

ENCOUNTERING JOHN DEWEY'S 'PRAGMATISM' IN AN INDIAN CONTEXT: AMBEDKAR'S CRITIQUE OF WAR, VIOLENCE, AND NATIONALISM

KALYAN KUMAR DAS
Presidency University



This essay engages with the Indian thinker Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's thoughts on war and violence and how these are intertwined with his notions of nationalism. For Ambedkar, critiquing violence amounts to a simultaneous critique of the idea of the nation. However, in bringing these two registers together, this article follows the trope of an intellectual history that incorporates Ambedkar's encounter with the American pragmatist thinker John Dewey, his reading of Bertrand Russell's thoughts on war, his criticisms of Marxist ideas on the necessity of violence in revolution as well as his scathing criticism of the question of violence in the Indian epic battle of Kurukshetra. In so doing, I hope to underscore how Ambedkar's ideas on violence were deeply influenced by both Dewey and Russell. In addition, I want to emphasize Ambedkar's novel vision of morality that, while specific to the context of an Asian sub-continental cultural ethos, remains profoundly cosmopolitan in nature.



Volume 2 · Number 3 · Winter 2018 · Pages 125-142

The most “humane” governments, which in peaceful times “detest” war, proclaim during war, that the highest duty of their armies is the extermination of the greatest possible number of people.

—Leon Trotsky, *Their Morals and Ours* (1938).

...the responsibility for an intelligent control of force rests on us all. In short, the point is that to achieve anything we must use force: only we must use it constructively as energy and not destructively as violence.

—Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, “Mr. Russell and the Reconstruction of Society” (1918)

Thoughtful contemplations on war and violence might be anomalous absurdities in light of their grim subject matter. Since the brief interlude that separated the two world wars (or especially since the Cold War), we live in perpetual anxiety.¹ This is even more so in a world afflicted by the gory materiality of war; it seems that “thoughtfulness” and “war” are concepts in strict opposition. Given the apparent binary nature of these terms, we are prompted to ask a difficult question: what does it mean to *think* about war, an event that instantiates a crisis that is itself thoughtless?

Even though it is an event of materiality, physicality, or action, war triggers thoughts—not simply in the aftermath but also during the course of the war. However, the range and nature of thoughts about war differ as radically as the means of warfare. In *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*, anti-war poet Siegfried Sassoon takes refuge in a nostalgic recollection of a world of innocence that is lost forever due to war. In George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia*, he provides a political aesthetics to counter incendiary prose and hate speech. The exactitude of their contexts do matter as much as the abstracted discussions of their views. However, for the present purposes I restrict myself to those thinkers who, after being engaged in witnessing too many wars, started pondering over the assumed “innate” tendencies that lead humans to war or philosophies that tend to willy-nilly justify war or its constituent element—violence. Here, I do not draw a distinction

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2018 John Dewey Society annual meeting in New York (April 13-14, 2018).

between more apparent causes of war and more “innate” or intrinsic aspects of war. Doing so is more likely to be counterproductive for the very choice of thinkers and philosophies that I discuss here as they are, for the most part, thinkers who avoided a hard distinction between *thought* and *action*.

In this essay, I focus upon the ancient war of Kurukshetra in the Indian epic or *mahakavya* – *Mahabharata*, especially its most “philosophically” famous component – *The Bhagavad Gita* which features dialogues between war hero Arjuna and his advisor Krishna. Risking a nativist argument, let me take a cue from the Indian philosopher Arindam Chakrabarty to point out the difference between Indian and Western epic traditions.² Understanding this is important to realize why we need to blur the lines between “action” and “thought” especially in a context like Kurukshetra war. According to Chakrabarty, Indian verse narratives of epic length cannot be easily characterized as “epic” in the western sense of the term. The crucial difference is that western epics are centered around the grand moment of action in a time of war, while Indian epics are centered around dialogues. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna and Arjuna are not directly engaged in fighting a battle. They are engaged in a philosophical conversation. Consequently, it would be foolhardy to think of such strict binarisation of thought and action or “words about war” and “wars *as such*” in such a non-western context. To expand upon this, it is worthwhile to look to the work of philosophers –some of whom never participated in the battlefield (unlike Sassoon or Orwell) and some who did and yet, all of them remained passionately engaged to philosophically preempt future possibilities of war—Bertrand Russell, John Dewey, and Leon Trotsky. For perspective, I invoke Dr. B.R.Ambedkar who brings Dewey, Russell and Marxism together as interlocutors on issues like war, force, violence, and nationalism. Through this, I also reveal possible ways in which Ambedkar’s ideas were shaped by their respective philosophies. While the context of Kuruskshetra war and its incessant invocation in modern Indian political world serves my rationale as to why I put such

² See Prathama Banerjee, Aditya Nigam, Rakesh Pandey, “Work of Theory: Thinking Across Traditions,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 51, No. 37 (2016).

widely disparate thinkers on the same platform, the textual connections I make here serve as my ultimate justification. I put these complex thinkers in conversation also because war and violence need not be thought through a single philosophical prism or ideological perspective. It requires, as Bertrand Russell suggests, a radical recuperation of “common sense” that cuts across “_isms.” In the preface to *Common Sense and Nuclear Warfare*, Russell writes:

What is needed is not an appeal to this or that –ism, but only to common sense. I do not see any reason why the kind of arguments which are put forward by those who think as I do should appeal more to one side than to the other or to Left-Wing opinion more than to that of men of conservative outlook. The appeal is to human beings as such and is made equally to all who hope for human survival.³

Such a clarion call to “common sense” beyond strict ideological affiliations and the assemblage of these thinkers look especially relevant in discussing a thinker such as Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar whose pragmatic concerns often speak to a broad spectrum of philosophical streams beyond the limits of the East and the West. Such scattershot critical cosmopolitanism in Ambedkar, however, is placed within the specific reference to the war of Kurukshetra.

Why Kurukshetra?

The war of Kurukshetra or Krishna-Arjuna dialogues in particular or *The Mahabharata*, in general, can actually be considered as a rather anomalous illustrative example to cite in an essay on issues like violence or violence in war in particular. Just as it is difficult to define the most appropriate genre of the Mahabharata (*purana/lore, katha/narrative or itihasa/history?*), it is almost impossible to resolve the tensions between the philosophic battle between “violence”/“himsa”

³ Bertrand Russell, *Common Sense and Nuclear War* (London and New York:Routledge, 2010).

and “non-violence”/“ahimsa” in a text that reaches its narrative apotheosis in the crisis of a war. For billions of modern readers of *the Gita* or the *Mahabharata*, the text(s) sends out a strong message against violence. That “ahimsa paromo dharma” or “non-violence is the highest principle” is a much cherished maxim in these texts/text is so dominant in the aggregated “interpretive load” of these narratives that it might even seem strange as to why I choose such a text in the present context. Firstly, the “philosophic” issues that these narratives apparently espouse are almost always retrospectively cited in contemporary times in an inexhaustible fashion. In a sense, the *Mahabharata* is a text that brings the apparent extremities of Indian political scenario closer than we can imagine and *The Gita* is hardly monopolized only by the Hindu right wing to justify their political decisions or to reimagine themselves as rightful heirs of the morally superior brigade in that great war of Kurukshetra- Pandavas. While the Indian foreign minister Ms. Sushma Swaraj has been busy in distributing *the Gita* among foreign diplomats as the latest example of India’s soft skill exercise, the President of India National Congress Mr. Rahul Gandhi recently reimagined his party as a team of Pandavas and his political opponents as Kauravas-the two belligerent parties in the Kurukshetra war. This suffices to conclude that the apparitions of the “literary unthing” or “literary monster”- the *Mahabharata* or the *Gita* are hardly exorcised from the political graffiti of present India. Secondly, the text of *Gita* also creates possibilities of retrospective reading that foregrounds the emergence of a discourse of nationalism in India. This essay will keep engaging with the twin registers of violence in war and nationalism by taking the *Gita* as the textual hotbed where Ambedkar deployed several ideas of John Dewey, Russell and Trotsky as well as commented on Indian texts like Jaimini’s *Purba Mimamsa* or Badaranya’s *Brahma Sutras*.

As is evident from his short acerbic essay “Krishna and His Gita,” for Dr. Ambedkar, the *Bhagabad Gita* is to be considered merely as a “philosophic defense of certain dogmas” and the text does not hold much importance beyond the status of a “counter-revolutionary text” that refuses to acknowledge its philosophical debt to the creditor – Buddhism. Despite the apparent celebration of the texts as upholding

“ahimsa” in modern times by his contemporaries like Gandhi or Tilak, Ambedkar mounts his attacks precisely because the text of *Gita* defends and justifies violence in war and even validates a violent war against one’s own kith and kin. This is, according to him, one of the “dogmas” on the basis of which he disqualifies it as a philosophic text. Born as an untouchable Mahar and a son of an army person in British Indian Army’s Mahar Regiment, Ambedkar was certainly opposed to how *Gita* legitimized the *varnashram dharma* (that constitutes another “dogma” that the text defends). While criticizing the text of *Gita* for upholding *varnashrama dharma* or denouncing it for legitimizing war is important for him, Ambedkar also attacks it on the basis of how the text inflates the meaning of key terms like “karma yoga” (by reading it as “action”) or “gyan yoga” (by reading it as “wisdom”) and paves the way for nationalist reconfiguration subsequently. Therefore, for Ambedkar, the *Gita* or the conversation between Arjuna and Krishna in Kurukshetra war constitutes a central concern for his moral as well as political philosophy. This essay is an attempt to engage with such a moral philosophy and to see how Dewey contributed to one of his illustrious student’s understanding of war, violence, force and how all these can figure in the “democratic ethos” of a polity that constituted a significant concern in their shared universe of moral philosophy.

Means versus Ends: Dewey, Trotsky and Russell

In July, 1938 issue of the American journal *The New Internationalist*, Leon Trotsky wrote a lengthy essay titled “Their Morals and Ours.”⁴ This text had a section completely dedicated to what Trotsky called “dialectics of means and ends.” For Trotsky, morality was a contentious domain and there has to be some understanding of the “class nature of morality” instead of taking it at face value. In this text, Trotsky tries his best to differentiate his Marxist ethos from those of Jesuits, utilitarian philosophy of Bentham and Mill as well as the bureaucratic socialism of Stalin in the USSR. Against the backdrop of

⁴ Leon Trotsky, “Their Morals and Ours,” *The New Internationalist*, Vol. IV No.6 (New York, 1938), 163-173.

Dewey Commission's investigations into the allegations against Trotsky and his followers in the Mexico City, Trotsky clarifies his stand on the philosophical conflicts between means and ends. For him, it is important to philosophically diffuse this by showing why means can use justifiable violence if the end is that of the dictatorship of the proletariat and focusing too much on the moral worth of means adopted to do it might actually become counter-productive for the revolution. Too much moralism on means might actually be a powerful method for destroying the revolutionary zeal of the proletariat. This is why Trotsky opines: "Morality is a function of the class struggle." For Trotsky, any generalizable moral value actually plays into the favors of the bourgeoisie. That is why he is immensely weary of the Kantian *categorical imperative*.

In the August issue of the same journal, John Dewey responds to Trotsky's concerns for the dialectics of means and ends in a short piece called "On *Their Morals and Ours*."⁵ Here, Dewey points out the problem of foreseeing the end that is supposed to justify the means. According to Dewey, the anticipation of an end might not meet the real end at the end of a social or political revolution and this "end-in-view" always differs from "end- in- reality." Moreover, there can be a multiplicity of ends, instead of one particular intended and anticipated end. There is always a possibility of also destroying other necessary ends in the process. The end-in-view, in this whole debate, must also be seen as a means in itself as it acts as an incentive for the end to be realized. While Trotsky does realize the dual nature of "ends-in-view," his perceptions are somewhat insensitive to dispositional changes that Dewey sees as necessary. Although Ambedkar does not mention this Dewey-Trotsky debate in particular, his criticism of Marxists methods that are likely to implement violence in bringing about a revolution, is heavily based on Dewey's moral philosophy that did not foreclose the possibility of dispositional change in lieu of an unbridled usage of violence as violation. A few months before his demise in 1956, this ardent Indian admirer of Dewey wrote a text called "Buddha or Karl

⁵ John Dewey, "On Their Morals and Ours," *The New International*, (New York, 1938). Also see, Leon Trotsky, *Their Morals and Ours: The Class Foundations of Moral Practice*, (New York, London, Montreal, Sydney: Pathfinder, 1969).

Marx?” where he cites Dewey and raises the debates between means and ends. Ambedkar asks: “whose means are more efficacious?” while comparing Buddha with Marx. Commenting on the Buddhist understanding of Ahimsa, Ambedkar says that Buddha never deployed an absolutist understanding of ahimsa or non-violence. According to Ambedkar, Buddha’s pragmatic mindset allowed him to recognize how violence is an integral part of our existence and then refers to Dewey:

There are of course other grounds against violence such as those urged by Prof. Dewey. In dealing with those who contend that the end justifies the means is morally deprived doctrine, Dewey has rightly asked what can justify the means if not the end? It is only the end that justifies the means.⁶

A little later he says:

As Prof. Dewey has pointed out that violence is only another name for the use of force and although force must be used for creative purposes a distinction between use of force as energy and use of force as violence needs to be made. The achievement of an end involves the destruction of many other ends which are integral with the one that is sought to be, destroyed. Use of force must be so regulated that it should save as many ends as possible in destroying the evil one. Buddha’s ahimsa was not absolute as the ahimsa preached by Mahavira, the founder of Jainism. He would have allowed force only as energy. The Communists preach ahimsa as an absolute principle. To this the Buddha was deadly opposed.⁷

Such Deweyan understanding of violence, force and energy is again cited by Ambedkar in another text. This time it is a longish review article that he wrote on Bertrand Russell’s anti-war book *Principles of*

⁶ Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, “Buddha or Karl Marx?” in *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches* (BAWS), ed. Vasant Moon (New Delhi, 2014) vol.3, 441-462.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Social Reconstruction, also known as *Why Men Fight?* In this 1918 essay “Mr. Russell and the Reconstruction of Society”, published in *Journal of the Indian Economic Society*, Ambedkar expresses his understanding of the dialectics of means and ends, force and violence. This demands a quotation *in extenso*:

The gist of it all is that activity is the condition of growth. Mr. Russell, it must be emphasized, is against war but is not for quietism; for, according to him activity leads to growth and quietism is but another name for death. To express it in the language of Professor Dewey he is only against “force as violence” but is all for “force as energy.” It must be remembered by those who are opposed to force that without the use of it all ideals will remain empty just as without some ideal or purpose (conscious or otherwise) all activity will be no more than mere fruitless fooling. Ends and means (= force in operation) are therefore concomitants and the common adage that ‘the end justifies the means’ contains a profound truth which is perverted simply because it is misunderstood. For if the end does not justify the means, what else will? The difficulty is that we do not sufficiently control the operations of the means once employed for the achieving of some end. For a means when once employed liberates many ends- a fact scarcely recognized- and not the one only we wish it to produce. However, in our fanaticism for achievement we attach the article ‘the’ to the end we cherish and pay no heed to the ends simultaneously liberated. Of course for the exigencies of an eminently practical life we must set an absolute value on some one end. But in doing this we must take precaution that the other ends involved are not sacrificed. Thus, the problem is that if we are to use force, as we must, to achieve something, we must see that while working for one end we do not destroy, in the process, other ends equally worthy of maintenance. Applying this to the present war, no justification, I think, is needed, for the use of force. What needs to be justified is the destructive violence. The

justification must satisfy the world the ends given prominence to by one or other of the combatants could not be achieved otherwise than by violence i.e. , without involving the sacrifice of other ends equally valuable for the stability of the world. True enough that violence cannot always be avoided and non-resistance can be adopted only when it better way of resistance. But the responsibility for an intelligent control of force rest on us all. In short the point is that to achieve anything we must use force; only we must use it constructively as energy and not destructively as violence. ⁸

Ambedkar's perceptions on the use of violence clearly imply that he considers force or even violence as an unavoidable part of our lives on earth. Referring to the British conservative political thinker Edmund Burke, Ambedkar in this review article reminds us that force and violence, even if it is deployed for a noble cause, might not sustain a revolutionary moment for long. Therefore, people need dispositional change through education and democracy. Here, Ambedkar is directly influenced by Dewey's idea of democracy that went beyond the usual definition of it in terms of universal adult franchise and he embraces Dewey's idea of democratic ethos and education as more efficacious ways of addressing inequality in human society. However, his understanding of violence or *himsa* follows his Buddhist comprehension of it in non-absolutist ways.

Ambedkar - A Modern Dharmavyadh?

In the *Aranyakparvan* (The Forest Chapter) of the *Mahabharata*,⁹ one

⁸ Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, "Mr. Russell and the Reconstruction of the Society," in *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches (BAWS)*, ed. Vasant Moon (New Delhi, 2014) vol. 1, 481-492.

⁹ For a profound analysis of violence in the *Mahabharata*, see how its "Souptik Parvan" has been explored by Professor Anirban Das. See Anirban Das, "Of Sleep and Violence: Reading the Sauptikaparvan in Times of Terror", in *Mahabharata Now and Then*, edited by Arindam Chakrabarti and Sibaji Bandopadhyay (London New York New Delhi: Routledge, 2014), p 203-218. I am grateful to my friend Samrat Sengupta for leading me to this brilliant piece.

comes across an unusual term- *anrisamsa* or “non-cruelty” as a substitute for *ahimsa*. In this chapter of the epic-the quintessential virtuous man, leader of Pandavas and a prominent protagonist of the epic— Judhisthira— is engaged in a conversation with Dharma, the incarnation of goodness. Dharma asks Judhisthira: “What is the best principle in life?” To this Judhisthira answers: “anrisamsa paromo dharmo” (non-cruelty is the highest principle). However, *anrisamsa* or non-cruelty, as a more practicable principle, is not philosophically presented by Judhisthira. In Aranyakparvan, this maxim comes from Dharmavyadh of Mithila-a sudra- a man of low caste origin or a dalit in modern parlance. He is a fowler or a vyadh who sells meat in the market and in that sense, lives a life that depends on violence. Dharmavyadh, as Professor Sibaji Bandopadhyay shows, finds a more pragmatic solution to the philosophical rigmarole apropos of *ahimsa*. For Dharmavyadh, *ahimsa* or non-violence is, at best, an impossible ideal. Bandopadhyay explains:

Dharmavyadha reckons the ‘state of violence’ to be an irremediable, unavoidable factor of the ‘human condition.’ In his system of Ethics, *ahimsa* obtains the precarious status of an unrealizable ideal.¹⁰

He, like Ambedkar, recognizes the presence of violence or force as energy and concludes that “*ahimsa paromo dharmo*” must be supplanted with “*anrisamsa paromo dharmo*.” *Anrisamsa*, Bandopadhyay shows, can be understood as leniency or non-cruelty. The fowler in this story recognizes non-cruelty as the more cherished path. Instead of dillydallying about an absolutist notion of non-violence, Ambedkar and Dharmavyadh both prescribe *anrisamsa*. In “Krishna and His Gita”, Ambedkar’s rejection of violence in the *Gita* is premised not on an absolute rejection of force. Rather, his path is a *majjhim pantha* (middle way) on the trajectory of Dharmavyadh’s “non-cruelty.” Such a path was only possible when Ambedkar

¹⁰ See Sibaji Bandopadhyay, “A Critique of Non-Violence,” *Three Essays in Mahabharata; Essays in Literary Hermeneutics*, (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2016), 267-307.

recognized the distinction between “force as energy” and “force as violence or violation.” In recognizing this distinction Ambedkar acknowledges his intellectual debt to John Dewey. While it is important for Ambedkar to use some level of persuasive force either through his rhetorical schema or pedagogical deployment of the Deweyan idea of democracy as a social ethos, it is equally significant for him to perceive violence in rather non-absolutist sense. But, in my opinion, this distinction between “force as violence” and “force as energy” does not fully exemplify Ambedkar’s appropriation of Dewey’s thoughts. Also, we need to ask why and how Ambedkar brings his criticism of Krishna and his rebuttal of Marxist thought together in the context of violence and means/ends debate. Is Ambedkar hinting at something more outrageous here? Is it possible to put Brahminical delineations on violence and Marxist endorsement of violence as an inevitable means for revolutionary praxis together on the same philosophical footing? If Ambedkar’s intellectual allegiances to Dewey is anything to go by, such speculations invariably find basis in Dewey’s moral philosophy.

While Scott Stroud has recently emphasized on the similarities between Ambedkar’s interpretations of Buddhist idea of ahimsa/himsa and his appropriation of the pragmatist visions of violence, the philosophical basis of this apparent similarity between Ambedkar’s critique of violence as legitimized by the *Gita* and his criticisms of the Marxist’s deployment of violence is not underscored by Stroud.¹¹ For Stroud, the only distinction that differentiates Marxists from Deweyan- Ambedkarite (read pragmatist-Buddhist) is the fine line between “force as energy” and “force as violence.” In order to find such a deeper philosophical conflict between Dewey and Marxists, one needs to look at the last section of his response to Trotsky. In my opinion such fundamental philosophical critique attempted by Dewey subsequently paved the way for Ambedkar’s simultaneous debunking of Krishna’s and Marxist legitimization of violence (in the form of violation). According to Dewey, there is, in

¹¹ Scott R. Stroud, “Pragmatism, Persuasion and Force in Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar’s Reconstruction of Buddhism,” *Journal of Religion*, 97 no.2 (2017), 214-243.

Marxist orthodoxy, a solid, rooted perception that the means follow from *the* principle of class struggle. By saying that the means are deduced from the principle of class struggle, they foreclose the possibility of understanding human problems through other ways or negate the possibility of examining the means adopted to materialize Trotsky's noble goal/end – “to liberate men from the control of other men and from the dominance of nature.” Ambedkar shares a similar opinion about both Krishna and the Marxists. In “Krishna and His Gita”, Ambedkar's primary concern about himsa does not come merely from a morality that rejects violence absolutely. His criticism of the Gita, in my opinion, comes from the fact that Krishna asks Arjuna to nullify his capacity to think and perform what varna system has assigned him to perform. Placing the onus on such *a priori* principle (varna or class struggle) is rejected by both Dewey and Ambedkar as they think it does not allow further examination of means adopted. This becomes clear from Dewey's closing statement in “On Their Morals and Ours”:

Orthodox Marxism shares with orthodox religionism and with traditional idealism the belief that human ends are interwoven into the very texture and structure of existence—a conception presumably from its Hegelian origin.

Critique of *Himsa* qua a critique of Indian nationalism

Just as the maxim “ahimsa paromo dharma” is reimagined in our contemporary times as the seed message of the *Mahabharata* that helps Hindus to see themselves as a community of “non-violence”, the seed *sloka* (verse) of the *Gita* is also thought to have supplied them with the most necessary philosophical lesson needed to survive in this modern world. The forty-seventh *sloka* of the second chapter (2:47) of the *Gita* is widely understood as the essence or kernel of the whole text and its philosophy: “karmanye ba dhikaraste ma phalesu kadachana.” Simply translated this goes like: “You are supposed to perform your duties and not think of the fruits of your actions.” This interpretation of the *sloka* has apparently given us the idea of “niskama karma” or “desireless

action.” But how is this oxymoron possible? In the pre-modern interpretations of the *Gita*, the notion of *karma* is very different from the idea of “worldly action” implied in this modern reading. The Indian non-dualist philosopher Adi Shankacharya’s *Gita* commentary as well as all such pre-modern commentaries interpret *karma* as mere “ritual actions” (this meaning is also described in various other brahmanic texts). In this sense, the idea of “karma” could never be compatible with “gyan” or “wisdom.” However, in the era of Indian nationalist movement, this idea of petty ritual action got replaced with a new interpretation.

The famous Bengali novelist and nationalist intellectual Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, in his 1888 book *Dharmatattva*, gave us this modern interpretation of “karma” for the first time. This nationalist/ writer went on to explain that Indians needed to merge karma and gyan in order to sustain themselves in the modern times. Here we must note that the anti-colonial movement was based on the construction of a discursive space of “difference” as well as a construction of “modern self” among Indians.¹² This paradoxical project, as Partha Chatterjee shows¹³, could only be possible when Indians could convince themselves that the construction and articulation of difference in the domain of “spirituality” as something “essentially Indian” could be found compatible with a pursuit for worldly action. It is to make this project successful that they needed to inflate the meaning of these terms, especially “karma.” In the nineteenth century revival of non-dualist philosophy, Indian nationalist thinkers even went beyond the interpretive limits set by the founder of this school of Indian philosophy – Sankaracharya. While for him, “gyan” and “karma” were like water and oil, for Bankim, these were intertwined and they implied “desire less action.” The notion of *niskama karma* (desire less action) could then be extended to render this question asked by the Indian theosophist

¹² See Sibaji Bandopadhyay, “Non-Dualism and Nationalism: A Case Study-The Dawn Enterprise,” *Sibaji Bandopadhyay Reader*, (New Delhi: Worldview Publications, 2011), p 38-104. Also see, Sibaji Bandopadhyay, *Three Essays on the Mahabharata*, (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2016).

¹³ Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

Annie Besant merely rhetorical- “Is spiritual Progress Inconsistent with Material Progress?” However, Ambedkar’s “Krishna and Gita”, as Sibaji Bandopadhyay shows, became an anomaly among this massive enthusiasm for neo-non dualist *Gita* interpretations that fueled the construction of the nationalist discourse. Ambedkar, the leader of the untouchables and the primary architect of the Indian constitution, became almost the lone voice in saying that such a marriage of “gyana” and “karma” is impossible and to do so would mount to a deliberate act of misreading:

Most translate the word Karma Yoga as “action” and the word Jnana Yoga as “knowledge” and proceed to discuss the *Bhagabad Gita* as though it was engaged in comparing and contrasting knowledge versus action in a generalized form. This is quite wrong.¹⁴

Ambedkar’s observations, thus, not only attacked his contemporary celebration of the *Gita* through the registers of war, violence or *varnasharama dharma*/caste system, his interpretations questioned the very claims upon which the edifice of Indian nationalist discourse would be constructed. The notion of karma and how it is inflated to serve such purpose is an example among many similar instances.

But such a reading does not immediately give us any concrete idea as to how Ambedkar himself thought of nationalism. Out of the previous paragraph it is evident that a committed reader like him could see through the implicit politics of such retrospective readings of the *Gita*. But how did he himself conceptualize the nation-state, especially when he put in such massive intellectual as well as political efforts to create the Constitution of the newly independent country. It is true that his contributions on the construction of the modern Indian nation-state can never be overestimated. It is now common knowledge that he was the principal architect of the constitution, the

¹⁴ As quoted in Sibaji Bandopadhyay, “Non-Dualism and Nationalism,” *Sibaji Bandopadhyay Reader*, (New Delhi, 2011), p 38-104. Also see, Sibaji Bandopadhyay, *Three Essays on the Mahabharata*, (New Delhi, 2016).

first law minister of independent India and he is also well known for giving us rigorous accounts of how the nation-state can have a stable life. But, contrary to the popular perception of Ambedkar as “a maker of modern India” (to borrow Ramachandra Guha’s phrase) he was also a thinker who saw through the contradictions of the very idea of nation-state or nationalism. In articulating these thoughts about the inner contradictions of such a cherished idea, Ambedkar never explicitly quoted Dewey or cited him. But in his statements he is unmistakably Deweyan. Let us compare their thoughts. Dewey, as Leonard J. Waks’ essay “John Dewey on Nationalism” in *Dewey Studies* shows, did recognize how certain social contradictions in a given society can be overridden through the construction of a horizontal comradeship and yet, nationalism inculcates a strong sense of hatred among fellow nationalists against the citizens of another nation:

Dewey grants that nationalism has been a ‘two-sided’ ethical force, a ‘tangled mixture of good and bad.’ On the positive side, nationalism was a “movement away from obnoxious conditions”: narrow parochialism and dynastic despotism. . . . But on the negative side, nation states have been built up by and sustained through violent conflict. Internal unity and fellow feeling has been accompanied by hostility to the people of other nations.¹⁵

It is this curious interplay of love and hatred that marks the paradoxical existence of nation-states. Dr. Ambedkar, in his book *Pakistan or the Partition of India*, gives us a similar definition of nationalism:

This national feeling is a double edged feeling. It is at once a feeling of fellowship for one’s own kith and kin and anti-fellowship for those who are not one’s own kith and kin.¹⁶

¹⁵ Leonard J. Waks, “John Dewey on Nationalism,” *Dewey Studies* Vol.1 No. 2 (2017), 112-125.

¹⁶ Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Pakistan or the Partition of India*, in Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches (BAWS) ed. Vasant Moon (New Delhi, 2014),

At a time when nationalist jingoism is rising, hatred for other communities is equally strong both in Indian and the United States, the realization of duality in the very idea of nation-states or how nationalist claims of ancient origin are located not in remote unintelligible (yet “glorious”) past but in recent, deliberately distorted readings of pre-modern texts or how war, violence and nationalism can be subtly and intricately thought through—are absolutely important. Both Dewey and Ambedkar can be our guide in helping us see through such intricacies. However, the fact that I have put Trotsky, Dewey, Ambedkar and Russell in conversation with each other in this essay, should not conveniently imply an easy subscription to any of their particular philosophical affiliations.¹⁷ Rather, my concerns concerning war, violence and nationalism in this essay reflect how all of them inhabited future points of criticism that their philosophical inclinations would encounter.

While Trotsky’s thoughts might operate as much needed correctives in negotiating with the hegemonic logic of global neo-liberalism in our times, Dewey’s ‘critical liberalism’ or immanent critique of liberalism and critique of different hues of Marxist thoughts might help us see the limits of Left’s multifaceted and wider political projects. As Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau suggest, Left does not necessarily have to see liberal democratic institutions as historically necessary obstacles that need to be overcome or toppled down through a radical revolutionary moment to envisage and politically realize the ‘end of politics’ (somewhat analogous to Francis Fukuyama’s ‘end of history’).¹⁸ Just as Dewey’s moral philosophy comes as a required rupture to interrogate the validation of violence in both-religious orthodoxy of the contemporary Right wing populism and the revolutionary zeal of the non-electoral Left, one must recognize

vol. 8, 1-482.

¹⁷ Richard Bernstein thinks that this particular attitude in itself is a fundamental characteristic of American Pragmatism of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James and John Dewey. See, Richard Bernstein, *The Pragmatic Turn* (Cambridge, Malden: Polity Press, 2010).

¹⁸ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London, New York: Verso, 2014).

how Trotsky's insights help us see the persistent hegemonisation of a neo-liberal market economy and 'market society' (to borrow Michael Sandal's phrase). Neither of these two ends of the political spectrum (in India and in the United States) perhaps fully helps us to bargain and negotiate with the rising Right populism in global politics. In many ways, these thinkers anticipated these challenges that dalit activism in India, Leftist politics at a global scale have to negotiate with in constructing what Mouffe and Laclau call 'hegemonic' and 'contaminated' universality or a certain kind of particular universality that makes the contingent moment of politics happen.

This, we must note, does not come at the expense of political antagonism as a constituent element— not only in John Dewey's radical democracy but, most certainly, in Ambedkar's democracy— a radical conflict-ridden democracy (as opposed to a Habermasian consensus based self-effacing democracy) in a caste ridden society beyond the mere aggregative view of democracy of votes. This is perhaps why it is important to carry the debates between Dewey and Trotsky or Ambedkar and the Indian Marxists further by revisiting figures such as George Novack¹⁹. I believe such interactions then help us in a post-Marxist Left projects of Laclau or Mouffe but also help us reengage with pragmatist philosophy of Ambedkar and his mentor Dewey. However, I am not certain if this concluding caveat seems much like the 'common sense' as Russell saw as much needed or Trotsky saw as a counter-revolutionary bourgeois moralism of thinkers like Max Eastman. Perhaps a time has come when post-Marxism can productively interact with American Pragmatism to face our contemporary challenges.

¹⁹ For a greater elucidation of George Novack's defense of Trotsky's Marxism in the debate between John Dewey and Leon Trotsky, see his response to the debate in Trotsky, *Their Morals and Ours*, 1969.