



SOCIAL JUSTICE AND EMPOWERMENT OF DALITS IN INDIA: AMBEDKAR THOUGHT

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KEYWORDS :

Background

Dr.Ambedkar was one of the most outstanding sons of India who has left an indelible mark on the history of mankind. He was considered to be one of the six best brains of the world. He is loved, adored and respected because he worked for social freedom and democracy in India against too many odds. India is passing through a testing time in view of increasing threats to national security, fraternity, unity and integration. Social tensions, caste conflicts and communalism are continuously on the increase. Ambedkar's observations in relation to social, economic, political and cultural issues and developments are becoming true. There is a vital need to preserve the thoughts of the noble son of India which are highly relevant in the present times. An attempt has been made hereby to give an account of the perspective of Dr.Ambedkar on social inclusion of Dalits in India.

Ambedkar's Social Struggles

Ambedkar submitted several memorandums to the British authorities demanding social justice and equality for the oppressed Indians. He argued that Home Ruled should ensure the social equality to the lower and depressed classes who belonged to the same Hindu religion, followed the same customs, lived with the same borders and shared the same aspirations for liberty and Home Rule. He observed that Home Ruled was as much the birthright of a Brahmin as that of a Mahar. The first duty, therefore, of the advanced classes was to educate, enlighten and elevate them. Unless and until that attitude was adopted, the day on which India would have Home Rule was distant. Ambedkar had firmly believed that social inequality would jeopardize political freedom and democracy. He was very much in favour of annihilating caste as the basis for establishing liberty, equality and fraternity in India.

Ambedkar started 'Mook Nayak' (Leader of the Dumb) on January 31, 1920 which served as the voice of the Depressed Classes. He brilliantly propounded the need for social equality. He wrote: "India was a home of inequality. Hindu society, he observed, was just like a tower which had several storeys without a ladder or an entrance. One was to die in the storey in which one was born. Hindu society, he continued, consisted of three parts: the Brahmins, the non-Brahmins and the untouchables. He pitied the souls of those persons who said that according to their philosophy there existed God in animals as well as in inanimate things and yet treated their co-religionists as untouchables. He lamented that not the spread of knowledge and literacy but accumulation and monopoly was the aim of the Brahmins. In his view the backwardness of the non-Brahmins was due to lack of education and power. In order to save the Depressed Classes from perpetual slavery, poverty and ignorance, herculean efforts must be made, he asserted, to awaken them from their disabilities.

Ambedkar had strongly argued that social equality, justice and freedom were the pre-requisites for swaraj. Ambedkar produced series of thought provoking writings criticizing

social injustice, untouchability and backwardness based on caste system in India. He organized a social revolution throughout the nation on the basis of the thoughts and works of Buddha, Basavanna and Jyotiphule. He asserted that it was not enough for India to be an independent country. She must rise as a good state guaranteeing equal status in matters of religion, society, economy and polity to all classes, offering everyman an opportunity to rise in the scale of life and create conditions favorable to the advancement of the people regardless of class and caste.

Ambedkar asserted that if the protection of the Britishers were withdrawn, those who did not condescend to look at the untouchables would trample upon them. He stated that the Swaraj wherein there were no fundamental rights guaranteed for the Depressed Classes, would not be a Swaraj to them. It would be a new slavery for them.

Ambedkar waged a relentless war against all oppressive characteristics and elements of Indian society through several organizations. He founded 'Bahiskrit Hitkarini Sabha' on July 20, 1924 with a view to – a) promote the spread of education among the Depressed Classes by opening hostels or by employing such other means as may seem necessary or desirable, b) promote the spread of culture among the Depressed Classes by opening libraries, social centres and classes or study classes, c) advance and improve the economic condition of the Depressed Classes by starting industrial and agricultural schools; and d) represent the grievances of the Depressed Classes. This organization worked for social revolution and cautioned the untouchables that the activities of Congress and Gandhi carried more gesture than active struggle for breaking the shackles that bound the Depressed Classes. He exhorted them to fight for self-elevation.

Ambedkar primarily concentrated his efforts on social movement and marched on a different direction. He put forth his efforts towards preparing the heads, hearts and hands of the Depressed Classes to secure human rights and equal opportunities. He led the marches for sharing the tank water and securing social dignity. He organized series of conferences throughout the country to bring about new consciousness and preparedness among the Depressed Classes. Ambedkar exposed the inhuman attitudes of those who raised violent protests against the insulting treatment meted out to the Indians in South Africa and to the Indian students in Britain and at the same time denied human rights to their countrymen and co-religionists in India. He made a fervent appeal to all leaders and publics at large who favoured the abolition of untouchability, to transform their sympathy into practicality and bring the reform into reality in their day to day life. He argued that untouchability was responsible for the destruction of untouchables, Hindus and the entire India. He emerged not only as a scholar but also as a spokesman of the dumb and downtrodden in India.

Ambedkar emphasized that the Depressed Classes would die for that religion which took care of them, but they would not care for the religion which did not care for them. He said that untouchability was such an abominable stain that it would not matter much even if some lives were sacrificed to wash it out. Any action that unified the people was good, where there was unity there was a good cause.

Ambedkar gave a new dimension to the religion and argued that the religion which treats crores of its adherents worse than dogs and criminals and inflicts upon them insufferable disabilities is no religion at all. Religion is not the appellation for such an unjust order. He cautioned: "Untouchability shuts all doors of opportunities for betterment in life to the untouchables. It is mischievously propagated by Hindu scriptures that by serving the upper three classes the Shudras attain salvation. Untouchability is another appellation for slavery. No race can be raised by destroying its self respect. If the Depressed Classes gained their self respect and freedom, they would contribute not only to their own progress and prosperity but by their industry, intellect and courage would contribute also to the strength and prosperity of the nation".

Ambedkar burnt the 'Manusmriti' on December 25, 1927 since it was a charter of rights for Caste Hindus which upheld inequality, injustice, discrimination and exploitation. He argued that the roots of 'Manusmriti' should be burnt first of all in the minds of the people. Eminent Ambedkarite Bhagavan Das writes: "Ambedkar firmly believed in social movement rather than political movement. His task was thousand times more difficult than that of Mahatma Gandhi who led the masses to freedom from the British rule which was barely 100 years old whilst Ambedkar led the social movement to liberate the oppressed who had been slaves for centuries. In the struggle for the freedom of the country Gandhi had the support of the millions of Indians, but in the struggle for liberation of the untouchables millions opposed him. Not even those for whom he struggled and bore patiently the humiliations and accusations hurled at him fully appreciated what he was doing, mainly because of the ignorance and lack of understanding".

Ambedkar wanted to secure national independence which was based on social and economic equity and justice. He wanted to create a new social and economic order in India which would ensure meaningful political democracy. He depicts the ideal society thus: "If you ask me, my ideal would be a society based on liberty, equality and fraternity....an ideal society should be mobile, should be full of channels for conveying a change taking place in one part to other parts. The path of social reform like the path to heaven at any rate in India, is strewn with many difficulties. Social reform in India has few friends and many critics".

Ambedkar actively participated in the three Round Table Conferences held in London in 1930s and declared that the untouchables in India preferred the replacement of the existing British Government by a Government of the people, for the people and by the people. He also prepared the Declaration of Fundamental Rights safeguard in the social, economic, religious and cultural rights of the Depressed Classes. He demanded a special recognition for the Depressed Classes in the future constitution of India. He called upon the untouchables to give up the idea of temple entry and concentrate all their intelligence and energies on capturing the political power which was the master key to their empowerment. He reluctantly signed the Poona Pact on September 24, 1931 which served as the death blow to the cause of Dalits since they were deprived of electing their true representatives to the legislature. He wrote: "Congress was a combination of the exploiters and the exploited. It might be necessary for the purpose of achieving political freedom, but it

was worse for the purposes of social reconstruction and economic equity".

The fiftieth birthday of Dr. Ambedkar was celebrated throughout Maharashtra and felicitations were showered on him for his historical services to the cause of the Depressed Classes. Almost all leading newspapers appreciated the scholarship, courage and conviction of Ambedkar. The Times of India, Bombay, observed: "Without political and economic power the Harijans will find it hard to attain social equality, and Dr. Ambedkar has done well in realizing this fact". The Bombay Chronicle appreciated that Ambedkar struggled day in and day out over the unending inhumanity to his community and it was no wonder therefore that his devotion to the Harijans was equaled, if not exceeded.

Ambedkar studied the life, mission and message of Buddha comprehensively and pointed out that the real history of India is nothing but the conflict of interest between Brahminism and Buddhism. He observed that there had been in ancient India a great struggle between Buddhism which had ushered revolution, and Brahminism which had launched counter-revolution. He observed: "Today we are in the grip of counter-revolutionaries, and unless we do something very quickly we may bring greater disaster to this country". Ambedkar led a historical conversion movement in October 1956 and embraced Buddhism because the principles of Buddhism were abiding and were based on equality. It was not merely a religious conversion but a revolutionary movement, the real purpose of which has not been understood by the people.

Social Inclusion of Dalits : Ambedkar's Perspective

Ambedkar produced volumes of writings which depict his multi faceted personality, thoughts and revolutionary contributions for the overall progress of the country in general and empowerment of weaker sections in particular. There is a vital need to preserve the thoughts of this great son of India as expressed by him in his writings and speeches. The social philosophy of Ambedkar can be understood by his monumental writings in various occasions.

Ambedkar in his work entitled 'Castes in India' stated that it is the unity of culture that binds the people of Indian Peninsula from one end to the other. Ambedkar observed: "It may not be out of place to emphasise at this movement that no civilized society of today presents more survivals of primitive times than does the Indian society. The Indians have lost the open-door character of the class system and have become self-enclosed units called castes. There have been several mistakes committed by the students of caste which have misled them in their investigations. It is almost impossible to sustain the existing caste system in India because it is against the law of nature and principle of equality". The super imposition of endogamy over exogamy is the main cause of formation of caste groups. The customs of 'Sati' and 'child marriage' are the outcomes of endogamy which enforced widow-hood for life and deprivation from gender justice and equality. The subdivision of a society is a natural phenomenon and these groups become castes through ex-communication and imitation.

Ambedkar in his work entitled 'Annihilation of Caste' stated that the reformers among the high-caste Hindus were enlightened intellectuals who confined their activities to abolish the enforced widow-hood, child-marriage etc, but they did not feel the necessity for agitating for the abolition of the castes nor did they have courage to agitate against it. He asserts that caste is not based on division of labour but it is a division of labourers. Ambedkar stated: "It was at one time recognized that without social efficiency no permanent progress in other fields of activity was possible, that owing mischief wrought by the evil customs, Hindu society was not in

a state of efficiency and that ceaseless efforts must be made to eradicate these evils. History bears out the proposition that political revolutions have always been preceded by social and religious revolutions. The emancipation of the mind and the soul is a necessary preliminary for the political expansion of the people. Caste does not result in economic efficiency. Caste cannot and has not improved the race. Caste has however done one thing. It has completely disorganized and demoralized the Hindus". Ambedkar called upon the Hindus to annihilate the caste which is a great hindrance to social solidarity and to set up a new social order based on the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity in consonance with the principles of democracy.

Ambedkar in his work entitled 'Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah' stated that man is a factor in the making of history and that environmental forces alone are not the makers of history. According to Ambedkar, Ranade was a great man by any standard. He wanted to vitalize the Hindu society to create social democracy. What appear to Ranade to be shames and wrongs of the Hindu society, were considered by the people to be most sacred injunctions of their religion. Ranade wanted to vitalize the conscience of Hindu society which became moribund as well as morbid. Ambedkar wrote: "Indeed it would be difficult to find in the history of India any man who could up to Ranade in the with of his learning, the breath of his wisdom and the length of his vision. Ranade is known more as a social reformer than as a historian, economist or educationist. His whole life is nothing but a relentless campaign for social reform. Ranade realized that the downfall was due to certain weaknesses in the Hindu social system and unless these weaknesses were removed the hope could not be realized. Social reform became therefore the one dominant purpose of his life. In fostering the cause of social reform Ranade showed great courage". Ambedkar concluded that the collapse of the Liberal Party headed by Ranade is a tragedy to the liberals in India. But it is really a disaster to the country. If the liberals have faith in, and love and respect for Ranade their supreme duty lies not merely in assembling together to sing his praises but in organizing themselves for spreading the Gospel of Ranade.

Ambedkar's evidence before the Southborough Committee dealt with judicious political representation to the untouchables. Ambedkar argued that communal representation with reserved seats for the most depressed community will not perpetuate social divisions but will act as a potent solvent for dissolving them by providing opportunities for contact, cooperation and re-socialization of fossilized attitudes. Ambedkar documented: "Except the Hindus the rest of the divisions are marked by such complete freedom of communication from within that we may expect their members to be perfectly like-minded with respect to one another. The castes are so exclusive and isolated that the consciousness of being a Hindu would be the chief guide of a Hindu's activity towards non-Hindu. But as against a Hindu of a different caste his caste-consciousness would be the chief guide of activity. From this, it is plain that as between two Hindus, caste-like-mindedness is more powerful than the like-mindedness due to their birth being Hindus. It will not do good to ignore these real divisions in devising a system of policy, if the policy is to take the form of popular Government. The untouchables are usually regarded as objects of pity but they are ignored in any political scheme on the score that they have no interest to protect. The importance and necessity of communal and adequate representation of untouchables is beyond question". Ambedkar's political thoughts were primarily based on the social ground realities of Indian society. He was the prominent advocate of social justice which is the foundation of national governance and development processes.

Ambedkar submitted a memorandum on the safeguards for the minorities in general and the Scheduled Castes in particular to the Constituent Assembly on behalf of the All

India Scheduled Caste Federation in the year 1946. The memorandum sets out in specific terms fundamental rights of citizens, safeguards of the rights of minorities and Scheduled Castes to representation in the legislatures, local bodies, executive and services. It also provides for special provisions for education and new settlement of the Scheduled Castes in separate villages. The document spelt out the specific rights and privileges of the Scheduled Castes but also prescribed certain remedies in the event of encroachment upon them in the independent India. The document contained preamble, fundamental rights of citizens, remedies against invasion of fundamental rights, provisions for the protection of minorities, safeguards for the Scheduled Castes and other aspects of national governance based on social justice and economic equity. Ambedkar provided series of meaningful ideas and guidelines with a view to make the Constitutions of India social justice oriented. He drew plenty of facts and figures from his own memorandum submitted to the Round Table Conference. Ambedkar wanted to establish a welfare state in India in the post-independence through meaningful constitutional provisions and safeguards.

Ambedkar in his work entitled 'Revolution and Counter Revolution in Ancient India' stated that much of the ancient history of India is no history at all. Not that ancient India has no history. It has plenty of it. But it has lost its character. It has been made mythology to amuse women and children. This seems to have been done deliberately by the Brahminical writers. Buddhism was a revolution. It was as great a revolution as the French Revolution. Though it began as a religious revolution, it became more than religious revolution. It became a social and political revolution. The first social reformer and the greatest of them all is Gautama Buddha. Any history of social reform must begin with him and no history of social reform in India will be complete which omits to take account of his great achievements.

Ambedkar made a comparative analysis of revolution launched by Buddha which was responsible for the establishment of a welfare state in India on the basis of equality, fraternity, liberty and collective welfare. The women and weaker sections of India were transformed from the state of slavery into the state of empowerment by Buddha and his followers in India. The counter revolution was launched by Pushyamitra, Manu and their followers which destroyed the egalitarian state and created series of social, economic, political and cultural disorders in India. The women and weaker sections were reduced to that of slaves of the system by the champions of Brahminism. Ambedkar drafted the Constitution of India with a fond hope of re-establishing a welfare state in the post-independence era.

Ambedkar in his work entitled 'Buddha or Karl Marx' made a comparative analysis of two great personalities who represented ancient and modern historical periods spanning about 2381 years. Ambedkar also made a historical analysis of the means adopted by Buddha and Marx. Buddha ensured the creation of an egalitarian society without a bloodshed while Marx established an egalitarian society through bloodshed. Buddha taught the principles of equality, fraternity, liberty and collective welfare and succeeded in heralding a new era of social justice, economic equity, political reformation and cultural revolution. Marx taught and adopted violent means which were diametrically opposed to Buddhism. Ambedkar strongly argued that violent means should not be adopted to create a just society. Attainment of equality at the cost of fraternity and freedom did not serve any good purpose according to Ambedkar. Buddha achieved the goal of Marx by adopting non-violent means in India. Ambedkar strongly emphasized the need and importance of creating a just society by following the principles of Buddha which have withstood all testing times in the history of mankind.

After embracing Buddhism on October 14, 1956 Ambedkar declared: "By discarding my ancient religion with stood for

inequality and oppression today I am reborn. I have no faith in the philosophy of incarnation; and it is wrong and mischievous to say that Buddha was an incarnation of Vishnu. I am no more devotee of any Hindu god or goddess. I will not perform Shraddha. I will strictly follow the eight fold path of Buddha. Buddhism is a true religion and I will lead a life guided by the three principles of knowledge, right path and compassion”.

Conclusion

Ambedkar provided a new dimension to social inclusion of Dalits in India. He strongly advocated that untouchability is not a religious system but an economic system which is worse than slavery. He had a distinctive approach to the oppression of women and weaker sections in India. Ambedkar's conception of emancipatory politics proceeded beyond a comprehensive delegitimation of slavery which is another name of untouchability. India can never be truly free until the last Indian segment of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are free. Ambedkar wanted Dalits, backwards, minorities and women to look back to their history and re-establish their supremacy by defeating the counter-revolutionary forces led by the champions of Brahminism. Ambedkar came to the right conclusion that the teachings of Buddha could elevate the status of India. Ambedkar embraced Buddhism as a symbol of revolt against the social exclusion of Dalits and called upon Dalits to become Buddhists and find a honorable place in Indian society and emerge as the ruling class. Fighting these evil forces with determination and strengthening the unity of democratic and secular forces is therefore, the best way in which we can uphold the social philosophy of Ambedkar and pay our tribute to the memory of Ambedkar who shines as the symbol of revolt against all oppressive features of the Hindu Society.

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