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Political Science

CRITICAL UNDERSTANDING OF B.R. AMBEDKAR'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

KEY WORDS: Moral community, Caste system, Democracy, Liberalism, Marxism, Conservatism, Liberal Bourgeoisie, Social Democrat, Progressive Radical, State Socialism

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ABSTRACT

The political philosophy of Ambedkar may help in renegotiating the crisis of western political theory in particular and leading the struggles of the masses in general. One can see Ambedkar's association with the grand political streams such as liberal, radical or conservative through his writings. At same time he differentiates himself with these three dominant political traditions. Ambedkar's philosophy is essentially ethical and religious. For him, social precedes the political. Social morality is the central to his political philosophy. He is neither fierce individualist nor conservative communitarian. His conceptions of democracy internalises the principles of equality, liberty, and fraternity in its true spirit. Though there are many attempts but one may find difficulty in locating him in dominant political traditions. Often this may leads to misunderstanding of the essence of Ambedkar. Ambedkar's political thought demands new language to understand the complexity of his thought.

INTRODUCTION

Ambedkar has emerged as a major political philosopher with the rise of dalit movement in contemporary times. There are several attempts to understand Ambedkar and his philosophy. Confusion prevails among scholars due to the existence of diverse, and sometimes, contradictory theoretical assessment of Ambedkar. The social context of the scholars and their subjective positions play major role in the assessment of the thinker and very often the opinions of scholars evoke extreme reactions which either elevate or demean Ambedkar. Though he had a great influence on Indian politics from the nationalist movement onwards, till eighties, there has been not much academic debate on Ambedkar. The communities of knowledge and centres of power either ignored or deliberately marginalized him as a thinker and social scientist. Ambedkar is nowhere mentioned in the contemporary Indian philosophy and the philosophical discourses of India. This exclusion of Ambedkar has to be understood with the implicit politics of the writers on Indian philosophy. Very interestingly, the masses /communities of under privileged of Indian society bring him into the forefront. It is not exaggeration to say that there is no major village in the country without the statue of Ambedkar. He is the most celebrated symbol of the contemporary times. Due to the masses/Dalit communities symbolic association with Ambedkar, political parties and academics ranging from conservatives to radicals, are forced to look at Ambedkar. The celebration of Ambedkar has the undercurrent of failure of Indian democratic State to reach the majority of this nation and the assertion of these ignored communities. In other words, Ambedkar's philosophy is a search towards the theories of social reconstruction of Indian society.

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF AMBEDKAR

Ambedkar's philosophy is primarily ethical and religious. He thoroughly explored the Indian traditions and its philosophical systems in a unique way. He developed political concepts like democracy, justice, state and rights from his understanding of Indian society and the functioning of its institutions on the moral grounds. He is very critical of the institution of caste, which influences all the spheres of individual's life and the Indian society as a whole. He further discusses how individual is related to society and how individual's freedom is limited by other social forces. He is critical of authoritarian Hindu social order and argued in favour of democratic society. He probed into the moral and social foundations of India and gave new meaning to the lives of disadvantaged people. His was a rationale approach. Reason plays a role in his writings and speeches. The methodology he used is very scientific rather speculative. He was influenced by the assumptions of modernity. He is well informed in many areas of Indian history, polity, culture, anthropology and philosophy. He quotes many thinkers in his

writings those who are influenced him.

The notion of community is central to his thinking. To say that individuals make up society is trivial; society is always composed of classes. It may be exaggeration to assert the theory of class conflict, but the existence of definite classes in society is a fact an individual in a society is always a member of a class. A caste is an enclosed class. Brahmins created caste and it is extended to other servile classes. Caste is endogamous unit and also a communal unit. His political theory was premised on moral community. It was as an ideal to be realised. He was very much critical about the Hindu social order. He argues that Hinduism is not qualified to be a community. Buddhism was projected as the ideal having the value of community grounding on morality. He considers that Buddhism attempted to found society on the basis of 'reason' and 'morality' His conception of community is very novel. He does not confirm to either Hindu ideal community or Marxist conception of community based on participation in production process. His conception of community is moral and ethical. It is not automatically available for participation in common affairs. His idea of community has to be created through hard and torturous process of moral transformation.

On Democracy

Ambedkar had a lengthy discussion on democratic form of government in his writings. His conception of democracy is different from the parliamentary democracy of Western Europe. Democracy came with the principles of liberalism. His conception of democracy makes different with parliamentary forms of in a significant way. Parliamentary democracy has all the marks of a popular government, a government of people, by the people and for the people. Ambedkar considered the problems and expressed discontent against the parliamentary democracy in the nations like Italy, Germany, Russia, Spain and some other European nations in proposing the parliamentary democracy in India. Ambedkar finds reasons for the failure of parliamentary democracy that 'parliamentary democracy gives no free hand to dictatorship and that is why it became a discredited institution in the countries like Italy, Spain and Germany which readily welcomed dictatorships'.¹ The nations that are opposing dictatorship and pledged to democracy to find their discontent with democracy. First, the parliamentary democracy began with equality of political rights in the form of equal suffrage. There are very few countries having parliamentary democracy that have not adopted adult suffrage. It has progressed by expanding the notion of equality of political rights to equality of social and economic opportunity. It has recognized that corporations, which are anti-social in purpose, cannot hold state at bay. With all this, 'the reason for discontent is due to the realization that it has failed to assure to the masses the right to liberty, property

or the pursuit of happiness. The causes for this failure may be found either in wrong ideology or wrong organization or in both.² He elaborated this point by pointing out the fault with both wrong ideologies and the bad organization in carrying the ideals of democracy. The idea of freedom of contract is one of the responsible factors for parliamentary democracy in terms of ideology. Parliamentary democracy took no notice of economic inequalities and didn't care to examine the result of freedom of contract on the parties to the contract, in spite of the fact that they were unequal in bargaining power. It didn't mind if the freedom of contract gave the strong opportunity to defraud the weak. The result is that parliamentary democracy in standing out as a protagonist of liberty has continuously added to economic wrongs of the poor, downtrodden and disinherited class.³ The second wrong ideology which has vitiated parliamentary democracy is the failure to realize that political democracy cannot succeed where there is no social and economic democracy'.⁴ He illustrated this point by comparing the collapse of parliamentary democracy in the countries of Italy, Germany and Russia with England and USA. He felt that there was a greater degree of economic and social democracy in the latter countries than existed in the former. 'Social and economic democracy are the tissues and fiber of a political democracy. The tougher the tissue and the fiber, the greater the strength of the body.' Democracy is another name for equality. Parliamentary democracy developed a passion for liberty. It never made even nodding acquaintance with equality. It failed to realize the significance of equality and didn't even strike a balance between liberty and equality, with the result the liberty swallowed equality and has made democracy a name and farce.⁵

Ambedkar accused the western writers that they are superficial and not provided the realistic view of democracy. They superficially touched the constitutional morality, adult suffrage and frequent elections as the be-all and end-all of democracy. Ambedkar proposed a written constitution for the effective democracy. The habits of constitutional morality may be essential for the maintenance of a constitutional form of government. He puts more emphasis on moral society and its custom than the written legal law in governing its people. He heavily invested on social morality for effective functioning of the democratic form of government. He reminds us very often, in devising the constitution one has to keep in mind that the principle aim of constitution must be to dislodge the governing class from its position and to prevent it from remaining as a governing class forever.⁶

Assessing the Political Thought of Ambedkar

About Ambedkar there are diverse opinions. Upper caste Nationalists has tried to brand him as a 'British agent'. For instance, Arun Shourie, the Hindu nationalist and the "intellectual hero" of the upper castes at the time of the anti-Mandal agitation and the Minister for Disinvestment in one of the BJP-led government, puts all his efforts to depict him as an antinational collaborator with British imperialism in his book *Worshipping false Gods, Ambedkar and the Facts* which have been Erased (1997). He charged that in the 1940s, Ambedkar never took part in any freedom movement. Instead, he was collaborating with the British. The motive of the Brahminical Hindu nationalists is quite clear. They want to prove that Ambedkar does not have any political credentials to be worshipped as a god of 'social justice'. This attitude has to be understood in the wake of a strong Dalit movement and their confrontation with Hindu nationalism and caste hegemony. Ambedkar is the symbol and source of philosophy for Dalits in pursuit of their struggles. In response to this, the upper caste Hindu nationalist thinker Arun Shourie, through his writings, consciously tried to neutralize the influence of Ambedkar in post-independent Indian politics in general and among Dalit masses in particular.⁷

Naxalite party like CPI (M-L) Peoples War tries to place him as a liberal Bourgeoisie/ democrat. Ranganayakamma,

identified as a Marxian writer, argues in her book that neither Ambedkarism nor Buddhism has the real potential to liberate Dalits. Only Marxism has the capacity to liberate them totally. Some would like to see him as a conservative, because of his leanings towards religion, Buddhism. However, there is an immediate emotional response to all the above remarks from the conscious Dalit scholars and masses. On the other side, Dalit parties like Bhahujan Samaj Party, or some Dalit scholars, argue that Ambedkar is the only radical thinker of the nation. For liberation of the Dalit masses, Ambedkar is the only solution. They took him to the level of a god. In this regard, Dalit scholar Anand Teltumbde comments, in making Ambedkar as a demigod, we are missing his essential message.' One may encounter similar kind of problems in theorizing Ambedkar's philosophy.⁸

K.Raghavedra Rao, well-known political scientist made an attempt to caricature social, political and religious philosophy in Sahitya Academy produced a monograph, *Babasaheb Ambedkar* (1993) He characterized his political thought broadly as liberal. In the liberal tradition, he tries to find out Ambedkar's version of liberalism to suit Indian context. He argues one may find in Ambedkar, a liberalism that has transformed into a version of neo-pluralism in the context of the new liberal theories of modernization and development. According to this, liberal state is conceptualized as a focal point for bargaining and relationship of exchange between associational groups of which a society is supposed to be made up. It is a shift from individualism towards group-based politics and collectivist goals. Raghavendra Rao identifies that Ambedkar seems to be more inclined towards a neo-pluralistic theory of state, and this is astonishing because he took this position as a liberal even before liberalism itself took a pluralistic turn, especially after the Second World War and under the impact of American capitalist ideology. Further he argues however for Ambedkar this operational notion of state structurally geared to humanistic ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. His ideal state was one, which all the three values converged under conditions of equilibrium. He is not a dogmatic in this venture.⁹

In Ambedkar's version, a liberal democratic state is the political system that can best tackle this issue.' Raghavendra Rao further explains how Ambedkar's liberal democratic state came close to Marxian and Weberian conceptions and how he differs from these conceptions. The liberal democratic state itself is not an isolated category and it requires an appropriate context of society, culture and religion to become a functioning reality. Ambedkar would argue that state is in fact a superstructure of a more fundamental structure- society. The economy, too, is a superstructure of this fundamental category. It means society is the base and primary, State and economy emerges out of it. He is in favour of normative society. Society rests itself on the foundations of normative order, which is religious order. To argue this way, of course, is to strike the liberal political theory itself at its roots' For Ambedkar, as for the Marxists, the State cannot operate independent of society in any significant extent. But while the Marxists foreground society strongly in the economy, Ambedkar evolved a theory of State with culture as its base. This may look like the Weberian notion but it is not. This is for the reason that Ambedkar attaches far greater importance to the economic structure of a society than a Weberian would. To that extent he is closer to Marx than to Weber. However, it has to be recognized that Ambedkar distances himself from both Marxian and Weberian positions in his political theory.¹⁰

Dr. Anand Teltumbde, a Dalit scholar sympathetic to both the struggles of Dalits and Naxalites, considers Ambedkar as a radical thinker. In his monograph 'Ambedkar' In and for the Post-Ambedkar Dalit Movement he points out that many students of the Dalit movement are influenced by the post-Ambedkar reflections in characterizing Ambedkar as a bourgeoisie liberal democrat The folklore is that 'Ambedkar'

needs to be replaced by the radical 'Ambedkar', who would inspire people to claim the whole world as theirs and not to beg for petty favours from robbers.' He made an effort to highlight the radical image of Ambedkar from the very implications of his thought. He considers locating Ambedkar's thought in liberal and Marxist traditions. One has to understand him in a social context he is operating rather fixing him in a particular position. He notes that Ambedkar in his first essay on caste, a Marxist orientation inspired by his supervisor Prof. Seligman is visible. In his later works, Ambedkar is more close to the liberal tradition than Marxism. However, consciously he never identified himself with liberalism. Being aware of its pitfalls, he needed to declare that he was not a liberal reformist, although while having reservations with the postulations of Marxism he could never hide his attraction towards him. The influence of liberalism on Ambedkar is more pronounced after he accepted the role of the chairman of drafting committee for the Indian constitution in collaboration with congress.

Teltumbe explores Ambedkar's thought in the light of failure of the liberal democratic State of India. He felt that liberal democracy might appear better than the decadent Hindu caste system but it is incapable of bringing any real change in favour of Dalits. It muffles the tension of the exploitative system and kills the revolutionary motivation of its victims. Further, he argues that Ambedkar was misunderstood as a liberal because of upholding the ideals of equality, liberty and fraternity. In fact, he denies that he had adopted them from the French revolution. He said he had derived them from the teachings of Buddha. These principles were the clarion call of the French revolution but later became the ideological props of the liberal bourgeoisie in Europe. Since Marx had ridiculed these principles as the fantasy of bourgeoisie society, many people tended to stereotype Ambedkar as a petty- bourgeois liberal democrat. According to Ambedkar, the source of these principles is different from the French revolution. So Marx's ridicules don't apply to him and it is substantially different from that associated with the liberal bourgeoisie. For Anand Teltumbde the basis for projecting Ambedkar as a radical is that his philosophy of the annihilation of caste is in the direction of the goal of liberty, equality and fraternity. Ambedkar clearly understood that caste stood on multiple props in Indian society. Annihilation of caste thus needed destruction of all of them. He rightly diagnosed that caste system is basically sustained by the peculiar economic constitution of the Indian village of which the land relations was the main feature. This kind of understanding of Indian society is unique to him and no others had identified this in the politics of his times. The Reformists, the Congress, Territorial nationalists, Communists and the Muslim league who were active in the politics of his time had not bothered to think in this direction.¹¹

Further, Ambedkar realized the necessity of political power for the attack on caste system. Even to bring about residual change in the belief system either through the cultural or religious route, he stressed the necessity of political power. At the same time, in the given time, he was not prepared to confront the State. As an alternative he proposed, feudal relations in the village could be destroyed only if the private ownership of the land is abolished and co-operativisation of farming is introduced. He thought this structural change could be effected through the constitution. The action of Ambedkar embracing Buddhism is a complex act. This gives a chance for the Left-wingers to call him a conservative, since any identification with religion, in any form, is seen to be the opium of the masses by them. In a completely different move, the Hindu political parties may get theoretical advantage by Ambedkar's advocating of religion. They conveniently forget that he proposed Buddhism in place of Hinduism. In fact, this action can be used against the radical spirit of Ambedkar's philosophy by groups like the BJP/Shivasena to portray Ambedkar as a conservative and appropriate his philosophy

to their ends. They would also have the added advantage of keeping the Dalits away from other radical struggles.¹²

The Progressive Radical Thinker

Many thinkers and radical political parties made an attempt to project Ambedkar as a liberal thinker. Liberalism, as a political theory developed in the west has a theoretical basis and reflection of modern industrial capitalist society. It implies individual rights as natural and absolute. Ambedkar seems to reject the liberal notion of society as an aggregation of individuals related to each other as individuals in terms of the goal of promoting individual interest. He has given importance to justice than utility. According to him utility is only a secondary criterion for judging right or wrong. That is, primacy of justice over utility is axiomatic for him. By subordinating utility to justice in his philosophical analytical scheme, Ambedkar departs from the very first tenet of utilitarianism in particular and liberal philosophy in general.

Ambedkar's accepted many of the basic assumptions of Marxism. Its most important aspect is the identification of economic exploitation with private property. His understanding of Marxism was used in an attempt to formulate a historical theory of caste and social struggle in India. Ambedkar criticized Marxism on the basis of ethicality. Ambedkar considers that for both Buddha and Marx the end is common but the only difference is the means that they professed. The means adopted by communists are violence and dictatorship of the proletariat whereas for Buddha, it is love and compassion, conversion of man by changing his moral disposition to follow the path voluntarily. Ambedkar considers Buddha as first revolutionary since he rejected caste system and social inequality and for his idea of Sangha. He comments on the issue of religion, that communists have carried the hatred of Christianity to Buddhism without waiting to examine the difference between two. Ambedkar also believes that humanity does only want economic values, but also wants spiritual values to be retained. Ambedkar tries to see the similarities between Buddhism and Marxism and also differences. Ambedkar argues that in India there is not only division of labour but also division of laborers exists. He also felt that economic interpretation of history is not the only explanation of history. Buddhism for Ambedkar stands for reason. In fact, for both Buddha and Marx the ends remain same but the means differ. For Marx, the means are violent takeover of the State through dictatorship of proletariat. For Buddha, it is conversion of man by changing his moral disposition to follow the path voluntarily. Ambedkar put the question to Marxists, what will takes place of state when it whither away. He expressed the doubt that the anarchic situation may take place. Ambedkar proposed Dhamma in place of it. However, Ambedkar developed his own version of socialism. He termed it as state socialism, which emerges from his interpretation of democracy. Ambedkar very much emphasized that caste is not only the division of labour but also division of labourers in India.¹³

CONCLUSION

Though Ambedkar was nurtured in the liberal tradition, he makes a difference from it. On many issues, he differs from liberal thinkers like Nehru. While embracing Buddhist religion, he seems to be conservative, but it is clearly evidenced that he is not conservative by his attack of Gandhi and the Hindu social order. At certain points, he seems to be radical (Marxist). But, he throughout his life, he maintains his differences with Marxist thought, particularly in understanding Indian society. However, the primary concern for Ambedkar is liberation of Dalits, the people of the lower strata of Indian society. He approached any political tradition from this point only. This has implications in providing the principles of reconstruction of Indian society. Moreover, Ambedkar's political philosophy has a great potential in mediating both liberal and communitarian traditions of the west. He connects the individual and community based on

morality. He proposes the democratic, humanistic and rationalistic religion such as Buddhism is the source for morality and associate living. When Ambedkar criticises Hindu community for its oppressive nature, he does it with a standard of individual liberty and freedom. When he is talking about suffering of individual members of Dalit community he is projecting an ideal moral community based on equality, liberty and fraternity. So it is not correct to call Ambedkar as either a fierce individualist or as a strong communitarian.

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