Political Theology:  
Text and Practice in a Dalit Panther Community 

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Knowing that there was so much unhappiness in the world the Buddha realized that it was wrong for him to sit as a sanyasi [ascetic] with folded arms and allow things to remain as they were.

Asceticism he found to be useless. It was vain to attempt to escape from the world. . . . What is necessary is to change the world and to make it better. 

(Ambedkar 1984:78)

All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice. . . .

The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.

(Marx [1845] 1964:620)

The Bharatiya Dalit Panthers is an organization of Maharashtrian Dalits (ex-Untouchables) who have converted to Buddhism and adopted as their long-range political goal the establishment of a democratic socialist state. The ideology of the Panthers, embodied in their texts and practices, synthesizes threads of Buddhist and Marxist philosophies. Longstanding debates about the supposed incompatibility of Buddhism and Marxism\(^1\) pose questions regarding the conjunction of religion and politics in popular movements, the role of popular texts in constituting ideologies of resistance, and the ways texts and beliefs become transformed into actions.

In the 1980s, interest in religion converged with concerns about power. The assumed complementarity between transcendental and pragmatic (Mandelbaum 1966), or philosophical and practical (Leach 1968), forms of belief that supported functional explanations of religion has been questioned in the last two decades by critical studies of the relation between doctrinal and popular religions (Lancaster 1988; Riegelhaupt 1973, 1984; Schneider and Lindenbaum 1987; Wolf 1984). These studies hold

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\(^1\)For discussions of the relationship between Buddhism and Marxism, see Benz 1966; Katz and Sowle 1987; and Ling 1966.

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implications for a theoretical perspective of popular culture. If, as Hall (1981:235) argues, "what is essential to the definition of popular culture is the relations which define 'popular culture' in a continuing tension (relationship, influence and antagonism) to the dominant culture," then the interaction between popular and doctrinal religions must be pressed analytically for implications of cultural struggle between nonhegemonic and hegemonic groups.

An important aspect of cultural struggle is the syncretism of religion and politics. Contemporary cultural struggles are characterized by the "tendency to theologize political conflicts, to transform domestic and international adversaries into enemies who represent the forces of evil" (McCarthy, in Schmitt 1985:viii). This syncretism of religion and politics, while causing little trauma for those actually engaged in social movements, has presented scholars with an analytic dilemma: Is religion being secularized, or is politics being sacralized? I argue that to better understand popular movements we must bridge the disciplinary division between politics and religion and conceptualize "political theology" (Schmitt 1985) as a cultural field within which power relations are contested. The political theology of the Bharatiya Dalit Panthers, embracing both Buddhism and socialism, was developed historically through the teachings of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and the poetry and political manifesto of the Dalit Panthers.

Ambedkar and His Dhamma

Literature plays a significant role in the social movements of oppressed people. Yet, until recently, scholars have tried to derive knowledge of subordinate groups from texts written by elites and have ignored the texts and ideologies that subordinate groups create to define their struggle and empower themselves. This is especially true in the case of Untouchables, who historically have been defined from the perspective of caste Hindus. The Untouchable movement, beginning in the 1920s under the leadership of Ambedkar, has allowed Untouchable authors to correct the elite image and history of caste relations in India.

In his major work, The Buddha and His Dhamma (hereafter Dhamma; the word means moral duty), Ambedkar offered an interpretation of Buddhism that has become the ethical foundation of the Untouchable movement. Panther groups, who represent the most radical transformation of this movement, continue to accept Ambedkar's teachings as the basis of their political action.²

Mass conversions of Untouchables to Buddhism, beginning in 1956, were preceded by nearly three decades of Untouchable agitations led by Ambedkar. The foci of Untouchable protest were caste society and varna ideology (varnashramadharma), which relegated Untouchables to the lowest social, economic, and ritual status. Ambedkar organized protests against the caste discrimination that prevented Untouchables from using public water tanks, entering Hindu temples, sitting in classrooms with caste Hindus, seeking dignified employment, and having social contact with higher castes. The scope of Untouchable dissent grew with the realization that attempts to gain acceptance within Hindu society were futile. In 1935, at an Untouchable conference in Yeola, Ambedkar declared that he "would not die a Hindu."

Ambedkar's actual conversion to Buddhism did not come until 1956, after he had investigated the possibilities of conversion to Christianity, Sikhism, and Islam. His reasons for choosing Buddhism were both practical and philosophical. He wanted Untouchables to reject the Hindu social order without forfeiting their Indian cultural heritage, and he saw in Buddhism a rational and moral ethic that would challenge the obscurantist elements of Hinduism and provide a philosophy of action for Untouchables. Dalit Buddhism can be considered a "popular religion" not because it is less rational or ethical than doctrinal religions, but because it was constituted in the activity of popular struggle, defines its adherents in opposition to the dominant culture, and provides a new identity for Dalits.

Ambedkar's purpose in writing the Dhamma was to bring together the life and teachings of the Buddha in a single consistent work. He rejected conventional explanations of Buddhism as often contradictory and attempted to replace them with arguments based on humanism and science. Yet, although the Dhamma is intended as an explication of Budhha's teachings, it is Ambedkar's political voice that pervades the text and establishes its historical importance. Ambedkar develops his interpretation of religion by taking the reader through the life of the Buddha and selecting those events in Gautama's life that most effectively communicate Ambedkar's own political message. Ambedkar thus speaks through Gautama and politicizes the Buddha's philosophy as he theologizes his own political views. In a very real sense, the text represents Ambedkar's dhamma as much as it does the Buddha's.  

Ambedkar begins with Gautama's childhood training as a Kshatriya and develops a critique of varna ideology by noting Gautama's questioning of "Kshatriya dharma" by his refusal to participate in warfare, the traditional duty of his caste. This refusal led Gautama to choose parivrajka (renunciation) and exile over his family duty as householder and his caste duty as warrior. While in exile, Gautama reflected on the nature of warfare and its relation to human suffering. Because he followed reason rather than blind obedience to family or caste duty, he saw that warfare is only a part of the larger problem of conflict between all classes of people: "the conflict between classes is constant and perpetual. It is this which is the root of all sorrow and suffering in the world." (Ambedkar 1984:45). Gautama then determined to investigate the problem of human suffering and the solutions offered by traditional philosophies.

His intellectual odyssey led him to examine a number of Brahmanic teachings, all of which emphasized self-mortification and control of the body as the means to salvation. Gautama entered an ashram and, "gazing at their strange penances," observed the Brahman ascetics as they fasted on roots and grasses, ate stones, ground corn with their teeth, and inflicted tortures on their bodies (Ambedkar 1984:46). Gautama tried to emulate the Brahmins. He stopped his breathing to enhance his concentration and subjected his body to severe torture, but found that these practices only caused pain; they were meant for the attainment of heaven and did not bring him any closer to solving the problem of human suffering on earth (Ambedkar 1984:47). He realized, in fact, that torturing the body by denying its basic needs destroyed mental endurance, prevented the acquisition of knowledge, and stood in the way of human liberation. If mind is the source of reason, upon which religion must be based, then one should be concerned with nurturing the mind. This, in turn, required a healthy body. Gautama decided that, "true calm and the self-possession of the

3Reference to Ambedkar's text are noted as Dhamma, while "dhamma" refers to the Pali term. The Dhamma was published posthumously in 1957. Ambedkar had finished the manuscript in February 1956 but was still correcting the proofs of the preface and introduction at the time of his death in December.
mind is properly obtained by the constant satisfaction of the body’s wants” (Ambedkar 1984:52).

When all traditional paths to knowledge failed to resolve the problem of suffering, Gautama sat under a banyan tree and meditated for four weeks, after which he attained enlightenment. In his enlightened state, Gautama, the Buddha, realized that his search actually was concerned with two problems: “The first problem was that there was suffering [dukkha] in the world and the second problem was how to remove this suffering and make mankind happy” (Ambedkar 1984:55). While ascetics devoted their spiritual practices to transcending suffering and attaining heaven, the Buddha was concerned with the elimination of human suffering from the world. This concern became the foundation of dhamma and represents the crucial characteristic of Ambedkar’s action-oriented Buddhism.

After attaining enlightenment, the Buddha systematically examined the Samhitas, Brahmanas, and Upanishads for a solution to the problem of human suffering. He found, however, that these texts were not based on logic or fact, were devoid of social values, and were unable to address the practical aspects of human suffering. Ambedkar notes Gautama’s criticism of all the traditional texts, but he focuses particularly on the Brahmanas, the textual embodiment of Brahman ideology, in order to attack the dominant ideas of Brahmanic culture. Buddha’s critique of Brahmanism has four foci: the infallibility of the Vedas; the ritual sacrifice; the Chaturvarna order; and the doctrines of transmigration and karma.

The Buddha, Ambedkar (1984:65) tells us, rejected the Brahmanic thesis that the Vedas are infallible and cannot be questioned or challenged. The notion of infallibility fixed the authority of the Vedas and precluded any re-examination of or challenge to their contents. Since freedom of thought alone leads to the truth, nothing can be fixed, authoritative, or infallible, and everything must be open to rational critical investigation.

The question of sacrifice struck directly at the ritual status and economic base of the Brahman priests. Buddha did not reject all sacrifice. He distinguished between true sacrifice, self-denial for the good of others, and false sacrifice, killing animals for personal benefit (Ambedkar 1984:65). Brahman priests gained prestige and wealth from performing false sacrifices, and Buddha explicitly disallowed these for his followers.

Buddha rejected Chaturvarna, the Brahmanic organization of society into unequal classes, and insisted that this order was Brahman-made rather than natural (Ambedkar 1984:65–66). Inequality is not simply a consequence of Chaturvarna; it is the foundation and official doctrine of the Brahman world-view. The Buddha’s attack on the Brahmanic law of karma relates to his rejection of Chaturvarna, since karma naturalized and fixed the inequality and suffering in the Chaturvarna system. Karma was calculated to sap the spirit of revolt completely. No one was responsible for the suffering of man except he himself. Revolt could not alter the state of suffering; for suffering was fixed by his past Karma as his lot in this life. The Shudras and women—the two classes whose humanity was most mutilated by Brahmanism—had no power to rebel against the system.

(Ambedkar 1984:66)

Ambedkar reinterpreted the key concepts of transmigration and karma (Pali, kamma) to distinguish between the Buddha’s rational explanation of these concepts and the speculative arguments of the Brahmans. Buddha denied the existence of a soul but taught the doctrine of rebirth. The question is, therefore, what is reborn if there is no soul? Ambedkar (1984:236–41) drew upon scientific analogies to
present the Buddha’s view of rebirth. The body is composed of elements of matter which, at death, disperse and join the mass of elements in space. Eventually, elements from this mass recombine to produce a new birth. The new body may contain elements of various previous bodies, so there is no question of the transmigration of the same soul or sentient being from one life to another; there is only a rebirth of elements. Each new birth represents a distinctive combination of elements in a unique individual. Thus, Ambedkar explains, Buddha denied the transmigration of the soul but affirmed the existence and regeneration of matter.

Ambedkar (1984:242–48) also subjected the doctrine of karma to scientific explanation. The Hindu belief in a soul, he argues, supports an individualistic and fatalistic interpretation of karma. Hindu karma is hereditary; it is impressed upon the soul and passes from one life to the next via the transmigration of the soul. The Buddhist rejection of transmigration implies that the effects of karma apply only to the present life. But what about the extended doctrine of karma, wherein deeds done in one’s past life predestine one’s present? Did Buddha teach the doctrine of past karma? Ambedkar (1984:243) views this as a pernicious doctrine that precludes human effort, and he argues that Buddha did not believe in the inheritance of past karma. He supports his argument with reference to the science of heredity. If genetic material is passed from parents to child, and a child inherits everything from its parents, then should not the soul and karma also be inherited from them? But karma, Hindus claim, derives from one’s own past actions, not from those of one’s parents. The Hindu doctrine of karma cannot explain the generative source of the immaterial soul, nor can it explain why the body, but not the soul’s karma, is inherited from one’s parents. According to Ambedkar, this inconsistency in the application of the scientific laws of heredity renders the Hindu version of karma nonrational and distinguishes it from the scientific thought of the Buddha.

Ambedkar’s explanation of the Buddhist doctrine of karma counters Hinduism’s fatalistic and individualistic interpretation. Since karma is not inheritable, the status of individuals is not determined by their past but by their present environment. Thus, Untouchability is not the product of an individual’s past sins but of society’s present order. Furthermore, karma is a social category. If individuals perform good deeds, the effects of those deeds will be beneficial for the social order; if they commit bad deeds, the whole society will suffer. An individual’s behavior affects society as a whole, implying a notion of collective moral responsibility:

The Law of Kamma has to do only with the question of general moral order. It has nothing to do with the fortunes or misfortunes of an individual. It is concerned with the maintenance of the moral order in the universe.

(Ambedkar 1984:173)

The teachings of the Buddha have been discussed in various metaphysical contexts. But, in the Dhamma, Ambedkar (1984:159) asks, “Did the Buddha have no Social Message? Did the Buddha teach justice? . . . love? . . . liberty? . . . equality? . . . fraternity? Could the Buddha answer Karl Marx?” Ambedkar’s reference to Marx was not simply rhetorical. He explored ideas about social action and class conflict in a speech to the Fourth World Fellowship of Buddhist Conference in Nepal in November 1956 and in his famous essay, “Buddha or Karl Marx,” published

4This 34-page essay was found among Ambedkar’s unpublished manuscripts after his death, and was published in the third volume of his writings and speeches (Ambedkar 1987). Among the books that Ambedkar’s followers believed he had completed was one entitled “The Buddha and Karl Marx” (Keer 1981:511). His editors explain, however, that they found an outline of the book, but did not find a completed manuscript with that title among Ambedkar’s unpublished papers (Ambedkar 1987:xiv–xv).
after his death, in which he outlined the similarities and differences between Buddhism and Marxism. Ambedkar rejected a number of Marxist assumptions, including the inevitability of socialism and the use of violence to bring about social change, but he accepted the core of Marx's ideas as essential to the goals of the Untouchable movement:

(i) The function of philosophy is to reconstruct the world and not to waste its time in explaining the origin of the world. (ii) That there is a conflict of interest between class and class. (iii) That private ownership of property brings power to one class and sorrow to another through exploitation. (iv) That it is necessary for the good of society that the sorrow be removed by the abolition of private property. (Ambedkar 1987:444)

Ambedkar's interest in Marxism is further evident in his assertion that the term dukkha (suffering), which is the foundation of the Buddha's religion, refers to exploitation and poverty (Ahir 1990:184). Thus, the fundamental purpose of dhamma is the recognition and removal of suffering through human action. The emphasis on social action, exploitation, and poverty, and the rejection of belief in the supernatural, soul, salvation, and rituals are the significant elements of Ambedkar's Buddhism. But Ambedkar went even further in his critique of religion. "The centre of Dhamma," Ambedkar (1984:83) explains, "is man and the relation of man to man in his life on earth." Thus, Ambedkar (1984:225–31) perceives an essential contradiction between religion and dhamma: religion is personal, dhamma is social; religion explains the world, dhamma reconstructs the world; religion is concerned with god, soul, and salvation, dhamma is concerned with ending human suffering. Dhamma, in other words, is moral action for social change. Like other forms of liberation theology, Ambedkar's Buddhism indicts the powerful and the privileged for the inequality and sufferings of society, views the poor as the victims of exploitation, and calls for the elimination of suffering through social action.

**Dalit Panthers**

**and Texts of Rebellion**

By the late 1960s, the first generation of Dalit youth to have received educational benefits under the Indian government's reservations policy began to express, through literature, their hatred of the Hindu caste system, their anger toward the ineffective mainstream Dalit political movement, and their disillusionment about the oppressive conditions of Dalits that continued to exist despite conversion to Buddhism and two decades of independence. In the late 1960s, Dalit writers became part of the Little Magazine Movement, which challenged the literary monopoly of high-caste Hindus and brought anti-establishment literature to the masses through Marathi literary magazines such as Vidrob, Nagova, and Aambi. The small collectives that ran these nonprofit magazines produced many of the modern non-Brahman writers of Maharashtra. The poets of the Little Magazine Movement created a new language through which Dalit resistance to power and oppression could become a public discourse, and established the trend for Dalit politics in which virtually every Dalit who could write became a poet before becoming an activist.

The Dalit Panthers, organized in June 1972 in Siddharth Nagar, Bombay, were rooted in the Little Magazine Movement and were inspired by the Black Panthers of America, with whose militant literature, community service, and political struggle
the Dalits were familiar (Murugkar 1991). They called themselves “Dalit,” meaning downtrodden or ground down, because it was a casteless term that both acknowledged and challenged their history of caste oppression; and “Panthers” because “they were supposed to fight for their rights like panthers, and not get suppressed by the strength and might of their oppressors” (Murugkar 1991:64).

Namdev Dhasal, Raja Dhale, J. V. Pawar, Arun Kamble, and other members of the Panthers were poets from the slums of Bombay whose experiences of the violence of caste oppression were expressed through angry, shocking, disrespectful, but poetic language. Dhasal used the street images of prostitutes and pimps on Faulkland Road to contrast the miserable life of Untouchables with the privilege of Brahmans; Keshav Meshram cursed the “mother-fucker God” of the Brahmans for laughing shamelessly in the face of Untouchable despair; and V. L. Kalekar inverted varna ideology by speaking of the “economic, social, political, mental, religious, moral and cultural pollution” of caste Hindus (quoted in Joshi 1986:77, 83). The poet-leaders of the Dalit Panthers organized demonstrations, publicly attacked images of Hindu deities, burned the Bhagavad Gita, and engineered a successful election boycott to bring attention to the desperate situation of the Untouchables.

The Panther movement was characterized in the beginning as Buddhist and vaguely socialist but as having no specific political ideology. As the Panthers became better organized and more popular, they went beyond the criticism of caste and addressed issues of economics and class. An explicit ideological statement appeared in 1973, when Dhasal, with the cooperation of Naxalite activists, issued a manifesto (in Marathi) that integrates Marx’s views of exploitation with Ambedkar’s critique of cultural oppression. The Panther manifesto confirms that the Panthers have “recognized the revolutionary nature and aspiration of the masses”; it equates Congress rule with Hindu feudalism; it calls for the redistribution of land and for the elimination of “the varna system, caste system and class system”; and it criticizes the opportunist politics of the parliamentarian left and the corruption and casteist politics of the Republican Party of India.7

The identification of Dalit struggles with those of African Americans, Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Africans indicates an international identity of the oppressed, which is more explicitly stated in the manifesto’s recognition of Dalits as: “Members of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, Neo Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion.”

The manifesto identifies the friends of Dalits as those true-left revolutionary parties that want to eliminate caste and class oppression; and it defines the enemies of Dalits as “power, wealth, price; landlords, capitalists, money-lenders and their

5Naxalites were high-caste Hindu members of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist). Their 1967 uprising in West Bengal and other areas of Northeast and Eastern India is discussed in Banerjee 1980.

6The Marxian content of the manifesto was never accepted by all Panthers and, in fact, was opposed by Dhale and his followers, who wanted a strictly Buddhist identity. The conflict between Dhasal and Dhale was the cause of the 1974 split in the Dalit Panthers. The manifesto remains important to the Bharatiya Dalit Panthers (formed in 1977), who are organized according to the communist principle of democratic centralism, although they do not consider themselves communists and do not follow the communist parties. All quotations from the Panther manifesto are translated from Marathi and are from Joshi (1986:141–47).

7The Republican Party of India (RPI) was the transformation of Ambedkar’s Scheduled Castes Federation but was not formally organized until 1957, after Ambedkar’s death. As a parliamentary party, it was forced into alliances with other parties and suffered from factionalism. It was perceived as a mainstream, ineffective party by younger Dalits who eventually formed the more radical Dalit Panthers.
lackeys; those parties who indulge in religious or casteist politics, and the Government which depends on them." It argues that the problems of Dalits "cannot be solved within the framework of religion and caste [but require] a scientific outlook, class consciousness and a completely atheistic and fighting humanism." And it clearly states the Panthers' ultimate goal:

We will not be satisfied easily now. We do not want a little piece in the Brahmin Alley. We want the rule of the whole land. We are not looking at persons but at a system. Change of heart, liberal education, etc., will not end our state of exploitation. When we gather a revolutionary mass, rouse the people, out of the struggle of this giant mass will come the tidal wave of revolution.

The Panther manifesto, written in a language more militant and polemical than that of the Dhamma, nevertheless shares the substance and spirit of Ambedkar’s political theology. There is an essentially human-centered ethic in the writings of Ambedkar and the Panthers that underlies their conviction that private property and exploitation are the “sins” that cause human suffering and that salvation from suffering can be eliminated only through human action.

Bharatiya Dalit Panthers: Political Theology in Practice

The Dalit Panthers split in 1974, with Namdeo Dhasal and Raja Dhale heading antagonistic factions, and fragmentation and internal disputes continue to divide the Dalit movement. The Bharatiya Dalit Panthers (BDP), a faction opposing Dhale which was organized in 1977 under the leadership of Arun Kamble, S. M. Pradhan, Ramdas Athawale, and D. Mhaske, became active in slums in the Pimpri-Chinchwad area, an industrial center approximately fifteen miles northwest of Pune along the Bombay-Pune Road. The leaders of the BDP differ significantly from the poet-leaders of the original Dalit Panthers. Their level of education is lower, and their political commitment is expressed in everyday struggles on behalf of slum residents rather than through poetry. The BDP has not contributed any texts to the Dalit movement, but its political activities embody the teachings of Ambedkar and the radical spirit of the Dalit Panther manifesto.

The BDP is a grass-roots organization that contests local elections, follows Ambedkar’s teachings, distrusts the communist and mainstream Dalit parties, and opposes the Congress Party. Its members are not popular with more educated and middle-class Dalits, who often refer to them as goondas (thugs). A split in the BDP in the mid-1980s led to the formation of Jogendra Kavade’s group, the Dalit Mukti Sena (DMS). Both the BDP and DMS are currently active in Bhimnagar, a predominantly Dalit slum in Pimpri-Chinchwad, but the disagreements between them do not interfere with their common goal. Leaders of both groups state:

The two groups are actually one. Our work is the same. We are both fighting for justice and social rights. Whenever there is any program, we all come together to celebrate. Then there are no fights or arguments. Whenever there is a necessity to fight with the government, then we come together.

Dalit political economist S. K. Thorat (personal communication) has suggested that much of the factionalism within the Dalit movement is the result of the inability
of its leaders to formulate a coherent political and economic ideology based on the writings of Ambedkar. While this is certainly evident (and devastating) for the movement as a whole, particular Dalit groups have been able to adopt an ideological position, institute specific strategies, and achieve local successes. The BDP, the larger and more effective organization in Bhimnagar, integrates socialist goals with Ambedkar's emphasis on moral living to effect change on the local level.

The BDP moved into Bhimnagar in the early 1980s and concentrated on obtaining basic services and preventing demolition of the slum. But the power of businessmen,
landowners, and politicians obstructed its efforts and, after five years of activism, the BDP managed to obtain only four water taps for the slum. There are still no paved roads, electricity, drainage system, latrines, clinic, or nearby school, and people still fear demolition.

The daily agenda of the BDP revolves around the slum residents’ struggles, which encompass issues of caste, class, and gender and test the organization’s commitment to helping the poor. The leaders of the BDP emphasize class politics and moral duty. On the one hand, the leadership’s goal is the “economic amelioration of these poor people.” On the other, leaders recognize that “life in the slum means living on one’s own strength and helping others to live. And preparing others for living is an important responsibility for the leaders.”

The residents acknowledge and respect the efforts of the BDP. Despite the social heterogeneity of the slum, residents view themselves as a community vis-à-vis the outside world. An important characteristic of the leadership, one resident explained, is that leaders “can understand ‘outside people,’ their way of talking and behavior, and can also understand their own people’s way of talking, and they combine both together and help people.” The leadership of the BDP accepts the manifesto’s inclusive identity of “Dalit” and consistently works for the underdog, whether that person is Mahar, Muslim, or caste Hindu. It defends the poor, those who “don’t belong to anyone,” against harassment by police, politicians, and dadas (crime bosses). It opposes government attempts to demolish slums and tries to find housing for the homeless. It obtains school admissions for poor children. It informs slum residents about available social welfare programs and government loans. It organizes casual laborers around work issues and assists them in disputes with labor contractors. It involves women in its activities through a special women’s wing that educates women, teaches them how to deal with government officials, and mobilizes them for demonstrations.

The organization’s attention to women’s issues is significant and reflects Ambedkar’s own concern for gender equality. Dalit women in Bhimnagar spoke of numerous incidents of abuse, rape, and kidnaping by police and outsiders. While a few admitted that they would not seek help for these problems, others told of how the BDP had intervened to help women: “Day and night men used to go and open women’s houses. That’s why the Panthers were started here. At night, men would take away a woman who slept near her husband—this slum was like that.” Leaders of the BDP explain that they even try to reconcile quarreling spouses if one party seeks their help:

Women are afraid to complain against their husbands, but if [abuse] goes on every day they have to seek help. Sometimes the neighbors tell leaders and we go to the husband and warn him to stop. But usually we like to have both husband and wife to talk to. Those who think izzat [honor] is important will not let their personal problems go outside the house. But there are some who do not consider that important, so they do come to us for help.

The leadership attempts to empower women by holding regular shabirs (study circles), through which women learn to confront bureaucratic authority. Women leaders in Bhimnagar have been active in educating Dalit women about eviction issues, discussing family problems such as alcohol and wife abuse, preparing women to respond to pressures from government family planning workers, and recruiting women for political demonstrations. The BDP also maintains an adult-education program in which women are taught reading, writing, arithmetic, hygiene, Buddhist prayers, and stories about the Buddha, Ambedkar, and Maharashtrian folk figures.
The BDP acknowledges its commitment to socialism and Buddhist morality in public statements. In 1986 a leader of the BDP in Bhimnagar contested a Corporation (City Council) seat. His campaign demonstrated a careful balance of radical activism and moral principle. In speeches and literature, he addressed the organization's political goals: "to fight imperialism, to strengthen the voice of the poor, to answer atrocities immediately, to bring socialism among the poor and rich." He emphasized the moral concerns of the BDP: "to realize the dream of Babasaheb [Ambedkar], to eradicate corruption, to destroy the bad activities of uncles and nephews, to side with the just courageously, to sacrifice life for the poor if necessary, to [bring about] pure ethical politics." He spoke strongly against casteism, economic inequality, and the "hypocrisy and pretenses of godliness," and he projected an image of himself as an "enemy to corruption, a support to the supportless, a strong voice of the weak, a selfless, outspoken, militant, courageous leopard."

Violence is a significant part of daily life in Bhimnagar and, because of their radical stand, members of the BDP often are singled out by police for beatings and false arrests. Female Dalit activists are special targets of police harassment. Dalit activism also leads to confrontation with criminal elements and with fundamentalist Hindus who view Dalits as competitors for jobs and educational benefits. Because the BDP has chosen a more radical position than other Dalit organizations, it is important to understand how the organization reconciles its emphasis on morality with its almost daily encounters with violence. Here Ambedkar's (1984:250) distinction between the will to kill and the need to kill, between absolute and constructive violence, is relevant. Ambedkar's objection to Marxism was based on its uncritical acceptance of violent means to achieve an otherwise legitimate goal. Ambedkar rejected absolute violence as a means to eliminate exploitation, but he also rejected absolute nonviolence. The Buddha's doctrine of abhima (nonviolence) is fundamental, Ambedkar noted, but not absolute:

He taught that evil should be cured by the return of good. But he never preached that evil should be allowed to overpower good. He stood for Abhima. He denounced Himsa (violence). But he did not deny that Himsa may be the last resort to save good being destroyed by evil.

(Ambedkar 1984:369)

Thus, while Buddha was against absolute violence, "he was . . . in favor of justice and where justice required he permitted the use of force" (Ambedkar 1987:450). Ambedkar distinguished further between the proper use of force as the source of energy for a right cause and as a last resort, and the improper use of force. The constructive use of force assures that it is used efficiently to conserve as many ends as possible while destroying evil (Ambedkar 1987:451). Private property, for example, is an evil that must be destroyed, but the use of force against the property owner must be constructive; it must not destroy other valuable ends, such as justice and freedom.

The Dalit Panthers, born of frustration with the inefficacy of parliamentary politics and raised on the violence of casteism, acknowledged violence as an inevitable

4 In December 1989, all Dalit factions, including the Republican Party of India, the Bharatiya Dalit Panthers and the Dalit Mukti Sena, united briefly under the RPI flag to strengthen themselves against increasing attacks by Hindu fundamentalist and naxalist groups in Maharashtra. For a discussion of the opposition between fundamentalist Hindus and Buddhist Dalits, see Contursi 1989.

I am grateful to S. K. Thorat for pointing out this aspect of Ambedkar's views on violence.
part of social change. But the violence used by the weak to defend themselves against the powerful is categorically distinct from the institutionalized, legitimized, and repressive violence by which the powerful victimize the weak. If the Dalit Panthers engaged in violence, it was a violence provoked by the legitimizing repression of state and religion. The Panther manifesto unequivocally states that the goals of the Dalit movement cannot be achieved through absolute nonviolence:

Legalistic appeals, requests, demands for concessions, elections, satyagraha—out of these, society will never change. Our ideas of social revolution and rebellion will not be borne by such paper-made vehicles. They will sprout in the soil, flower in the mind and then will come into full being with the help of a steel strong vehicle.

(in Joshi 1986:146)

The Panther factions do not ignore questions regarding the morality of violence, however. DMS leaders claim that they split from the BDP over the latter’s excessive use of violence. But the BDP says that its use of violence is situational, that it first tries “to go by the law.” In resolving labor problems, for example, the BDP views strikes as a last resort and attempts first to negotiate with employers regarding the workers’ needs:

We try to convince [employers] that the difficulty of the worker is real and he’s not getting enough for his food, enough for his survival. We try to tell them to “raise one rupee.” But if they do not accept, then we adopt measures like satyagraha, marcha [demonstration] and agitation.

The BDP also resorts to force in its dealings with politicians. During one municipal election, the Congress (l) candidate promised slum residents water and latrine facilities in return for votes. Two weeks before the election, water connections were brought into the slum and foundations were dug for latrines. After the candidate won, the connections were removed and the latrine pits filled in. Petitions, rallies, marches, and protest visits to the newly elected official failed to bring relief. In a final desperate act, slum leaders broke the main pipeline and took water illegally. Only then were water taps installed in Bhimnagar. By destroying government property only after first organizing marches, rallies, and demonstrations, the BDP used force as a last resort. As the leaders explain,

Our aim is to protect democracy and bring about a socialist state. We are not opposed to violent revolution, but we feel that as long as we can, we should use only democratic and peaceful ways of persuading and convincing people. But if that is not possible, then we would take up even violence as a way of change.

This statement, one may argue, implies a constructive use of force that is consistent with Ambedkar’s interpretation of Buddha’s teachings. In its struggle to reconstruct society based on socialist democracy and moral social relations, the BDP finds in Ambedkar and the Buddha a guide to means and in Marx a vision of its ultimate goal.

Political Theology
as an Interdiscursive Field

Scholars traditionally have posited a functional distinction between religion and politics: Religion is concerned with elements of the sacred and the supernatural,
Illustration 2. Dalit women inside home in Bhimnagar. Photograph on wall is of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. (Photo by Janet Contursi.)

and politics with competition for and control over resources. Yet, as the case of the Bharatiya Dalit Panthers shows, at the level of lived experience, these formal distinctions are meaningless. People do not compartmentalize their everyday ideas and behaviors in the way that scholars compartmentalize knowledge. Hall’s (1985) critique of poststructuralism addresses this issue by arguing that current theoretical trends that privilege “difference” preclude an understanding of how discourses can be simultaneously different and in unity.

The purpose of discerning patterns of articulation between the apparently distinct discourses of politics and religion lies in the need to understand how and why these discourses lend themselves to the contestation of power in actual circumstances. Political theologies illuminate the process of struggle between those who would impose moral and legal authority over others and those seeking liberation from imposed authority. Elite discourses on religion and politics share a common assumption about human nature, power, and authority that non-elite groups contest through their own political theologies.

Sin and Suffering:  
The Human Dilemma

Weber’s (1964:116–17) discussion of the religious preferences of nonprivileged classes acknowledges that, in addition to the individual’s existential/practical need to believe in salvation, there exists “an inner compulsion to understand the world as a meaningful cosmos.” The hope for immortality or a better rebirth may allow
acceptance of the sufferings of this world, but it cannot explain why suffering, particularly unjust suffering, exists. The individual’s need to comprehend the purpose and meaning of suffering is for Weber the intellectual/metaphysical basis of salvation religions.

This very need, however, presents a credibility problem for salvation religions. Weber (1964:138–39) explains that the more the rationalization of religion tends toward the conception of a transcendental unitary god who is universal, the more there arises the problem of how the extraordinary power of such a god may be reconciled with the imperfection of the world that he has created and rules over.

The need to vindicate god for allowing the existence of suffering and to reconcile godly omnipotence with human impotence, almighty omniscience with human ignorance, and divine justice with human wickedness is the problem of theodicy that is inherent in the doctrines of all salvation religions. Theodicy reveals a logical relationship between sin, suffering, and salvation: Since god is perfect and just, suffering must be a consequence of human sinfulness, and the inherent sinfulness of humankind imposes a need for divine salvation.

Solutions to the problem of theodicy take many forms, with predestination, dualism, and karma being only ideal types. Weber’s (1964:147) implication that a variety of combinative possibilities exist for solving the problem of theodicy is illustrated in studies of popular religion in South Asia, where scholars have found that villagers hold multiple explanations for suffering. While karma may be invoked as an ultimate explanation for important life experiences and conditions, villagers often explain everyday misfortunes by reference to angry deities, sorcerers, malevolent spirits, or cosmic influences (Babb 1983; Daniel 1983; Keyes 1983; Kolenda 1964, 1981; McHugh 1989; Obeysekere 1968; Sharma 1973; Wadley 1983). What is common in villagers’ explanations, and what links them to the ideal solutions examined by Weber, is the tendency to view suffering as something humanity brings upon itself, either through wrongful actions, neglect of duty, or inherent fallibility. If karma is invoked as the ultimate cause of one’s misfortune, the misfortune is assumed to be the result of human (although not necessarily one’s own) actions. If a more immediate cause of misfortune is acknowledged, such as an angry spirit or deity, suffering is seen as just retribution for the failure to perform the proper ritual. If sorcery is blamed for suffering, human agency is again at fault.

The critical point here is that solutions that vindicate god ultimately indict humanity for the existence of evil and suffering. The solution of theodicy thus requires, as Berger (1969:78) argues, a ‘profoundly masochistic shift from the question about the justice of God to that about the sinfulness of man. . . . [T]he problem of theodicy is translated into the problem of anthropodicy.’ This ‘religious masochism’ (Berger 1969:73) is implicit in a discourse that glorifies notions of service, devotion, selflessness, duty, surrender, penance, propitiation, obedience, sacrifice, suffering, and submission. Although the individual may indeed make rational choices regarding the explanations for suffering and the actions that can counteract misfortune, those choices are constrained within religious discourses that define humanity as essentially sinful and human suffering as natural, inevitable, and unchangeable. The world, such as it is, is the product of human evil and error, and, in the face of its essential sinfulness, humanity has little recourse other than submission to divine power and authority.
Sovereignty and Political Authority

These assumptions about human nature and authority have their counterpart in political discourse. The recently translated work of the twentieth-century legal scholar, Carl Schmitt,\(^{10}\) represents an attempt to understand the similarities in political and theological discourses that might account for their structural unity. Schmitt (1985:36) argues that:

All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development—in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver—but also because of their systematic structure.

Schmitt’s analysis of the concept of sovereignty, when viewed in conjunction with Weber’s and Berger’s discussions of theodicy, reveals an implicit pattern of articulation between political and religious discourses. The notion of the sovereign in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe referred both to god and monarch and was based on the idea of their transcendance vis-à-vis the world and the state, respectively. Church and ruler were regarded as infallible decision-makers and, hence, the highest authorities. Referring to the views of the conservative political philosopher, Joseph de Maistre, Schmitt (1985:55–56) notes that

sovereignty . . . essentially meant decision. . . . [T]he relevance of the state rested on the fact that it provided a decision, the relevance of the Church on its rendering of the last decision that could not be appealed. Infallibility was . . . the essence of the decision that cannot be appealed, and the infallibility of the spiritual order was of the same nature as the sovereignty of the state order. . . . The important point was that no higher authority could review the decision.

The vindication of the sovereign from the consequences of his decisions, like the vindication of god in the face of human suffering, was based on the recognition of his transcendent authority, and was further supported and justified by the elite conceptualization of the popular masses. The implication in theodicy that humans are sinful and the cause of all suffering was reflected in the political realm in arguments about the “nature of men,” particularly those of the lower classes, who were characterized by the elite as ignorant, unruly, evil, and wicked, and as having an indestructible “will to power” (Schmitt 1985:56–58). Faced with the alternative of mob rule, the elites’ need for a sole decision-maker was more urgent than questions about how a decision was made or whether it was just.

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century democratic revolutions and the extension of popular suffrage theoretically replaced rule by a sole decision-maker with rule according to the decisions of the people, a concept that remained under attack from liberals and conservatives, including Le Bon, Nietzsche, Flaubert, and Ibsen. Undoubtedly, for the elite, decision-making by the masses rather than the monarch inverted the correct order of things and raised the specter of chaos. Schmitt (1985:50–

\(^{10}\)Schmitt remains a controversial figure because of his position in Germany during the 1930s. He was tried at Nuremberg but was acquitted of any complicity in Nazi crimes and propaganda. For an analysis of his work, his concept of decisionism, and his influence on the Frankfurt School, see the summer 1987 issue of Telos. I draw from his 1922 writings which, despite his later political affiliation (still a topic of debate), are nevertheless important contributions to political and legal theory.
51) notes that it was the nineteenth-century radicals who most clearly grasped the revolutionary meaning of secular humanism and popular decision-making:

After the writers of the Restoration developed a political theology, the radicals who opposed all existing order directed, with heightened awareness, their ideological efforts against the belief in God altogether, fighting that belief as if it were the most fundamental expression of the belief in any authority and unity. . . . (A)mong the most extreme radicals, a consequent atheism began to prevail. The German left-Hegelians . . . were no less vehement than Proudhon in proclaiming that mankind had to be substituted for God. . . . Precisely because of his youthful intuition, the utterance of the young Engels in the years 1842–1844 is of the greatest significance: "The essence of the state, as that of religion, is mankind’s fear of itself."

Fear of popular decision-making is not confined to Western political traditions. India’s varna ideology, an organic world-view, explained social order and stability as the result of caste hierarchy, in which religious and political decision-making was controlled by members of the highest castes. High-caste texts describe the consequences of defying the natural order:

[M]en become corrupt and incapable of svāraj or self-rule, they begin to ignore their dharma [duty]. This results in varnasākara or "confusion of castes," arājākata or lawlessness, mātasyāṅgata or the law of the sea . . . according to which the big fish eat the small, and the eventual disintegration of the social order . . . [H]ence the institution of government becomes necessary.

(Parekh 1986:20–21)

In the Arthasastra, his treatise on monarchical government, Kautilya recognizes the king’s authority as the final decision-maker as well as his duty to protect the people, maintain their customs, and preserve the dharma and the social order (Heesterman 1985; Parmar 1987).

The people’s potential to defy authority and subvert the existing social order provides the justification for elite power. The association of the state with order and of the popular masses with disorder is the axiom of elite political thought that determines the state’s response to popular social movements. Throughout history, movements of oppressed people have been defined by the authority structure as radical, insurgent, terrorist, subversive, or counterrevolutionary; have been branded as unlawful; and have been repressed through the legitimizing violence of the state.

Human Nature, Authority and Popular Movements

As this discussion of theodicy and sovereignty suggests, elite religious and political discourses share a common philosophical assumption regarding the nature of humanity and the need for a hierarchical authority structure. The Christian fundamentalist view of humanity as inherently sinful, for example, lends support to elite notions of humanity and to the need for authority, law, and order. Fundamentalists respond to a perceived threat of social disintegration by resorting to scriptural texts and charismatic leaders to reassert moral authority and reinstate social order (Caplan 1987). Christian fundamentalist sects
are expressions, sometimes highly perverted and reactionary expressions, of the need for community, stability, and authoritative moral leadership; the need to find meaning and order in life; the need to submit to a rigorous and demanding spiritual discipline, and to give oneself to a cause higher than the self.  

(Lasch 1982:16)

The belief that disorder results from secular forces undermining traditional authority leads Christian fundamentalists to oppose measures that might enhance popular decision-making and to advocate increased legal controls or restrictions on certain, generally weaker, sectors of society. Moral Majority members, for example, oppose an Equal Rights Amendment and believe that women “should be reinstated in their rightful place, under the benign control of men” (Caplan 1987:18).

Groups that oppose the dominant power structure offer notions of human nature that counter those found in elite discourses. Rather than viewing humans as inherently sinful and in need of a higher authority, many progressive groups define sin, suffering, and salvation in political terms. Lancaster (1988:77–78) notes that liberation theology in Nicaragua conceptualizes sin as “that which most radically divides man from man and estranges humanity from God: exploitation.” Thus, the poor do not experience a sense of inherent inferiority because of sin but rather see themselves as the victims of exploitation by the wealthy. “Sin must thus be said to originate, if not from the deliberate actions of particular persons (the rich), then certainly in the process of their accumulation of wealth” (Lancaster 1988:78). As social and spiritual goals coincide, the Nicaraguan poor see salvation as the elimination of political and economic suffering through collective action against structures of power.

Members of the Bharatiya Dalit Panthers similarly view the disruption of the status quo as necessary for the establishment of a just and egalitarian society. The Panther movement is grounded in texts that reject notions of the inherent impurity of Untouchables and the natural superiority of the higher castes and that provide an alternative vision of self and society. Despite the weakness and fragmentation of the movement, its goals constitute such a threat to religious and political authority structures that Dalits are consistently harassed and attacked by Hindu fundamentalists, and the Panthers are denounced as criminals and violently repressed by the police.

If, as Althusser (1971) has argued, what is important about ideology is the way it interpellates, or constitutes the individual, then religious and political discourses that constitute individuals as sinful and in need of a higher authority must be analyzed for their potential effects. More specifically, since individuals not only learn the objectified meanings of their culture but identify with them, internalize them, and are constituted through them (Berger 1969:15), the differential positioning of social groups in cultural discourses is significant. The responses of stigmatized groups (Berreman 1979; Thorat 1982) to various forms of cultural oppression indicate some common strategies. Throughout history, oppressed peoples have developed political theologies, discourses of resistance that are embodied in texts, ideologies, and actions, and are centered around a notion of the morality of defiance, refusal, rebellion, and rejection. The political theologies of subordinate groups, perhaps lacking in sophistication and theoretical consistency, nevertheless are the stuff of popular culture.

Members of the Bharatiya Dalit Panthers contest authority in various ways: They defy the dominant ideology that defines them as essentially inferior and construct their own system of values and criteria of morality; they utilize forms of protest that are public, collective, and destructive; they maintain solidarity through a shared
goal and self-constituted identity; and they legitimize and perpetuate their resistance through popular education and community activism.

Popular texts bind together and codify the principles that guide the social action of subordinate groups. Ambedkar’s Dharma and the Panther manifesto articulate religious and political discourses within a practical political theology. The Dharma recognizes exploitation as the basis of suffering and proposes moral social action, in lieu of spiritual salvation, to eliminate suffering. The manifesto reinforces this basic theme, provides a class analysis and radical Dalit identity, and acknowledges the necessity of constructive violence as an ultimate means to eliminate exploitation. Dalit resistance has encountered many obstacles and achieved only small victories. Nonetheless, the Panthers demonstrate how oppressed people may redefine their existence, defy authority, come together collectively, and occasionally win.

List of References


