

Dr. B.R Ambedkar, Dalit Movements and Social Justice in 21st Century

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Abstract:

Caste is a bitter truth of Indian society. According to Dr. Ambedkar “The caste system is not merely a division of labour. It is also a division of labourers”. Caste system is a tool of exploitation of labouring class. For the ruling class, caste system served both as an ideology and social system. In the opposition of castist social system untouchable castes mobilised themselves against Brahminical feudal domination and exploitation. They interpret Brahmins as Aryan invaders who conquered the Dravidian race.

The anti-caste or anti-Brahminical movements in India can't be understood without discussing the contribution of Dr. B. R Ambedkar. His “Annihilation of Caste” is extremely important work to understand caste system and anti-caste struggles. Ambedkar played an important role in mobilising the lower castes to struggle against caste oppression and to demand equal rights. He gave self-identity to the people who were suppressed for centuries. Ambedkar fought for democracy by demanding equality for dalits, by attacking caste system and by attacking feudal ideology and authority of Brahminism. Ambedkar is a source of inspiration for dalits. He was a liberal reformer of his time.

In the first section, this paper attempt to look at the structure of caste and role of Ambedkar how he understood caste system, how he consolidated dalits and how the programme to annihilate caste was. In the second half of the paper we try to understand the role of anti-caste movements to eliminate caste system from our society and also try to explain social justice in present time. There must be equality, liberty and justice in every society for healthy democratic setup and values. India can be considered democratic in the absence of caste system, social injustice and religious intolerance.

INTRODUCTION:

Among the cluster of thinkers and philosophers of India, Bharat Ratna Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar occupies undoubtedly the most important place. He is an advocated of social justice in India. In the row to oppose caste system he has a great contribution. According to B.R. Ambedkar, the dalits were primarily socially, economically and politically weak and could only be uplifted by changing the social structure through legal, political and educational means.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was popularly known as Babasaheb Ambedkar and everyone knows that he was one of the architects of the Indian Constitution. He was a very well-known political leader, eminent jurist, Buddhist activist, philosopher, anthropologist, historian, orator, writer, economist, scholar and editor, too. Dr. Ambedkar fought to eradicate the social evils like untouchability and for the rights of the dalits and other socially backward classes throughout his life. Dr. Ambedkar was appointed as India's first Law Minister in the Cabinet of Jawaharlal Nehru. He was posthumously awarded the Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian honour in 1990.¹

Bhimrao Ambedkar was born on 14 April 1891 in Madhya Pradesh. He was the fourteenth child of his parents. Ambedkar's father Ramji was a Subedar in the Indian Army and posted at Mhow cantonment, MP. Ambedkar had to face severe discriminations from every corner of the society as his parents hailed from the Hindu Mahar caste. Mahar caste was viewed as "untouchable" by the upper class. Awarded a scholarship by

the Gaekwar (ruler) of Baroda, he studied at universities in the United States, Britain, and Germany. He entered the Baroda Public Service at the Gaekwar's request, but, again ill-treated by his high-caste colleagues, he turned to legal practice and to teaching. He soon established his leadership among Dalits, founded several journals on their behalf, and succeeded in obtaining special representation for them in the legislative councils of the government.²

According to the census 2011, Dalits represent a community of about 170 million in India constituting about 17% of the total Indian population,³ Thus one out of every six Indians is Dalit. Yet due to their caste identity Dalits regularly face discrimination and violence which prevent them from enjoying the basic human rights and dignity promised to all citizens in India. Dalit is a modern term for the untouchables in India are underprivileged people in all social, economic and political fronts of our society which lead to their misery discrimination, exploitation and oppression by the caste dominated social stratification of Indian society.

Caste, Varna and Jati:

The word 'caste' (from the Latin *castus*) was loosely applied to the Hindu system of social stratification by the sixteenth-century Portuguese, India's first modern European colonizers. Since *casta* in Portuguese means 'pure' or 'chaste', the word connoted the Portuguese understanding of the phenomenon as being akin to race, species or lineage, as they thought the system was intended to preserve purity of blood. A more particularized view emerged with later European observers⁴ who became aware that, while systems of social division have existed throughout history across the world, the form prevalent in India was not to be found anywhere else.⁵

Caste, as such, is a form of social stratification involving a mode of hierarchically arranged, closed endogamous strata, membership to which is ascribed by descent and between which contact is restricted and mobility impossible.⁶ The Indian word for caste is *jati*. When we refer to 'caste', we really speak of *jati*, although many tend to confuse it with *varna*, which refers to the basic 'classes', four in number, established in Hindu scripture.⁷ The *chaturvarna* or four-varna system enshrined a hierarchical segmentation of society into the following primarily professional orders: *brahmins* (the priestly castes), *kshatriyas* (the warrior/fighting castes), *vaishyas* (the business/trading castes) and, at the lowest rung, *shudras* (the working classes: artisans, agriculturists, food gatherers, hunters, fisher folk and the like).⁸ While there are only four varnas as given in Hinduism, there are thousands of *jatis*. These may have evolved as subdivisions of particular varnas, but by the present day, they have developed characteristics very distinct from their originals.

Varna represents Hinduism's hierarchical framework, but it is *jati* which really dictates the rules and regulations of life for the average Hindu. Each *jati* has its own special norms dictating permissible food, occupation, marriage, social interaction and so forth, and from each *jati*/caste come numbers of sub-castes, making the whole system highly complicated. While the caste cluster within a Varna easily admits the Varna hierarchy, the castes within it contend among themselves for superiority, the more vigorously with those in their hierarchical vicinity. Perennial internal tensions paired with the *jatis* acceptance of their inferiority/superiority within the broad Varna framework have lent the system its dynamism as well as its longevity.

The beginnings of the caste system are unclear and so is its evolution. There is a broad consensus, however, that it evolved through the varna system and reached its maturity between 600 and 200 Before Common Era.⁹ Its laws were codified between 200 BCE and the second century CE in the *Manusmriti*, or the Laws of Manu, ascribed to the mythological ancient lawgiver, Manu, who is credited with the creation of the Hindu social code.¹⁰ Of the Varnas, the Brahmins occupied the highest place, being said to have materialized from the mouth of Brahman, the divine being. The origin of the Kshatriyas and Vaishyas was ascribed respectively to Brahman's arms and thighs; Shudras, the lowest of the order, were deemed to have sprung from his feet. Testifying to education's primacy in ancient India (and to the system's exploitative ingenuity), the three upper Varnas were also given the name *dwija*, the twice born, denoting the 'second birth' they were said to undergo at the *upanayana* ceremony, performed in childhood and marking their transition into the

world of formal learning. This initiation, again, was the prerogative of only men. The ceremony and with it education were and are proscribed for shudras. Also debarred were the large numbers of people caste society excluded from its confines: its 'outcastes', those today called dalits.

Castist society excluded *adivasis* its indigenous tribal people, who lived in forests and in remote mountain regions, and those who, though part of the economic system in terms of labour relationships, were excluded from all other interaction because they were 'untouchable'. Any contact with members of this group, even their sight, sometimes even their shadow, was held to be ritually polluting and abhorrent; elaborate purifications would be undertaken if such happened. To this group were assigned work such as the removal of solid waste, butchery, the flaying of animal carcasses for their hides, the making of footwear and the tending of funeral pyres - everything, in other words, that had to do with decay, death and the 'unclean'. They lived segregated from the main population, on the fringes of villages and towns, and could not enter 'pure' environments such as schools or temples or go near public drinking water.

The castes within the Varna framework have been fluid. Many new castes were formed and many have disappeared; many split up and many merged with others over time in response to local political and economic demands. If caste society had not changed over the centuries, there are least traces of today's social structure in history.

Ambedkar and Social Justice:

The Constitution, as it stands after all amendment, ambitiously declares India a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic with liberty, equality and justice as its guiding principles. Ambedkar focused on social justice because Indian society is divided socially. Social justice has significance in the context of Indian society which is divided into Castes and Communities and they create walls and barriers of exclusiveness on the basis of superiority and inferiority such inequalities pose serious threat to Indian democracy. The concept of social justice takes within its sweep the objective of removing inequalities and affording equal opportunities to all citizens in social, economic and political affairs. Ambedkar is also one of the proponents of social justice in modern India. **According to Ambedkar**, the term "social justice" is based upon equality, liberty and fraternity of all human beings. The aim of social justice is to remove all kinds of inequalities based upon Caste, race, sex, power, Position, and wealth. The social justice brings equal distribution of the social, political and economic resources of the community.¹¹

According to Dr. Ambedkar the root cause of social injustice to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes is the caste system in Brahminical society. He observed, castes are enclosed units and it is their conspiracy with clear conscience that compels the ex-communicated to make them into a caste. The logic of their obdurate circumstance is merciless and it is in obedience to its force that some unfortunate groups find themselves closed out with the result that now groups by a mechanical law are constantly being converted into castes in a widening multiplicity. He further maintained that the root of untouchability is the caste system and the root of the caste system is religion, the root of the religion attached to varnashram and the root of the varnashram is the Brahminism. Thus Brahminism which is based on caste system is the main cause of social inequality.

Dr. Ambedkar was against the Hindu caste system that has been primarily responsible for committing all sorts of atrocities on the various sections of the society particularly the weaker sections Scheduled caste and Scheduled Tribes. He was against Manusmirthi which provide legitimacy to Brahmins to commit all sorts of atrocities on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and justify their evil designs.

Dr. Ambedkar believed that by treating unequals equally, that would automatically violate the principle of equality and thus the task of democracy would remain unfinished. That is why there has been a need to have special safe guards for the depressed classes. For a long period of suppression, subordination and exploitation had seriously handicapped the members of discriminated Dalit masses and placed them or a disadvantage in at least three ways: **First** of all, it had diminished their motivations and aspirations. While children belonging to the dominant social groups could, from an early age, aspire for the most prestigious

social and economic positions, children of the discriminated masses were not accustomed to think in these ways. Socialization in a context of deprivation and discrimination deprived them of the ability to even aspire for prestigious jobs. **Secondly**, although jobs were formally open to all, the oppressed and discriminated people were unable to compete successfully with the members of the better-off-social groups. The latter lived in an environment that provided access to better schools and other associated benefits that come from wealth and higher social class. Therefore, they had advantages against which the deprived people could not compete and win. **Thirdly**, in addition to the inequality of background conditions and social position, it was found that children of the dominant social committees perform better in standard examinations. Insofar as these procedures were used to assess the ability of the individual, members of the dominant community had an edge over the others.¹²

Role of Anti- Caste Movements to Bring Social Justice:

Anti-Caste Movements are a type of social movements aims to create a society in which social discrimination has no place. Especially anti-caste movements are the opposition of castist philosophy and social order. The development of new classes among the non-Brahman castes led to the growth of a democratic consciousness among them. The non-Brahman movements came forth in southern and western India in the later part of the 19th century by mobilising the Shudra and Ati-Shudra castes against Brahmanical feudal domination and exploitation. They concentrated primarily on various aspects of caste oppression, superstition, caste-feudal privileges and rights, hereditary nature of posts, education based on Sanskrit, etc. The movement brought forth the racial theory of origin of caste to explain caste oppression, by interpreting Brahmans as Aryan invaders who conquered the Dravidian race. The conservative trend within the non-Brahman movement tended to restrict itself to opposing the monopoly of Brahmans in the field of education and government employment, in the legislatures and the struggle to get the representation and control over district boards. The Justice Party, the Non-Brahman Party, the Unionist Party (Punjab) represented this trend.

The radical section of the non-Brahmin movement was more broad-based, more thorough in their anti-caste stand, rejecting the whole caste system with its hierarchy and oppression. They also took up the questions of peasantry and of middle castes as well. The leaders of non-Brahminical movement aroused the democratic consciousness of the oppressed masses and prepared the ground for their mobilization into anti-imperialist movements. Anti-caste movements or non-Brahminical movements gain their names mainly in Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra because of strong leadership of Erode Venkatappa Ramasamy, commonly known as Periyar and Jyotiba Phule (Jyotirao Govindrao Phule).

Jyotiba Phule founded the Satyashodak Samaj (SS) in Pune. The main Task of the SS was to make the non-Brahmins conscious of their exploitation by Brahmans. Phule was born in the so called lower caste *Mali*, a gardener which involved in cultivation of vegetables. Satyashodak Samaj did not limited its activities to any particular caste, but they worked among the various non-Brahmin castes in the rural areas also. They also included the textile mills of Bombay. The SS rejected the feudal style marriages and adopted the SS style marriages which were based on the principles of equality, mutual respect and loyalty between husband and wife. To understand the caste system Phule got success. But he wrongly believed that British rule had destroyed the rule of Brahmans and brought education to all castes equally.

EVR or Periyar formed the Self – Respect movement – *Suyamaraiyathai*—after he walked out of Congress in 1925 for their unwillingness to support separate representation for the Non-Brahmins. He assumed Congress as pro-feudal, pro-Varna and conservative in nature. Periyar’s movement was concentrated in the Tamil areas of Presidency. It was oriented towards the oppressed castes, including the untouchables, and took active steps to involve women and youth. Militant actions, with an atheistic approach, were launched by Self-Respect Movement, not only on Brahminism, but also on religion itself, on superstition, caste division and caste privileges. They promoted the pride in Tamil language and opposed the use of Sanskrit.¹³

Ambedkar and Anti-Caste Movement:

The anti-caste or anti-Brahminical movement in India cannot be understood without discussing the phenomenal contribution of Dr. Ambedkar. He not only led the Dalits, but also had written extensively on the caste system and Dalit liberation strategies. Evaluating Ambedkar's important role in Anti-Caste and Dalit Liberation Movement, Com. Anuradha Ghandy writes,

Following the tradition of the earlier Non-Brahmin Movement Ambedkar did not participate in the nationalist movement though Ambedkar was aware of the exploitation of the British and Depressed classes realized that they needed Swaraj to develop the movement, he felt that it could not take on two enemies (i.e., the upper castes and the British) at the same time. So they targeted their attack on the caste system. Throughout his political career, Ambedkar was a firm opponent of Gandhi and he exposed the hypocrisy of the Congress leadership on the issue of eradicating untouchability. Ambedkar played a very important role in mobilizing the lowest castes in Maharashtra to struggle against caste oppression and to demand equality. He gave the people, suppressed for centuries, a self-identity in which they developed a pride in being from the Mahar Community, and he gave them the self-confidence that, given equal opportunities, they were no less than members of the higher castes. The almost total conversion of the entire Mahar Community to Buddhism in 1956 served to encourage this sense of identity and pride. The public rejection of Hinduism which sanctifies inequality and caste discrimination and public conversion to a religion based on egalitarian principles, is another symbol of desire for equality. It includes also a rejection of the old feudal ideology of Brahminical ritualism"

Movement in the Present Period:

Under the influence of the world wide upsurge among the students, the youth and the Blacks in the 1960s and the Naxalbari movement, Dalit youth in Maharashtra revolted under the banner of the Dalit Panthers. The movement began in the city of Bombay in 1973. It was initially a cultural movement, of poems and articles printed in the small magazines brought out in that period. Dalit students and youth from the slums and hostels condemned the Manusmriti, announced that the 15th of August was false independence and called for a boycott of elections. The movement did not last long, but it spread rapidly to other urban centres like Pune, Nagpur, and even to cities in Madhya Pradesh and other places like Karnataka, Gujarat, Chandigarh, Bhopal and Agra, where units of the Dalit Panthers were formed.

The Panthers revolted against caste oppression and also the RPI Dalit leaders who they felt had betrayed the Ambedkarite anti-caste/anti-untouchability movement. Their campaign to villages where caste oppression was reported indicates this. They also attacked the ideological bastion of the caste system by burning the *Manusmriti*. They also attacked the corrupt parliamentary system by calling for a boycott of the by-elections to the Lok Sabha in Worli at Bombay, and managed to get almost 85 percent of the SCs in the area to boycott the elections. This was the first time that the Dalit movement took an explicitly anti-state stand. The Dalit Panther movement was a part of the democratic revolutionary class struggle in the region. It was as a result of this movement that the scheduled castes of the country began rejecting the derogatory word *Harijan* (with its Hindu connotations) and instead adopted the word 'Dalit.'¹⁴

The Dalit Movements:

The Dalit movements separated themselves from the Non-Brahmin movements, and took up militant mass struggles against feudal and caste bondage. Struggles for entry into temples and the use of common water tanks became widespread. In the realm of production relations, the struggles centred on the refusal to perform traditional caste duties, performing forced labour for the landlords and government officials. Another arena of struggle, representing the aspirations of growing Dalit petty-bourgeoisie, was related to the access to education and employment.

The Dalit movement, like the Non-Brahmin movements, failed to understand the link between British Imperialism and feudalism. The Dalit movements tried to build up a united front with the working class in the urban areas but there were few attempts in the rural areas, where caste oppression was strong. There was an objective reason for this, it was difficult for the Dalit movement to propose a unity with the non-Dalits,

who had strong biases against them and practiced untouchability. Another reason due to which class unity could not be achieved was the sectarian outlook of the Dalit leadership, also seen in the urban areas later.

Conclusion:

In the 21st century there is no qualitative change in the practice of caste. Atrocities against dalits are increasing day by day. There is a big gap between dalits and other section of the society socially. Although reservation makes them economically well that lead to change their class structure but there is no change in social status. Once a dalit is always a dalit, is a quotation to understand the character of castist social system. Caste is now a phenomenon of by birth not by work unlike the class. There must be equality, liberty and justice in every society for healthy democratic setup and values. India can be considered democratic in the absence of caste system, social injustice and religious intolerance.

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