Part of the task of feminist scholarship is to uncover patriarchal ideologies embedded in social discourse. For feminist historiography, a dilemma arises when this task entails the critique of a leader popularly celebrated as a champion of an oppressed group. This dilemma mires a gendered reading of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's social and political thought. B.R. Ambedkar, born an untouchable from the Mahar caste, dedicated his life to the political and social struggle against untouchability and caste. Today, he is one of the few nationalist leaders who is esteemed by both men and women, feminist and anti-caste activists. As a defender and advocate of Dalits, a community found in villages, towns and cities across India, Ambedkar is one of the few nationalist leaders who has, as Ramchandra Guha writes, "truly pan-Indian appeal."[1] While the feminist historian must contend with both the Dalit popular imagining of Ambedkar, an imagining that can potentially empower both men and women towards the practice of equality, and the continued marginalization of Dalits in India, he or she also faces an intellectual responsibility to assess Ambedkar's thoughts on women and gender relations through his own words. Such an engagement with Ambedkar's writings and speeches reveals his ambivalence towards Dalit women and his espousing of patriarchal gender relations similar to the dominant socio-religious reformist model. While Ambedkar does denounce the most apparent and infamous patriarchal practices of his time, namely sati, child marriage and enforced widowhood, his critique of patriarchy is restricted to upper caste customs and emerges only when it supports his critique of Brahmanism and caste.

[1] Ramchandra Guha, *An Anthropologist Among the Marxists and Other Essays* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001) 97.

In this essay, I will offer an analysis of the representations of gender relations in the writings and speeches of B.R. Ambedkar. The sources I interpret, from an anthropology seminar paper presented at Columbia University in 1916 to the formulation of oaths for conversion to Buddhism in 1956, span a period of forty years.[2] Despite the inconsistencies in thought that emerge given the time span of these writings, my analysis will suggest that Ambedkar's critique of patriarchy is both limited and strategic and that his prescriptions for Dalit women remain within the paradigm of nationalist-reformist ideals of respectability. I will highlight the tension between Ambedkar's critique of social hierarchy and his vision of a strong and respectable Dalit community as a political force, a vision that seemed to necessitate the marginalization of Dalit women. With the end of colonialism and the promulgation of the Indian Constitution, however, a subtle, but meaningful, change in thought about gender relations can be discerned in Ambedker's writings. I will suggest that this change may be linked to the establishment of democracy and a legal and political framework that reflected Ambedkar's commitment to the universalist ideals of equality and liberty. Ambedkar's discussions of gender relations after 1950, I argue, can be categorized as feminist in that they represent the ideals of a particular kind of political modernity, one rooted in respect for the individual as social agent and equality before the law.

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Since the publication of his first biography, Dhananjay Kheer's *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, in 1954, Ambedkar's life and thought has been a focus of study for historians, political scientists, scholars of religion and others; researchers, however, have

[2] I do not presume to have done an exhaustive study of Ambedkar's writings and speeches. This paper will offer a limited survey of his writings and will only point to some of the gendered aspects of Ambedkar's thought.

only recently begun to analyze Ambedker's ideas on gender.[3] Nearly all accounts of Ambedkar's work begin by recounting his early experiences of caste-based discrimination. Ahir narrates the humiliating experiences Ambedkar endured from his early days in primary school, where he was forced to sit outside the classroom and denied water, to his days working as a lawyer, harassed by his colleagues and also prohibited from drinking common water.[4] Ambedkar's time abroad in New York and London is also described as a crucial experience that imparted a critical perspective on conditions in India. As Ambedker himself recalls, "my five years of study in Europe and America had completely wiped out of my mind any consciousness that I was an untouchable and that an untouchable wherever he went in India was a problem to himself and others."[5] While these experiences are recounted as formative moments in the development of Ambedkar's cultural and political critique of caste, most accounts of him do not discuss his relations with his family. Brief mentions Ambedkar's long friendship with Fanny Fitzgerald, a British woman he first met during his stay in London, and his second marriage to Sharda Kabir, a Brahmin nurse, have begun to surface in biographical sketches.[6] The influence of the significant Dalit women in his life, his mother, who suffered an early death after giving birth to fourteen children, only seven of which

[3] Dhananjay Kheer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission* (Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1954). Two essays in Anu Rao, ed. *Caste and Gender* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003), "Dr. Ambedkar and the Empowerment of Women," by Eleanor Zelliot and "The Hindu Code Bill for the Liberation of Women," by Pratima Pardeshi, explicitly discuss Ambedkar's views on women, but there is still a dearth of scholarship on this matter. Recent work such as Christophe Jeffrelot, *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analyzing and Fighting Caste* (London: Hurst and Company, 2005) makes little mention of Ambedkar's view on gender. Valerian Rodrigues, ed. *Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar* (New Delhi: Oxford University press, 2002), a collection of Ambedkar's writings that covers the wide range of his thought, neglects the theme of women and gender.

[4] *See* D.C. Ahir, "Dr. Ambedkar's Pilgrimmage to Buddhism" in *Dr. Ambedkar, Buddhism and Social Change*, edited by A.K. Narian and D.C. Ahir (Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1994).

[5] *Quoted in* Nanak Chand Rattu, *Reminiscences and Remembrances of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar* (New Delhi: Falcon Books, 1995), 12.

[6] Gail Omvedt, *Ambedkar: Toward an Enlightened India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2004), 11.

survived, his paternal aunt or his first wife, Ramabai, however, has not received sufficient scholarly attention.

Gail Omvedt and Eleanor Zelliot have provided remarkable historical studies of the nineteenth century non-Brahman movements that influenced Ambedkar's anti-caste and social reform work.[7] These works demonstrate how the critique of Brahmanism formulated by Jotirao Phule and the Satyashodak Samaj provided an influential template for struggles against caste. Phule, along with his contemporaries and associate Tarabai Shinde, put forth powerful critiques of Brahmanism as patriarchy and advocated for the welfare of all women, upper and lower caste women. Interestingly, while Ambedkar's understanding of the intersection of caste and gender inequality seems to be influenced by Phule, several aspects of Ambedkar's ideas on women are less radical and contain patriarchal elements that Phule himself challenged during his life.[8]

Most studies of Ambedkar focus on his efforts to abolish untouchability and caste and his political work in both colonial and post-colonial India.[9] The Mahad Stayagraha in 1927, understood by Omvedt as "the foundation for the liberation struggle of Mahrastrian Dalits," was a movement for access to public space and resources; the demonstration transformed into a "cultural challenge" when protesters burned the Manusmriti.[10] From 1930-1935, Ambedkar organized the Nasik Satyagraha to gain entry to the Kalaram

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[7] *See* Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: The Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994); Gail Omvedt, *Dalit Visions: The Anti-Caste Movement and the Construction of an Indian Identity* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1995); Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1992).

[8] For example, while Ambedkar had conflicting ideas about government funding of education for untouchable girls, Phule, despite strong criticism from both family and community, established a school for untouchables girls in 1848.

[9] See, for example, Jeffrelot; Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Omveld, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*.

[10] Omvedlt, *Dalits and the Demoratic Revolution*, 152; Omvedlt, *Enlightened India*, 158. It is interesting to note that, given the large body of work focusing on the disputes between Ambedkar and Gandhi, Amededkar's use of the term "satyagraha" for his demonstration at Mahad is given relatively little attention. Ambedkar also displayed a picture of Gandhi during the protest.

temple, a movement that included many female activists. Ambedkar also worked to abolish the traditional responsibilities of the Mahar caste and organized a march of 25,000 Kunbi and Mahar peasant tenants against their Brahmin landlords in 1938. In her evaluation of these movements, Gail Omvedt argues that Ambedkar targeted issues of civil rights and thus diverged from the "focus on personal virtue," such as hygiene and vegetarianism, in Gandhi's Harijan Sevak Sangh.[11] I will argue, however, that a "focus on personal virtue," can be also be discerned in Ambedkar's prescriptions for Dalit women. While Ambedkar advocated for their participation in politics and public demonstrations, he is equally concerned with their habits, dress, and appearance.

Ambedkar held the first Depressed Class Conference in 1920. His emergence into politics followed his successful mobilization of a group of educated Mahar men and upper caste reformers. In 1926 he was nominated to the Legislative Council, where he first sponsored a bill for access to the water tank in Mahad. He also supported a bill for maternity leave for women, arguing that its expense should come from both the government and private employers. Discussions of Ambedkar's political efforts focus on his advocacy of separate electorates for the Depressed Classes and consequent dispute with Gandhi. The development of the Depressed Classes into a formidable political force was key to Ambedkar's vision of their advancement; the Poona Pact, which overturned the Communal Award and replaced separate electorates with reserved seats in the general electorate after Gandhi fasted in protest, was a disappointment and resulted in a lasting distrust for Gandhi. The clash with Gandhi has, in part, Jeffrelot argues, given Ambedkar

[11] Gail Omvedt, *Towards an Enlightened India*, 50.

a reputation of siding with the Britsh and thus being anti-nation.[12] Ramchandra Guha departs from most studies of Gandhi and Ambedkar and tries to "see their contributions as complimentary" arguing that boh Gandhi and Ambedkar can be considered heroes for the history of the nation and the emancipation of the dalits.[13] My reading of the dispute between Gandhi and Ambedkar will focus on a series of letters exchanged during the Communal Award negotiations and the ways in which Ambedkar challenged the patriarchal foundations of Gandhi's authority.

In 1936, after the obstacles encountered during the Nasik Satyagraha and the disappointments of the Poona Pact, Ambedkar announced that he "would not die a Hindu." Confrontations with caste Hindus and the ideology of Brahmanism led him to the realization that Hinduism itself had to be abandoned in order to both restore dignity and rights to the Untouchables and to forge nationalist solidarity. As Valarian Rodriguez writes, "one of Ambedkar's most important arguments against Hinduism was that caste and untouchability did not let Hindus act as a community."[14] Gauri Viswanathan argues that Ambedkar's renouncing of Hinduism and conversion of Buddhism should not be read a reaction to political obstacles, but rather as an attempt to formulate "alternative

[12] Jeffrelot, 2. Jeffrelot also argues that this has contributed to the relative dearth of scholarship in Ambedkar. The representation of Ambedkar as anti-nation is found in Arun Shourie's recent work. *See* Arun Shourie, *Worshiping False Gods: Ambedkar and the Facts which have been Erased* (New Delhu: ASA Publications, 1997). Shourie questions Ambedkar's role in drafting the Indian Constitution and argues that Ambedkar sympathized with the British and hindered the efforts of upper caste reformers. Both Jeffrelot and Guha offer scathing critiques of Shourie work and argue that while Ambedkar did oppose Congress, characterizing it as both capitalist and upper caste, his nationalist and anti-colonial credentials cannot be questioned. *See* Jefrelot and Guha. Nick Dirks argues that "the privileging of Gandhi as an emblem of nonpartisan feeling has, as its inverse, the demonization of Ambedkar as a purveyor of sectarian politics." *See* Dirks, 220. It seems the scholarship on Ambedkar has had to face the burden of this indictment and establish Ambedkar's nationalist and anti-colonial position.

[13] Guha, 100. Guha's engaging essay provides a thoughtful analysis of the overlaps between Gandhi and Ambedkar's thought. It seems that further work can be done on this topic. For example, comparisons can be made of Gandhi and Ambedkar's ideas on honor, shame, self-respect and rights; religion as a ethical basis for all politics; and even their use of language.

[14] Rodrigues, "Introduction," 25.

conceptions of nation and community" and "restore dalits an agency that untouchability had eroded."[15] Ambedkar searched for a religion that embraced the ideals of equality, liberty and fraternity. He critiqued aspects of Buddhism that contradicted his ethical commitments and even gave Buddhism, as Omvedt argues, a "'liberation theology' interpretation"[16] My analysis of Ambedkar's conversion will highlight the feminist aspects of his reformulation of Buddhism.

Scholars have also discerned a feminist concern with equality in Ambedkar's work on the Constitution and Hindu Code Bill.[17] Anu Rao argues that in addition to Ambedkar's challenge to caste within the realm of culture, "the political language of rights and representation that had come to dominate dalit struggles at this point rendered the language of law and constitutionalism an important site for advocating changes within the structures of caste and gender." [18]Ambedkar's attempt to provide legal equality for women in matters of divorce and inheritance and equal rights to all citizens indicate, as I will argue, Ambedkar's commitment to liberal ideals and democracy as not only a form of government but also a social relation.

While historians and political scientists of India have analyzed Ambedkar's ideas of caste, the "founding figures" of Indian anthropology, as Jeffrelot notes, such as M.N. Srinivas and Louis Dumont have largely neglected Ambedkar's understandings of the origin, regulation and maintenance of caste. Ambedkar's analysis of the practice and

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[15] Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press ,1998) 215, 232.
[16] Omvedlt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, 248.
[17] *See* T. Bharathi, "Ambedkar and the Uplift of Women," in *Ambedkar and Social Justice*, Vol. II (New Delhi: Director Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1992.); Pardeshi; and Nazeer H. Khan, "Ambedkar on Gender Inequality: Myth and Reality" in *Ambedkar on Federalism, Ethnicity and Gender Justice*, edited by Nazeer H. Khan and (New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publications, 2001).
[18] Anu Rao, "Introduction: Caste, Gender and Indian Feminism" in *Caste and Gender*, edited by Anu Rao (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003) 23-24.

ideology of caste emerges in various sources, including his histories of India. His histories, as Omvedt notes, demonstrate that caste has a history, a social origin, and thus also can have an end; they impart the critical idea "that the action of the oppressed and exploited could be effective in" accomplishing this end.[19] As Rodriguez writes, Ambedkar employed the "resources that history and culture offered for an emancipatory project but argues that they became effective only through the matrix of the present."[20] In my discussion of both Ambedkar's analysis of caste and his histories of India, I will discuss how gender relations are central to the regulation of caste and how he strategically uses the figure of the oppressed or empowered woman to develop his narrative of the struggles and revolutions in Indian history.

Ambedkar's histories and conversion to Buddhism also provide a vision of Indian identity that is not premised on Hinduism. Several scholars argue that this formulation makes Ambedkar especially relevant for Indians today.[21] Omvedlt also notes how Ambedkar influence can be discerned in the work of African Americans, the Burukumin, Japan's ex-untouchables, and Buddhists throughout Asia. [22] Ambedkar's legacy, however, seems to hold most practical relevance and symbolic power for dalits in India. As Omvedlt argues, Ambedkar has imparted to dalits today "the sense of having been exploited and oppressed builders of the great Indian civilizations and of emerging out of

[19] Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, 22. See B.R. Ambedkar, *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables?* (New Delhi: Amrit Books, 1948); B.R. Ambedkar, *Who Were the Shudras: How They Came to be the Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society* (Bombay: Tackder and Co, 1946); B.R. Ambedkar, "Revolution and Counter Revolution in Ancient India," in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 4,* edited by Vasant Moon (Mumbai: Education Department, Government of Maharastra, 1987).
[20] Rodrigues, 2.
[21] Jeffrrelot also discusses how the Hindu right has co-opted Ambedkar. *See* Jeffrelot, 145.
[22] See Omvedt, *Enlighted India*.

centuries of darkness to claim their heritage."[23] Ambedkar's significance as a hero for Dalits and as a nationalist leader has grown among Dalits and other disadvantaged groups in India. His ideas continue provide a "regime of rights and self-worth" and Ambedkar as a historical figure remains a powerful symbol for these groups.[24]

While anthropological and historical work has examined the intersection of caste and gender social systems, these works seem to only focus on the constraints of caste regulation on upper caste women and neglect the conditions facing lower caste women.[25] M.N. Srinivas suggests that the cultures of the lower castes embodied a matriarchal principle that afforded women more liberty and only with processes of "sanskritization," did lower caste women become victim to patriarchal oppression. [26] Scholarship on the non-Brahman movement in Maharastra, most notably by Rosalind O'Hanlon, Uma Chakravarti and Gail Omvedt, has discussed the incorporation of gender and caste critiques into Jotirao Phule, Tarabai Shinde and Pandita Ramabai's writings and work; but these accounts also center around the plight of the upper caste woman.[27] Andre Beteille, in a comparison of race and caste through gender, demonstrates that both systems of race and caste are marked by sexual violence towards women on the lowest echelons of the hierarchy by men on the highest and a preoccupation with the purity of

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[23] Omvedt. *Dalit and Democratic Revlution*, 9.
[24] Rodrigues, 37.
[25] *See*, for example, Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi, *Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1986). Even in more recent woks, such as Dirk's *Castes of Mind*, statements on the intersection of caste and gender inequality refer only to customs facing upper caste women. See Dirks, 17, 232.
[26] *See* M.N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1995).
[27] *See* Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth Century Western India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Uma Chakravarti, "Reconceptualising Gender: Phule, Brahmanism and Brahmanical Patriarchy," in *Gender and Nation* (Guragon: Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Newray Inc, 2001); Gail Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: the Non-Brahmin Movement in Western India: 1873-1930*. Bombay: Scientific Socialists Education Trust, 1976.

women on the highest strata.[28] Recent scholarship, such as the essays in *Caste and Gender*, has continued to challenge the analytic separation of caste and gender inequality. These critiques contest both feminist and anti-caste social understandings for marginalizing Dalit women and have mounted a powerful critique of mainstream Indian feminism. Rao, Pardeshi, Moon and Pawar, and Zelliot suggest that Ambedkar's encouragement of Dalit women's political participation and advocacy for women's legal rights constitute his critique and challenge to patriarchical ideologies and practices.[29] Gabrielle Dietrich, however, argues that "unfortunately, Ambedkar, though aware of women's position in general, has not integrated his analysis of caste with an analysis of patriarchy. He confines himself to general observation."[30] In the discussion that follows, I will extend Dietrich's assessment and attempt to demonstrate that not only is Ambedkar's critique of patriarchy instrumentally applied to his larger project of the critique of caste and Hinduism, but that Ambedkar also prescribes patriarchal norms of domesticity and respectability for Dalit women.

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Ambedkar's challenge to patriarchal relations is limited to those social relations that either hinder the development of an autonomous Dalit political community or reinforce his critique of caste and untouchability. Patriarchy should not be conceived of as only control over women but should also encompass a wide range of relations between

[28] Andre Beteille, "Race, Caste, and Gender," *Man*, 25:3 (Sept. 1990) 489- 504.
[29] *See* Rao; Pardeshi, Zelliot; Meenaski Moon and Urmila Pawar "We Made History Too: Women in the Early Untouchable Liberation Movement) in *Caste and Gender*, edited by Anu Rao (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003).
[30] Gabrielle Dietrich, "Dalit Movements and Women's Movements" in *Caste and Gender*, edited by Anu Rao (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003). 74.

men that emerge around the authority of men older men.[31] Patriarchal privilege underlies not only the marginalization of women by men, but also the authority that older men command over younger men.

Ambedkar confronts and challenges patriarchal norms in his discussions with Gandhi and specifically, in his attempt to wrestle the authority to represent the Depressed Classes from Gandhi. In a speech at the Minorities Committee on November 13, 1931, Gandhi, after reasoning that separate electorates for the Depressed Classes was the most "unkindest cut of all," argues that if there were an election, he rather than Ambedkar, would receive the majority of Depressed Class votes.[32] Gandhi at this time has already been given the appellation "Bapu" and his repeated references to the "child-like faith" of the masses of India in him further identify as him a father figure. "I claim myself, in my own person," he asserts, "to represent the vast majority of Untouchables." He dismisses Ambedkar's role of spokesperson of the Depressed Classes, representing him as someone whose "bitter experiences" has distorted his judgment and reason; "it is not a proper claim," Gandhi states, "which is registered by Dr. Ambedkar when he seeks to speak to for the whole of the Untouchables of India."

In speeches countering Ambedkar's claims and in letters to Ambedkar, Gandhi repeatedly highlights his years of experience contemplating and working on Dalit issues. In one letter to Ambedkar, Gandhi writes, "I understand that you have got some grievances against me and the Congress. I may tell you that I have been thinking over the

[31] This conception of patriarchy was elaborated by Professor Sumathi Ramaswamy in a seminar on Gender and Sexuality in India.
[32] "Extract from Mr. Gandhi's Speech at the Minority Committee, November 13, 1931," *Correspondence with Gandhi – Papers regarding fast*, British Library, India Office Record.

problem of Untouchables ever since my school days – when you were not even born."[33] Gandhi here seems to evoking, in part, the reverence and submission older men mandate from younger men in a patriarchal system. He employs his seniority to establish his authority over Ambedkar and on issues affecting Untouchables. Ambedkar, however, identifies and challenges the premise of Gandhi's authority. "It is true, Mahatmaji," Ambedkar responds, "that you started to think about the problem of Untouchables before I was born. All older and eldery persons always like to emphasize the point of age."[34] Ambedkar then proceeds to question Congress' commitment to the abolition of Untouchability and concludes that Untouchables "believe in self-help and self-respect. We are not prepared to have faith in great leaders or Mahatmas." With this, Ambedkar argues for the agency of the untouchables in caste reform and simultaneously invalidates the patriarchal foundations of his authority.

Gandhi later argues that Ambedkar's plan for achieving equality for Untouchables "arrest[s] the marvelous work of the Hindu reformers."[35] Ambedkar, he notes, fails to recognize "how dependent they [the depressed Classes] are on them ["the so-called caste Hindus]."[36] Ambedkar denounces the paternalism Gandhi's work on caste reform. In order for Ambedkar to become the spokesperson of the Depressed Classes in both the realm of colonial politics and the imagination of Indians, Gandhi's authority had to be delegitimized. Ambedkar does this by invalidating his patriarchal privilege and

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[33] "Dr. Ambedkar – Mahatma Gandhi Meetings, August 14th 1931" in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part 1*, edited by Hari Narake, N.G. Kambedle, et al. (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Publication Committee, Government of Maharastra, 2003) 52.
[34] Ibid, 53.
[35] "Gandhi's letter to P.M. Ramsay McDonald, September , 1932,",*Correspondance with Gandhi – Papers Regarding Fast*, in British Library, India Office Records.
[36] "Letter to Sir Samuel Hoare, Yerada Central Prison, March 11, 1932," *Correspondence with Gandhi – Papers Regarding Fast*, in British Library, India Office Records.

paternalist approach and by arguing for the importance of experience in the ability and power to represent others. In this way, he rejects paternalistic reform efforts and empowers Dalits to both interpret their situation on their own terms and employ their own agency in the eradication of caste.

Ambedkar's critique of the patriarchy extends beyond the arena of elite male politics and can also be found in his analysis of sati, child marriage and enforced widowhood, three of the most fervently debated social practices in the nineteenth century. These practices, however, were largely confined to the upper-caste. Ambedkar's critique of patriarchy thus relates primarily to upper caste women and neglects the situation of lower caste women. In Ambedkar's analysis, all three practices function to maintain the caste system. Caste is perpetuated through preservation of endogamy and is thus dependent on the regulation of female sexuality and the female population. It requires, as Ambedkar writes, "equality in numbers of men and women"; "surplus" men or women "become a problem because they can marry out and thus threaten the caste."[37] Whereas the problem of surplus women can be resolved through sati or enforced widowhood, the spiritual and economic well-being of the caste precludes surplus men from being either killed or forced into celibacy.[38] Ambedkar argues that the protection of "surplus" men arises from the operation of patriarchy: "man as compared with woman has had the upper hand…With this traditional superiority of man over woman his wishes have always been consulted. Woman, on the other hand, had been an easy prey to all kinds of iniquitous

[37] B. R. Ambedkar, "Caste in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development" in K.L. Chanchrek, ed, associate editors Saroj Pradad, Rajesh Kumar, *Social Justice and Political Safeguards for Depressed Classes: Dr. B.R. Ambedkar* (New Delhi: Shree Publishing House, 1991), 7.

[38] Ambedkar notes that "it is in the interest of the caste to keep him as Grahastha (one who raises a family)" but provides no analysis of the importance of women's domestic labor for the caste. This omission is particularly glaring since enforced widowhood, Anu Rao argues, enables the exploitation of a women's domestic labor and thus also adds to the material wellbeing of the caste.

injunctions, religious, social or economic. But man as the maker of these injunctions is most often above them."[39] The position of men within the caste allows them to remarry, but the structure of caste requires that the bride come from "the ranks of those not yet marriageable in order to tie him down to the group." The maintenance of caste, in Ambedkar's analysis, thus also explains the custom of child marriage.

In Ambedkar's analysis, the relationship of gender inequality to caste is functional; gender inequality is not analyzed on its own and is subsumed by the system of caste. Caste necessitates the regulation of women and the patriarchal practices he discusses; sati, enforced widowhood and child marriage are the "means" of caste regulation. Ambedkar notes that a wide range of "ideals" centering on a wife's devotion to her husband were created to rationalize these customs. As he writes, "the very fact that these customs were so highly eulogized proves that they needed eulogy for their prevalence"; the ideology of pativrata enables practices which "must have been so abominable and shocking to the moral sense of the unsophisticated that they needed a great deal of sweetening."[40] Pativrata, in Ambedkar's analysis, is thus also an element in the regulation of caste.

Ambedkar's critique of these patriarchal customs and ideologies seems largely strategic: by linking caste with the practices that were associated in both the colonial and reformist imagination with the backwardness of Indian civilization, Ambedkar is able to identify caste as the historical point of origin of India's decay and the most significant obstacle to social reform and India's advancement. As Gabrielle Dietrich argues, "while he [Ambedkar] sees a connection between social evils like sati, child marriage, ban on

[39] "Caste in India," 8.
[40] Ibid, 11.

widow remarriage, caste and untouchability, his occupation is clearly with untouchability and caste."[41]

Through his analysis of sati, child marriage and enforced widowhood, Ambedkar is also able to mount a critique of social reform movements in India. In the *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar distinguishes between social reform that "in the sense of the reform of the Hindu Family and social reform in the sense of the reorganization and reconstruction of the Hindu Society."[42] While the former relates to "widow remarriage, child marriage etc," the latter "relates to the abolition of the Caste system." He faults the social reform movement in India for only targeting the former. His own analysis of these practices demonstrates the connection between the two types of reform and seems to suggest that comprehensive social reform cannot occur without the abolition of caste.[43] Dirks argues that nineteenth century reform movements, through their focus on "Brahmanic practices," simultaneously "worked to assert the primary importance of Brahmin customs for the definition of the Hindu Community."[44] Ambedkar seems aware of this and its influence on lower castes. He writes that "the status of caste in the Hindu society varies directly with the extent of the observances of the customs of sati, enforced widowhood and girl marriage."[45] At a time when, as Zelliot notes, "other castes were 'sanskritizing' and adopting such older Brahmanical practices as child marriage and

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[41] Dietrich, 74.
[42] Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste with a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi* (Nagpur: Samata Prakashan, 2004), 27.
[43] Uma Chakravarti examines how Jotirao Phule, Pandita Ramabai and Tarabai Shinde offered critiques of "the intimate connection between caste and gender codes" evidenced in issues of enforced widowhood. *See* Uma Chakravarti "Reconceptualising Gender," 273. In his assessment of 19th century social reform, Nick Dirks argues that "in some way caste was an extension of the 'woman's question,' given the extent to which caste values – in particular upper caste values – were implicated in the issues that were targeted by social reformers concerning the treatment of women, such as sati, widow remarriage, and the age of consent." *See* Dirks, 232.
[44] Dirks, 256.
[45] Ambedkar, "Caste in India,"18.

prohibition of widow remarriage," Ambedkar did not advocate the assumption of these customs and vehemently opposed them.[46] While a critique of patriarchy, albeit focused on the upper caste systems, can be discerned in this, it also indicates Ambedkar's rejection of the construction and definition of a majoritarian community based on Brahmanic practices.

Ambedkar, as Sharmila Rage notes, identifies "caste ideology" as the "very basis of the regulation and organization of women's sexuality."[47] Intermarriage, the "fusion of blood" that "can alone create the feeling of being kith and kin," thus would not only "serve as the solvent of caste," but would also liberalize traditional sexual economies. [48] While Ambedkar's prescription of intermarriage could be seen as another aspect of his critique of patriarchy, his discussions do not convey a challenge to patriarchal control of women's sexuality. Here too not only is Ambedkar preoccupied with caste, but it seems that his advocacy of intermarriage is, in part, to rectify the inequality between lower caste men and upper caste men in their access to women. He writes that Manu mandated "each class to marry within his class" and was "particularly careful not to allow intermarriage to do harm to his principle of inequality among the masses"; intermarriage was allowed only when a man marries "a woman from any class below him."[49] A lower caste man cannot marry a woman from a higher caste and notes in his history of ancient India that under Brahmanism, a Shudra could be charged with adultery and put to death for

[46] Zellliot, "Dr. Ambedkar and the Empowerment of Women," 206.
[47] Sharmila Rage, "A Dalit Woman's Standpoint," in *Caste and Gender*, edited by Anu Rao (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003) 94-95.
[48] *Annihilation of Caste*, 59, 60.
[49] B.R Ambedkar, in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 3,* edited by Vasant Moon (Mumbai: Education Department, Government of Maharastra, 1987) 25.

marrying a higher caste woman.[50] Ambedkar seems to be critiquing how caste restricts a man's freedom to select his own bride; he does not seem to be challenging patriarchal control over women's sexuality but rather its control of men's access to women.

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Ambedkar's contestation of patriarchal ideologies and practices is thus largely limited to those that affect lower caste men and upper caste women. His analysis of the intersection between caste and gender inequality does not fully extend to the situation of dalit women. While Ambedkar organized conferences for depressed class women and encouraged their literacy and political participation, a patriarchal and paternalistic approach to gender reform pervades his discussion of Dalit women.[51] Furthermore, Ambedkar's writings suggest that the assertions and empowerment of Dalit women could potentially threaten the wellbeing and strength of the Dalit community as a socially and politically formidable force.

A connection between the empowerment of women and emasculation of men emerges in not only Ambedkar's thoughts on Dalit women, but also in his critique of Hinduism. In his discussion of Hindu goddesses, he argues that whereas Vedic Goddesses "were worshipped only because they were the wives of Gods," Puranic Goddesses are worshipped "in their own right" because they "went to the battlefield and

[50] B.R. Ambedkar, "The Woman and the Counter Revolution" in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 3,* edited by Vasant Moon (Mumbai: Education Department, Government of Maharastra, 1987) 310

[51] For example, Ambedkar's support for women's participation in the anti-caste movement in evident in the following statement: "I am a great believer in Women's organization. I know what they can do to improve the condition of society if they are convinced…Ever since I began to work among the Depressed Classes, I made it a point to carry women along with men. " B.R. Ambedkar, "Address to Second Session of the All-India Depressed Classes Women's Conference, July 20, 1942, Nagpur," in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part 3,* edited by Hare Narake, Dr. M.L.Kasare, et al. (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Materials Publication Committee, Government of Maharastra, 2003) 282.

performed great heroic deeds."[52] This he argues, made the Gods "a set of miserable cowards." The strength of the Goddesses dilutes the strength of the Gods and emasculates them. As Ambedkar writes, "it seems that the Gods could not defend themselves against the Asuras and had to beg of their wives to come to the rescue…How can such cowardly Gods have any prowess?"[53] The "doctrine of Sakti," Ambedkar continues, is an "absurdity." Ambedkar not only dismisses the possibility that a female principle of power could be enabling, but even suggests that strong Goddesses and emasculated Gods is a perversion that has deluded and weakened their worshippers.

This idea is echoed in his assessment of the educational needs of the Dalit community. In a speech delivered in 1956, Ambedkar recalls that after noticing the large sum of money the colonial government invested in Hindu and Muslim education at Benaras Hindu University and Aligarh University, he asked the Viceroy to support education for the Depressed Classes. "The Europeans," he recollects, "were very sympathetic. They accepted my proposal. The problem was on which item the money should be spent."[54] The government allocated funds for the education, including boarding, of Depressed Class girls. Ambedkar regarded this allocation as both insufficient and contrary to his goals: "If our girls are provided education and made educated, where at home, is the material to cook various types of dishes? What is the end result of their education? The government spent the money on their heads and withheld the amount of education." Ambedkar approached the Viceroy again and explained that

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[52] B.R. Ambedkar, "Riddles in Hinduism: An Exposition to Enlighten the Masses," in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 4,* edited by Vasant Moon (Mumbai: Education Department, Government of Maharastra, 1987) 99.
[53] Ibid, 107.
[54] B.R. Ambedkar, "Speech on Occassion of Conversion, October 15, 1956," in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part 3,* edited by Hare Narake, Dr. M.L.Kasare, et al. (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Materials Publication Committee, Government of Maharastra, 2003), 538.

he had envisioned funding on education to produce men like himself, men whose "learning is so great" that they could "sit on the pinnacle of the palace." Ambedkar argues that from such a position, "one can make overall surveillance" and if the Depressed classes are "to be protected, then sharp eyed men are to be created." The Viceroy agreed and "sixteen men were sent to England for higher education," but, as Ambedkar notes, "just as some earthen pots are half-baked and some baked, of those sixteen, some are half-baked and some are baked." The funds lost on the "half-baked" men are "a different matter," but funds lost to the education of girls are controversial enough to be included in his speech. Ambedkar's evaluation of the community's educational needs imparts his vision of a strong community led and supported by strong male leaders. Women's roles are limited to those as wives and mothers; any form of empowerment that would detract from their nurturing and nourishing the community's men could potentially be subversive. Ambedkar here suggests that women's education would thus disrupt their performance of domestic labor; women's education would be problem if it came at the expense of men's or of it interfered with their roles as caregivers of the men of the community.

Ambedkar also suggests that women's role in fashioning a politically and socially formidable Dalit community comes through their performance of dominant codes of respectability. In speeches to or about dalit women during the colonial period, Ambedkar espouses the language of community rather than the individual. He remains vigilant against women subverting his vision of dalit empowerment and instructs women to assume middle class norms of domesticity and respectability. In Ambedkar's discussions, the behavior of women and gender relations within the dalit community index the

community as a whole. He is thus attentive to their activities and reputation and while he endorses certain modes of reform, he also marginalizes and ostracizes sectors of the dalit community, namely, the Mahar prostitutes in Bombay.

"Self-respect," Ambedkar asserts, "is a most vital factor in life."[55] Self-respect is central to Ambedkar's vision of empowerment, but it seems that this concept contains two separate ideas. One aspect relates to personal dignity, a self-assertion of equality and a counterpoint to a sense of inferiority, and the other to honor, or the embodiment of the qualities that confer a sense of equality and respect through their social signification. Ambedkar's insistence on self-respect as a socially and politically transformative identity thus also includes a coercive directive to women to assume the practices deemed respectable by more socially and politically powerful communities.

For example, while Ambedkar opposes the mimicking of upper-caste customs such as enforced widowhood, he instructs Dalit women to dress like upper-caste women. Ambedkar views the silver jewelry and short saris commonly adorned by Mahar women as marks of their subjugation and advises them to appear like upper-caste women. While Pratima Pardeshi argues that this does not convey Ambedkar's endorsement for the "brahmanisation of dalit women," but rather indicates that "Dr. Ambedkar saw the question of the dalit woman's identity of self-respect as crucial to social reform and to the revolutionary struggle."[56] As Pardeshi suggests, a crucial site of empowerment emerges from the rejection the dress codes enforced by caste. However, while Ambedkar asserts Dalit women's equality with upper-caste women and encourages Dalit women, through

[55] B.R.Ambedkar, "Presidential Address to Ratnagiri District Bahishkrit Parishad," in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part 3,* edited by Hare Narake, Dr. M.L.Kasare, et al. (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Materials Publication Committee, Government of Maharastra, 2003), 10.
[56] Pardeshi, 352-353.

their dress, to defy caste inequality, "self-respect" is here earned not only through this assertion, but also by embodying an upper- caste habitus. The project of social reform thus also depends on the recasting of Dalit women's identities to fit the criteria of what constituted respectable among the upper-castes.

Ambedkar marginalized Dalit women whose activities contradicted his vision of a self-respecting and respectable community. For example, he found the work of Mahar prostitutes in Bombay so shameful that he refused to integrate them into his movement. Ambedkar's rejection of Mahar prostitutes reveals his privileging of honor above rights. In a meeting in 1936, Ambedkar demands that the prostitutes abandon their "disgraceful life."[57] He asserts that "the Mahar women of Kamathipura are a shame to the community"; "unless you are prepared to change your ways," he announces, "we shall have no use for you. There are only two ways open to you: either you remain where you are and continue to be depressed and shunned, or you give up your disgraceful profession and come with us." In Gail Omvedt's recounting of this incident, she notes that the prostitutes had hoped that Ambedkar would use his stature to protect them from police harassment. Ambedkar's refusal conveys his disregard for the safety of the women. Prostitutes sully the reputation of the community and Ambedkar, despite his commitment to equality, individualism and liberty, privileges the honor of the community over wellbeing of some of its members. Ambedkar ignores the structural material conditions facing the women and similarly ignores the potential exploitation of their sexual labor by the police. Omvedlt notes that Ambedkar received criticism from other "caste reformers…for ignoring the severe economic constraints that drove women to this

[57] Ambedkar, "Speech at Damodr Thakersey Hall, Bombay, June 16, 1936," in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part 3,* edited by Hare Narake, Dr. M.L.Kasare, et al. (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Materials Publication Committee, Government of Maharastra, 2003) 150.

profession."[58] Omvedlt argues that Ambedkar's position indicates his advocacy of "self-respect over economic constraints"; by asserting the prostitutes "ability to choose and act," Ambedkar, "refused to see the women simply as victims."[59]While Ambedkar does highlight the prostitutes agency, he also represents them as a source of "shame." Ambedkar casts them as pariahs and unequivocally posits that they detract from the honor of the community.[60]

In his speech to the Mahar prostitutes, Ambedkar directs them to "marry and settle down to normal domestic life as women of other classes do."[61] Marriage, in the form that exists among other classes, would restore both the prostitutes and the community's honor. The paternalism and advocacy of patriarchal gender norms in these directives are echoed in Ambedkar's 1942 speech to the Second Session of the All-India Depressed Classes Women's Conference in 1942. Ambedkar speaks to the conference attendees as mothers, as the custodians of the community, and instructs them on how to perform their domestic life:

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[58] Omvedt, *Enlightened India*, 64.

[59] Ibid. Interestingly, dalit women, unlike upper caste women, are rarely represented as victims in Ambedkar's accounts; they are usually only cast as the objects of reform. When they are represented as victims, it is usually to bring attention to the social and political marginalization of the dalits in India. For example, see B.R. Ambedkar, "Letter to the Editor of Times of India, March 19, 1938," in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part 1,* edited by Hare Narake, Dr. M.L.Kasare, et al. (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Materials Publication Committee, Government of Maharastra, 2003), 256. Ambedkar discusses the release of a man who raped a fourteen year old girl from the depressed classes. Noting the lack of "fair play and justice," in the parole of her attacker, Ambedkar writes "We are destined to be a minority. We can only criticize. We can never hope to control."

[60] Ambedkar repeatedly uses the figure of the prostitute in metaphors and analogies in his writings and speeches. For example, see B.R. Ambedkar, "Speech at a Public Meeting in Mazgaon, Bombay, Feb. 1933" in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part 3,* edited by Hare Narake, Dr. M.L.Kasare, et al. (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Materials Publication Committee, Government of Maharastra, 2003) 87, or in an interview with a journalist recalled in "Speech on Occasion of Conversion" 535. The prostitute symbolizes a woman who lacks virtue and self-respect and possesses an "immoral character." Given the large number of Dalit prostitutes in Bombay, his choice of language suggests not only their marginalization in Ambedkar's movement, but also the degree to which Ambedkar distances himself from them in public representation of the Dalit movement.

[61] Ambedkar, "Speech at Damodr Thakersey Hall, Bombay, June 16, 1936," in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part 3,* edited by Hare Narake, Dr. M.L.Kasare, et al. (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Materials Publication Committee, Government of Maharastra, 2003) , 150.

> "Learn to be clean; keep free from all vices. Give education to your children. Instill ambition in them. Inculcate on their minds that they are destined to be great. Remove from them all inferiority complex. Don't be in a hurry to marry: marriage is a liability. You should not impose it on your children unless financially they are able to meet the liabilities arising from marriage. Those who will marry will bear in mind that to have too many children is a crime. That Parental duty lies in giving each child a better start than its parents had. Above all, let each girl who marries stand up to her husband, claim to be her husband's friend and equal and refuse to be his slave. I am sure if you follow this advice you will bring honour and glory to yourselves and to the Depressed Classes."[62]

Ambedkar seems to espouse the model of domesticity and respectability associated with the "new woman." The 'new woman,' the model of proper femininity, formulated through late nineteenth-century nationalist and social reform movements, was educated, financially prudent, modest, and hygienic; she indexed both the respectability and modernity of the community. [63] Influenced by Victorian gender ideals, the companionate model of marital relations, one in which the wife is both the partner and helpmate of her husband, provided the paradigm for relations within marriage for the new woman. The

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[62] B.R. Ambedkar, "Address to Second Session of the All-India Depressed Class Women's Conference," 282.

[63] This is the description of the social reform and nationalist movement's reformulation of women's gender roles discussed by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, "Recasting Women: An Introduction," in *Reacasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, edited by KumKum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, "Introduction, in *Women Writing in India, 600 BC to the Present, Vol. I*, edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (New York: The Feminist press at the CUNY, 1991); and Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). Recent scholarship, however, has highlighted alternative visions of gender relations espoused by nineteenth century reform movements. For example, Sanjay Joshi argues that in North India reformers were opposed to the companionate model of gender relations and advocated instead a reiteration of pativrata and the roles outlined for women in the Manusmriti. *See* Sanjay Joshi. *Fractured Modernity: Making of a Middle Class in Colonial North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

'new woman,' as Partha Chatterjee writes, "was subjected to a new patriarchy"[64] It is this new vision of gender relations, a paradigm of both modernity and respectability forged for and by elite sectors in colonial society, that Ambedkar espouses for dalits.

The new woman is identified not only through her difference from the Westernized woman, as Chatterjee argues, but also from the lower class and caste. As Tharu and Lalita discuss, "increasingly over the nineteenth century, the respectability of women from the emerging middle classes was being defined in counterpoint to the 'crude and licentious' behavior of lower class women."[65] Among the lower caste figures, popularly represented were "maidservants, washer women, barbers, peddlers, procuresses, prostitutes"; "it was precisely this degenerate condition of women" Chatterjee argues, "that nationalism claimed it would reform, and it was through these contrasts that the new woman of nationalist ideology was accorded a status of cultural superiority to the Westernized woman…as well as to the common woman of the lower classes."[66] This association, with it denigration of lower class and caste women, becomes particularly problematic for the lower class or caste leader attempting to forge a formidable and honorable social and political community. Ambedkar seems to be accepting the nationalist signification of the new woman; he urges the depressed classes to assume the gender roles and relations of the new woman and new patriarchy. Ambedkar does not challenge the nationalist and reformist paradigm of respectability and domesticity; rather, he demands that dalit women embody them. In his imagining, a dalit community socially and politically equal to the upper caste and elite sectors of society would require the lower caste woman to refashion herself as a new women.

[64] Chatterjee, 127.
[65] Tharu and Lalita, 8.
[66] Chatterjee, 127.

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Ambedkar's discussions of gender after independence signal a shift from a focus on respectability to one on rights. While his earlier discussions contain instrumental critiques of upper-caste patriarchy and paternalistic directives for the domestic reform of Dalit women lives, Ambedkar's work on the Constitution of India and the Hindu Code Bill impars a commitment to women's legal and political equality as citizens of India. He rewrites prevailing laws to reflect his respect for the individual and his commitment to equality and liberty. In this way, as Pratima Pardeshi writes, Ambedkar undoes Manu's "caste-based and patriarchal law" and provides India with a new template for social relations, one based on "fraternity," which, Ambedkar argues, "is only another name for democracy."[67] Ambedkar, however, feared that the legal principles of liberalism and egalitarianism would not be sufficient to combat the deeply ingrained sexism and casteism in Indian society. He feared, as Gauri Viswanathan argues, that secular differentiation" in India could be "consistent with rather than an alternative to a social philosophy based on hierarchy."[68] Thus, while Ambedkar remains dedicated to the individualistic and universalist principles of equality, liberty and fraternity, he maintains committed to community identity as a site of empowerment.[69] This community identity is constructed and performed through conversion to Buddhism and can be seen to impart a feminist worldview to its members.

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[67] Pardeshi, 494; *Annihilation of Caste*, 57.
[68] Viswanathan, 215.
[69] In an All-India Radio broadcast on October 3, 1945, Ambedkar asserts that his "social philosophy may be said to be enshrined in three words: Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity." He does not trace the genealogy of these terms to the French Revolution, but rather, cites Buddhism as his influence. "My philosophy," he continues, "has roots in religion and not in political science. I have derived them from the teachings of my master, the Buddha." *See* B.R. Ambedkar, "All-India Radio Broadcast, October 3, 1945" in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part 3,* edited by Hare Narake, Dr. M.L.Kasare, et al. (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Materials Publication Committee, Government of Maharastra, 2003).

Ambedkar's frustrations with the secular state in enacting equality grew with the difficulty of getting the Hindu Code Bill passed. After years of championing the bill and participating in its debate, Ambedkar resigned from Nehru's Cabinet on September 25, 1951, noting that he only stayed on in Nehru's government despite his differences in the hope that he could get the bill passed. Ambedkar argued that the bill was intended to give "the widow, the daughter, the widow of the pre-deceased son…the same rank as the son in the matter of inheritance. In addition to that, the daughter also is given a share of her father's property; her share is prescribed as half of that of her son."[70] In this way, the bill strives rectify the ideology of son preference informing gender inequity in Hindu culture; in addition, by affording widows and daughters equal status in inheritance, Ambedkar encourages the financial independence of women and thus places an obstacle to the exploitation of women's labor, especially that of a widow. He concedes that although "large majority of our countrymen do not accept" the Bill, it passes the "test of one's conscience"; in order to remove the "obstruction of Law in the social advancement of women," the bill, he argues, had to become law.[71]

The Hindu Code Bill, Ambedkar notes in his resignation letter, "was the greatest social reform measure ever undertaken by the Legislature of this country"; Nehru "although sincere, had not the earnestness and determination required to get the Hindu Code Bill through."[72] Ambedkar also voices his extreme disappointment and frustration with the lack of effort on the issues affecting the Scheduled Castes. He argues that "to

[70] Ambedkar, "Hindu Code Bill," in Rodrigues, 496.
[71] B.R. Ambedkar, "Hindu Code Bill Referred to Select Committee," in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 14, Part 1,* edited by Vasant Moon. (Mumbai: Department of Education, Government of Maharastra, 1995) 42.
[72] B.R. Ambedkar, "Statement in Parliament in Explanation of his Resignation from the Cabinet, New Delhi, 10th October, 1951," in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 14, Part 2,* edited by Vasant Moon. (Mumbai: Department of Education, Government of Maharastra, 1995) 1325, 1324.

leave inequality between class and class, between sex and sex which is the soul of Hindu society untouched and to go on passing legislation relating to economic problems is to make a farce of our Constitution and to build a palace on a dung of heap."[73]

Disenchanted with the focus and efficacy of the secular state, Ambedkar turns to Buddhism to create a community and ethics to undo the principle of hierarchy in Indian society. Conversion to Buddhism is an explicit critique of the inequality and segmentation that characterizes Hindu society and provides, as Omvedt argues, the opportunity to "redefine and reconstitute…relations with the whole of Indian society, with its various groups, its historical and cultural traditions."[74] It enables the imagining of alternative visions of community and nation; in their imparting of the universalist principles of equality and freedom to the individual, these visions can broadly be characterized as feminist. While many of the oaths required for conversion, such as vegetarianism, fidelity, and teetotalism, embody the practices of upper-caste Hindu reformist respectability, these practices are resignified to embody a social ethic.[75] For example, as Pardeshi notes, the prohibition against alcohol indicates Ambedkar's concern for women and was intended to help hinder marital violence.[76] Ambedkar reformulates Buddhism to accommodate both "a modern liberal philosophy" and the "criteria for a religion with a social mission" that "answered the needs of India's depressed millions."[77]

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[73] Ibid, 1325.
[74] Omvedt, *Dalit and the Democratic Revolution*, 134.
[75] See B.R. Ambedkar, "Conversion Oaths," in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part 3,* edited by Hare Narake, Dr. M.L.Kasare, et al. (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Materials Publication Committee, Government of Maharastra, 2003), 527-532.
[76] Pardeshi, 357.
[77] M.S. Gore, *The Social Context of Ideology: Ambedkar's Social and Political Thought* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1993) 258. For example, Ambedkar contends that the "Four Noble Truths," which he terms the "Four Aryan Truths," were not part of the original doctrine of the Buddha. As he writes in the Buddha and his Dhamma, "if life is sorrow, death is sorrow and rebirth is sorrow, then there is an end of everything. Neither religion nor religion can help a man to achieve happiness…The four Aryan truths are a stumbling

The transcendental aspects of religion are disregarded in favor of the ideological from which principles for the restructuring of social relations can be derived.

The alternative Ambedkar puts forth is one already embedded in his histories of ancient India. The age of Buddhism, the golden age of Indian civilization in Ambedkar's narrative, provides the historical antecedent for the repudiation of Hindu beliefs and the social relations they structure. Ambedkar, like other reformers, employs "trope of decline" and the level of advancement of each period in history is indexed by the status of women. [78] However, while Ambedkar's histories remain within the nationalist and reformist genre in terms of structure, his narrative impart very different representations of the past and consequently, aspirations for the future.

Uma Chakravarti discusses the prominence of idealizations of a supposed Aryan Age as the golden age of India in the reformist and nationalist imagination; this golden age is indexed by the figure of the "the Aryan woman," who "came to occupy the center of the stage in the recounting of 'the wonder that was India' representing an amalgamation of Brahmanical and Kshatryia values."[79] Ambedkar departs from this representation and argues that the Aryan age was an oppressive and decadent time. This age was marked by gambling, intoxication, and perverse sexual and gender relations. Ambedkar cites the examples of Draupadi and Sita and argues that Aryan women do not provide a model for women today. "We wonder why Draupadi never had been given a

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block…The four Aryan truths deny hope to man." See B.R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and his Dhamma* (Bombay: Siddharth College Publication, 1957), x.

[78] Joshi, 81.

[79] Uma Chakravarti, "Whatever happened to the Vedic Dasi: Orientalism, Nationalism and a Script for the Past" in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, edited by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990) 29.

chance to gamble away her free husbands," he writes, "or Sita an opportunity to send her calumniators and doubters on the pyre onto the woods."[80]

The Buddha's social revolution, however, not only denounced the caste system and bars on intermarriage and interdining, but also liberated women and advanced their status in society. Buddhism gave women "the right to knowledge and the right to realize their spiritual potentialities along with man."[81] Ambedkar argues that "the Buddha did not place any premium on virginity as such. He kept his way open to all classes of women – married, unmarried, widows and even prostitutes."[82] Women enjoyed equality with men in all matters, including property and marriage; "under the Buddhist regime," Ambedkar argues, "she became a free person."[83]

The third phase in Ambedkar's history of India begins with the revolution of Pushyamitri; Buddhism is overthrown and Brahmanism, a counter-revolution, is established. Manu provides the legal institutionalization of Brahmanism and not only is caste, in its most severe forms legitimated, but practices like endogamy, sati, child marriage and enforced widowhood are enacted to regulate caste. Manu, Ambedkar argues, is responsible for the downfall of the Indian woman. He "wanted to deprive women of the freedom they had under the Buddhistic regime."[84] Women were not

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[80] Ambedkar, "The Position of Women in Hinduism or Buddhism," Vol. 17, Part 2, 495.
[81] Ambedkar argues that "Buddhism was a revolution. It was as great as the French Revolution." It began as a religious movement, but resulted in both the social and political restructuring of Indian society.
[82] Ambedkar, "The Rise and Fall of the 'Hindu Woman': Who was Responsible for it?," *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part 2,* edited by Hare Narake, Dr. M.L.Kasare, et al. (Mumbai: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Materials Publication Committee, Government of Maharastra, 2003), 121.
[83] Ambedkar, "Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India,"310. Ambedkar also notes that the status of women in Buddhist countries is higher than that in India. He argues that this is in part because "the Buddhist wife does not look up to her husband as a god, she is not expected to eat after her husband has finished his meal or immolate herself after her husband's death as an alternative to life of utter dejection." See Ambedkar "The Rise and Fall of the 'Hindu Woman': Who was Responsible for it?," 496.
[84] Ambedkar, Rise and Fall, 125.

permitted to divorce and were denied access to learning and property; marital violence was sanctioned and "a wife," as Ambedkar notes, "was reduced to the level of a slave."[85]

Ambedkar's movement for conversion to Buddhism thus signifies an appeal to return to the social relations that marked the Buddhistic regime in India. Buddhism provides an ethical framework, that along with the legal guarantees of the Constitution, that could transform Indian society. Conversion allows women to forsake the patriarchy of both Hinduism and the Indian secular state and enter a more egalitarian social system It is the Buddhist woman, a model of an educated, empowered and independent woman, not the Aryan woman, who embodies the Ambedkar's aspirations, for future social relations.

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Ambedkar concludes his discussion on the status of women in the different periods of Indian history by suggesting that critiquing figures of the past who prescribed roles for women based on the needs of their times is not the most productive project for the empowerment of men and women. Perhaps a gendered reading of Ambedkar's writings and speeches is open to this accusation. Ambedkar's social and political thought remains a testament to his ideological independence and to his commitment to the empowerment of all individuals. His radical critiques of both the principle of hierarchy and majoritarianism maintain their salience today. Many of his views on women and gender relations do stand in contradiction with the body of his work. While this reveals a blindness to women's subjectivities and the structural and material constraints affecting their lives, it also points to the predicament of a colonized and minority group attempting to forge a formidable social and political community. Not only was Ambedkar

[85] Ibid,124.

constrained by the politics of the colonial state and the play of "communities" for power, he was also not impervious to the prevailing discourses on gender that linked particular modes of respectability with modernity. Ambedkar also had to contend with the denigration of the dalit community by the majority of other Indians; his conflicting and at points, patriarchal views on gender indicate the difficulty of maintaining a truly feminist politics in a context in which the men of a community are rendered socially and politically impotent. Ambedkar compromised challenges to the structural inequalities facing women in order to inculcate proper norms of domesticity and respectability in the dalit community. He also, however, had to confront the burden of untouchability, a notion premised on the logic of defilement and the psychology of aversion; this too can be seen to have exerted additional pressures that shaped his views on the significance of women's codes of behavior to the empowerment of the community.

Today Ambedkar remains a hero for dalits, both men and women. Despite the contradictions in his ideas on women and gender, it could be argued that the very idea of Ambedkar functions to deliver a message of the universal right to social and political equality. For this, it seems that feminists as well pay tribute to Ambedkar as a champion of gender equality. He himself, however, argues that a possible means of empowerment would be to "strive to emulate those great souls among Indian women whose names have survived many a mighty empire, whose thoughts were higher than statecraft and whose hearts greater than the power of monarchs" such as Savitri, Maitreyi, Gargi, Mirabai and Padmini [86] Ambedkar thus not only provides for the contingency of his own statements on gender relations but also enables various models of women's lives to serve as templates for an ethical and empowered mode of social life.

[86] Ambedkar, "The Position of Women in Hinduism and Buddhism," 498.

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