

The Semiotic Concept in Ambedkar's Communication and Idea of Dalit Emancipation

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Abstract: Symbols play a significant role in politics and assertion. In India, different kinds of signs are used in Dalit assertions and politics. In his struggle for Dalits' rights, Dr. B R Ambedkar had employed different modes of verbal and non-verbal communication tools. He used various symbols to popularise his ideology and messages among his followers. Ambedkar's sense of clothing, *Manu Smriti* burning, and Buddha all had symbolic meanings. This paper, under the theoretical framework of semiotics, seeks to ascertain how these symbols helped Ambedkar to spread his ideas of Dalit emancipation and emerged as vital tools for Dalit rights.

Keywords: Dalit, Ambedkar, symbol, politics, clothing, *Manu Smriti* burning, Buddha

Introduction

Symbols play a significant role in politics and assertion due to their comprehending, communicative and mobilizing potential. They are meaningful and valuable in politics as they evoke unconscious images and emotions by capturing the hearts and minds of the people. Harold Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan define political symbols as "the perspectives and instrumentalities of power." They significantly function to change and maintain the power structure (Lasswell & Kaplan, 1950) and work as a cultural idiom of politics and political ideas and practices (Kaushik, 2001). Symbols consist of latent and manifest meanings, and political parties and leaders use them to propagate their messages, ideologies, and policies.

Different kinds of symbols have been used in Dalit assertions and politics in modern India. Dr. B R Ambedkar, who has been credited for working tirelessly for social and political upliftment of Dalits, employed different modes of verbal and non-verbal communication tools to rouse the consciousness of untouchables and unite them against the caste-based discrimination. Ambedkar performed various symbolic acts to popularise his ideology and messages among his followers and create a counter-narrative against the Brahmanical hegemony. *Manu Smriti* burning, Buddha, and his clothing style—the three-piece suit contained symbolic meanings. Novak (1974) understands politics as "primarily the art of understanding the symbols operative in society and learning how to make them issue forth in action." In this sense, the analysis of Ambedkar's symbols gives an insightful understanding of the relevance of his symbolic act and how he reformulated social and political ideas

through symbolic action. Ambedkar successfully reconstructed these symbols to pose a counter-narrative for Dalit assertion.

This paper attempts to understand his symbolism under the theoretical paradigm of semiotics. Through this theoretical framework, the paper demonstrates that Ambedkar's modern and radical approach also got reflected in the selection and use of these symbols. The paper concludes that Ambedkar's dress was a symbol of Dalit liberation from the existing stereotypical image of unclean Dalits and an escape from the shackles of caste (Guha, 2002) while the *Manu Smriti* burning was a "symbol of a sharper break with Hinduism: (Sarkar, 2014). The paper also argues that Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism had a significant social and political message to counter the dominant Hindu symbols like *Rama* and *Krishna*.

Literature Review

Ambedkar's Communication

A man of many parts, Ambedkar was a social reformer, a social scientist, a lawyer, an economist, and a great constitutionalist. In his entire life, he relentlessly struggled for the empowerment of the oppressed, and in this fight, his brilliant communication skills played a distinct role. He employed different modes of verbal and non-verbal communication to raise the consciousness of Dalits. Stroud (2018) finds the influence of John Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism on Ambedkar's communication and the Buddhist idea of non-violence and argues that his communication emphasizes engagement, interaction, loving opponents, and giving respect even though that person did not do so on previous occasions. Like Dewey, Ambedkar also believed in the power of communication, which can be used to solve the social problem. Ambedkar describes caste and caste-based discrimination as a barrier in establishing proper communication, having everyday activities in the society as well as a hurdle in forming a strong public opinion (Ambedkar, 1979). In his efforts to eradicate caste, a healthy and reason-based communication was also emphasized. From his first struggle, 1927's Mahad Satyagraha for Dalits rights, to his religious conversion in 1956, it was his master communication skill that brought the question of Dalit emancipation at the center stage during and after Independence, even though he had vehemently opposed the methods and ideas of social and political reforms of Mahatma Gandhi, who was the undisputed supreme leader and regarded as the Father of the Nation. "Based on logic, argumentation, research and unearthing of ideas and facts, he [Ambedkar] argued well and established his reputation as a brilliant communicator at a time when there was hardly any support from society for the causes centred on the exploited sections" (Sahu, 2018).

Before Ambedkar, there were significant social reformers in Maharashtra like Jyotirao Phule and Kisan Faguji Bansode, who had started newspapers for the Dalit cause, but they did not last long. It was Ambedkar's entry into journalism that created a powerful impact with radical social and political ideas. His journalism has been described as "the journalism of regeneration and reconstruction to unchain the exploited and uplift the excluded" (Sahu, 2018). He started his first newspaper *Mooknayak* in 1920 and later, *Bahiskrit Bharat* (1927-1929), *Samta*, *Janata* (1930-56), and *Probudd Bharat* (1956). These newspapers were his strong tool to reach out to the

untouchables and unite them for political and social rights. He used these to comment on various public figures' activities, to urge participation in conferences, and to inform the Depressed Classes of world events (Zelliot, 2013). In his writings in newspapers, (Keer 2016) argues that "Ambedkar explained his views, define his aims and reply to the critics of his and wrote editorial after editorial in his short, crisp and fearless style."

His first newspaper *Mooknayak* was started with the help of the ruler of Kolhapur Chatrapati Shahu. Although the newspaper closed down within three years due to want of funds, it gave Ambedkar a better understanding of running a newspaper, which helped him later. It was Ambedkar's keen interest in journalism that even during his days in London, he used to closely monitor the activities of *Mooknayak*. Ambedkar heralded a new era of social-justice-oriented mass communication in India through *Mooknayak*. His journalistic writings exposed the numerous Hindu myths, mysticisms, and mumbo jumbos, justifying the injustices to large masses of Indian society (Guru, 2015).

Bahishkrut Bharat was established during the *Mahad Satyagraha* in 1927. It was also closed down because of financial problems in 1929. He extensively wrote on a range of issues in this fortnightly and was passionately involved in its publication. The two newspapers adopted a strong stand against the caste-based discrimination and published fiery contents on Hindu religion and scriptures and various supported causes for social reforms in the country (Pol, 2018). Among all the newspapers of Ambedkar, *Janata* was his most successful and long-lasting fortnightly. *Janata* repeatedly published a sentence – "Tell the slave he is a slave and he will revolt," which gives a sense of its radical and assertive tone. Despite its publication in the vernacular language Marathi, the newspaper was full of rich content. It used to comment on world affairs such as the French Revolution, World War II, U.S. politics, and problems in Jerusalem besides covering Dalit issues. The articles on the ideology of Karl Marx and Marathi translation of Maxim Gorky's *Mother* were also published, besides the achievement of Dalits across the country. While commenting on Ambedkar's efforts to strengthen his political outfit, (Omvedt, 1994) mentions that his newspaper *Janata*, on the one hand, popularised the thoughts and activities of the Independent Labour Party. On the other, it countered the views of the Indian National Congress and Mahatma Gandhi. Famous poems and literature, the activities of *Jalsa*, and the appeal for building funds and members for the party incessantly figured in *Janata* (Omvedt, 1994).

In the freedom struggle, when the press was actively working along with nationalist leaders to spread the idea of a nation and mobilizing the people for freedom struggle, Ambedkar was engaged in "propagating a different vision of Dalithood through his newspaper *Janata* which stressed the Dalit's difference from the mainstream nation" (Ratnamala, 2012). Ambedkar's journalism also had a strong effect on Dalit literature in India as it explored the political and social consciousness of people (Bechain, 2014). His newspapers played a significant role in the Dalit movement. His "lucid style of writing with a scholarly approach and his command over the language was equally important in creating an impact at the time" (Pol, 2018). These are vast repositories of information related to Dalit assertion and

political activism in India. Dhananjay Keer (2016) rightly encapsulates the trajectory and evolution of Ambedkar in India's social and political arena along with his newspapers.

"His first paper was named the *Mooknayak* (the leader of the dumb), and the second was called the *Bahishkrit Bharat* (the Excluded India). The third was *Samata* (Equality), and the fourth was the *Janata* (the People). The leader of dumb made a stir and described the sufferings of outcastes. In the third stage, he gave expression to their aspirations for equality. In the fourth, he expressed the desire of his people for assimilation into Hindu Society based on equality, liberty, and fraternity".

This verbal communication was accompanied by strong symbolic communication, which assisted him in reaching out to mostly illiterate untouchables. He employed different symbolic actions to rouse the consciousness of untouchables and unite. Before Ambedkar could raise his banner against caste-based discrimination, he had to face challenges within untouchables first. Lack of unity, differences among themselves, unconsciousness of their rights, ignorance towards age-old inhuman treatment, and lack of education were the main hurdles in bringing Dalits under an umbrella to agitate. Under this scenario, Ambedkar was in search of an issue that was affecting their daily lives. What could have been better than water to serve this purpose both politically and socially?

In August 1926, the Bombay Legislative Assembly had passed a resolution directing all municipalities to implement legislation related to the opening of all public places for everyone. Following this, the Mahad tank in Konkan was declared open for all castes, but Dalits did not dare to use this water. Ambedkar found this as "an opportunity for open symbolic action at the mass level" (Gore, 1993). He mobilized untouchables in a brief period and held a peaceful march, and drank water from the tank. Similarly, he chose *Manu Smriti* and burnt it "as a symbol of a rejection of the religious basis of untouchability" (Zelliot, 2013). This radical symbolic act created unrest among the caste Hindus, and over the period, it emerged as a potent symbol against caste discrimination. Ambedkar's western dress also had a symbolic message for Dalits. Simultaneously, his Buddha was a symbolic figure against dominant Hindu mythological characters and a symbol for untouchables to establish their new identity by associating with it and rejecting the Hindu religion.

Politics and Symbols

Max Lerner's (1941) comment that "men possess thoughts, but symbols possess men" reminds the vast dimension of symbols and their role as well as importance in every field of human life. The symbol represents things beyond the stated and given object, and it conveys merely complex ideas. One has to associate it with specific thoughts and ideas to make the symbol means. Active engagement between the symbol and the target audience is required to communicate the embedded meanings in symbols. Although symbols play an essential role in knowing the world, their interpretation varies from person to person and community to community. Cohen (1979) notes that in all social relations, power relations, and symbolism is present.

In politics, symbols play an essential role in their communicating and mobilizing potential. Political actors deliberately or unconsciously manipulate symbols and employed them to get desired political gains (Geertz, 1979). Symbols not only helped

political agents in their work to reach out to the masses but also helped people to understand and associate themselves with the 'political process' (Kertzer, 1988). In this way, they play an instrumental role in maintaining or changing the political establishment by serving vehicles of communication between ruler and masses. Symbols also influence people on a personal level. In a democracy, Constitution, Parliament, Judiciary, and other institutions have a functional role in governance and maintaining the rule of law. At the same time, they also carry symbolic meaning along with the national flag, national symbols, anthem, monuments, and memorial days. In political parties' functioning, party flag, electoral symbol, song, statue, dress, color, historical figures are significant symbols that have a crucial role. Day to day political activities like demonstration, *padayatra*, and rally are also part of symbolic action. Leading scholars Lasswell and Kaplan (1950) argues that these political symbols "function directly in the power process, serving to set up, alter, or maintain power practices." These symbols have latent and manifest meanings and work as a cultural idiom of politics and political ideas and practices (Kaushik, 2001). In an argument, symbols have powerful and distinct work in the imagination of a nation by a citizen (Anderson, 1983).

Dalit Assertion Symbols and Ambedkar

Questioning age-old caste-based discrimination has been central to Dalit assertion and politics in India. There were several movements against the degrading treatment meted out to lower castes in the Hindu hierarchy. Even before Ambedkar came into the picture, figures like Sant Ravidas, Periyar, Jyotirao Phule, and others questioned the Dalit oppression and Caste Hindu hegemony. Ambedkar's entry gave a new direction to Dalit assertion and politics. While questioning the caste system, he initially accepted the notion of Sanskritization aimed at raising the status of *Sudras* within the existing caste system. Still, soon he realized its limitation, and by late 1920, he rejected the caste system in toto (Jaffrelot, 2004).

In all these periods, from the early age struggle of social reformers to Ambedkar's entry into the picture, there were several symbols that not only rose the consciousness of Dalits and mobilized them but also gave them weapons to question the Brahmanical system. Counter mythological figures like Shambuka in Ramayana and Ekalavya in Mahabharat, who were believed to be from the lower caste, were projected as the oppressed heroes to create a counter-culture narrative. In some parts of the country, Mahishasur, who identified asura, was worshipped and emerged as a strong figure of the Dalit Bahujan counter-culture (Ranjan, 2016). Many caste-based mythological figures of Dalit groups have become symbols of assertion in different parts of the country. Like *Chuharmal*, a hero of the *Dusadh* (Scheduled Caste) community in Bihar, was the symbol of warriors against the upper caste oppression (Narayan, 2006). In his work, Narayan (2006) talks about many such "dissenting cultural resources like myths, legends, local heroes and histories," which were used by *Shudra* in several parts of Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar for political mobilization and "as markers of pride and glory." Pai (2002), while studying the emergence of BSP in UP

and Dalits political empowerment, highlights the mobilization of Dalits and the new form of assertion by invoking cultural symbols of Ambedkar.

During his lifetime, Ambedkar had become symbols of Dalit assertion and aspiration. Interestingly, in the 1950s, there was a healthy myth about Ambedkar among the Jatav, an untouchable caste in UP. The Jatavs believe in two myths of their origins (Lynch, 1972)- (i) They are *Kshatriyas*, and in ancient times they had hidden their identities to escape the wrath of mythical Brahman Parashuram, and (ii) *Jatav* belongs to the ancient Buddhist religion in which everyone was equal, and it was Brahmins' teaching of Hinduism that is responsible for their lower rank in the society. Lynch (1972) argues Ambedkar came close to the Buddhist myth of *Janata*, and the community accorded him the status of the prophet and cultural hero because he rejected the caste system, his charismatic leadership, and revolutionary act in modern India.

The question of Dalit emancipation and untouchability took a new direction with Ambedkar's entry into public life during the freedom struggle. While questioning the caste Hindu, he also created new cultural space for untouchables to give them a different identity with self-respect. And in this journey, he constructed new symbols to mobilize the masses. Although the symbolic action of Ambedkar is the area that has not been covered in a focused manner in the existing literature, many scholars touched this aspect while highlighting his mobilizing action and work for social change. *Manu Smriti* burning was his long-lasting symbolic action, which is still a radical symbol of Dalit dissent voice. This landmark symbolic action shocked the Hindu society (Gokhale, 1993). George (2019) notes that Ambedkar strongly believed that religious code has an essential role in "the psychological enslavement" of people. *Manu Smriti* put in the mind of untouchables that can get a better life in the next birth by going as per this religious law book. With the burning of *Manu Smriti*, Ambedkar first wanted to remove this ignorance among the Dalits, and this symbolic action helped him to send his message among all sections of the undoubles across the country. And it also created a counter ideology by weakening the orthodox authority in the society permanently (Lelyveld, 1990).

Clothes play an active role in constructing the identity of any individual, family, society, caste, class, religion, and nation at large (Tarlo, 1996). In the image-making of 'unclean Dalits,' their dirty clothing had a larger role, and Ambedkar's three-piece suit was many things to say while seeking the new identity for Dalits. Discussing clothing patterns in India (Tarlo, 1996) further submits that dress codes also connect with modesty and respect of that particular individual and community. Therefore, Ambedkar's western clothes symbolized communicating Dalits to gain self-respect by changing their dressing. Charu Gupta (2000) argues that Dalits show empowering potential in 'foreign clothes' instead in *Khadi* to gain their grounds in the Hindu caste order.

However, Ambedkar wearing western dress, attracted a lot of criticism from all political quarters terming his attire as "unfit for a leader representing the poor" and not "culturally authentic" (Jaoul, 2006). In his study related to the symbolic importance of Ambedkar statues installed by Dalit groups in various parts of UP, Jaoul (2006) says that for Dalits, Ambedkar "wearing a red tie and carrying the Constitution involves dignity, pride in emancipated citizenship and a practical acknowledgment of

the extent to which the enforcement of laws could positively change their lives." Ross (2008) argues that wearing or not wearing clothes is a "political act," and it also "indicates rank." In India, Dalits were at the lower rank of the social system and were forced to have filthy clothes. During the freedom movement, Ambedkar's rejections of *Swadeshi* clothes and adopting western attire had a political message against the Brahmanical Indian dress code, which continue to dominate the Dalit discourse.

Like other spheres of human life, religious teaching and theology also construct symbolic forms to spread messages (Eliade, 1961). Ambedkar converted to Buddhism in 1956 after several years of deliberation and study of different religions. He not only interpreted Buddhism differently but also constructed the symbolic aspects of Buddha beyond a religious figure. He believed that "religion is a social force" (Ambedkar, 1979) and the foundation of a society that gives a sense of commonness among the people. Therefore, he strongly advocated the need for religion and refused to buy the argument that religion is a private affair (Rodrigues, 2017). In his views, there must be two parameters to judge the philosophy of any religion. These are - social utility and social justice. In his understanding, true religion is ready for contestation and change, and it cannot be a fixed belief set for all the time (Rodrigues, 2017). He found that Hinduism has failed on these yardsticks and projected Buddha as a counter symbol. His rejection of the Hindu religion and the adoption of Buddhism was an ideological attack on the caste system (Racine & Racine). Now, Ambedkar and Buddha are established cultural symbols of Dalit assertion and *Jai Bhim* greeting in their daily lives by Dalits is a revolutionary cultural code (Guru, 1997).

Methodology

In this paper, Semiotics has been adopted as an approach to understanding Ambedkar's symbolic actions. Roland Barthes's framework of Semiotics has been employed to analyze his symbols. In his concept, Barthes takes Ferdinand de Saussure's idea of semiotics, which divides sign into two parts—Signifier and Signified, to propose his concept. Saussure (1915) argues any sign produces meaning by the combination of Signifier (the written form of language) and Signified (the concept and mental image produced by the language). Barthes (1967) adds a second level of signification in his concept and submits that sign can be interpreted at two levels: (i) Denotation (literal meaning) and (ii) Connotation (culturally embedded meanings). At the second level of signification (connotation), a sign crosses the boundaries of its first level of signification (denotation - primary meaning) and signifies symbolic values (Barthes, 1967). This symbolic value is myth/ ideology, which promotes the interest of dominant groups and helps in maintaining the existing power structure (Story n.d). This study utilized all these aspects of Barthes semiotics to analyze Ambedkar's symbols.

Analysis

Manu Smriti Burning

Before Ambedkar could raise his banner against caste-based discrimination, he had to face challenges within untouchables first. Lack of unity, differences among themselves, unconsciousness of their rights, ignorance towards age-old inhuman treatment, and lack of education were the main hurdles in bringing Dalits under an umbrella to agitate. Under this scenario, he was exploring a symbol to attack the fundamental of caste discrimination. He chose *Manu Smriti* — the ancient Hindu law book which promotes the caste system, grants special privileges to the *Savarnas*, and advocates penal action on the *Shudras*. Ambedkar believed that it was this text that has 'philosophized' and 'codified' the existing caste structure (Ambedkar, 1979). This text produces myths that upper caste people are superior by birth, and people in the lower caste are inferior. Such myths naturalize caste-based discrimination and give an ideological base to the caste system. Barthes (1972) argues that ideology controls social behavior and presents the cultural concept as natural phenomena. In this case, the caste-based ideology propagated by *Manu Smriti* draws the lines for Dalits to accept the lower position in the Hindu social order as if that is the natural order. Ambedkar decided to set on fire a copy of this text publically. The act of *Manu Smriti* burning was backed by a different and counter ideology against Brahmanical dominance. On December 25, 1927, during the Mahad Satyagraha, Ambedkar and his supporters burnt the *Manu Smriti* "as a symbol of the rejection of the religious basis of untouchability" (Zelliot, 2013). This radical act of Ambedkar had several symbolic dimensions.

The whole episode was carefully constructed to make a strong social and political statement. Although the preparation was done well in advance, strategically, no advance publicity was given, fearing strong protest of caste Hindus (Gore, 1993). Firstly, a resolution was passed in the Depressed Classes Conference condemning *Manu Smriti* and proposing its burning. The act of organizing a conference and adopting a resolution is considered modern means to organize and voice an opinion on a particular issue. For largely illiterate Dalit masses, this act had a symbolic meaning of fighting against the oppression and undemocratic system using modern political methods. It was also to train them about democratic political exercise and realize their say in decision making.

Interestingly, the mover of the resolution was Ambedkar's close Brahmin colleague G N Sahastrabuddhe. An untouchable leader, P N Rajabhoj seconded the resolution. This symbolism defined Ambedkar's ideology that he was against the Brahminism, not against the Brahmins. The social equality and brotherhood in the society between touchable and untouchables and an appeal for a collective rejection of ancient old cruelty meted out to Dalits based on the regressive law book was symbolically demonstrated through this act. In front of the pandal, a pit was dug, and a pyre was created, and with Sahastrabuddhe in a leading role, *Manu Smriti* was burnt ceremoniously with the help of sandalwood, and the Dalit hermits performed the task. As (Jaffrelot 2004) argues, in his starting years, Ambedkar had accepted the notion of Sanskritization but later rejected the caste system. *Manu Smriti* burning was a decisive step in that direction. But the method applied by him like pyre and sandalwood (a

sacred wood for Hindus), to set *Manu Smriti* to fire, convey the connotation that he could not wholly disassociate from the existing rituals of Hinduism at that time.

In the same conference, three other resolutions were also adopted—declaration of human rights for all. Hindu society is reduced to one class only, and everyone should be allowed to become a priest. In this way, Ambedkar had laid the initial doctrine of untouchables struggle for fundamental rights and dignity, equality in Hindu society, and exclusivity to the profession by birth. And to achieve these modern goals, he called for the dismissal of the existing Hindu law book because it was a symbol of darkness and ignorance (Janata, 1997) and demanded a new code to govern Hindu society (Keer, 2016) based on liberty, equality, and fraternity.

The idea was also to prepare a ground for political struggle as he compared the burning of the *Manu Smriti* to the burning of foreign cloth recommended by Gandhi (Gore, 1993). Although, interestingly, Gandhi's image was also there in the conference, equating the burning with a boycott of British clothes was intended to unite Dalits for a radical protest that too wholly different from the ongoing freedom struggle for political independence.

Buddha as a Symbol of Resistance

Geertz (1973) defines religion as "a set of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations." Ambedkar constructed and re-interpreted the symbolic dimensions of Buddha to achieve the desired goal. For denouncement of Hindu religion, it was much required to counter the dominant Hindu myths as Barthes argues that myth function in the society in a way that it projects cultural and historical things as natural and hides the inherited ideology (Barthes, 1972). In his words, "Buddhism is the most scientific religion based on morality, equality, tolerance, and compassion for all. Except for the Buddha, founders of all religions claimed infallibility for themselves, while the Buddha was satisfied with the role of Margadata" (Keer, 2016). A myth explains the culture and molds the way people conceptualize anything. The use of Buddha was to create a counter-culture in front of hegemonic Hindu culture and provide a figure which can inspire millions of untouchables to remove their ignorance.

Ambedkar developed political philosophy under the philosophical context of enlightenment (Rodrigues, 2017), and Buddha was his enlightenment figure. Through Buddha, he questioned God in the Hindu religion and provided a model to Dalits to logically counter the mythological figures in Hinduism. Ambedkar did not consider religion as a private affair, and his Buddha can also be understood as the symbol of his political philosophy like justice, equality, liberty, and democracy. Mahatma Gandhi was his bitter political opponent, and Ambedkar opposed his social and political ideas throughout his life. *Ramarajya* was Gandhi's social and political philosophy, and he was inspired by Ram's administration (Ravindra Kumar).

Contrary to it, Ambedkar was a Constitutionalist with a modern vision of governance, and he symbolized his modern and progressive ideas through Buddha. (Ilaiah, 2004) argues, "Gandhi used symbols like Rama and the Bhagavad Gita, whereas Ambedkar invoked the symbol of Buddha and critiqued Rama, Krishna, and the Gita."

Ambedkar offered a new cultural life to Dalits after conversion to Buddhism (Dangle, 1992). In this cultural life, Buddha was a symbol of inspiration and identity.

Clothes as Identity Marker

Clothes play an active role in constructing the identity of any individual, family, society, caste, class, religion, and nation at large (Tarlo, 1996). Ambedkar wore western clothes and preferred being well maintained. Having higher education from overseas, his liking and attraction towards foreign clothes were evident. But his fashion statement was more than his personal choice as in (Barthe's, 1990) arguments; fashion also carries linguistic meanings. The caste system has notions of pure and impure (Dumont, 1980). Brahmins being priests, occupied the top level in the caste system and were considered as pure while untouchables at the bottom level as impure and polluted. The polluting nature of works like sweeping the toilets, removing dead animals, and polluting elements were assigned to them, and they were forced to live separately. The myth-making related to the lower caste was also extended to their characterization through dirty clothes. There was even a social mandate where they were not allowed to wear suitable dresses. The untouchables' filthy garments were, in a way, the symbol of their submissiveness to upper caste people (Jaoul, 2006). This discriminatory behavior and perception towards them were naturalized. While discussing the myth-making or ideological construct on clothing, Barthes highlights the reality constituted through it and argues that people never encounter with the real clothes but encounter with the myth that is fashion (Barthes, 1990). Hence, Ambedkar's three-piece suit and fashion statement created a counter-myth for Dalits in their new get-up.

In 1927, during Mahad Satyagraha, which has been described by Omvedt (2011) as the "first untouchable liberation movement," Ambedkar asked the untouchables to renounce eating carrion, not to eat thrown out crumbs and emphasized to regain "self-respect" and gain "self-knowledge" (Keer, 2016). To do this, it was much needed to counter the existing well-accepted depictions, which had formed the degraded image of Dalits and raise their awareness to be well dressed. This idea was reflected in his speech while communicating with a group of women.

"Never regard yourselves as untouchables. Live a clean life. Dress yourselves like touchable ladies. Never mind if your dress is full of patches, but see that it is clean. None can restrict your freedom in the choice of your garments and the use of the metal for your ornaments" (Keer, 2016).

Fashion keeps changing the apparel and aesthetic judgment of people. These fashion changes first primarily affect the Upper classes, and the moment lower classes start imbibing this style, the upper classes leave the existing style and move to a new one (Simmel, 1957). Therefore, Ambedkar's clothing goes beyond the Brahmanical clothing culture so that Dalits will not have to follow the upper caste adopted fashion but will establish their own and different style. He found this empowering potential in western clothes, which presented an altogether different image of Dalits.

Ambedkar had a modern approach to address Dalit problems, and he believed that to address the issue of social inequality, there is a need to abolish the Hindu religion. He had sharp ideological differences with Gandhi over the problems of social

and political reforms. His clothing also reflected these differences. He found a way in modern education and thinking to raise the self-consciousness of Dalits and make them self-reliant. In this journey, he first wanted to project a different image of Dalits and boost their confidence in front of well-dressed caste Hindus. Since he had seen the Dalit emancipation outside Hindu religion and culture, his western clothes were a symbolic resistance against the hegemonic Brahmanical culture. The foreign clothes had also become a signifier of Dalits' adaption of western norms, participating in modernity, gaining respect, and leaving the caste stigma behind (Gupta, 2012).

During the independence struggle, the boycott of foreign clothes was a potent symbol to show mistrust in British rule. Under Gandhi's leadership, the *Swadeshi* movement was at its peak, and the country had boycotted western clothes on a massive scale. The mood of the nation was against the British attires and culture. In this scenario, for anyone in public life, wearing western clothes was political statements, related to the new Dalit identity in Modern India (Tarlo, 1996).

Swadeshi movement symbolized *Khadi* as "established certain normative frameworks that marginalized the lower castes and rendered Dalits invisible" (Gupta, 2012). Ambedkar wanted to challenge this homogenization of upper caste monopoly in the freedom struggle, and his western attire was resistant towards this. The dress intended to oppose Gandhi, who was propagating *Khadi*. Ambedkar criticized Gandhi's attempt and described *Khadi* as a symbol of retrogression to a past of oppressive Hindu customs (Ambedkar, 1993). This was also the reflection of his sharp opposition to Congress's program to achieve freedom and Dalit emancipation. Unlike Gandhi, Ambedkar argued that the question of social reforms comes first, and getting political freedom from the Britishers comes only after that. Guru (1998) notes, for Ambedkar, the social aspect of nationalism was more important than the political, which was emphasized by the Hindu nationalists. And his attire was also a symbol of his emphasis on social issues and his no-confidence towards the idea of India propagated by large caste Hindu dominated leadership of the freedom movement. Ambedkar was an admirer of city life, and he believed that the untouchables should move to cities for better living standards, amenities, and modern education. His fashion statement was representative of this thought too. "Our clothes are our resistance" this dialogue from Rajinikanth's film *Kabali*, wherein Ambedkar's personality influences the lead character—rightly defines the well-dressed Ambedkar's vision and protest even in today's time. His dressing still operates as a symbol of Dalits' aspiration, a protest against deeply entrenched caste biases and discomfort in the eyes of Caste Hindus.

Conclusion

Ambedkar's symbolism was a complete projection of his modern ideas of Dalit emancipation in independent India. He carefully constructed and re-interpreted these symbols to define his aim and bring a large section of untouchables under one banner to agitate for their fundamental social and political rights. His selection of the symbols and how he developed and effectively applied these demonstrate his ace communication and mobilizing skills. The emergence of new symbols and re-interpretation of old ones frequently occurs in the social and political arena. Still,

Ambedkar's great visualization of symbolism through *Manu Smriti* burning, Buddha, and his clothing that these symbols are always at the center of Dalits' assertion. There have been several reported incidents in the recent past that substantiate this analysis. Like *Manu Smriti*, *Dahan Diwas* is organized every year by the Dalits' rights groups, attacks on Dalits for wearing leather shoes, and riding a horse by Scheduled Caste groom. The ideas of Ambedkar are alive in these powerful symbols, which continue to inspire millions of Dalits and challenge regressive thinking.

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