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**Burning up the Dharmasastras:
Group Identity and Social Justice in the
the Thought of B. R. Ambedkar
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On December 25, 1927, a conference of "Depressed Classes" gathered in Mahad, south of Bombay, to prepare a satyagraha, a non-violent struggle, to gain access to the waters of the Chaudar Tank. Earlier that year Dr. B.R. Ambedkar had led a march to the tank, taken a drink from it and set off a powerful reaction of social boycott of untouchables by high-caste Hindus. Now he returned, this time invoking not only the methods of Mahatma Gandhi but the example of the French Revolution. The conference first passed a declaration of human rights, asserting the principle of equality and calling for the abolition of the caste system. This was followed by a resolution condemning the Manusmriti, the classic Hindu code of conduct. Then, in a pit dug out in front of the speaker's platform, these "Laws of Manu" were placed on a pyre and committed to the flames.¹

Twenty years later, Ambedkar was to serve as chief draftsman of India's constitution, but by that time he had declared his intention to secede from Hinduism and Hindu society altogether and to lead those who would follow into another religion and another social order. The religion, finally selected on the eve of his death in 1956, would be Buddhism, and the social order

would be socialism, founded on the solidarity of the working classes.

For Ambedkar the overthrow of Hindu ideology was the necessary condition for the liberation of India's poor and oppressed, but he was not optimistic about the speedy victory of an alternative system. If he left millions of people with a new charter of hope, he himself died bitter and broken.² After the initial excitement of mass Buddhist conversion, the movement is said to have suffered the fate of its historic bhakti predecessors: it was absorbed and compartmentalized within the totality of India's hierarchical social order and came to replicate within itself the structure of that system.³

That despairing judgment of Ambedkar's achievement, however, neglects the opening up of wide domains in Indian life in which the ideology of hierarchy can claim neither legitimacy nor apparent practical effect. The terms of political debate, the institutions of the state, and much of the economy can plausibly be analyzed in terms of liberal concepts of the individual actor or Marxian concepts of class. If hierarchy, in Dumont's sense, retains its hold on India, it is now frequently submerged beneath the level of conscious articulation or masked in utilitarian rhetoric. Furthermore, the units of analysis recognized in Indian political and economic discourse bear an uncertain relation to historic social categories: class or ideological labels may disguise caste or ethnic identities; but caste, language and religion may stand for social consolidations that

are distinct innovations both in terms of their internal relations and their role in society.⁴

One of the great problems in the study of modern Indian society is to map the categories of social groups as "units of analysis" and to relate them to the major "domains" of political and economic life. Ambedkar stood as a radical voice of opposition against the dominant ideology of Indian nationalism which was more concerned with the establishment of a harmonious social order, making the parts fit into a harmonious whole, rather than the achievement of social justice or economic advancement. Disorder and fragmentation have been the great anxieties addressed by the dominant ideologies of Indian history. For this reason, "nation building" was an end in itself. India still stands at a considerable distance from a fully mobilized nation-state, poised to devote the entire energies of its population to an identifiable set of goals. More realistically, India's relatively weak integration places severe limits on the impact of national policy. Whether that kind of nation-state is a prerequisite for further economic and social development is a matter for speculation. Those who seek such development must decide what obstacles stand in its way, and some would say that an ideology of social harmony is one such obstacle. But if the price of change is conflict, what social groups can or should be mobilized into conscious movements for the reallocation of power? Can India as a whole be the primary arena for such conflict? And are there forms of conflict that can lead to something other than

matsyayana, the condition of anarchy in which the big fish devour the small?

Ambedkar and Partition

Muslim separatism has loomed as the paradigm for all politics based on ascribed cultural identity. The fact that the independence of India came simultaneously with its partition on August 15, 1947, serves as a warning against the possibilities of future dismemberments. At the time, partition was undoubtedly a shock even for those who had sought it. Few people had understood what Pakistan would mean: closed international borders, antagonistic armies, the displacement and death of millions, wars and preparations for war. If the goal of Indian nationalism was unity, Pakistan marked, for many, its dismal failure, the "inglorious end," as Gandhi put it, of his thirty-two years of struggle.

Ambedkar was one non-Muslim to support the partition of India, even to the extent of envisioning the exchange of populations that for others was its unanticipated consequence.⁵ The creation of Pakistan would free India from endemic Hindu-Muslim controversy, which only served to reinforce the authority of religious orthodoxy and inhibit radical social change. In separate countries, both Hindus and Muslims could devote themselves to matters other than their mutual enmity.

Ambedkar's argument for Pakistan was founded on the assumption that the "religious beliefs. . . of the Hindus and Muslims. . . constitute the motive force which determines the

