Chapter-III

From Mahad to Montgomery: Vindicating Civil Rights
Once to every man and nation,
Comes the moment to decide
In the strife of the truth and falsehood
For the good or evil side;

Some great cause God's new messiah
Offering each the gloom or blight
And the choice goes by forever
Twixt that darkness and that light.

Though the cause of evil prosper
Yet 'tis truth along is strong
Though her portion be the scaffold
And upon the throne be wrong

Yet that scaffold sways the future
And behind the dim unknown
Standeth God within the shadow
Keeping watch above his own.96

The political philosophy of satyagraha (meaning literally 'force of truth') is a relatively modern phenomenon. It was articulated and applied by Mahatma Gandhi in his political protests and campaigns initially in South Africa and later in India. The term 'satyagraha' itself was coined by Gandhi in 1906. He later elaborated on this theme in his book *Satyagraha in South Africa*. Edward A. Leonard discusses Gandhi's prolific writings on all subjects, and points out that he refused to write any comprehensive or systematic work on 'satyagraha'; the

96This poem is written by James Russell Lowell. Martin Luther King Jr. read this poem in his historic 'A Time to Break Silence' speech. King had delivered this speech at Riverside Church at New York City, on 4 April 1967, exactly a year before he was assassinated. (James Melvin Washington, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, San Francisco, 1991), pp. 243-44.
systematization of the Gandhian philosophy of 'truth as a force' and 'nonviolence' in fact began in the 1930s and was done by both Indian and American scholars. Gandhi himself used this method on several occasions and at several places: from Champaran in Bihar and Kheda in Gujarat, to the famous 'Salt-Satyagraha' at Dandi during the Civil Disobedience Movement. Ambedkar also used this method in his famous 'Mahad Tank Satyagraha' in 1927. He further used it as a weapon during his 'Temple-Entry-Satyagraha' at the Kalaram Temple at Nashik and at the Parvati-Temple at Pune. This method attracted the attention of the world yet again in the 1950s when it was used in the United States of America during the 'Montgomery Bus Boycott' which culminated in the historic Civil Rights Movement. Both Mahad and Montgomery will be dealt with in this chapter.

While Ambedkar used the method of Satyagraha on many occasions, he always had a great awareness of the questions of 'whose satyagraha' and 'satyagraha against whom'. He had full faith in the utility of the method but the skepticism he had about the effectiveness of Satyagraha is reflected in a speech he delivered at Mahad, where he noted that:

It is not that you can solve all your problems by Satyagraha. This is only a request to the upper-class Hindu mind. This Satyagraha movement is going to prove whether the Hindu mind treats human beings like human beings. This Satyagraha is to change the hearts of Hindus. This movement will decide whether Hindu mind regards humanity in the new age.

The experiment with nonviolent direct action was initially interpreted as being nothing more than a new form of political protest, aimed at achieving conventional social or ethnic ends. Although this interpretation holds some validity, it would be a gross injustice to the motivations and actions of several leaders who made huge sacrifices for the cause. Most of the leaders in the course of Civil Rights Movement adhered not to a vague rejection of violence, but rather to Satyagraha, a reasonably coherent, well-defined political and social philosophy.

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Martin Luther King, emerging out of Montgomery, became one of the tallest leaders of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s in the United States of America. His faith in Satyagraha was no less strong than his mentor Gandhi’s, as is reflected in these words from Stride towards Freedom:

First, nonviolent resistance is not a method for cowards; it does resist. If one uses this method because he is afraid or merely because he lacks the instruments of violence, he is not truly nonviolent. Second, basic fact that characterizes nonviolence is that it does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his friendship and understanding. Third, a characteristic of this method is that the attack is directed against forces of evil rather than against persons who happen to be doing the evil. Fourth, it is a willingness to accept suffering without retaliation, to accept the blows from the opponent without striking back. Fifth, it avoids not only external physical violence but also internal violence of spirit. 100

Stride towards Freedom was published on 17 September 1958. Two days later, while King was autographing the book at a departmental store in New York City, he was stabbed by Isola Curry, a deranged black woman. King was so badly injured that the doctor observed that he would have died if he had even sneezed once. ‘The real test of one’s belief’, wrote King’s biographer Coretta Scott King ‘is how one reacts in a severe crisis’. As soon as King recovered and could speak clearly, he said about Curry: ‘This person needs help. She is not responsible for the violence she has done me. Don’t do anything to her; don’t prosecute her; get her healed.’ 101

Satyagraha, of which mercy or an attitude of non-vengefulness is an integral part, derives out of a deep faith which has its roots in philosophy and religion. Both King and Ambedkar operated with similar methods, and both derived their faith and confidence from similar sources: one from Christianity and the other from Hinduism, until he converted to Buddhism. Like any leader facing the question of inclusion of religion in the political movement, both Ambedkar and King faced an added challenge from the radical ideology of Marxism. While King rejected Marxism outright, Ambedkar came quite close to Marxist ideas, although he finally

preferred Buddhism to Marxism. This chapter will also explore these flirtations and encounters of partly religious movements with the ideology of Marxism.

**Dalit Protest**

Deprived sections across the world have organised themselves into protest movements against discrimination of various kinds, be it based on colour, religion, caste or ethnicity. M. S. Rao notes that the problem of these movements 'has been one of establishing a new identity—the kind of image that they want to project in order to gain self-respect, honor and status.'102 In India, deprived people ranging from outcastes to Dalits have gone through several phases of identity-formation. People belonging to these various communities have launched movements which have much in common in terms of ideology. Dalit movements, however, cannot be seen as a homogenous group, there were various shades and hues within this larger category that need greater elaboration. Some movements have been explicitly militant in their nature whereas others have adopted the strategy of nonviolence. What unites these various struggles, though, is their dissatisfaction with the oppressive social and economic order.103

Perhaps the earliest, most coherent and noticeable Dalit struggle during modern times was the one launched by Jotiba Phule, which subsequently influenced Ambedkar to a large extent. Phule was extremely radical in his writings and challenged the underlying basis of caste oppression, as is evident in his book *Ghulam-giri* (slavery). One of his prime targets were the priests, who enjoyed privileges at the cost of the freedom of a large section. He uncompromisingly attacked the orthodox nature of Hinduism which subjected the 'shudra' masses to historical ignorance. His activism and politics became clear through the operations of the *Satyashodhak Samaj*, which sought to create a society based on the modern

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Phule launched several initiatives in favour of widow remarriage, education for untouchables and girls, all of whom were extremely bold and unprecedented initiatives, as he not only had to battle against the entrenched orthodoxy within Hinduism, but also against the hierarchy that was embedded deep within the psyche of caste-Hindus. He had an extremely radical stand on most issues, and in fact re-interpreted religious traditions and texts in an extremely subversive way, which no doubt invited the ire of the upper castes. He attacked Brahminical domination and orthodox Hinduism through his reinterpretation of Indian mythology which was published in the form of polemical tracts, ballads and plays. He was, finally, a true champion of the oppressed and toiling masses. According to Gail Omvedt, ‘Phule’s description of exploitation and his suggestion for economic development centre on the peasantry and agriculture, in contrast to the elites’ fascination for emphasising industrial development.’

Phule’s early writings include Brahmananche Kasab, which he wrote in ballad style in 1869 and which touched upon many of the themes that would engage him throughout his life. Another one of his works, Gulamgiri, which has been mentioned earlier, carries the English subtitle ‘In the Civilized British Government under the Cloak of Brahmanism’. Perhaps this reflects a great faith in the British as the carrier of modern reforms, a faith that was shared by many nationalist leaders during this period. Dadabhai Naoroji’s Poverty and Un-British Rule in India reflects, for instance, the idea that there was a core system of inherently British values which had somehow been derailed within the colonies. Phule’s manifesto was, however, much more radical than that of Naoroji as it did not merely invoke an ideal British rule, but actually pitted itself strongly and sometimes even violently against oppressive structures within the country, a

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106 ‘Priest-craft exposed’ was the English title to the translation given by author himself, but the literal translation would be ‘the Cleverness of Brahmins'.

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tendency that was conspicuous by its absence within the moderate nationalist discourse.

Phule dedicated Ghulam-giri ‘to the good people of the United States’ as a token of admiration for their sublime, disinterested and self-sacrificing devotion in the cause of Black Slavery; it also expressed the earnest desire that Indians would take their example as a guide in emancipating Shudras from the ‘trammels of Brahmins thralldom’. Referring to a certain non-negotiable and essential right which was the distinguishing feature of all humans, Phule wrote in the introduction to the volume that:

Though God gave Shudras, Ati-Shudras and others the right to enjoy equally all the things which He created, Bhats (Brahmin) rejected this right of all and placed themselves at the topmost status in the false books in the name of God.107

Phule, it is true, failed to provide a broader economic analysis or a political organisation that was appropriate to carry forward this struggle. He did, however, have a clear vision of the need for a liberation movement, which is no doubt why he was the first Indian to start a school for the untouchables as well as the first girls’ school in Maharashtra. Phule reasoned that education and an end to superstition were the only real means of achieving the liberty that was desperately needed. In this he was influenced in no small measure by the notions of enlightenment, rationality and freedom. In fact, he argued explicitly that Western education was solely responsible for bringing the idea of equality in India.108

In contrast to leaders of higher class and caste, like Raja Ram Mohan Roy for instance, who stood clearly for educating the upper classes claiming that educating this topmost layer would lead also to a filtration or a ‘trickle-down’ effect which would also partly enlighten the ‘masses’, Phule took the opposite approach, arguing that educating the ‘masses’ was the only real way of achieving any degree of true and meaningful liberation. In advocating this, however, Phule

also incurred the disfavour of the colonial Government, which was not at all interested in subverting the *status quo*. The report of Board of Education clearly elaborates the true intention of the colonial rulers. Mountstuart Elphinstone (ex. Governor of Bombay) one of the most liberal administrators wrote:

> It is observed that the missionaries find the lowest castes the best pupils; but we must be careful how we offer any special encouragement to men of that description. They were not only the most despised but among the least numerous of the great divisions of society and it is to be feared that if our system of education first took root among them, it would never spread further, and we might find ourselves at the head of a new class superior to the rest in useful knowledge, but hated and despised by the castes to whom these new attainments would always induce us to prefer them. Such a state of things would be desirable if we were contended to rest our powers on our army or on the attachment of a part of the population but is inconsistent with every attempt to found it on a mere extended basis.\(^{109}\)

Despite this discouraging stand adopted by the colonial government, Phule’s faith in the positive role of the British remained relatively unshaken, though a measure of disillusionment did creep in. Later his successors, most notably Ambedkar, had relatively liberated from this rather blinkered vision that failed to see the colonial regime for what it was. However, though Ambedkar was in this sense more ‘liberated’, he was also in other ways more moderate than Phule. However, the fact that Phule’s movement and writings provided a great impetus to later struggles cannot be denied. Ambedkar, for instance, locked himself straight into a debate which had been initiated by Phule and finally accomplished the unfinished task of proving that shudras were of Kshatriya origin and that the whole of ancient history was a struggle between Brahmans and non-Brahmans.\(^{110}\)

Ambedkar considered Phule India’s greatest social reformer and his master, and almost placed him at the same pedestal with the more hallowed personalities of Buddha and Kabir. This continuity is evident in almost all struggles all over the globe, and it is accepted almost as an axiom today that no idea can emerge out of other. Martin Luther King too, for instance, emerged out of a prehistory of movements, and learned his lessons from several precursors, most notably from Dubois, whom he considered as his mentor along with Gandhi. King admired

\(^{109}\) Ibid, p.53.
\(^{110}\) Ibid, p.120.
Dubois for the latter’s creative dismantling of the myth of Negro inferiority more than anyone else.\textsuperscript{111}

Black Protest

The problem faced by Blacks in the United States of America has been basically that of subjugation of a coloured minority by a White majority. Despite the physical and psychological impact of slavery and institutionalized segregation, the feeling of protest persisted in large sections of the oppressed minority even during the height of oppression.\textsuperscript{112} At any period of time, they had two basic options in voicing their protest: they could either try to return to Africa, which was perceived as the ‘native land’ in Black American folklore for a long time despite the years of habitation in the US,\textsuperscript{113} or demand equal rights and responsibilities.\textsuperscript{114} The former option resulted in the nationalistic strain in the Black Protest, while the latter led to the demand for political, social and economic integration. Throughout the nineteenth century, nationalism remained an important undercurrent and was given a concrete shape in the twentieth century by Marcus Garvey. Pan-Americanism also grew from these very nationalistic roots.\textsuperscript{115} The other trend in Black Protest, that of attaining full equality within the United States, had the tacit approval of the Black masses. There is a direct line of development in this strain of thought from the most outspoken nineteenth century leader Fredrick Douglass, through the NAACP (The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People).

One of the most articulate spokesmen of the new, aggressive Black man was W. E. B. Dubois, who believed that the Black Americans could move toward

\textsuperscript{111} Coretta Scott King, \textit{My Life with Martin Luther King Jr.} (San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), pp. 305-06.

\textsuperscript{112} See for instance Maya Angelou ‘I Know why the Caged Bird Sings’.

\textsuperscript{113} See for instance Toni Morrison, \textit{Songs of Solomon} (New York: Plume Books, 1977) where this folklore has been described beautifully.


\textsuperscript{115} Ibid, p. 5.
equality only by expressing righteous indignation against oppressive structures and by demanding his rights as a citizen. In 1899, Dubois wrote *The Philadelphia Negro* where he made a sociological survey of the life of a Black man living in America, and which is widely seen today as the first empirical critique of the social, economic and cultural conditions of the Black community. By 1903, he was ready to lead one of the two intellectual camps within the Black community.

In this year, Dubois also authored *The Souls of the Black Folk* where he stressed the beauty of the ‘folk’. He highlighted the value of liberal learning, the value of original culture, spirituality of life and argues that by implementing all of these, man could achieve perfection, if at all it was achievable. In 1904 he wrote in his *Credo* the following words:

> I believe that all men, black and brown, and white, are brothers, varying through Time and Opportunity in form and gift and feature, but differing in no essential particular, and alike in soul and in the possibility of infinite development....I believe in liberty for all men; the space to stretch their arms and their souls; the right to breathe and the right to vote, the freedom to choose their friends, enjoy the sunshine and ride on railroads, uncursed by color; thinking, dreaming, working as they will in a kingdom of God and love....

The spirit expressed in this *Credo* led to the call for a conference of Black leaders under the guidance of Dubois at Niagara Falls, Canada in June 1905. The meeting at Niagara and the movement that followed it essentially re-defined the Black American intellectual. Once these intellectuals surveyed the condition of American life they could scarcely contain their bitterness over what was happening to them and indeed, to their country. As they became more capable of discharging the responsibilities of full citizenship, they were rejected even more unequivocally than ever before by their White compatriots.

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119 Ibid, p.252.
Dubois undertook a systematic analysis of the African and Afro-American experience; he wrote about the segregation and discrimination in the US army, even though it fought to save ‘democracy’ within the wider world. He noted the barbaric treatment of Afro-American soldiers as they returned to take their places in segregated society. Small wonder then that Dubois, along with several other black intellectuals of his generation, became bitter and defiant and impatient. In poetry, and through prose, they wrote of and denounced the injustices and imperfections of the American democratic system.

Dubois’ distinct and very remarkable contribution, more than any other black leader, responsible for remaking and redefining how his people had been subjected to oppression and darkness and how they needed to interpret and understand this world for themselves. He established that ‘racism’ was largely a product of ignorance and that the real solution to this lay in education and legal reforms. It is very important to note that when King was using nonviolent direct action in Montgomery, Dubois cheered but gently criticised the young Black minister’s ‘absolute-pacifism’ and his failure to integrate black people’s real class and political interests within this pacifist framework.

Ambedkar in the United States

These ideas that were being debated and hotly discussed not only reached India through the medium of print, but also through direct and lived experiences. Indian leaders like Phule had looked to the Black people’s struggle in America to draw lessons for their own cause. But during the later period, due to better communication and transport networks, it became possible for Dalit leaders to experience, feel and participate in the struggle for liberation of the Black American.

120 Ibid, p.255.
121 Manning Marable, Black Leadership: Four Great American Leaders and the Struggle for Civil Rights (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. XVI.
122 Ibid, p. 117.
Ambedkar, for instance, studied at the Columbia University from 1913–1916\(^{123}\) and learned immensely from his study of these movements\(^{124}\), anticipating many of the strategies that would be used later by leaders like Martin Luther King. During 1955–56, for example, while King was coming to terms with the real meaning of ‘Satyagrah’, Ambedkar was already organising a mass conversion to Buddhism (one of the biggest mass conversions in modern times).

Ambedkar’s understanding and grasp of the subject of Black struggles is reflected from the fact that he never directly compared the ‘negroes’ of America and the ‘untouchables’ of India. Further, unlike most of the leaders of the anti-caste movement, he refused to claim that ‘shudras’ were in fact ‘adi-dravida’ or that their religion was ‘adi-dharma’. Borrowing heavily from his American experience, he also vehemently rejected the racial basis of caste and the ‘untouchability’ that was thereby generated. Eleanor Zelliot notes that Ambedkar’s awareness of the obvious racial differences between ‘negroes’ and ‘whites’ in America might have heightened his belief that the way to achieve equality for ‘untouchables’ lay in achieving political and educational rights. Most of his ideas that had a separatist undercurrent, for example, the formation of separate political parties for the backward castes or classes (depending on time to time), demand for reserved seats in legislature (separate electorate) and in government jobs, were based on a strong belief that only democratic institutions could bring about long-lasting social justice. This faith in democratic struggles was perhaps partly a result of his engagement with black politics in America. Even later, during the postcolonial period, when Ambedkar was the Labour Minister within Jawaharlal Nehru’s cabinet, he instituted progressive institutions like the ‘Joint Labour Management Committee’ and an ‘Employment Exchange’ all of which betray a slight American

\(^{123}\) Sayajirao Gaikwad, Maharaja of Baroda (a princely state in colonial Gujarat) was known for his distinguished financial and moral support to social reform during his time. He had not only financed Ambedkar’s education at Elphinstone College in Bombay, but also assisted his higher studies at Columbia University from the ‘State Education Department’ of his state exchequer.

Ambedkar also wrote directly about American history, displaying his keen awareness of the situation within that country. He wrote, for instance, that Lincoln in fact did not believe in the emancipation of Negroes as a categorical imperative. Ambedkar, in a way, saw a parallel in the approach of Lincoln and Gandhi, and this was based on an incident where, when Viceroy Linlithgow referred to the Untouchables as a separate element and said that their consent was necessary, Gandhi vehemently objected. Ambedkar attempted to draw a parallel between the two leaders, both of whom tended to be projected as ‘crusaders’. He wrote:

Mr. Gandhi’s attitude towards Swaraj and the Untouchables resembles very much the attitude of President Lincoln towards the two questions of 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.

**Martin Luther King in India**

However, the interchange and borrowing of ideas was not unidirectional, and it was not just the Indian leaders like Phule and Ambedkar who studied and followed the American situation keenly. King, as we have mentioned before, was greatly interested in the Indian struggle and borrowed heavily from the tactics and

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125 Ibid, p. 83.
126 Abraham Lincoln had remarked: ‘If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time save slavery, I do not agree with them. If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time destroy slavery, I do not agree with them. My paramount object is to save the Union and not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it. If I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it and if I could do it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that.’ (Quoted from *Collected Works of Lincoln*, Vol. xi, pp. xii–xiii).
127 Gandhi wrote: ‘I felt that the putting up by the Viceroy and then the Secretary of State of want of agreement by the Congress with the Princes, the Muslim League, and even the Scheduled Castes as barrier to the British recognition of India’s right to freedom was more than unjust to the Congress and the people.’ (*Harijan*, 13 October, 1940)
strategies used by Gandhi. In fact, he also visited India in 1959 and wrote in his memoir about the tremendous response that he, his wife Coretta and Lawrence D. Reddick (a Black professor of history at Atlanta State University, Montgomery) received from the press. Acknowledging Indian newspapers, he remarked that the 'Montgomery Bus Boycott' was quite well known in India. In his memoirs, Martin asserts that Indian papers gave a better and more continuous picture of the 381-day long 'Bus-Strike' than most of the newspapers in the United States itself. He appreciated Indian reporters who were painstakingly fair and who reflected in their editorials a fair grasp of what was going on in America and other parts of the world.\textsuperscript{129} King's stay in India was very brief when compared to that of Ambedkar's in the United States. But this short yet remarkable trip to the land of Gandhi was an affirmation of the bond that existed between the oppressed in India and in the United States.\textsuperscript{130} This trip provided King with the opportunity to interact with various groups at universities and addressing several public meetings which were unusually packed due to the keen interest of Indian people in the problem of racial segregation.

One important difference that remains between the politics of Martin Luther and that of Dalit leaders within India was their respective attitudes to the aggressive stance of the American government on various issues, especially issues that were related to the war. Ambedkar, for instance, was publicly critical of the Indian Foreign Policy that relied heavily on the politics of 'Non-Alignment'; he saw this as completely anti-America and conjectured that it would result in the severance of ties between the United States and India.\textsuperscript{131} While Ambedkar was highly influenced by the philosophy of John Dewey\textsuperscript{132} (a Professor who was Ambedkar's teacher at

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid. p. 24.
\textsuperscript{132} John Dewey, who lived since mid-nineteenth century to mid-twentieth century, was a noted philosopher and psychologist who have remarkable contribution in the fields of promoting democracy and education. He is considered to be one of the founders of 'Pragmatism' and 'Functional Psychology'. His has unparalleled contribution in the field of educational reforms in the United States in first half of twentieth century.
Columbia University) who convinced him that educated and politically-aware people are able to carve their own political destiny in a pragmatic way\(^{133}\), Martin Luther King considered Mahatma Gandhi as his philosophical mentor and had already experimented with the truth of 'nonviolence' and anti-militarism as a strategy in the Montgomery-Boycott much before he landed to India.

King reflected that though the United States was about thrice the size of India, and had only one third of its population size. He realised during his trip that there of course remained a big housing problem in the United States, but the magnitude of the problem was even greater in India. During the late 1950s, in the city of Bombay for example, there were more than half a million people who slept on the streets every night. These were mostly unattached, unemployed or partially employed males. They used to carry their bedding with them like foot soldiers and unroll each night in any unoccupied place they would be able to locate from a sidewalk to a railroad station to the entrance of a shop\(^{134}\). King further noted in this connection that though during the 'Great Depression' of 1929, one third of the United States was 'ill-housed', 'ill-clad and ill fed'\(^{135}\), this was true for India even during a period of economic well-being, with two-thirds of the total population suffering the same fate in 1959. This observation continues to apply even today, and the Arjun Sengupta report\(^{136}\) noted in 2009 that seventy-seven percent of Indian people earn Rs. 20 a day and a majority of them hail from the most backward castes. King was, however, surprised to note that though there was rampant poverty in India, the crime rate was relatively low. He saw it as a manifestation of the spiritual quality of the Indian people and noted that in spite of being poor and half-starved, Indians did not indulge in abuse, whether verbal or physical, as Americans frequently did.\(^{137}\)

\(^{133}\) Eleanor Zelliot, *op.cit.*, p.83.


\(^{135}\) Ibid, p. 27.


King noted after his brief Indian sojourn that 'nonviolent-resistance' called for a certain measure of good-will and even 'love'. It was not sentimental love but a sterner variety of 'love' that enabled an organisation into various forms of collective action to correct a wrong. He left India more convinced than ever before that 'nonviolent-resistance' was the most potent weapon available to the oppressed peoples of the world in their struggle for liberation. He noted that the hatred and bitterness that usually follows a violent struggle was missing in India, proof of which was the mutual friendship based on complete equality had already been cemented between the Indian and British people within the Commonwealth.\(^{138}\) We return, in the next section, to look at a practical application of this strategy of nonviolent resistance which was applied in the course of the Dalit struggle in India.

MAHAD\textsuperscript{139} SATYAGRAHA

\textit{Haat}\textsuperscript{140}

\textit{In the motionless alleys}
\textit{Outside the village gates}
\textit{You came and thundered}
\textit{Everyone started}
\textit{Brushed of the dust and woke up}
\textit{You walked forward}
\textit{Holding a flaming urn}
\textit{All the merchants of darkness were fear struck}
\textit{You kept on walking}
\textit{With everyone following}
\textit{You stopped at the bank of the pond}
\textit{And gave us life...}

'Jithe gaon, tithe Maharwada' is a Marathi proverb which means, literally: 'wherever there is a village, there is a maharwada'. Mahar, the caste to which Ambedkar belonged, was to be found in almost every village of Maharashtra. Their quarters were called 'Maharwada' and were usually located outside the village on eastern-side.\textsuperscript{141} This whole imagery illustrates the working of a village system in Maharashtra with Mahars settling outside the village and serving the inhabitants of the core-village from outside as \textit{balutedars}. During colonial times, their recruitment into the ranks of the British army, however, provided them with an unprecedented opportunity to equip themselves with education and hence became a

\textsuperscript{139} Mahad is located in Raigad district of Maharashtra. This town situated on the bank of river Savitri, has a Buddhist historical site. 'Chavdar' is natural lake where Ambedkar started his first 'satyagraha' against 'untouchability'.

\textsuperscript{140} 'Haat' in Marathi means 'hands'. This poem has been written by Arjun Dangle, one of the founder members of the radical Dalit Panther Party, and has been cited here from Jayashree B. Gokhale-Turner's article, 'Blakti or Vidroh: Continuity and Change in Dalit Sahitya', \textit{International Studies in Sociology and Social Anthropology}, Vol. 31, 1981. pp. 38–39.

politically-aware group. The Mahars were however denied entry into the army since 1893 with the abolition of the old Presidency army and this was when the first signs of a Mahar movement emerged. Eleanor Zelliot, while labelling the movement of untouchables in Maharashtra as the 'Mahar-Movement', also traces the line of leaders and reformers among the Mahars to the pre-Ambedkar days. Gopal Baba Walangkar, for example, belonged to the Konkan region and drafted a petition in 1894 requesting re-acceptance of the lower castes in the army. Although the petition could not be translated into English and was not handed over to the British, it did mention Mahars, Chambhars and Mangs who had served both the army and domestic service.\textsuperscript{142}

Poona had already become a large army camp centre during these times. Mahars here were much better organised and Shivram Janba Kamble, a leader from their own community who was well educated and quite eloquent in English, played a significant role in this. A decade after Walangkar's attempt, a mass-memorandum signed in 1904 by more than 1500 Mahars belonging to various parts of Maharashtra was sent to the Governor of Bombay Presidency. A rather negative response was received from the Collector's office of Poona, indicating that nothing could be done about the request. In 1910 yet again a 'Conference of Deccan Mahars', with Gangaram Krishnajee as President and Shivram Janba Kamble as Secretary prepared a more sophisticated and powerful document to be submitted to the office of the Secretary of State.\textsuperscript{143} This document made a clear demand for employment in the lowest ranks of police service, in the ranks of sepoys and foot-soldiers in the army. The appeal was made while invoking the past services rendered by Mahars and the British sense of justice. Although the reply to this petition does not exist, it is significant that the recruitment of Mahars in the labour units of the army was resumed at the beginning of First World War in 1914.\textsuperscript{144}

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid, p.91.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid, pp. 91-92.
\textsuperscript{144} Towards the end of the First World War in 1919, 11th Mahar Regiment was raised, but it was soon disbanded. It was during the Second World War, there grew the need of troops. Ambedkar had already been appointed to the Defence Advisory Committee of the Viceroy's Executive Council. His appointment helped exerting pressure for establishment of 'Mahar Machine Gun Regiment'. 62
In 1919, Ambedkar made his first appeal before the Southborough Committee about direct representation of the Depressed Classes. The Committee, though ignoring this demand of direct representation which was also supported by a large number of other leaders such as G.A. Gawai, V. R. Sindhe, R.P. Pranjpey and M. M. Joshi, nevertheless allowed one nominated member to enter the Bombay Legislative Assembly. D. D. Gholap, who belonged to the Mahar community, was chosen as the nominated representative; he had earlier worked in close association with Ambedkar and had helped him with his paper Mook-Nayak. It was only in 1926 that the Muddiman Committee (which was formed to report on the success of the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919) suggested the need to focus on the status of the Depressed Classes. Ambedkar was, as a result, nominated to the Bombay Legislative Council as the second member from the ‘untouchable-community’.

Ambedkar had already founded the ‘Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha’ (Association for the Depressed Classes) in 1924, and this society sought to promote the spread of education among the socially and politically downtrodden, and also aimed at improving their economic status and providing a voice for their grievances.146 The Bombay Depressed Classes Teachers’ Association decided on 2 February 1927 to felicitate their leader Ambedkar for his appointment to the Legislative Council. On 19 April, another meeting was held at Parel in Bombay which was presided over by a municipal educational supervisor called S. B. Pendurkar. As Ambedkar’s biographer Dhananjay Keer puts it: ‘the sun of self-respect had now arisen in the sky and clouds of oppression had begun to flutter away. The Depressed Classes had started looking up.’ It was in this backdrop that

Interestingly, Mahar-Regiment* remains only regiments in Indian Army that recruits troops from all communities and regions across the country.

the call for a ‘March on Mahad’, which became a momentous event in the life of Ambedkar, was called for.\textsuperscript{147}

In 1927, a meeting of the Depressed Classes was held at Koregaon.\textsuperscript{148} Ambedkar, while addressing the meeting, told the masses present that hundreds of fighters from the community had fought for the Britishers and that the same British had dumped this community and dubbed them a ‘non-military-community’. Ambedkar underlined the fact that their former pro-colonial stance was not a matter of pride, but also noted that since they were treated as untouchables by caste-Hindus, they had literally no means of livelihood and as a result were forced to offer their military services to the Company. He urged his people to agitate against the government and to negotiate for a removal of the ban on entry into the army.\textsuperscript{149}

**Mahad Conference**

Kolaba district Depressed Classes planned to hold a conference at Mahad on 19 and 20 March 1927. Surendranath Tipnis, Subhedar Savadkar and Anantrao Chitre were the crucial guiding forces behind the organisation of this conference. A vigorous campaign was organised in the adjoining areas explaining the purpose and importance of the conference. As Keer has observed, boys of fifteen to old men of seventy from far and near plodded distances of over hundred miles with bundles containing pieces of bread until they reached Mahad.\textsuperscript{150} It is said that more than 10,000 delegates, workers and leaders attended the meeting. Drinking-water was purchased for some forty rupees for the conference as it was not available for the


\textsuperscript{148} A military monument at Koregaon near Pune serves as a central point in the legendary history of Mahar heroism. There is a famous pillar which commemorates the sacrifice of the ‘mahar-soldiers’ of the British Army who fell while fighting against the forces of the *Peshwas* in 1818. In this ‘Battle of Khadki’ (part of Third Anglo Maratha War) Baji Rao-II was defeated by the forces of ‘British East India Company’.


untouchables in the adjoining area. Ambedkar addressed the meeting in these words:

...no lasting progress can be achieved unless we put ourselves through a three-fold process of purification. We must improve the general tone of our demeanor, retone our pronunciations and revitalize our thoughts. I therefore ask you now to take a vow from this moment to renounce eating carrion. It is high time that we rooted out from our mind the ideas of highness and lowness among ourselves. Make an unflinching resolve not to eat the thrown out crumbs. We will attain self-elevation only if we learn self-help regain our self-respect and gain self-knowledge. There will be no difference between parents and animals if they will not desire to see their children in a better position than their own position.151

The conference, in a resolution, appealed to the upper castes to help the depressed classes in securing their civic rights, and to help the untouchable students in seeking education. They appealed to the government to prohibit untouchability and to provide them with free and compulsory education. They also pleaded for the implementation of the ‘Bole-Resolution152 by local bodies, which urged upon all municipalities and district boards to throw open all public places to all castes including untouchables. Affirming their allegiance to this resolution, delegates at the conference started marching towards the Chowdar Tank to assert their right to drink water from the public tank. Ambedkar’s biographer Dhananjay Keer calls this a momentous event which was great in magnitude and far-reaching in consequences; he calls it a march against slavery, and priestly oppression. It was argued that if the Christians, Muslims, and even the cattle owned by untouchable could drink water out of these public tanks, why could the untouchables not do so? The ‘march’ weaved its way through the streets of Mahad and terminated at the tank. Ambedkar took the water and drank it. The masses followed suit in a symbolic gesture of vindicating their rights.153

Within a few hours, a false rumour was spread by the caste-Hindus that untouchables were also planning to enter the temple of ‘Lord Veereshwar’, a local deity. Using this rumour as a pretext, hundreds of caste-Hindus assembled on the

152 In August 1926, Bombay Legislative Assembly passed this resolution. It is name after Raosahab Seetaram Keshav Bole who had moved the motion.
153 Dhananjay Keer, op. cit.
streets armed with bamboo sticks and small arms. Many Dalit delegates had already left by then, though some of them were packing and yet others were having their food before finally departing. At this point, several armed upper caste Hindus barged into the tent. They knocked food into the dust, physically assaulted those having food and created mayhem. Several untouchable women and children became easy targets and many stray individuals were badly beaten. Several victims were forced to look for shelter in the houses of Muslims.

The news of this attack soon spread all over Mahad. Dhananjay Keer has observed that hundreds of untouchables waited for their leader Ambedkar who was staying in the nearby Traveler’s Bungalow, waiting for a gesture of approval from him so they could start to retaliate. Their leader however appealed for peace and discipline. Keer remarks that a word of provocation from Ambedkar would have turned Mahad into a pool of blood and destruction as the number of delegates still lingering in the town was much larger than a handful of hooligans. They, however, showed exceptional discipline and remained silent at the behest of the leader. A serious riot was thereby averted. Out of the nine who indulged in the violence, five were given four months’ rigorous imprisonment on 6 June 1927.

Mahad Satyagraha

Ambedkar, in order to present the correct view and ideals of his party, started a fortnightly paper in Marathi called ‘Bahiskrit-Bharat’, which rolled off the press for the first time on 3 April 1927. The paper was used to define his aims, to explain the views of the party as well as to reflect upon the criticisms extended by the critics of his movement. It was declared in the 26 June 1927 issue of ‘Bahiskrit-Bharat’ that those Depressed Class members who wished to wash out the stigma of pollution attached to their community by the Hindus of Mahad (by their act of purification of the tank) and those who wanted to denounce the act of assaults committed on their representatives for having touched the water of Chowdar-Tank
should volunteer themselves at the Bombay office of 'Bahiskrit Hitkarani Sabha' under the auspices of which 'Satyagraha' was to be launched. 154

On 4 August 1927, the municipality of Mahad, in a sudden and inexplicable turn of events, decided to revoke the famous 'Bole-Resolution' according to which the Chowdar Tank was thrown open for use by the depressed classes. Ambedkar took this as both a challenge as well as an opportunity to formulate ways for intensifying the struggle for re-establishing the rights of the untouchables on the public tank. During mid September 'Bahiskrit Hitkarani Sabha' he declared 25 and 26 December as dates for offering 'satyagraha'. 155

Ambedkar stressed on the positive role of reason and spiritualism vis-à-vis religion as he himself believed that it provided both elevation and salvation. It was ironical however that a particular religion in this spiritual land had shut the doors of any opportunity for the betterment of the untouchables. How, it was asked, could a religion compel a section of its own followers to remain in dungeon and seclusion? Hinduism prevented a certain section from educating itself as well as from taking up the profession of its choice. He vehemently attacked the validity of the commonly propagated notion of Hindu scriptures that by serving the upper castes Shudras would attain salvation. He questioned rather boldly:

If you say your religion is our religion, then your rights and our rights must be equal. The religion which discriminates between two followers is partial and the religion which treats crores of its adherents worse than dogs and criminals and inflicts upon them insufferable disabilities is no religion at all. Religion is not the appellation for such an unjust order. Religion and slavery are incompatible. 156

Against the practice of untouchability by Brahmins, Ambedkar also launched a protest movement for 'temple-entry'. Though Ambedkar never worshipped either at temple or at home, he organised this movement as a protest and to assert for equality. Another important aspect of this 'temple-entry' movement was to eradicate the attraction of untouchables for Hinduism so that they

155 Ibid., p.90.
156 Ibid, p. 92.
could come to know the reality about their social status within Hinduism. Ambedkar emphasised that the success of the struggle depended not only upon the means, but also on the justness of the cause. In a noteworthy borrowing from the precepts of Gandhi, he contended that if the end was good, there would not be much difficulty with its success as truth always succeeded at the end. Emphasising upon the strength of truth, he maintained that for winning a just end, a satyagrahi must inculcate boundless self confidence and great conviction in his cause.\textsuperscript{157} Ambedkar, while deliberating whether violence or nonviolence should be the guiding force for the struggle, clarified in following words:

\begin{quote}
Fight whether violent or nonviolent was just if the end sought was good. If the end sought was just, the insistence on its achievement and fight for it must be equally just. The man who comes to kill you, or to outrage the modesty of a woman, or sets fire to another's house, or commits theft and is killed while struggling to escape, dies by his own sins as all aggressors and wicked men do. If wounding ones feelings is violence, Gandhi's Satyagraha is also based on violence. Truly speaking law should be nonviolence wherever possible; violence whenever necessary.\textsuperscript{158}
\end{quote}

Participation of the masses generally decides the course of any movement as well as the destiny of any movement. In order to galvanise the youth into activity, a conference of the Depressed Classes Students was convened at Poona on 2 October 1927. This was an attempt to bring about the educated and intellectual younger generation of the Depressed Classes in close association with their leader Ambedkar and his ideology.

At the same time, Ambedkar did not hesitate to engage support for his cause from the international community. Mardy Jones, a Labour Party M.P. in the British Parliament was on an India visit. On 4 November 1927, the Depressed Classes Institute invited him for an interaction. The 27 November issue of ‘Bahiskrit-Bharat’ reported that Jones was deeply aggrieved knowing and seeing a large number of populations who were subjected to the sick and de-humanised conditions. And the population living under such conditions outnumbered the

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid, p. 91.
combined population of many European countries like England, Ireland and Scotland.\textsuperscript{159}

The opposition parties which comprised generally of the orthodox caste-Hindus met on 27 November at 'Veereshwar-Temple' in Mahad. They had assembled to strategise a plan to brazen out the satyagrah planned by 'Bahishkrit Hitkarani Sabha' at the Chowdar tank next month. It is important to note however that by now the efforts of the Depressed Classes had managed to establish the 'justness of cause' for the proposed 'satyagrah'. So much so that many upper castes in the meeting not only sympathised with the 'Depressed Classes', but also stood by their demands ending the meeting in a mayhem.

The administration did not take the matter lightly. The District Magistrate made a visit to Mahad in person and discussed the matter with both the parties involved. The influence of the upper castes on the colonial administration remained firm, as a caste-Hindu party was suggested to recourse to the law. Their leaders accordingly filed a suit against Ambedkar, Shivtarkar, Krishnaji S. Kadam and Ganya M. Chambhar. The court immediately issued temporary injunction on 14 December to the three leaders and served them with notices of not going to Chowdar Tank to fetch water till the further notice of the court.

The text of the injunction in Chowdar Tank case signed by magistrate G. V. Vaidya read:

\ldots the applicants have on December 12\textsuperscript{th} 1927, filed in this court, Regular Suit No. 495, for obtaining a Declaration that the said Chowdar Tank is of nature of private property of the touchable classes only and that the untouchable classes have no right to go to that tank or take water therefrom and also for obtaining a perpetual injunction restraining the defendants from doing any of these acts... the law regarding temporary injunction as per order 39 of the Criminal Procedure Court suggests any property in dispute in suit, is in danger of being wasted, damaged or alienated by any party to the suit, the court may grant temporary injunction...

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid, p. 95.
taking all circumstances into consideration, I therefore order temporary injunction as asked for with notice to be issued.\textsuperscript{160}

All important government officials gathered at Mahad on 19 December. Police forces were sent to encircle the Chowdar tank. The satyagraha was on however, as per the earlier schedule. Most of the arrangements for holding the conference and \textit{Satyagraha} had already been made. Several delegates and other participants started pouring in from 21 December 1927 and the District Magistrate himself came for a daily patrolling at the venue to discourage them from participating in the \textit{Satyagraha}. As soon as Ambedkar reached Dasgaon, he was handed over a letter (requesting for a meeting) from the District Magistrate by the Superintendent of the Police.\textsuperscript{161} When Ambedkar went to meet the District Magistrate, he was requested and persuaded to postpone the \textit{Satyagraha}. He was however allowed to address the audience.

Thousands of delegates walked from Basgaon, along with their leader Ambedkar and reached the venue at Mahad in the afternoon of 24th December. The conference commenced its proceedings in the evening around 4:30p.m. Messages from prominent sympathizers were read out in front of a massive audience of about 15,000. Ambedkar in his presidential speech addressed those opposing the Satyagraha saying the untouchables would not perish because they could not use the water from Chowdar tank. Satyagrahis wanted to go to the tank only to prove that like others they are also human beings. He further clarified that the conference was arranged to inaugurate an era of equality in this land referring to an international parallel where French people had gathered in Versailles to issue the 'manifesto of human rights'.\textsuperscript{162}

\textsuperscript{160} As cited in booklet 'Satyagrah of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar' compiled by Dr. Vivek Kumar and published by Satyagrah Centenary International Conference Organizing Committee (New Delhi, 2007), pp. 15–17.
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid, pp. 98–99.
The deliberations continued till late night and debate and discussion continued on the other day i.e. 25 December. Some historic and very important resolutions were passed in the conference. The first resolution to be passed was the ‘declaration of human-rights’. It was moved by Shivtarkar and seconded by Bhaurao Gaikwad, N. T. Jadhav and Gangubai Savant. The second resolution in all probability was the most contentious. Sahasrabudhye\(^{163}\) while moving the resolution on ‘Manusmriti’ condemned this holy scripture straightaway, saying it was living symbol of inequality, cruelty and injustice.\(^{164}\) At about 9 p.m., a copy of the Manusmriti put on a pier in a specially dug pit right at the entrance of the venue of the conference and was ceremoniously burnt. The third resolution sought Hindu society to be turned into ‘a single class’ and the fourth resolution demanded for making ‘priestly profession’ a democratic institution.

The next morning i.e. on 26 December, Ambedkar himself moved the resolution on ‘satyagraha’. Being a lawyer himself, he was aware of the pros and cons of the Satyagraha which had already been referred to the court and the matter was sub-judice. He clarified about the trials and tribulations involved therein. Some twelve leaders supported the plea for satyagraha and four were against it.\(^{165}\) Two famous leaders of the Non-Brahmin movement, Javalkar and Jedhe had reached at the venue of the conference and declared their support to the Satyagraha. The proceedings of the conference were adjourned at 1:30 p.m. and some volunteers were asked to collect the signatures of those willing to participate in the satyagrah. To everybody’s surprise, close to 4000 people registered for the same in an hour’s time.\(^{166}\)

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\(^{163}\) Gangadhar Sahasrabudhye, by birth a Brahman was personal friend and close associate of Ambedkar.


\(^{165}\) Ibid, pp. 101–02.

\(^{166}\) Ibid, p. 102.
The District Magistrate was informed about the general mood of the delegates and participants of the conference. As he himself wished, he addressed the conference:

...according to resolution of Bombay Legislative Council, public tanks, schools and roads, are open to all. But twelve persons have filed a suit against saying that the tank is a private property. You should therefore, await the decision of the court. You know that those who assaulted you last time were punished. If you break the law, you will also suffer the same fate. As a friend, I advise you not to precipitate this issue till the decision of the court is out.167

Several leaders like Javalkar, Subhedar Ghatge spoke to the audience declaring their support for the satyagrah, but at the same time requested for postponement considering the critical juncture. Proceedings were yet again adjourned till next morning. During the night, key persons and leaders held a long discussion and finally came to the consensus of postponing the struggle considering the case pending before the court. On 27 morning Ambedkar moved a fresh resolution withdrawing the first. It was decided to take out a procession winding its course around the tank. A large section of the participants looked restless and demoralized, but Ambedkar tactfully handled the volatile situation appealing:

You are a brave people. Those who are prepared to lay down their lives for the vindication of their rights are sure to prosper. But the moment now has come when you should think twice before you strike the blow...you know well that the satyagrah started by Gandhi was backed by the people as it was against a foreign domination. Our struggle is against the caste-Hindus and naturally we have little support from outside. Taking these facts into consideration, I feel, we should not antagonize the government and put it on the side of our opposition...you rest assured that a postponement of this struggle will not mean that we have given up.168

There remained of course, a section that was still disappointed with the postponement and appeared discontented with the leadership. Yet everybody understood the delicacy of the situation and gave full cooperation. Delegates and members formed themselves into a procession and started moving peacefully. There were placards and boards reading demands in the form of slogans. The procession moved swiftly around the tank and showed unbelievable patience and discipline. In an hour and a half, the procession returned to the venue of the

167 Ibid, pp. 102–03.
conference by noon. In the evening, Ambedkar addressed a group of Chambhars asking them to lead a life with self-respect.

The burning of a copy of Manusmriti at Mahad was a way of symbolically rejecting the rules that it specified and the doctrine of inequality at birth on which the cruel caste system was based. As a method of communicating a message to an illiterate following, this had the same significance as the 'making of salt at Dandi' by Gandhi. They both symbolised a rejection of the premise on which authority was based and they both helped to break down the mystique of 'divine' dispensation—the divine dispensation attributed to British rule in one case and Brahmanic omniscience and omnipotence in the other. Ambedkar, defending this collective act, asserted:

The bonfire of 'Manusmriti' was quite intentional it was a very cautious and drastic step, but was taken with a view of forcing the attention of the caste Hindus. At intervals such drastic remedies are a necessity. If you do not knock at the door, none opens it. It is not that all the parts of 'Manusmriti' are condemnable, that it does not contain good principles and that Manu himself was not a sociologist and was a mere fool. We made a bonfire of it because we view it as a symbol of injustice under which we have been crushed across centuries. Because of its teachings we have been ground down under despicable. 169

Ambedkar's action therefore provided the nucleus of pride and defiance around which the new identity of the untouchable as a rebel could be built. This episode also had its parallels with the Black Americans' struggle for dignity, which was perhaps best exemplified in the episode of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and Rosa Parks' agitation, which will be discussed in the next few sections.

169 Ibid., p. 106.
MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT

Bus Ride to Freedom

December 1st 1955 as I sat on the bus,
Not meaning to cause a fuss.
The bus got too full,
I was thinking this is bull.
I am not giving in for any white-men;
I will sit on my seat; without defeat.

The law said no white man could sit beside or across from a black.
I strongly disagreed with that.

When the driver yelled “get up”, I stayed down.

He then had me arrested and taken downtown.

From that day forth, I decided to help
in March to freedom from buses with separation.

On 13th November, 1956, the buses were declared free of ‘segregation.’

Whites made up less than a third of the bus riders of the Montgomery public transit system in 1955. And Blacks had long regarded bus segregation as one of the most burdensome local aspects of Jim Crow. City buses had 36 seats. Under Alabama state law, the first 10 were reserved for Whites. The last 10 were

170 Montgomery is the capital city of Alabama State of the U.S. In the 1950s, it was an important market for cotton, livestock, yellow pine and hardwood lumber and one of the key centres for the manufacture of fertilizers for commercial purposes. It was the largest cattle market towards east of Texas and south of river Ohio. The was lack of industries, however, made about half the Black male population workers and labourers. More than 60% of the Black females were domestic helps. Martin Luther King Jr. noted that Blacks and Whites accepted the well-established patterns of segregation as a matter of fact. There was hardly anyone who challenged the system. Montgomery was an easygoing town; it could even have been described as a peaceful town. But the peace was achieved at the cost of human servitude (Martin Luther King Jr., Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story London, 1959, p.37.)

171 This poem has been written by ‘George Cassuto’ originally a native of the Netherlands. His parents were Jewish survivors of the ‘holocaust’. Currently he is a school teacher in Northern Virginia.

172 Jim Crow laws refer to a series of laws enacted by both the central and state governments in the U. S. A. These laws mandated the de jure segregation in all public facilities and opportunities including housing, education, medical care, transportation, employment, etc. These laws not just segregated restaurants and restrooms, but also the American military. Most of these laws were enacted from 1977, when reconstruction ended and 1964–65 when most of the laws were overruled by Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act.
customarily reserved for blacks. The middle 16 were a kind of racial no man’s land, where seating was at the driver’s discretion. Black passengers had to give up their seats to white passengers. In addition, drivers (all of whom were White) could make Black passengers, once they had paid their fare at the front, exit the bus and re-enter through the door at the back of the bus.\footnote{Mark Feeney reported in \textit{The Boston Globe} from Detroit, 25th October 2005. Rosa Park died at her home in Detroit of natural causes, according to a spokesman for US Representative John Conyers, Democrat of Michigan. US Representative Charles Rangel, a New York Democrat, lauded Mrs. Park’s mettle. ‘I truly believe that there’s a little bit of Rosa Parks in all Americans who have the courage to say enough is enough and stand up for what they believe in.’}

Pressure had been building in Montgomery for some time to deal with public transportation practices that treated Blacks as second-class citizens. Those pressures were increased when a fifteen year-old girl, Claudette Colvin, was arrested on March 2, 1955 for refusing to give up her seat to a White person. Colvin did not violate the city bus policy by not surrendering her seat. She was not sitting in the front seats reserved for Whites, and there was no other place for her to sit. Even under the double standards of the bus seating policy at the time, blacks sitting behind the ‘White reserved section’ in a bus were only required to give up their seats to Whites if there was another seat available for them. But despite the apparent legality of her refusal to give up her seat, Colvin was still convicted. Some of the city’s Black leaders thought that they had missed an opportunity for more serious action at Colvin’s arrest. The Montgomery chapter of the NAACP had for some months been eager to file suit over the segregation of city buses. Two cases had been seriously considered only to be rejected when the prospective plaintiffs were deemed unsuitable.

\footnote{Jessica McElrath, \url{http://afroamhistory.about.com/od/montgombusboycott/amontgombusboycott.htm}.}
Rosa Parks and Her Arrest

Rosa Louise Parks was born in Tuskegee, Alabama, on 4 February 1913. Her father was James McCauley, a carpenter; mother Leona Edwards, a school-teacher. To care for her maternal grandmother and, later, her mother, Parks dropped out of high school early in her junior year. In 1932, she was married to Raymond Parks, a barber 10 years her senior who was active in the civil rights movement. She later recalled that Raymond was the first man of her race, aside from her grandfather, with whom she actually discussed anything about the racial conditions.174

With her husband’s encouragement, Parks went back to school and became one of the few Blacks in Montgomery to have a high school diploma. She worked at a local hospital and, during World War II, at an Army Air Force base. Later, Rosa and her husband were members of a nascent voting-rights group called the ‘Voters’ League’. She kept a list of all Black voters in Montgomery. In December 1943, Parks joined the NAACP. She was the only woman there. They needed a secretary, and she confessed that she was too timid to say no. She served in that position until 1957. Parks was also active in several local religious and civic groups.

On 1 December 1955, Parks boarded a Montgomery, Alabama city bus after finishing work as a tailor’s assistant at the Montgomery Fair department store. As all Black patrons were required to do, she paid her fare at the front of the bus and then re-boarded in the rear. She sat in a vacant seat in the back next to a man and across the aisle from two women.175

After a few stops, the front seats of the bus became full, and a White man who had boarded stood in the passageway. The bus driver asked Parks, the man next to her, and the two women to let the White man have their seats. As the others

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81 Ibid.

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moved, Parks remained seated in her seat. While three other passengers in that row complied, she did not.

Blake asked whether Parks was going to stand.

‘No’, she said.

‘Well, I’m going to have to have you arrested’, he told her.

‘You may do that’, she replied.\textsuperscript{176}

Blake called the police, and she was arrested. She did not know it at the time, but this courageous act would lead to a historic 382 day bus boycott and consequently the desegregation of buses throughout the United States.\textsuperscript{177}

E. D. Nixon, president of the Montgomery branch of the NAACP, went to the police station along with Clifford and Virginia Durr.\textsuperscript{178} Both were leading White members of the local civil rights community. Nixon and the Durrs secured Rosa Parks’s release. The trial was set for the following Monday, and she was brought home. It was there that Nixon proposed to Parks that she allow herself to become the test case of bus segregation. As he later recalled, ‘I knew she’d stand on her feet. She was honest, she was clean, and she had integrity.’

Raymond Parks was upset, and would suffer a nervous breakdown during the boycott. He argued against his wife’s accepting the plan of bus boycott. ‘The White folks will kill you, Rosa’, he had told her.\textsuperscript{179} Even so, she said yes. ‘If you think it will mean something to Montgomery and do some good, I’ll be happy to go along with it,’\textsuperscript{180} Rosa affirmed. Same night, the ‘Women’s Political Council’ another local civil rights group, showing its full solidarity drafted a letter of protest which read:

\begin{quote}
Another Negro woman has been arrested and thrown into jail because she refused to get up out of her seat on the bus and give it to a white person. We are, therefore,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{176} Mark Feeney reported in \textit{The Boston Globe} from Detroit, 25th October 2005.
\textsuperscript{177} Taylor Branch has discussed in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book \textit{"Parting the Waters,"} about the Civil Rights Movement.
\textsuperscript{178} Mrs. Parks had done work of a seamstress for Virginia Durr.
\textsuperscript{179} Mark Feeney reported in \textit{The Boston Globe} from Detroit, 25th October 2005.
\textsuperscript{180} Ibid.
asking every Negro to stay off the buses on Monday in protest of the arrest and trial.

The Bus Boycott

There were many speculations as to why Rosa didn’t obey the driver. Quite a few people in the White community argued that she was planted by the NAACP in order to lay the groundwork for this test. To many, this explanation seemed credible, since she was a former secretary of the local branch of the NAACP. Later King reflected that she was not planted by the NACCP, or any other organisation; she was planted there by her personal sense of dignity and self-respect. He further added that she was anchored to that seat by the accumulated indignities of days gone by and the boundless aspirations of generations yet unborn. E. D. Nixon, who had signed the bond of Rosa Parks, telephoned King and said:

We have taken this type of thing too long already. I feel that the time has come to boycott the buses. Only through a boycott can we make it clear to the white folks that we will not accept this type of treatment any longer.

Ralph Abernathy, a young minister of Montgomery’s first Baptist Church also agreed that ‘bus boycott’ was the best course of action. L. Roy Bennett, the president of the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance presided over the scheduled meeting. After articulating Rosa’s resistance and consequent arrest, he presented the proposal of ‘bus-boycott’ by the Negroes of Montgomery. He asserted: ‘Now is the time to move. This is no time to talk; it is time to act.’

A big challenge was now to spread the news of boycott among the Negro community. But an interesting thing happened for those who were readying for the protest. A Negro maid who could not read well happened to find a copy of the unsigned appeal for the protest which was distributed on Friday afternoon. Apparently failing to understand the message of the leaflet, she passed it on to her

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182 Ibid, p. 42.
183 Ibid, p. 43.
184 Ibid, p. 44.
employer. This White employer got the contents of the leaflet printed as the front page story of the *Montgomery Advertiser*.\(^{185}\)

5 December was scheduled as the date for the boycott. On that cold and cloudy morning, onlookers watched as the buses drove by with almost nil or few Black passengers onboard. Most of those who had to go for their jobs managed other means of transportation or walked on foot. Several students studying at Alabama State College who usually kept the buses crowded in the Jackson line, walked jubilantly for their classes. Some hired cabs and many rode on horses and mules to reach their workplace. The first day of the boycott had been a success.\(^ {186}\)

Rosa was tried at the police court the same morning for disobeying the city segregation ordinance. Fred D. Gray, a young Black counsel defended her. The judge heard the arguments, declared Rosa guilty and fined her. King recollects it as one of the first clear cut instances in which a Negro had been convicted for disobeying the segregation law. This conviction however had a twofold impact: it was a precipitating factor arousing the Negroes to positive action as well as a test of the validity of the segregation law.\(^ {187}\)

Soon after Rosa’s trial, Ralph Abernathy, E. D. Nixon and E. N. French met to discuss the urgency of an *ad hoc* organisation for guiding and directing the protest further. By afternoon, Bennett had already gathered several people to decide upon the evening’s mass meeting. There was a mood of elation all over the place, following the successful protest. King was nominated as president. Bennett was made the vice- president; U.J. Fields became recording secretary and Nixon the treasurer.\(^ {188}\) ‘Negro Citizen’s Committee’ was suggested as a name for the newly-formed organisation. But this was rejected on the plea that it closely resembled

\(^{185}\) Ibid, p. 47.
\(^{186}\) Ibid, p. 52.
\(^{187}\) Ibid, p.53.
\(^{188}\) Ibid, p.55.
‘White Citizen’s Council’. Finally a consensus was reached upon ‘Montgomery Improvement Association’ as suggested by Abernathy.

King was scheduled to speak that evening at a mass meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church. King spoke about unity, Christian love, and nonviolence. It was a powerful message that set the tone for the boycott. Martin Luther King said:

There comes a time when people get tired. We are here this evening to say to those who have mistreated us so long that we are tired—tired of being segregated and humiliated; tired of being kicked about by the brutal feet of oppression. We had no alternative but to protest. For many years we have shown amazing patience. We have sometimes given our white brothers the feeling that we liked the way we were being treated. But we come here tonight to be saved from the patience that makes us patient with anything less than freedom and justice. One of the great glories of democracy is the right to protest for rights. 189

At the mass meeting, it was decided to continue the boycott. While there was no call to end segregation on buses, there were three clear-cut demands: courteous treatment from drivers, first-come first-serve seating, and black drivers for black routes. 190 In order to help those participating in the transport boycott, a ‘volunteer-carpool’ began on 13 December with over 300 vehicles. Some 30,000 people used it daily.191 A ‘transportation-center’ in a downtown parking lot was created. It was used as a central meeting point where after passengers were picked up from various locations, they were brought to this centre. From there, all those going to one section of the town rode in a car together. The passengers waiting for car pools were often harassed by the police for loitering, and drivers received traffic tickets two or three times a week and were even arrested for overloading their cars.

Early in the boycott, many White citizens helped in providing transportation to and from work for their Black employees. About a week after the protest started, Julliette Morgan, a White woman wrote a letter to the editor of the Montgomery Advertiser comparing the bus protest with the Gandhian movement in India. She

189 Ibid, p.60.
faced the rejection and condemnation of the White community. Mahatma Gandhi’s name became well known in Montgomery before she died in 1957. But over time, the number of Whites providing transportation dwindled under pressure from others in the White community. Boycott leaders quickly realised that their plans for a more organised alternative transportation system would have to be put into high gear if the boycott was to succeed in the long term.

The Legal Challenge to Bus Segregation

The Montgomery Improvement Association filed a suit in the United States District Court challenging the constitutionality of bus segregation on February 1, 1956. In the same month, Martin Luther King and more than ninety others were arrested for conspiring to conduct a boycott. King’s trial and conviction received nationwide attention, and made him a national figure.

A hearing on Browder v. Gayle was held in Montgomery on 11th May 1956. The plaintiffs outlined their harsh treatment on city buses before a panel of three federal judges: Appeals Court Judge Richard T. Rives, Montgomery District Judge Frank M. Johnson Jr., and Birmingham District Judge Seybourn H. Lynne. The attorneys for the black plaintiffs argued that the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas applied not only to public education, but to public transportation as well.

On 5 June 1956, the special panel ruled two to one in favour of the Black plaintiffs. Rives’ majority opinion in which Johnson concurred held that the 1954 Brown ruling, which had overturned the 1896 Plessey v. Ferguson separate but equal decision was 81

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195 Ibid.
196 Plessey v/s Ferguson(1896), is a landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision in the jurisprudence of the United States, upholding the constitutionality of racial segregation even in public accommodations, particularly railroads, under the doctrine of “separate but equal”. The decision was
equal doctrine, applied not only to public schools but to other forms of legalised segregation, including public transportation. The District had already ruled in favour of ‘Montgomery Improvement Association’. The Association appealed the decision to the Supreme Court. Finally, on 13 November, the Supreme Court upheld the lower court ruling though the boycott continued until 20 December when federal marshals served the order on city officials to implement the court decision.

Assessment

After the boycott, Rosa Parks, her husband, and mother, moved to Detroit at the request of her younger brother, Sylvester. He had lived there since the end of World War II and was fearful for the safety of his sister, who had been harassed in public and received countless threatening phone calls. Still Parks remained active in the civil rights movement, giving speeches and participating in marches and protests. She eventually took a job in a Detroit office, where she worked from 1965 till her retirement in 1988.197

Rosa Parks’ courageous refusal to bow to an unfair law sparked a crucial chapter in the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, the ‘Montgomery Bus Boycott’. She had no idea when she refused to give up her seat on that Montgomery bus that her small action would help put an end to the segregation laws in the South. She wrote this in her autobiography, *Rosa Parks: My Story* much later in 1992. She has clarified that usually people say that she did not give up her seat because she was tired, but that wasn’t true.198 She was not tired physically; at least not more than she usually was at the end of a working day. Some people have

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an image of her as being old then. She was forty-two. She admitted in her autobiography that she was only tired of giving in. \(^{199}\)

Jessica Mc Elrath however has an interesting story about this. She is of the opinion that if Rosa had not been somewhat distracted that Thursday evening, she would not have gotten on that particular bus. It was way back in 1943 that Rosa had run afoul of bus segregation by refusing to re enter a bus through its rear door after having paid her fare. The same driver, J. P. Blake, had ejected her from the vehicle. Rosa found the experience so humiliating that she had ever since avoided any bus Blake was driving. \(^{200}\) But that act of ‘creative-witness’ as Martin Luther King refers to in his *Stride towards Freedom* made Rosa Parks a world icon of freedom and earned her the popular title, ‘mother of civil-rights movement’.

As the boycotts were on, intimidation tactics took various forms. The most sweeping official action designed to deter boycott leaders came in February 1956, when the Montgomery grand jury indicted eighty-nine boycott leaders including King, Parks, Abernathy and most of the other participating Black ministers. The charges were based on a 1921 state statute that barred boycotts without just cause. Those indicted were arrested over the next few days, booked and released on bond. But as official tactics failed to discourage the boycott, unofficial intimidation soon took a more dangerous turn.

In January, the parsonage in which King and his family lived was bombed. Coretta Scott King and the Kings’ two-year-old daughter narrowly escaped injury. \(^{201}\) King stood on his damaged porch and persuaded an angry crowd of blacks, some of them armed, not to respond with violence. Two nights later, a stick of dynamite was thrown at E. D. Nixon’s home, but fortunately no one was hurt. \(^{202}\)

\(^{199}\) Ibid.
\(^{200}\) Ibid.
\(^{201}\) Ibid.
It sounds ironical that in the early days of the boycott, MIA officials while negotiating with officials of the city and the bus line, made demands which stopped far short of ending segregation on city buses. Instead, those negotiations focused on ending the practices of forcing Blacks to stand so that Whites could sit (such as in the case of Rosa Parks) or of forcing Blacks to leave seats in the front of the Black section of a bus so that Whites could fill them if the White section was full. The boycott leadership also sought the hiring of some Black bus drivers and more courteous treatment of Black riders by bus drivers.

If the city officials had agreed to these modest demands, they could have prevented the boycott and quite likely have caused the focus of the Civil Rights Movement to shift to some city other than Montgomery. Indeed, business interests in Montgomery, supported by the *Montgomery-Advertiser's* editorial page, supported some form of compromise, as did the majority of the leadership of the MIA. But city officials pressured by the militant and racist 'White Citizens Councils' refused to move. In the early weeks of the boycott, the then Mayor W.A. Gayle declared: 'When are we going to hold our stand? We are not going to be a part of any program that will get Negroes to ride the buses again at the price of the destruction of our heritage and way of life.'

The narrow-mindedness on the part of city officials prompted MIA leaders to widen their demands when they moved to the federal court. The Rosa Parks case was not used as the basis for the federal lawsuit for several reasons. As a criminal statute, it would have to pursue its way through the state criminal appeals process before a federal appeal could be filed. City and state officials could have delayed a final rendering for years. In addition, it is possible that the only outcome would have been that the conviction of Parks would be vacated, with no lasting impact on bus segregation.

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204 Ibid.
An American Experiment with Satyagraha

King realized that the biggest job in getting any movement off the ground was to keep together the people who form it. This task required more than a common aim: it demanded a philosophy that won people's allegiance and opened channels of communication between the people and their leaders. Here, Gandhi teachings began to exert its influence: the basic guiding principle and most potent weapon available was nonviolent resistance or passive resistance.205

What is important in terms of King's political thought is the philosophy behind his protest strategy. He believed in nonviolence in relation to political action. Although nonviolent direct action had been used successfully as a tactic by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), A. Philip Randolph and others, to King goes the credit of revolutionising nonviolence as an appositive moral force based on a true love ethic. King's rationalisation of nonviolence stemmed from his perception of the ultimate goal of most American Blacks; it was not possible to free oneself violently from a majority group whom one was to continue living with.

He also realised that very few violent revolutions in history had succeeded without the sympathy or support of a non-resisting majority and conditions for this kind of revolution did not exist in America. King felt that a nonviolent revolution on the other hand would result in a peaceful transformation of society. However, to the interpretation of nonviolent strategy, King also added a 'militant' character.206 By 'militancy' he meant the creation of dynamic nonviolent tension, which would force a community which had constantly refused to negotiate, to confront the issue.

On whether violence could ever be adopted, King stated:

I stressed that the use of violence in our struggle would be both impractical and immoral. To meet hate with retaliatory hate would do nothing but intensify the existence of evil in the universe. Hate begets hate; violence begets violence;

toughness begets greater toughness. We must meet the forces of hate with power of love; we must meet physical force with soul force. Our aim must never be to defeat or humiliate the white man, but to win his friendship and understanding.\textsuperscript{207}

King's transition towards his later life, when he was disillusioned, when people talked about violence and nonviolence, shows that one needs to think about what constitutes violence, even nonviolence can become violence and vice versa in difficult and critical circumstances.\textsuperscript{208} It is suggested that King was coming closer to the ideas of Malcolm X, who on the other hand was converging towards the methods of King.

**Mahad to Montgomery: Drawing Some Parallels**

It might, at first sight, seem slightly strange to compare the Montgomery of King with the Mahad of Ambedkar not only because of the different geographical setting, but also because, at first sight, Ambedkar and King were quite different from each other in their ideologies and strategies. To give just one example, whereas King was so influenced by Gandhi that he compared him with no other than Jesus himself, Ambedkar was always at loggerheads with the Mahatma. Another difference in the two situations is that though a resolution was passed by the colonial administration in 1920s in India against segregation at public places, the United States of America failed to do this even on paper. It was only as late as 1954 that the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v/s Board of Education* effectively ended segregation.

Both Ambedkar and King highlighted the historical wrongs and inhumane conditions to which 'untouchables' and 'Negroes' have been subjected. Both highlighted the urgency of basic hygiene and discipline in order to ensure a better


\textsuperscript{208} Megan French in a personal interview conducted at Columbia University, New York City, on 14\textsuperscript{th} July 2008. Megan is a graduate student at Institute for research in African American Studies at Columbia University and researching on 'Black Power'. She is White and her parents were part of the historic Civil Rights Movement in the U.S.
culture. Towards the closing of the Mahad Satyagraha, Ambedkar had addressed a crowd of 3000 women saying:

Never regard yourself as untouchables. Live a clean life. Dress yourself like the touchable ladies. Never mind if your dress is full of patches, but see that it is clean. None can restrict your freedom in the choice of your garments and in the use of metal of your ornaments. Attend more to the cultivation of the mind and the spirit of self-help. But do not feed in any case your spouse and sons if they are drunkards. Send your children to schools. Education is necessary for females as it is for males. If you know how to read and write there would be much progress. As you are, so your children will be. Mould their life in a virtuous way, for sons should be such as would make a mark in this world.209

King’s reflection regarding the deprived socio-economic conditions in the Black ghettos underlines a similar concern as that of Ambedkar for the Dalits:

Our crime rate is far too high. Our level of cleanliness is frequently far too low. Too often those of us who are in the middle class live above our means, spend money on non essentials and favourites, and fail to give serious causes, organizations and educational institutions that so desperately needs funds. We are too often loud and boisterous and spend far too much on drink. Even the most poverty stricken among us can purchase ten-cent bar soap; even the most uneducated among us can have high morals. Since crime often grows out of sense of a futility and despair, Negro parents must be urged to give their children the love, attention and sense of belonging that a segregated society deprives them of.210

Researchers estimate that some 17,000 Blacks took part in the Montgomery boycott initially, although the numbers grew quickly because of action by the transport system itself. Shortly after the boycott ended, King claimed that 42,000 Blacks took part. Mahad also had more than 15,000 people participating in the ‘satyagraha’. Such huge numbers can only be assured in a nonviolent action. Further, while Ambedkar criticised the means of Communism, King illustrated his objection to both violence as means and ‘dictatorship’ as the end.

Both Ambedkar and King realised the delicacy of a situation where satyagrahis represented the minority; a small mistake could push the cause of the satyagrahis to the periphery as the majority parties always try to create a situation

of confrontation or sabotage. The most crucial aspect in such movement therefore, becomes the action of the minority which stands to lose much. King warned:

Let our action not be compared with the action of organizations like Ku Klux Klan and White Citizen's Council because while they are protesting for the preparation of injustice, in the community we are protesting for the justice in the community. Their methods lead to violence and lawlessness. There will be no threats and intimidation. We will be guided by the highest principles of law and order."  

Ambedkar faced the same critical situation during the Mahad Conference. He understood thoroughly the ploy of the caste-Hindus when they resorted to violence on the streets of Mahad. He therefore made his fellow men understand the power of 'passive-resistance'.

There is world of difference between a Satyagraha launched by caste Hindus and one launched by untouchables. When caste Hindus initiate a Satyagraha it is against the government and they have community support. When the untouchables launch a Satyagraha all the caste Hindus are arraigned against us.  

Ambedkar preferred to fight the case in the court rather than on the streets and persuaded the members participating in the conference to disperse peacefully. The legal battle finally ended with a decision in favour of the untouchables led by their leader Ambedkar. This decision in their favour created an impression about the colonial administration representing 'rule of law' among the depressed classes. King and his colleagues took to the same legal battle which finally was ruled in the favour of Montgomery Improvement Association. The trial and conviction of King helped the movement and its leaders enhance their confidence for nonviolent direct action.

There also seems to exist a similarity between Ambedkar and King on how they reacted to wars. Both the leaders seemed critical of wars. King, while facing the riots in the ghettos of the United States, voiced his opinion against war in one of his speeches titled 'A Time to Break Silence' which was made on 4 April 1967:

I have walked among the desperate, rejected, angry young men; I have told them that Molotov cocktails and rifles would not solve their problems. I have tried to

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offer them my deepest compassion, while maintaining my conviction that social change comes most meaningfully through nonviolent action. But they asked and rightly so, what about Vietnam? I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today: my own government.214

Ambedkar was highly critical of the mindless and exorbitant resources expended on wars, the burden of which was ultimately borne by the working classes. In his presidential address to the Seventh Indian Labour Conference which was held on 27 November 1945, he observed:

Labour may ask the moneyed classes a pertinent question saying, ‘if you do not mind paying taxes to meet the expenditure on war, why do you object to raising the funds when their purpose is to raise the ‘labour standard?’ how many uneducated persons could be educated and how many sick persons could have been restored to health, if money spent on war had been spent on the public welfare?215

One wonders however about the reason behind his public criticism of India’s foreign policy of ‘Non-Alignment’, which seemed to him to cut India off from American contact.

Ambedkar moved ahead of Booker T. Washington’s experiment in the United States of America. Washington had emphasised educational opportunities and economic empowerment of the Blacks. Ambedkar prepared Dalits for political rights along with social and economic upliftment. And ‘Separate-Electorate’ was a milestone in this regard. It was only from 1935 that the Dalits could contest elections for Central and Provincial assemblies as per the provisions of the ‘Poona-Pact’. The political assertion for the Blacks came much later. It was the ‘Voting Rights Act of 1965’ that extended the electoral franchise to all Americans irrespective of race.216

The role of women is crucial in such movements facing the double burden of race and gender. During the civil rights movement also, people faced heinous

Youthful Energy, Wisdom of Experienced Activists Combine in CCBPP Membership Campaign

A Shloka from Bhagwad Gita: a Hindu Religious Scripture known for its Karma Theory
forms of sexism; it is commendable that women like Rosa Parks’s rose to protest, setting the ignition for the historic civil rights movement.\textsuperscript{217} King remarked that men and women who had been separated from each other by false standards of class were now ‘singing and praying together in the common struggle for freedom and human dignity.’\textsuperscript{218} Ambedkar had prepared the ‘Hindu Code Bill’ in 1951 to ameliorate the conditions of women in India. As Ambedkar himself described: ‘the bill was killed and buried unwept and unsung.’\textsuperscript{219}

**Religion: A False Ideology or a Useful Strategy?**

Religion and politics within India and all over the globe are interlinked in various complex ways. The question of whether religion is a liberator or a ‘false ideology’ in the traditional Marxist sense cannot thus be answered in simple terms. World history has been a testimony to the fact that most of the mass movements have been waged taking the help of the religion. Mahatma Gandhi’s experiment of ‘satyagraha’ during the freedom struggle of India always remained guided by the highest principles of Hinduism and the Gita. From his daily prayers to the ultimate goal of ‘swaraj’, his philosophy ultimately culminated in the Hindu idiom of ‘Ram-Rajya’.

Martin Luther King, like Gandhi, became a crusader against the injustice of segregation in the United States of America. Highly influenced by Gandhi, he followed the same nonviolent method of ‘satyagraha’; so much so that he compared Gandhi with Jesus in terms of tackling the hatred showed by enemies through ‘love’. Martin started his career as a Baptist minister in a church in Alabama. He believed that racial integration could be achieved through target-oriented tactics

\textsuperscript{217} Lindsey Herbert, in personal interview conducted at UC, Berkeley on 29th July 2008. Lindsey is Students’ Advisor at African American studies and her research area is Caribbean Women’s history and literature.


which were based on liberal Judaeo-Christian theology. The application of these tactics affirmed that King’s prescription, like W. E. B. Du Bois’ in the early stages, was basically political.\textsuperscript{220} While recollecting his experiences of Montgomery in \textit{Stride toward Freedom}, he observed the role of religion in bringing people together for a just cause:

A religion true to its nature must also be concerned about man’s social conditions. It seeks not only to integrate men with God but to integrate men with men and each man with himself. Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them is a dry-as-dust religion. Such a religion is the kind the Marxist like to see—an opiate of the masses.\textsuperscript{221}

Nelson Mandela was yet another satyagrahi who used Gandhi’s method in South Africa, though he separated it completely from its religious connotations. History has its own fancies; Mandela was thus experimenting with a weapon discovered in South Africa by an Indian. Apartheid\textsuperscript{222} separated segregated Blacks and Whites for a long time, much before their National Party gave it a legal endorsement. Mandela followed the nonviolent method for long, but there came a point where the brutal force of the oppressor seemed impossible to be countered by passive resistance alone. Militant action became part of the struggle officially supported by Organization of African Unity. Mandela recognised the solidarity of the communists:

The communists were the only whites who were prepared to treat Africans as human beings and their equals; who were prepared to eat with us, talk with us, live with us and work with us.\textsuperscript{223} Communists were eager to work with the African National Congress (ANC) and so were the organizations of South African residents originally from India. Even coloured people—those of mixed race—were considered ‘lower’ than whites but higher than blacks.\textsuperscript{224}

Martin Luther King during his Montgomery campaign thoroughly tested the method of Satyagraha and developed a comprehensive critique of Communism.

\textsuperscript{220}Filip Schulke (ed.), \textit{Martin Luther King Jr.: a Documentary} (Atlanta: W.W. Norton and Co., 1976), pp. 163–70.
\textsuperscript{221} Martin Luther King Jr., \textit{Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story} (London: Victor Gollancz, 1958), p. 34.
\textsuperscript{222} According to the Oxford Dictionary, Apartheid literally means ‘racial-segregation’ especially in South Africa.
\textsuperscript{224} Ibid, p.25.
which had been successfully used in Soviet Union in 1917, in China in 1949 and new experiments had already started in Latin America in late 1950s. King remarked:

First, I rejected their materialistic interpretation of history. Communism is avowedly secularist and materialistic has no place for God...History is ultimately guided by spirit, not matter. Secondly, I strongly disagreed with communism's ethical relativism. Since for the communist there is no divine government, no absolute power order, there is no fixed immutable principle; consequently almost anything-force, violence, murder, lying-is a justifiable means to the 'millennial' end. Third, I opposed its totalitarianism. In communism the individual end up in subjection to the state. True the Marxist would argue that the state is an 'interim' reality which is to be eliminated when the classless society emerges; but the state is the end while it lasts, and man is only a means to the end. Communism in theory emphasized a classless society, and a concern for social justice, though the world knows from sad experience that in practice it created new classes and a new lexicon of injustice.225

This ‘materialistic conception of history’ was also partly rejected by Ambedkar. Witnessing Gandhi’s experiment, he had realised the cementing force of religion in social and political movement. It was the treatment that his fellow untouchables experienced daily which led him to vow that he would not die a Hindu. But he believed in God in the sense that he believed that some unknown power might be influencing human destiny. He also believed in the usefulness and necessity of religion. He reasoned that a poor man mad with hunger avoided theft not because he feared the legal consequences, but because of the healthy pressure his religion exercised over his mind.226 He stated:

It is an error to look upon religion as a matter which is individual, private and personal...religion becomes a source of positive mischief if not danger when it remains individual, private and personal. Equally mistaken is the view that religion is the flowering of special religious instinct inherent in the nature of the individual. The correct view is that religion like language is social for the reason that either is essential for social life and the individual has to have it because without it he can not participate in the life of the society.227

Dhananjay Keer has referred to the fact Ambedkar often quoted from the Gita because he felt that it was acceptable to both ‘touchables’ and ‘untouchables’. Ambedkar ascribed the origin of ‘philosophy of satyagraha’ to the Gita. Keer

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substantiates this with reference to an editorial published on 27 November 1927 in *Bahishkrit Bharat.* Ambedkar with his enhanced understanding of the *Gita* borrowed the political principles, but rejected the social philosophy propounded by it saying:

> I reject the social philosophy propounded in the Bhagwad Gita based as it is on the *Triguna of Sankhya* philosophy which is in my judgment a cruel perversion of the philosophy of *Kapila*, and which had made the ‘caste-system’ of graded inequality the law of the Hindu social life. Positively my social philosophy may be said to be enshrined in three words: liberty, equality and fraternity. Let no one however say that I have borrowed my philosophy from the French Revolution. I have not. My philosophy has roots in religion and not in political science. I have derived them from the teachings of my master, the Buddha.

It so happened in 1929 that a group of untouchables from a village near Nashik decided to embrace Islam. When this group came to Ambedkar for advice, he told them to wait for some time and see if they could not bring about some change in Hinduism. But finally, let alone his supporters, he himself got frustrated and ultimately embraced Buddhism at ‘Deekshabhoomi’, Nagpur on 14 October 1956. Ambedkar did not survive long to witness the usefulness of Buddhism in annihilating caste, as he died on 6 December this same year, a day that is celebrated as the ‘*Mahaparinirvana-Din*’ by his supporters.

Ambedkar took into consideration the various possibilities of conversion into other religions which would have offered political as well as social advantages, such as Sikhism or Islam. He finally chose Buddhism as this religion for it opportunity of escape from the Hindu concept of ‘caste’ and a ‘high-moral standard’ but lacked political overtones. But the usefulness of religion was always accepted by Ambedkar as he was of the opinion that man could not live by bread alone, and that he needed food for thought; religion, according to him, instilled hope in men and drove him to activity. He further added:

> Religion is not opium as it is held by some. What good things I have in me or whatever have been the benefits of my education to society, I owe them to the

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228 Dhananjay Keer, *op. cit.*, p. 90.
229 Speech broadcasted on All India Radio (A.I.R.) on 3 October 1954.
religious feelings in me......I want religion but I do not want hypocrisy in the
name of religion.232

Ambedkar, during the last years of his life, concentrated on his final work
The Buddha and His Dhamma. While he agreed with the 'end' of Marxism, he was
highly critical of use of violence to achieve that end. He accepted the wonderful
achievements accomplished by the Communist dictatorship in the Soviet Union and
agreed that the 'proletarian-dictatorship' could be an answer to many poor
countries. But he warned that permanent dictatorship cannot be justified as
humanity does not only want economic values, it also wants spiritual values to be
retained.233 Ambedkar did not agree with Thomas Carlyle either, who called
political economy 'a pig philosophy', for man wants material comfort also. He
believed man must grow materially as well as spiritually. He wrote in The Buddha
and His Dhamma:

French Revolution was welcomed because of its slogan 'Fraternity, Liberty and
Equality'. It failed to produce equality. We welcome Russian Revolution because
it aimed to produce equality. But it cannot be too much emphasized that in
producing equality, society cannot afford to sacrifice fraternity or liberty. It seems
that three can coexist only if one follows the way of the Buddha. Communism can
give one but not all.234

Ambedkar stated that it was Buddha who sought to change the mind of a
man and alter his disposition in order to ensure that whatever a man wishes to do,
he could do it voluntarily and without any force or coercion; the chief means to
attain this change in disposition was what he chose to call 'Dhamma'. But one
wonders if there had to be a change of mind through the Buddhist method and not
through the Gandhian one. Finally, though Ambedkar chose Buddhism as against
Marxism, he agreed with the ends which the Marxists sought to achieve but
rejected the means adopted for the same. He clarified his stand saying:

We consider the communist goal of immediate revolution to be unrealistic, not
necessarily unjustified. We support their social and economic objective but not
their political philosophy. Besides they have done nothing to educate the common
people in their way of thinking. We think the path of revolutionary communism to
be counter productive. That can not be said of the movement for establishing the

232 Dhananjay Keer, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Life and Mission (Bombay: Popular Prakashan,
rights of the untouchables. We do not favour violence as means or strategy in our movement.235

Gail Omvedt is of the opinion that conversion to Buddhism swept the ‘Mahar’ community throughout Maharashtra which had far-reaching consequences of social rebellion, as they refused to do the work at Hindu households. They refused to carry dead animals or do other menial duties foisted on them for generations in this unjust society. Such daring refusals invited atrocities and reprisals in most parts of the state.236 The surfacing of Buddhist (non-Hindu) identity was a considerable achievement and it also received support from the caste-Hindu peasants, who had witnessed the tradition of radical non-Brahmin movement from Phule through Shahuji Maharaj237 to Ambedkar.

Mridula Mukherjee, however, counters the claim made by Gail Omvedt about the role of the Neo-Buddhist identity in the assertion of Dalit Politics in general or even Maharashtra in particular. She is of the opinion that the assertion of Dalits has most effectively been materialised within the broader Hindu fold as prescribed by Gandhi. She has observed that sociologists have found that despite the claims of the leaders of the Dalits, the reality remains that:

Buddhist converts in the villages have not given up their old Hindu gods and goddesses, but have only added photographs of Ambedkar and the Buddha, in that order, to the pantheon. Buddhist converts in the villages show their new found confidence by celebrating Hindu festivals. The upper castes are angered by not by their having become Buddhists- they are able to accommodate that quite easily- but precisely by their defiance of traditional Hindu norms and emulation of Hindu religious practices. Gandhiji’s understanding and strategy of struggle against the

237 ‘Chhatrapati Shahuji Maharaj’ was founder of princely state ‘Kolhapur’. He was genealogical descendent of ‘Shivaji’. Unlike any other ruler of a princely state, he gave unparalleled help to lower-caste movement by appointing young activists to the office of his government irrespective of his caste origin or status. He made significant effort toward abolition of discriminatory customs and practices against the untouchables. Providing education and employment for them was his top priority. He extended both financial and moral support to a number of promising students and academics in his state as well as outside his state. Ambedkar was also one of many who were a recipient of altruistic help from Shahuji. (Masao Naito, ‘Anti-untouchability Ideologies and Movements in Maharashtra from the Late Nineteenth Century to the 1930s’, in H. Kotani (ed.), Caste System, Untouchability and The Depressed, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1997), p. 170.
Dalit problem, which emphasized gaining religious equality via temple entry, remains validated.  

A pertinent question to be answered is why Ambedkar chose Buddhism as a means to defeat oppressive caste structures. Although there are innumerable views on why he chose this particular path (for example, some claim that Buddhism was chosen so that the benefits of the reservations could be retained), Manager Pandey has provided us with the most balanced view. Pandey notes that all religions are a bundle of myths, some are more rigid and some are relatively less, but since Ambedkar understood the importance of these myths in the life of the common man, he chose religion as a method.

In fact, the biggest concern of Ambedkar was ‘annihilation of caste system’. Ambedkar, in spite of all his efforts failed to ascertain any big movement or organization. This increased his despair even more during his last years. In this given situation, he felt that an annihilation of caste can be attempted with the help of religion. He thought of this method, as he realized the immense importance of religion in a common man’s life and hence can be used to exterminate caste. And he chose ‘Buddhism’ is the only religion which discards ‘caste-system’ in principle. I, however, reiterate the fact that had Ambedkar instead of ‘conversion’ organized a political movement, results would have been much better.

The study suggests Ambedkar’s engagement with communism never could convert him into an atheist. Ambedkar was a spiritual person and subsequently with his study of Buddha and his teachings he realized that an egalitarian religious sect like Buddhism can help in the cultural transformations of the lowest strata of the Hindu fold; the Dalits.