

B.R. Ambedkar on “Castes in India: *Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*” in  
Eric Schliesser (ed.), *Ten Neglected Classics of Philosophy*

Meena Krishnamurthy, Queen’s University, 2020

In 1913, at the age of 22, B.R. Ambedkar arrived in New York City, ready to pursue an M.A. in Economics at Columbia University. He first presented, “Castes in India: *Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*” in Alexander Goldenweiser’s anthropology seminar.<sup>1</sup> The paper was later published in *Indian Antiquary*.<sup>2</sup> Ambedkar begins the paper with the following remarks:

The caste problem is a vast one, both theoretically and practically. Practically, it is an institution that portends tremendous consequences. It is a local problem, but one capable of much wider mischief, for “as long as caste in India does exist, Hindus will hardly intermarry or have any social intercourse with outsiders; and if Hindus migrate to other regions on earth, Indian caste would become a world problem.”

The caste problem was – and still is – an urgent global problem. As we know, it exists not only in India but also among the South Asian diaspora of the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and the United States. W.E.B. Du Bois and Jyotirao Phule argue that the caste problem and the race problem are one and the same.<sup>3</sup> More recently, in *The New Jim Crow*, Michele Alexander argues that the incarceration of poor people of color in the United States is tantamount to a new caste system. The caste question, its genesis and evolution, was and still is an important concern within India and outside of it.

In “Castes in India,” Ambedkar gives a pathbreaking account of the origin and evolution of caste in India. This relatively unknown scholarly essay served as the theoretical basis for what would later become his most famous work, *Annihilation of Caste*, which was a moral argument against the caste system.<sup>4</sup> I begin, in section 1, by explaining what caste is and why it originated in Ambedkar’s view. In section 2, I discuss the role that caste plays in the oppression of women in India. In section 3, I argue that, in giving a causal explanation of women’s oppression, Ambedkar departs from other important political works of the time, including Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj*, which all but ignores the oppression of women as an important form of social inequality. In section 4, I discuss the philosophical lessons that we learn from reading Ambedkar’s essay. Drawing on Charles Mill’s criticisms of liberal political theory, I close, in section 5, by arguing that, because of the insights it offers, Ambedkar’s “Castes in India” serves as an important corrective to the traditional canon in political philosophy.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ambedkar’s “Castes in India” (hereinafter CI) was first presented as a draft at Alexander Goldenweiser’s anthropology seminar at Columbia, in New York on May 9, 1916. An annotated version of the essay was recently republished in Sharmila Rege (ed), “Against the Madness of Manu (New Delhi: Navayana, 2013 ), 77-108.

<sup>2</sup> Volume XLI, May 1917.

<sup>3</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, “Evolution of the Race Problem”, *Proceedings of the National Negro Conference*, 1909, 142-158; Jyotirao Phule, “Slavery,” in G.P. Deshpande (ed.), *Selected Writings of Jotirao Phule* (Delhi: Leftword Books, 2002), 23-100.

<sup>4</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* (New York: Verso, 2014); hereinafter “AoC.” The speech was originally prepared in 1936 for the Annual Conference of the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal of Lahore. Interestingly, the conference was cancelled after the organizers came to know about the content of Ambedkar’s speech.

## 2. Caste in India

Hindu society is classified into four Varnas or castes: Brahmin (priests and teachers), Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors), Vaishya (farmers, traders, merchants), and Shudra (laborers). The main castes are further sub-divided into many smaller Castes or Jatis, including Adivasis (indigenous people, mostly of South India), Chandalas (those who deal with corpses), and Dalits (meaning “broken”, previously referred to as “Untouchables”).<sup>5</sup> The Jatis are believed to lie outside the Caste or Varna system.

Following Sir H. Risley, Ambedkar takes for granted that “Caste” is “a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name which usually denotes or is associated with specific occupation” (CI, 6). He also thinks that caste is much more than this. Ambedkar’s aim in, “Castes in India,” is to get clearer on the other essential features of caste, their origin and function. He begins his discussion of caste by canvassing other representative views of caste and by identifying what they “regarded as peculiarities of Caste” (CI, 7).

Some, such as Émile Senart, believe that “the idea of pollution” is essential to caste.<sup>6</sup> In India, Dalits are considered “polluted” or “unclean” and cannot touch or come into close contact with members of the other four castes – this is why they were traditionally referred to as “Untouchables.” If Dalits do come into contact with members of a higher caste – if their shadow falls on a Brahmin, for example – the higher caste person must perform cleansing rituals to rid herself of the resulting “pollution.”

While pollution may be an important part of caste, as it is practiced, Ambedkar rejects the claim that it is essential to caste. In his view, it is a contingent matter that caste is connected with pollution. In India, the highest caste is the priestly caste, and, he suggests, the “priest and purity are old associates” (CI, 7). Ambedkar concludes, “the idea of pollution” is associated with caste only because caste, in this instance, has a religious flavor. It originated from the *Laws of Manu*, which was a moral-religious legal code in India (around 200 BC).

Others, such as John Nesfield, hold that an essential feature of caste is the absence of social interaction. Caste limits social interaction to members of one’s own caste.<sup>7</sup> Ambedkar suggests that this is the effect of caste, not its cause (CI, 8). It is the result of castes’ “exclusiveness” (CI, 9). He argues that this natural consequence of caste, which was originally due to the exclusiveness of caste, eventually took on the character of a religious prohibition encoded in the *Laws*. Since it is something that only resulted later in the development of the caste system, Ambedkar does not see it as essential to the character of caste.

S. Venkatesh Ketkar defines caste in relation to a system of castes: “caste” cannot exist without other castes and there must be mechanisms to ensure that the boundaries between the different castes do not blur.<sup>8</sup> Ketkar suggests that the prohibition of intermarriage between castes and membership by autogeny are the two essential features of caste. Ambedkar argues –

---

<sup>5</sup> The term “Dalit” – perhaps first used by Jyotirao Phule and later popularized by Ambedkar – is a relatively new term. Before 1935, the term “Depressed Classes” was used by the colonial government. After 1935, the term “Scheduled Castes” was and continues to be used for official matters. During the nationalist movement led by the Congress party and Gandhi in the 1930’s-1940’s, the term “Harijans” was popularized. The term “Untouchable” was used throughout the twentieth century, but is no longer in use because of its pejorative connotation.

<sup>6</sup> Émile Senart, *Castes in India*, Translated by Sir E. Denison Ross (London: Methuen, 1930).

<sup>7</sup> John Nesfield, *The Function of Modern Brahmins in Upper India* (Calcutta: 1887).

<sup>8</sup> S.V. Ketkar, *History of Caste in India* (Ithaca, NY: Taylor and Carpenter, 1909).

and sees this as his main contribution to the discussion of caste – that “these are but two aspects of one and the same thing, not two different things as Dr. Ketkar supposes . . . If you prohibit intermarriage the result is that you limit membership to those born within the group” (CI 10). In Ambedkar’s view, intermarriage and autogeny are two different sides of the same coin.

### *Caste as Endogamy: The Problem of the Surplus Man and Woman*

Ultimately, the only characteristic that can be considered “the essence of Caste”, on Ambedkar’s view, is “endogamy” (CI, 11). Caste is a social group that is enclosed through endogamy, where exogamy existed previously.

According to Ambedkar, the Indian population is a mixture of “Aryans” (Indo Europeans), “Dravidians” (Indigenous peoples of India), “Mongolians” (East Central Asians), and “Scythians” (Siberians) (CI, 5). These groups of individuals came with distinct cultural practices and beliefs. Overtime, through constant contact and interaction they came to share in a common culture. This is to say, in the Indian subcontinent, there was a longstanding history of exogamy (CI, 13).<sup>9</sup> Ambedkar believes there is a general human tendency toward exogamy; caste is “an artificial chopping off of the population into fixed definite units” (CI, 11). Having identified the essence of caste, Ambedkar seeks to explain how caste (as endogamy) came to be.

Why would endogamy be imposed on a previously exogamous society? Endogamy is necessary to maintain enclosure – the rigid boundaries – of caste, something that the caste system cannot exist without. Ambedkar argues that the central threat to the boundaries of caste is the problem of “the surplus man and surplus woman” (CI, 17). For caste to persist, men and women must marry and have children with individuals within their own caste. This requires an equal number of marriable men and women within a caste. Parity is achieved only when husband and wife die at the same time. This raises problems, of course. The husband may die before the wife, leaving a surplus woman or the wife may die before the husband, leaving a surplus man. If parity is not established, and the surplus man and woman cannot find suitable partners inside their caste, then they will be driven to marry and to have sex and children with people of other castes. This transgression – the creation of progeny, that is – blurs the boundaries of caste and threatens to undermine the entire system. This is why, according to Ambedkar, endogamy is imposed: it is an attempt to resolve the disparity between the number of marriageable men and women.

As Ambedkar notes, to ensure endogamy, the surplus woman must be “disposed” of. She was traditionally disposed of in two ways.<sup>10</sup> First, she was burned on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband – this is the practice of *sati* (CI, 19). Sati eliminates the two dangers that a surplus woman creates. If the surplus woman (a widow) isn’t disposed of and remains in the group, she may marry outside the caste and violate endogamy or she may marry within the

---

<sup>9</sup> In Ambedkar’s mind, this is what distinguishes caste from race in the United States. In the United States, he argues, there was never a practice of exogamy between black and white Americans (CI, 11). It was endogamous from the start. Ambedkar doesn’t tell us what grounds the tendency toward exogamy, writing, “the prevalence of exogamy in the primitive worlds is a fact too well-known to need any explanation” (CI, 13).

<sup>10</sup> Though Ambedkar doesn’t mention it, female infanticide is another mechanism to deal with the surplus of women.

caste, thereby reducing the number of men available for other potential brides and increasing competition among them. Burning the widow means she is “dead and gone”; the problem of remarriage inside or outside the caste no longer exists (CI, 20). Ambedkar notes that sati is very hard to put into practice, since most women will resist being thrown into a fire.

The second solution is to enforce widowhood on the woman for the remainder of her life (CI, 19). While it leaves open the possibility of remarriage and its problems for the caste system, it is more practicable. However, Ambedkar argues that this practice “fails to guard the morals of the group” (CI, 20). In contrast to the practice of sati, with enforced widowhood, the woman remains alive. Without the protection and social standing conferred to her by marriage, Ambedkar worries, that she may be viewed as a source of “allurement” and left open to “immoral conduct” (CI, 20). Because of their vulnerable social positions, widows in India were and are more vulnerable to sexual harassment, rape, and forced prostitution than married women. Ambedkar suggests that this problem can to some extent be avoided by engaging in further immoral conduct: it can be avoided by degrading the widow to a condition where men are no longer “allured” (CI, 20). For example, widows were required to remove their jewelry and make up, and to shave their heads. This was done, in part, to make the widows less appealing to men. They were prohibited from attending weddings or other religious ceremonies, which often required ostentatious dress. They were also restricted, more generally, to staying inside of the home. This way they could avoid the risk of attention from men. As Ambedkar concludes, the objectionable conditions that many widows in India faced are not natural; they are by design.

Because of patriarchy, the problem of the surplus man is much more difficult to solve. Ambedkar writes,

from time immemorial man as compared with woman has had the upper hand. He is a dominant figure in every group and of the two sexes has greater prestige. With this traditional superiority of man over woman his wishes have always been consulted. Woman, on the other hand, has been an easy prey to all kinds of iniquitous injunctions, religious, social or economic. But man as a maker of injunctions is most often above them all. Such being the case you cannot accord the same kind of treatment to a surplus man as you can to a surplus woman in a Caste (CI, 21).

Ambedkar doesn't explain why or how men came to have superior social positions in Indian society. He takes this for granted and suggests that, because of this status, men will ensure that they are not treated as abjectly as woman are. Men's superior social position ensure that their voices are heard and that their interests are protected. This is why widowers are not subject to the same treatment as widows in India.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Ambedkar assumes that, because men (unlike women) have a voice in how caste is arranged, the problem of surplus men is more difficult to solve than that of surplus women. One could argue that the problem of surplus men is also more difficult to solve because of the particular way that the elite caste in India is split between priests and warriors. In other societies, there have tended to be at least two other ways of solving the problem of surplus men (besides incarcerating them or finding other ways to get them killed): (a) send them away as colonists; (b) recruit them into an army. In both cases, there is a higher probability of the men dying or reproducing with foreign women (through enslavement or rape of those women). In the Indian case, (b) is not possible because Brahmins didn't typically enter the military. Fighting was traditionally left to the Kshatriya caste. This means that, in India, other ways of disposing of surplus men, outside of (a) and (b), must be found.

Nevertheless, as important as the man is to a caste, endogamy is still more important – something must be done to solve the problem of the surplus man. One option is to require him, like the surplus woman, to be a widower. For some this will be easy enough, since they may be inclined toward self-imposed celibacy. However, given human nature, this policy is generally unrealizable. More importantly, as Ambedkar notes, it is also undesirable: celibacy means that the widower is no longer be able to contribute to the numerical strength of his caste (CI, 23). It is the interest of the caste to keep him as “Grahastha (one who raises family)” (CI, 23). The solution, then, is to provide the surplus man with a wife, but this is difficult. In a caste that is thoroughly self-enclosed there are just as many marriageable women as there are men. The only way to provide the surplus man with a wife is to recruit one from those who are not yet of marriageable age. *Girl marriage* ensures that the surplus man is kept within the caste, and numerical reduction is avoided while greater numerical strength of the caste is encouraged through procreation.

To summarize, in Ambedkar’s view, the cultural practices of sati, enforced widowhood, celibacy, and girl marriage were created to solve the problem of the surplus man and woman in a caste and, ultimately, to maintain endogamy – which is the essence of caste.

### *Brahminism*

Having explained the mechanisms of caste in India, one might wonder, why go to the trouble of solving the problem of the surplus woman and man in the first place? Why go to such lengths to maintain the rigid boundaries of caste? To answer this question, Ambedkar suggests we must consider the first caste to enclose itself and then explain how the others followed (CI, 32).

In Ambedkar’s view, Brahmins were the originators of caste.

The strict observance of these customs [of endogamy] and the social superiority arrogated by the priestly class in all ancient civilizations are sufficient to prove that they – the Brahmins – were the originators of this “unnatural institution” founded and maintained through these unnatural means [CI 32].<sup>12</sup>

In creating “caste”, Brahmins sought to protect their self-interest by entrenching a system that gave them “prestige” and “power” (CI, 32-42). Brahmins crafted religious philosophy, eventually encoded in the *Laws*, to justify and popularize the notion of a social hierarchy and their superior social position within it (CI, 29, 34).<sup>13</sup> What was unnatural was soon viewed as natural, leaving little basis for challenging the Brahmins’ superior social status.

Despite this, Ambedkar argues, the Brahmins did not create the “caste system” – that is, the system of other castes and sub-castes. Their actions merely result in the creation of two castes “Brahmins” and “non-Brahmins”. The “non-Brahmins” subdivided further, which led to the formation of the many other castes in India. Two processes were at play.

---

<sup>12</sup> C.f., “it is the social system which embodies the arrogance and selfishness of a perverse section of the Hindus who were superior enough in social status to set it in fashion, and who had the authority to force it on their inferiors” [Ambedkar, AoC 5.8].

<sup>13</sup> As Ambedkar wrote, “this high-flown and ingenious sophistry indicates why these institutions were honoured” [CI, 29].

The first process is “psychological” (CI, 41). Ambedkar argues that the non-Brahmin subdivisions became endogamous castes by whole-heartedly “imitating” the Brahmins.<sup>14</sup> These groups sought to secure social esteem for themselves through imitation. They, like the Brahmins, used religious philosophy to turn themselves into enclosed castes with superior social status, lesser than the Brahmins but higher than other castes (CI, 41).

Drawing on Walter Bagehot, Ambedkar argues that imitation is a “deep-seated” tendency among humans (CI, 41).<sup>15</sup> It is not voluntary, in his view, but is rather a subconscious drive seated in the most obscure parts of the mind (CI, 41). According to Gabriel Tarde’s laws of imitation, Ambedkar argues that we tend to imitate those who are both most superior to us and nearest to us (i.e., those we see and interact with daily).<sup>16</sup> The Brahmins, with their God like status in India enjoy prestige and, given their priestly status, were a central part of most people’s daily lives. Given this, it is not surprising that the other castes imitated the Brahmins by enclosing themselves.

Imitation is often an imperfect process. To ensure endogamy, the castes closest in status to the Brahmins, and who have the most familiarity with their practices, enforce the same social practices as Brahmins (CI, 43). Like the Brahmins, they insist on strict observance of sati, enforced widowhood, and girl marriage. However, the castes that are more distant in social status are those that depart more significantly from these practices and have less day to day to contact with Brahmins. Some of the lower castes have only girl marriage, for example.

The second process by which other castes are formed is “mechanistic” (CI, 44). Ambedkar argues that there is no such thing as a single “caste” but only “castes,” which are plural in number. Consider the Brahmins. The Brahmins made themselves by closing themselves in and closing others out (CI, 44). In general, “if group A wants to be endogamous, Group b has to be so by sheer force of circumstance” (CI, 44). The process of endogamy necessarily leads to the creation of at least two groups.

Though he doesn’t make this explicit, I would argue, there is a connection between the mechanistic and the psychological explanations of caste. It is the psychological process that drives Brahmins to engage in the mechanistic process in the first place.

Prestige and power – which the Brahmins seek – are positional goods. To secure prestige and the power that comes with it one must have superior social status. To have superior social status requires that there is an inferior – someone to be superior in relation to. This means there must be at least one other caste that is inferior to the Brahmins. In the end, it is the psychological need for prestige and power that drives Brahmins to enclose themselves and, in turn, to create a non-Brahmin caste. Of course, the other non-Brahmin castes also wish to secure prestige and power. To the extent that they can, they imitate the Brahmins, securing as much prestige as possible. Ensuring that there are Dalit-like castes, which sit outside the

---

<sup>14</sup> M.N.Srinivas' later work on Sanskritization also looked at the imitation of Brahmin behavior by upward mobile backward caste members. It was also criticized for its lack of engagement with Brahmins' unwillingness to accept non-Brahmins as their equals in the social interactions in workplace by blaming the victims. See his *Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).

<sup>15</sup> Here he follows, Walter Bagehot, *The Works and Life of Walter Bagehot, vol. 8 (Physics and Politics, Currency Monopoly, and Essays)* ed. Mrs. Russell Barrington (London, UK: Longmans, Green and Co, 1915). Available here: <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/bagehot-the-works-and-life-of-walter-bagehot-vol-8>.

<sup>16</sup> Ambedkar draws on Gabriel Tarde, *Laws of Imitation*, trans. E.C. Parsons (New York: Henry Holt, 1903).

caste (varna) system and necessarily have the least prestige among the groups, ensures that all other castes have at least some prestige, since they will always sit above at least one other group. This explains how the caste system in India originated and why it continues to persist today.

### §3. Other views

While Ambedkar offers an insightful account of the origin of caste, the most original contribution of his essay is its account of women's oppression in India. While Ambedkar was not the first to try to identify the cause of women's oppression in India, his thinking advances over some of most influential thinkers on the matter. To see that this is the case, I will lead you through a brief survey of Indian thinkers on caste and women's oppression in India.

In her most well-known book, *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) – a renowned Sanskrit scholar, educational reformer, and political theorist – discusses the poor conditions of Brahmin women in India. Like Ambedkar, she focuses on the practices of sati, widowhood, and girl marriage and she links the oppression of women in India to the *Laws of Manu*. In her view, the *Laws* not only encourage and protect these oppressive practices but, perhaps more importantly, they also express “distrust and low estimate of women's nature and character in general.”<sup>17</sup> For this reason, she argues that the law-giver Manu is “one of the hundreds who have done their best to make woman a hateful being in the world's eyes” (81). The *Laws* express contempt for women in India and they entrench the inferiority of women into the very normative structure of Hindu law and society. While she is very critical of this outcome, Ramabai suggests that it is rather difficult to ascertain the motives of those who wrote these horrible laws in the first place.<sup>18</sup>

Jyotirao (“Mahatma”) Phule – an anti-caste social reformer and political writer – would later ask, “what can have been the motives and object of those who wrote such cruel and inhuman “Laws”?”<sup>19</sup> In answer, he argues, Brahmins are motivated by their own selfishness. They seek to create a system that benefits them as well as future generations of Brahmins. They began by creating the idea of the caste system and wrote books, such as the *Laws*, and devised mythology to legitimize this system and to thereby protect their own interests.<sup>20</sup>

According to Phule, Brahmins repressed resistance to their supremacy through two mechanisms: war (conquest) and ignorance. According to Phule, when the Aryans, who later became the Brahmins, conquered the Indian subcontinent they forced many of the original inhabitants to leave; and they killed and enslaved those who remained. To ensure the enslaved wouldn't revolt, the Brahmins used religion to convince them that “their slavery was justified even in the eyes of God.”<sup>22</sup> Their religious treatises proclaimed that God had deliberately created the Shudras for the sole purpose of providing eternal service to the Brahmins.<sup>23</sup> This is

---

<sup>17</sup> Pandita Ramabai, *The High Caste Hindu Woman* (New York: Fleming H Revel, 1909), 80.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

<sup>19</sup> Phule, “Slavery,” 30.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

<sup>21</sup> Periyar E.V. Ramaswamy – a Dravidian activist and political thinker – held something similar. He believed that a small number of individuals created caste distinctions so that they could dominate others.

<sup>22</sup> Phule, “Slavery,” 37.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

how the Brahmins kept the Shudra ignorant of the immorality of the caste system (and of their own inherent equality). Despite this, he argues, some of the Shudras revolted against the despotic laws of the Brahmins. The Brahmins, he writes, responded by punishing the Shudras and dividing them into a further cast, “dictating that neither they nor their children should ever be touched by the other people.”<sup>24</sup> This is how the Dalit caste was created and the practice of untouchability began, in Phule’s view.

Influenced by Ramabai, Phule seeks to explain women’s oppression through appeal to his general theory of conquest, violence, and caste. He argues that women were the primary victims of violence during the Aryan conquest.<sup>25</sup> They not only suffered violence first hand (“blood oozing out of the gashes”) but also second hand through the death of their fathers, husbands, brothers, and children.<sup>26</sup> Later, extending his views to the more recent practices of child-marriage and widowhood, Phule argues that girls continue to suffer greatly.<sup>27</sup> He notes that girl children are separated from their families at a young age (to live with their husband’s families), fed less than their boy husbands and, as a result, stunted in growth; on top of this, they are loaded with work for days and nights. Phule worries that these terrible living conditions lead many young girls to commit suicide. He has similar views regarding widowhood. Like Ambedkar, he believes that widowhood left women open to sexual exploitation – either in the form of rape or forced prostitution.<sup>28</sup> In some cases, this leads to unwanted pregnancy. In one case he discusses in detail, a pregnant widow, who was manipulated into sex by a Brahmin, killed her infant to avoid disgrace. She was arrested, tried, and found guilty and was sentenced to imprisonment for life. In Phule’s view, her moral character was spoiled by both the Brahmin community and its pernicious laws. He doesn’t trust Brahmins to end these practices of, what Uma Chakravarty would later call, Brahmanical patriarchy.<sup>29</sup> This is why Phule asks the British government to step in and to outlaw girlhood marriage and widowhood in India.

Gandhi’s departs from Ramabai and Phule’s views on the conditions of women. While Gandhi campaigned against child marriage and argued for allowing widow remarriage, he was less critical of widowhood than they were. Gandhi sees the widow – self-sacrificing and celibate – as a figure that all men and women should strive to emulate.<sup>30</sup> To the extent that Gandhi sees prostitution as a problem, he sometimes suggests that prostitutes have the choice to leave the profession and accuses them of preferring to live a life of ease. In his view, the only way forward was for prostitutes to “realize their dignity” and to “refuse to sell [their] honor.”<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>27</sup> Jyotirao Phule, “Opinion from Jyotirao Govindrao Phulay on Note No. I by Mr. B.M. Malabari on Infant Marriage in India,” in G.P. Deshpande (ed.), *Selected Writings of Jotirao Phule* (Delhi: Leftword Books, 2002), 193-194.

<sup>28</sup> Jyotirao Phule, “Opinion from Jyotirao Govindrao Phulay on Note No. II, by Mr. B.M. Malabari on Enforced Widowhood,” in G.P. Deshpande (ed.), *Selected Writings of Jotirao Phule* (Delhi: Leftword Books, 2002), 195-197.

<sup>29</sup> Uma Chakravarty, “Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Class, Caste and State,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 3, 1993.

<sup>30</sup> Ashwini Tambe, “Gandhi’s ‘Fallen’ Sisters: Difference and the National Body Politic,” *Social Scientist*, 37.1/2 (2009): 21-38 at 25.

<sup>31</sup> Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (hereinafter “CWMG”)*, (Delhi: Government of India, Publications Division, 1999), vol 76, no 30, “Meaning of Prohibition.”

According to Gandhi, prostitution – like most other moral failing – results from lack of “self-control”, the key to self-reliance and freedom. Prostitutes fell into “immoral” behaviour because they fell prey to sexual desire and laziness.<sup>32</sup> On one hand, Gandhi attributes a significant sense of agency to these women by suggesting that their situation is the result of their own choices. Yet, on the other hand, he also engages in victim blaming and fails to acknowledge the broader conditions within which women made these choices. He largely ignores the conditions of material deprivation women (especially widows) found themselves in.<sup>33</sup> Many women were forced, by their circumstances or by men, into prostitution rather than freely choosing it.<sup>34</sup> As Ashwini Tambe argues, Gandhi’s approach to women’s oppression is overly individualistic. This is why it misses the impact of broader social circumstances on women.

Ambedkar’s own thoughts about the oppression of women build on those of Ramabai and especially Phule. Ramabai identifies the *Laws* as the central cause of women’s oppression through their inferiorization of women. Phule explains why the *Laws* entrenched the oppression of women in the first place: to protect the self-interest of the Brahmins. This raises the question: why does Brahmin self-interest take the form it does? Why does it result in practices of girl marriage, widowhood, and sati in India? Phule doesn’t say, but this is the question that motivates Ambedkar’s discussion in “Castes in India.” Ambedkar aims to build on Ramabai and Phule’s work by delving deeper into the origin of these oppressive practices. As we know, the concept of endogamy – the very essence of caste, in Ambedkar’s view – is central to his account. Endogamy ensures that caste boundaries are rigidly maintained, which ensures Brahmin’s superior status.

Ambedkar’s work is also a direct response to Gandhi’s writings on women. Unlike Gandhi, Ambedkar did not believe that women voluntarily chose sati, widowhood, or girl marriage. Endogamy necessitated these practices and Manu’s *Laws* gave women little choice but to follow them. He did not believe that internal change – developing the virtues of self-control and self-reliance – would improve women’s lives. The problems that women and girl wives face have nothing to do with their own lack of moral virtue. Ambedkar, like Ramabai and Phule, felt that Brahminism and its *Laws* were the problem. To improve the conditions of women, he argued that the caste system must be eliminated. Overtime, he came to believe that Hinduism could not exist without Brahminism and its caste system. So, he came to

---

<sup>32</sup> In order to protect themselves, Gandhi urged every woman to pray when arising every morning: “God, keep me pure, give me the strength to preserve my chastity, strength to preserve it even at the cost of my life. With thee as my protector whom need I fear?” He claimed that “such a prayer made with a pure mind will surely protect every woman” (CWMG, Vol. 25, pp 437-438; quoted in Debali Mookerjea-Leonard, “To Be Pure or Not to Be: Gandhi, Women, and the Partition of India,” *Feminist Review*, 94 (2010): 38-54 at 47).

<sup>33</sup> On this see, Ashwini Tambe, “Gandhi’s ‘Fallen’ Sisters,” 26 and Madhu Kishwar, “Gandhi on Women,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 20.40 (Oct 5): 1691-1702 at 1699.

<sup>34</sup> This may be because he believed that women ought to choose death rather than dishonor: “[women] must develop courage enough to die rather than yield to the brute in man. It has been suggested that a girl who is gagged or bound so as to make her powerless even for struggling cannot die as easily as I seem to think. I venture to assert that a girl who has the will to resist can burst all the bonds that may have been used to render her powerless. The resolute will give her the strength to die (Gandhi, CWMG, vol.76, no 30, 355-356; quoted in Mookerjea-Leonard, “To Be Pure or Not to Be: Gandhi, Women, and the Partition of India,” 48).

advocate mass conversion to neo-Buddhism, which, in his view is an anti-hierarchical religion.<sup>3536</sup>

#### §4. Lessons Learned

##### *Causal mechanisms matter*

Ambedkar – like the other Indian political thinkers we consider here – is primarily concerned with explaining the origin and evolution of the caste system and the poor conditions of women in India.<sup>37</sup> His interest in causation is not independent of his moral and political theorizing. Understanding how the caste system arose and evolved over time is key, in his view, to analyzing why it is morally wrong and how it can be abolished. He has practical and theoretical reasons for thinking this. First, Ambedkar, like Phule, believes that people will be motivated to engage in action to abolish the caste system only after they understand how it works and what is morally objectionable about it.<sup>38</sup> Writing about the caste system – its origin and evolution – is central to his attempts to counter the Hindu ideology spread by Brahmins. Ambedkar wrote to help Brahmins understand that caste is something created for and by Brahmins and other castes with superior social status. His hope is that this knowledge will motivate them to eliminate the caste system. One might wonder why the Brahmins need to be educated about the origin of the caste system, if they are its creators. While Dalits and other lower caste individuals can see through the ideology of Brahminism, because of their social position and experience, Brahmins believe their own spurious justifications of the caste system. Ambedkar wishes to help them counter this belief through his writings. Second, perhaps because of his training in sociology, Ambedkar believes we can only be sure of how to undo an

---

<sup>35</sup> Ambedkar publicly converted to Buddhism on October 14, 1956. He believed that some aspects of Buddhism were problematic and supported Navayana (neo) Buddhism, which reinterpreted Buddhism to address social inequality. For his views on Buddhism, see B.R. Ambedkar, Aakash Singh, Rathore Verma, Ajay Verma (eds.), *The Buddha and his Dhamma: A Critical Edition* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>36</sup> Ram Manohar Lohia, a socialist and independence activist, was greatly influenced by Ambedkar. However, he did not believe that Hinduism was unsalvageable. Instead, he believed that religious reform was essential to eliminating caste. He wrote: “Religion will also have to be cleared of its rubbish about castes” (see his *Caste System* (Hyderabad: Samta Vidyalaya, 1964), p. 141). Periyar was closer to Ambedkar in his views of Hinduism; he believed that Hinduism was nothing more than ideology and was used to oppress the Dravidians of South India. Periyar, in contrast to Lohia, was a “rationalist” and supported Atheism.

<sup>37</sup> Causation is a longstanding concern in Indian philosophy. Classical Indian philosophers – in the Upanishads and Vedas – sought to identify the unitary cause of the origin of the complex universe. They were also concerned with the question of how action can lead to seen and unseen effects. These two interests were connected. Classical Indian thinkers believed that action, of the right sort, could lead to (or cause) spiritual liberation. In the hopes of attaining liberation, they sought to understand the nature of the world and how to navigate it. Understanding causation – the relation between cause and effect – was central to this project. Ambedkar’s interest in causation continues in this Indian tradition, but instead of focusing on spiritual liberation he is focused on social and political liberation. For an introduction to causation in Indian philosophy, see Roy W. Perrett, “Indian Theories of Causation,” *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 1 (Taylor and Francis, 1998), Available at: <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/causation-indian-theories-of/v-1>.

<sup>38</sup> In fact, Ambedkar’s thoughts in “Castes in India” serve as a basis for his later writings, including AoC, which outlines numerous moral criticisms of the caste system and a concrete plan for eliminating it.

injustice after we understand how it arises in the first place. In recognizing the role of endogamy in the caste system, and the role of ideology (perpetuated by *the Laws*), Ambedkar sought to find a way to abolish the caste system.

### *Social, not natural*

Through Ambedkar's analysis, we see that the caste system and the poor conditions of women are not natural. They are not the result of biology. They are the result of rules and practices designed by Brahmins and other high caste Hindus. This is a claim that was worth establishing then and reminding ourselves of now. Injustice is a social condition, not a natural one. As Ambedkar makes clear in his later work, in *Annihilation*, this claim has important moral consequences. The continued poor conditions of women, more generally, and of Dalits, more specifically, are not just the result of failing to help these individuals, a mere violation of a positive moral duty. Since they are the result of the purposeful actions of high caste Hindus, the poor conditions of women and Dalits constitute a violation of a negative duty not to harm. This is an important moral conclusion because it makes clear who caused the harm of the caste system and who has a moral responsibility to make up for it.

### *Social, not individual*

While the harm of caste impacts individuals, Ambedkar makes clear that the harm of caste accrues to individuals because of the social groups they belong to. The indignity and economic and sexual exploitation that widows experience is a function of their position in the social hierarchy of the caste system. It is largely a function of belonging to a high caste – being a Brahmin woman. Of course, lower caste women experience the worst of the caste system, but they do so in a way that is distinctive of their own caste. They experience poor treatment – economic and sexual exploitation, violence, and disrespect – at the hands of high caste men and women.

### *Intersectionality matters*<sup>39</sup>

In Ambedkar's view, we cannot understand the nature of the caste system and the harm that it gives rise to without considering how it intersects and interacts with patriarchy. It is because of patriarchy that endogamy and Brahmin self-interest take the form that they do - i.e., in establishing the practices of sati, widowhood, and girl marriage. Recall, Ambedkar says that, because of patriarchy (CI, 21), what can be done to women – namely, imposing celibacy, strict behavioral and aesthetic codes – can never be imposed on men. Patriarchy ensures that the most egregious harms of the caste system fall upon women.

## §5. A Corrective to Contemporary Liberal Political Philosophy

With these lessons in mind, it is clear that Ambedkar should be taken seriously as an important political philosopher who is worthy of study today – especially as a corrective to standard liberal political theory. To see why, consider the political philosophy of John Rawls,

---

<sup>39</sup> The term “intersectionality” was first used by Kimberle Crenshaw in “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1.8 (1989): 139-167.

which has received significant attention (too much, in some people's view). Rawls's task in his most famous book, *A Theory of Justice*, and subsequent work is to identify the set of principles that would govern a just society. Rawls begins by asking us to imagine ourselves in an original position, where we are to imagine ourselves behind a veil of ignorance. In this position, we have knowledge of general science and the social sciences and we know nothing specific about ourselves – we do not know our identity or social position, for example. We are asked to decide on the principles that it would be most rational to agree to from this position – these are the principles that will and ought to govern a just society. Rawls argues that we would select the *Difference Principle* to govern the distribution of primary goods such as income and wealth. The difference principle states that inequalities in primary goods are to be arranged so that they are to the (material) benefit of the least advantaged. Rational self-interested individuals would choose the difference principle because, once outside of the original position, it would ensure that, even if they happen to be among the worst-off members of society, they would be as well off as they could be.

Behind the veil, we know that material inequality might arise in the real world, but we lack a clear understanding of why or how it might do so. Charles Mills has famously argued that, through these sorts of omissions and distortions, liberal theories, including those of Rawls, John Stuart Mill, and Thomas Hobbes, mystify the practices and structures that lead to inequality.<sup>40</sup> In particular, he argues, mainstream liberal theory omits imperialism and white supremacy from history and present representations of Europe and the Americas. Liberal theory functions to mislead people into accepting the status quo as legitimate. As a corrective, Mills suggests we need an account of how domination comes about and how it is reproduced. In identifying how the caste system arose, why it continues to persist, and how it causes objectionable (material) living conditions for women, Ambedkar does exactly this. He gives a Millsian account of the oppression of woman and Dalits.

Why is this kind of project important? Getting clearer on the causes of inequality – in the ways Mills and Ambedkar would like us to – is important because it can lead us to new ideas about how to resolve social and economic inequality. Widows in India are often (but not always) living in poverty. Patrilocal residence – the custom of Hindu brides' marrying into and living with their husbands' families – means that women sever ties with their own families. In many cases, this practice leaves women dependent on in-laws who don't want the burden of supporting the women after their husbands' death. Sometimes, family members also prevent the women from retaining possession of their husband's property, which makes living on their own almost impossible for these women.<sup>41</sup> Underlying these practices is the belief that women lack value after their husband's death and, in turn, that they are not entitled to care or property. Redistribution of wealth would certainly help in these cases. With greater income, these women would have greater economic security, for example; they may be better able to provide for their own basic needs and those of their children.<sup>42</sup> They may, in turn, be less likely

---

<sup>40</sup> Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1997).

<sup>41</sup> This practice goes against customary law in India. The Hindu Succession Act (1956) states that widows who choose to remarry do have a right on their deceased husband's property.

<sup>42</sup> How much redistribution is supported by Rawls's Difference Principle is up for debate. I have argued in that it would require significant redistribution. See "Completing Rawls's Arguments for Equal Political Liberty and its Fair Value: The Argument from Self-Respect," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 43.2 (2013): 179-205.

to take up or be coerced into prostitution by their material circumstances. They may also be more able to cope with any debt that results from their husband's death (as in the case of death from chronic illness). However, in Ambedkar's view, redistribution of wealth and income would in itself be unlikely to solve many of the worst problems facing women in India, especially widows.<sup>43</sup> He would look at the India of today where the middle class is exploding and not be surprised by the fact that widows, no matter their class status, still experience social stigmatisation and social exclusion. As mentioned, in some cases, widows are still confined to their households and excluded from attending social and religious events. Even today, the religious ideologies that support Brahmanical patriarchy (i.e., *the Laws*) still work to oppress women. Ambedkar, following Phule, would argue that, in addition to redistribution of wealth and income, Indians, and especially the Brahmins among them, need to be re-educated. We must use our new theories about domination, the caste system and patriarchy, to debunk the religious ideologies that support the caste system and the oppression of women. Without this, redistribution – no matter how significant – is unlikely to fundamentally improve the abject conditions of women.<sup>45</sup>

Furthermore, Ambedkar believes that, even with appropriate education, Brahmins may be unlikely to let go of their superior social position and the ideologies that supports it. As I mentioned earlier, he argues that the only way forward is to opt out of Hinduism completely, its laws and ideologies, and to convert to neo-Buddhism. However, Ambedkar also knew that mass conversion among caste Hindus to Buddhism was unlikely. This is why he worked hard to ensure that the constitution and laws of independent (postcolonial) India contained concrete protections for women and Dalits. For example, Ambedkar drafted and sought to introduce The Hindu Code Bill, which, among other things, sought to change marriage laws – including marriageable age and rights to divorce for women<sup>46</sup> – and to give women the right of property (to her father's and husband's) – all of which had been denied by *the Laws*. In defending the new code, Ambedkar reportedly said,

I should like to draw attention of the house to one important fact. The great political philosopher Burke who wrote his great book against the French Revolution said that those who want to conserve must be ready to repair. And all I am asking this House is: If you want to maintain the Hindu system, Hindu culture and Hindu society, do not

---

<sup>43</sup> We see here some similarities to Susan Moller Okin's criticisms of Rawls in *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989). In her view, that Rawls's theory of justice, in its original form, was unable to account for or overcome many of the injustices that women (in the United States) face.

<sup>44</sup> This is the beginning of Ambedkar's potential response to Lohia, who wrote: "Women must be given equal rights with men. Really speaking they must even get more if equality is to be obtained ... these laws are not relevant for more than 80 per cent of India's women ... They have a meaning only for a few high-caste women in Brahmin, Bania, and Thakur homes ... the act was good but incomplete and initiated by twice-born self-interest ... the problem of the majority of Indian women is the lack of water taps and latrines" (Lohia, *The Caste System*, p. 58-59). Ambedkar would argue that access to material goods isn't enough to establish social equality, which is of importance in addition to and may even be necessary for the kind of economic equality Lohia is concerned with.

<sup>45</sup> He also argued for inter-caste dining and marriage.

<sup>46</sup> In a similar vein, Periyar arranged many remarriages of widows, which he referred to as "self-respect marriages" (marriages carried out without a priest or religious rituals). He often asked the eldest widow in the family (widows were and still are viewed as a bad omen) to carry out the marriage ceremony.

hesitate to repair where repair is necessary. This Bill asks for nothing more than to repair those parts of the Hindu system which have become dilapidated.<sup>47</sup>

Ambedkar believes that, if it couldn't be abolished, then Hinduism must at least be repaired as far as possible. When the Bill initially failed to pass in 1948, Ambedkar resigned from the Cabinet. Later, in 1955, with some changes, his bill was passed as four separate bills.<sup>48</sup>

In contrast to Ambedkar, contemporary liberal political philosophers have too often shied away from making concrete suggestions about law and policy. For Rawls, this is something that is done – through a process of reflective equilibrium<sup>49</sup> – only after the basic principles of justice have been decided upon. Following Rawls, mainstream (mostly American political) philosophers spent decades arguing about the right principles of justice, never quite making their way to concrete questions about appropriate policy and practice to overcome real and lived injustice. Today, things are changing in the United States. Even among those working in the mainstream, there is interest in social injustice, particularly as it relates to race, gender, sexual orientation, and class. Students, in particular, want to know how social injustices arise and how they ought to be combatted. These young political philosophers could learn a few lessons – the importance of causation, social groups, and intersectionality – from studying Ambedkar's political philosophy, especially his essay on "Castes in India."

## §5. Conclusion

Ambedkar came to New York city and presented a sophisticated account of the origin and evolution of the caste system in India. He believed the oppression of women – through the practices of sati, widowhood, and girl marriage – played an essential role in the establishment and maintenance of the caste system by ensuring the rigid boundaries of caste. Unlike contemporary liberal political thinkers such as Rawls, Ambedkar looked at the world he found himself in and tried to explain how social and economic inequality arose. His ideas didn't stay in

---

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Eleanore Zelliott, *Ambedkar Abroad*, Sixth Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Annual Lecture, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2004, p. 15. Available here:

<https://www.jnu.ac.in/sites/default/files/6th%20Dr.%20Ambedkar%20memorial%20Lecture.pdf>

<sup>48</sup> As is suggested above (p.10), another benefit of getting clear about the cause of inequality is that we can also get clearer about who has the moral responsibility to implement the solutions we come up with. While Rawls held that the duty to satisfy the difference principles (and to act in accordance with the policies that stem from it) is a duty that all citizens of a just society have to one another, Ambedkar would likely argue that, if particular groups of individuals have caused the inequality through practices of domination, then they have special duties to remedy it. Rawls cannot account for the existence of duties of repair that most of us would think that Indian Brahmins have toward Dalits and women. In this respect, Ambedkar's theory serves as a useful contrast to Rawls's liberal political theory and those like it.

<sup>49</sup> The method of reflective equilibrium consists in working back and forth between our considered judgments or intuitions about what to do in a specific instance and the principles of justice that we believe ought to govern it. In working back and forth, we are supposed to decide what course of action (policy, practice) is the right one to take. Michael Della Rocca has argued that the method of reflective equilibrium has status quo bias built into it. See his, "The Taming of Philosophy" in Mogens Laerke, Justin H. Smith, and Eric Schliesser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 178-208. This may also explain why Rawls's method is unable to account for duties of repair (c.f., fn. 48).

the ivory tower of academia. They motivated his own attempts to educate the masses and ultimately, as a writer of the constitution, to change the laws of India. As Mills has argued, political philosophers of the western tradition trade too often in abstract theories that have little to do with the important injustices we face. They render ideologies and practices of white supremacy, imperialism, and patriarchy invisible. Looking toward the work of Ambedkar and other Indian thinkers can help us out of the ivory tower and toward the real world, leading us to seeing things more clearly and to develop concrete solutions to the very real problems we face.