

Dalit Svaraj: Toward a Political Theory

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0. Preface: On the Direction of Theory

Our political theories, if political theory is to fulfill the function it is meant to do,¹ must be built upon the foundations of the lived practices and self-understanding of the multiple masses of the polity. The theory should abstract, clarify, refine and reflectively enlighten the doing, willing and thinking of the people. The spirit of the people must be reflected in the mirror of theory. Were authentic, or really meaningful political theory presented before the people, we could not expect the masses to fully comprehend all of its significations and reticulated networks of meaning – it is a specialty discipline after all. However, surely the masses should be able to recognize themselves, their actual polity, reflected in the mirror of that theory. As we have as yet no svaraj in Indian political theory, as we continue to work with categories and concepts alien to the lived social and political experience of the common man, the reflection thrown back upon the people in the light of political theory as it is currently taught in Indian universities is a horror of distortion – it is not just a cracked mirror, it is a grotesquely warped mirror that is cracked.²

From the point of view of modern political theory, svaraj without dalit svaraj is tantamount to liberty without equality.³ On the contrary, a political theory of svaraj is premised upon substantive dalit svaraj. It is crucially important to be clear about this.⁴ The authenticity of Indian political theory does not lie merely in indigenizing our political thought, in a backwards turn to some pre-modern “wonder that was India”; but, rather, more profoundly, it lies in democratizing our political thought, in an excavation downwards. In other words, the direction that political theory must take is the same direction that Ambedkarite political practice always took: not backwards; forward by way of downward. Or to borrow Gopal Guru's words, it lies in “expanding the social base of its intellectual landscape”.⁵

1. Slaves of Slaves

If Indians were slaves under imperialism, as Gandhi and others had often claimed, then dalits

1 What is political theory supposed to do? See Chapter 1 for an answer to this question.

2 Cf. Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai, *The Cracked Mirror* (2012), p. 6.

3 Rawls did a great injustice to all those suffering the injustice of inequality by prioritizing liberty over equality in his lexical ordering – the difference principle has been principally an indifference on the part of Rawlsians.

4 There is a broad misconception about the 'nativism' in the nativist turn of Indian political theory. Gurpreet Mahajan has most plainly represented this error of thinking very clearly in the introduction of her recent book *India: Political Ideas and the Making of a Democratic Discourse*. She argues that the project of indigeneity in Indian political thought carries with it methodological assumptions that are false, and which essentialize cultures and absolutize difference. She writes: “Looking for an essence, or for authentic *Indian* concepts, is therefore a misplaced project and cannot, and must not, be the ground for constructing an Indian political theory” (p. 5). As this paper argues, the ground for an Indian political theory does not lie in Indian concepts; it lies in Indian people.

5 Guru, *The Cracked Mirror*, p. 28.

were the “slaves of slaves.”⁶ This was the double-bind of the dalits during British rule. How to disentangle oneself from a double bind? Every move that Dr. Ambedkar made attempting to untangle himself from one of the knots of bondage only seemed to entangle him more tightly in the other.

Dr. Ambedkar once quipped, “If Tilak had been born among the untouchables, he would not have raised the slogan 'Swaraj is my birthright', but he would have [instead] raised the slogan 'Annihilation of untouchability is my birthright'”.⁷ The tension, at times outright antagonism, between svaraj understood as Indian home rule, and the more focused interests of the dalits, or “depressed classes” as they were called in that era, recapitulates the profound and I believe irreconcilable differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar. I have discussed this at length in a paper entitled “Gandhi and Ambedkar: Irreconcilable Differences.”⁸ That paper responds to the enormously increasing literature that attempts to reconcile the life and work of Gandhi and Ambedkar. I pay particular attention to the exemplary writings of Thomas Pantham, Ramachandra Guha, and Partha Chatterjee, who represent three distinct archetypal techniques of reconciliation (specifically, homogenizing, historicizing, and dialectical reconciliation, respectively). While appreciating the motives behind reconciliatory gestures, I argue that such attempts are both false in principle (if due weight is given to the full extent and nature of their differences) as well as dangerous in practice (given the risk of appropriation of Ambedkar by upper class intellectuals). In contrast, and to avoid these pitfalls, I argue, quite against the current trend, that we must resist attempts to reconcile Gandhi and Ambedkar. Instead, we must recognize and preserve their differences and keep ever attuned to their tension, and remain vigilant about it.⁹

So, what would dalit svaraj mean in the light of that background and the Gandhi-Ambedkar debate? Is it a surreptitious reconciliation by other means? Is it an appropriation of Ambedkar to a majoritarian Hindu cause? Is it not the fusion of two irreconcilables? I think not. Quite the contrary, in this certainly most suspect and risky linkage of terms, we might actually uncover a kind of solution to, a way out of, the impossible double-bind that entrapped Ambedkar. And even beyond that, it was a tacit notion that seems to have carried considerable weight for Ambedkar not only before independence, but also afterwards. As I hope to show in what follows, what I am referring to as dalit svaraj uniquely captures an innovation in Ambedkar's own political thought and practice, and is not merely my academic invention.

From the perspective of Indian political theory, what is important to cull out from these arguments is this: dalit svaraj is not just a precondition for svaraj, or authentic Indian independence; rather, dalit svaraj is the mark, measure and metric of svaraj as such. This holds true not simply for svaraj in its straight-forward political sense as 'home rule', but equally for its more nuanced moral and ontological denotations. Gandhi, in his own idiosyncratic way, was himself emphatic about this now and again. In *Young India* in 1920, Gandhi wrote:

Non-cooperation against the Government means cooperation among the governed, and if Hindus do not remove the sin of untouchability, there will be no Swaraj in one year or one hundred years....¹⁰

6 These are Gandhi's words, as discussed further below. Ambedkar himself fully characterized the situation thus: “The British have an empire. So have the Hindus. For is not Hinduism a form of imperialism and are not the Untouchables a subject race, owing there allegiance and their servitude to their Hindu Master?”, BAWS 9: 429.

7 In his editorial in the *Bahishkrit Bharat* (29 July 1927), cited in Keer p.

8 Published in the *International Journal of Gandhi Studies* (2013).

9 [in book, move that stuff to this note and just write, “in the previous chapter”].

10 In the *Young India* of December 29, 1920. BAWS 9: 37. Again: "Untouchability cannot be given a secondary place on the programme. Without the removal of the taint Swaraj is a meaningless term.....I consider the removal of untouchability as a most powerful factor in the process of attainment of Swaraj." *Young India* of 3rd November 1921.

A decade later, at the Round Table Conference, Gandhi again said:

Just as the Congress considered Hindu-Muslim Unity, thereby meaning unity amongst all classes, to be indispensable for the attainment of Swaraj, so also did the Congress consider the removal of the curse of untouchability as an indispensable condition for the attainment of full freedom.¹¹

However, at other times, Gandhi vacillated:

A correspondent indignantly asks me...what I am doing for the (untouchables): “Should not we the Hindus wash our bloodstained hands before we ask the English to wash theirs?” This is a proper question reasonably put. And if a member of a slave nation could deliver the suppressed classes from their slavery without freeing myself from my own, I would so do today. But it is an impossible task.¹²

As far as Dr. Ambedkar was concerned, he believed that words such as these showed that Gandhi and the Congress were insincere when they said that removal of untouchability was a condition precedent to svaraj. But not relying on words alone, Ambedkar also set out to show in his writing that Gandhi's words were anyway never followed through by the required action.

Ambedkar provides three main bundles of evidence. First, Ambedkar documents the farce that was made out of the Bardoli Programme, which was a constructive plan of Congress drawn up in 1922 for recruiting members, raising funds, and spending the funds on social and political endeavors. The fourth point of action was, “to organise the Depressed Classes for a better life, to improve their social, mental and moral condition and to induce them to send their children to national schools and to provide for them the ordinary facilities which the other citizens enjoy.” The sub-committee set up to implement the fourth point of action did not receive the funds required to undertake any real work, and thus its head, Swami Shradhanand of the Arya Samaj, resigned. With neither funds nor a sub-committee head, the Working Committee meant to oversee the implementation of the Bardoli Programme decided that, instead of implementing the fourth point of action, it would pass off this work to the All-India Hindu Mahasabha. In 1923, it wrote asking the Mahasabha “to take up this matter and to make strenuous efforts to remove this evil [untouchability] from amidst the Hindu community.” As Ambedkar sardonically concludes his account of these events: “Thus came to an end the Constructive Programme undertaken by Mr. Gandhi and the Congress for the Untouchables.”¹³

Second, Ambedkar narrates the satyagrahas at Mahad and Nasik for establishing their rights for drawing water from a public tank and for temple-entry, respectively. Since these satyagrahas were by untouchables against Hindus, and not by Indians against the British, Gandhi was opposed and Congress did not lend support.¹⁴ The satyagrahis were isolated and demoralized, supply lines cut off.

BAWS 9: 36.

11 Cited in BAWS 5: 315. (Find in CWMG)

12 Cited in BAWS 5: 318. (Find in CWMG)

13 BAWS 5: 299. Of the 50 lakh rupees allotted to the Bardoli Programme, the sub-committee on the untouchables expected to receive at least 10%, or 5 lakhs. This was promptly reduced to 2 lakhs. In the end, less than 50,000 rupees were ever spent – less than 1% of the total budget on a constituency comprising 20% of the total population. (BAWS 9: 35).

14 BAWS 5: 307-309. There was another satyagraha of the untouchables at Vaikom, which Gandhi did support. Ambedkar's contention is that Gandhi supported the Vaikom satyagraha because Congress was party to it, whereas in the Nashik and Mahad satyagrahas, the untouchables acted without Congress. Thus, Ambedkar sums it up by suggesting that “Mr.

The third piece of evidence Ambedkar points to in order to show that neither Congress nor Gandhi were sincere about dalit emancipation as a precondition for svaraj relates to the Round Table Conference; specifically, Gandhi's vociferous objections to the demands made there by representatives of the dalits that the Indian Constitution should contain two political safeguards: the right to "adequate representation," or what today we refer to as reservation; and, separate electorates for a period of 10 years. How these details were decided later through the Poona Pact has been widely discussed in the literature¹⁵ in terms of creating a chasm between Gandhi and Ambedkar. Below we will return to some of these points in relation to the permutations of Ambedkar's understanding of svaraj.

2. Framing the Double Bind

Dr Ambedkar's discomfort with svaraj, both as a term and what it signified, is fairly well known. Far less known, however, are the subtle ways that Ambedkar appropriated this term from time to time over the years. I have documented 215 uses of the word within the corpus of Ambedkar's writings and speeches. Indeed, if you follow the development of his thought from the 1920s to the 1950s, it is apparent that Dr. Ambedkar mastered a powerful rhetorical use of the term, ultimately deploying it to justify his deeply controversial conversion to Buddhism in 1956.¹⁶

But a great deal happened before that moment. To begin, one of the most articulate and direct expositions of Ambedkar's understanding of svaraj can be found in his opening address at the Round Table Conference held in London in 1930. I cite it at length, as it allows us to enter directly into the crux of Dr Ambedkar's understanding of both the problems and the promise inherent in svaraj.

The depressed classes, ...one-fifth of the total population of British India...form a group by themselves..., and, although they are included among the Hindus, they in no sense form an integral part of that community. It is one which is midway between that of the serf and the slave....This enforced servility and bar to human intercourse, due to their untouchability...works out as a positive denial of all equality of opportunity and the denial of those most elementary of civic rights....

...The Depressed Classes had welcomed the British as their deliverers from age long tyranny and oppression by the orthodox Hindus. ...Has the British Government done anything to remove it? Before the British, we could not enter the temple. Can we enter now? Before the British, we were denied entry into the Police Force. Does the British Government admit us in the Force? Before the British, we were not allowed to serve in the Military. Is that career now open to us? ...There is certainly no fundamental change in our position.

...We must have a Government in which men in power...will not be afraid to amend the social and economic code of life which the dictates of justice and expediency so urgently call for. This role the British Government will never be able to play. It is only a Government which is of the people, for the people and by the people that will make this possible.

Gandhi was not prepared to protect the lambs who would not accept him as their shepherd" (308).

15 See previous chapter/ Aakash Singh Rathore, "Gandhi and Ambedkar" *International Journal of Gandhi Studies* (2013).

16 According to Dhananjay Keer, Ambedkar was asked what advantage he would gain by conversion. He replied, "What will India gain by Swaraj? Just as Swaraj is necessary for India, so also is change of religion necessary for the untouchables. The underlying motive in both the movements is the desire for freedom." Keer, p 274.

...We feel that nobody can remove our grievances as well as we can, and we cannot remove them unless we get political power in our own hands....It is only in a Swaraj constitution that we stand any chance of getting the political power into our own hands, without which we cannot bring salvation to our people.

...The idea of Swaraj recalls to the mind of many of us the tyrannies, oppressions and injustices practised upon us in the past and fear of their recurrence under Swaraj. We are prepared to take the inevitable risk of the situation in the hope that we shall be installed, in adequate proportion, as the political sovereigns of the country along with our fellow countrymen.

This poignant speech touches upon the central dilemmas of the double-bind. First, that the dalits are included among the Hindus, but in such a way that they are simultaneously caste out from the Hindu fold. They are excluded within, and they naturally fear that after the coming independence they will be “included out”. Having been always excluded, dalits had earlier falsely invested hope in the British that they should be their liberators from oppression. But the British preserved the social system they found, and carried on permitting the untouchables to be excluded from social and civic life. Thus, svaraj *is* desirable, despite that it recalls to mind the oppression and tyranny that the untouchables faced for centuries at the hands of the caste-Hindus. Now, to prevent being excluded even after svaraj, government in India must be *of* the people and *by* the people: that is, dalits (one-fifth of the population) must be permitted a share of political sovereignty. Finally, Ambedkar makes clear that the dalits themselves must own and address their grievances – it is not to be done *for* them, but *by* them. It is a vicious irony, however, because they need svaraj in order to empower themselves, and at the same time, to empower themselves is to achieve svaraj.

Gandhi was himself well aware of the double-bind that Ambedkar found himself entangled within. Not only did he describe the situation in detail, he also advised Ambedkar that there was only one way out, which was to find salvation in Hinduism:

There are three courses open to these down-trodden members of the nation. [1] They may call in the assistance of the slave-owning Government. They will get it, but they will fall from the frying pan into the fire. Today they are slaves of slaves....They will be used for suppressing their kith and kin. Instead of being sinned against, they will themselves be the sinners.... [2] The second is rejection of Hinduism and wholesale conversion.... [3] Then,...self-help and self-dependence, with such aid as the non-Panchama Hindus will render....The better way...is for the Panchamas heartily to join the great national movement that is now going on for throwing off the slavery of the present Government.¹⁷

Thirty years later, Ambedkar reflected back upon this advice:

When Gandhi demanded Swaraj I supported him. I asked him just one question: what will be the position of the Dalits in his so-called Swaraj? Will our people have some standard of life, will we be educated, will there be no harassment of untouchables in Swaraj?¹⁸

But in the interim, at least up until Gandhi's fast-until-death, that forced Ambedkar into signing the Poona Pact, Ambedkar had actually paid some heed to Gandhi's advice. For example, it was reported that when Ambedkar affirmed that he would attend the Round Table Conference in London in 1930,

¹⁷ *Young India* dated 20th October 1920 or 3rd November 1921. BAWS 9: 36-37:

¹⁸ BAWS 17(3): 443:(1951)

despite the Congress boycott, Ambedkar said “I will demand what is rightful for my people, and I will certainly uphold the demand for Swaraj.”¹⁹ That is the curious, plain statement of the dilemma: the double-bind: what is rightful for Ambedkar's people – since they are both dalits *and* Indians – is simultaneously swaraj and not swaraj.

3. Whose Swaraj?

Chittaranjan Das had remarked somewhere that svaraj was undefinable. But that did not prevent him and countless others from impregnating the term with all kinds of meaning. This could be banal and literal – such as, “purna svaraj means complete independence”²⁰ – or even sarcastic and ironic – such as svaraj is “the highest bliss and the greatest stimulant”.²¹ Gandhi's understanding is surely the most rich and complex. We are aware of the double-sense of svaraj as home-rule as well as individual self-mastery, as both political and moral. Beyond that, Gandhi speaks of it in terms of agency: India must “generate sufficient power to be able to assert herself.” Swaraj thus has these elements of power and self-assertion. Gandhi then evokes the image of “paralysis” as the opposite of svaraj: “What can a paralytic do to stretch forth a helping hand...but to try to cure himself of his paralysis?”²² And, finally, there are interpretations of others' use of the term. For example, Ambedkar argued that Gandhian svaraj was a “paradox”: it stands for freedom from foreign domination, which means destruction of the political order. But it keeps in tact the social order, which permits one class to dominate the other – indeed, on a hereditary basis, which is permanent domination. This is the paradox of svaraj.²³

For some, svaraj suggested not freedom, but tyranny, slavery, something to fear. Ambedkar closes his well-known “Annihilation of Caste” with words to that effect:

In the fight for Swaraj you fight with the whole nation on your side. In this [eradication of caste] you have to fight against the whole nation and that too, your own [nation]. But it is more important than Swaraj....Swaraj for Hindus may turn out to be only a step toward [our] slavery.²⁴

Ambedkar, therefore, fought tirelessly to: “make sure that Swaraj does not become a strangle-hold for the Untouchables.”²⁵ The dalits must be protected “against the tyranny of the majority under the Swaraj constitution.”²⁶ This motif is repeated numerous times throughout his writings and speeches:²⁷

19 BAWS 17(3): 64:

20 BAWS 5: 314.

21 BAWS 5: 299-300.

22 BAWS 8: 154.

23 BAWS 9: 290-1. In another work, Ambedkar presents a related argument: “Mr. Gandhi's attitude towards Swaraj and the Untouchables resembles very much the attitude of President Lincoln towards the two questions of the Negroes and the Union. Mr. Gandhi wants Swaraj as did President Lincoln want Union. But he does not want Swaraj at the cost of disrupting the structure of Hinduism, which is what political emancipation of the Untouchables means, as President Lincoln did not want to free the slaves if it was not necessary to do so for the sake of the Union. There is of course this difference between Mr. Gandhi and President Lincoln. President Lincoln was prepared to emancipate the Negro slaves if it was necessary to preserve the Union. Mr. Gandhi's attitude is in marked contrast. He is not prepared for the political emancipation of the Untouchables even if it was essential for winning Swaraj. Mr. Gandhi's attitude is, let Swaraj perish if the cost of it is the political freedom of the Untouchables.” *Selected Works of Dr BR Ambedkar* p. 4409.

24 from “Annihilation of Caste” (1936 / BAWS 1: 79).

25 BAWS 10: 496.

26 BAWS 9: 312. Also see BAWS 10: 510: the scheduled castes should live “free from the fear of the majority,” words Ambedkar attributed to Prime Minister Attlee.

27 For example: “That for the better protection of the Scheduled Castes from the tyranny and oppression of the Caste

Swaraj would be the substitution of domination by the British for domination by the Hindus. Without ensuring protection of all their rights, in a free India [dalits] would not be free. Swaraj meant Hindu Raj.²⁸

So, Ambedkar queries, in conclusion:

What good can the Congress brand of Swaraj bring to [the servile classes of India]? They know that under the Congress brand of Swaraj the prospect for them is really very bleak. ... If it is [Gandhism] it will mean the spread of charkha, village industries, the observance of caste, Brahmacharya (continenence), reverence for the cow and things of that sort. If it is left to governing classes to make what it likes of Swaraj the principal item in it will be the suppression of the servile classes....²⁹

Ambedkar believed that it was not only the untouchables who feared svaraj. He cited evidence that many other minority communities had their apprehensions. He indicated, for example, that a letter written by an Indian Christian reproduced in *Young India* illustrated the attitude of Indian Christians to svaraj:

How comes it then that the Indian Christian born and bred on the soil of India and of ancestry purely Indian, has not learnt to cherish the ancient history of this country...? ...Again how comes it that both Hindus and Mahomedans regard the Indian Christian sentiment towards their aspirations as lukeworm if not positively hostile, and conversely why is it that the ever-growing height of the national spirit in India makes the Indian Christian feel dwarfed and helpless and suspicious of his security in the future.³⁰

Ambedkar suggests that, notwithstanding a few prominent members, the Indian Christian Community, far from taking active part in the struggle for svaraj, was really suspicious and afraid of it.

And indeed, Ambedkar recognized that svaraj had different meanings amongst the different communities. Citing Gandhi: "To the Musalmans, Swaraj means, as it must mean, India's ability to deal effectively with the Khilafat question."³¹ He also goes into a long analysis of Savarkar's understanding of svaraj to the Hindus:

Swaraj to the Hindus must mean only that in which their "Swaraj", their "Hindutva," can assert itself without being overlorded by any non-Hindu people.³²

Hindus, which may take a worse form under Swaraj, which cannot but be a Hindu Raj." *Selected Works of Dr BR Ambedkar* p. 1258 (<http://drambedkarbooks.wordpress.com>)

28 BAWS 17(3): 366. And again: "what can Swaraj mean to the Untouchables? It can only mean one thing, namely, that while today it is only the administration that is in the hands of the Hindus, under Swaraj the Legislature and Executive will also be in the hands of the Hindus, it goes without saying that such a Swaraj would aggravate the sufferings of the Untouchables. ...The Legislature and the Executive may pursue its policy of inequity towards the Untouchables without any curb. To put it differently, under Swaraj the Untouchables will have no way of escape from the destiny of degradation which Hindus and Hinduism have fixed for them." BAWS 10: 494 (Letter to A.V. Alexander dated 14th may 1946)

29 BAWS 9: 209.

30 BAWS 5: 474-475: *Young India* 21/12/22.

31 BAWS 8: 154.

32 BAWS 8: 135.

As part of his idea of Swaraj, Savarkar insists upon the retention of the name “Hindustan” for India, and the retention of Sanskrit as the sacred language, Hindi, written in Nagari, as the national language. Ambedkar sums up Savarkar's position:

...the scheme of Swaraj formulated by Mr. Savarkar will give the Hindus an empire over the Muslims and thereby satisfy their vanity....But it can never ensure a stable and peaceful future for the Hindus, for the simple reason that the Muslims will never yield willing obedience to so dreadful an alternative.³³

What is interesting, not only did Ambedkar thus contrast his own understanding of svaraj from that of Gandhi, but also from that of Savarkar. Indeed, Ambedkar also refers to Chittranjan Das' idea of svaraj, and several others. As we shall see, he also evokes Jotiba Phule's take on svaraj and aligns himself with Phule. None of this is presented systematically in Dr Ambedkar's writings, but I shall endeavor to reconstruct a concise and coherent picture.

There can be no doubt that Ambedkar was well aware of the range of meaning attributed to the term svaraj, from political to moral, from religious to ontological. He cites at length a letter of Shradhananda Sanyasi of the Arya Samaj whom he respects for his forceful stand that “the curse of untouchability” needs to be “blotted out of the Indian society,” and that this is a precondition for Congress to succeed “in their efforts for the attainment of Swaraj.” In this letter, the Swami's peculiarly bio-political understanding of svaraj is abundantly clear: “national self realization and virile existence is impossible without Swaraj. I, as a Sanyasi, should devote the rest of my life to this sacred cause—the cause of sexual purity and true national unity.”³⁴

Ambedkar also goes into a lengthy discussion of Chittaranjan Das' understanding of svaraj, primarily to argue that both he and Gandhi obfuscated its meaning to suit their political agenda of the moment: if they wished to advocate dominion status for India rather than total independence, then svaraj would mean something deeper than independence. In Chittaranjan Das' words, “Independence, to my mind, is a narrower ideal than that of Swaraj.” Das continues: “India may be independent tomorrow in the sense that the British people may leave us to our destiny but that will not necessarily give us what I understand by Swaraj.”³⁵

Despite Ambedkar's critique, it seems to me that Chittaranjan Das' understanding of svaraj was in fact quite complex and profound. Much further, in fact, I think Das' sense of svaraj seems to come closest to Dr Ambedkar's own. Consider this text:

To my mind, Swaraj implies, firstly, that we must have the freedom of working out the consolidation of the diverse elements of the Indian people; secondly, we must proceed with this work on National lines, not going back two thousand years ago, but going forward in the light and in the spirit of our national genius and temperament.³⁶

33 BAWs 8: 145. Elsewhere Ambedkar has fleshed out this claim, but in terms of Congress, and not of Savarkar: “the Congress High Command seems to have misunderstood what the main contention of the Muslims and the minorities has been. Their quarrel is not on the issue whether the Congress has or has not done any good to the Muslims and the minorities. Their quarrel is on an issue which is totally different. Are the Hindus to be a ruling race and the Muslims and other minorities to be subject races under Swaraj? That is the issue involved in the demand for coalition ministries. On that, the Muslims and other minorities have taken a definite stand. They are not prepared to accept the position of subject races.” *Selected Works of Dr BR Ambedkar* p. 1637.

34 BAWs 5: 306.

35 *Selected Works of Dr BR Ambedkar* p. 1891.

36 *Selected Works of Dr BR Ambedkar*, p. 1892.

In the first place, Das here prioritizes India's internal harmony to its independence from British rule. Second, he offers a thin conception of svaraj, one that does not leap back into some golden age but rather one that pushes forward. If by “diverse elements” Das could be understood to refer to the Dalits in addition to the Muslims, then the authorship of this text could easily be attributed to Ambedkar himself. It is fully consistent with Ambedkar's remarks at the Round Table Conference, cited at length above. Indeed, it is often said of Chittaranjan Das that he pursued svaraj “for the masses and not for the classes,” and in his own talk on “What is Swaraj?” and in other speeches, Das distinguishes bourgeois revolution from the truly mass revolution that svaraj, to be authentic, must be. Nevertheless, despite the similarities, Dr. Ambedkar had nothing complementary to say either about Das or about his understanding of svaraj. For Dr. Ambedkar, Das was simply toeing the Gandhian line, and such words meant next to nothing, since no substantive action for the downtrodden ever followed from them.

In stark contrast, there was Mahatma Jotiba Phule's notion of svaraj. Ambedkar's radical socio-historical work *Who Were the Shudras?* is dedicated to the memory of Phule. It is fascinating to read the way that Ambedkar attributes to Phule his own position with regard to svaraj, and the primacy of social equality and emancipation over home rule. This is clear in the dedication, where Ambedkar refers to Phule as:

The Greatest Shudra of Modern India who made the lower classes of Hindus conscious of their slavery to the higher classes and who preached the gospel that for India social democracy was more vital than independence from foreign rule.³⁷

4. Five Hindu Attitudes Toward Svaraj

Ambedkar's dedication to Phule and his positioning of Phule as one who holds to the primacy of social emancipation over svaraj foreshadows a division that Ambedkar makes later in his Preface to *Who Were the Shudras?* Ambedkar divides the Hindus into five classes, and I believe that we can read these five classes as articulating five different attitudes toward svaraj:

[1] There is a class of Hindus, who are known as orthodox and who will not admit that there is anything wrong with the Hindu social system. To talk of reforming it is to them rank blasphemy. [2] There is a class of Hindus who are known as Arya Samajists. They believe in the Vedas and only in the Vedas....[3] There is a class of Hindus who will admit that the Hindu social system is all wrong, but who hold that there is no necessity to attack it. Their argument is that since law does not recognize it, it is a dying, if not a dead system. [4] There is a class of Hindus, who are politically minded. They are indifferent to such questions. To them Swaraj is more important than social reform. The fifth class of Hindus are those who are rationalists and who regard social reforms as of primary importance, even more important than Swaraj.³⁸

Clearly the fifth class calls back Ambedkar's dedication to Phule. The first group are the sanatanis, and perhaps also the RSS. The latter is suggested in Ambedkar's quip that these “meek and non-violent looking” Hindus can become so violent when someone attacks their sacred books.³⁹ The second group might include Savarkar's notion of Hindu svaraj. It certainly includes Swami

³⁷ BAWS 7: 4 (unnumbered dedication prior to title page).

³⁸ BAWS 7: 12:

³⁹ BAWS 7: 14.

Shradhananda's bio-political idea of svaraj. Ambedkar says that the book “treads heavily on the toes” of this second group.⁴⁰ Ambedkar does not further define or describe the third group in his text. The fourth group is clearly the Congress of Gandhi and also C.R. Das. About this group, he writes “as to the politically-minded Hindu, he need not be taken seriously.”⁴¹ This curt dismissal is surprising, however, because Ambedkar spent decades dedicated to the effort of bringing this fourth group around to his point of view. His more elaborated opinion about this group can be found in his work on partition:

Under the leadership of Mr. Gandhi, the Hindu Society, if it did not become a political mad-house, certainly became mad after politics. Non-co-operation, Civil Disobedience, and the cry for Swaraj took the place which social reform once had in the minds of the Hindus. In the din and dust of political agitation, the Hindus do not even know that there are any evils to be remedied. Those who are conscious of it, do not believe that social reform is as important as political reform, and when forced to admit its importance argue that there can be no social reform unless political power is first achieved.⁴²

It was the fifth group of Hindus whom Ambedkar thought would be likely to welcome the book and it is them to whom he has addressed his arguments. This is the group of people who believe in the urgency of social reform, despite that the problem will certainly require not just enormous effort, but also a great deal of time.⁴³ This group by definition included Ambedkar himself, for he was at this time willy nilly also a Hindu. But though it represented Ambedkar's lexical priority of dalit emancipation over the others' preferences for svaraj, this did not exhaust his own conception of svaraj. What we do notice, though, is that for Ambedkar, svaraj was just too important an issue to be left in the hands of Congress.⁴⁴ As he succinctly put it: “Do they not know that in the Swaraj of India is involved the fate of 60 millions of Untouchables?”⁴⁵

5. Dalit Svaraj

One of the finest articulations of Ambedkar's own authentic sense of svaraj becomes visible through his critique of the petty scheming being carried out by both the Hindu Congress and the Muslim League:

Is Swaraj to be an opportunity to serve the people or is it to be an opportunity for Hindus to conquer the Musalmans and for the Musalmans to conquer the Hindus? Swaraj must be a Government of the people by the people and for the people. This is the *raison d'etre* of Swaraj and the only justification for Swaraj. If Swaraj is to usher in an era in which the Hindus and the Muslims will be engaged in scheming against each other, the one planning to conquer its rival, why should we have Swaraj and why should the democratic nations allow such a Swaraj to come into existence? It will be a snare, a delusion and a perversion.⁴⁶

In Ambedkar's view, nationalism is a means to an end, not an end in itself. The worth of svaraj

40 BAWS 7: 13.

41 BAWS 7: 13.

42 *Selected Works of Dr BR Ambedkar* p. 1841.

43 BAWS 7: 15.

44 BAWS 17 (iii): 304. anno 1943.

45 *Selected Works of Dr BR Ambedkar* p. 2261.

46 *Selected Works of Dr BR Ambedkar* p. 1981.

is determined by the nature of the society that is constructed thereby.⁴⁷ The end of svaraj, its sole justification, is in bringing government to the people, low as well as high, having a government by these people, and not just for these people. Recall that not only for Gandhi, but also for Ambedkar, agency is at the heart of svaraj. In Gandhi's conception, however, the agency was attributed to caste Hindus, that they should do penance for their sin of untouchability – and thus, for example, the Harijan Sevak Sangh should consist primarily of caste Hindus, and harijans should not work in it.⁴⁸ For Ambedkar, however, svaraj was more profoundly democratized, tied up with the agency of the untouchables, and it was crucial that the dalits own and themselves agitate against their own grievances and the injustices they suffer.

In contrast to the democratic orientation of his own position, Ambedkar cites several examples of the contempt that Congress leadership, the upper classes, have for the lower classes. Even Bal Gangadhar Tilak, reputed to be the father of the svaraj movement, said in 1918, when the Backward classes had started an agitation for separate representation in the legislature, that he did not understand why the oil pressers, tobacco shopkeepers, washermen, and so on should want to go into the legislature: “their business was to obey the laws and not to aspire for power to make laws.”⁴⁹ This is the starkest possible contrast to Ambedkar's own agency centred understanding of svaraj for the people. Thus Ambedkar reiterates that unless the dalits agitate and own their fight, “Swaraj will not be government *by* the people, but...government...*by* the governing class;...and government *for* the people will be what the governing class will chose to make of it.”⁵⁰

Implied within the issue of agency, and related to the haughty contempt of the high classes for the masses, is the pervasive paternalism of Congress' svaraj rhetoric. The promise to protect the depressed classes, to ameliorate their suffering, this bears no import toward the dignity and honour sought to be secured through dalit svaraj. Ambedkar queries: “is social amelioration the be-all and end-all of Swaraj?”⁵¹ Quite the contrary, Ambedkar suggests that dalit impoverishment, which they have been forced to endure for centuries, is of less consequence than the “insult and indignity” that it has been their misfortune to bear:

47 BAWS 10: 41 (Labour): In this essay Ambedkar present his arguments for why he wishes to support the war effort independently of the quit India movement: foremost, because Hitler is a menace and must be stopped, irrespective of Britain's rule in India; secondly, because external independence is fully compatible with internal slavery.

48 When Gandhi came to know that Chambar activist P. Rajbhoj was working in the HSS, Gandhi wrote him a letter asking him to desist. Gandhi emphasized that the HSS was meant for savarnas who repented of discrimination against Harijans. (Letter from Gandhi to Rajbhoj, dated 31 August 1934. CWMG vol LVIII, Ahmedabad, 1974, p. 383. Also see P. Bidwai, 'Relevance of Ambedkar: Modernity and pseudo-Gandhians', *The Times of India* (Bombay edition), 5 May 1995, that argues that Gandhi was 'paternalistic' with respect to the Harijans, holding the high-caste responsible for their emancipation.

49 “First let them consider the mentality of the leading members of the Congress High Command who have guided the destiny of the Congress in the past and who are at present running the affairs of the Congress. It would be well to begin with Mr. Tilak. Though he had acquired the reputation of being the father of the Swaraj movement his antipathy to the servile classes was quite well known. Next after Tilak I may take Mr. Vallabhbhai Patel. In 1942, Lord Linlithgow invited members belonging to the Scheduled Castes. Mr. Vallabhbhai could not bear the idea that the Viceroy should have invited such a crowd of mean men. Soon after the event, Mr. Vallabhbhai Patel made a speech in Ahmedabad and said 'The Viceroy sent for the leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha, he sent for the leaders of the Muslim League and he sent for Ghanchis (oil pressers), Mochis (cobblers) and the rest.' His speech indicates the general contempt in which he holds the servile classes of his country.” BAWS 9: 209.

50 BAWS 9: 212. Ambedkar reiterates this tension between high class svaraj and dalit svaraj in numerous ways: the “Hindu is mad with joy” when he reads the part of the *US Declaration of Independence* that lays down that “whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it....” But, Ambedkar points out, he never pays attention to the opening lines, “that all men are created equal.” BAWS 9: 430.

51 BAWS 9: 212.

Not bread but honour, is what they want. That can happen only when the governing classes disappear and cease to have control over their destiny. The question for the servile classes is not whether this reform or that reform will be undertaken. The question is: Will the governing classes in India having, captured the machinery of the State, undertake a programme for the reform of the social order whereby the governing class will be liquidated, as distinguished from a programme of social amelioration?⁵²

But Ambedkar is quite specific, nonetheless, that it is the profound impoverishment of the masses of Indian people that pushes him to side with the svarajists against the British,⁵³ despite the fact that – as he humorously describes it – when dalits hear the upper castes speak on “svaraj” it seems to them like hearing the Devil citing scripture. But, as Ambedkar poignantly remarks, without svaraj, “no Indian can feel that upward impulse which is the source of elevation witnessed in a self-governing community.” This “impulse and elevation” about which Ambedkar so eloquently speaks is certainly opposite to that “insult and indignity” that dalits have suffered for so long.⁵⁴

Dalit svaraj, or free, equal, and agent-centered participation in the political sovereignty of a free and sovereign nation works Ambedkar and the dalits out of that double-bind that they had found themselves ensnared in for so long. At any rate, one of the strangle-holds – British rule, external domination – had already dissolved itself. In that long, arduous, complicated and bloody process, Ambedkar never did manage to win separate electorates for his people. The untouchables were no longer slaves of slaves. But what about internal domination, were they still slaves?

6. Conclusion

Gandhi, when speaking of the untouchables' double-bind, had said that they had only three options before them. From among those options, he had warned them of the dangers of siding with the British. He had also ruled out the second option, the idea of embracing Christianity or any other religion, on the basis of the insincerity and opportunism of doing so. What he had advised, rather, as the best option was that the untouchables could find salvation in Hinduism, in entering more completely into the Hindu fold. Until now we have spoken only of the first and third options, Ambedkar's Scylla and Charybdis, and the way they manifested themselves for Ambedkar and the dalits as an irresolvable double-bind. But Ambedkar indeed also had the second option before him. And he took it.

When Ambedkar was asked what advantage he would gain by conversion, he replied, “What will India gain by Swaraj? Just as Swaraj is necessary for India, so also is change of religion necessary for the untouchables. The underlying motive in both the movements is the desire for freedom.”⁵⁵ When

52 BAWs 9: 212-213.

53 Ambedkar points out that the British brought great improvements to India in the form of the social shaming of the practice of untouchability and also by introducing the equipment of modern civilization, such as canals, railways and the post. But Ambedkar asks, “at what cost?”: “There is no doubt that the cost of the British Government in India is out of all proportion to the means of the people. It is the costliest government in the world.” It impoverished them. BAWs 17(iii): 44 (1930 lecture to All India Depressed Classes Congress).

54 In this speech, Ambedkar seems to be referencing C.R. Das, though he doesn't name him, when he takes up the voice and argument of the Congress elites, who assure the untouchables that their true interest lies in svaraj. Without svaraj, the argument runs, the dalits would never get power in their hands; without power they could never get salvation for their people. Svaraj should not sound to them as “a weird apparition,” and it shouldn't remind them of the injustices, tyrannies and oppression they have long suffered by their own people. The svaraj of the future protects the masses from classes. It is in the best interests of the oppressed. BAWs 17(iii): 49.

55 According to Dhananjay Keer, p 274.

Ambedkar deployed the idea of svaraj to justify his controversial decision to convert, we should realize that at that moment, Ambedkar had mastered a powerful rhetorical use of the term. Indeed, Ambedkar's use of svaraj is a classic instance of Hegelian sublation (*Aufhebung*), a simultaneous cancellation and preservation. Ambedkar picks up and preserves what he finds valuable in the concept, even as he cancels and overcomes what is retrograde to his aims and intentions.

And not only was the justificatory terminology that Ambedkar used a liberating appropriation, but the very act itself – the agentive act of conversion, the refusal to accept the paternalism of Hindu svaraj – was an expression of dalit svaraj. Buddhism dissolved the tension of the double-bind. It was svarajist insofar as the religion originated on Indian soil. It was thus not a search for liberation through British or alien ideas and practices. As a religion, its holy sites were not located outside of the Indian subcontinent, like Christianity (Rome, Jerusalem), Judaism (Israel), or Islam (Mecca, Medina) – in this respect, he picked up into his own conception of svaraj a trace of Savakar's idea of Hindu Swaraj. But at the same time, Buddhism was the destination for the transit out of Hindu bondage, it was svaraj as freedom from alien rule, svaraj as freedom from Hindu domination.

Ambedkar hinted at this in various ways throughout his 1948 Preface that he had authored for Laxmi Narasu's "The Essence of Buddhism":

Prof. Narasu was the stalwart of the 19th century who had fought European arrogance with patriotic fervour, orthodox Hinduism with iconoclastic zeal, heterodox Brahmins with nationalistic vision and aggressive Christianity with a rationalistic outlook – all under the inspiring banner of the unflagging faith in the teachings of the Great Buddha.⁵⁶

Ambedkar's long search for a resolution to the double-bind took so long that one of the coils of bondage was undone of its own accord. The other remained. The political system had changed; the social system abided all change. At the end of his life, Ambedkar found a way out of the social system that did not – to call back Gandhi's warning – take the dalits from the frying pan to the fire. This was conversion to Buddhism. This was Buddhism as dalit svaraj.⁵⁷

56 BAWS 17(2): 87-88. It is certainly clear by this time 1948 that Ambedkar's conversion out of Hinduism, announced in 1935 at the Yeola conference – which had to wait till 1956 – was going to be into Buddhism.

57 [Write in for book: Buddhism shares all the characteristics of a thin svaraj: egalitarian, pluralist, tradition but not fixed rigidly, evolving, nationalist (Indian original), but hybrid (see the video about buddh-dialectic and bactria), and not purist.]