



Casteless Democratic India: Vision of B. R Ambedkar

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ABSTRACT

Indian is highly stratified, multi-layered and multi cultural. On the social plane, we have...a society based on principles of graded inequality which means elevation for some and degradation for others. On the economic plane, we have a society in which there are some who have immense wealth as against many who live in abject poverty. Despite being a highly stratified society characterized by caste system, the objective of the paper is threefold- to examine the caste system in India, to trace out the historical roots of untouchability and finally to discuss and analyse Ambedkar's perspective of Hindu social system and his notion of social justice. Paper argues that Caste, as a system has continued to reproduce itself through endogamy. Those who strive for the democratic transformation of Indian society, irrespective of political ideology, have to fight against the prevalent caste. Ambedkar has always been for establishment a society based on the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity.

Caste System and the Origin of Untouchability

In Indian society, caste is still the most powerful factor in determining the person's dignity. The caste system is the result of the Hindu belief in reincarnation and Karma. The four Castes eventually developed into a social mosaic of 3000 subcastes, with the untouchables at the bottom of the list. The practice of caste system and untouchability was the corner stone of the Hindu society. The period from c. 500 B.C (the time coinciding with the rise of Buddhism) to the 14th and 5th centuries A.D (the Gupta Age) is widely regarded by historians as the period of the formation of the Indian Caste System and its supporting ideology (Habib, 2000: 169). The first most intricate theoretical exposition of the Brahminical societal structuring is found in Manusmriti. By the early centuries of the Common Era, Manu had become the standard source of authority in the Hindu orthodox tradition. According to the Varna model, the Harijans or Untouchables are outside the caste system, and contacts with Harijans pollute members of other four varnas (Srinivas, 1972). There is a hierarchy other than that of the pure and the impure, namely the traditional hierarchy of the four Varnas. The set of the four Varnas divides into two: the last category, that of the Shudras, is opposed to the block of the first three, whose members are 'twice born' in the sense that they participate in initiation, second birth, and in religious life in general (Dumont, 2002: 162). Brahmins introduced on elaborate system to preserve their purity. In order to maintain purity, all relations with lower castes were prescribed. Those who opposed the Brahmin religion were branded as untouchables and thrown out of the society. The caste system cannot be said to have grown as a means of preventing the admixture of the races or as a means of maintaining purity of blood.

The term scheduled caste is an administrative coinage and terms such as Chandala¹, exterior caste Harijan, purity in order to maintain Dalit², etc have been in currency, each of which had a different origin. The breed of the Chandala is a degraded one and is ranked with that of dog and the pig. The concern here is that the Hindu doctrine of creation refers only to four varnas and if so, how does one court of Panchamas, those of the fifth? Gandhi adopted the use of the term "Harijan" in place of untouchable. He insisted that caste (Varna) was essential to Harijan. Ghurye divided untouchables into two: 'pure' and 'impure'. The untouchables become pure through abjuring 'beef and such other anathematic diet (Ibid 1979), this is precisely what M.S. Srinivas Christened as San-

skritisation³. However, Sanskritization scarcely functional for achieving higher ritual status for the untouchables (Oommen, 2008).

The principle of graded inequality has been carried into the economic field. "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need" is not the principle of the Hindu Social order. The principle of the Hindu Social order is: From each according to his need to each according to his nobility (The illustrations given above are merely drawn from imagination). They are facts of the history. Through Sanskritization movement, a section of untouchables who could improve their economic condition, either by abandoning or continuing their traditional occupations. A low caste was able, in a generation or two, to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism or teetotalism, and by Sanskritizing its rituals and pantheon (Srinivas 1952). They tried to justify their claims to a higher social status in caste hierarchy by inventing suitable mythologies.

Ambedkar's vision of Social Justice: Perspective and Prospect

Social justice as a form of justice means what is socially just; and what is socially just varies with time and space. John Rawls (1971) believed that his theory of justice is an improvement over utilitarian accounts of justice as maximum welfare. He developed the following principles of justice: (a) each person is to have an equal right to most extensive basic liberty compatible with similar liberty for others, (b) social and economic inequities are arbitrary unless they are reasonably expected to be the advantage of the representative man in each income class, (c) inequalities are to attach to positions and offices equally open to all. Similarly taking a leaf from Rawl's theory of social justice (Beteille 2005), argues that, "the fundamental issue in distributive justice is equality; a more equal or at least a less unequal distribution of the benefits and of social co-operation". The basic aim of social justice is to remove the imbalances in the social, political and economic life of the people to create a just society. In terms of culture-specificity, the term social justice has a different meaning in Indian society. It means dispensing justice to those whom it has been systematically denied in the past because of an established social structure. Division was created between touchable and untouchable. Untouchables were given only duties with no rights. The higher castes in Hindu society en-

joyed all rights and privileges. Ambedkar was of the opinion that Hindu society failed to unite unity and it was unfortunate that religion was a rock on which Hindu built their houses. His two well known works 'Who Were the Shudras?' (1947) and 'The Untouchables' (1948), has for the first time analyzed in detail the 'Shudras' and 'untouchables' which created a stir in.

Ambedkar's quest for social justice can be visualized in the philosophy, policy and ideals of the constitution of India. It is a fact that Ambedkar did not propound any specific definition or theory of Social Justice. His thought are eloquently portrayed in his writings and speeches published posthumously. On the basis of these, it can easily argue that Ambedkar has mentioned multiple principles for the establishment an open and just social order in general and Indian society in particular. Ambedkar was of the opinion that social justice can be dispensed in a free social order in which an individual is end in itself. Similarly, the term of associated life between members of society must be regarded by consideration founded on liberty, equality and fraternity. In a way these principles of social justice are similar to the principles of social justice as mentioned in Rawls's theory.

Ambedkar argues "Ideals would be a society based on liberty, equality and fraternity..." After India's independence for dispensing social justice in the wake of emerging democracy in a hierarchically arranged society, Ambedkar discussed the operationalization of principles of equality, liberty and fraternity, which were considered to be cardinal principles of any democracy. For social justice, he tries to find a creative combination of democracy and modernity. He looked at democracy as an initial condition or the sphere which could be used for converting opportunity into an asset. For him conversion could be achieved only through modernity. Ambedkar tends to treat democracy as an initial condition of social justice both as consciousness and also as a material possibility. He does not take the position that social backwardness are historical discrimination is the final conditions within a claim to social justice can be established without moral justification.⁴ For Ambedkar, moral justification needs to be internal to social justice implicating the most marginalized section of society. Moral justification is internal to the Bahujan or orthodox concept of social justice, as the most marginalized cannot afford to either rubbish or trivialize such institutions; claims meet just the partial conditions when understood from the point of views of subaltern universe of justice.⁵

Ambedkar began investing the origin of the caste system more than a decade before Govind Sadashiv Ghurye- the first Indian anthropologist to do so. Yet his contribution was overlooked for many years, Oliver Herrenschmidt emphasizes as a prelude to his own efforts to redress this imbalance. The core of Ambedkar political strategy remained constant: Brahmins and Capitalism were the main enemies. Dalits, as the super-oppressed and exploited, must maintain their autonomy. It was Ambedkar who felt for the untouchables to come forward and play a pioneering role in the eradication of caste destruction of the Brahminical system. The process of change was to involve a rejection of slavery by the slave, social struggles and political movements. The following father of Indian anthropology such as M.N Srinivas and Louis Dumont has ignored Ambedkar, even though he anticipated many of their arguments (Mendalsohn and Vicziany 1998).

According to Ambedkar, 'caste is religion and religion is anything but an institution. It may be institutionalized by it is not the same as the institution in which it is embedded. Religion is an influence or force suffused through the life of each individual molding his character determining his actions and reaction, his likes and dislikes. These likes and dislikes, action and reactions are not institution, which can be lopped off. They are forces and influences, which can be dealt with by

controlling them or counteraction them. If social forces are to be prevented from contaminating politics and perverting it to the aggrandizement of the few and the degradation of the many then it follows that it will contain mechanism, which will bottle the prejudices and nullity and injustice, which the social forces are likely to cause if they were let loose' (Vijayan 2006: 18).

Ambedkar's notion of social justice is based on equal rights and human dignity through legal framework. As the result of his thought, Indian constitutions grantees equal rights to all. He was first person to demand separate electorates and reservation system in favour of dalits in round table conference hence three round table conferences were failed. Ambedkar realized that affirmative action is only way to improvement of dalits communities which safeguards through legal institutions. Ambedkar did not encourage the aspiration of caste system within India and castes system generates inhuman practice among the communities. Ambedkar believed that economically dalits are very poor which they are lack access to political, social and economic power. Ambedkar did consider dalit representation into mainstream political arena which generates dalit movement in various Indian states for freedom and justice. He also believed that law is an important powerful weapon to fight against discrimination.

The constitutional commitment of the creation of a classless society be lifting equality and human dignity is sheltered by the rampant practice of untouchability and of bonded labour system. Ambedkar believed in the political process and was only anxious that the Depressed Classes share in it according to then numbers and needs.⁶ He believed that democracy offers every individual achieve social equality, economic and political justice guaranteed in the preamble of the constitution. Liberty, equality and fraternity should be the only alternative to abolition caste society (Rajasekhria & Jayaraj 1991: 370). He argued that 'liberty cannot be divorced from equality; equality cannot be divorced from fraternity. With equality, liberty would produce would kill individual initiative. Without fraternity, liberty and equality could not become a natural course of things. It would require a constable to enforce them. We must begin by acknowledging the fact that there is complete absence of two things in Indian society. One of these is equality' (Larbeer 2003: 64). Political democracy gives equal rights for everyone which assures legal provision to all. Ambedkar believed One Man One Value which means the basic need of each person are well satisfied with freedom and dignity.

Notes

(Endnotes)

- 1 The term Chandala was of Hindu textual origin, exterior caste had been introduced by the British officials, and the term Harijan was coined by Narsinh Mehta and propagated by M.K. Gandhi However the term dalit was coined by activists of Scheduled Caste background and has gained wide acceptance.
- 2 The term Dalit literally grounded, oppressed or broken) includes Scheduled castes, Scheduled tribes and other Backwards classes, However, in current political discourse, the term dalit is mainly confined to Scheduled castes.
- 3 Sanskritization can be defined as a process by which, a low caste or tribe takes over the customs, ritual, belief and style of life of a high and in particular a twice-born caste. For more details see: M.S Srinivas(1998:88).
- 4 Gopal Guru. 2008 . "Social Justice". In Nirija Gopal Jalal and P.B Mehta (ed.), Politics in India. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 372
- 5 Ibid., p. 372.
- 6 Eleanor Zelliot. 1998. From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movements. Delhi: Manohar Publications, p. 97.

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