Ambedkar and Gramsci: Subalternity, Hegemony, and Cultural Resistance

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Abstract:

This paper explores the conceptual intersections between B. R. Ambedkar's critique of Brahminical hegemony and Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural dominance, situating both thinkers within their respective struggles against entrenched hierarchies — caste and class. By reading Ambedkar through a Gramscian lens, the paper investigates how both thinkers redefine the nature of power, resistance, and subaltern agency. It argues that while Gramsci theorizes the "subaltern" as a product of class-based cultural domination under capitalism, Ambedkar reconfigures subalternity through the spiritual, social, and epistemic violence of caste. Ultimately, the study proposes an interdisciplinary framework that places Ambedkar and Gramsci in dialogue by extending the theory of cultural hegemony beyond Europe and discussing it in the context of the politics of caste and identity in India.

Introduction:

Antonio Gramsci and B. R. Ambedkar's intellectual paths converge on the issue of cultural domination or the ways that ideology, religion, and social institutions uphold inequalities under the pretense of moral or natural order. Both thinkers recognize that cultural consent, where the oppressed internalize their subordination as acceptable, is how power functions in addition to material coercion. According to Gramsci, hegemony is "the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group" (Prison Notebooks, 1995). This consent is found in the Brahminical order, which uses religion and custom to legitimize caste hierarchies, according to Ambedkar, who wrote in a different socio-historical context. As he asserts in Annihilation of Caste (1936), "The religion which discriminates between two followers cannot be called religion. It is a disease."

Thus, Ambedkar's anti-caste campaign becomes a social and intellectual revolution that aims to fight against the ideologies of hierarchy. Similar to Gramsci's criticism of bourgeois institutions like the Church, the media, and the educational system, his critique of Hindu scripture and priestly authority reveals how religion serves as a means of domination. Ambedkar and his radical humanism sought to free Dalits from the ontological violence of caste through social, spiritual, and ethical reconstruction, whereas Gramsci's Marxist humanism sought to free the working class from capitalist hegemony through intellectual and moral reform. Both see liberation as a revolution in consciousness rather than just a redistribution of wealth.

Hence, the paper discusses the following questions:

1. How do Gramsci and Ambedkar view the interaction between culture and power?

2. How can Ambedkar's criticism of Brahminism be reimagined as a hegemonic theory?
3. When class and caste are examined jointly within a global theory of subalternity, what new frameworks are revealed?

In terms of methodology, the study uses a comparative theoretical analysis that puts Gramsci's Prison Notebooks and Ambedkar's writings, Annihilation of Caste and Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India, in conversation.

Theoretical Framework: Hegemony and the Subaltern

The common understanding that dominance is maintained by the moral and cultural consent of the oppressed rather than just by force is where Ambedkar and Gramsci agree. Both theorists reveal how institutions, beliefs, and seemingly normal behaviors allow social hierarchies to perpetuate themselves. Their theoretical frameworks of hegemony and subalternity are discussed in detail in this section, which also places them within the different but related contexts of caste and class oppression.

Antonio Gramsci reinterprets Marxist ideas of power in The Prison Notebooks, contending that ruling classes uphold their domination via consent (cultural leadership) and coercion (state force). As he explains, “The supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as ‘domination’ and as ‘intellectual and moral leadership’” (Prison Notebooks, 1995). Hegemony is the result of this "intellectual and moral leadership," whereby the worldview of the dominant class permeates society and is ingrained in daily life, education, and religion.

It is important to note Gramsci's distinction between civil society (institutions that generate consent) and political society (state apparatuses, coercive power). Ideology becomes most effective in civil society, which includes the media, families, churches, and schools. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the proletariat to establish a counter-hegemonic culture that challenges bourgeois domination by establishing a different moral and intellectual framework.

Gramsci presents the idea of the subaltern classes or marginalized groups that have been left out of historical narrative and political representation, within this framework. He calls for the emergence of “organic intellectuals” or individuals who arise from within these subaltern classes that may help articulate their experiences and organize collective resistance. As he notes, “Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals” (Prison Notebooks, 1995). According to Gramsci, intellectual activity is a political act that is essential to the formation of a new historical bloc rather than the domain of elites.

Writing within the highly stratified framework of Indian society, B. R. Ambedkar pinpoints Brahminical ideology as the primary mechanism of cultural dominance. In Annihilation of Caste (1936), he argues that Hinduism is not merely a religion but a social order that has been codified in theology. He writes, "The Hindu social order does not recognize the individual as an end in himself. It subordinates him to the interests of social classes and castes" (Annihilation of Caste, 1936).

Ambedkar talks about this process in Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India by demonstrating how the Brahminical priestly class has monopolized cultural and spiritual capital by establishing its power through ritual and knowledge control. According to him, religion has served as a powerful hegemonic tool that becomes the foundation of hierarchy and enforces obedience. Hence, caste turns into a tool of power that uses education, language, and ritual purity to rule—what Pierre Bourdieu would later refer to as symbolic violence.

Thus, Ambedkar foreshadows a Gramscian interpretation of how ideology uses consent to incite inequality. Dalits and Shudras join in their own subordination because they have internalized caste and mistake servitude for dharma. Ambedkar calls for a mental revolution to overthrow this order, replacing ritual authority with moral awakening and education. In a radical act of counter-hegemonic rearticulation, his call for conversion to Navayana Buddhism replaces the logic of birth-based hierarchy with one of ethical equality.

Caste in India operates similarly to class in capitalist Europe, not as a simple economic category but rather as a cultural-economic formation that shapes consciousness, as demonstrated by the comparative discussion between Ambedkar and Gramsci. Ambedkar's critique of Brahminical hegemony parallels Gramsci's critique of bourgeois hegemony as both expose how dominance is sustained through institutions of meaning-making rather than overt repression.

Both thinkers acknowledge that a revolution in consciousness is necessary for liberation. According to Ambedkar, the educated Dalit becomes the leader of social change, while Gramsci believed that the working class needed to produce its own natural intellectuals to create a counter-hegemonic worldview. Both view education as deeply political and not just instrumental; it is a way to redefine "common sense" and regain narrative agency.

Therefore, a framework for comprehending subaltern resistance as both cultural and structural is produced by the intersection of Ambedkarite and Gramscian thought. True emancipation arises not only from violent overthrow but also from changing the landscape of thought itself, as evidenced by their shared insistence on moral and intellectual change.

Reconfiguring Subalternity: From Class to Caste

In the Indian context, the conflict between Ambedkar's untouchables and Gramsci's subaltern highlights the ethical and intellectual boundaries of a strictly class-based Marxist framework. Marxism's materialist interpretation of exploitation sheds light on the structural logic of capitalism, but it leaves out important aspects of the cultural, religious, and ritualistic processes that uphold caste. Early on, Ambedkar acknowledged this constraint, noting that "the division of labor in a Caste society is not spontaneous; it is a division of laborers" (Annihilation of Caste, 1936). The Dalits' oppression is ontological—codified into the very metaphysics of the social order—in contrast to the proletariat, whose subordination is essentially economic. Therefore, caste, which is supported by theology and upheld by custom, is a way of being rather than just a way of producing.

According to Marxism, which has its roots in European industrial modernity, inequality results from who owns and controls the means of production. But in India, religious hierarchies have always been entwined with economic ties. Because caste ideology predates and transcends economic class, a Dalit continues to face oppression even after gaining material wealth. As Ambedkar notes in Who Were the Shudras?, “Caste is not merely a division of labor. It is also a division of laborers, graded one above the other.” Thus, any class analysis that ignores caste risks reproducing the very hierarchies it seeks to dismantle.

Although more complex than classical Marxism, Gramsci's concept of the subaltern still assumes a largely economic form of silencing—the exclusion of peasants and workers from the political and cultural institutions of bourgeois society. However, a fruitful reinterpretation of Gramsci's adaptable and cultural conception of hegemony is possible: his subaltern classes could be reframed in Ambedkarite terms as castes who are ritually dehumanized and excluded from knowledge.

Capitalist hegemony, or the bourgeoisie's control over culture and consciousness, silences Gramsci's subaltern. But within the Brahminical order, Ambedkar's untouchables are not just silenced—they are structurally incomprehensible. As Gayatri Spivak later asks, “Can the subaltern speak?” Ambedkar’s answer, implicit in his life and work, is that the Dalit must first remake the conditions of speech. The untouchables must establish a different moral and discursive space outside of Hinduism since their very existence is characterized as pollution, which prevents them from speaking within it.

The subaltern question is changed from one of representation to one of ontological recognition by Ambedkar's critique. Ambedkar's subaltern is denied humanity itself, just as Gramsci's subaltern is denied voice. This distinction emphasizes the necessity of broadening

the scope of subaltern theory beyond its European foundation in order to take into consideration forms of domination that are not only material but also spiritual, genealogical, and metaphysical.

One of the most significant instances of counter-hegemonic resistance in contemporary history is Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism. Along with half a million followers, his conversion in 1956 marked a political and cultural upheaval in addition to a change in religion. Ambedkar reinterprets Buddhism in The Buddha and His Dhamma as a system that rejects divine hierarchy and ritual pollution and instead presents it as a logical, egalitarian, and moral substitute for Brahminical orthodoxy.

According to Gramscianism, Ambedkar's conversion serves as the formation of a new historical bloc, reorienting social consciousness away from inherited status and toward moral equality. In a similar vein to Gramsci's vision of the working class creating a different civil society to oppose bourgeois moral leadership, it is a spiritual counter-hegemony that challenges the authority of the Brahminical Church. By reorienting religion itself toward ethics and rationality, Ambedkar transforms spirituality into a site of revolution, not resignation.

Both social exclusion (untouchability) and epistemic erasure subalternize Ambedkar's Dalit subject. In addition to being excluded from knowledge, the Dalit is portrayed as ignorant and impure, and as incapable of knowing. Even in liberal frameworks of representation, the Dalit voice is guaranteed to remain unheard due to this condition, which philosopher Gopal Guru refers to as "epistemic injustice." Therefore, Ambedkar's educational and reinterpretative endeavors—his rewriting of history, religion, and law—become an act of epistemic reclamation, the creation of a new body of knowledge from the perspective of the oppressed.

According to Ambedkar, caste functions as "a system of graded inequality" in spiritual terms, where even the oppressed internalize their subordination as a divine mandate. To undo this colonization of the soul, Ambedkar calls for a revolution in consciousness, paralleling Gramsci’s emphasis on the intellectual and moral reform necessary for any real social change. The subaltern in India, therefore, must fight not only the external domination of caste elites but also the internalized hegemony that binds belief to bondage.

Conclusion

Despite having different historical and cultural backgrounds, B. R. Ambedkar and Antonio Gramsci share a common understanding of power as cultural, moral, and ideological, according to a comparison of their works. A potent framework for examining how social hierarchies maintain themselves through institutions of meaning—religion, education, and cultural production—is made possible by their mutual understanding that domination is

maintained by consent rather than just coercion. Reading Gramsci's theory of bourgeois hegemony alongside Ambedkar's critique of Brahminical hegemony reveals that both thinkers see liberation as a fight over consciousness rather than just over politics or economics.

Ambedkar expands on Gramsci's observations regarding caste, highlighting the shortcomings of class-based Marxism in cultures where religious sanctification of hierarchy is prevalent. Gramsci's observations on the moral and intellectual leadership of ruling groups are foreshadowed and deepened by his diagnosis of Brahminism as a cultural regime that ties belief to servitude. Yet Ambedkar's intervention goes further: he transforms Gramsci's secular "war of position" into a spiritual and ethical revolution, situating emancipation not in the seizure of the state but in the reconstruction of moral community. The emergence of Dalit literature, religious conversion, and the development of new social ethics are all examples of counter-hegemonic practices that reinterpret what it means to resist.

Both scholars maintain that a revolution of consciousness must accompany any political revolution in order for it to last. According to Gramsci, the subaltern class begins to form its own worldview that can challenge bourgeois "common sense" when organic intellectuals start to appear. According to Ambedkar, this change is personified by the educated Dalit, who regains interpretive agency and breaks the monopoly of Brahminical knowledge. The axis of liberation—an act of epistemic disobedience against cultural domination—is education in both frameworks.

The dialogue between Ambedkar and Gramsci, therefore, invites a rethinking of subalternity beyond the confines of class. It calls for a framework that accounts for the intertwining of economic, religious, and epistemic hierarchies, and that recognizes how cultural hegemony shapes the very conditions of existence.

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