INTRODUCTION

In May 2006, The Hindu carried an article titled, “Justice for Dalits still a dream.” It began,

“In February this year, Dalits in Mahmadpur – a small village near Kunjpura in Karnal district, Haryana – were attacked by members of the land-owning Rode community. Over 30 Dalits were seriously injured. The immediate provocation for the incident was a procession the Dalits were planning on the occasion of Ravidas Jayanthi. The police, on the advice of the village sarpanch (who belongs to the Rode community), refused to allow the procession to be taken past the ‘upper caste’ area in the village. When the Dalits attempted to take out their procession, the police stopped them. The next day, in blatant violation of the law, the sarpanch allegedly instigated upper caste youth to attack the Dalits with hatchets and sickles by making announcements on a loudspeaker from the local temple. The attackers did not spare even women and children.”

The story continued,

“The events that followed the February incident were shocking. Instead of arresting those who attacked the Dalits, the police arrested 15 Dalits on false charges ranging from ‘dacoity’ to ‘attempt to murder.’ Instead of framing charges against the sarpanch for allegedly instigating the violence, the police tried to pressure the injured Dalits into forming a 10-member ‘peace committee’ with equal representation from both communities, and suggested that they reach a settlement.”

This incident brings to fore one of the most important aspects of Dalit predicament in modern India. Here is a group which wants to take out a procession in honor of one of its most venerated Dalit saints, Ravidas, and the upper caste group does not let this procession be taken past the upper caste area. Much worse, it retaliates most brutally on Dalits for daring to think of such a procession. A swarm of questions comes to the mind. Why does the Rode community not allow a procession of a Dalit saint? Why does it take

2 Ibid.
so much offence to this procession? And more importantly, why does the Rode community react so brutally towards Dalits, even after their successful blockade of the Dalit procession? A linked question is: how does the ‘local temple’ become a site for such an assault? Why does the rest of the Hindu society accept such an act? We can also ask the question: from where does the Rode community derive its social strength?

We can also ask the other side, a different set of questions. Why do Dalits want to take the procession through an upper caste area, if they very well know that Ravidas is not venerated by the Caste Hindus? What social function does this act perform? It is clearly evident from this, unpleasant, incident that it not a fight over material resources but a fight for cultural and symbolic rights. It is also clear that the Rode community is not willing to give this cultural space to the Dalit community. What was the Dalit community trying to do by taking a procession through the upper caste area? In other words, what is the social meaning behind this procession? To this we can say that Dalits are trying to raise the status of their saint and, simultaneously, of themselves in the eyes of the upper caste community. The Dalit saint Ravidas sermonized on the essential equality of man and thereby denounced caste and its logic. If we take this aspect into consideration this procession is, essentially, a fight for dignity, esteem and social equality for Dalits. Therefore, the procession and the violence that resulted with it is unlike that of other processions that happen in India. For example, the Muslim objection to a Hindu procession in its religious area. Normally, there is a communal aspect to this procession and its objection and the resultant violence also tend to be communal. But here, in the Rode community’s case, communalism shows its other face: casteism. Interestingly, the procession is not to claim a different or separate identity. It is to assert that they are their social equals and, more importantly, to assert the ideal of equality in a society that is antithetical to it. It is for this very reason the upper caste Rode community is infuriated with the act. It hurts their social status as superiors.

There is another important facet that needs to be questioned. Why did Dalits so passively accept this violence? Why did they not retaliate? Are they numerically weaker than the Rode community; or do they fear a much harsher retaliation from them? Why do they
seem to be so powerless? What are the social implications of this feeling of powerlessness for this community?

Apart from this, we can ask a third kind of question: why were the police assisting the Rode community rather than the Dalit community by not allowing the procession to take place? Are there any legal restrictions on taking a procession in that area? The way the police discriminated by framing false charges against the Dalits shows the communal nature of police and other state apparatus in this country. In other words, the police acted in a manner that can be termed communal. If so, how does it acquire this character? These are some of the questions that are of important concern to this work.

To answer the above questions, we need to understand the nature of the Dalit community and, importantly, the context in which they exist: Hindu society. The reason why the Dalit community accepts such a fate and does not retaliate is that they exist as a minority in the Indian social life. There is, also, a high level of contempt for this group from the rest of Hindu society and, as a result, they lack the support of other upper caste groups. This is linked to the historicity (historicality) of this contempt in the form of Untouchability. This is further linked to the way Indian society is structured in the form of caste and hierarchy. Therefore, in order to understand their predicament, we need to have a closer look at the larger picture in which Dalits exist: Indian society. Not only do they not have support from other upper caste groups, but the Dalits are divided among themselves. They are some of the most fragmented groups in Indian society. This adds another dimension and complexity to their minority-ness. Along with this aspect, they constitute one of the poorest groups in Indian society. A major chunk of the poor in India is constituted of Dalits. This, further, depreciates their status in society. Their economic necessities constantly force them to abjure their moral claims and rights, thereby, leaving them facing odd/false moral dilemmas. Rajeev Bhargava puts forward one such dilemma: “Is something, no matter how meager, better than nothing, or is having nothing better than having something available in a morally unacceptable form?”

This dilemma is a post-independence phenomenon; where the upper caste politics and Dalit deprivation

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generates a situation in which Dalits are pushed into involuntarily. The result of this dilemma for Dalits is Psychological Humiliation. It is a humiliating situation because one is asked to choose between morality and “meager” benefits, which any individual committed to morality would wish to avoid. This aspect reinforces their “minority-ness” in Indian society.

There is one more just as important dimension to Dalits that makes them unique. Due to the practice of Untouchability, they have experienced one of the worst forms of ‘social humiliation’ know to human history. Untouchability is a system where a group is excluded from society based on some false social characteristics of the group. They were not recognized as humans to start with. They were mis-recognized as a subhuman group, which needs to be both excluded and controlled. The system of Untouchability was maintained through many social practices. Caste is the principle social and cultural practice that legitimizes and sustains this practice. Due to existence of this practice for a long time Dalits interiorized a sense of inferiority. This inferiority, further, entrenches their Dalit-ness. From this point of view, the procession by the Dalits in Haryana for their saint is a struggle for recognition. As a group which has suffered mis-recognition from the rest of society, recognition by the upper caste as their social equals is deeply important for them. This recognition or mis-recognition happens, largely, through cultural means. In this sense, cultural recognition becomes the important demand for Dalits.

Cultural recognition in political theory is articulated in the form of cultural rights. These [cultural rights] are added to social and economic rights. Liberals, Multiculturalists and Communitarians all advocate and defend cultural rights; but they justify and defend them on different grounds. A liberal defense of cultural rights is based on the argument that culture contributes to the overall well being of the individual, as it provides the ‘context of choice’ for the individual. Since, freedom to choose between different conceptions of a

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4 Here, the term ‘psychological humiliation’ is used differently from humiliation as a moral category as expressed by Avashai Margalit in his The Decent Society (trans. Naomi Goldblum) (Cambridge, MA: Havard University Press, 1996).

5 The term is used here as Ambedkar employs it in his writings to elucidate the Dalit condition in Indian society.
good life is an important value for liberals, culture becomes this context of choice. The individual is still the prime focus for liberals. For Communitarians, on the other hand, the community or group not the individual is the prime focus. Since, communities are identified by their distinct cultures, for them, culture is important in a deeper sense. Charles Taylor is one of the chief exponents of this argument. According to him, recognition is an important concern to us moderns, because it is linked to authenticity and dignity. Recognition is a “vital need” for us. This further entails recognition of our cultural differences and identities. Translated into theoretical terms, our modern value of equal respect to all necessitates accepting of differences. Apart from this, cultures need to be preserved and valued because they have “animated whole societies over some considerable stretch of time.” In simple terms, cultures need to be valued as relics of the past for Taylor. Since individuals live in communities, individuals are largely committed to collective goals rather than just individual ones. Group rights become important for communitarians. Multiculturalists, unlike liberals and communitarians view culture not in static terms but in dynamic terms. They see cultures as constantly forming by accepting or borrowing features from other cultures and discarding some practices. They historicize culture by arguing that what is called culture is not something given but which has or could have been contested by others within the culture. By making an important distinction between majority and minority cultures, multiculturalists argue for cultural rights for minority groups to protect against the domination or assimilation by majority culture. Unlike communitarians, who defend a common, less fragmented, culture to promote the common good of community, multiculturalists argue for pluralizing culture so that minorities and their differences are not sacrificed in the process of homogenization. Important for us to note is that multiculturalists are more sensitive to power than communitarians or liberals. However, what all three theories assume is that all minorities qua minorities have distinct cultures; and cultural rights entail fighting for preservation of these distinct cultures. This assumption is a result of not taking the Dalit problematic with respect to culture into consideration.

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7 The arguments of Liberalism, Communitarianism and Multiculturalism are dealt with in the first chapter.
Dalits, this work argues, are not striving to preserve any particular culture, because they do not belong to any distinctive culture. They are also not attempting to pluralize the majority culture by including Dalit saints along with the Hindu pantheon. Nor, are they demanding a purge of the negative elements in Hindu culture. Their demand is much more radical than what these culturalists are willing to concede. They demand a radical rejection of the dominant culture and replacing it with a new alternative egalitarian culture. This would be the second hypothesis of this work. To establish this, this work assumes that B R Ambedkar is the best articulation of the Dalit predicament and the true reflection of Dalit consciousness. Though there have been many Dalits leaders like Jagjivan Ram and others, who have articulated a more condescending view for Dalits, this work is also an attempt to establish that Ambedkar is the best representative and the only true representative of Dalit dignity and moral consciousness. Coming back to the issue of relevance of cultural rights to Dalits, this work claims that cultural rights, as articulated by the three liberal theories of Liberalism, Communitarianism and Multiculturalism, hold little meaning for Dalits. Since Dalits do not have a separate and distinct culture, they do not seek to preserve a culture from majority culture. But, as a minority group in contrast to the Hindus their cultural claim is to reject Hindu culture itself. Anything less than this, Ambedkar would argue, is a threat to their dignity and humanity. This can be defended using the Taylorian argument of group rights.

One of the important claims of this work is that Antonio Gramsci’s understanding of cultural domination is more appropriate to understanding the Dalit predicament. In Gramsci’s framework the term minority can replace his notion of the subaltern. For Gramsci all those on whom domination and hegemony is exercised are a minority. This domination and hegemony, which is well known, is maintained by a complex mixture of social, economic and cultural means. Domination is done by a minority of elites over a majority. Majority or Minority from this perspective is not determined by numbers but by the actual power a group enjoys in a social setup. Ambedkar, unaware of Gramsci, holds a strikingly similar view of determining a minority. Based on this criterion, he goes on to argue that Dalits being the most powerless constitute the true minority in Indian society. The Hindu upper castes maintain their domination through all the above mentioned
means, in which culture plays a crucial role in hegemonizing over the lower castes. Caste, for him, as Nicholas Dirks enunciates, "is a cultural construction of power." In India, power is exercised and maintained through the institution of caste. That does not mean caste is only a cultural product; it has an economic dimension too. Ambedkar criticized Marxists in India for ignoring the cultural aspect while giving undue importance to the economic understanding of caste. Ambedkar also directed our attention to the moral damage that has happened to individuals and groups due to caste. As said earlier, its worst outcome has been the social humiliation inflicted on Dalits. Not only has damage been done to Dalits, it has corrupted the character of the whole society right from top to bottom by communalizing all groups, particularly the upper castes. The result has been contempt for lower groups by upper castes and hatred and jealousy by lower castes towards upper castes. Coming back to the issues surrounding culture and power, we can say that a Gramscian reading of culture is more sensitive to power as it is exercised not just on ethnic minorities, but also on everyone in society by a dominant group. With this reading of culture, cultural rights take an altogether different meaning. It also needs to be said that for both Gramsci and Ambedkar, culture is not something that is necessarily used to exercise power; both believe that culture is important to society and individual. Broadly, with minor differences, both have an Arnoldian notion of Culture. Culture in an Arnoldian sense is high culture with a capital C. As we will deal with Ambedkar’s understanding of culture later in the work, let us here take a look at what Gramsci (in his early years) has to say regarding Culture. He writes,

"Culture is organization, discipline of one’s inner self, a coming to terms with one’s own personality; it is the attainment of a higher awareness, with the aid of which one succeeds in understanding one’s own historical value, one’s function in life, one’s own rights and obligations. But none of this can come about through spontaneous evolution, though a series of actions and reactions which are independent of one’s own will... Above all, man is mind, i.e. He is a product of history, not nature."  

This statement, which means that man above all is mind, gets echoed in Ambedkar too; and both believe the development of an individual’s personality as one of the highest aims of society. What is denied to the minority or subaltern is this very Culture. From this understanding, a right to Culture means having the liberty to exercise one’s capacities to their maximum. Ambedkar goes beyond Gramsci by asking: how one can achieve this, particularly, without renouncing Democracy.

Based on the discussion we just had, we know how liberty gains its importance for Ambedkar. In that case, how can one achieve progress in society without sacrificing liberty? This commitment to liberty obliges Ambedkar in defending a democratic rather than a dictatorial form of government. However, he quickly realizes that a formal conception of democracy is replete with many problems. He questions the accepted wisdom of political theory. A formal conception of democracy believes in a regime of equal rights to all members of a society; taking them as individuals. In a society that abounds in social inequality, a regime of equal rights is bound to undermine the interests of minorities. At the same time, a society in which members act as a caste or a group rather than as individuals, creates a system of a permanent majority and a permanent minority. Ambedkar makes an interesting comment in this regard. He says that it does not matter whether power is held permanently in the hands of a single person, single class, or a communal majority group, it still amounts to dictatorship. Therefore, tyranny of the majority is as bad as that of any individual tyrant. He also makes another normative claim by saying that the communal minority is equal to the communal majority in a Democracy. This means a minority’s rights cannot be sacrificed for the greater interest of the majority. This principle echoes the Kantian dictum, that every one shall be treated as an end in himself and none shall be treated as a means to another’s ends. In this sense, a minority shall be treated as an end in itself. In such a case, how can minorities be protected in a democratic form of government? Particularly, when the minority is a distinct cultural group? Ambedkar goes on to ask: how to protect minorities who are distinctively marked but do not possess a unique culture? Since the essence of democracy is that those who rule represent the interests of the people; to ensure effective representation, instead of arguing for equality of rights and taking individuals as the
prime units, we need to deviate a bit by recognizing groups and give some group rights, without completely compromising on individual rights. In other words, a proper balance of group rights and individual rights is needed.

The next thing, Ambedkar argues is that in a hierarchical and differentiated setup, we need to move beyond an equality of rights argument and replace it with an argument supporting differential rights. Differential rights can also facilitate in breaking the cultural domination of some groups. They can assist in bringing about a culture that is conducive to minorities. This would be one of the important hypotheses of this work. Ambedkar provides sound theoretical arguments in defense of differential rights. He argues in order to ensure liberty to individuals, it is imperative to have equality; otherwise some will enjoy liberty at the cost of others. In order to ensure Equality, when there is so much of diversity in human nature and social inequality, there is a need to understand Equality in a more substantiative sense. Ambedkar concentrates, in particular on social inequality; while, supporting formal equality in case of differences in human capabilities that are natural. Human capabilities largely are affected by social circumstances; and these circumstances have strong sociological reasons. They do not just affect individuals, they also affect groups and differently. These groups can be classified along class, gender and caste lines. A system that is insensitive to their differences can turn out to be unjust. Different groups also have different social standing in society; a group with a high social standing has more access to resources (social, economic and cultural) and political power, which can be used to manipulate the system for its own advantages. Moreover, these advantages can be used for maintaining their domination over others. A large portion of Ambedkar's writing is addressed to this particular problem with a formal conception of Democracy. Democracy, in order to be true to its name and philosophy, must avoid unjust domination of any kind: a class over another; a group over another; majority over minority. In order to achieve this, it must recognize the social standing of groups in society; understand the kind of power relations that exist between groups; their history; and then take measures to protect groups who are in an underprivileged position. Ambedkar makes minority rights central to Democracy. By arguing that the weaker a minority the more its need for safeguards and positive measures to promote its interests,
he adopts a "Max-min" principle of social justice; which is familiar to us in the form of the more recent difference principle of John Rawls. In the Rawlsian formulation, a just distribution should adopt a principle where the greatest advantage goes to the least advantaged. In this sense, Democracy can be a vehicle for bringing about social change and furthering justice in society.

Differential rights can be hypothetically classified into positive and negative types. Rights that act as safeguards fall under the negative type, and rights that are given to augment a group's social standing, fall under the positive type. Ambedkar demands both types of rights for minorities. But, largely, his writing and political life consisted of demanding negative rights in the form of safeguards for Dalits. The demand for separate electorates falls under this category. They are meant to ensure a minimum representation of Dalits in legislature. They are according to Ambedkar an effective way representing minority groups. Ambedkar writes comprehensively, as to how separate electorates are an effective and authentic way of ensuring representation of minorities. Based on this understanding he criticizes reservation in elections granted to Dalits in the Poona pact. Whereas reservations in public services, Ambedkar considered mostly an enhancing measure, rather than negatively as safeguards, one of the arguments of this work is that, from an Ambedkarian standpoint, reservations in legislature are a fundamental compromise on the basic right to effective representation of minorities, in particularly of Dalits. Later in the work, we will see the arguments furnished by Ambedkar to defend his claim.

Ambedkar, like Gramsci, is a writer who wrote extensively on concrete issues. A major portion of his writing is dedicated to criticizing the politics of majority and minority in India. He also wrote on how the dominant groups used Nationalism as an ideology to promote their own interests, conveniently ignoring the interests of minorities. The biggest culprit according to him was the Congress Party. The Congress Party, which has been dominated by upper castes, portrays itself as representing the interests of the whole Indian population, which includes the minorities. But in fact, covertly, it pursues the interests of the interests of the Hindu majority, and within the Hindu majority the
dominant caste interests. Ambedkar was strongly against British colonialism in India - his early academic writings concentrated on this aspect; but he was equally critical of internal colonialism by the Hindu majority. To some extent, he blames the British for their unprincipled paternalist approach in addressing the problems of minorities. After the Poona Pact and his experience with reservations in elections, he was completely convinced that separate electorates were the only solution to the problem of Dalits as a minority. His last engagement with the British, in the form of requests and petitions, ended frustratingly with them not conceding to his request of declaring Dalits as a separate minority in Indian society and thereby granting them separate electorates. In this context we need to point out Ambedkar's persistent claim that Dalits are not part of Hindu society, and therefore are a minority in Indian society. Here, Ambedkar, apart from social and economic aspects, adds another important criterion for designating Dalits as a minority. He introduces the cultural argument by saying that culturally they do not belong to the Hindu community because they [Dalits] were never accepted as Hindus by the Hindus; and they [Dalits] never participated in the religious practices of the Hindus. He criticized the Congress for playing number politics by including Dalits in the Hindu fold. Apart from this, the Congress really had no true concern for Dalits. The Congress' ploy to assimilate Dalits in the Hindu fold was to deny them their legitimate rights in the form of separate electorates. Ambedkar condemns Gandhi in this regard.

Thus, Ambedkar considers Congress-led nationalism antithetical to minority interests. What then is Ambedkar's understanding of nationalism? Does he think that nationalism, as an ideology, is necessarily an instrument of the ruling classes? Can nationalism help in achieving social justice without hampering minority interests? Ambedkar's answer is in the affirmative. Ambedkar thinks that nationalism can provide the necessary solidarity that is needed to advance social justice. We can here notice a communitarian strain in Ambedkar's thought. It is communitarian because fraternity holds an important place, along with liberty and equality, in Ambedkar's thought. A society in order to progress towards achieving a socially just society, needs a great amount of solidarity among the members of society. It needs a common sense of belonging to a community. For this purpose, Ambedkar would like some amount of homogeneity between members of
society. Now, a question can emerge in the mind of the reader: Can differential rights and communitarian values go together? For Ambedkar they are not contradictory, because Ambedkar defends differential rights not on a permanent basis but on a temporary basis. The ultimate objective of differential rights is to integrate minorities into mainstream society, and to attain social and economic equality. Differential rights, for him, are meant to bridge social and cultural differences, but not to maintain them, as multiculturalists like I. M Young argue. However, it can be further argued that if social differences persist then differential rights are indispensable, from an Ambedkarian standpoint.

Ambedkar, being a practical man, asks the self-critical but important question: are differential rights sufficient to protect the interests of minority groups? Does the nature of society have any bearing on their effectiveness? In other words, can a community which has experienced a culture of domination in the form of caste system be changed just by granting reservation in legislature and public services? Ambedkar’s answer, as we will see later in the work, is a firm no. Ambedkar believes, a society should be conducive enough to uphold, not just differential rights but also rights in general. Based on this understanding, Ambedkar asks simple but pertinent questions: Will Indian society uphold constitutional morality? Whenever the rights of minority are violated, will the Indian society condemn it and react in an appropriate manner? Ambedkar’s reply is in the negative. Ambedkar blames Hindu religion as the chief culprit for creating and sustaining a hierarchical and unjust society. So what is the solution? Should Hindu religion be reformed by purging it of all its inequities? Should Hindu Religion be reinterpreted, as Gandhi does, to make it more egalitarian and accommodative? Ambedkar argues that Hinduism is so entrenched with inequality and contempt for lower groups there is no other way but of rejecting Hinduism completely. It must be replaced by an egalitarian religion: Buddhism. Buddhism can provide the moral domain that is necessary to protect the rights of citizens in society. But, it can be asked: how does one explain so much of violence and existence of social inequality in Buddhist societies? Ambedkar believes that, unlike Hinduism, equality is the fundamental doctrine of Buddhism. He takes great pains to explain what Buddhism is and stands for. In his version of Buddhism, there is no space for superstition and hierarchy. It is a religion which is committed to social justice,
rationality and ending (social) suffering. More importantly, it is a moral religion, which is committed to the right relation between man and man. This phrase the right relation between man and man can be understood as, trying to strive for achieving a society where no man is denied of his self-respect, not just by social institutions like caste but also by other members of society. In this sense, Buddhism shall occupy the cultural space of society to ensure minority or differential rights and rights in general.

To conclude, let us summarize what was said in this lengthy introduction to this work. This work posits five hypotheses. They are as follows:

1. Dalits are a unique minority in Indian society. Therefore, their relation to Culture is a very complex one.

2. Contemporary theories on Culture and cultural rights are inadequate in understanding and explaining their cultural predicament.

   They are inadequate in two different ways:

   a) They assume that every minority is a cultural minority. Yet, minorities can be the result of a culture. In this case: Dalits have been created by Hindu culture.

   b) The relationship between Culture and Power has not been properly understood by these theories.

3. From Ambedkar’s standpoint, the concept of minority needs to be expanded to include social and economic minorities. In other words, groups which are socially and economically weak in a particular society should be characterized as minorities; not just by numerical strength.

4. Differential rights and differential treatment is necessary to protect the interests of minorities (cultural and non-cultural), and to ensure equality of rights.
5. A cultural domain is necessary to both for the pursuit of equal rights and differential treatment. Buddhism will provide such a cultural domain.

Methodology

One of major concerns of this thesis is to engage with the broad theoretical suppositions regarding minorities and their relationship to culture; and, more particularly, with respect to Dalits as a minority. For this reason, literature that deals with theoretical debates on culture, minorities and power have been the main focus in this work. To understand the Dalit predicament as a minority, the thesis argues, we need to look in to one of the best articulations of this predicament; and this articulation is found in the work of B.R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar was a practical person. Though, he came from an academic background, with a certain expertise in Economics and the British Constitution, Ambedkar did not engage in abstract theoretical writing in relation to politics. In this sense, he is not a systemic writer. His ideas regarding politics and political values are scattered in various writings. Mostly, these writings engage in concrete, contemporary issues of prime importance in his day. Therefore, all published writings and speeches of Ambedkar have been referred to. This would include his debates in the constituent assembly. And to understand Ambedkar himself, additional secondary literature on Ambedkar has been referred to, though selectively. Since this is a work which attempts to locate Ambedkar's work within the broad theoretical debates related to Culture, Minorities, Justice and Rights, these debates have been discussed and a sound background reading of these debates has gone into the work. References to these works have been given only when it was considered necessary. Apart from this, works related to modern Indian history, particularly works related to the minority problem under the colonial period and the transfer of power have also be consulted. Last, but equally importantly, a background reading of sociological and anthropological works related to Dalits and Dalit situation has been an important part of this work. An important technical consideration to note is that through out the work, the term Dalit or Dalits has been used
in order to refer to what Ambedkar calls untouchables or depressed classes, with some exceptions where necessary.

Objectives

1. To problematize and theorize views on culture, rights and minority politics in relation to Dalits and their rights.

2. To understand Ambedkar's thought on minorities and, simultaneously, to understand the Dalit predicament based on Ambedkar's reading of it.

3. To relate and understand Ambedkar's ideas on minority rights with a body of concepts such as Justice, Rights, Equality, Democracy and Culture.

4. To trace, the sources of Ambedkar's thought, and to analyze him from both sympathetic and critical angles.

5. To locate Ambedkar in the contemporary theatrical debates relating to Democracy, Justice, Rights and Culture.

6. To explore the implication of Ambedkar's idea of minorities.

Scope of the Study

This study limits itself to studying Ambedkar's concern with the minority problem. It is, also, concerned with Dalits as a minority in Ambedkar's thought. It deals with the debate that regarding minorities in the later colonial period. It does not claim to deal with other minorities like Muslims, Christians or Tribals except when it is of general concern. Since it is a work which restricts itself to the normative political theory of Ambedkar's thought,
it does not go deeply into other areas that are of concern to him. For example, Ambedkar writes extensively describing the predicament of Dalits - the way untouchability operates and affects them. It also does not deal with the Ambedkar's anthropological, historical and economic works, which are not central to his thought on minorities. For example, we do not deal with his theories concerning the origin of caste. It also does not deal with modern debates regarding caste and situate Ambedkar's position in them, because this is not significant to understanding his thought on minorities.

Structure of the Work

The first chapter deals with the theoretical issues related to minorities and culture. Its principle aim is to provide a proper theoretical background to understand Ambedkar and the Dalit problematic. Here, we will deal with three broad liberal frameworks: Liberalism, Multiculturalism and Communitarianism. After a brief discussion about the concept of culture, we will map out the basic theoretical positions of these frameworks and then try to assess them. One of the main arguments in this chapter is that a Gramscian framework is more sensitive to culture and its relation to power. Next we move on to discussing the problems that arise in the above liberal theories when we take the Dalit predicament with culture into consideration. This chapter conclusively argues that the Dalit case throws up serious problems for liberal theories on culture and cultural rights, and finds that a Gramscian framework is more suitable to explain and understand the cultural domination of Dalits by the upper castes.

In the second chapter, we will encounter Ambedkar and an attempt has been made to read his thought by placing him in contemporary political theory. Here, our principle aim is to understand certain basic concepts and ideals that act as the building blocks of Ambedkar's thought. Some of these concepts work as heuristic devices to understand his conception of minority problem. A major section in this chapter is dedicated to explaining and understanding some of the technical aspects related to minorities, separate electorates and electoral processes. Here Ambedkar's critical understanding of majority
rule and his understanding of concept of minority are discussed. Ambedkar firmly argues that in India voting is always communal. By communal, here, Ambedkar means votes based on caste and religious lines: broadly on community lines. He declares that this is completely antithetical to democracy, because a communal agenda is pursued by sidelining real issues that are of concern to the people. More importantly, this communal voting creates a permanent majority and a permanent minority. And because of the permanency of these two categories the true political rule of the majority gets misused for communal ends. Apart from this, a powerful community can push its agenda by relegating minority interests. We deal with this problem in detail in this chapter. Ambedkar also attempts to find ways out of this quagmire of communal majority and minority. The solution in such a case is differential rights to groups that cannot get represented in the electoral process. Based on this he suggests separate electorates. He also talks of upper caste domination in the executive and judicial services. This makes the character of administration also communal. To counter this, Ambedkar believes reservations could provide a minimum presence to minorities in the system.

The next chapter titled “Nationalism and Minorites” attempts to present Ambedkar’s strong critical assessment of the way minority politics takes place in India. Here we discuss issues related to nationalism. Ambedkar’s criticism of upper caste nationalism led by the Congress is dealt with here. We also look at his understanding of the concepts of Nation, Nationality and Nationalism. His work “Pakistan and Partition of Indian” is a major contribution to these issues; hence, a lot of discussion surrounding the question of Pakistan and nationalism takes place in this chapter. Alternatively, our aim is to grasp his basic ideas which can be of further use to us in understanding his thought on the nation and its minorities. We also consider how the rights of minorities were sidelined by using the euphoria of nationalism; the politics behind denying separate electorates; and how the upper caste intelligentsia stigmatizes reservations in government services. We also discuss how Ambedkar defends reservations and how his defense of them is a part of his broader political philosophy of defending differential rights. Dalits and their minoriteness is also discussed throughout the chapter. Lastly, the chapter ends, by discussing
Ambedkar's role as a member of Constituent Assembly, and his actual achievements in the Assembly.

The fourth chapter reverts back to his critical normative understanding of Indian society. Here, we shall deal with the larger philosophical and political project of transforming societies that adopt a democratic form of government into democratically-minded societies. His central argument is that Democracy means a democratic society or a way of life rather than just a form of government. Moreover, only in a democratic society can a democratic form of government function effectively in action and in spirit. Based on this understanding, Ambedkar criticizes social reform as undertaken by the upper castes. In order to understand his idea of social reform in the Indian context, we first need to understand his critique of Indian society. Hence, a major portion of this chapter is dedicated to describing his critique of Indian society. He primarily blames Hinduism and its philosophy of graded inequality in the form of caste. Caste, for him, is the chief evil that needs to be purged out of Indian society. He writes at length to describe the connection between the Hindu sacred texts and caste practices by combining both his interpretation of Hindu religious texts and his sociological understanding of Indian society. Most importantly, unlike most scholars, he uses normative criteria to judge both the texts and their practices, stating what these normative criteria are before he begins his criticism. Hence, any social reform must first and foremost attack Caste and fight to eradicate it. Devoid of this a social reform was, and would be a sham. After his criticism of upper caste social reform, he proposes his own version of social reform. For him, a complete rejection of Hinduism and its values is the only solution. Hinduism had to be replaced by Buddhism. We discuss in the chapter how and why Buddhism stands as a better alternative in the eyes of Ambedkar. Buddhism, Ambedkar argues, has the moral and spiritual resources that can nourish a democratic society. We then move on to discussing the characteristics of a democratic society in Ambedkar's thought.

The last chapter, titled alternative, attempts to move away from Ambedkar and by maintaining a critical distance understand the Dalit predicament as it stands today. It is also an attempt to critically assess Ambedkar and the policies he pursued; and it tries to
argue that the reservation policies are caught up in problems that to some extent had been predicted by Ambedkar. Here, we begin by discussing the problem of exclusion of Dalits within governmental and bureaucratic structures; how they are turned into internal minorities as a result of upper caste politics of inclusion and exclusion. Dalits are minorities not just in bureaucratic structures but even in legislatures. Here, the lacuna between separate electorates and just reservation in legislatures, as argued by Ambedkar, are clearly visible - most Dalits are divided on party lines and are not able to come together for protecting the rights of Dalits. The chapter argues that the situation of Dalits has remained the same, with minor improvements. Atrocities on Dalits and violation of their basic rights are as much a reality as they were in Ambedkar’s life time. As we discussed, in the beginning of this introduction contempt of Dalits is as much a reality as it was fifty years ago. The issue of fragmentation of Dalits into various religious and spiritual sects is also discussed. This chapter tries to critically argue that this fragmentation is not necessarily a negative phenomenon, based on arguments put forth by I. M. Young that plurality is a fact of modern social movements and it can also be a good thing. From this standpoint, the chapter critically questions the homogenizing ideal that looms large in Ambedkar’s thought. And, further, tries to suggest that some kind of an overlapping consensus between all Dalits groups can be reached without their giving up their particularities. It conclude by saying that Ambedkar’s thought is crucially relevant in understanding the modern-day Dalit predicament; he was prescient about a lot of problems related to Dalits. Ambedkar’s vision of transforming Indian society by adopting Buddhism is still a desirable goal for all Dalits and possibly for all Indians.