

B.R.Ambedkar on Untouchability : A Critical Study

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Abstract

In the backdrop of pathetic plight of untouchables in India, History salutes Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar for the role he played in removing the stigma of untouchability throughout his life. For at least over last four decades, Dalits have devotedly followed Ambedkar as their ideal and zealously practiced, as they claim, his teachings what they call Ambedkarism. But at the same time, it should be pertinent to ask why despite this flawless following of Ambedkar, they continue to occupy the lowest rung in the social as well as economic hierarchy of Indian society?

Keywords: Untouchables, Dalit, Ambedkarism, Harijan, Caste System, Hindu, Social reformers and thinkers influencing Ambedkar, Crusade against Untouchability, Sustenance of political freedom by social freedom, Legislative.

Introduction

The Indian caste system is the traditional system of social division in the Indian Subcontinent, in which social classes are defined by a number of endogamous groups often termed as jātis. A Varna is a division of the society that consists of many sub-castes or Jātis. Manusmriti and some other shastras mention four varnas: The Brahmins (teachers, scholars and priests), the Kshatriyas (kings and warriors), the Vaishyas (traders, landowners and some artisan groups), and Shudras (agriculturists, service providers, and some artisan groups). Another group of untouchables excluded from the main society was called Parjanya or Antyaja. This group of former "Untouchables" (Dalit) was considered either the lower section of Shudras or outside the caste system altogether.¹

Before Ambedkar had emerged on Indian horizons, India had already been shaped into a society of serfs where each layer of population was sequentially subjugated by the superior ones. From the lowest of untouchables to the highest of the people, each class of population had its own tales of sorrow and misery but among them, no doubt, the untouchables suffered the most.

Objective of the Study

The main objective of this paper is to the study Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's crusade about Untouchability in a critical manner and to understand how Social democracy and political democracy must go hand-in-hand. It also focuses on reviewing the post – ambedkar dalit movements, believed to be in accordance with the teachings of Ambedkar.

Review of Literature

History bears testimony to the fact that efforts were made by social reformers like Jyotiba Phule, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Ramaswami Nayakar, M.G. Ranade and a host of other reformers who enlightened individuals to oppose the caste system and the practice of untouchability as they considered it as a heinous crime against humanity.

Pre – Independent India has seen a host of social and religious reformers who sought to cleanse the Hindu religion getting rid of the evil of Untouchability that has crept into it. These movements were also the expression of the rising national consciousness and spread of the liberal ideas of the west among the Indian people. They, in varying degrees, emphasized and fought for the principles of individual liberty and social equality and stood for nationalism. The new intelligentsia recognized these needs and launched movements to reform or revolutionizes social institutions, religious outlooks and ethical conceptions inherited from the past, since they felt that these were obstacles to national advance.

Mahatma Gandhi took up cudgels against the practice of untouchability and made it a part of his programme for the attainment of political independence. Infact, the term "Harijan" was first used for the



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untouchables in India by Mahatma Gandhi. Instead of calling them "untouchables," he called them "Harijan" or men of God. "If anybody of people can be described as men of God, (O'Malley, Modern India and the West, P. 2) ²

Bhim Rao Baba Saheb Ambedkar was greatly influenced by these movements of past which had a direct bearing on the upliftment of untouchables in India. However, Ambedkar's ideology was different towards the subject that got reflected when he published his book *The Annihilation of Caste*. Ambedkar's work strongly criticized Hindu religious leaders and the caste system in general. He protested the Congress decision to call the untouchable community Harijans, a moniker coined by Gandhi.

Concepts and Hypothesis

According to Ambedkar, "Caste is not just a division of labour; it is a division of labourers." With what Congress and Gandhi have Done to the Untouchables, Ambedkar intensified his attacks on Gandhi and the Congress, charging them with hypocrisy. In his work *Who were the Shudras?*, Ambedkar attempted to explain the formation of the Shudras i.e. the lowest caste in hierarchy of Hindu caste system. He also emphasized that how Shudras are separate from Untouchables.³ Ambedkar oversaw the transition of his political party into the All India Scheduled Castes Federation, although it performed poorly in the elections held in 1946 for the Constituent Assembly of India. In writing a sequel to *Who were the Shudras?* in 1948, Ambedkar lambasted Hinduism in the *Untouchables: a Thesis on the Origins of Untouchability*:

He also condemned the Caste practices carried out by Muslims in South Asia and slavery in Muslim communities.

The major theoretical exposition of the caste system by Ambedkar was his presidential speech supposed to be delivered at the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal, Lahore, at the end of March 1936. The conference was postponed up to the middle of May due to very bitter criticism for having elected its president a leader like Ambedkar "who was a declared hater of Hindu religion".⁴

According to Ambedkar, there was no Hindu consciousness. In every Hindu, the consciousness that exists was the consciousness of the caste. He remarked that the word "Hindu" did not appear in Sanskrit work prior to the Mohammendan invasion. Hindu society was a collection of castes. They did not even form a federation. Men did not become a society by living in physical proximity. Similarity in habits and customs, beliefs and thoughts was not enough to constitute men into society. Men constituted a society because they had things, which they possessed in common. It continued to exist by communication. He emphasized:

"The caste system prevents common activity and by preventing it, it has prevented the Hindus from becoming a society with a unified life and a consciousness of its own being. There is only individual share or part in the associated activity." ⁵ Ambedkar thought that an antisocial spirit was the worst feature of the caste system.

Dr Ambedkar believed that the caste system was shattering Indian society, so he wanted to reconstruct society. Johannes Beltz writes: "His analysis of caste is based on cultural and religious differences, not on ethnic exclusivism."⁶

Research Design

Through his writings and speeches, Ambedkar inspired millions and millions of Dalits helping them to realise how their fellow men treated them worse than beasts.

The concept of untouchability arose from the prevailing caste system and division of society in Vernas.

Many European scholars from the colonial era regarded the Manusmriti as the "law book" of the Hindus and thus concluded that the caste system is a part of Hinduism.

"The Hindu Civilization... is a diabolical contrivance to suppress and enslave humanity. Its proper name would be infamy. What else can be said of a civilization which has produced a mass of people... who are treated as an entity beyond human intercourse and whose mere touch is enough to cause pollution?" ⁷

Ambedkar's movement was a social movement with a political connotation. Political power as the liberator from social oppression formed the core of the movement and it informed the later phase of lower caste assertion. Ambedkar was also one of the prominent spokesperson in the Constituent Assembly and influenced the constitutional provisions extended to the lower castes.

Findings

Ambedkar realized that though political power was a vital premise for a fundamental reconstruction of the Indian society on a democratic basis, social reforms were equally necessary to achieve the goal. Therefore, the sustenance of political freedom by social freedom was a necessity of pre independence era.

Ambedkar's persistent efforts to ameliorate the conditions of so-called untouchables resulted in the inclusion of certain provisions in the India, which had far reaching effects. A number of constitutional provisions relating to the welfare and upliftment of the untouchables were also included in the Constitution. These constitutional provisions were later reinforced by legislation. As per Article 17(Abolition of Untouchability),"Untouchability" is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. Under Anti-Untouchability act of 1955 (renamed as protection of Civil rights Act in 1979) and Schedule Caste/Tribe Prevention of Atrocities Act 1989, practice of untouchability and discrimination in public places and community life is treated as an offence.

In the contemporary period of modern times, as it was in the past, the 'phenomenon of Ambedkarism' has swept across the length and the breadth of the country. All the political parties are in a run to prove they are better 'Ambedkarists'—as all of them are trying to push their concern for the dalits and the down-trodden for whom Ambedkar stood entire his life.

However, reviewing the post-Ambedkar dalit movement at some significant milestones, one finds a queer underscoring behaviour, believed to be in accordance with the teachings of Babasaheb Ambedkar that is certainly incongruent with the essence of what he taught. This dichotomy between the essential Ambedkar and the 'Ambedkar' in the faith of dalit masses - the icon of Ambedkar comes out as the problematic in this review. In relation to almost every aspect of his teaching there emerged an icon that represented varying amount of distortion. The ruling classes that always look for the grounds to divide masses had severally reinforced this distortion and accelerated fragmentation of dalits in every field.

"Untouchability" was abolished under India's Constitution in 1950. Yet entire villages in many Indian states remain completely segregated by caste, in what has been called "hidden apartheid".⁸

Conclusion

He was an original thinker who recognized that untouchables and tribals were the original inhabitants of India and hence needed to be treated separately and specially. Separate electorate for them was his brainchild. Ambedkar was a multi faceted personality whose work and personal struggle continue to inspire countless people to fight for their social and economic betterment.

While Ambedkar's supporters argue that he was working to secure Dalit and Backward Caste political rights. Contemporary and modern scholars also questioned Ambedkar's research and point of view regarding origin of the caste system and racial theories.

The importance of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in the shaping of modern India cannot be forgotten. He led millions of the oppressed to a life of self-respect, dignity, and responsibility. It was he who was primarily responsible for the final drafting of Indian Constitution. Babasaheb brought the revival of Buddhism in India that has now grown tremendously after his death, and continues to grow today among his countless followers.

Ambedkar was leader in the struggle for Indian independence, the architect of the new nation's constitution, and the champion of civil rights for the 60 million members of the "untouchable" caste to which he belonged. He spoke and wrote ceaselessly on behalf of "untouchables" but his passion for justice was broad. In 1950 he resigned from his position as the country's first minister of law when Nehru's cabinet refused to pass the Women's Rights Bill.

On each stage of framing of Indian constitution Dr Ambedkar's contribution was most profound – whether it be a matter of opting for a parliamentary form of governance, or deciding for federal structure or granting of fundamental rights to citizens or inclusion of directive principles of state policy, or be it with regard to the separation of power. The list continues. He intervened and proposed his views and even drafted many of the provisions incorporated in the constitution.

The fundamental source of most of Ambedkar's political thoughts and action is his conception of State and religion that he had adopted as the extraneous

instruments to reconcile the state of flux of things and the necessity of order in them.

He acquired sympathy and criticism both about his mass conversion of Buddhism as a political stunt, from his opponents. Ambedkar was also criticized for his intensely anti-Hindu views, though his supporters argue that he was only opposed to "Orthodox Brahmanism" rather than to all Hindus. He came in touch with many progressive people belonging to Brahmin and other upper classes.

This paper is not an appraisal of his work. If it was one he is likely to still shine brightest among his contemporaries. It is an appraisal of his icons that came to be the beacon for the dalit movement. It is the futuristic dimension that he represents which is called in question.

There are enough clues left behind by Ambedkar himself that point to this need. There is no doubt that he was frustrated at the end of his life seeing the undesired aftermath of his lifelong struggle. He had to lament over the betrayal of the educated dalits in whom he had seen the crusaders of his mission. He had to weep with remorse that he could not do anything for his people in the villages. He had to disown the Constitution for working on which he had cut short his life at least by a few years. He had to swallow the frustration of not being able to pilot the Constitution of his conception (States and Minorities). He had to regret the anti-people State that emerged in republican India. He obviously lacked the analytical tools to see through the reasons for these happenings. His excessive religiosity and spirituality at the fag end of his life perhaps could be taken as the manifestation of this frustration. The social engineer could only be busy with problems; he is unlikely to come to grip with the design defects in the system. Almost everything that Ambedkar pinned his hopes on can be found today in antithetical shambles. His educational society, his vision of Buddhism, the political party of his conception, the social reforms could be some of the examples. These tragic aftermaths also would denote the necessity of a critical review of Ambedkar's thoughts if they were to be used as the ideology to further the dalit movement towards its logical end. If this process is sincerely followed, there cannot be any doubt that this 'redefined Ambedkar' would be a revolutionary icon, organically linking the dalit struggle to the revolutionary struggle in the world. It will truly globalise the dalit struggle.

Suggestion

The Indian caste system is gradually relaxing, especially in metropolitan and major urban areas, due to the penetration of higher education and co-existence of all communities. But in the countryside and small towns, this system is still very rigid. However, the total elimination of caste system seems distant, if ever possible, due to caste politics.

"Untouchability" is not an ancient cultural artifact; it is human rights abuse on a vast scale," said Smita Narula, researcher for the Asia division of Human Rights Watch and author of the report. "The tools for change are in place - what is lacking is the political will for their implementation."⁹

Therefore, Ambedkar's legacy, as a socio-political reformer, has been long-lasting on modern India. In post independence India, his socio-political thought has acquired respect across political spectrum and influenced various spheres of life like socio-economic, education and Government policies of affirmative action by socio-economic and legal incentives. He had grown increasingly critical of mainstream Indian political parties for their perceived lack of emphasis for the elimination of the caste system. Dr Ambedkar had many other achievements to his credit, which give an insight into the progressive thinking of one of the most prominent untouchable political figures of the time.

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