



Dr. B.R. Ambedkar as a crusader for the 'Annihilation of Caste'

Rajender Pondra

Ph.D in English (Linguistics & Phonetics), The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad.

Gajula Kumar

Department of English, Osmania University, Hyderabad.

ABSTRACT

Caste system in Indian Society is a class structure that is decided by birth. It divides people based on the profession and birth. Caste system in India is a system of social stratification which consists of two different concepts like Varna and Jati. There were four Varnas such as Brahmins, Kshtriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras during the Vedic Society. Dalits were always excluded from this Varna System and treated as 'Untouchables'. Many Indian leaders and thinkers wrote and fought against the caste system and the practice of untouchability. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar theorized the necessity of Annihilation of Caste and dedicated his life for the eradication of caste system in India. Indeed, He is the first thinker who disseminated the idea that Annihilation of the caste system is the only solution to the problems associated with it.

This paper tries to discuss the role of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar as a leader, human rights activist, thinker, writer and reformer for the eradication of the caste system in India. In the beginning it talks about Ambedkar's life as a struggle. Then it establishes Ambedkar as a human rights activist and a champion of women's rights. It further explores Ambedkar's vision for the 'casteless Indian society' through Annihilation of Caste.

KEYWORDS : Caste, Caste discrimination, Annihilation of Caste, Human Rights, Women's Rights, Social Justice, Liberty and Equality

Ambedkar's Life as a Struggle

Babasaheb Ambedkar was a leading social activist and reformer who gave his life for the upliftment of the Dalits. A leader for the oppressed, he relentlessly fought for the eradication of caste discrimination that had fragmented Indian society. He was a reformer who campaigned against the untouchability and for the liberation of dalits. Born in a socially and economically backward family, He was the victim of caste discrimination, humiliations, and inequality. He belongs to the Mahar Caste, which was treated as an untouchable community by the dominant caste people in Maharashtra. Thus Ambedkar was subject to discriminations and humiliations due to the caste system. However, fighting all odds, he earned a law degree and various doctorates from Columbia University and London School of Economics. He gained reputation as a scholar for his research in the field of Caste Studies, law, economics, and political science. He was India's first law minister and the chief architect of the Indian Constitution.

Ambedkar's Idea of Social Justice

"My Ideal: a society based on Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity" – Ambedkar

Social Justice is the view that everyone deserves equal social, economic and political rights and opportunities. Plato and Aristotle initiated the discussion on Justice in the western philosophy. Ambedkar believed in the concept of social justice as it has emphasized the equality of all human beings irrespective of their caste, gender, religion and race. Ambedkar's concept of social Justice stands for the liberty equality and social justice of all human beings. In his speech, "Annihilation of Caste" Ambedkar stated that his ideal society would be based on Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity.

Ambedkar as a champion of Women's Rights

"I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved" – Ambedkar in a meeting of the depressed classes on 18th July 1927

Ambedkar struggled for the women's liberation from the male dominated society. He argued that Manu Smriti (Laws of Manu) is a system which oppressed the Dalits and women for centuries. He opined that Manusmriti is anti-dalits and women as it degrades them. Ambedkar used to regularly contribute essays on the question of women's empowerment to the news papers like *Mooknayak* and *Bahiskrit Bharat*. In addition, Ambedkar also created awareness among the illiterate women to struggle against the social evils like child marriages and Devadasi system. He believed in the social and political movements run by women. He opined that the movements under the

leadership of women may change the society and improve the conditions of women and other oppressed people. Moreover, Ambedkar also fought for the women's education as he firmly believed that education is the most powerful weapon to change the lives of women. Therefore, he advised the men and women to educate, agitate and organize for the social change.

Ambedkar as a defender of Human Rights

Dalits and other lower caste people were not allowed to drink water from wells. They were not allowed to enter the temples in the colonial India. Ambedkar led several movements to establish the rights of dalits over water and other resources. Indeed, it was a struggle to protect the dignity of the dalits and assert their rights as humans. In 1927, Ambedkar led the march at Mahad, Maharashtra along with dalit activists and leaders to taste the water from the Public Lake as it was earlier prohibited. This marked the beginning of caste eradication movement. As the temple entry was banned for dalits, Ambedkar started a movement in 1930 at the Kalaram Temple, Nashik, Maharashtra. This movement claimed that the dalits also have every right to enter the temples and it was viewed as another milestone in the history of dalit movements for human rights & social justice. Ambedkar opined that only political power cannot be a solution for the problems of the depressed classes. But their salvation lies in their social elevation.

Annihilation of Caste

It is an undelivered speech written in 1936 by B. R. Ambedkar. The speech was prepared as the presidential address for the annual conference of a Hindu reformist group *Jat-Pat Todak Mandal*, on the ill effects of caste in Hindu society. Ambedkar sent the manuscript of his speech titled 'The Annihilation of Caste'. However, the organising committee felt that his critique of the Vedas and his desire to leave the Hindu fold, intolerable. Hence, the organization recommended Ambedkar to delete his criticism of Vedas, to which he replied that "he would not change a comma". The speech thus remained undelivered. Ambedkar subsequently published it in May 1936. This speech was viewed as the manifesto for the social emancipation.

In July 1936, Mahatma Gandhi wrote articles under the title «A Vindication Of Caste» in his weekly journal *Harijan*, in which he commented on Ambedkar's speech. In the second edition of his book, Ambedkar replied to Gandhi's comments. This edition was published in 1937 as *Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi*. He published a third edition in 1944; it included another essay, "Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development", which had been presented at a seminar in New York in 1916. It is one of well

researched essays on the caste system and Chaturvarna system in India.

In *The Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar, probably for the first time, raised many profound questions with respect to caste. First, he rejected the defense of caste on the basis of division of labour and argued that it was not merely a division of labour but a division of labourers. Ambedkar gave illustrations in this speech on how dalits were deprived of education and freedom of occupation and were subjected to stigmatized manual labour, all resulting in their virtual economic slavery, how they were segregated and deprived of basic rights such as drinking water even from public wells, and above all how they were made victims of social persecutions (Mungekar Bhalchandra, 2011).

Ambedkar (1936) argues that the worst feature of the caste system is 'anti-social spirit' in the following words,

"Caste does not result in economic efficiency. Caste cannot improve, and has not improved, the race. Caste has however done one thing. It has completely disorganized and demoralized the Hindus. The Hindus often complain of the isolation and exclusiveness of a gang or a clique and blame them for anti-social spirit. But they conveniently forget that this anti-social spirit is the worst feature of their own Caste System. One caste enjoys singing a hymn of hate against another caste as much as the Germans enjoyed singing their hymn of hate against the English during the last war [=World War I]. Unlike a club, the membership of a caste is not open to all and sundry. The law of Caste confines its membership to persons born in the caste. Castes are autonomous, and there is no authority anywhere to compel a caste to admit a new-comer to its social life. Hindu Society being a collection of castes, and each caste being a closed corporation, there is no place for a convert. Thus it is the caste which has prevented the Hindus from expanding and from absorbing other religious communities. So long as Caste remains, Hindu religion cannot be made a missionary religion"

Ambedkar (1936) observed that caste is a powerful weapon for preventing all reform. It also destroys public spirit, public opinion and public charity. He further stated: "The effect of caste on the ethics of the Hindus is simply deplorable. Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible. A Hindu's public is his caste. His responsibility is to his caste. His loyalty is restricted only to his caste. Virtue has become caste-ridden, and morality has become caste-bound. There is no sympathy to the deserving. There is no appreciation of the meritorious. There is no charity to the needy. There is charity but it begins with the caste and ends with the caste." Ambedkar ultimately suggested that inter-caste marriage is the only remedy to destroy caste.

Ambedkar (1936) expressed his desire to convert himself from Hinduism to Buddhism in the concluding remarks as he believed that it would liberate dalits from the oppression,

"I am sorry, I will not be with you. I have decided to change. This is not the place for giving reasons. But even when I am gone out of your fold, I will watch your movement with active sympathy, and you will have my assistance for what it may be worth. Yours is a national cause. Caste is no doubt primarily the breath of the Hindus. But the Hindus have fouled the air all over, and everybody is infected—Sikh, Muslim, and Christian. You, therefore, deserve the support of all those who are suffering from this infection—Sikh, Muslim, and Christian. Yours is more difficult than the other national cause, namely Swaraj. In the fight for Swaraj you fight with the whole nation on your side. In this, you have to fight against the whole nation—and that too, your own. But it is more important than Swaraj. There is no use having Swaraj, if you cannot defend it. More important than the question of defending Swaraj is the question of defending the Hindus under the Swaraj. In my opinion, it is only when Hindu Society becomes a casteless society that it can hope to have strength enough to defend itself. Without such internal strength, Swaraj for Hindus may turn out to be only a step towards slavery. Good-bye, and good wishes for your success".

On the 14th October, 1956, Babasaheb Ambedkar embraced Buddhism, initiating mass conversions of Dalits. He continued the crusade for social revolution until the end of his life on the 6th December 1956.

Conclusion

Thus, Ambedkar was critical of Gandhi, attacked caste system, converted to Buddhism, and became a true representative of the oppressed castes. Ambedkar's analysis of caste has been inspiring to many dalits and Non-dalit intellectuals. He developed a critique of Indian society based on the Enlightenment ideals of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. He was intellectual, liberal and more modern than many of the Indian thinkers and leaders. Ambedkar's passion for the eradication of caste system is still relevant as the 'caste system' is still a serious social problem in India. Ambedkar is India's one of the greatest original thinkers and leaders for the 'Social Change'. He is a scholar, outstanding social reformer and a Messiah for the downtrodden people. His emancipator ideals are still relevant to every dream of a just, modern, liberal, secular, humane, democratic Indian society and they are inspiring to the present day youth for the socio-political change in the country. His ideals and arguments are significant to achieve a casteless Indian society and a society which is based on Liberty, and Equality.

In these following words, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar expressed hope that the caste system can be eradicated with the education and continuous struggle for freedom, "My final words of advice to you are educate, agitate and organize; have faith in yourself. With justice on our side I do not see how we can loose our battle. The battle to me is a matter of joy. The battle is in the fullest sense spiritual. There is nothing material or social in it. For ours is a battle not for wealth or for power. It is battle for freedom. It is the battle of reclamation of human personality".

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