5

Equality and Spirituality

Men are born unequal.
—B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*

Norm and ideology are the two forms in which we recognize the political being of an idea. As norm, an idea adjudicates on empirical politics, as if from outside and above. As ideology, an idea drives empirical politics from within. While a norm works by displaying its ideality, which politics aspires to but never fully achieves, an ideology works by making the idea indistinguishable from the real, the true, the ordinary—that is, by extinguishing any imaginable gap between idea and experience. In this chapter (and in chapter 6), I ask, What is the place of ideas in politics? How does an idea come to be qualified as a political idea? Do political ideas always operate as norm or ideology, or do they also operate in more underdetermined ways, for example, as a frame or a horizon that renders politics legible in the first place? Are ideas free-floating, abstract entities that necessarily travel light across borders, or are they predicated on particular forms of embodiment, modes of address, and what Deleuze and Guattari call conceptual "personae," which limit their mobility and purity?[1] Above all, how does an idea, in the process of its politicization, define and delimit the political as such?

I take the idea of equality as an example. Equality has been known since there has been inequality, that is, from the beginning of history. Equality "happens" every time a subaltern speaks back to power, suspending—sometimes momentarily, sometimes for longer—the hierarchical order of things. In that sense, equality always already accompanies inequality as its shadow and its

specter. But equality as an idea—whether self-standing or flanked by liberty and fraternity—is an eminently modern phenomenon. In modernity, equality transitions from being a stance or an intimation to being an idea par excellence. I want to explore how equality comes to be conceived of as an idea in the first place and as a quintessential political idea at that. Needless to say, equality emerges from experiences of inequality. Hence, the first step in the career of equality as a political idea is the detailed depiction of inequalities. And yet, it is never an easy move—from thinking inequality to thinking equality as such. This chapter focuses the conceptual difficulties faced by modern politics in making a transition from a critique of inequality to equality as a positive idea.

Unequal Differences and Different Inequalities

Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's essay "Samya," written between 1873 and 1875, is justly famous for being one of the earliest theoretical considerations of equality in modern India. Like others before and after, Bankim dedicated most of this essay to detailed description of inequalities. But unlike most others, he tried to make a self-conscious transition from describing inequality to positing equality as a positive idea.

Bankim's primary theoretical move was to juxtapose the concepts of equality and difference. He used the same term, *baishamya*, for both because inequalities were often organized and experienced as difference, and differences as inequality, he said.[2] Hence, the first analytical step in the thinking of equality had to be a query into the distinct but overlapping provenances of the two terms, *inequality* and *difference*. Humans were born unequal, Bankim said. Natural inequalities, such as of appearance and aptitude, one had to live with. But created inequalities—of caste, class, race, and gender—demanded analysis and intervention, especially because they were often passed off as innate differences between people.[3] Having described in detail class, caste, race, and gender inequalities in India, Bankim then declared that not all inequalities were equal. Caste, class, and gender were not just different grounds for the same phenomenon called inequality. They were incommensurable inequalities—differently structured, differently experienced, differently tied to the fact of difference, and indeed, differently amenable to politicization. Inequality of wealth, as between landlord and peasant, was the most obviously arbitrary and the easiest to expose and remedy. Indeed, the longest sections of "Samya" were descriptions of economic inequality. Caste inequality, on the other hand, was more difficult to overcome because it was founded not on an externality like wealth but on centuries-long denial of freedom of thought to the Shudra and the outcastes,

causing caste to appear as just another instance of the quintessential difference between intellectual and manual work.[4] And gender inequality, Bankim added, was the most difficult to politicize because it played on the purportedly real differences in the natures of men and women.[5] Taking gender inequality as the paradigmatic moment in his argument, Bankim proclaimed that if difference were indeed a ground for inequality, then we could not have criticized the racially unequal treatment of Englishmen and Indians in colonial India, for who could deny that they were as different from each other as women from men?[6]

In Bankim's work equality and difference appear as continuous concepts. Thus, unlike our a textbook understanding of the history of liberalism, it was not as if (political) equality was thought first and (social) difference thought post facto, in order to expand and nuance the idea of equality. It was not as if equality as an idea, as embodied in the event of the French Revolution, was logically and chronologically prior to difference as an idea, as embodied in the Haitian Revolution and in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Equality, as examples from the colony show even more starkly, was unthinkable, from the very beginning, without a simultaneous thinking of difference. In the colony, the novel facts of colonial and racial difference reanimated the older facts of gender and caste difference, creating a matrix of different inequalities and unequal differences within which equality had to be thought. Just as equality is unthinkable without engaging difference, difference too is unthinkable except in association with equality, Bankim implied. For difference can be grasped in its pure form, as difference per se, only when we can assume that two or more entities are otherwise equal and equivalent and therefore only different. Bankim thus painstakingly ran through a comparison of women and men in Indian society and evaluated each instance of difference in terms of whether it was an index of inequality, or shorn of all inequalities, of actual difference (as did Tarabai Shinde in Maharashtra, in her 1882 tract *Stripurush Tulana*[7]).

Equality in Bankim thus appears not merely as the other of inequality but as the logical implication of different kinds of inequalities "thought together." Equality cannot be gleaned, Bankim seems to be saying, simply out of the logical negation of any single instance of inequality, for the undoing of one inequality does nothing for another. Equality can be gleaned only from thinking together diverse asymmetrical inequalities. The common criterion that allows a conceptual equivalence across diverse inequalities was equality itself—equality in its unqualified, absolute mode of being as absence. In other words, if equality must be thought via a negation of inequalities, then it seems as if equal-

ity is thinkable only as an absence that acquires body and presence in so many iterations of inequality. In Bankim, thus, equality emerges as an abstraction—a pure theoretical construct thought into existence from within the delineation of myriad inequalities. In that equality as concept cannot be gleaned from a direct experience of actually existing equality, it seems to assume, in Bankim, the ontology of an idea par excellence.

This early thinking of equality in Bengal can be seen as a moment of fashioning a certain language of thought that would be adequate to equality as an idea. Bankim serialized "Samya" in his journal *Bangadarshan*, surrounded by other essays on diverse topics such as history, evolution, causality, and consciousness. Evidently, equality here was part of a more general effort at fashioning a language of thought, at testing out the "thinkability" of equality as well as other concepts and quasi concepts. *Bangadarshan* was a forum for the fashioning of modern Bengali prose. It showcased experiments with the essay form, in an open-ended effort at rendering the world at large into thought. The critical terms of discourse were yet to be settled. The term *samya* itself, in contemporary Bengali, had various shades of meaning, such as similarity, equivalence, balance, calmness, consistency, unity, assurance, equanimity, and equilibrium. The term *baishamya* could mean both inequality and difference but also disunity, inconsistency, imbalance, conflict, and indeed, a state of misfortune. The thinking through of equality thus was also a thinking through of a language adequate to giving equality the ontology of an idea.

In Bankim, therefore, equality is not yet a political utopia. Even as Bankim discussed, alongside John Stuart Mill, nineteenth-century utopian socialists—Robert Owen, Louis Blanqui, Charles Fourier, Henri de Saint-Simon, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon—and their experiments in communal living and property sharing, he barely partook in any utopian passions. He agreed that there should be a general sharing of property, especially of land—he called it *sadharanikaran*, or generalization (and not nationalization as in later socialist discourse)—and mentioned the superiority of Islamic *sharia* laws of inheritance over both Hindu joint family customs and European systems of primogeniture.[8] Bankim discussed European utopian socialism as if it were only a matter of finding the right institutional and legal mechanism for setting up a more egalitarian inheritance and property regime.

And yet, there are passages in "Samya" that stand out. These are passages in which Bankim tries to imagine equality as a positive concept, that is, as more than the negation or absence of inequality. Of the many thinkers of equality, Bankim said, the most important were Buddha, Christ, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whom he called avatars of equality.[9] Each imagined equality in the con-

text of a particular historico-empirical form of inequality—casteism and Brahminism in India, slavery and tyranny in the Roman Empire, and aristocratic privilege and rack-renting in ancien régime France. But Buddha and Christ were different from Rousseau in that they posited equality as a sacred and timeless idea and hence came to be worshipped as gods. Rousseau, on the other hand, was more narrowly political and context bound, and hence not entirely free of errors. He thought that society was a voluntary contract among individuals—Bankim exclaimed with incredulity.[10] Buddha's and Christ's theories of equality did have profound political impact—Buddhism led to the rise of the great Maurya Empire headed by a Shudra king, and Christianity gave dignity and rights to the poor—but the significance of their ideas went far beyond their local secular expressions. Indeed, if Rousseau's theory of equality had far-reaching implications—not just the French Revolution but communism and the Communist International were direct results of Rousseau's writings, Bankim said—it was because Rousseau shared in, even if partially, this imagination of equality as eternal and sacred truth.

Bankim prefaces "Samya" by saying that he conceptualized equality differently from his European contemporaries.[11] Is it here, in this gesture toward spirituality, that Bankim locates his difference? Even though early Bankim is seen as a rational and liberal thinker and often contrasted with a later Bankim, more invested in religion and culture and hence a favorite of Hindu nationalists, it is clear that in "Samya" (the text quoted most often as proof of his early liberalism) Bankim is already working on two registers. When he describes and critiques existing inequalities, he takes on a historico-political perspective—as does, for example, his contemporary Jyotiba Phule in western India, historicizing the enslavement of lower-caste peoples as caused by Aryan subjugation of indigenes.[12] But when trying to think of equality as such—that is, equality as more than the absence of inequality—Bankim moves to a spiritual register, a move that Ambedkar will also make half a century later. It seems, then, that the theoretical move from inequality to equality, in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, was crucially predicated on a certain mobilization of spirituality, not just in canonical thinkers such as Gandhi and Ambedkar but also, as we shall see, among many liberal, socialist, and communist ones.

The Spirituality Question

It is commonly assumed that equality is a spiritual question only in premodern times, until it gets secularized, with the French Revolution, into being a purely political idea. It is also assumed that before modernity equality was imagined

as and only as equality in the eyes of God—as in popular Christianity and in devotional Bhakti and Sufi traditions. To conceive of equality, one had to invoke what Ajay Skaria calls a sovereign "third party"[13]—who, by mediating empirical difference, equalized two beings facing each other across a hierarchy. Equality-in-difference, thus, could only be a triangulated condition of being. You and I are never equal by ourselves. We are equal only when we appear in the eyes of God or, in the secularized theology of the modern state, in the eyes of law. Many believe that with the rise of Marxism equality came to be imagined as a phenomenon immanent to human society. As equality came to be an economic concept, it assumed the form of an unmediated bilateral relationship between two individuals or two classes facing each other directly and agonistically.

The centrality of the state in socialism and communism, however, belies this claim of Marxism as able to imagine equality as an immanent phenomenon. Ambedkar pointed this out when he set up a comparison between Buddha and Marx, stating that while Buddhism imagined equality as the mutual orientation of two social subjects, Marxism, in the name of the "dictatorship of the proletariat," privileged the superordinate state as mediator, arbitrator, and enforcer.[14] No doubt the rise of the economic as a measure of inequality was a deeply transformative historical moment. And yet, I believe that Marxism, in order to cross the threshold between critique and affirmation, had to borrow a certain spiritual orientation from other traditions of thought—hence, liberation theology, Christian socialism, Islamic socialism, and so on. In chapter 6, where I explore the rise of the economic conception of equality via the work of vernacular Marxisms, I show how many early twentieth-century Bengali thinkers felt compelled to rethink the very nature of the economic—by mobilizing sociology and literature—in order to affirm equality as a positive idea, so much so that the economic would come to share some features of what I call the spiritual in this chapter. In this chapter, I stay with the spirituality question.

The modern-day secularist reading of all precolonial spiritual traditions as necessarily having to do with the figure of God as judge and arbitrator is incorrect. All spiritual traditions of the world did not work in the same way. This is something that we forget because modernity forces all spiritual traditions into the rather narrow and inhospitable category of religion, with its inescapable identitarian and civilizational connotations. Instead of religion, I use the term *spirituality* here, though it too is problematic because all traditions of the world did not subscribe to the notion of a spirit either, Buddhism again being a case in point. So I use the term *spirituality* merely as a placeholder, denoting

the whole complex of philosophy, theology, ethics, performance, and practice that constitutes what we today understand as the domain of the nonsecular. I intend to show, through a close reading of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century writings, how equality comes to be staged on a spiritual register in modern times—in terms of an intersubjective, interpersonal, often interspecies orientation, with or without God. I explore three spiritualist takes on equality—Advaita Vedanta, Islam, and Buddhism.

Equality and Nondualism

We have encountered Advaita Vedanta already in chapter 1, in the context of Vivekananda. A philosophy of nondualism (imperfectly translated as *monism* or *oneness*) associated with the eighth-century thinker Shankara, Advaita Vedanta proposed that individual beings had no separate existence from the universal self or Brahman. Brahman was pure consciousness, in which embodied and experiencing selves dissolved not just in death but also in life, once true knowledge of nondifference or indifference was achieved. The experiencing and embodied self related to this ultimate undifferentiated consciousness in the way that the space within a container related to space as such (as undifferentiated in reality though arbitrarily separated by the contingency of form, or *rupa*) or in the way that a mirror reflection related to the body (in terms of a false doubling necessary for self-recognition). Hence, we have the famous nondualist aphorisms that are often invoked in modern times—*ahambrahmasmi* (I am Brahman) and *tat tvamasi* (you are that)—and the nondualist promise that it is indeed possible to overcome alterity or otherness.

Four aspects of Advaita Vedanta lent themselves to re-citation in modern times as grounds for equality. First, in this tradition, Brahman was not God but pure consciousness. Hence, in nondualist terms, one was equal to another not because both were equal in the eyes of God, but because the self, the other, and Brahman were continuous with each other—being, in the final instance, made of the same substance or element. Not surprisingly, detractors often accused nondualists of being atheists and even crypto-Buddhists!

Second, in this tradition, difference was understood as the default condition of being. Worlding was understood as a ceaseless movement of differentiation of primal consciousness, via the work of creative energy or *maya*. Equality was therefore not the point of departure of thought in nondualism, unlike in liberalism, where thought begins from the axiom that all humans are born equal, or in Marxism, where thought begins from the quasi-historical moment of primitive communism and arrives at the historical moment of transcen-

dence to future communism. In nondualism, equality can be thought only out of experiences of immitigable worldly difference, rather than as a return to or a reiteration of any originary, extrahistorical, undifferentiated state of being. One had to *arrive* at equality, as it were, against the grain and push of everyday experience, marked by *avidya*, the limited or partial cognition proper to the second-order reality of practical (*vyavaharik*) life. By that logic, in nondualism, difference was anterior to equality and equality an insight predicated on a prior experience of empirical multiplicity.

Third, according to this tradition, to arrive at equality one needed only knowledge of the true nature of the self (*atman*) as continuous with other selves. By implication, equality happened not in a distant, utopian future of either communism or moksha but at the very instant of personal enlightenment. For once the knowledge of equality was achieved, one could not but act equitably toward all creatures, high and low. Hence, there is an overlap among the terms *samya*, *samata*, and *samabhava*—equality, equanimity, and equilibrium—and hence also equality is imagined as consciousness or, more correctly, "enlightenment."

Fourth, even though classical Advaita was a highly abstract, asocial, and disengaged philosophy—which argued that the world was an illusion—medieval and early modern nondualists transformed this tradition substantially by bringing other spiritual traditions like Yoga and Bhakti to bear on it.[15] Matthew Lederle talks about "vernacular" nondualisms, involving devotional hagiographies and hymns, which questioned Brahminical high scriptures (*shastras*) and posited experience or *anubhava* as a valid condition of knowledge (*pramana*). The thirteenth-century Varakari saint Jnaneshwar, famous for his critique of the caste system and for being the first vernacular commentator on the Bhagavad Gita, was just such a radical nondualist and would become popular in modern times as an exemplar of equality.[16]

Vivekananda, as we have already seen, invoked nondualism as the basis for his own allegiance to socialism. He characterized the modern age as the global age of Shudra power.[17] Other anticaste theorists in turn invoked Vivekananda—Kuvempu in Karnataka (who wrote a biography of Vivekananda and a play on a Shudra renouncer called *Shudra Tapaswi*) and the poet Kumaran Asan in Kerala (who is said to have named the Ezhava movement's periodical *Vivekodayam* following Vivekananda's visit to Kerala and memorialized the legend that Vivekananda had boldly called out Kerala as a "madhouse" of caste conflict). Many nationalist revolutionaries turned communists too were inspired by Vivekananda. Vivekananda can thus be situated in a longer precolonial tradition of transformation of classical Advaita Vedanta in the name of worldly equality. As Madaio shows, Vivekananda frequently drew on the text *Vivekachuda-*

moni, which qualified nondualism in light of human experience. Vivekananda also cited precolonial *nirguna* philosophers (who believed that the divine had no form or quality, very much like the Brahman of Advaita)—such as Kabir, Nanak, and Dadu Dayal, who, he said, were "reformers" laboring to "raise the lower classes of India."[18]

No less influential than Vivekananda was Sree Narayana Guru's re-citation of Advaita Vedanta in late nineteenth-century Kerala. Like Vivekananda, Narayana Guru dealt in later versions of nondualism mixed with Saiva Siddhanta devotional principles. As Udaya Kumar shows, Narayana Guru's philosophical works—such as *Atmopadesa Sataka* and *Arivu*—proposed that primal differentiation was integral to the manifestation of knowledge (*arivu*). Difference thus was not illusory (as Shankara might have said in an earlier time) but a positive condition of the world and of knowledge of the world. The point was to distinguish between valid (gender) and invalid (caste) principles of differentiation and thus develop a critique of contemporary social hierarchy. Humans were marked by a special creaturely predicament. Unlike other animals, they failed to recognize themselves as a species being, living in the midst of other species. Humans were divided by false concepts such as caste. Narayana Guru exhorted the low-caste Ezhavas to give up castemarks and form a collective (*samudayam*), which could act simultaneously as community and as species, that is, as Ezhavas and as humanity.[19]

Interestingly, Narayana Guru, at the end of his life, consecrated mirrors as deities in temples to facilitate the recognition and worship of the self as Brahman. As Udaya Kumar explains, because the eye cannot see itself seeing, the mirror is necessary to enable self-recognition. And yet because the mirror image is passive and does not look back, there remains a need for a second-order self, which helps perceive the first person, the I, in the intimate of act of self-recognition.[20] This doubled consciousness is Brahma-*jnyan*, the ultimate experience of equality-in-difference, made possible not just by seeing oneself but also by overseeing the very act of seeing oneself—a theory of recognition very different from identitarian philosophies of recognition popular today.

Writing in the 1920s and 1930s, the Muslim communist poet Kazi Nazrul Islam also invoked nondualism. As a child, Nazrul earned his keep as a muezzin calling prayers at the local mosque and studied at a *maktab*, learning the essentials of Islamic theology. Gifted with a beautiful voice, he then joined a wandering *leto* troupe—where he became familiar with popular drama that performed stories from the Puranas and the epics. Later he joined the Bengal Forty-Ninth Regiment and got posted in Karachi, developing further connections with Arabic and Persian traditions. He returned to Bengal as a poet and a

communist, who nevertheless continued to write on Hindu and Muslim spiritual traditions. Nazrul translated the Islamic concept of *tawhid* or the oneness of Allah as Advaitic nondualism. This was not entirely idiosyncratic. As Jonardon Ganeri shows, the seventeenth-century Mughal prince Dara Shukoh had undertaken a mutual adaptation of Upanishadic and Islamic philosophies in what he called the *Majma ul Bahrain* (the meeting of the oceans).[21] Nazrul in a different way was doing the same. Addressing a political assembly of Muslim students, he declared that global humanity was poised to come together in nondualism. Only if we could awaken this insight within us, would the poor and the exploited be liberated.[22]

In a long poem titled "Abhedam" (Nondifference), Nazrul plays with the nondualistic concepts of *nama* and *rupa*—name and form—the distinguishing mechanisms by which the universal self appears as differentiated in the world. Combining Vedantic metaphors with metaphors from the popular tradition of devotion to Kali, Nazrul writes of impending equality:

> I will sorrow, suffering, and disease into being—I am the exploiter
> Who takes from others—and I am also the god who punishes such sins
> There is no anger in me, it is just a game
> I make inequality—and I abolish it too
> I play, I chance upon myself,
> What an ugly, unfitting shadow am I
> I want to kill it too
> —there is no difference here, between myself and others
> No thirst for fame, no anger
> No fear of violence, no division
> No war, no peace, only supreme equality [*samya*]
> No politics, no fear, only the name *abhedam*[23]

Three points are worth noting with respect to this nondualistic mode of thinking equality. First, the locus of equality here is the first person—the I—and not figures of alterity, such as a you or a they, even though Shudras and the working classes do animate the sense of that I. Second, the ground of equality here is nondualism and not unity, community, indivisibility, or identity. Third, nondualism emerges not entirely via the activity of argumentation, as in the Bankim moment, but through exhortation and performance—not just in Vivekananda and Narayana Guru, who primarily worked through public appearance and public address, but also in Nazrul, whose poetic diction was fashioned in an exhortative and mobilizing mode.

Islam and the Mundane Facts of Life

Nazrul was accused by many of being a bad Muslim—because he used metaphors from Hindu devotional traditions, because he was too steeped in music, and because he was a self-proclaimed communist. And yet, Nazrul was not exceptional in his interest in spirituality and equality. Many other Muslim writers wrote copiously on equality in spiritual terms, but there was a crucial difference between Advaitic and Islamic ways of theorizing equality that we must note.

Vedantic nondualism engaged with the human condition in its presocial creaturely aspect, wherein both difference and indifference appeared as anterior to the historical institution of hierarchies such as of caste, race, and nationality. Islam, in early twentieth-century Bengal and India, theorized equality differently—by claiming to bring into the ambit of spirituality the mundane sociological facts of human life and livelihood. This was done on the grounds that Islam was a worldly tradition. Worldliness, however, did not imply a division between religious and secular pursuits of life or between theological and political discourse (in fact, many Muslim political thinkers of this period were *maulavis* and ulema, especially those mobilized during the noncooperation and Khilafat movements of 1920–22). Worldiness here was a critique of the ruling philosophical binary of the times—namely, the binary between idealism and materialism.

Abul Hashim, an important leader in the Bengal Provincial Muslim League sympathetic to the Left, argued that *deen*, originally an Arabic term meaning "way of life" that became indigenized in both Persian and the Indian vernaculars, was not religion. Religion was a western European concept that reduced spirituality to private contemplation and faith, leaving vast aspects of life out of its purview. *Deen* combined philosophy, law, and intuition and was therefore more encompassing of life. As a philosophy, *deen* was a matter of rational intellection and knowledge. As law, it was a matter of regulating ordinary, everyday aspects of life—economic activities as much as worship and prayer. And as intuition, it was an opening toward the transcendental and the futural, that is, toward matters as yet unknown. *Deen*, therefore, was neither pure idealism, like Advaita Vedanta, nor pure materialism, like scientific Marxism.[24] Already by this time, Marxism-Leninism had taken root in India, and with it the binary between idealism and materialism had become common sense. In the context of everyday politics in India, the idealism/materialism binary translated directly into the binary between the spiritual and the economic. Muslim thinkers of equality resisted this binary.

The philosopher-poet Muhammad Iqbal, in his 1930 magnum opus *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, argued that the Islamic notion of the oneness of God's creation denied the dichotomy between nature and society. In Islamic thought, nature was not dead matter, devoid of intent, purpose, and action, an object world to be conquered and harnessed by humans under the spell of a purely economic logic. God's creation was imbued with animation and movement; difference—as among humans, animals, and objects—was merely a difference of degree rather than of quality, a neomaterialist statement if any! Some humans simply had a more developed self or ego (*khudi*) than other creatures. Iqbal, as mentioned in chapter 4, disagreed with the theological position that there was a strict division between God and his creation, and that creation was a finished and finalized entity, a once-and-for-all act by God, subject to a regime of fixed natural laws, which could be studied by pure science sans spirituality. Creation was the mode of being of Allah, dynamic and ongoing—full of surprises, contingencies, and openness toward the not-yet—and from it were derived human freedom and human futures. A poet above all, Iqbal saw an analogy between poetic creativity and the creativity of God—making Iqbal's God quite distinct from that of both deists and pantheists of earlier times. It was precisely the underdetermined and unfinished nature of the world, the unpredictable movement of its becoming, that produced revolutionary potentialities and what Iqbal called the capacious and integrated "now" of transformation—the duration of poetic/divine creativity, wherein the past, present, and future became simultaneous.[25]

Abul Hashim also insisted that humans must live in communion with nature and not by dominating or objectifying it, as dialectical materialism would have us do, because both *qudrat* (nature, the universe, forces immanent to the world) and *fitrat* (the nature of a thing or person) were aspects of God. The universe was not a sum of isolated fragments and identities—a set of fixed differences—but a differentiated whole in which every genus and species was interdependent, defining and supplementing one another. Obviously familiar with Vedantic nondualism and Vivekananda, Hashim implied that both the idealism of Advaita Vedanta and the dialectical materialism of Soviet Communism were inadequate to the thinking of equality precisely because both divided the unity of Allah's creation into a subject world and an object world.[26]

Khalifa Abdul Hakim, who taught philosophy at Osmania University, Hyderabad, spoke similarly about the nature of matter: "The materialism of Marx suffered the same contradiction as the evolutionary materialism of Herbert Spencer. Spencer's unconscious, blind, mechanistic matter somehow takes care to preserve and advance the life-values it creates, so does the presumably

unspiritual matter of Marx which advances towards a proletarian revolution steadily with a logic and method which could emerge only with a goal-seeking spirit."[27] Marxism is secretly founded on a spiritual principle, Hakim implied, which generated a spirit of sacrifice in political actors and a deep faith in the inevitability of communism. But its imagination of matter as inert/objective produced a determinism that, paradoxically, left no space for precisely such revolutionary faith. Hence, Marxism introduced, through the backdoor as it were, a sensibility of spiritual freedom and moral obligation, while loudly decrying religion. Islam, being invested in the sustenance of life on earth, however, proposed that diverse domains of life—economics, sexuality, and politics—were equally shot through with intent, sense, and animation. What we call morality and spirituality today is nothing other than the sensibility that "adjudicates between the competing claims of our physical, sexual, economic and political existence."[28] That was the meaning of *tawhid*—namely, the understanding that economics, politics, culture, and morality were not separate spheres of life, following different laws and different disciplines, but a mutually articulated whole.

This spiritual paradigm based on *tawhid*—which brought matter, nature, livelihood, and worship within the same framework[29]—resonated with the history of popular Islamic piety in Bengal. As Richard Eaton has shown, the spread of Islam in eastern and frontier Bengal, led in medieval times by Sufi and Pir vanguards, happened via activities of forest clearance, land reclamation, agricultural settlement, and the consequent admission of low-caste and aboriginal elements into an Islamic civilizational world.[30] A particular relationship to nature, in both its dangerous/wild and its domesticated/bountiful aspects, was therefore constitutive of the East Bengali experience of Islamic life. This was also true of what came to be seen, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as the specifically Islamic virtues of industrious labor, personal thrift, austerity, economic self-dependence, charity, and indeed, a reformed, unostentatious piety—all of which were invoked by spiritual leaders of the time in terms of Koranic injunctions about hard work, compulsory *zakat* (contributions to a common fund for the needy), and prohibition against usury.[31]

Add to this the living memory of the Faraizi rebellion and Wahabi reformism in East Bengal. Abul Mansur Ahmed, one of the early leaders of the Krishak Praja Party who started *raiyat samitis* (peasant committees) when he was only a teen, introduces himself in his memoirs as a descendent of Gazi Ashequllah, son of Asraddin Faraizi, and mujahedin of Syed Ahmed Barelvi. Known as the great jihadi of the area, Ashequllah spent his old age—after his return to Bengal from the northwest frontier—teaching martial arts to the vil-

lage youth and discussing issues of jihad and martyrdom with peers. Those who participated in these discussions were, according to Ahmed, mostly peasant smallholders.[32] Interestingly, when the poet Nazrul contested elections for the upper house of the Central Legislative Council in 1926, Badshah Pir, grandson and spiritual successor of the Faraizi leader Dudu Miya, canvassed for him.[33] In Bangladeshi writer Akhteruzzaman Elias's remarkable novel *Khoabnama* (The saga of dreams), peasant insurgency—electoral mobilization led by the Muslim League and the Krishak Praja Party as well as the sharecroppers' Tebhaga movement led by communists—appears always already haunted by the ghost of Faraizi warrior Munshi Barkatullah Shah, who was martyred fighting the East India Company soldiers.[34]

An insurgent popular discourse about the oneness of Allah and the equality of men thus accompanied the articulation of spiritual and economic issues in the wider agrarian world of Bengal, where the majority of peasants were Muslims. The Bengali periodical *Samyabadi* (The egalitarian), which was run, between 1922 and 1925, mostly by Muslims, is a good example of this phenomenon. Neilesh Bose discusses this periodical's career extensively in his study East Bengal's regional sensibility, marked as it was by a strong Muslim cultural presence, both elite and subaltern. The periodical's frontispiece displayed quotations such as "All humans belong to one community"; "May he who is one and without varna grant us insight"; and "He who is abstract, he who has no race, color, caste, creed show us the way to enlightenment." Maulvi Huq Selbarshi wrote in the first issue of *Samyabadi* that Islam was the religion of equality par excellence. It was only because of contingent historical reasons, such as proximity to Hinduism, that Muslims had fallen prey to caste distinctions. Mohammad Sanaullah wrote that Islam was the historical refuge of oppressed low-caste Hindus. Another essay argued that all religions develop hierarchies in time, such as race in Christianity, high culture/low culture (*ashraf/altaf*) in Islam, and *jati* and *varna* in Hinduism. But it was also religion that ultimately abolished hierarchies. Mohammad Barkatullah argued that inequality was the way in which Allah tested humans and their capacity for self-transformation.[35] Theological differences—such as between reformist ulema of the Anjuman e Ulema e Bangla, like Muhammad Akram Khan, who ran the periodicals *Al Islam* and *Mohammadi* and wrote the important text "Sud Samasya" (The problem of interest) on the issue of peasant indebtedness,[36] and the Pir Abu Bakr of Furfura, who represented an unreformed variety of popular worship involving discipleship, magic and healing—did not seem to trouble the general agreement over the equation between Islam and equality. Abul Hossain, in fact, described Bengal peasants as *banglar balshi* (the Bolsheviks of Bengal) and anticipated an

impending peasant revolution.[37] More self-consciously communist periodicals of the time—such as *Dhumketu* (The comet) and *Langal* (The plow)—were also dominated by Muslim authors and editors, including the poet Nazrul and one of the earliest of Indian communists, Muzaffar Ahmed.[38] The first issue of *Langal* ran an essay titled "Samyabad Ki" (What is egalitarianism?), which directly translated *Islam* into *egalitarianism*: "Some Muslim leaders have alleged that Samyavad is the enemy of Islam. Quite to the contrary, Islam is a greater critique of Dhaniktantra [capitalism] than Samyavad [socialism]. . . . Taking interest on loans is forbidden among Muslims. Because earnings from interest is earning without undertaking labor, Islam does not tolerate those who make money from usury. Communism has also said that taking interest is illegal."[39]

In other words, popular Islamic discourses of equality threw a shadow over thinkers both self-avowedly communist and anti-communist. Abul Hashim's *The Creed of Islam* argued that Islam was more socialistic than socialism itself. He summarized Islam in terms of the principle of absolute and exclusive sovereignty of God, which, he said, logically denied sovereignty to man. Man was not meant to rule over other men or over nature. Hence, the revolutionary *kalima* of the Koran was against the master-slave hierarchy. Even though historically there were slaves in Muslim lands, slaves could achieve great glory in Islam. The paradigmatic story was that of the black slave Bilal, appointed by the Prophet Muhammad as the first muezzin, who refused allegiance to Abu Bakr after Muhammad's death, on the grounds that he bowed only before Allah. In Muslim India, slaves had been sultans in medieval times. *Bandagi*, a term that meant both service and worship, thus denoted one's obeisance exclusively to God and, by implication, the universal equality of men, in their common condition of being nonsovereigns unto themselves.[40] This image—of slave kings—was frequently invoked in Muslim discourse of the times, such as in the speeches of Azizul Haq and Mohammad Rampuri, as was the image of the untouchable Dom and Chandal praying side by side with the elite *ashraf* in the mosque.[41] And from the fact that the slave Bilal was a man of color, Abul Hashim further concluded—as did many of his contemporaries—that Islam denied racial and national distinctions, for in Islam humanity (and nature) was one and universal.[42] Hence Pan-Islamism and socialist internationalism were frequently combined by contemporary Muslim authors, such as by Mushir Kidwai.[43]

In an interesting gloss on the concept of God being the sole sovereign, Abul Hashim argued, clearly in response to the communist promise of the withering away of the state, that an ideal Islamic society was the only imaginable instance of true anarchy or statelessness. Deeply involved though he was in

electoral politics in Bengal in the 1930s and 1940s, Hashim argued that despite what European political philosophy might say, there was really no such thing as popular will. Society was an artificial construct, a matrix of differences and inequalities, and by no means an organic whole that could operate as *a* people. The modern representational state therefore did not actually represent the people, not even the majority of people. The state was just an instrument of domination—a symbol of inequality if any. In contrast to the modern state, Hashim held up the ideal of the Khilafat (caliphate), which he said was a regime without state machinery and monopoly of violence, wherein order emanated from within the moral social order rather than from outside and above.[44] Abdul Hakim quoted Arnold Toynbee to say that in modern times God had been replaced not by man but by the racial state. We must study the history of religion, lately displaced by the study of purely political and economic history, in order to be able to imagine human society as an immanent form, that is, as more than being simply the conceptual other of the state.[45] A significant resonance appears here with Ambedkar's formulation in "Buddha or Karl Marx," where he criticized communism precisely for its state-centricity and propagated Buddha's way of realizing equality via the immanent morality of interpersonal conduct.

Many of these Islamic texts, significantly, were self-consciously theological. The elaboration of equality was thus intended as theological elaborations, complete with Koranic exegesis. And yet, these texts operated side by side with poetry—perhaps illustrating Hamid Dabashi's reading of the Persianate intellectual world, including south Asia, as above all a "humanistic" world, wherein the poet—often figured as the marginal, the vagabond, the ungovernable being, mad with love/passion/oneness with God—operated as the most intractable critic, speaking back to both theological and political power, a characterization that, by the way, fits quite well with the persona of Kazi Nazrul Islam.[46] But I am more interested here in how the poetic form enabled a particular embodiment of the contemporary Islamic critique of the idealism/materialism binary and thus allowed the embedding of mundane economic facts within a spiritualist narrative. Poetry, one could say, became a place in-between the didactic aspects of communism and Islam. A good example is Iqbal's poem "Lenin," in which Lenin encounters Allah and apologizes for his cognitive limitations. How could a human know whether God existed or not—"trapped [as she or he is] in nights routinely following days / While You create ages and preside over moments?" But then the human must also ask of God the challenging question, which remains "like a thorn stuck to the heart": "What is this apparent wealth that is nothing but speculation / which is millions in usury for some and un-

timely death for others? / What is this new knowledge that drinks blood and preaches equality?"

Tū qādir o aadil hai magar tere jahāñ meñ
Haiñ talḳh bahut banda-e-mazdūr

Kab Dūbegā sarmāya-parastī kā safīna
Duniyā hai tirī muntazir-e-roz-e-mukāfāt[47]

You are powerful and just, but in your world
bitter is the place of the working man.

When will the ship of capital sink?
The world awaits the day of your retribution.

Kazi Nazrul Islam wrote of the day of revolution as the moment when Israfel, the burning one, blows his trumpet, announcing the Day of Judgment. Note how he renders *zakat* poetically:

The bandit moon rises in the sky to take zakat.
The poor, the wretched open your palms, the rich secure your granary.
The moon of Id is the rosy smile of Belal.
Standing on the scales of justice in the blue sky, calling out *azan*,
I have brought the message from the moon of Id of Allah.
After Ramzan, we shall break our fast with their hoards.
All shall get food, Id will be a happy day.
Plunder what is given to you by Allah; none of you will be a sinner for that.[48]

Elias, in his *Khoabnama*, creates the persona of the wandering poet-renouncer, the *fakir* who sings ballads of revolutionary war as well as of farming activities, through the unfolding of the story of equality in the East Bengal countryside.

Buddhism and Equality without God

It is appropriate to end with Ambedkar—not only because he "returned" to spirituality as the last great expressive act of a life dedicated to the cause of caste equality but also because, even as he sought to fashion a particular religion of equality, he tried to account for the phenomenon of religion as such. In his "Philosophy of Hinduism," Ambedkar said that religion was constitutive of the human condition because it dealt with elemental questions of life such as birth and death, nourishment and disease. But this is not to say, as Gandhi did,

that all religions were true at heart. There were indeed true and false as well as good and bad religions. The history of religion was one of change and revolution. Ambedkar did not go by the conventional narrative of modernity. The rise of science and the alleged triumph of secular reason over religion was not really the defining event of his story. To Ambedkar, the most important revolution in the history of religion was the invention of God![49]

Through an anthropological study of "primitive" religions, Ambedkar argued that early forms of religion did not have conceptions of either God or morality. Religion—concerned as it was with death, disease, birth, growth, food, scarcity, and other such struggles of material life—propitiated productive and destructive forces of nature, such as sun, rain, wind, and pestilence. These forces were neither good nor evil. They were amoral, simply there to be fought, harnessed, and placated. In other words, religion was simply about life in its exigencies, dangers, and flourishing. The concept of God had extrareligious origins. It emerged out of deference to great and powerful men—heroes and kings—or out of pure speculation about an author-architect of the world. God came to be integrated with religion only in later times.

The invention of God was followed by a second major revolution—namely, the subsumption of morality under religion. In early times, the relationship between gods and humans was imagined as a form of kinship—hence the familiar image of god as a father or mother figure. "Political society"—Ambedkar's term—was thus composed of descendants and worshippers of a common progenitor god; consequently, competing polities had competing gods. Later, once society came to be imagined as composed only of humans and gods became transcendental figures beyond political society, the God-human relationship changed from being that of kinship to that of faith, belief, and adoration. Instead of watching over the public and civic life of the community, God now appeared to watch over the individual and regulate his or her personal conscience. Lineage loyalties came to be replaced by moral injunctions. Consequently, it became possible to imagine a single polity composed of people worshipping different gods (e.g., the Indian nation), just as it became possible to imagine a single universal God watching over a humanity otherwise divided into different polities (e.g., modern-day Islam or Christianity).[50]

Ambedkar's was not the standard story of secularization but was instead a more complex story of the changing constitution of both politics and religion and of their changing relationship. One could say that Ambedkar was enunciating what we today call "political theology" (though the term *theology* is a tad inappropriate for traditions like Hinduism and Buddhism, which, unlike Abrahamic traditions, were more practice based than scripturally driven). Ambed-

kar's reconstruction of Buddhism as a religion of equality must be placed in the context of this longer narrative of the changing nature of political theology through time. To Ambedkar, Hinduism was a particular political-theological formation, in which religion was law and law was religion. It was an elaborate set of social proscriptions and punishments, posited as sacred, timeless, and scriptural. Its gods were amoral (Krishna of Bhagavad Gita even encouraged fratricide for the sake of political power). Its defining concepts—*atman*, *karma*, and rebirth—implied that people were born to inferior castes owing to bad *karma* in their previous lives. Hinduism thus was not only an elaborately sanctified justification of inequality but also a religion of status quo, obedience, and conformity. It was, most importantly, an antisocial religion because it prevented sociability ("fraternity," Ambedkar said)—such as eating together and intermarrying—across peoples born to different castes. It was in defiance of Hinduism as political theology that Buddhism emerged as a religion of equality in ancient India. The rise of Buddha was nothing short of a revolution—for Buddha promulgated a supremely moral religion, which did not discriminate on grounds of caste, gender, or species. It admitted low-castes and women into the *sangha* and critiqued the sacrifice of mute animals in the Vedic fire.

Ambedkar, however, was making a far more complex move here than just valorizing one religion over another based on superior morality. Even though Ambedkar did say, apropos Buddhism, that religion was morality and morality religion, he also said, in *Annihilation of Caste*, that morality by itself was never a sufficient condition for equality. What was needed was religion, no less—because it was only when equality was sacralized as an idea that it became truly inviolable.[51] So Ambedkar offered his followers Buddhism. While he called his Buddhism *navayana* or the new path, he did not invent a new religion, a civil religion in the Rousseauian sense. Instead, he self-consciously enacted a return to religion in its most primordial, purest, and barest form—that is, to a religion without God.

In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, written just before his death, Ambedkar proposed a conception of religion without the mediation of gods and prophets and without grounding in any notion of an eternal inner being, such as soul or *atman*.[52] To Ambedkar, the religious subject and the subject of religion was the ordinary, mortal, finite human being in his or her everyday life—with no guarantee of God, soul, scripture, or heaven. Buddha, he said, never claimed to be God or prophet or avatar. Nor did he offer revelation or miracle. He even refused to comment on questions that had no answers—such as "What is the self?," "What happens after death?," and "Is the world finite or infinite?"[53] For such questions had no bearing on everyday life.[54] Buddhism, in Ambedkar's

telling, was thus simply a set of meditations on the finite human condition, no more and no less—and for precisely that reason religion in its truest and most originary sense. It was *dhamma*—a vision of everyday social behavior—based on *prajnya* (insight, as opposed to Brahminical knowledge or *jnyan*), *sila* (proper conduct), *karuna* (compassion), and *maitri* (friendship), in precisely that order of ascension.[55]

Buddhism proposed that *dukka* (suffering or sorrow) was an "incontrovertible fact" of life. *Dukka* was the result of the universal fact of conflict. While in Ambedkar, conflict and suffering were indexed as caste oppression, they were not reducible to that. Suffering could result from conflict between kings, between nations, and between mother and son, husband and wife, friend and friend. Buddhism, however, did not see suffering as a precondition to enlightenment, as did many ascetic and hermetic traditions in early India and elsewhere. *Dukka* was there to be overcome. And this was possible because of the nature of existence as *shunyata*. *Shunyata*—often translated as "the void," "nothingness," or "emptiness," translations that Ambedkar disputed because it seemed to deny the materiality of the world—simply meant "impermanence." The Buddhist conception of *shunyata* was therefore an insight into the ultimate ephemerality and inconstancy of the world—which proposed change itself as the proper ontology of being. Referring to the Buddhist epistemological principle of "dependent origination" (which held that an entity was itself only by virtue of its relation to other entities), Ambedkar argued that Buddhism was an antifoundationalist philosophy.[56] Hence, it had no need for God or a soul or any other form of essence or identity. It allowed escape from all given identities, however ancient, including caste. Buddhism was by nature a revolutionary doctrine, a doctrine of change.[57]

Ambedkar was a master of the long essay form. His *Annihilation of Caste*—originally written as a speech that could never be delivered—was an inimitable example of how to properly set up a structure of disputation, complete with thesis and counterthesis, scale changes from particular to general, and a systematic movement toward resolution, which, in this case, was to arrive at religion as the ultimate issue at stake with respect to equality. But Ambedkar intended *The Buddha and His Dhamma* as a scripture, a Buddhist Bible. The book followed the life and travels of Buddha in his quest for enlightenment. Ideas were staged as dialogues and disputations between Buddha and his interlocutors, both disciples and opponents. The conversion of diverse figures—from king to untouchable to courtesan—to Buddhism was recorded, and teachings were set out as aphorisms, even as many passages reappeared in the text in the familiar form of

the Ambedkarite long essay. The point to note is that, as far as Ambedkar was concerned, equality ultimately emerged as embedded in scripture.

It bears mentioning that Ambedkar was not the only one who co-theorized Buddhism and equality. So did Iyothee Thass in Tamil Nadu, Rahul Sankrityayan in north India, Dharmanand Kosambi in west India, Anagarika Dharmapala in Sri Lanka, and Haraprasad Shastri in Bengal. Haraprasad Shastri was as different a figure as possible from Ambedkar. A Brahmin scholar of purely academic orientation, Shastri spent most of his life searching for old manuscripts and trying to reconstruct the history of Bengal as the original land of Buddhists. In his essay "Jatibhed" (Caste division), he argued that Bengal was originally inhabited by Shudras, untouchables, and aborigines—the name Banga or Bengal apparently derived from the caste name of the untouchable Bagdis.[58] The history of Bengal was really a history of caste, he said.[59] Brahmins came late to Bengal, appropriated popular religious forms, battled Buddhism, and finally, consolidated their caste supremacy during Muslim rule through anti-Muslim rhetoric.[60]

One of Shastri's greatest concerns was to understand how and why Buddhism vanished from Bengal and whether Buddhism could have survived among the poor and the outcaste in transformed ways. In a series of essays published in nationalist leader Bipin Chandra Pal's periodical *Narayana* in the mid-1910s, Shastri blamed Brahminical appropriation of the tenets of Buddhism for the loss of the Buddhist way (along with, he added, local Buddhism's turn toward secret *tantric* practices, which involved, significantly, touching "polluting" substances such as female genitalia, urine, and excreta). Through extensive fieldwork in various parts of Bengal, Shastri reconstructed the tradition of *dharmapuja*, which he argued was the modern surviving form of Buddhism in Bengal. By legend, the untouchable Kalu Dom was the initiator of this form of *dhamma* devotion. In this tradition, *shunya-murti* (the figure of the zero, symbolized often by an opaque black stone) was the object of worship. Priests were almost always low-castes and outcastes (Shastri found one case of a Dom woman priest), and iconic texts were pitched against Brahmin oppressors of the poor. Ramai Pandit's *Shunya Purana*, also known as *Dharma Puja Bidhan*, written most likely in the eleventh century, recounted how when Brahmin oppression became unbearable, Dharma took the form of Muslims and defeated them. Bhim Bhoi's *Kali Bhagavad* recounted the setting up of a neo-*bhikshu* or neomonastic way of life, with great similarities to *Vinayapitaka* (an early Buddhist text of monastic governmentality), in which begging for alms from Shudra households was mandatory.[61] Not just Brahmins but even powerful kings were put in their

place by Buddhists in earlier times, Shastri added. As the Buddhist philosopher Chandrakirti had said already in the fifth century, there was no pride in being a king—the king, after all, was a servant of the people, whose salary was but one-sixth of what peasants produced.[62] Buddhism in Bengal was thus a lost religion of equality. Hence, Haraprasad Shastri lamented the loss of Buddhism: "Shunyabad, Bigyanbad, Karunabad bhule gelo, Darshan bhule gelo, shila, binay bhule gelo" (The doctrines of shunyata, rationality, and compassion were forgotten; philosophy, codes of moral conduct, and conscience were forgotten).[63]

Conclusion

In modern times, thus, diverse spiritual traditions have been critical in rendering the idea of equality thinkable as a positive concept. Different spiritual traditions did this differently, and we must remain wary of lumping them together simply by virtue of their being "religious" and not "secular." But three common elements should be flagged here in order to clarify the nature of the phenomenon we are studying. First, all the spiritual traditions I discuss had an intense relationship with Marxism, even as they were often critical of it. By the same logic, all these spiritual traditions, especially Islam, sought to resignify the economic itself as part of the spirituality question. Second, all these traditions offered additional concepts to supplement the concept of equality—such as nonduality, *tawhid*, *maitri*, and *dhamma*. These were concepts meant to engage the fact and concept of difference, without which equality remained unthinkable, just as difference remained unthinkable without equality. These were by no means concepts signifying community or unity or indivisibility—such as of the poor or the proletariat or the people—bearers of equality, as it were. In fact, Marxism-Leninism made this move—of displacing the question of equality onto the question of (class) unity or community, thus postponing with undue analytical haste, the preliminary question of What is equality? in favor of a very different question, Who is equal? True, the thinkers I discuss here invoke particular subaltern figures as signifying the thinkability of equality—Bankim's woman, Vivekananda and Narayana Guru's Shudra, Nazrul and Abul Hashim's Muslim peasant, and Ambedkar's untouchable. And yet in place of identity, which denies difference within and exacerbates difference without, what we have in these thinkers is the imagination of "encounter." What the spiritual traditions seek to do, in other words, is imagine equality as that which emerges out of an encounter of unequals. Whether Iqbal's Lenin encountering Allah or Narayana Guru's worshipper encountering herself in the mirror, it was encounter as a form—encounter across unequal differences

and different inequalities—that was resignified as moments of nonduality, *tawhid*/oneness, and *maitri*/friendship. In fact, even as Marxism-Leninism sought to imagine equality as universal equivalence, via the transvaluating work of the economic, in the concept of class struggle, it too mobilized the form of the encounter—a very different, warlike, agonistic encounter—as the precise moment of equality.

What then of equality as idea and as political idea? Needless to say, an idea becomes an idea by fighting free of its imbrication in diverse moments of encounter—acquiring in the process the autonomy, abstraction, lightness, and mobility that are properties of an idea qua idea. Equality becomes an idea just so—by traveling out of liberal political philosophy and the historical stage of the French Revolution and passing through not just economic but also spiritual and aesthetic registers of enunciation in diverse languages. As important, it becomes an idea by becoming amenable to diverse forms of embodiment—essay, exegesis, exhortation, poetry, and indeed scripture.

But equality, I propose, does not quite become a political idea. Like the economic fact, as I argue in chapter 6, spirituality remains in the last instance an extrapolitical imperative—as being both before and beyond the moment of politics. By that logic, the spiritual, like the economic, appears as both the condition of possibility of the political and its limit. It promises to stabilize and regulate the political against its own immediacies—and it continues to remain efficacious when politics fails or goes into abeyance. Can the moment of Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism and his final writing of *The Buddha and His Dhamma*—after the cessation of his long political career and his resignation from the first government of independent India—be seen as an index of precisely this extrapolitical prospect of equality?