The task that I seek to undertake in the rest of the paper then, is to read the Dalit movement and its discourse as a text, *against its own self-perception*, in order to extricate the elements of an epistemology of its critique of modernity.

### **The Insurrection of Little Selves: Dalits and Others**

The decade of the 1980s, I have argued elsewhere, saw the appearance of the first ruptures in the secular-nationalist discourse that had emerged out of the freedom struggle. For the first time, the overarching ‘Indian’ identity gives way during this period, to innumerable smaller, ‘fragmented’ identities. We have seen that at least four major strands can be discerned in this series of developments: a) subnational assertions for movements of autonomy and occasionally, the desire for secession. b) struggles around gender oppression, especially dowry, custodial rape, sati etc. c) ecological movements centering on the displacement of people by mega-development projects and the question of local access to and control over natural resources. d) finally, the coming to the fore of issues of caste oppression in the North.<sup>10</sup> The backlash to the implementation of backward caste reservations by the Karpoori Thakur government in Bihar and the massive anti-reservation riots, directed against the Dalits in Gujarat in 1981, were the early signs of what was to burst forth in the post-Mandal phase, as far as caste conflict was concerned. These developments actually represented the unravelling of the structure of nationhood that had been laboriously built over the years of the national movement and given further shape in the Constituent Assembly.

It is true that a “critique of the concrete Indian nation, however, need not be a critique of the category of nation as such”.<sup>11</sup> A number of these assertions therefore continued to imagine themselves in the nation-form, though the entity whose nation-form was now sought was no longer Indian in many

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<sup>10</sup> See also, Aditya Nigam(1996), “India After the 1996 Elections: Nation, Locality, Representation.”, *Asian Survey*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 12, December 1996

<sup>11</sup> M.S.S. Pandian (1998) “Stepping Outside History? New Dalit Writings from Tamil Nadu” in Partha Chatterjee (1998 ed.) *Wages of Freedom: Fifty Years of the Indian nation-State* . Oxford University Press, Delhi, Calcutta etc. p. 294

cases - it was Assamese, Khalistani, Gorkha, etc. Often enough though, the very dispersal of the community made such imaginings impossible and reflected itself in imagining India differently. The fact however, remains that deep inside, these diverse movements reflected a dissatisfaction with the large homogenizing, concrete discourse of nationhood that had submerged their specific cultures. From the Dalit or the Dalit-bahujan standpoint this moment of rupture has been seen as unprecedentedly liberatory. I am aware that clearly there are problems with the attempt to unite all the disparate groups into a single entity called the 'Dalitbahujan' – especially from certain sections of the Dalits. However, for the purposes of this paper, I will not dwell on these different strands within the movement and treat the dalit-bahujan discourse as one.<sup>12</sup> In these articulations, the period since the 1980s but more specifically, the post-Mandal (1990) phase has been seen as the 'turning point'. Before I go into the critique, it may be necessary to recall the common sense, as well as the self-perception of the dalit relationship to modernity (and colonial rule), in order to make my point clearer.

It is by now common sense that there has been a considerable investment in modernity and its emancipatory promise among the Dalits and more generally, among the many non-Brahmin castes and to the extent that modernity in India is historically a product of the colonial encounter, this extends to a positive assessment of colonial rule. As V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai note, it was the availability of the language of rights and the secularization of public space, thanks to Western education and the modern processes unleashed by British rule, that provided the main ingredients of the emancipatory struggle of the non-Brahmin and the *adi-dravidas* (the dalits).

“If the declaration of certain spaces as public rendered them open and free in terms of approach and use to subaltern groups, a language of rights, which Western education and an acquaintance with political liberalism had provoked into existence, came to structure and direct subaltern aspirations for equality and justice.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> I do not intend to underplay the contradictions and conflicts between the dalits and the shudras, but clearly, I do not also intend to pit one against the other - especially when, I believe there are certain important common elements of their critique, relevant for my purposes - despite the more real contradictions in the real world. The entire discourse of Kanshi Ram and his Bahujan Samaj Party, in fact centres around the construction of this larger Bahujan identity. There are quite a few non-dalit scholars, mostly from the more backward castes, who have affiliated themselves, in the Saidian sense, with the Dalit position and are accepted by large sections of the movement as theirs. I will therefore treat them as giving voice to this discourse.

<sup>13</sup>V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, (1998)*Towards a Non-Brahmin Millenium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar*, Samya Calcutta. p.56

In fact, British presence meant something more. It was seen as a kind of Bonapartist regime that could balance different interests and provide the much needed space to non-Brahman and Dalit existence. As the *Non-Brahmin Manifesto*, issued in December 1916, observed, it was the British alone who could “hold the scales even between creed and class and... develop that sense of solidarity and unity without which India will continue to be a group of mutually exclusive warring groups without common purpose and common patriotism.”<sup>14</sup>

Industrialization and modern education continue to be seen as liberators of the oppressed dalit communities and the social space of the city as the place of freedom. Chandra Bhan Prasad, a leading Dalit intellectual, for instance, in a highly symptomatic series of articles, also assesses the coming of the British as “having made a difference” in this respect, in the following words:

“British arrival coincided with the particular era when societies world over were emancipating themselves from the medieval social systems. The *emergence of urban civilization was a great phenomenon*, which made medieval institutions redundant worldwide. Emergence of urban civilization was intrinsically interwoven with *inventions of modern tools, scientific discoveries, spread of modern education*, in other words, industrial revolution, with which were associated *the notions of liberty, freedom and democracy*.”<sup>15</sup>

How strong this aversion to the village is can be seen clearly from the way D.R. Nagaraj, relates the conflict between the militant farmers’ movement in Karnataka and the Dalits.

“The Farmers’ Movement notice board at the very entrance of the village, declaring that no government official could enter it without the permission of the Raita Sangha is only a symbolic act... And this naturally means that the Farmers’ Movement has intentions to establish administrative control also over the village. Dalits are wary of such moves since it smacks of the caste Hindu hegemony of the past.”<sup>16</sup>

The motifs are all there and clear. The language of rights, the spread of modern scientific education, the emergence of the secular urban space, the ideas of liberty, freedom, equality – all situated in the city. These are recurring themes.

Yet, there is something amiss in this eulogy to the modern. A relentless resistance to the idea of

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. Pp. 2-3

<sup>15</sup>Chandra Bhan Prasad (1999), “Social Fascism is Real, ‘Communal Fascism’ a Mischievous Construct”, serialized in *The Pioneer*, September 5-11, 1999. I have quoted from an unpublished version of the same article.

<sup>16</sup> D.R. Nagaraj(1993), *The Flaming Feet - A Study of the Dalit Movement*, South Forum Press and Institutue for Cultural Research and Action, Bangalore.

abstract citizenship, the insistence on what was called ‘communal proportional representation’ is inscribed in the very heart of Dalit and Non-Brahmin politics from its very inception. The almost life-and-death contestations that took place around this issue and which unrepentant modernists like Nehru and Namboodiripad found so embarrassing, and which eventually found their embodiment in the Indian Constitution, points to the need to examine the various layers of this relationship between the Dalits and modernity, afresh. There are other compelling reasons why this exercise needs to be undertaken. For, two hundred years of modern development and four decades of independence later, the struggle of the Dalits had to begin afresh in very different circumstances. It would be interesting to take a look at this new critique now. For the purposes of this paper, I take one of the best articulated critiques, *Towards the Dalitization of the Nation*, by Kancha Ilaiah.<sup>17</sup> I will occasionally refer to some others, merely to emphasize that his is not an isolated, idiosyncratic position. I will also refer, as when necessary to some other writings by him.

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<sup>17</sup> Kancha Ilaiah (1998) “Towards the Dalitization of the Nation” in Partha Chatterjee (1998, ed)

## The New Dalit Critique

In the above mentioned essay as well as in what can be called a companion piece<sup>18</sup>, Ilaiah, distinguishes between three schools of thought in the anticolonial struggle, namely: 1) Dalitbahujan nationalism represented by Jotirao Phule, B.R. Ambedkar and Periyar. 2) Hindu nationalism represented by Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi (and in the second essay, he includes in this ‘epistemological current’, characters as diverse as Rammohun Roy, Nehru, Golwalkar and S.P Mookerjee. 3) The Brahminical Communist nationalism represented by P.C. Joshi, and S.A Dange (in the second essay, this list includes, M.N. Roy, RP Dutt, T. Nagi Reddy and EMS Namboodiripad and there it is referred to as the “secular socialist nationalism that was caste-blind”).<sup>19</sup> A footnote in the latter essay, further comments on the secular, communist stream, saying: “All of them came from upper-caste and upper class backgrounds. In all their writings, Hinduism and Brahminism were never critiqued.”<sup>20</sup> This threefold distinction is important for it reveals some of the inner tensions of nationalism, even if it presents it as a singular entity, subsuming the Dalitbahujan current as just another ‘nationalism’ and ignores some other currents like the Muslims. It is also important for what it has to say of the communists - a point I shall return to soon.

According to Ilaiah, with the dawn of independence,

“(T)he adoption of a republican, parliamentary, constitutional democracy gave notional rights to the Dalitbahujans. *Gandhi’s Hindu nationalist agenda was subtly given effect to by Nehru*, who strengthened the tendency to recruit *bhadralok* brahminical forces to control the state structures.”<sup>21</sup>

He continues further to elaborate this point thus:

“The Gandhian Harijanization process was also carried out through the state apparatus. *The Nehruvian state did this through the process of brahminization of the state structures which ensured that the so-called secular state became the private property of the brahminical castes. The recruitment boards, educational centres, judicial structures, the military and police agencies were consciously handed over to the brahminical forces. To appear to be secular, some marginalized institutions were allowed to be headed by the Muslim elite, but they were coerced into accepting brahminical hegemony. The Nehruvian state structure resisted the entry of the Dalitbahujans even through reservations, their entry being described as the degeneration of the system.*”(all emphasis added)

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<sup>18</sup> Kancha Ilaiah (1999) “Dalitism versus Brahminism: The Epistemological Conflict in History” in Ashish Ghosh (1999, ed) *Dalits and Peasants - The Emerging Caste-Class Dynamics*, Gyan Sagar Publications, Delhi.

<sup>19</sup> Ilaiah, (1998: 268-9) and (1999: 19)

<sup>20</sup> Ilaiah (1999: fn 4, p. 39)

<sup>21</sup> Ilaiah (1998) p. 272

The interesting thing about this perception is that it sees the Gandhian Hindu-religious discourse as flowing seamlessly into what took shape as the Nehruvian state - Nehru's own discomfort and embarrassment with Gandhian 'sentimentality and religiosity' notwithstanding. It is also interesting that Ilaiah sees the process of the secular state becoming the 'private property of the brahminical castes' as a *conscious act* of the Nehruvian state elite, not as an unintended by-product of its working. Finally, his perception that the entry of the Dalitbahujans even through reservations, was seen as the degeneration of the system, points to the continuing embarrassment of the Nehruvian/modern elites with the idea of recognizing caste. How do we understand this critique? One possible way of reading it would be to do so straight off, in its most manifest sense. But for such a reading to make sense, one would either have to fall back on an essentialization of caste identity that remains unchanged through the great changes that modernity was expected to and did bring in its train. Alternatively, we would have to resort to a conspiracy theory of history and see the entire story of our modernity and of postcolonial India as the outcome of such a conspiracy. D. R. Nagaraj for instance, refers to it as "the treacherous deal that was struck between the forces of modernity and the caste system."<sup>22</sup> His is of course a very sophisticated rendering of the idea and he comes very close to anticipating what I think is the crux of the problem. So, he goes on to suggest that "the Shudra thinkers were accurate and insightful in laying bare the strategies of oppression practiced by traditional society, but they were naive in their optimistic support to agents and practices of modernity."<sup>23</sup> His reference to the 'naivete' in investing their 'optimistic support' in modernity actually points to the need for an investigation into the discourses and processes of modernity. However, here Nagaraj disappoints us and notwithstanding his own suggestion, still continues to see the problem as one of upper caste conspiracy alone.

To continue with Ilaiah's critique. He goes on to argue that the "Nehruvian state was not a secular agency because in its everyday practices in the offices, brahminism alone was constructed as meritorious, and it alone was shown to be India's salvation."<sup>24</sup> His critique then makes the most amazing move of distinguishing between *two different modernities* in India: the Hindu nationalist - or what we may understand as official - modernity and the 'indigenous modernity' of the proto-scientific practices of the dalit-bahujans and women, always ever innovating in the course of their

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<sup>22</sup> Nagaraj (1993), p. 56

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 56

<sup>24</sup> Ilaiah (1998) p. 275

productive work.<sup>25</sup> This operation of bifurcating high modernity and separating it from the ‘low’ already problematizes modernity whose project has only been homogenization, and standardization of the cultures/knowledges through erasure and silencing of such low cultures. Ilaiah then goes on to elaborate that high modernity came to its own with the ‘feudal brahmins’ selling away their landed properties and coming to occupy the position of the urban middle class. Through its control over the English language, this class came to control the state sector and finally, “it was in the cities that the nexus between the twice-born castes (Brahmins and Banias) was consolidated.”<sup>26</sup> Thus was shattered the ‘dream of the city’ that was the fulcrum of the Dalit’s attachment to modernity. Politically, what is most galling however, is that with the emergence of the Hindutva challenge, came the re-imposition of the kind of binarism that was reminiscent of the national movement. “The Dalitbahujan school *looked at the secularism vs. communalism opposition with suspicion* because brahminism in whatever form cannot be secular..”<sup>27</sup>(emphasis added) Many Dalit and Dalitbahujan scholars would agree with Ilaiah and clearly the BSP’s alliance with the BJP in UP would suggest that this argument against an absolute prioritizing of the secular-communal divide, has wider purchase. However, I am not very sure they would all agree with Ilaiah’s reason’s for regarding it with suspicion. Ilaiah seems to give the impression that their critique was that the so-called secularists were insufficiently secular because they were ‘brahmin’. More likely, the suspicion is because the imposition of this binary model de-legitimized all other aspirations that were now coming to the fore - including that of the Dalits. Once the opposition was set in place, any political stance could only be understood if it made sense in the terms set by this discourse. Often the struggle between the Dalits and the neobrahmins in the countryside - or the neo-kshatriyas as Ilaiah calls them, namely the dominant OBCs - forced a different kind of logic of alliances. Seen in the dichotomous world of ‘secularism versus communalism’, the BSP’s alliance with the BJP in UP, however, shortlived could *only be understood as opportunism*. Ilaiah, later in the essay comes closer to spelling this out:

“The so-called secular upper-castes, again in order to undermine the Mandalization process, organized a discourse around secularism vs. communalism. In this, the ‘upper’ castes working under various shades of ideologies - the socialist, Communist, liberal-democratic forces of the Congress variety...were very active...The leading role was, however, taken by the brahminical communists.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid. p. 276

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 280

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p.283

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.p. 285

Lest this be seen as idiosyncratic, let us quote from the article by Chandra Bhan Prasad mentioned above: “Once again when the question of social transformation is being raised , we are being told we must join the ‘secular brigade’ to defeat ‘communal fascism’, and *probably they mean that the social questions can be tackled later.*”<sup>29</sup>

### **A Fissured Modernity and the Protean<sup>30</sup> Self**

Let us try to make sense of Ilaiah’s discussion (which as I have indicated, is shared by at least some other important Dalitbahujan writers) above of the seamless flow of Gandhian anti-modern Hindu-religious nationalism into the structuring of Nehruvian modernity and his explication of the shattering of the dream of the city. How do we understand this transformation or explain this perception, if we do not take recourse to either option - that of cultural essentialism or that of a conspiracy theory of history?

Here I wish to refer to a slippage in Ilaiah’s reading of the situation that occurs in his attribution to the Nehruvian postcolonial state what was in fact an already inherited condition. In his important work, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, published in 1945, Ambedkar, for example, discusses the nature of what he calls the governing class – clearly in the colonial context. He has no doubt that the Brahmins are the governing class. There are two reasons for thinking so. The first is their *cultural hegemony* or what he calls the “sentiment of the people”. He explains this through, among others, the instance of Malabar, “where Sambandham marriages prevail” among the “the servile classes such as the Nairs” who “regard it an honour to have their females kept as mistresses by Brahmins to deflower their queens on *prima noctis*.”<sup>31</sup> The second test “is the *control of the administration.*” He then goes on to provide statistical data of the community-wise distribution of gazetted posts in the year 1943 in Madras presidency to show the preponderance of Brahmins – especially in the more highly paid ones. “Similar data from other provinces could also be adduced in support of this conclusion” but, he adds, that would be unnecessary because it is so patently obvious.<sup>32</sup> Ambedkar in fact, went further to compile the information on Congress victories in the 1937 elections and the representation of communities among

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<sup>29</sup> Chandra Bhan Prasad Op. Cit.

<sup>30</sup> This expression is suggestively used by Geetha and Rajadurai, Op. Cit.

<sup>31</sup> Vasant Moon (ed. 1991)Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches* , Vol. 9, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra. P.205

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. Pp. 206-207

Congress members of Provincial Assemblies, Cabinets, and Parliamentary secretaries to buttress his argument. “In all the Hindu Provinces, the Prime Ministers were Brahmins. In all Hindu Provinces if the Non-Hindu ministers were excluded, the Cabinets were wholly composed of Brahmins.”<sup>33</sup>

Iyothee Thass’ frontal attack on the Swadeshi activities, indeed reflected the same anxieties. He “located the power of the modern secular brahmin in the control he wielded over public opinion”. The nationalist press was especially the butt of his attacks.<sup>34</sup>

Like Ambedkar, E.V. Ramasamy Naicker ‘Periyar’ too was concerned with the new power being acquired by the brahmin in the modern secular realm. “As far the Self-Respecters were concerned, the single-most secular index of brahmin power in these modern times was the newspaper....The Self-Respecters were so convinced of the links between the power of the written (newspaper) word that they began newspapers of their own”<sup>35</sup> Geetha and Rajadurai draw attention to what they call Periyar’s reading of the protean brahmin sensibility. “He remarked on several occasions that the brahmins retained their privileges by remaining open to change and by adopting a winning flexibility.”<sup>36</sup> One of his statements in this regard is particularly striking:

“Rajaji will eat at a panchama’s house; Shankaracharya will bathe on seeing a panchama; some others will bathe if a panchama’s shadow falls on them, others if a panchama touches them. Yet others will marry a panchama man or woman – but all of them will still remain brahmanas...Brahmin orthodoxy in 1940 was of a different kind than what obtained in 1900. After 1940 this orthodoxy changed form again.”<sup>37</sup>

It is remarkable that Periyar is constantly alert not only to the extreme flexibility of the brahmin self. He is also alluding here to the two different realms – one occupied and represented by Rajaji and the other by the Shankaracharya. In Rajaji’s realm the changes taking place, I believe were such that the brahmin was not only negotiating the challenges brought in by the processes of the modern but also recasting the brahmin self in crucial ways. Many brahmins remained brahmins but many of them had seriously started believing that Hindu society needed to be modernized and freed of the blot of caste distinctions. The route taken for this was nationalism – the new imagination of a homogenous

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p. 218. The figures in the tables accompanying this statement show a fairly high number of Non-Brahmins too as an aggregate category but from the argument it seems that Ambedkar seemed to include the Baniyas and often, Kshatriyas as being part of the brahminical governing class.

<sup>34</sup> Geetha and Rajadurai Op. Cit. P.63

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. Pp. 314, 315

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 316

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in, Ibid. p. 317. The rest of the discussion in this section is based on this work and on Pandian(1993), (1995)

Hindu society as the centre-piece of the emergent Indian nation. The problem was that even then they wanted this change on their own terms, that is, *without relinquishing their new and emerging power in the secular realm.*

This is incidentally one of the points on which some of the historians of the Cambridge school seem to have built their argument against the Non-Brahmin movement. David Washbrook for instance, notes

“They [Justice Party leaders] argued that their challenge was solely towards the secular, political position which the brahmins had attained. Yet, once the brahmin’s spiritual role has been stripped from him, how can he remain a brahmin in any meaningful sense? What the Justice party really objected to was the political position of certain individuals *who happened to be brahmins...*”<sup>38</sup>

The point raised by Washbrook touches the key issue involved – if in a somewhat mala fide manner. For Washbrook does point to the fact that it was not brahminism in the old ‘non-secular’ (‘spiritual’) sense that was at issue. From there, however, he quite unsurprisingly, moves to asserting that therefore, it was a ‘wholly secular’ conflict (with individuals who ‘happened to be brahmins’) that was animating the Non-Brahmin leaders. It seems to me that this is precisely where we need to uncover the layers of meaning associated with the transformation of brahmin power in the secular realm – in the realm of civil society and institutions of modern representative democracy. Washbrook’s simple conclusion that if this struggle was not against the ‘spiritual’ brahminism, then *it could only have been against the secular power* of ‘individuals who happened to be brahmins’ should alert us to the pitfalls of the use of such dichotomized categories. The modern/nonmodern or modern/traditional dichotomy often seems to blind us to the complexity of the very processes of articulation of the traditional and the modern. Seen thus, it was probably, not the kniship between Gandhian traditionalism and Nehruvian modernity, as Kancha Ilaiah suggests, but the very forms of articulation of the modern with the traditional that laid the foundations of the Nehruvian state’s slide into a domination of the brahminical upper castes over the modern state institutions. It is probably more likely that already by the turn of the century neither sector was purely ‘traditional’ or ‘modern’. It maybe more useful to see what appear to be two aspects – that of the breakdown of the old order and the insertion into the new, necessarily hybrid modernity - as *constituting a single moment.*<sup>39</sup> It

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<sup>38</sup> Quoted in MSS Pandian(1995), “Beyond Colonial Crumbs: Cambridge School, Identity Politics and Dravidian Movement(s)”, *EPW* Feb. 18-25, p. 387

<sup>39</sup> I owe this point to a discussion with Nivedita Menon. Further discussion with MSS Pandian helped me sharpen the understanding in the context of non-brahminism.

was not as if the processes of modernity ushered in by the colonial encounter were simply destroying the hold of caste hierarchies and bringing in the new world of modern development, industrialization and a regime of rights and citizenship. Rather, the old was ‘always already’ present in the new but no longer in the old form. At one level this can sound like a moth-eaten truism. After all, a marxist dialectician can always claim that the notion of *auhhebung* is *at once* the preservation of the old in the new *and* its transcendence. Yet marxist historiography and scholarship on India has precisely seen this in the dichotomous terms of the so-called “dual role” of colonialism – the destruction of the traditional and the initiation of the modern. The categories have remained as dichotomized as in many other writings of the modernization theorists. What I want to suggest here is somewhat different. In suggesting that the ‘two aspects’ be considered as a single moment, I wish to draw attention to the fact that the very process by which the political category of the ‘brahmin’ became available to the Non-Brahmin movement, thanks to the discourse of equality and rights, was also the process by which the brahmin power was instituted in the secular-modern realm.<sup>40</sup> By the time it thus became possible to challenge the brahmin’s oppression he had already mutated into something else. This new power accrued to him now because he had the advantages of English education, rather than because of his ritual superiority.

There are at least two ways in which this can be understood. If it is true that the brahmin in colonial India was already a different being, we can see one face of his existence, as Periyar did, in the Brahmin whose infinitely malleable and ‘protean’ self saw the opportunities offered by colonial rule and quickly adapted itself to the new dispensation. This Brahmin deftly appropriated the public/private distinction to his convenience and ‘privatized’ caste identity by becoming secular in the public realm and a believer in the private.<sup>41</sup> Within his ‘inner’ domain, he continued to be a casteist, even to the extent of continuing to practice untouchability. But there was another face – that of the mutated ‘nationalist’ whose nationalism, like Savarkar’s, was modern to the core, but which demanded the subordination of all questions of internal reform of the Hindu society to the fight for independence. Such was also the face of the brahmins of the secular anti-imperialist nationalists like Nehru and the Communists, though unlike Savarkar and Tilak or Sardar Patel, theirs was a more inclusive nationalism. In a different way then, this mutated upper caste self became, willy-nilly, a party to suppression of the urge for Dalit liberation.

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<sup>40</sup> I owe the point about the emergence of the ‘brahmin’ as a political category to MSS Pandian, made in a personal communication to me.

<sup>41</sup> For a more detailed consideration of this category, see the last section of this paper.

The problem with the pervasive sociologicistic understanding of the category of the 'upper caste' (or caste in general) is that it can only fall back on the formal nomenclature thus misrecognizing the function it begins to perform in the changed context. Let me make this a bit more explicit by trying to break down the category of the 'urban upper caste self' by interrogating the most problematic aspect of it – the notion of the 'brahminical marxist'. We may begin with Kanshi Ram's colourful metaphor regarding the communists: that they are "green snakes in green grass".<sup>42</sup> This metaphor leads us straight to the deep-rooted anti-communism within one important strand of the Dalit movement - right from the days of Ambedkar. Why this anti-communism came to be so strong among the most oppressed sections of Indian society is a question that has never been sufficiently posed by the secular, radical or communist scholars. From the side of the Dalits too, at best there has been a gesturing towards the upper-caste character of the Indian communists, but that is precisely the kind of sociologism that has become an uninterrogated common sense, which falls back on the essentialism that I seek to question.

The second part of Kanshi Ram's metaphor regarding the upper castes in other parties like the BJP, provides a cue that can be productively followed up. These upper-castes are, according to him like "white snakes in green grass". In other words, the difference between the upper castes in other parties and those in the communist parties is that the latter are more difficult to identify. The radicalism of the communists makes 'them' indistinguishable from 'us'. This indistinguishability in itself may not have been a problem and the entire Dalit movement could have moved over to marxism if it had seen its liberation as being possible there. 'Indigenism' was hardly a consideration for them and with the marxists' celebration of modern civilization and technology, there should have been even less of a distance. What actually prevented such a possibility was the fact that already Indian marxism had exposed itself as being insensitive and blind to dalit oppression, operating within a framework that was most comfortable for the brahminical mind. Why this was so is precisely the issue that concerns us here and calls for further investigation.

In the first bursts of dalit/bahujan assertion, in the early years of this century, there was probably an important factor at work: what was at issue was a radical definition of the Self, an assertion of Dalit subjectivity. This Self *had to be, of necessity*, defined in radical alterity to its brahminical Other. For the Dalit to be able to speak its lived experience, it had to speak in terms of brahminism. Marxism,

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<sup>42</sup>Ilaiah (1999) p. 41, fn 31

on the other hand, in its reduction of all oppressions to class, tended to do violence to that enterprise of self-definition. The absolute prioritization of ‘class’ made caste oppression unspeakable. Further, the Dalit enterprise of self definition was predicated on another, quintessentially modern project, a search for Dalit history. Marxism’s rendering of history, its claim to be the sole agent of that history and its privileging of the anti-imperialist struggle over all others (in the name of History) was likely to be much more irksome, given the fact that it, in effect, proposed what the ‘brahminical’, Hindu nationalists wanted, although in a language that was irritatingly close to that of the Dalitbahujan leaders. In fact, Ambedkar’s turn towards Buddhism and his production of a whole new narrative of Indian history as one of struggle between Buddhism and Brahminism, was I believe an ingenious attempt at instituting *as cultural memory*, a new historical discourse. By doing this Ambedkar was producing a modernist, rational-historical narrative while at the same time, filling up what had been a major blank, an absence, the denial of a past to the Dalit. To be able to speak of the past in the language of history and modern subjectivity was the task at hand. If this was the magnitude of the task being undertaken by Ambedkar, he could scarcely afford a resort to abstract Universal History. And abstract universal history may have seemed to him to be a means of *forgetting rather than recalling*. I would in fact, suggest that the reason why many individuals from the privileged upper castes took shelter in ‘universal history’ was that by dissolving the specificities of particular experiences, it probably helped him/her to forget his/her ‘shameful past’ as oppressor or person of privilege. Class oppression was universal and we also had it – there was nothing shameful about it. But to accept that ‘untouchability’ was also a heritage of our past, was something the modern mind found difficult to deal with.<sup>43</sup>

Anybody even remotely familiar with the history of Indian marxism and marxists, would be aware that the generations of youth who came to the movement *did so through a rejection their traditional identities, in search of a modern one*. The majority were youth from upper caste backgrounds, though there were Muslims in fairly large numbers, and there were at least some from the lower castes too, who joined the communists. Their coming to marxism, at least in the later phase, was for them the acquisition of a new identity. They could thenceforth talk about their society and the struggle to change it in terms that belonged to the lexicon of modernity. To most of them, even

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<sup>43</sup> Some commentators in a recent volume *Dalit Jan-Ubhar* (ed. Kanwal Bharati et al; n.d. probably 1999), BM Prakashan, Lucknow point out that enthusiasts of class-struggle considered caste an ‘unnecessary complication’, better ignored and wanted to rather look ahead. (Renu Rathor, Ashish Rathor and Aviram “Dakkhin Toley Ka Saval” p. 284)

the suggestion that they carried their upper caste socialization still within them would have seemed scandalous. Marxism was a means of forgetting the specific past for many, in the name of a larger universal one (“the history of all hitherto existing societies is a history of class struggles”). Here in this transformation, in the ‘overdetermined’ constitution of our modern self lies its protean character. *This modern Self*, is not simply a traditional casteist in disguise. It is modern and in its self-perception, thoroughly purged of its traditional, caste socialization. Often, it sincerely believes that the best way to be modern is to erase all thought of caste and religion from its mind. It is thus the truly liberated self that in looking beyond the narrow confines of sectarian particularisms, actually becomes blind to their continuing salience in a myriad new ways. It is this modern Self that appears upper caste in all the ways that the modern Self in the West appears routinely as white, upper class, male. If there is any trace in its consciousness of any of these privileges, there is always a rational and modern explanation for it. I will illustrate this with the example of EMS Namboodiripad’s text on the *National Question in India*. In this text, EMS summons the tools of historical materialism to explain Kerala’s history. He understands the historical role of brahminism in terms of the institution of the caste system that ‘ushered in a superior economic organization of society’. Dilip Menon’s fascinating but troubling study quotes from the earlier Malayalam version of the text:

“The greatest advantage of the caste system was that it paved the way for a major economic revolution. What the transfer of the rights over land from the hands of those who cleared the forests and cultivated the land, to those who lived off a portion of the produce without engaging in cultivation, actually meant was the emergence of a new sense of private property.”<sup>44</sup>

EMS goes on to mobilize the most modern of the available arguments, thus:

“...the well-known American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan, has conclusively shown that the matriarchal family is of a lower order than the patriarchal family. So have Marxist historians...(beginning with Engels himself) shown that the changeover from matriarchy to patriarchy takes place at a time when the hoe is replaced by the plough as the instrument of production in agriculture.”<sup>45</sup>

Notice that this defense of caste system and patriarchy, follows an altogether modern logic rather than drawing on his erstwhile brahmin Self. One can actually add with a fair degree of confidence that many of the communist leaders and cadres, at least at a conscious level, made serious efforts to purge aspects of casteist practices that they had inherited from their early socialization. And yet

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<sup>44</sup>Menon, Dilip (1999), “Being a Brahmin the Marxist Way: EMS Namboodiripad and the pasts of Kerala” in Daud Ali (1999) *Invoking the Past: The Uses of History in South Asia*, OUP, New Delhi. P. 76

<sup>45</sup>EMS Namboodiripad (1952) *The National Question in Kerala*, Peoples’ Publishing House, Bombay. p. 7

they remained caught within the mesh of caste (as of gender) privilege and therefore, of discriminatory practices. To recognize this phenomenon as modern is to problematize the universalisms of modernity; it is also to realize the formidable challenge that this 'upper-caste-ness' presents. I therefore, find it difficult to agree with Dilip Menon or many of the Dalitbahujan critics who would prefer to read this as a straightforward "attempt at negotiating EMS' Namboodiri identity at a time when Brahmins were under siege in south India..."<sup>46</sup>

In this context, it is interesting that this problem seems to have presented itself before both Ambedkar and Periyar and they seem to have grappled with this problem of sociological essentialization of caste identity in their own, if limited ways. Ambedkar, in fact, at one stage made this explicit: "By Brahminism, I do not mean the power, privileges and interests of the Brahmins as a community. That is not the sense in which I am using the word. By brahminism I mean the negation of the spirit of liberty, equality and fraternity... In that sense, *it is rampant in all classes*".<sup>47</sup> He then goes on to say that the effects of this Brahminism were evident not merely in the social sphere but also in the denial of civic rights to untouchables as well as in the field of economic opportunities.<sup>48</sup> Periyar even coined a term for this new form of brahminism - "political brahminism". He often noted that the brahmin's resistance to social reform was grounded less in religious orthodoxy and faith and more in their political proclivities, intents and ambitions.<sup>49</sup>

To understand this upper-caste-ness as mere brahminism in a sociological fashion is to imply that they are incomplete moderns. It is to imply that this lack can be overcome by more of the same medicine. On the other hand, to understand this as the way the universalism of modernity took root in our conditions – in some ways analogous to that in the West, where it has constructed the dominant culture as norm – is to problematize the specific trajectory of modernity in our context and thus open up the possibility of emancipation and of the recovery of lost voices in the new dispensation. We need to recognize that notwithstanding this feature of the universal modern, it remained a 'secular' modernity. In fact this is precisely what the contemporary crisis of modernity seems to be all about. The insurrection of little selves globally, is precisely a challenge to that universalizing aspiration of modernity that, in its bid to standardize and homogenize and to create the 'Universal Man' (the abstract citizen) actually ended up presenting European culture as the norm. Universalism is the

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<sup>46</sup> Dilip Menon, *ibid.* p.61

<sup>47</sup> Dhananjay Keer(1954/1997), *Dr Ambedkar - Life and Mission*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay. p. 303.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* p. 304

<sup>49</sup> Geetha and Rajadurai(1998), p. 319

privilege of the dominant, in the contemporary world. For it to be able to see what is not dominant, it has to be fissured. Only then does it become possible for us to see this protean modern Self - the self which is a mutant of the old but is still, irreducibly new. The 'treacherous deal' that Nagaraj talks of cannot, therefore, be understood as a mere conspiracy between the upper castes and modernity. However, it is a problem of the universalizing tendency of modernity that it is destined to run up against the subversive deployments of its own discourses of rights and equality - thus opening up such fissures and breaches on its front.

### **Ambedkar, Periyar and Modernity**

It seems to me that one of the persons to see this problematic aspect of modernity - though he did not articulate his discomfort in these terms - was Ambedkar. His alertness to the question arises out of his subaltern social location and becomes apparent in relation to what Gail Omvedt has described as the 'problem of entry'. What she means by the 'problem of entry' is basically that of "getting jobs and getting land"<sup>50</sup> in the case of the workers and the peasants respectively. She argues that "Dalits *were* workers; they *were* peasants; but as workers they were invariably in the lowest paid and most unskilled industrial jobs and as peasants they were likely to be landless or poor peasants".<sup>51</sup> It was this that concerned Ambedkar more than anything else. Consequently, he saw how the "basic problems of the untouchables being excluded from the higher paid weaving jobs" was also being reflected in their being less represented in leading and organizing the struggles of textile workers. In the course of the 'historic textile strike' of 1928, Ambedkar told the Simon Commission, he had brought up this matter repeatedly before union leaders. "I said to the members of the union that if they did not recognize the right of the depressed classes to work in all the departments, *I would rather dissuade the depressed classes from taking part in the strike*"<sup>52</sup> (emphasis added).

As we shall see below, there are two important senses in which Ambedkar resists the universalizing urge. First, by refusing to privilege the 'nation', 'anti-imperialism' and 'class', over the question of caste, he is resisting the idea of the part being represented in an *essential section* of the whole.<sup>53</sup> In

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<sup>50</sup>Gail Omvedt (1994) *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution - Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*. Sage Publications. London and New Delhi. p. 154

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.* p. 154

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* p. 154

<sup>53</sup> Here I am slightly misusing Althusser's notion of the 'essential section' or *coup d'essence*, though my use of it also falls, strictly speaking, within the terms defined by him. See *Reading Capital*, p. 94

other words, he is resisting the prevalent common sense, that if the whole is free, the part will be free; if India is free so will be all its constituent parts. The part - Dalit Being - is not part of any whole and cannot be represented in any essence of the whole. The irreducibility of the part is also its declaration of autonomy. Second, he is also questioning *the very given-ness of the working class*. The 'problem of entry' then, is the problem of the very 'making' of the working class. The working class was no transcendent entity in whose abstract embodiment – as the Subject of History – the Dalits could invest their future. It was a real, 'actually existing' class, which, like everything else, could be and had to be shaped. This was then the most important question for Ambedkar - more important, at any rate, than organizing the 'actual' working class, which he already understood to be upper caste in its blindness to the Dalit sensibilities. This, by the way, is part of a larger sensibility shared by many Dalit leaders of the time and the instance of the 1921 strike in the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills in Madras city brought out the conflicts within equally clearly. It even exposed the fissures within the larger Non-Brahmin identity that was being constructed by the Justice Party. We need not go into the circumstances of the strike called by the Congress-supported union but it is important to note that the adi-dravida (dalit) workers of the Binny mills refused to participate in the strike. Amidst accusations that they were blacklegs, M.C. Raja, one of the important political leaders of the adi-dravidas commented that the "adi-dravidas had exercised their right to give or withhold their labour as they thought best in their own interests. Previous experience had taught the adi-dravidas that participation in strikes proved detrimental to their interests and they had often been forced to sell their property and pledge their jewels in the past."<sup>54</sup>The interesting account of the long fall-out of the strike and the disturbances that followed as violence erupted in Pulianthope in North Madras, between the adi-dravidas and the strikers is described in detail by Geetha and Rajadurai. This description throws into sharp relief, the background that may have shaped Ambedkar's later stance on the matter.

The above statement of Ambedkar's is not an isolated instance. He was clearly continuously troubled by the problem of the 'making' of the working class. Even when he got involved with the task of organizing the 'actually existing' working class, he remained alive to this problem. It is well-known that when he formed his first political party in 1936, he called it the Independent *Labour* Party. From then, till the time the Cripps proposals forced the question of constitution-making on the agenda, bringing alive the spectre of an imminent Hindu rule, and he had to re-position himself as the leader

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<sup>54</sup> Geetha and Rajadurai, Op. Cit. Pp. 181-183

of the Depressed Classes, he continued to be keenly involved with the questions of labour and the making of the working class. Dhananjay Keer's highlights this role of his in a fairly detailed manner. This was the time that he concerned himself also with the general struggles of the working class, resisting the infamous Industrial Disputes Bill, organizing strikes and public meetings jointly with the communists. Even during this period, however, his concern in this direction can be seen, for instance, in his organizing of the Untouchable Railway Workers Conference and attempts to address their issues separately as well. "He asked his critics how they would consolidate the working classes when they did not remove such glaring injustice and partiality which was wrong in principle and injurious to the principle of solidarity."<sup>55</sup>

While resigning from Gandhi's Harijan Sevak Sangh, Ambedkar wrote a long letter to A.V. Thakkar, secretary of the Sangh he stated: "Like the Negro in America, he [the Untouchable] is the last to be employed in days of prosperity and the first to be fired in days of adversity. And even when he gets a foothold...he is confined to the lowest paid department..."<sup>56</sup>

As I mentioned, not only does Ambedkar refuse to take the working class as given, he equally vehemently refuses to accept the givenness of the nation, such as was sought to be constructed by the Congress.

"...(I)f the Untouchables have not joined the "Fight for Freedom", he contended, "it is not because they are the tools of British Imperialism but because they fear that the freedom of India will establish Hindu domination which is sure to close to them, and forever, the prospect of life, liberty and pursuit of happiness...The Congress, on the other hand regards the freedom of India from British imperialism to be the be-all and end-all of Indian nationalism."<sup>57</sup>

It is important to note too, that Ambedkar not only argued against the Congress idea of nationhood; he problematized the very category itself. In the text I have quoted above, which he intended the 'foreigner' [read Westerner] to also read, Ambedkar deals at length with the category of 'nation'. For he believes that the foreigner is allowing himself to be deceived by the Congress brand of nationalism. Thus Ambedkar: "[f]or, words such as society, nation, and country are just amorphous, if not ambiguous terms. There is no gainsaying that 'Nation' though one word means many classes. Philosophically, it may be possible to consider a nation as a unit but sociologically it cannot but be regarded as consisting of many classes." The reason why the foreigner allows himself to be misled

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<sup>55</sup> Keer, Op. Cit. p. 304

<sup>56</sup> Ambedkar (1991) Op. Cit. P. 187

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. Pp. 168, 169

into supporting the Congress, he says, “is to be found in the wrong notions of self-government and democracy which are prevalent in the West.”<sup>58</sup>

He goes on to argue:

“Western writers on democracy believe that what is necessary for the realization of the ideal of democracy, namely, government by the people, of the people, and for the people, is the establishment of universal adult suffrage. Other means have been suggested such as recall, plebiscite, and short parliaments...I have no hesitation saying that both these notions are fallacious and grossly misleading.”<sup>59</sup>

Ambedkar then goes onto the comment that democracy and self-government have failed everywhere and the reason it has been so, is their inability to deal with the question of ‘classes’.<sup>60</sup> The idea that he holds responsible for this failure is that of abstract citizenship. In many countries, “the governing class may be so well entrenched that the servile classes will need other safeguards besides adult suffrage to achieve the same end [i.e. self-government].”<sup>61</sup> This is a failure of understanding that is irritating to him because it afflicts even the “leaders of the British Labour Party, heads of radical and leftist groups in Europe and America represented by men like Laski, Kingsley Martin, Brailsford, and editors of journals like the *Nation* in America and the *New Statesman* in England...”<sup>62</sup> I suggest that this desperate bid to deal with the political categories of liberal democracy, born out of Ambedkar’s social location, must be read as an attempt at negotiating the manner of their reception in our specific context. A tension runs throughout his life-work between the attempt to occupy an unmarked, universalist ground and his being forced to repeatedly abandon it. It is certainly as a modernist that Ambedkar acts, but all the same he refuses to take modernity and its theoretical and political categories as a package deal, questioning and resisting the very mode of its articulation with the nonmodern.

The refusal to take the nation as given, is evident also in the writings of all the major leaders of the Dalits/Non-Brahmins. I have already mentioned Iyothee Thass. E.V. Ramasamy (Periyar), too was involved in continuously interrogating the nationalist project. As has been argued forcefully by MSS Pandian, Periyar’s concept of nation “denied its origin in the classical Indian/Tamil past and envisaged

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. Pp. 201-2

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. Pp.202-3

<sup>60</sup> One may note that Ambedkar often uses the terms governing and servile classes to denote castes.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. p. 204

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. p. 235

it wholly in the anticipatory.”<sup>63</sup> Periyar’s trajectory is interesting as, unlike Ambedkar after him, he did have a brief five year spell of political life as a committed Gandhian and Congressman. In this phase, Ramasamy was fiercely nationalist and it was with his gradual disenchantment with Congress that he re-evaluated his understanding of British rule. It was then that he came to the conclusion that “if we had remained the slaves of *north Indians*, we would have remained ‘sudran’, ‘rakshashan’, ‘asuran’, ‘kundakan’, ‘kolakan’, ‘pratikolan’, ‘narakan’...”<sup>64</sup> His final break with the Congress came in November 1925, with the Kancheepuram Conference of the Tamil Nadu Congress, when two of his resolutions on in support of ‘communal representation’ were disallowed.<sup>65</sup> In his interventions at the Kancheepuram conference he was candid that, “(I)n our present situation many fear that Swaraj if granted will only usher in Brahmana Raj. If, in these days of British rule, it is possible for some to prevent others from walking down certain streets and to prevent them from having access to water from the village wells and ponds...what would they... not do if they came to wield [political] authority? What horrors would they not perpetrate?”<sup>66</sup> There are many different phases through which his critiques of nationalism pass but all through them what remains more or less constant is the attack on the many faces of brahminism as the centre-piece of that critique. It finally led, despite Ambedkar, to his “painstaking... interrogations of the proceedings of the Constituent Assembly ...It culminated...[in his] rejection of the Constitution of India...”<sup>67</sup>

Although, unlike Ambedkar, Periyar actually remained a strong votary of socialism – what he called *samadharm* – and an admirer of the Soviet Union. He also remains firm in his rejection of religion and his strong advocacy of rationalism, science and progress. And yet, his subject is neither the industrial proletariat nor the abstract unmarked citizen produced within a discourse of universal history. His search for the Self leads him to an exercise analogous to that of Ambedkar’s. He therefore produces a narrative of Indian history as one of the perennial struggle between the subjugated Dravidas and the subjugating Aryans.<sup>68</sup> His search leads him to the discovery of the Dravida Self, which he occasionally expands to include the Sudras and the ati-Sudras of the North – an untenable exercise in terms of the canons of history in whose name the fight was being

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<sup>63</sup> MSS Pandian (1993) “Denationalizing the Past: ‘Nation’ in E.V. Ramasamy’s Political Discourse”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 16. P. 2282

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. p. 2283

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. p. 2282

<sup>66</sup> Geetha and Rajadurai, Op. Cit. p. 291

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. p. 323

<sup>68</sup> It may be mentioned that Ambedkar had rejected this Aryan domination theory, though others like Jyotiba Phule upheld it. It has since been revived by Kanshi Ram and the BSP. See Dube (1997) for details.

conducted. But then, that is precisely the point. History, in this struggle, was not a scientific, objective reading of the past – it was what it has always been. It was a narrative already constituted by and therefore subordinate to the political demands of the present. Often, this history was not ‘memory’, it was instituted as memory to fill the big absence that was the denial of the adi-drauida and shudra past. But this mode of ‘modern scientific history’, as against the Vedas, Itihasas and the Puranas which he relentlessly critiqued as ‘irrational’ and ‘unscientific’ was a necessary condition of emancipation, for it framed the entire constitution of the Non-Brahmin, Dravida Self.

Despite EV Ramasamy’s great appreciation of socialism, he, like Ambedkar came into conflict with the communists and socialists. He argued that class divisions in Hindu society were inscribed within caste divisions. “(B)rahmins lived of their intellectual capital and spiritual surplus while the non-brahmins, denied easy access to either, had to labour to live. The division of labour into intellectual and manual labour and the elaborate religious and cultural codes devised to validate this division were considered by the Self-Respecters to be fundamental to the problems of justice and equality in caste society.”<sup>69</sup> The modern category of class was thus constituted by the very nature of modernity’s articulation with the non-modern, by the existence of caste.

In concluding this discussion then, I wish to suggest that the very existence of Dalit politics, both during the anticolonial struggle as well as in the present, continuously disturbs and challenges the binaries of nationalism/imperialism and secularism/communalism, refusing incorporation into either term of the binaries. Its very existence therefore challenges the complicity of the two terms which effectively serve to *prevent the emergence of the Dalit as subject*. It keeps irrupting as the *problematic third term* repressed by the modern discourses of secularism, nationalism and secular-nationalism. In fact, as our discussion shows, the argument is that, precisely at the moments when the Dalit begins to find her voice, it is the binary mode of conceptualizing politics that seeks to stifle it. What continuously pits the Dalit against these categories framing thought and political action, therefore, is the *experience of subaltern location*, which experiences modernity as simultaneously liberating and as denial of voice and agency. This is what gives centrality to the *category of experience* in Dalit scholarship and lies at the root of the widespread distrust of non-Dalit accounts of Dalit history. What appears here as the essentialization of Dalit identity in this insistence of Dalit

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid. p. 439

accounts of their own history, seems to be in fact, an attempt to reclaim Dalit voice from the hegemonic practices of historiography.

To go back to Sumit Sarkar then, the 'deafening silence of historiography', I would suggest, needs to be understood as the effect of what can be called, with apologies to Kant, the 'categorical imperative' of modern politics as it historically came to be.

### **Caste and Political Society: The Other Face of the Modern Self**

It is necessary, at this stage to underline that the discussion so far deals explicitly, with *only one aspect* of caste in modern society. This is exemplified by the existence of 'caste' in the modern Self in the form of the committed secularist-liberal/marxist individual. I have tried to break down the category of the 'brahminical marxist' in Dalitbahujan discourse, in order to understand the existence of this self. This modern individuated self inhabits the ground of high modernity in India - the ground of civil society, governed by modern notions of citizenship and defined by contractual relations and rules of free entry and exit. Equality, autonomy, deliberative procedures of decision-making are the values that underlie the functioning of the institutions that constitute it.<sup>70</sup>

On the other hand, there are vast domains of life that are differentially incorporated into this arena of citizenship. The history of the modern Self in India – and indeed in many non-Western, postcolonial societies – is marked by the existence of a very large domain where very different, often contradictory processes are at work. The advent of modernity has transformed the overall context and provided a kind of institutional set-up within which the so-called traditional has to negotiate its daily existence. In this domain of daily transactions between the traditional and the modern, we see the continued existence and salience of caste, religion or ethnicity as it struggles to adjust itself to the new languages and practices of a modern democratic polity. I will call this domain, after Partha Chatterjee, the domain of political society. The kind of secularized self discussed earlier, represented by the liberal/marxist individual actually consists of a small, if crucial dimension of 'our modernity'. In this other vast domain there are people who could even be described as say, 'full-blooded casteists'. If we look at the ways in which routinely, everyday discourse is marked, even in the cities, by the languages of caste, religion and the like, we would be compelled to acknowledge that there

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<sup>70</sup> For a quick definition, see Partha Chatterjee (1998), "Introduction", *Wages of Freedom - Fifty Years of the Nation-State*, Oxford University Press, Delhi etc, p. 10.

is a great deal of truth in the Dalit critique that the brahminical castes have taken over our public institutions and colonized the public sphere. And yet these too are *neither traditional nor modern*. These modes of existence represent attempts at negotiating the new world in languages that inflect the languages of political modernity with a distinctly 'traditional' flavour.

To understand the dynamic of what I am referring to, let us look at the phenomenon of caste associations. In the late 'sixties, Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph described this politics of the caste associations as *the modernity of tradition*.<sup>71</sup> In this pioneering study, the Rudolphs described caste associations as 'paracomunities' "that enable members of castes to pursue social mobility, political power, and economic advantage." They argued that "(t)he characteristics of the paracomunity resemble in many ways those of the voluntary association or the interest group familiar to European and American politics."<sup>72</sup> This was so in the sense that membership in the association was not purely ascriptive. Birth in a particular caste was a necessary but not a sufficient condition of membership in the association. More importantly, they argue,

"When caste associations turned to the state for furthering their purposes, their initial claims were aimed at raising caste status in terms of the values and structure of the caste order. But as liberal democratic ideas penetrated to wider sections of the population, *the aims of caste association began to shift from sacred to secular goals*. Instead of demanding entry into temples, prestigious caste names, and 'honorable' occupations and histories in the Census, the associations began to press for places in the new administrative and educational institutions and for political representation. Independence and the realization of political democracy intensified these new concerns. Caste associations attempted to have their members nominated for elective office, working through existing parties or forming their own; to maximize caste representation and influence in state cabinets and lesser governing bodies...Perhaps the most significant aspect of the caste association in the contemporary era, however, *has been its capacity to organize what appears to be a politically illiterate mass electorate*. Doing so enabled it to realize in some measure its new formed aspirations *and to educate its members in the methods and values of political democracy*." <sup>73</sup>

There is a lot of empirical work that has been done since, in more recent times, that has made us alert to the more complicated dimensions of the developments that the Rudolphs refer to. In the first place, it can be argued that even the early attempts at recognition of their status by the state which the Rudolphs think are in terms of the values of the caste order are, in fact, not so. Once the technologies of colonial governmentality were in place and the operations of enumeration and state recognition introduced the new dimensions in the recognition of status, the desire to get that

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<sup>71</sup> Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph (1967), *The Modernity of Tradition - Political Development in India*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. p. 29

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. Pp. 32-33. Emphasis added.

recognition was *already* located outside the framework of the caste system. Sanction of status by the ritual authorities was subverted at the very instance the caste associations came into being. This continued well into the post-independence period. In one early study by Rajni Kothari and Rushikesh Maru, for instance, the authors showed how in the formation of the Kshatriya Sabha of Gujarat, a marginal peasant and landless labourer caste called Bariyas, and the Bhils - a depressed tribal community - combined together under the leadership of twice-born Rajputs. Kothari and Maru argued that the socially and politically democratic character of the Kshatriya Sabha was evident in the motivation behind its formation. "Caste consciousness played a part, but not for the purpose of preserving caste traditions and customs but rather of transforming them through political power."<sup>74</sup> In a study conducted around the same time by Myron Weiner, this secularization of caste became more evident. One of the respondents told Weiner, for instance that being a Rajput "is not a question of blood but of spirit and action". Another told him that "(t)he Kshatriyas are a class, not a caste", while yet another told him that if the Bhils are brave enough, we will call them Kshatriyas".<sup>75</sup> The change in status, notes the study is not 'merely rhetorical', and that, at least within the sabha, "Bariyas now sit on charpoys...on an equal level with Rajputs."<sup>76</sup> The more important point however, is the suggestion that these associations have turned out to be paracommunities, implying that they have become detached in some way from ritual hierarchy and are emerging as equal to other communities or paracommunities, playing a mediatory role between the 'illiterate mass' and the political system. It is here, in this articulation of the new caste-community interests in relation to the state and at the same time, in making the new languages more intelligible to the masses they seek to represent that the caste association, and by extension, communities in general, open up a new domain of political transactions between the two worlds. The Rudolphs correctly observe that the leadership in the caste association is no longer in the hands of those qualified by heredity. "The availability of association leaders is conditioned by their ability to articulate and represent the purposes of the caste association and for this purpose they must be literate in the ways of modern administration and the new

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<sup>74</sup> Rajni Kothari and R.M. Maru, "Caste and Secularism in India", *Journal of Asian Studies*, XXV (November 1965), quoted in *Ibid.* Pp. 99-100

<sup>75</sup> Myron Weiner, "Segmentation and Political participation: Kaira district" in *Party Building in a New Nation*, (Chicago, 1967), quoted in *Ibid.* Pp. 100-101. There are nay number of historical and sociological studies available now to illustrate this point. I am only indicating the ones quoted by the Rudolphs.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* p. 101

democratic politics."<sup>77</sup>The very organization of the association then acquires the structure of modern voluntary associations: "It has offices, membership, incipient bureaucratization, publications and a quasi-legislative process expressed through conferences, delegates and resolutions."<sup>78</sup>

The Rudolphs also refer to a study by Willaim L. Rowe who reviewed "the doctrinal orientations" of the *Kayastha Samachar* of Allahabad between 1873 and 1915. The interesting thing about this journal of the All-India Kayastha Association is that mid-way through its existence it underwent a change of nomenclature and became the *Hindustan Review*. Rowe also found that by 1905, "the specifically 'caste' matters have been relegated to the rear section...with an increasing number of articles on national and political questions...(sometimes) by Parsi, Muslim and foreign writers." He also quotes an editorial in the June 1901 issue entitled "Caste Conferences and National Progress" that argued that caste feeling hindered "true national feeling".<sup>79</sup>

And yet, if were to conclude from this evidence that caste has become thoroughly modernized, we would be making a mistake. In order to understand the existence of caste in this wider domain, we need to refer to what Harold Gould calls 'compartmentalization'. In his study of the Lucknow rickshawallas, Gould found that all the persons in his sample adhered fairly strictly to the norms of endogamy. They dined too with members of their own caste groups "under domestic conditions despite the fact that during working hours they constantly violated the rule enjoining commensal exclusiveness." "Respondents saw no inconsistency in this", according to him, as "they held that their work is part of one domain with its specific necessities respecting social interaction while their domestic or non-work life is quite part of another."<sup>80</sup>This compartmentalization of the domain of the home and the family from that of the workplace - and in a larger sense the entire public domain is a crucial mechanism by which I believe, this other self negotiates modernity and its processes. The Rudolphs call this "the Indian dilemma" and describe it as the "contradiction between public ideology and private commitment".<sup>81</sup>They go on to argue, along with Gould, that "(p)ivate commitment to tradition, to ascriptive communities and their values, however, not only is compatible with continued modernization but also, as long as it remains private, facilitates it by

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid. p.34

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. p.35

<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Ibid. p. 125

<sup>80</sup> Harold Gould, "Lucknow Rickshawallas: The Social Organization of an Occupational Category," *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* quoted in Ibid. p. 121

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. p. 130

providing adaptive institutions.<sup>82</sup> One would think, even the continuance of the practices of untouchability in the private domain, along with other less abhorrent caste practices, are also compatible with modernization. In this other domain of political society, at least, it continues to be so.

In more recent days, D.L. Sheth has also pointed to the continuance of similar trends of secularization of caste. On the basis of CSDS' election survey data, he has argued, that caste has ceased to 'reproduce' itself as an institution of ritual hierarchy. His description tends to come close to that of the Rudolphs', that caste has in fact become a kind of 'paracommunity'.

There is one problem, however, with this reading presented by the above studies. Despite obvious merits, they produce these descriptions within an overall narrative of modernization. All these studies conducted in the 'sixties, carry the stamp of the times and the imprint of the modernization theory is writ large all over them. These studies then, can only see these developments as different stations on the high road to modernization of the peripheries of the non-Western world. The idea of compartmentalization or the 'Indian dilemma' appears then, to be of major significance, as the assumption is that as long as commitment to ascriptive identities *can be kept at a private level* they can *facilitate modernization*. And like the West, where religion has been consigned to the private realm, these commitments here too can become and remain private matters. Continued adherence to them can therefore present no problem to the modernizing project. The dilemma, in other words, should be seen as no more Indian than it is of the West. Considerable amount of scholarship interrogating that kind of an understanding of the modernization process has now made all the problems with it manifest. Without going into the details of such a critique, we can simply note that it eventually ends up overlooking the specificity of different, alternative modernities. From such an understanding, it is only possible to see these hybrid formations as incompletely modern, but nevertheless, on the way to becoming fully modern ones.

It is necessary to underline that this simple story needs to be complicated today in order to properly grasp trajectory of modernity in postcolonial societies like India's. The problem with this trajectory of postcolonial modernity, is that not only was it an elite project as indeed, it was in the West too. Its problem probably, was also that it was the project of an elite that discovered its Self in the humiliating experience of colonial domination. It wanted to be modern, for it understood that

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid. p. 130

that was the very condition of its liberation from foreign domination, but it wanted to do so on what it considered to be its own terms. Undoubtedly, this elite was a brahminical Hindu elite and the terms on which it imagined its national liberation to be possible was therefore, by declaring its sovereignty in the spiritual/cultural domain.<sup>83</sup> This was what led, from the early years of the formation of nationalist discourse, in its moment of epiphany, to the stifling of all the impulses of internal social reform within communities and effected a closure that has been at the heart of the problem of our modernity. The critical point is therefore, that “the search for a postcolonial modernity has been tied, from its very birth, *with its struggle against modernity*”.<sup>84</sup> The specific context of our colonial encounter and the way in which nationalism took shape then could not but lead to other such closures – as for instance among the Muslims.<sup>85</sup> The modernizing project, in our context then, is likely to always carry the trace of this past.

In some of his recent writings, Partha Chatterjee has also suggested that there is lodged, in the very constitution of postcolonial democracies, a contradiction that he describes as one between modernity and democracy . If by democracy we mean, not merely a set of institutions, but more importantly, the ‘entry of the masses into politics’, then the ways in which this entry materialized, in the first place, is further likely to pose a constant challenge to the project of modernization. I would therefore, argue with Chatterjee, and in the light of our discussion so far, that the contradiction is what ensures that the very character of our modernity, therefore, is fraught with all these contradictory impulses. For this reason, even though caste remains but a trace of itself, and may thus have ceased to reproduce itself, it is like the religious community and communalism, bound to acquire a new life within the logic of the modern regime of power.

The new Dalit critique of caste, then is really not so much about untouchability and the ritual practices associated with caste in the private sphere but needs to be understood as a continuing struggle against the modern incarnations of ‘casteism’. In this sphere, the point I wish to underline in conclusion is that these modern incarnations of upper-caste privilege continue to have a powerful afterlife, precisely because they are no more articulated in the old language of caste. Their new resilience depends entirely on the modern discourses of ‘efficiency’, ‘merit’ and even ‘hygiene’ – when for instance,

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<sup>83</sup> Partha Chatterjee (1993) *The Nation and its Fragments*, Oxford University Press, Calcutta, Delhi, p.6

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. p.75

<sup>85</sup> Since this essay is part of a larger ongoing project, I am only indicatively referring to some of the ideas that have been developed in the other parts of the project.

questions of purity and pollution come to be articulated within a wholly modern universe. To that extent, the language of our secular discourse, provides it with its most effective political weapon.

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