

**Mapping the Politics of a Poet vs Poetry on the Politics of Caste:
A Reading of Milton and Ambedkar**

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Milton's prose works foreground his passionate belief in liberty in private and public domain. Whether we examine his Divorce tracts that sought to link his private experience of an unhappy marriage with his concern over the institution of marriage, as it impinged upon personal liberty and gender relations in his society, or study his plea for freedom of expression, the freedom to write and publish without State control, Milton's writings bring forth a rare synergy between the personal and the political, the individual and the polity in the life of a poet in seventeenth century England.

This aspect is strikingly evident in the writings of Ambedkar, a significant writer, scholar, republican statesman of twentieth century India. Ambedkar's tracts against social oppression, his plea for freedom as distinct from the nationalist agenda, his republican convictions, his use of rhetoric, legal scholarship, and eloquent prose bear comparison with Milton's political concerns and his marginalized position within the polity. Ambedkar's focus on caste is distinct from Milton's concerns towards his society. However, the underlying conviction for the establishment of a tolerant society that ensures freedom in social and religious domain bears comparison and merits a closer study of their thought on citizenry, representation and Polity. Both relied on rationality to question age-old structures of monarchy /Caste as oppressive to individual dignity. Their questioning paved the way for living in an age of Post-Truth and non-religious social spaces.

This paper seeks to examine John Milton's legacy in the context of anti-caste writings of B.R. Ambedkar to understand the impact of tracts, political Prose in shaping a movement of the marginalised against institutionalised oppression. The paper would highlight Milton, the poet's political activism and Ambedkar, the political activist's place in poetry and political discourse.

Milton's tracts, *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce Restored to the Good of Both Sexes* and the *Second Edition of The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1643, 1644), Selections from *Areopagitica* (1644) and his *Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* (1660) would be briefly examined to locate the poet's negotiation of notions of domestic and civil freedom and the need for individual's freedom of thought and expression to be guaranteed by the State. Ambedkar's speech at Mahad in 1927 and his work, *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) would be studied to locate a growing disenchantment with the nationalist agenda and his stand on prioritising social reform over political self-governance. The works under consideration of the two writers ranging over 1640-1660 and 1920-1940, respectively, carry considerable significance in the social, political and literary history of the two nations. The fact that one was ruling over the other for a prolonged period is of no less significance. Ambedkar's critiquing of the Congress / Nationalist agenda as socially regressive and therefore politically flawed and inadequate, throws interesting reflections on Milton's qualified endorsement of Cromwellian administration. Here are two writers who wrote brilliant persuasive prose but their convictions and arguments did not always find political acceptance in their respective society and they remained marginalized, but formidable critics of their society.

By 1642, Milton had announced, (in *The Reason of Church Government Urged against Prelaty*) that "I might perhaps leave something so written to after times, as they should not willingly let it die". (John Milton. *Paradise Lost*. Ed. Scott Elledge. A Norton Critical Edition, 1993:357) However, his scholarship was diligently employed in articulating his

public concern over the state of England for the next twenty odd years. He fiercely defended individual dignity, his right to freedom in thought, expression, conduct, and faith. He argued for the disestablishment of Church, to render the church independent of and unpatronised by the State. His plea for a non-partisan Church, his interpretation of the Bible (often labelled heretical by his critics), reflect his contestation of invasion by the State and the Church that resulted in "abused liberty" and "Unmerciful restraint" in the life of the individual. (1993:359)

Milton's proposal to grant divorce on grounds of intellectual incompatibility was a radical one for his times and alienated him from his friends and critics alike. In his Divorce tracts Milton posits marriage as a fellowship, as "the solace and delight" of man that ensures "sociable delight" and views a spouse as "A fit conversing soul". His conception of woman, albeit derived from the biblical image of a "help meet for man" grants a substantial space and agency to her within the institution of marriage. (1993:363) Milton's ideas concerning marriage are based on his private experience but his argument for granting of divorce is directed at the underlying need for church reform and drawing the attention of the Parliament to the notion of civil freedom.

Relocating the institution of marriage from the ecclesiastical frame to a civil one, from the domestic/individual domain to the public/political domain, Milton seeks to foreground the family as a structure of power as an analogue for the State and the Church that require urgent reform. He points out that "no effect of tyranny can sit more heavy on the commonwealth than this household unhappiness on the family. And farewell all hope of true reformation in the state, while such an evil as this lies undiscerned or unregarded in the house.. "(1993:381). The *Second edition of The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1644) is armed with greater persuasiveness and a sophisticated, impersonal tone invested with the power of rhetoric.

The movement from the personal to the impersonal, from the religious to the civil, both in tone and content, is evident in the prose tracts of both Milton and Ambedkar.

Ambedkar's essays on caste oppression reflect his political use of private experience to start a public debate on the inflexible structure of caste in Hindu society and how it needs to be eschewed of its religious legitimacy in order to ensure civil and individual freedom and empowerment.

In their writings, both Milton and Ambedkar wage an eloquent crusade for freedom from social oppression that receives ecclesiastical / priestly sanction. Both the writers marshal their scholarship to offer a radical re-interpretation of the scriptures and seek political intervention to initiate religious reform. The linking of religious reform with civil freedom and individual empowerment is an interesting and important interface between their writings, which I perceive, as a valuable legacy for our contemporary society, both national and the global.

Another striking commonality pertains to the style and tone of their discourse. Ambedkar's speech at Mahad and his intended speech to Jat Pat Todak Mandal were originally written as speeches to be delivered and subsequently published as tracts. Milton's prose works, on the other hand, were written and published as tracts or pamphlets but carried a strong tonality of oratory laced with resounding rhetorical questions, sarcasm, wit and frequent appeals to assumed listeners. His written tracts were addressed to the Parliament of England or to the Westminster Assembly of Divines, although they were too long and erudite to be possibly audited. Ambedkar's eloquence was no less polemic and allusive, both to history and scriptures. If Milton cited the Bible and Euripides with ease, Ambedkar frequently quoted from Manusmriti, shastras and referred to the writings of Mill, Carlyle, Burke, Matthew Arnold, Leslie Stephen or Marx besides of course quoting Gandhi to much strategic use.

Areopagitica, "a speech of Mr John Milton for the liberty of unlicensed printing, to the Parliament of England" was published by the poet in 1644 at the height of the First Civil War. It is a passionate plea against pre-publication censorship. Milton's second edition of *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* was cited as a work of licentiousness by the

Stationers Company that faced an inevitable axing under the proposed licensing act. Milton opposed it vehemently and argued for tolerance and the need for pluralist discourse in society. He underscored the sanctity of freedom of the individual to thought and expression. He pointed out, "Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions, for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making"(1993:389). The tract shows once again, how Milton ably steers an assault on his person to address issues affecting the community at large, in its religious and secular negotiations. Arguing for tolerance towards dissent and plurality of discourse, Milton asks, "Yet if all cannot be of one mind, --- as who looks they should be? --- this doubtless is more wholesome, more prudent, and more Christian, that many be tolerated rather than all compelled." (1993:390-91)

Milton's fame, today, rests more on his poetry, chiefly his epic, *Paradise Lost*. The valorization of servitude, obedience to God and the trajectory towards a private, individual salvation by schooling oneself to value, "A Paradise within (thee), happier far" that the poem (XII 587) upholds has clouded the fiery opposition to tyranny and an earnest effort towards "removal of.....thralldom upon learning", undertaken by the poet in his prose tracts and pamphlets (1993:386). Critical reception to *Paradise Lost*, has often not sufficiently reckoned with the poet's engagement with political and religious reform in the two decades of his work prior to his writing of the epic.

Isabel Rivers points out that "The Restoration meant the destruction of Milton's hopes for the political and a religious reformation of England. He lost his position and his wealth; he retired to private life and to poetry." (1993:313) And one may add, to appropriation by various orthodoxies. The pamphleteer and the bard have not been juxtaposed by posterity, instead the two have been located as inconsistent, contradictory and historically embarrassing.

Milton's prose when read as sub-texts to his grand narrative, could offer a rewarding entry-point to his epic. It would also throw light on the historical processes and an

imperialist era which precipitated an understandable marginalization of Milton's prose and a corresponding valorization of *Paradise Lost*.

Ambedkar's writings, on the other hand, interestingly have witnessed a very different course in history. During his lifetime, Ambedkar stood marginalized from the Congress and his writings were branded partisan, propagandist, or as pro-British. However, within two decades following India's Independence, Ambedkar and his writings have invaded the political and literary domain in a dynamic, enriching and significant way for the State and its citizens alike.

Both Milton and Ambedkar drew our attention to the close affinity between religion, society and freedom of the individual. Both argued passionately for liberty of the individual and the need for religious reform to take precedence over political reform. Ambedkar like Milton foregrounded responsible moral action and rational choice as essential pre-requisites to make religious reform possible. Yet a major difference in their approach to God/religion is largely decisive in mapping the political texture of their thought and ideology and its reception among their readers in the future.

Milton frequently invoked God to set forth his argument concerning social reform or change in the canon law. Ambedkar, on the other hand, problematised God while reflecting upon equality in a society divided on caste lines. Milton was concerned as much with liberty as he was engrossed with omnipotence and the notion of divine foreknowledge. Ambedkar wrestled with the question of an unjust, hierarchical social structure in Hindu society and how god has been rendered inaccessible to large sections of the community. Ambedkar pointed out repeatedly that inequality and social discrimination are legitimized by religious scriptures. Therefore, he argued, in 'Annihilation of Caste (1936), that social and religious reform were pre-requisites for ushering in political reform and liberty.

W.C. Bonnerji, the president of the eighth session of the Congress put forward a typical Congress position on this issue in the year 1892: "I for one have no patience with those

who say we shall not be fit for political reform until we reform our social system. I fail to see any connection between the two.... Are we not fit because our widows remain unmarried and our girls are given in marriage earlier than in other countries?" (*Annihilation of Caste: An Undelivered Speech. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol 1, 1989:39)

Ambedkar pointed out a subtle distinction between "social reform in the sense of reform of the Hindu family and social reform in the sense of the reorganization and reconstruction of the Hindu society." (1989:41) Questions pertaining to widow remarriage, child marriage, etc., he observed, are issues that agitate the high caste Hindu family but which remain simply non-existent among the backward castes. Ambedkar questioned the rationale behind the nationalist agenda of the Congress in his work 'Annihilation of Caste' and argued that we are not fit for political reform as long as we do not allow one section of our countrymen to use public streets, schools, wells and other civic amenities.

If Milton argued for reform, Ambedkar demanded a radical re-ordering of social structure. He specifically called for a "reconstruction of society" (1989:42). Elucidating systematically that caste has no scientific origin, it does not guarantee economic efficiency or improvement of the Hindu race, Ambedkar rejects caste as "the primary monster" that would nullify any form of political or economic reform. As caste system is a social division of the people of the same race and religion, inter marriage (not mere inter-dining) is what he calls "the real remedy for breaking caste" (1989:67) Further, as the religious shastras legitimise caste, he observes, "the real remedy is to destroy the belief in the sanctity of the shastras." (1989:68) The authority of the shastras and the Vedas, the notion of sacredness of the social order has to be destroyed to bring in equality within Hindu society.

Ambedkar's stand is not merely a reformist but rather a revolutionary one concerning his society. He set out new principles for the organization of civil society, both in his

"Speech at Mahad" (1927) and "Annihilation of Caste" (1936). Ambedkar put forward the ideals of the French Revolution-- Liberty, Equality and Fraternity -- as the right principles to strive for and uphold in the effort to reorganize Hindu society.

Ambedkar in the late 20s and 30s shifted the focus in the agitation against caste system from the Temple to the Tank. This signified his increasing emphasis on social reform and civic freedom over gestural assertion like the demand for the right to temple entry for the untouchables. The burning of *Manusmriti* in 1927 and denunciation of Hindu shastras in 1936 for perpetuating a social system steeped on selfishness and arrogance of a class superior in social status that forced its will on the rest of the community are important landmarks in Ambedkar's political career. They signify his radical position that aimed at a complete transformation, a revolutionary re-formulation of his society. In his Mahad speech, he pointed out that "the root of untouchability is in the ban on intermarriage" and by removing this injunction "real equality" could be established (*Speech at Mahad*. B. R. Ambedkar, 1972:122). He cited extensively from the course of the French Revolution to argue for a revolutionary re-ordering of society. He believed that the complete abolition of caste system alone could establish equality and guarantee liberty in our society and puny reforms would be of little help in this regard. While Ambedkar fought against the caste system from within the Hindu fold until 1920s, by 1936 he announced his decision to quit Hindu society. His rejection of the caste system and, therefore, of Hindu Society in 1936, could take a formal shape only twenty years later in 1956 when he along with lakhs of untouchables embraced Buddhism and its ideals based on equality. The fight against caste "is more difficult than the other national cause, namely Swaraj. In the fight for Swaraj you fight with the whole nation on your side. In this, you have to fight against the whole nation and that too, your own. But it is more important than Swaraj", he had said in 1936. (1989:80) In this, he echoes Milton's stand against the Church and the State in his writings.

Ambedkar's critique of caste system as operative in Hindu society was a severe and unrelenting one. He compared the caste Hindu society's oppression of untouchables as a form of colonization wherein the lower castes are subjugated and their civil and religious rights severely curtailed by the hegemonic group. His writings form the ideological core of literary discourse that emerged from the Dalit community in the decades following his death in 1956, initially in Marathi and by the mid-80s and 90s in almost all the major Indian languages. Poetry, fiction, plays, essays and autobiographies poured forth from the first generation educated Dalits who had traversed the trajectory of identity from the Harijan to the Dalit.

This paper argues that while Milton's fight against canonical tyranny and for true reformation in the state as outlined in his prose tracts were subsumed by the ideals of submission and servitude in his post-restoration poetry that captured the imagination of his readers since his death, Ambedkar's writings, on the contrary, have ignited a dynamic dialogue between history culture, politics and literary discourse. Such a methodology was employed successfully by Milton during his life time. While the poet's political activism marginalized him in his society, Ambedkar's activist writings have empowered the socially marginalized communities to articulate their experiences, angst and aspirations in poetry and other literary, aesthetic forms, often reformulating its aesthetic norms and paradigms in the process.

A brief, in fact, a cursory survey of Dalit poetry in various Indian languages would indicate how it has internalized Ambedkarite thought and marshals it to interrogate continued oppression of Dalits in Indian society. Often, Ambedkar is a dynamic presence in Dalit writings.

The Tamil Dalit dramatist K.A. Gunasekaran's play *Bali Aadugal* presents Ambedkar in conversation with Mulk Raj Anand outlining the need for Dalits to rise in uproar against their oppression and juxtaposes it to the action of the play world. The play dramatizes Ambedkar's call to resist casteist oppression by underlining the need for

Dalits to roar like the lion and not bleat like the goat as only goats are sacrificed. (*Bali Aadugal*: 1999)

A reading of poetry by poets in different Indian languages, translated and anthologised in Hindi (Ed. Thorat & Badatya: 2008) indicates the pervasive presence and impact of Ambedkar's writings on pan-Indian Dalit Poetry. The young Malayalam poet Srija A.S. calls upon Dalits thus:

*"Adopt the path shown by Ambedkar
And re write the history of mankind afresh."* (2008:310, trans.by me for the purposes of this paper)

Merli K. Punoos observes:

*The sun arose from Maharashtra
Taught us the value of education
Ambedkar is his name,
We have learned to struggle now
We have learned to move ahead now
Ambedkar has shown us the way
The Path of Deliverance is revealed now.*

(2008: 308, trans. mine)

The Punjabi dalit poet, Harbans Lal Baddan, in his poem *The Messiah* presents Ambedkar as a messiah who showed the path of dignity to the untouchables. Referring to the Mahad Satyagraha and the burning of the *Manusmriti*, the poem highlights Ambedkar's contribution to constitutional modes of striking down caste discrimination and compares him to Gautama Buddha in his efforts to establish an egalitarian society, initiating gender equality and enshrining his vision in the constitution. The poem concludes with a terse reminder that this messiah was a human being like one of us who opened up the path of possibilities for one and all.

The Hindi poet, Omprakash Valmiki, draws our attention to the continuation of caste structure in today's society and the appropriation of Ambedkar in the politics of gesture and emblems in his poem 'Mirror':

*Beneath the tall, titanic statue of Ambedkar sits
The cobbler who screams loud and clear
Which bastard has gifted us this caste system.*

(2008:31, trans. mine)

The procession where swords, tridents and weapons are openly displayed add to the intimidation of the caste oppressed poor, points out the poet. The Assamese poet, Pitambar Das, addresses the Dalits and exhorts them to revolt against exploitation, corruption and caste and compile a history of their own in blood.

The Bangla poet, Anil Sarkar, asks:

*"Is this country ours?
Are there not tea shops even today that keep a separate cup or a glass for us?"*

(2008:281, trans. mine)

Dalit writers endorse Ambedkar's revolutionary position of working towards a restructuring of society, a rejection of shastras and annihilation of caste. They reject Gandhian discourse of reform and efforts at change of heart. The integration of Ambedkarite thought to literary discourse by Dalits indicates to Milton-lovers possible strategies that could make Milton's legacy less partisan, less ahistorical by engaging with the bard and the pamphleteer, not selectively, but inclusively and simultaneously, to evolve a productive dialogue between his times and our times.

What Wordsworth lamented in 1802 is valid for us today as well:

*Milton! Thou shouldst be living at this hour;
England hath need of thee: she is a fen
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
..... we are selfish men.*

*Oh! Raise us up, return to us again;
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power. (1993:493)*

The need to integrate the vision of Milton's republican, a liberty ensuring State that allows dissent and critique of culture, religion and State highhandedness with the conviction of Ambedkar in Constitutional guarantees to all citizens, foregrounding of social equality and opportunity over privileging creed or caste, has become the need of the hour. The Poet and the Polity need to negotiate the path of freedom and equal opportunity in the private and public domain to the advantage of the hitherto marginalised and the underprivileged. The writings of Milton and Ambedkar offer valuable insights and scope to contemporary society in the global context to restructure their sociocultural matrix to ensure equitable distribution of resources, freedom of thought and speech to every individual in the public domain.

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