

The Caste System in India: A Study of Ambedkar's Philosophies

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Abstract

Dr. Ambedkar is the establisher of a new society. He destroyed a society, which had been given important to inequality. He made the society to treat all men and women equally with respect. The lower class people of India enjoy a life of dignity and pride today because of him. Baba Sahib Ambedkar is the father of our constitution and not just a Dalit leader, but a national leader. The scholars argue that he is a leader to all worlds. The philosophies of Dr. Ambedkar are the hope and remedy for all the evil caused in the society. The Dalits have been facing pain and sufferings for a long period. The outcast people believe that the next era will be theirs and they wanted to discard all the evil forces, economic forces, political forces, religious forces, social cultural forces, and established Dalitism as the universal alternative. Dr. Ambedkar had clearly exposed the life style of Dalit to the world. He presented the Aryan invasion's impact on Dalit history. The declaration of Dr. Ambedkar era is the conscious and deliberate decision of the Dalits in India. It has the meaning that the Dalits too independently live in India. The paper evaluates that the Dr. Ambedkar as a multi-personal personality. It also examines his role as a social activist, humanist, Buddhist, and Dalit liberator. An understanding of the nature and scope of the caste system in India is needed for the comprehension of the social and political fabric of the country.

Keywords: Ambedkar, Caste system, era, Castes, hierarchy, liberator

Introduction

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was a jurist, scholar, Bahujan political leader, and a Buddhist revivalist, and the chief architect of the Indian constitution. Bimrao was born on April 14, 1891 at Mahar in Central Provinces. He belonged to the Hindu Mahar caste. He was the fourteenth child in his family. In 1907, he passed his matriculation examination and in the following year he entered Elphinstone College, which was affiliated to the University of Bombay, becoming the first from his untouchable community to do so. He had his early education in Satara. From his childhood itself he spent his life to fight against the system of untouchability. He is also credited for having sparked the Dalit Buddhist Movement. Ambedkar was honoured with the Bharath Ratna, for his highest degree of national service. He practiced law for a few years before he began publishing journals advocating political rights and social freedom for India's untouchables. Ambedkar considered untouchability as a corollary of the caste system. His first writing was titled as "Caste in India, Their Mechanism, Genesis and Devolepment". In this paper, Ambedkar raised two theses. One is that India is culturally homogeneous, and second one is that the basis of caste was the endogamy of the Brahmins, which was adopted in turn by the non-Brahmins. He wrote "Ethnically people are heterogeneous" in this he had expressed the unity of culture. It has not only a geographic unity, but it has over and above all a deeper and much more fundamental unity. The indubitable cultural unity that covers the land from end to end substantiates his views on the origin of caste. Dr. Ambedkar criticised theories which emphasised colour or occupation and stressed that the geneses of the caste within the Brahmin practice of endogamy, which created castes through initiation and excommunication. He pointed out that the caste

system was a legal system maintained at the at the point of the bayonet. Its survival was due to prevention of the masses from possessing arms and denying to them the right to education and the right to property.

According to Dr. Ambedkar the established order is based on an inexorable law of karma or destiny has no relation to the merits of the individual living under it. He refused to accept the concept of Chaturvarnya as an ideal form of society. The varna system never formed a society. The four varnas were animated by nothing but a spirit of animosity towards one another. Chaturvarnya divided the society into four classes of which the shudra were placed at the last and the education and the property were denied to them. At outset, the caste system totally divided the society into several categories. It was a system in which the outcast people have been paralysed, crippled and deadened.

It was the antithesis of socialism. In Dr. Ambedkar analysis, untouchability was not based on the principal of inequality. In this system, gradation of the caste formed an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt to a system which gave no scope for the growth of those sentiments of equality and fraternity so essential for a democratic form of government. The social system based on inequality stands on a different foot from a social system based on graded inequality.

In the system of graded inequality there are the highest (the Brahmins) and the higher (the Kshathriyas) and below (Sudhras) were created. The Vaishya presented as the higher class and the Sudhras are forced to be their slaves. Later, they were called as the untouchables. The people of the high class imposed more works on the low class people and have been paid low salary. The high class people never try live with the low class people at any condition. The higher class people always very conscious to get rid of the low class people but the Bhramins do not wish to combine with the high and the low class people. Dr. Ambedkar fought for the equality. Sometimes the existing caste system makes the jealous on each class and raises the commotions between them. In short each, the highest and the high class were interested in maintaining the social system consciously or unconsciously. Dr. Ambedkar exposed that the consequences of the untouchability to the world boldly.

He pointed out that “slavery was never obligatory.” But untouchability is obligatory. A person is permitted to have a slave in the name of caste system in India. The low class people have been compelled to clean the latrine of them. But they have no option because they needed the money to feed their children. So, they accepted the ugly works given to them. They are subjected to all the disabilities of an untouchable. According to Dr. Ambedkar “the law of slavery permitted emancipation”. It was not the fate of the low class people but it was well played by the highest and high class. Once a boy born in an untouchable family, he has to obey the high class people.

Babasaheb Dr B R Ambedkar is the greatest pioneer of Buddhist Revival in India. He had been hailed as a modern Bodhisattva. One of the duties of bodhisattva is to reinterpret the dharma, according to the requirements of his time keeping in view the growing spiritual and social consciousness of humanity. Dr. Ambedkar accomplished this task splendidly through his noble and sacred book, ‘The Buddha and His Dhamma’. His three Gurus are Phule, Kabir and Buddha. Buddha’s doctrines of ‘Annicca’ (transistoriness) and ‘Annata’ (egolessness) exercised a profound influence on Dr. Ambedkar , these two doctrines made him both scientific and humanitarian in outlook, Lord Buddha led him to question the infallibility of Vedas, the faith in the salvation of the soul, the efficacy of rites, ceremonies and sacrifices as means of obtaining salvation, the theory that god created man or that he came out of the body of the Brahma, and the doctrine of Karma which is the determination of man’s position in present life by deeds done by him in his past life, the impact of the teaching of Buddha, can be seen in Dr. Ambedkar’s writings.

According to Gouthama Buddha the reorganisation of mind as the centre of everything and that the mind is the fountain of everything , that is all the good evil that arises within and befalls us from without led Dr. Ambedkar to affirm that the cleansing of the mind is the essence of religion. So he suggested many solutions to the religious, social, economic and political problems. To him untouchability was not a by-product of blood or race inferiority. It was essentially a distorted expression of social psychology, a sort of social nausea of one group against another group.

Therefore, the solution in his socio-religious problems lay in removing social nausaeas from the mind of the Hindus and infusing in them a common national sentiment. At the same Dr. Ambedkar ceaselessly strove to raise the mental stature of the downtrodden masses by encouraging them to have faith and hope in their create potentialities. He put great emphasis on the individual as the centre of all doctrines and activities. Buddha had said that “man is himself responsible of his own fate, good or bad, and he is not a mere puppet of external causes which fix his destiny for him. A man overcome sorrow and achieves happiness by his own sustained efforts”.

Buddha followed the doctrine of egalitarian and humanism. At the time of the birth of Buddha his father Sudhodhana was elected to the chief position in the Sakya state which had a republican institution. These republican principles of Buddha’s constitutional set up influenced Dr. Ambedkar, thus seen throughout his book ‘The Buddha and His Dhamma’. While accepting Buddhism, Dr. Ambedkar most courageously reinterpreted the Dhamma of Buddha and created a revolution in a revolution, and the process incurred the displeasure of many orthodox Buddhist. But reinterpretation has been going on all religions at the hands of seers and scholars in successive ages. Dr. Ambedkar was perfectly justified in reinterpreting the Dhamma of the Buddha and restoring it to its pristine purity and truth. Dr. Ambedkar, being a confirmed rationalist and a forthright secularist, gave a fresh twist to Buddhism. He gave evidence of his indomitable courage and unalloyed conviction by his bold reinterpretation by writing the Buddha and His Dhamma which may be considered as his magnum opus.

The other important point in Dr. Ambedkar Renaissance had to do with his concern for the development of India as a whole. In arguing that the basic conflict was between ‘Buddhism and Brahmanism’, he was making an important intervention in debates on the question of Indian identity. Most Indian intellectuals of his time and even today have seen this as basically a ‘Hindu’ identity, in which all the various religions and sects originating in the Indian subcontinent are viewed as having a basic unity that is characterised by their flexible and comprehensive view of the human soul. This is then contrasted to the ‘western, religions which see a separation between man and God, and between man and nature, religions that are based on monotheistic, sectarian and individualistic world views.

Buddhism, according to this position, is basically similar to Hinduism in its major themes. Dr. Ambedkar was building on this tradition. While he used the term ‘Hinduism’ in most of his writings accepting the reality that by the 20th century most Indian accepted the definition of themselves as ‘Hindus’, still in defining the contradiction in Indian society he used the term ‘Brahmanism’ to emphasize the crucial role played by the concepts of Brahmanic superiority and caste hierarchy.

Brahmanism’s unique characteristics was to foster all those features, Buddhism opposed them. Brahmanism emphasized magic and ritual, while Buddhism emphasized magic and ritual, while Buddhism emphasized rationality and ethics. The conflict between Brahmanism and Buddhism was seen as of the outmost interest to Dalits in Particular, because it was in the process of defeating Buddhism that the that the caste system solidified, and certain specific groups were particularly degraded and classed as ‘untouchables’ thus Dr. Ambedkar argued that dalits were in fact originally

Buddhists who had been rendered untouchables and their being deprived of access to resources was part of the ongoing civilization conflict.

Dr. Ambedkar was, through the example of Hinduism and the caste system, painfully aware of the entanglement of religion and society; therefore he intended to reconstruct Buddhism not only as a religion for the untouchables but as a humanist and social religion, which combined scientific understandings with universal truth. His Buddhism protected a religion for modern civic society. He proclaimed that he was in search of a new religion suitable for dalits. Equality, righteousness, non-violence and compassion were the main tenets of that new religion, which proved to be ideally suited for shudras and untouchables. Buddhism was of course unalterably opposed to caste. Not only did he deny it, in many ways the Buddhist text shows a leading role for the ‘untouchables’ of the time, known as chandalas. The chandalas are always shown as enemies of Brahmins, for instance in one of the stories sariputta, the Buddha’s most esteemed follower, takes birth as a chandala, gives true spiritual teaching to a Brahmin student, forcing him “between his feet” for his inability to answer questions.

All in all, Buddhism played a leading role in contesting the field of defeating social order with Brahmanism, and within this gave an important role to untouchables who are often depicted as spiritual if not quit Buddhist followers. Dr. Ambedkar visited Buddhapuri, it was in the early 1940’s and Dr. Ambedkar was secretary for state in the viceroy’s council. This visit to Buddhapuri is hardly known amongst the Dalit community because there was a much more prominent even, which overshadowed this visit. This was the second meeting of the scheduled caste federation which took place in Kanpur on 29 January 1944. In his speech at Kanpur, Dr. Ambedkar raised the point that the emancipation of the untouchables was more important to him than the freedom of the country. He saw that the scheduled caste as the third group, on an even plane with Muslims and Hindus. Hinduism as the all pervasive, crippling and enslaving religion, which kept the scheduled caste in subjugation, must be discarded and rejected. Again and again, he made a plea to fight castism amongst the scheduled caste and be passionately put forwarded the argument that the scheduled caste movement needed unity, self reliance, and organizational strength and that women had to take an active part in it to make it a success.

In the 1950’s Dr. Ambedkar’s affinity to Buddhism increased. He went to Sri Lanka for attending a convention of Buddhist scholars and monks. While dedicating a new Buddhist Vihara near Puna, Dr. Ambedkar announced that he was writing a book on Buddhism and that as soon as it was finished, he planned to make a formal conversion to Buddhism. Dr. Ambedkar twice visited Burma in 1954. Second time he went there for attending the third conference of the world fellowship of Buddhists in Rangoon. In 1955, he founded the ‘Bharatiya Buddha Mahasbha’, or the Buddhist Society of India. He completed his manuscript and final work, ‘The Buddha and his Dhamma’ in 1956. It was published posthumously.

During the 1930s the autonomous anti-caste stance would come to crystallize more explicitly in opposition in opposition to the Hindu caste reforms. The social organisation within the autonomous anti-caste tradition was now linked to the congress party. The controversy between Gandhiji and Dr. Ambedkar were crucial in the formation of the autonomous anti-caste position. The idea that the ‘Depressed classes’ were to be separated from Hinduism and the Hindu community was represented by Dr. Ambedkar in the opposite camp, M K Gandhi argued in favour of the inclusion of the ‘Depressed Classes’ among the Hindus and caste reforms. Before 1935 the government used the concept of ‘Depressed Classes.’ In 1935 the government of India Act introduced the category ‘Scheduled Caste’. The non-Brahmin movement as well as the communist movement, by and large, were working within the congress party at this time, but the Dalit movement differed in this respect. Finally in 1930 Dr. Ambedkar founded Depressed Class Federation in 1930 this federation developed

into the 'Scheduled Caste Federation' from 1942 onwards. In 1932 a political break up took place between Dr. Ambedkar and Gandhi resulting in the so called Poona Pact. The British government held three Round Table Conference in London, with the purpose of finding out Indian opinion regarding reforms for the proposed new constitution of India which resulted in the 'Government of India Act 1935'. The second of these was held in 1931 and both Dr. Ambedkar and Gandhi were present. This meeting developed in to an outright confrontation between these two historical figures, both claiming to represent the 'Depressed Classes. 'in connection with this conference, the so called C communal Award was announced, according to which the 'Depressed Classes' were given electoral benefits in relation to the rest of society. The communal Award generously announced that the category of Depressed Classes should be given the benefit of two votes in election. Dr. Ambedkar found the ideals of the Varna system impossible to combine with equality. It is because of the effort of Dr. Ambedkar and others the article 17 of the Indian Constitution deals especially with untouchability and declares its practice, in any form, to be forbidden. But the state should not only passively refer from discriminating; it should also take action on behalf of the weaker section.

Five years later addition was made and according to the Untouchability Offenses Act of 1955, the enforcement of any disability arising out of 'untouchability' become an offence punished by law. In 1976, two decades later, this Act was made even more effective in the Protection of Civil Right Act. Anyhow Dr. B R Ambedkar, one of the illustrious sons of India did services for the uplift of scheduled caste by carrying out a life long struggle to safeguard effectively the rights of the dalits and led his people to life, dignity, meaning and self respect. His mission was to bring about a radical transformation in the living condition of millions of his community. He also wielded to guarantee the Dalits protection from the atrocities of the upper cast. Ambedkar's vital contribution is not only to his own community but also to the Indians as a whole.

Conclusion

Dr. Ambedkar, the leader of the untouchable and depressed classes, was a social scientist, reformer, thinker, writer, statesman and a man of constitutional authority. He is known as the Messiah of the social revolution and it was launched against all kinds of oppressive and discriminative practices prevailing in our social structure. He was strongly opposed the practice of untouchability. His contribution to the social, political and constitutional development of Independent India has been significant and substantial. He was the chief architect of propounding a theory of safeguards and protection for the backward classes and weaker section of the society and also for the course of social justice and security of his own kind, along with the idea of political equality and sought its due place in the constitutional law of India as a new sense of identity and respect. Dr. Ambedkar therefore is called as the 'Modern Man'. He was a valiant fighter for human rights and a social visionary. Throughout his life, he fought against inequality, injustice, and oppression. The depressed classes of India found in him a leader for their cause. Dr. Ambedkar was radical in his social thinking as well as his political ideas. He was strongly opposed the practice of untouchability and totally rejected the theory of 'Dialectical Materialism' of Marxism. Dr. Ambedkar strongly opposed the caste system, which existed in Hinduism. The effect of Caste on the ethics of Hindus is simply deplorable. Caste has killed public's spirit and it has destroyed the sense of public charity. His responsibility is not only to his caste but to the whole humanity.

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