



Introduction Visions

This is a study of the socioeconomic perspectives of the leading anticaste intellectuals over a period of five centuries, from the ‘early modern’ period of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries to the end of colonial rule. It focuses on the framework of their perspectives, their visions, their ‘utopias’. In fact, the first formulation of an Indian version of utopia comes not from elite literature, but from one of the anticaste intellectuals with a mass following. The bhakti radical, Sant Ravidas (c. 1450–1520), was the first to formulate an Indian version of utopia in his song “Begumpura”. Begumpura, the ‘city without sorrow’, is a casteless, classless society; a modern society, one without a mention of temples; an urban society as contrasted with Gandhi’s village utopia of *Ram Rajya*. “Begumpura” describes a land with no taxes, toil or harassment, where there is no hierarchy but all are equal. Finally, calling himself a ‘tanner now set free’ he proclaims that he wanders freely with his friends: the right to walk anywhere in a settlement, city or village, is a unique matter for dalits.

During this long period of five centuries covered by this study, India entered the modern era, first on more or less equal terms and in exchange with Europe, then as a colonized and subject country. It was a period of turmoil, of growth, of the formation of new ideas. Elite intellectuals sought to absorb challenges from the class-caste subalterns, developing their vision of India, which took multiple forms: the 'hard *hindutva*' of Savarkar which saw India as basically a Hindu nation, the 'soft *hindutva*' of Gandhi which looked to an idealized Ram Rajya as a goal, the mild socialism of Nehru, and the harder leftism of the communists. During the same period, the subalterns put forward their vision and their goals, within the framework of a unique utopia first conceived by Ravidas and other radical saints.

We shall look at the development of this utopian vision and the socioeconomic characteristics of the society envisioned through this long period. The first four chapters will cover the leading saints of the radical bhakti movement—Namdev and his contemporary bhakti saints, Chokhamela, Janabai, Nirmala, Soyra, Banka and Gora Kumbhar; Kabir, Ravidas, and finally Tukaram. Then we look at the main theorists of the early colonial period—Jotirao Phule and Pandit Iyothee Thass and other leaders of his 'Sakya Buddhist' movement. Pandita Ramabai is an important transitional figure, one who actually sought to establish a utopian community of women. Finally, we look at Periyar E.V. Ramasamy and Dr B.R. Ambedkar, who brought these visions to a climax in debates with marxism, gandhism and other forms of nationalism.

The Contradictions of Modernity: Class, Caste and Utopias

'India is shining' proclaim its fans. It was a slogan that failed to move the broader sections of the electorate. The fact is that while superhighways begin to link the country's great urban complexes, thousands of farmers are committing suicide in

places like Vidarbha, a backward region of the industrialized state of Maharashtra. The ‘me generation’ celebrates high rises in salaries for well-trained professionals, while the poor of the oppressed castes scabble for jobs. Airports become too small to hold the burgeoning airlines and flights, cities too crowded to hold the growing number of cars, while bullock carts continue to ply country roads. Huge high-rises hide the slums below. And privileged-caste killers of bargirls, who wait on men of high society, walk away free from the courts, while their rural counterparts get away with cruel atrocities on dalits.

Modernity is riven with contradictions. Class, race and patriarchy underline the brutalities and achievements of capitalist industrialization, and amid the luxuries of advanced production and the mystic of information technology come clashes of ethnic groups, the sound of missiles, and the fear and reality of war. Every country experiences such contradictions, yet India, as it takes its place in the third millennia modern era, seems to have more than its share.

In marxist terms, contradictions are explained by the nature of capitalist modernity as the stage just before socialism. The rapid growth of the forces of production induced by capitalism has done its work; prosperity is seen as achievable, and can hardly be hidden from the producers of society. Here the main contradiction is between the socialized character of productive forces, the tremendous promise of technology, and the reality of private control and unbridled competition. Socialism, the attainment of a collective human control over all of this, will resolve these contradictions. But as Ambedkar remarked in his “Buddha and Karl Marx” (1987, vol. 3, 444), and as is increasingly clear in the twenty-first century, history has been hard on Marx’s predictions: the proletariat instead of becoming immiserated and uniting to destroy the old society and usher in the new, is itself drastically divided. Ambedkar’s solution was to attack and

level, or annihilate, what marxists called the ‘superstructure’ – the complex edifice of caste oppression in India – as a necessary prelude to achieving a democratic socialist society.

Indian modernity is marked, naxalites would say, with ‘semi-feudal and semi-colonial remnants’. In more modern terms, the presence and power of the West, especially the United States, remain a reality, and even more, the presence and power of caste continue. This defines the contradictions—a rapid rate of growth and ‘India shining’ for some; drought, hunger, farmer suicides and atrocities on dalits and women for others. Men, women and children are attacked and murdered for going ahead of caste Hindus in processions, for claiming humanity, and because of an assumption that they might have killed a cow. The Other Backward Classes (OBCs) continue to remain next to the bottom economically, lacking pride, and beset with their own caste prejudices. With all of this, India remains one of the poorest societies in the world, even with its supposedly luminescent growth rate.

Such contradictions of modernity have not led the exploited and oppressed into acquiescence; rather there has been struggle, marked by a vision of a better society, marked by utopias. Utopias are given birth to by the contradictions of modernity, and they involve both what we may call ‘reason’ and ‘ecstasy’. Ecstasy arises because of the hope and fervent emotion aroused by the possibility of a utopian society, a society of equality and love. Reason defines the road to utopia; it analyzes the current situation of society and shows the strategy needed to realize a better one. Utopias have existed throughout the long centuries of entering into modernity, but with some changes. In the initial period, with the promise of a better society very distant, ecstasy is dominant. But gradually, as the outlines of the situation become clear, reason takes an equal place, and the actors seeking utopia begin to grapple with the actualities of realizing it.

They are utopias, not simply fantasies, because they have a foothold in reality and yet contradict the uglier aspects of reality. They have existed for the centuries in which modernity has been coming into existence, promising a new world that is seen as both possible and necessary: possible because of economic growth and the rise of oppressed classes whose struggles are marked by a new consciousness, a new awareness and education; necessary because of the daily denial of such a consciousness of hope by the brutalities of actual life. Utopias exist because the promise and a partial, fragmented reality of a prosperous society exist in the productive possibilities of the present, promising ecstasies of living in this world—but not allowing them to be realized. In an era where they can only foreshadow a distant future, utopias provide hope and even ecstasy for the masses. Once, however, the realization becomes possible, reason can be used to delineate the path towards the achievement of such utopias. Thus, utopias in the modern age unite reason and ecstasy, giving inspiration and outlining a path for the creation of the new society, achieving the utopian existence in which ecstasy is made real. Both ecstasy and reason will be recurring themes in this monograph.

In India, utopias have been posed for centuries by the radical anticaste intellectuals coming from dalit and bahujan (former untouchable, former sudra) backgrounds. They can be traced from the early modern period of the bhakti movement, when they were only hints of a future, to the more determinate forms guiding the struggles under colonialism. The inchoate or determined forms of utopias have thus depended on the situation of the time; as modern developments increased, the new society seemed to become more and more one to struggle for, one with specific outlines.

This monograph will give a survey of their development as they have been formulated to frame the socioeconomic vision

of anticaste intellectuals from the 'early modern' period of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries to the end of the colonial period.

Imagining India: Utopias and Indian traditions

Thomas More's *The Best State of a Commonwealth and the New Island of Utopia*, published in several editions supervised by the author between 1516 and 1518, gave its name to a tradition. More's imagining of an ideal society of 'Christian communism' (xv) was an expression of sixteenth century Renaissance humanism which had promised a more balanced modernity – one uniting reason with emotion, universalism with concern for the particular and its diversities – than what actually came to exist after the advent of a more imperialistic and violent Europe. Strikingly, More's Utopia was envisioned as a society of the 'new world', the still-mysterious continent lying to the west of Europe, later to be plundered, but imagined also as full of wealth and noble humanity. This also indicated a non-Orientalist admiration of the non-European 'Other' as a society that could offer hope to a Europe fallen into a morass of corruption, murderous political onslaughts, warfare, and stark inequalities leading to petty crime and brutal punishments, enclosures that threw thousands off the land and into destitution as a prelude to industrialized agriculture. All of these, according to More, were a result of private property, and his Utopia promised both equality and collective ownership.

As Stephen Toulmin (1990) has argued in his fascinating study, More's 'Erasmian' vision of human ability to achieve a just society was cut off by the brutalities of political assassination and war, among the very phenomenon that More had brought to the fore as the antithesis of Utopia. Europe in the end entered a full-fledged modernity under the aegis of imperialism, just as India was later to experience a forced push into modernity as a

colonized land. Utopian promises, which had marked the initial hopeful thrust of the global age at the beginning of the ‘early modern’ period, failed in both continents. Yet *Utopia* and its continual recreations are reminders that they existed.

In the later brutalities of capitalist industrialization, Marx was scornful about ‘utopian socialism’ for placing communism in the realm of ideas and fantasy, and giving no clear analysis that would ground the fight for socialism. His own ‘scientific socialism’, he and his followers believed, had in contrast the solid foundation of an inevitable march of history in which the gravedigger of capitalism, the proletariat, was thrown up by the dynamics of capitalism itself. Yet the original Utopia did make a claim to being realizable by positing itself as actually existing, and history has not been so kind to Marx either. The proletariat at a world level and in advanced capitalist societies has remained divided, one large section coopted into an alliance with its own ruling classes under the rubric of nationalism, other sections still bedazzled by religion, yet other sections too impoverished to think beyond survival. In practice marxian communism has also functioned as a utopia, motivating millions throughout the world but with sometimes questionable results, whether in Stalin’s Russia or Mao’s China or in the smaller brutalities exercised by communists in partial power elsewhere.

Karl Mannheim tried to deal with the ambivalent but necessary role of utopias in *Ideology and Utopia* (1936), written originally in German in 1929 from a marxist sociological perspective. There he argued that while both ‘ideologies’ and ‘utopias’ had emerged from a political struggle of different social groups (classes), the difference was that where ideologies reflect the interests of ruling groups and so obscure realities in order to stabilize society, “certain oppressed groups are intellectually so strongly interested in the destruction and transformation of a given condition of society that they unwittingly see only those

elements in the society which tend to negate it” (1936, 40). Thus the utopian mentality is also, at some level, unrealistic. The difference is nevertheless important. Utopianism is necessary for action leading to transformation; if utopianism is lost, “man would lose his will to shape history and his ability to understand it” (263). Here, almost in spite of himself, the historical-materialist Mannheim admits the sociological necessity of ideas and the ‘ideal interests’ that Weber had stressed.

Utopias, the posing of alternatives, remain a crucial aspect of any struggle; they are, in other terms, the part of social movement discourses or frames that inspire people to action by uniting ideals with an analysis that makes a claim to possible realization. They unite ecstasy and reason, projecting a future that is achievable by present action. It is interesting that much of postmodernist theory rejects utopias as part of a presumed modernist arrogance; post-modernism rather celebrates the diversities of fragmentation and its acceptance but in so doing ignores inequalities and injustices, and efforts to move beyond them (see, for instance, Norgaard 1994).

This celebration of diversity and refusal to pose ‘absolutes’ can be simply a justification for relying on oppressive ‘diverse’ traditions or the continuation of existing inequalities of capitalist society. As Vasant Kaiwar points out, in an analysis of one of the well-known Indian postmodernists, “All [of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s] stock critiques of historicism and metanarratives, of Marx’s myopia about difference, the advocacy of fragments, different ways of being-in-the-world are so many codes for rejecting the Utopian imagination and transformative praxis” (2005, 3738). Postmodernism in fact harks back to premodern romanticism in that it locates whatever ecstasy is possible in the present, banning the future and efforts to move forward to it as oppressive grand narratives, making ‘Enlightenment reason’ into a curse. It is not surprising that Gandhi is appropriated by

postmodernists; he was the symbol of the romanticization of the past in India, as we shall see.

Utopias are projected visions, sometimes imagined in the past, sometimes located in a different world, sometimes inscribed in the future possibility. But they all lay a claim to some kind of reality, the reality of being *possible*, and in so doing provide the motivation for efforts at social transformation. The ‘heavenly city’ or the glorious life projected in religious traditions is brought down to earth, and posed as inspiration for living and possible action before oppressed human beings. They represent a combination of ecstasy and reason – the two pervading themes of this study – because they envision a society of abundance and enjoyment, and at the same time project through the understanding of history and its forces the way to achieve such a society through reason-guided action.

It is a striking fact that in India we can see the emergence of utopias at almost the same time as in Europe. But these are found at a lower level of society (as contrasted with the high intellectual Thomas More, writing in Latin). Utopias were not available in Sanskrit. Rather they are found in the visions of dalit-bahujan intellectuals of the radical bhakti movement of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. These are not so elaborated as in Europe, but that is in part due to the lack of documentation of mass activities and the fact that there were very few among the more literate elites who could move beyond the sanskritized and brahmanic perspectives that militated against visions of equality.

Such utopias were presaged in the universalistic religions of Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. These religions envisaged a ‘Kingdom of God’, a ‘heavenly city’ placed beyond the world. However, in crucial ways they saw the working out of human destiny within this world, and sought to fashion this world in ways that could correspond to the heavenly vision. This would be

achieved through divine intervention, usually a 'last judgment'. Once, however, industrialization and modernity posed the possibilities of a more just and wealthy society, these heavenly visions laid the ground for envisaging utopias that were more secular and achievable on the earth.

Brahmanism offered no such vision of equality or a just society for all; rather, its 'golden age' was the first yuga or era when varnashrama dharma was truly practised, sacrifices took place, and 'pure' men (the brahmins) united with the gods. History fell from this, passing through degenerative periods until the *kaliyuga* or 'dark age' was reached. Brahmanism has envisaged this as the historically existing society, while its historical 'renewal' was seen as only a repetition. Countless, endless cycles are imagined, which humans also go through in the process of reincarnation. 'Salvation' or *mukti* was seen as attainable outside this world of maya or illusion. A monism was postulated; it was said that the individual could attain a realization of his or her unity with the whole, that the individual self or *atman* was equivalent to this whole, or brahman. But this was seen in terms of an abstract, reified self, quite different from the empirical individual. Thus, monism with its universal identity was quite consistent with extreme discrimination and hierarchy at the empirical level because there was no clear linkage between brahman/atman and empirical reality. In the famous dialogues of Yagnavalkya with Maitreyi in the upanishads, there is almost a denial of love for the actual, empirical other (for a discussion, see Omvedt 1994, 40–42). The 'self' or *atman* is beyond this empirical world.

Buddhism also maintained a cyclical view; but it posited the original 'utopia' as a society of equalitarianism, even communism, and the emphasis was on seeking transformation of the individual; there was constant stress on the efforts of the empirical self. Though human improvement was at first seen on an individualistic level, with Mahayana Buddhism an element of

‘collectivity’ was added through the vision of the Boddhisatta that allowed the transfer of merit. This in turn led to the vision of a *Sukkavati*, a land of joy in which all were designed to be liberated; Sukkavati was the creation of a Boddhisatta, but like the Christian heavenly city it was available to all through grace. Therefore, like the heavenly Jerusalem, it had some potential for leading to the vision of an earthly Jerusalem.

For example, in an article on Mongolia, Bulag (1997) argues that the development of Buddhism after the sixteenth century in Mongolia was similar to Renaissance initiatives in Europe. The Mongol Khans took an initiative to ‘spread the doctrine like the sun’ and while this Buddhist Mongolian metanarrative was oppressive (also like the Renaissance) because it suppressed the counter-narratives of the shamans, destroying them physically, its positive feature was the leading to a vision of empirical transformation. This Bulag argues, in terms of the Buddhist notion of time, where “everybody was governed by two notions of time: the so-called cyclical time of karma and linear time. But karma can only be improved in linear time, it is a gradual, cumulative process” (1997, 63). Bulag then describes how the Mongolian reformer Dorjiev, around 1926 (about the time of Ambedkar), was arguing that the Buddhist doctrine is largely compatible with the communist tradition. Here is a striking example of the degree to which ‘modernization’ was a worldwide process in which similar trends could be seen in different parts of the world. But what was possible with Buddhism was not so possible within brahmanism. Interestingly, Bulag contrasts Buddhism with Confucianism, which played a role in the East Asian world similar to that of brahmanism in India.

Islam played a similar role in India; creating a just society had also been a goal; *darul-ul-islam* was continually sidetracked historically and interpreted in terms of fundamentalism and

repressive laws. Nevertheless it functioned at crucial points in providing a vision, as we shall see in the discussion of Pakistan (in chapter 10), which was, in the thinking of its main founders, Jinnah and Iqbal, a modernistic, democratic society.

In this thesis we will deal with intellectual activists and leaders of the subaltern castes, who in some ways all envisioned an earthly utopia, and sought to use reason to achieve it, not just enjoying an ecstasy of religious devotion. In imagining utopias, they drew on nonbrahmanic, nonbrahman traditions, including Buddhism and certain versions of Saivism, rejecting the ritualism and the inequalities of traditional, elite thinking. In the early modern period, for the radical bhakti sants, this utopia was not so fully worked out; however Ravidas envisaged 'Begumpura', the city without sorrow, without taxes or toil, where he could wander freely with his friends—something a dalit could never do in the actual Banaras. Tukaram talked of Pandharpur as the city where even the headman was made to toil, where time and death 'had no entry', where people went dancing to mingle with each other. Kabir sang of Amrapur, the city of immortality, or of Premnagar, the city of love. These were foreseeings; during the early modern period these subaltern intellectuals had no access to a language of reason and analysis, to a study of history; they were forced to work within and subvert the basically brahmanic religious framework that was hegemonic. Their 'ecstasy' of utopia was envisaged in some timeless place.

This was, however, a beginning and a vision that served to inspire many. Later, during the colonial period, such visions were given a more definite embodiment, as ecstasy was (in our terminology) linked to reason. Leaders from Jotirao Phule to Iyothee Thass and Ambedkar analyzed the roots of current exploitation in the past and sought to outline a way to end it. They drew their inspiration from a dissenting religious imagination, rejecting brahmanic Hinduism for Buddhism,

Christianity, a universalistic monotheism, even an atheism as in the case of Periyar. Their imaginings of a new society accepted technological progress as an important basis for prosperity; they rejected the village for the city, just as in the early modern period the radical sants had envisaged a city of love and sorrowlessness. The metaphors they used and the traditions they evoked were in sharp contrast to the gandhian reading which relied on the *Gita* and enscribed a Ram Rajya with its stabilized, harmonic and hierarchical idealized village on the national consciousness, just as the identification with the indigenous ‘non-Aryan’ inhabitants contrasted with the elite identification as Aryans.

Methodological Issues

This research has broadened in two major ways since its beginning. Earlier I was to focus on the socioeconomic perspectives of the anticaste movement, taking the ‘colonial modern’ period from roughly the middle of the eighteenth century to independence. This would include figures such as B.R. Ambedkar, Jotirao Phule and Periyar, but I also wanted to examine the development of such thinking among the anticaste movement’s activists as a whole.

Two developments made me broaden the focus. As I was beginning to translate Tukaram and engage with bhakti, it was becoming clear to me that there was a strong strain of radicalism here that had been ignored by the more well-known scholars (see for example “Introduction” to Tukaram by Chitre 1991, and More 1996). Tukaram, and later Kabir anticipated ‘modern’ themes in many respects—above all equalitarianism and an insistence on experience. At the same time, I began to realize that economists and historians (such as Subrahmanyam and Richards) were beginning to talk of an ‘early modern’ period beginning in the fifteenth century or so. It would be incorrect, in other words, to see ‘modernity’ as solely a colonially induced

phenomenon. There were interesting parallels and interactions between Europe and India much earlier than that, and a shared history. These included fights against priestly dominance, the beginnings of scientific enquiry, political themes of equality and democratic participation—and the expression of utopian imaginings. In India, as in Europe, these themes emerged, expressed in many ways by the radical sants of the bhakti movement, who represented early modern anticaste movements that dated some centuries before colonialism.

My work, therefore, looks at a specific trend of intellectual thought in India; it touches on the salient aspects of the vision and thought of some of the important ‘organic intellectuals’ emerging from the dalit-bahujan masses over a period of roughly five centuries.

Any study is taken from a particular perspective, with a methodological framework. My methodological premise can be stated simply: there are conflicts and contradictions in society; these conflicts and contradictions have a material foundation in the socioeconomic relations of production; they appear at the ideological and ideational levels also, not simply as a reflection of the ‘material base’ but with relative independence. However social scientists or historians may define ‘society’, it cannot be assumed to be a tightly integrated whole. All societies contain elements that are in contradiction with one another, as well as elements that are disparate.

I also hold that these conflicts and contradictions in any social formation are shaped not simply by ‘class’ or economic factors but also by nonclass factors such as gender, religion, race or other ethnic identities. In South Asia, for 3,500 years the shaping of these conflicts and contradictions has been heavily structured by caste (at the ‘material’ level of relations of production) and brahmanism (at the ideological level). This social structure of brahmanism/caste has had a complex history in the subcontinent.

Caste was apparently unknown in the earliest civilization in India, the Harappan, and was only foreshadowed in the Vedic period. Brahmanism, defined in terms of *varnashrama dharma*, was comparatively a latecomer. It emerged as a full-fledged ideology around the middle of the first millennium BCE, struggled with Buddhism and other *samanic*¹ ideological systems for over a thousand years, and became hegemonic in the major part of the subcontinent only from about the fifth and sixth centuries of the common era. Brahmanism as ideology and social structure also confronted, from the eighth century onward, Islamic religious and social thought that became a powerful force through almost the entire country. At the same time, the defeated Buddhism survived as a dominated ideological system for much longer, while Christianity was an influence in parts of the subcontinent perhaps from the first century onwards, and certainly from the sixteenth century. Popular religious movements, including radical Saivism and some forms of bhakti, struggled against this brahmanic domination from very early.

From about the time of the broad period of ‘modernity’ in India – stimulated by Islam and the subaltern, subterranean movements of Buddhism (now mainly in tantric forms), Sufism and radical Saivism – radical bhakti movements can be clearly traced. During the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, in what social scientists and historians are increasingly describing as an ‘early modern’ period, these movements flourished in almost every region of India. The late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries can be identified as a period of setback for the movements, for after a long struggle their radical edge was blunted, and the

¹ Samanic is the non-sanskritic spelling for what is corrupted as *shramanic* and *sramanic* in brahmanic literature. Samana refers to the nonbrahman seers and wandering ascetics of the Jain, Buddhist and Ajivaka religions. While *sramana* in Sanskrit means “one who exerts himself and performs religious austerities,” Buddhist commentaries associate the word *samana* with the ‘quieting’ (*samita*) of evil (*papa*). According to *Dhammapada* (verse 265), “someone who has pacified evil is called *samana*.”

processes of brahmanic cooptation became dominant. This was precisely the time when the formation of new ‘nationalities’ – or patriotisms, as Bayly (1998) would have it – replaced the ‘imperial’ claims of the Mughals. Thus, for example, the rising Maratha powers and their regional expressions (those states that grew under the sardars of the Peshwas) were thoroughly brahmanic; while even the new Sikh power under Ranjit Singh saw the consolidation of a conservative form of Sikhism that allowed untouchability to continue.

The colonial period saw even more complex processes. Up to perhaps the late eighteenth century, the varying regions of India had been more or less at an equal level with Europe; but colonialism meant that the decisive entry into full modernity was made under the domination of an alien power. This did not mean that Indians lacked agency in the shaping of the new world; as scholars are increasingly emphasizing, not only did they participate in the formation of what we know today as ‘Hindu’ culture, the experience of colonialism influenced Britain too (see, for instance, Pennington 2005). However, it warped intellectual as well as economic development. In many ways colonialism helped the brahmanic elite to consolidate itself even as it gave new scope – through education – to subaltern groups. This elite responded to colonialism with the updating of brahmanism, now known as ‘Hinduism’; and with its inscription into nationalism, ‘Hindu nationalism’ was born. At the same time, the response of the subalterns took on new and modern forms.

Thus the framework used in this monograph approaches what many in Maharashtra are calling a ‘Marx-Phule-Ambedkarite’ methodological perspective. Sociologically, it is broadly speaking a weberian framework. Weber had argued, in a classic formulation, that while economic (material) forces were crucial, ideologies also exerted influence, especially at certain crucial

periods of history in determining the future of society (Weber 1904–05, 1996 edition). This is thus a study in ‘subaltern’ social thought, but it needs to be stressed that ‘subalterns’ in India have to be defined not simply in ‘class’ or economic terms, but also in caste terms. Thus, in the conflict against the dominant brahmanic ideologies, we can identify the intellectuals from the subordinated masses primarily in caste terms—they are identified in the literature primarily in this way. While a few members of these subordinated groups may have been relatively more upwardly mobile in economic terms – Tukaram was a mahajan, a moneylender as well as a farmer; Phule was a contractor, a position he shared with many from privileged castes; Ambedkar became a relatively successful lawyer and was no ‘ordinary’ untouchable – their lives were still marked by the experiences of caste discrimination, and they very often either started from or remained much more subordinated in ‘class’ terms than most *dwija* castes.

Anticaste: Radical Bhakti and Nonbrahman Movements

This study, then, looks at the socioeconomic thinking of leaders of anticaste movements over a period of five centuries, from about the fifteenth century to 1956. It analyzes the movements in two main stages. The first was the early modern period from about 1500 to 1750, when radical sants pioneered a strong form of a devotional movement with a vision of equality, an emphasis on empirical thinking, and access to ecstasy for all. The second phase began with colonialism, when full-fledged modernity came to India and anticaste intellectuals had to form their own vision in confrontation with the developing ‘Hindu nationalism’ of the elite. This, in turn, had two phases, the first up to about 1920 when the focus was on analysis of historical and current subjugation, and the second from the 1920s onward when leaders like Periyar and Ambedkar focused on the coming of a new independence, and in dealing with marxism, gandhism

and the developing movement for Pakistan among Muslims.

The study of anticaste movements (the nonbrahman movement, the dalit movement) as social movements is now well established in India. What is not so clear is why what I call 'radical bhakti' should be considered a social movement. Most social movement theory takes it for granted that social movements are the phenomenon of 'modernity', but without giving much justification for this and without clearly defining the periodization of 'modernity'. At the same time, studies of bhakti often refer to them as social movements, for instance, Krishna Sharma, *Bhakti and the Bhakti Movement* (1987) – which ascribes a singular form to this – and the even more influential David Lorenzen's edited collection, *Religious Movements in South Asia 600–1800* (2004). These studies see one or more 'movements' in the premodern period, without bothering to define 'movements'. In fact, by the broad definition given of social movements – for example, by Oberschall (1993) and McAdam, McCarty and Zald (1996) – there is no reason to exclude such movements.

However, the question, what constitutes a 'movement', remains. That is, when should we speak of 'one' bhakti movement or 'many' and over what territory and time span? Social movements are, after all, delimited phenomena including action, and not simply expressions of a timeless essence. Among other criteria, they assume some kind of interaction between the various agents involved.

I would argue that such a process of interaction existed for the movement of 'radical bhakti' I am referring to, covering an area ranging from Maharashtra (the Varkaris) to northern India. This was one of many such movements in the same period; others included, for example, the Virasaivas in what is now Karnataka and Andhra, Sikhism which came to centre in the northwest, Vaishnavite movements in eastern India (the

Oriya and Bengali-speaking areas) and so on.² The sants of the western and northern circuit knew of each other, yet were cut off from similar movements in south India. This particular bhakti movement, which has its beginnings in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, can be said to be the first phase of the broad anticaste movement of ‘modern’ times in India. From this period, I discuss here Namdev, Janabai, Kabir and Tukaram.

The second phase took place in the early ‘colonial yuga’ (1850–1930). Here I discuss Phule, Iyothee Thass and (Pandita) Ramabai. They undertook a search for the historical origins of caste inequality and brahmanic dominance; the intellectuals of the movement asked most strongly ‘Where do we come from?’ With the new input from European intellectuals – missionaries, besides rationalists and scientists of various kinds, being most important – this question could be and was asked. It was often answered in terms derived from the discourse of Europeans (for instance, the Aryan theory) but the anticaste intellectuals used these in their own way.

The third phase begins in the 1920s, and took place in the context not only of a strong Indian nationalist movement under the hegemony of Gandhi, but also, perhaps even more importantly, of grappling with marxism. Marxist and socialist ideology was making its entrance in a big way and had a major intellectual influence on Indian intellectuals far beyond the limited reach of communists and socialists—simply because it posed in its terms utopia as an earthly utopia (the communist society, following on the original ‘primitive communism’ and intervening period of suffering

² I am not discussing here the earliest ‘bhakti’ movement in Tamilnadu, dating from the seventh to eighth century CE. The historical context was very different – the movement was associated with the persecution Jains and Buddhists – and the equalitarianism was perhaps more questionable. There is no historical evidence to back up the thesis that all bhakti movements originated from this one.

and exploitation through slavery, feudalism and capitalism). As anticaste intellectuals grappled with these issues – thrown up by marxists, nationalists who borrowed mostly the Hindu/hindutva identity, and Muslims who were increasingly seen as constituting a separate ‘community’, ‘samaj’ or ‘nation’ – they formulated anew their own utopia, which differed from that of the marxists primarily in emphasizing that the end of caste oppression and exploitation must go along with the end of class oppression and exploitation.

It has long been my thesis that the nonbrahman/anticaste movement represented the true Enlightenment in India, that it expressed most strongly the values of democracy, equality, the use of rationality/reason, the notion of progress (see Omvedt, 2005; also Meera Nanda (2002, 2004)). In this work I shall show that visions of utopia provided a motivating power for the anticaste movement from the time of Namdev and Kabir through Ambedkar’s version of Buddhism as ‘reconstructing the world’. In the period of the radical bhakti movement the vision lacked an earthly grounding, but from the eighteenth century onwards, which was the colonial period in India (a period of ‘modernization’ throughout the world), old religious utopias of bhakti, Christianity, Islam, etc, were brought down to earth and given a historical embodiment. As utopias, they shared a vision with marxism – in spite of marxism’s claim to be anti-utopian and its scorn for ‘utopian socialism’, marxism in fact motivated millions of activists and working people throughout the world with a semi-religious vision of a socialist society – but they differed from marxism in stressing the aspect of the ending or annihilation of caste.

Inventing and Reinventing India: The Subaltern Vision

Finally, the discussion of India’s sociopolitical situation today very often focuses around the issues of communalism, on the

one hand, and that of the assertion of the dalits and OBCs on the other. Few, however, have taken the theories and utopias (in Mannheim's sense) of the anticaste challenge seriously enough to influence their analysis. This is true not only of the sophisticated intellectual critics of secularism such as T.N. Madan, Partha Chatterjee and Ashis Nandy, but also of many of the more marxist defenders of secular and democratic ideals. Among these is a well-argued study by Stuart Corbridge and John Harris, *Reinventing India: Liberalization, Hindu Nationalism and Popular Democracy* (2000), who conclude by saying, "We agree with Paul Brass that the defining struggle in Indian politics is between the centralizing instincts of the BJP and the Hindu nationalists... and the countervailing forces ...of caste mobilization in general" (238) but then disagree with Brass's emphasis on the particular needs and claims of subaltern groups defined within a regional and local context. Corbridge and Harris instead want to focus on the generalizing role of the state, and the conclusion of their study is that

The deepening of democracy in India offers India's 'social majorities' their best hope for taking some control over the economic and political situation which governs their lives and which might yet be made to work for their empowerment. As ironic as it might seem to some critics, their attempts to reinvent India still have regard for the invention of India that was proposed in the Constituent Assembly. (239)

While this is well said, in taking the 'tall men' of the period of India's independence to be Nehru (above all), Patel, Rajendra Prasad, Lohia and other 'national' leaders, they ignore not simply the part played by Ambedkar in the Constituent Assembly but also marginalize his basic thinking. While resigning from parliament and his position as minister, not – as Corbridge and Harris seem to think – over issues of 'agricultural labourers' and nationalization of land, but over the failure to pass the

Hindu Code Bill (the first legal effort to give economic and marital equality to women), Ambedkar had warned, “To leave inequality between class and class, between sex and sex which is the soul of Hindu society untouched and to go on passing legislation relating to economic issues is to make a farce of our Constitution and to build a palace on a dung heap” (1995, vol. 14, 1: 1325).³

‘Building a palace on a dung heap’ is a striking phrase; and in pointing to the ‘soul of Hindu society’ Ambedkar was pointing to where the dung heap existed; and that there was moral and religious debris that had to be cleared. Ambedkar was objecting not to the practice of Hinduism, but to its ideals, to its morality. He was attacking the morality of the ‘religion’ that had been constructed from brahmanism, in a millennia-old process culminating in the colonial period. His political and intellectual thrust was not simply against Savarkar’s ‘hindutva’ but against Gandhi’s varnashrama-based ‘Hinduism’, and even Nehru—to the extent that Nehru was in his own way a kind of ‘soft’ apologist for traditional brahmanic Hinduism (see Alysius’ *Nationalism without a Nation in India* (1998) for a critique). These elements of ideals, vision and morality were crucial. Corbridge and Harris are right to argue that class-based politics and the dynamics of capitalism are still central to the analysis of Indian society; but they are wrong to take this in the mechanistic sense that gives no role to the moral and spiritual norms fostered in different ways by different religious traditions.

It is precisely this issue that was foregrounded in an earlier and somewhat ignored sociological interpretation of

³ As the context makes clear, ‘class’ is used here the way it had been used during the British period, such as in references to ‘Depressed Classes’, and at the time of the Constitution to ‘backward classes’. It is in fact a reference to castes as a sociological category, not a marxist one; its use emphasizes that their economic position largely reflected their social position.

India's problems. In *India: The Roots of Crisis*, Satish Saberwal attacked the 'easy agnosticism' of those who refuse to take religion seriously (1988, 247–58) and claimed that problems of communalism, caste-based politics, corruption and the erosion of moral authority – indeed we may argue the failure to establish a moral centre to many Indian social institutions – can be attributed to certain aspects of tradition. He compared the historical role in European modernity played by the Catholic Church in providing an institutional continuity (including traditions of reason in universities, common cultural traditions and a common ethics) to the lack of these in India. Neither brahmanism, nor bhakti, nor Islam, claimed Saberwal, could provide these.

Partha Chatterjee objected to this in a review, arguing that *dharma* could be seen as a 'unifying master code' (1988, 105). Saberwal responded that even on its most favourable ground, which postulated a ruler's commitment to righteous conduct, *dharma* had the main problem that its 'universalizing function' was incomparably weaker compared to that of Christianity in Europe because it did not legitimize a general, nonsegmented and nonsegmenting code. *Dharma*, according to Saberwal, was above all particularistic. "If it be the logic of cleavage between groups...which its 'shared ideas' stress, we may then speak of the constitution of society only in a weak sense" (256).

A similar point had been made in stronger language by Phule, when he wrote in his last book, *Sarvajanik Satyadharm Pustak* [The Universal Religion of Truth], that because of "the false self-interested religion of the Aryans, the cunning Arya Bhat-Brahmans consider the ignorant Shudras to be inferior; the ignorant Shudras consider the ignorant Mahars to be inferior; and the ignorant Mahars consider the ignorant Mangs to be inferior...since marriage and social relations are forbidden among them all, naturally their various customs,

eating habits, and rituals don't match each other. How can such a conglomerate of 18 grains be united to become a 'nation' of integrated people?" (1991, 494). Here was not only a question of cleavage, but of scorn; with the lower groups considered ignorant and inferior. Phule and his colleagues, and after him Periyar and Ambedkar, experienced the scorn and cleavage created by brahmanism, and saw this as the main obstacle to the development of a democratic national unity.

The privileged caste leadership of the national movement, the 'tall men' discussed by Corbridge and Harris, never really contested the claims of the Hindu nationalists in their ranks; most of them were in one way or another themselves Hindu nationalists. Their mild saffron laid the basis for the persistence and later political growth of the more virulent 'Hindutva' trends. This was true even of Gandhi. Savarkar had defined hindutva by identifying the 'holy land' (*punyabhumi*) with the 'fatherland' (*pitrubhumi*), thus giving Hinduism a territorial/nationalist foundation. But when Gandhi opposed conversion by arguing that 'Hinduism' was by birth the religion of the untouchables and they should reform it rather than reject it, he was implicitly using a similar definition: in fact, he opposed conversion, even to Sikhism, more strongly than even the Hindu Mahasabha. At the same time, Gandhi's Ram Rajya expressed a stagnant, village-centred idealized version of Ram's kingdom, which ignored much of the story of the avatar Ram; but the dalits and most bahujans never forgot Shambuka, the sudra slaughtered for the 'sin' of practicing *tapascharya* (penance). This gandhian vision of Ram in crucial ways laid the foundation for the development of the harder, hindutva Ram Rajya which culminated in the massacres of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002. In turn, the marxists and the nehruvian socialists were unable to counter hard-core hindutva because they did not contest it at the level of ideals

and religious morality. Their socialism was also a utopia but it ignored some of the crucial realities of Indian life.

Thus, in a larger sense, there is no need to ‘reinvent’ India; what has to be done is to turn to the India ‘invented’ by or envisioned by its dalit-bahujan intellectuals and leaders. The alternative to Ram Rajya and *Hindu Rashtra* is the *Bali Rajya* of Phule, the Begumpura of Ravidas, the *Dravidastan* of Periyar, the ‘Buddhist commonwealth’ of the Sakya Buddhists of Tamilnadu. These were formulated as ideals and as frameworks for specific socioeconomic policies and programmes at the same time as the privileged castes-led national movement was explicitly or implicitly looking to Ram Rajya. They had a specific developmental thrust. This included an urban orientation (as opposed to a ‘nation of villages’), a need for prosperity and the industrialism that would fuel it, a sense of collectivity and the assertion of an anticaste equality. In later years they drew upon many of the ideas of socialism, but they also fought many of its aspects. Leaders like Ambedkar and Periyar were friendlier to the idea of Pakistan than the elites because they shared much of the Muslim critique of the Hindu orientation of the Congress.

In other words, this study will argue that the positions of Gandhi and Nehru – representing an implicit ‘soft hindutva’ and a mild socialism that ignored the realities of caste respectively – have defined India for too long. It is time to look at the dalit-bahujan alternatives in imagining India, and in formulating the utopias that can motivate and guide our struggle out of the current morass.