

Force and adoration: Ambedkar's maitri

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IN his final work *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Bhimrao Ambedkar returns frequently to the concept of *maitri*, which he most often renders, for the first time in his essay on Marx, as 'fellowship'. 'Maitri or fellowship towards all must never be abandoned', he writes in 'Buddha or Karl Marx'. 'One owes it even to one's enemy.' In deploying maitri in such a fashion, translating it neither as friendship nor fraternity, and finding its possibility in the actions of the soldier, bandit, magistrate, and even the executioner, the mature Ambedkar departs from the normative rendering of the concept in two ways. First, he understands maitri categorically as that which refuses the foundational distinction between

friendship and hostility. Maitri is a gesture that one makes towards the enemy; as such, it militantly exceeds the moral dictates of friendship and fidelity.

In his final years, immersed into formulating a rigorously non-humanist and religious critique of religion, Ambedkar deepens the concept of maitri further, including in its ambit not merely the human but also the animal. 'Maitri', he claims in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, 'is extending fellow feeling to all beings, not only to one who is a friend but also to one who is a foe: not only to man but to all living beings.' Indeed, creaturely life, Ambedkar argues, is most proper to maitri precisely because the normative concep-

tion of love (*karuna*), which human beings express only towards their own species, excludes non-humans. Maitri, on the other hand, makes both the adversary and animal its intimate subject. It is inclusive in a way that the Christian conception of love is not.

Maitri too is religious and quotidian. Yet unlike love, which harbours despite its best intentions a sacrificial hierarchy at its source – in a remarkable and paradoxical neologism, Ambedkar calls religious love (*bhakti*), and the love for religion, ‘life-force’ – maitri is anti-sovereignty and non-theological. Acts of sovereignty, manifest in the sovereign’s right to take life precisely in the name of keeping life sacred and safe, whose most violent instance is the death penalty, contaminates the ethical force of maitri. Even if it is marked by an irreducible religiosity, then, maitri resists the pernicious alliance between religion and sovereignty. It does not take life in the name of keeping life unscathed. Nor does it give life in the name of charity or pardon. Instead, maitri gives life, even to the enemy combatant, in the name of absolute equality, in the name of forgiveness that refuses to be identified as such.

It is this religion without religion that Ambedkar thinks of when he recovers the encounter between the Buddha and the dreaded bandit Angulimala in his masterwork. In that encounter, what converts the violent bandit is neither the sudden dawning of guilt upon him nor his momentary exposure to divine luminescence. What converts him instead is the truth manifest in the figure of the Buddha himself. Only this ‘love of truth’ founds the empirical ground of an egalitarian faith and establishes another mode of belief and adoration, one that exceeds both the religious and humanist conceptions of love. Hence Ambedkar’s perennial

dissatisfaction with love, affirmed again in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, ‘Love is not enough. What is required is maitri.’ Perhaps the proper rendering of what the mature Ambedkar calls maitri, then, is neither fraternity nor friendship, even though he alludes to both throughout the 1940s and the 1950s, but rather adoration, an immeasurable gift of belief and compassion (*mudita*) across the abyss of species difference.

What does this radical reconceptualization of love, this forceful affirmation of life as such, give us most to think about? What might a ‘religion without religion’, which would, by its very name, also be a religion profoundly aware of its own ineluctable complicity with force and mastery, call forth? In trying to recover Ambedkar’s moral thinking from normative and humanist histories of equality, my intention here is simply to recall that what is living, what exists, and most ontologically, *what is*, for Ambedkar, not that which is same but rather that which is wholly other, wholly unequal, and above all, wholly mortal.

In this politicization of finitude, this foregrounding of the knowledge of impermanence (*sunnyata*), Ambedkar does not valorize death or sacrifice in the manner of a *satyagrahi*, even though he does not renounce the imperative of war and ‘general mobilization’ either. Instead, he recovers in the consciousness of finitude the possibility of an unconditional and collective sacrifice of interest; a sacrifice from which equality amongst mortals might emerge. Thus, in *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), two decades before his masterwork, and right in the midst of his critique of the anti-democratic structure of Plato’s *Republic*, Ambedkar had already called equality a responsibility towards the ‘incommensurable’; a responsibility

heterogeneous to calculation, substitution, and measure.

A responsibility, in other words, that mobilizes force – and what is annihilation (*ucched*) if not a call to force – in the name of absolute singularity, in the name of the unequal’s irreproducible and each time unique birth and death.¹ It is on this affirmation of life amidst life’s impermanence that the mature Ambedkar’s *ahimsaic* adoration would come to hinge. In this paper, I offer an archeology of this adoration, of Ambedkar’s radical attempt to formulate the conditions of a love proper and adequate to politics. I will not trace the infinite variations in which this excessive love appears in his itinerary, in neologisms such as ‘love of truth’, ‘love of politics’, and so on. I will only attempt, in a necessarily delimited fashion, to follow the rhythms and vicissitudes of this adoration, this egalitarian excess, that the mature Ambedkar eventually calls maitri.

How does the late recovery of adoration (maitri) turn the thread of Ambedkar’s enduring thinking about force? Does the move away from sovereignty lead to an attenuation of force? Or is maitri itself the maturation of that militant critique of force which had begun to take shape as early as Ambedkar’s Columbia University seminars in the 1910s? Is maitri, by turns and simultaneously, force *and* adoration, founded in love yet necessarily in excess of it? An excess that Ambedkar captures in his equivocal tribute to Ranade when he declares, ‘I regard my feelings of hatred as a real force. They are only the reflex of the love I bear’? What kind of love is this? And what would this force, this ‘real force’, be?

1. See Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, in *Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*. Government of Maharashtra, Education Department, henceforth *BAWS*, Vol. 1, p. 60.

In a remarkable passage in *Philosophy of Hinduism* that deals with the relationship between force and conduct, the later Ambedkar leaves some traces that we may follow. He compares the instinctive urge to satisfy hunger with the impulse to 'forge a weapon against the enemy.' Both belong, he argues, to the order of biological and psychological force in which the body simply makes movements that it deems necessary to survive. These movements, which might entail violence in that they veer towards killing the enemy or predator, are not immoral. They are simply 'unmoral'. That is, they cannot be judged by the established norms of morality at all, for these acts are so instinctive, so incalculable, that they cannot be placed in a world of normative values. They cannot be 'compared with others, valued, or chosen.'

And yet, even if 'governed by forces not as moral in purpose', Ambedkar says, they are 'as valuable in result.' Forging a weapon against the enemy is, thus, an ordinary and ordinary, indeed a pre-ethical, act. It is unmoral and invaluable because it comes before any measure of moral value, before any judgment of faculty or force has been established. 'Psychologically' everyone possesses it; everyone *must* possess it.

In as much as it is not tainted by the 'spirit of retaliation', forging a weapon – that most ancient and ordinary movement of the hand – belongs to the order of quotidian and egalitarian force. It is *not chosen*, it is given equally.² Never does Ambedkar – and we see this emerge in the most militant fashion in *Thoughts on Pakistan* – attenuate the significance of passion and mastery, of competition and honour for democracy proper. Instead, he

renounces hostility precisely to reclaim the equalizing possibilities opened by war in its purest and most ethical sense.

Maitri is another name, then, for love that is founded in difference, in an ethical and transformative violence even. It is a passion for that which is equal, if only because with it one shares one's own finitude and anxiety, and in the final instance, one's nothingness. Each time singular, maitri is inalienable yet shared, given to mastery and equality alike. Inasmuch it does not renounce difference, it does not give up on honour and competition either. That controversial question in *Thoughts*, 'The Hindus have a difficult choice to make: to have a safe army or a safe border?' marks the founding paradox of that force which will conceptually mature and eventually take form as maitri.

Every now and then, Ambedkar's conceptualization of force falls into the language of immunity and measure, of spiritual purism and national sovereignty even. Yet by giving it the name of religious responsibility, he also imparts his vision of force an ethical and immeasurable depth. Incandescently announced in the title of *Annihilation of Caste*, calling for an unconditional destruction of 'irreligion', this force measures itself against nothing but truth. 'Religion', after all, 'is concerned with the love of truth.'³ The annihilator (*uccehdvadi*) holds itself accountable to no authority or limit. In him, freedom and mastery subsume measure; responsibility comes to be marked by the religiosity of force alone.

As Ambedkar memorably puts it, 'The moment it degenerates into rules it ceases to be Religion, as it kills responsibility, which is the essence of a truly religious act... I have, there-

fore, no hesitation in saying that such a religion must be destroyed and I say, there is nothing irreligious in working for the destruction of such a religion.'⁴ In sum, annihilating religion in the name of religious responsibility, seeking through immeasurable force what can only be called, thus, a religion without religion. It is the same logic of immeasurability that Ambedkar mobilizes again when a decade later he militantly proclaims, 'The slogan of a democratic society must be machinery and more machinery, civilization and more civilization.'⁵

More machinery than whom? Measured against which other civilization? Where is this other democracy? Ambedkar does not say – he has perhaps America in mind – except that this immeasurability is grounded in absolute equality alone. A very singular thought is at work here, one that often gets carried away in the most anti-democratic directions. For in Ambedkar, there are moments when certain forms of masteries, certain variations of the master-serf relationship even, tend to acquire a peculiar sheen of just benevolence, if not equality. But then, that is the very nature of democratic action, the very nature of critique of force, as Ambedkar himself concedes.

One can never safely separate its evil from its egalitarian promises. Indeed, only when one is radically possessed by the idea of immeasurability, only when one is unconditionally given over to the emancipatory possibilities of generalized force, that one can write of equality in the manner that Ambedkar writes of it. 'A society

4. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*. Bheem Patrika Publications, Jullunder, 1936, pp. 87-88

5. Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to Untouchables*. Classic, Lahore, 1977; originally published 1945, p. 295. (Emphasis added)

2. See Ambedkar, *Philosophy of Hinduism*. BAWS, Vol. 3, p. 82.

3. Ambedkar, *Philosophy of Hinduism*. BAWS, Vol. 3, p. 86.

which does not believe in democracy may be indifferent to machinery,' he claims, 'but a democratic society cannot. The former may well content itself with a life of leisure and culture for the few and a life of toil and drudgery for the many.' But not democratic society, he repeats. Authentic equality will come, he declares in a dizzying formulation, only 'when machine takes the place of man.'⁶

This materialist, almost utopian, dream of the automaton appears in the same threshold decade between 1930 and 1940 that annihilation (ucched), with its explicit call for mastery and mobilization, for religiosity and action, has also entered Ambedkar's lexicon. Nothing that Ambedkar writes in this decade remains untouched by the categories, figures, tropes, rhetoric, and facts of World War. In works that appear towards the end of the war, Ambedkar returns to an intermittent but unconditionally hostile critique of fascism. If his responsibility towards Nietzsche and nihilism had always been marked by equivocation, his repulsion to Nazism's claim to spiritual mastery remained unambiguous. It is suggestive that Ambedkar's most explicit attempt to rescue Nietzsche, the latter's ethical nihilism even – by which he simply means Nietzsche's capacity to understand the immeasurable virtuosity of force – comes in Philosophy of Hinduism. And this equivocal defence is mounted precisely as a critique of those who, in their petty understanding of mastery, have extrapolated and vulgarized Nietzsche's thinking of force. Of course, Ambedkar clarifies:

'It is not difficult to see that his philosophy can be as easily applied to evolve a super state as to superman. This is what the Nazis have done. At

6. Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to Untouchables*. p. 295.

any rate the Nazis trace their ancestry from Nietzsche and regard him as their spiritual parent. Hitler has himself photographed beside a bust of Nietzsche; he takes the manuscripts of the master under his own special guardianship; extracts are chosen from Nietzsche's writings and loudly proclaimed at the ceremonies of Nazism, as the New German Faith. Nor is the claim by the Nazis of spiritual ancestry with Nietzsche denied by his near relations. Nietzsche's own cousin Richard Ochler approvingly says that Nietzsche's thought is Hitler in action and that Nietzsche was the foremost pioneer of the Nazi accession to power. Nietzsche's own sister, few months before her death, thanks the *Fuehrer* for the honour he graciously bestows on her brother, declaring that she sees in him that incarnation of the Superman foretold by Zarathustra.'⁷

Yet, precisely because of this vulgar filiation between philosophy and street politics, Ambedkar sees in fascism's will to mastery not a love of Nietzsche, nor a fidelity to force, but a betrayal of adoration. How can people who shamelessly consecrate an all too human thinker be authentically Nietzschean? Hitler is a perversion – Gandhi will terrifyingly say *exemplary* – of what Ambedkar usually associates with 'direct action'. This perversion contaminates the equality that might have been accomplished in an authentically fought war.⁸

Fascist action, given over to idolatry, bust-worship, and ceremonial politics of the street – hence, Ambedkar's comparison of the 'gang-

7. Ambedkar, *Philosophy of Hinduism*. BAWS, Vol. 3, pp. 74-75.

8. 'Direct action' is one of Ambedkar's most insurgent and prolific expressions. See for one example, Ambedkar, *Essays on Untouchables and Untouchability: Political*. BAWS, Vol. 5, p. 375.

sterism' of the Muslim League and Hindu Mahasabha with the NSDAP – destroys the purity of war.⁹ Adoring Nietzsche, fascism attempts to annihilate tradition, seeks to break away from religion, tries to gather unparalleled technological energy in the interest of national reparation, and fails. Nazism, then, is repulsive not because it is nihilistic. Instead, it is a colossal failure because it is not properly, ethically, forcefully, annihilative (ucchedvadi).

Ambedkar himself is scrupulous in his reading of *The Anti-Christ* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*; rigorous in distinguishing Nietzsche's own faith from the unfaithful interpretation of his lovers; careful to mark out one Nietzsche text from another. Accustomed by now to being misunderstood by followers and antagonists alike, he is drawn to that Nietzsche who 'foresaw for himself a remote public, centuries after his own time to appreciate him.'¹⁰ This poignant line, a direct reference to the confessional sentence that appears in the foreword of *The Anti-Christ*, also illuminates the mature Ambedkar's own reconciliation with nationalist grudge over his own mastery of philosophical sources, or as Nietzsche might put it, his 'honest[y] in intellectual matters to the point of harshness.'¹¹

'Nietzsche's philosophy had become identified', Ambedkar says, 'with will to power, will to violence and denial of spiritual values, sacrifice,

9. Ambedkar, *Pakistan, Or the Partition of India*. Thacker & Co., Bombay, 1945, p. 260.

10. Ambedkar, *India and the Prerequisites of Communism*. BAWS, Vol. 3, p. 117.

11. 'These [with courage for the forbidden] alone are my readers, my rightful readers, my predestined readers: what do the rest matter? – The rest are merely mankind.' Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*. Harmondsworth, London, 1968, p. 114.

servility to and debasement of the common man in the interest of the superman.¹² It is not Nietzsche himself, not his demand for sacrifice, not his ‘courage for the *forbidden*’, not his dream of the Superman that debases force. It is the appropriation of sacrifice by the unfaithful few, paradoxically, that vulgarizes it.

Despite his absolute rejection of equality as sameness, Ambedkar’s Nietzsche believes – *any philosopher worthy of the name must uncompromisingly believe* – that at the heart of every revolution there lies the authentic demand for incommensurable equality; that is, equality that refuses to subsume difference. Ambedkar’s Nietzsche, perhaps most importantly, is a thinker of the future, one who ‘took comfort by placing himself among the “posthumous men”, and in whose ideas virtue and force were emancipated from their petty cruelties and hierarchical perversions.’¹³ Even as he finds deplorable resonances of the *Manusmriti* in Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Ambedkar refuses to deny the genius of Nietzsche’s selfless ambition: conceiving a mastery that would be grounded in disinterest (*upeksha*).

What Ambedkar always feels compelled by, then, is the immeasurable virtuosity of war between equals. The promise of equality that comes by way of mastery, even militarized sovereignty, never fails to attract him. This mastery is not of one over another; instead, this is a relational mastery, a war sans hostility that forges kinship between equals. Everyone must equally and dutifully prepare for such an ‘equalitarian’ war. Nonviolence,

after all, might be construed as truthful, meaningful in its ethical, that is, non-hegemonic and non-normative sense, only when everyone is a soldier, when everyone has the equal right to sacrifice, when each has equally mastered the virtue of selfless war and nonviolence alike. Virtue itself, above all, might sometimes necessitate war. ‘We wage war, O disciples, therefore we are called warriors,’ Ambedkar’s Buddha tells his followers. ‘Wherefore, Lord, do we wage war?’ they ask him. ‘For lofty virtues, for high endeavour, for sublime wisdom – for these things do we wage war: therefore we are called warriors. Where virtue is in danger do not avoid fighting, do not be mealy-mouthed.’ An incommensurable equality then, equality not of measure but of immeasurable mastery: this is where Ambedkar is most Nietzschean, never shying away from virtuous war, never renouncing the ethical value of difference – and sometimes competition – amongst equals.

If love, freedom, mastery, honour even, are necessarily conjoined, what is, for Ambedkar, mastery *proper*, mastery that is virtuous and equalitarian? Who is worthy of being such a master? It is that who respects suffering and finitude; who relinquishes civility (*vinaya*) not even in war; who renounces transcendence for a scrupulous ontology grounded in the unequal’s quotidian and unspectacular mortality alone. Thus, fascism’s spectacle of spiritual ancestry contaminates what might have been its authentic ‘levelling force’.¹⁴

Let us briefly pause here, on this term ‘levelling force’, which is a singular way of describing equality, of thinking equality as an extenuation of force. In a vertiginous formulation, Ambedkar describes ‘unfettered sla-

very’, that is, the equal right of everyone to own slaves, as an ‘equalitarian principle’. As long as everyone is a master, as long as one class (*Shudra*) alone is not enslaved and devoid of mastery, slavery retains its ‘levelling force’. Barely three passages earlier, Ambedkar had already declared, ‘In short, justice is simply another name for liberty, equality, and fraternity.’¹⁵

Now the problem of whether *general slavery*, while it is certainly egalitarian in as much as everyone can be a master, is also *just*, Ambedkar does not resolve. However, it is clear that for him equality within the system of generalized slavery ensues from the fact of equality in virtue. Everyone, without discrimination although not without competition, is seen as equally deserving of having property. Which means, rather than being grounded in charity or compassion of one dominant group towards another, general slavery universalizes – no, radically *freest* – responsibility and even *maitri*. Each touches another freely; each is obliged to another; each defends his neighbour equally; everyone and not the benevolent abolitionist alone are equally responsible for freedom. Everyone, above all, is righteously and legitimately armed. Only in this mastery can authentic nonviolence and love of equals take root.

‘Assuming there is a grievance, assuming there is *consciousness of grievance*, there cannot be a rebellion by the lower orders against the Hindu social order because the Hindu social order denies the masses the right to use arms. Other social orders such as those of the Muslims or the Nazis follow the opposite course. They allow equal opportunity to all. They allow freedom to acquire knowledge. They allow the right to bear arms and take upon them-

12. Ambedkar, *India and the Prerequisites of Communism*. BAWS, Vol. 3, p. 117. (Emphasis added)

13. Ambedkar, *India and the Prerequisites of Communism*. BAWS, Vol. 3, p. 117.

14. Ambedkar *Philosophy of Hinduism*. BAWS, Vol. 3, p. 26.

15. Ambedkar *Philosophy of Hinduism*. BAWS, Vol. 3, p. 25.

selves the odium of suppressing rebellion by force and violence. To deny freedom of opportunity, to deny freedom to acquire knowledge, to deny the right of arms is a most cruel wrong. It mutilates and emasculates man... The Nazis had indeed a great deal to learn from the Hindus. If they had adopted the technique of suppressing the masses devised by the Hindus, they would have been able to crush the Jews without open cruelty and would have also exhibited themselves as humane masters.’¹⁶

This is a giddy passage. After all, there is something peculiar – something given over to violent measure – in a critique of cruelty that nevertheless redraws the world according to a hierarchy of sufferers whose fates, Ambedkar knows fully well, are equal only in their incommensurable suffering. Why this resort to a hierarchy of incommensurable sufferers and unequals? Does such a hierarchy not reduce equality precisely to that which Ambedkar abhors, which is measure? Why does the untouchable have to be the most sovereign unequal, most unequal amongst the world’s unequals? What is at work in this contamination of Ambedkar’s immeasurability, his pure ethics, by mastery and measure?

There is, beyond doubt, a strain of radical conservatism in Ambedkar’s itinerary; one which is often compelled by a vision in which nothing seems more degrading than being banished from the world of senses, barred from light and touch, consigned to shadows and corners. In a fragment of his autobiography composed a few years before Auschwitz, Ambedkar speaks evocatively of his life in a dungeon, away from humanity and light, in the company of animals alone. And this

16. Ambedkar, *India and the Prerequisites of Communism*. BAWS, Vol. 3, pp. 126-27. (Emphasis added)

was no incarceration or confinement of the Nazi type. This was life, ordinary, routine, solitary, often homeless, and marked by sleeplessness and death, right in the heart of modern India.

We will have to let go for now this singular moment in Ambedkar’s itinerary of the self – indeed that which becomes the very ground of his radical selflessness (*anatta*) – for another occasion. Here, let us only mark that it is this experience and the plea for its singularity that aggressively shapes Ambedkar’s comprehension of suffering of those distant from him in time and place. And yet, while the demand for incommensurability sometimes forces him into seeing elements of freedom even in Roman bondage in ways he finds unavailable to the Hindu untouchable, while it forces him into remorselessly describing even slavery as a ‘vague gift’ for the slave, it is also his intimate knowledge of servitude and confinement that enables him to recover from the Jewish migration from Egypt an exemplary religious force.

A militant extenuation of force, a general mobilization of virtue on industrial scale, then, will have always mediated Ambedkar’s religiosity. A revolutionary and ethical violence will have, in his eyes, never compromised his nonviolence (*ahimsa*). In Ambedkar, religion and machine, maitri and force, faith and knowledge, often cohabit, inseparable yet heterogeneous to one another. For what Ambedkar calls the love of truth is also a certain adoration of force, an affirmation of life in the right to mobilize. Perhaps that is why in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, it is the aporetic and sacrificial figure of the soldier that returns most often as the exemplar of maitri, as the true affirmer of species life as such.