

DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR AND THE DOWNTRODDEN

Dr. Mrs. ManjeetHundal

Head, Sociology Department, S.R.C.S.D. College, Pathankot

Abstract: *Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar popularly known as Babasaheb was an Indian jurist, economist, politician and social reformer who inspired the modern Buddhist movement and campaigned against social discrimination of dalits, women and labour. Dr.Ambedkar struggled throughout from 1920-1940 on the question of 'How to emancipate untouchables from the ritual system known as Hinduism and how to create a society based on the values of liberty, equality and fraternity'. This paper tries to give answer to these questions by explaining caste, life history of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and his struggle for equality.*

I. CASTE

The caste system in India is a system of social stratification which historically separates communities into thousands of endogamous hereditary groups called Jatis usually translated into English as castes. Caste is taken from Portuguese word Casta which means birth, so caste is a group, the membership of which is based on birth.

According to Sir Herbert Risley, "Caste is a collection of families, a group of families bearing a common name, claiming a common descent from mythical ancestor, human or divine, professing to follow the same hereditary call and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community". According to Blunt, "Caste is an endogamous group or collection of endogamous groups bearing a common name, membership of which is hereditary, imposing on its members certain restrictions in matter of social intercourse either following a common traditional occupation or claiming a common origin and generally regarded as forming a single homogenous community."

According to D.N Majumdar and Madan, "Caste is a closed group."

Thus, the caste system is one of the unique institutions of the Indian society which in its fully developed form is present in India. It is divided into four varnas Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. In this the Brahmanas occupied upper position and Shudras now known as Dalits were excluded from the varna system altogether, ostracised as untouchables. To know the position of people of different varnas, diverse periods need to be reviewed.

II. THE VEDIC PERIOD

In the Rig-Veda varna was based on colour theory. Arya was referred to as fair and dasa as dark. However, there is no reference to Brahmana or Kshatriya. People of the two varnas differed not only in their skin colour but also in their worship and speech. Thus the differences were both racial and cultural. Brahmanas, Rajanyas (Kshatriyas) and vaishyas constituted Arya Varna and non Aryans made up the Dasa varna. The Purush-Sukta, a part of the Rig-Veda states that the Brahmanas, Rajanyas, Vaishyas and Shudras sprang from the mouth, arms, thighs and feet of Purusa (God), later on these became castes. However, during this period occupations were not hereditary nor there was banon eating food cooked by shudras. There was no trace of untouchability.

III. THE LATER VEDIC CIVILIZATION

This period was based on the ideology of sacrifice. The Doctrines of karma, maya, transmigration, identity of the individual soul with the universal soul and mukti as main tenets spread during this period. Later, vedic civilization consisted of samhitas – atharva, yaju and sama, the brahmanas and sutras. The performers of yajnas came to be known as Brahmanas. They were highly respected, as they performed religious duties. Aryans had to fight with the original inhabitants and they formed another group known as the Kshatriyas who were required to protect the conquered territories. The remaining Aryans became a separate class and were named as Vaishyas. The non Aryans became the fourth class and were known as Shudras. Initially these classes were not rigid but gradually restrictions were imposed on change of duties. Power of the priestly caste (Brahmanas) increased, but the Kshatriyas challenged this from time to time. In the course of time these two castes, Brahmanas and Kshatriyas, enjoyed special privileges but Vaishyas and Shudras were denied the same. Occupational differentiation aroused during this period.

IV. THE SMRITI PERIOD

Dharma or a code of duties for harmonious functioning of various divisions in society, was accepted during this period. From time of the Imperial Guptas, castes and sub-castes were rigidly separated. Intercaste relations were defined in regard to dining, marriage, touch and ritual observances resulting in advent of outcastes and women degradation. Consequently, India became a society in which the functional view of caste system aroused referring to merits which society derived from the distribution of work and duties to various groups, initially as varnas and later on as castes and sub-castes. Thus the four varnas were separated by a set of laws based on two cardinal principles: division of labour and synthesis. A number of sub-castes and mixed castes emerged with the rise of new occupations.

V. THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

During the medieval period artisans, priests, servants and money lenders were the main groups. The nobles and officers were graded according to the military status. The caste panchayats had become strong for regulating behaviour of its members. In the Mughal rule, socio-cultural aspects of the caste system were not affected. The Brahmans looked after temples, directed religious ceremonies, worked as teachers, administered Hindu personal laws. The Kshatriyas were the rajas (kings) and zamindars (land lords) although they lost large part of their dominion in north. They were warriors who fought against the foreign invaders to protect their interests, position and prestige. The Vaishyas were quite prosperous as they were engaged in banking, commerce, transport and crafts. They generally served royal families and rich. The plight of the Shudras was same as before because they continued to suffer from social disabilities.

VI. CASTE IN THE BRITISH PERIOD

The British rule encouraged caste system by favouring some caste groups with higher status and by granting them titles and land. The system was basically inegalitarian and the British never discouraged caste based inequality, injustice and discrimination. On the contrary, British administrators and ethnographers defined caste in terms of its functionality to society and culture in India. They emphasised inter-caste and intra-caste harmony with the objective of keeping people divided into castes and sub-castes so that they did not unite against British colonial rule in India.

As a result of all this society was divided into different segments in a hierarchical order, Brahmanas on top of social ladder followed by Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras respectively. On the basis of caste system occupations were distributed and no body could change his ancestral occupation. As a result of this caste system gave rise to many social evils the main sufferers being Shudras who were obligated to serve the higher castes. Shudras had to perform unclean jobs catching and killing animals, living in holes, carrying the corpse and executing criminals. The Shudras were to live in remote, wild areas or near well known trees and burial grounds. They were not allowed to enter Hindu temples in some regions nor could walk on the road in front of temple. In the south Indian state of Travancore, untouchables had to carry a bell that announced their presence so that higher caste Hindus would not be defiled by their proximity. At night they were not to walk about in villages and towns. Their transactions were among themselves and their marriages with their equals. A man who fulfilled religious duty could not seek intercourse with them. They were supposed to eat food from broken dishes, black iron were their ornaments and dress be the garments of the dead. Thus, numerous restrictions were laid on the Shudras which were also called untouchables at that time.

VII. LIFE HISTORY OF DR. BHIMRAO RAMJI AMBEDKAR

Dr. Ambedkar was born in a poor low Mahar (dalit) caste in the town and military cantonment of Mhow in the Central Provinces now in Madhya Pradesh. He belonged to the Mahar caste whose members were treated as untouchables and subjected to socio-economic discrimination. Dr. Ambedkar's family had long been employed for army of the British East India Company and his father Ramji Sakpal served in the British Indian Army at the Mhow cantonment (Ahuja M.L. 2007). Ramji Sakpal used his position to get Dr. Ambedkar's admission in the government school as they faced resistance owing to their caste.

Dr. Ambedkar was able to attend the school but he and other untouchable children were segregated and given little attention or assistance by the teachers. They were not allowed to sit inside the class. Even if they needed to drink water, someone from a higher caste would have to pour that water from a height as they were not allowed to touch either the water or vessel that contained it. This task was usually performed for the young Dr. Ambedkar by the school peon and if the peon was not available then he had to go without water. This situation he later in his writings described as "No peon, No water." He was required to sit on a gunny sack which he had to later take home with him. Dr. Ambedkar passed his high school from Satara, as his father after his retirement in 1894 moved to Satara. His original surname Ambavadekar comes from his native village 'Ambavade' in Ratnagiri district. His Brahman teacher, Mahadev Ambedkar was impressed by his intelligence that he changed his surname from Ambavadekar to his own surname Ambedkar in the school record of Bhim Rao.

In 1897, Dr. Ambedkar was enrolled at Elphinstone High School, Bombay where he was the only untouchable child. In 1907, he passed his matriculation and in the following year he entered Elphinstone College that was affiliated to the University of Bombay becoming the first from his untouchable community to do so. In 1912, he obtained his degree in economics as well as political science from Bombay University and prepared to take up employment with Baroda State Government. In 1913, he moved to the United States as he was awarded Baroda state scholarship for postgraduate education at Columbia University in New York City. He passed his M.A. Examination in June 1915 majoring in economics with sociology, history, philosophy and anthropology as other subjects of study. He presented a thesis on Ancient Indian commerce. In 1916, he completed his second thesis National Dividend of India - A Historic and Analytical Study for another M.A. and finally received his Ph.D in Economics in 1927 for his third thesis, after he left for London. On May 9, 1927 he read his paper "Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development" before a seminar conducted by the anthropologist Alexander Golden Weiser.

VIII. EMPLOYMENT

Dr. Ambedkar was educated by the Princely state of Baroda, he was bound to serve it. He was appointed as military secretary to the Gaekwad¹ but had to quit within a short time. Thereafter, he tried to find ways to make a living for his growing family as he was married in 1906 only. He worked as a private tutor, an accountant and established investment consulting business, but it failed when his clients learned that he was an untouchable. (Keer Dhananjay 1971). In 1918, he became professor of political economy in the Sydenham College of Commerce and Economics at Mumbai. Even though he was successful with the students, other professors objected to his sharing the same drinking water jug that they all used. As a result of all this he started his struggle for untouchable equality.

IX. Dr. AMBEDKAR AND HIS THOUGHTS ON EQUALITY

Dr. Ambedkar received liberal education. Outside India he was respected by all for his intelligence but in India he was reminded in every aspect to be one of the out castes of Hindu society. He explains that his exterior is as clean as his interior. But he feels that in the eyes of Hindus this is not so. He made statement in Harijan magazine "The outcaste is a byproduct of the castesystem. There will be out castes as long as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of the castesystem. Nothing can help to save Hindus and ensure their survival in the coming struggle except the purging of the Hindu faith of this odious and vicious dogma."

According to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar no person is low or high but untouchability is result of this high and lowness. Dr. Ambedkar in his speeches gave illustrations of how shudras were deprived of education and freedom of occupation. They were subjected to stigmatised manual labour all resulting in their virtual economic slavery, how they were deprived of basic right such as drinking water even from public wells and above all how they were made victims of social persecutions.

Dr. Ambedkar after completing his studies and while working felt the necessity for the struggle of untouchable inequality. The first important challenge to the status quo in form of direct action came at the Mahad conference in March 1927. This conference ended with a march on the Chowdar water tank in 1927. Four years earlier the Mahad municipal authorities had opened the tank for use of untouchables but the high caste had Hindus refused to allow them to drink water. In his speech before drinking ceremony, Dr. Ambedkar criticized the British government for stopping recruitment of mahars into the British army under pressure from higher castes. Dr. Ambedkar urged his followers the importance of education and financial independence to break the hold of traditional village system of servitude. He also asserted for right of untouchables to enter the Hindu temple.

Dr. Ambedkar in one editorial warned high castes "We want equal rights in society we will achieve them as far as possible while remaining within the Hindu fold or if necessary by kicking away this worthless Hindu identity. And if it becomes necessary to give up Hinduism it would no longer, be necessary for us to bother about temples" (Gore 1993). This radical threat to "kick away" Hindu identity shocked the Hindu society and eventually led Ambedkar turn to Buddhism.

Dr. Ambedkar was trying to develop a movement of protest. In a speech on November 1927 on the Mahad Chowdar water tank, Dr. Ambedkar specifically advocated satyagraha and proclaimed that the march was a call for a fundamental social revolution. However, the most controversial demonstration of this rejection of caste inequality was shown by burning a copy of the ancient and sacred Hindu Law Book 'the Manusmriti' which symbolizes the values of orthodoxy.

¹ Sayajirao Gaekwad III (born Shrimant Gopalrao Gaekwad, 11 March 1863 – 6 February 1939) was the Maharaja of Baroda State from 1875 to 1939, and is notably remembered for reforming much of his state during his rule. He belonged to the royal Gaekwad dynasty of the Marathas which ruled most of present day Gujarat.

Dr. Ambedkar from his personal experiences felt that untouchability being severe in society cannot be eradicated easily, so he founded a Marathi journal Mooknayak (Leader of the Dumb) in 1920. In his editorials, he began to define his position as an untouchable in relation to other constituencies which described them to be a separate class from Brahmans and non Brahmin Hindus. After this he started practicing as barrister in the High court of Bombay but again experienced severe discrimination. Therefore, in 1924 he started Bahishkrit Hitkarni Sabha (association for the welfare of the depressed classes) with the objective to develop a consciousness of social struggle and to overcome inertia and indifference. It was at this time Dr. Ambedkar coined the slogan 'Educate, Organize, Agitate' which he repeated again at the All India Depressed Classes Conference in 1942. One of the most important statement of Dr. Ambedkar's view was Annihilation of Caste (1930). He said that the real method of breaking up the caste system was not to bring about inter caste marriages and intercaste dinners but to destroy the religious notions on which caste were founded. The religious notions were the traditional Hindu ideology of rank based on purity and untouchability which manifested itself in caste, ritualism and in the suppression of autonomous individuality.

Dr. Ambedkar called the replacement of Hindu ideology based on hierarchy and pollution with the fundamental principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. For him these were religious principles. Most reformist wanted to abolish untouchability but they did not want to abolish caste as Ghandhi was one of them. He declared "I was born a Hindu but I will not die a Hindu." He urged untouchables to change their religion, reject Hinduism and get converted to a religion that doesn't recognize caste or untouchability. Dr. Ambedkar rejected the term Harijan given by Gandhi to untouchables but preferred the term 'dalit' which means oppressed instead of untouchables.

In 1935 after an unsuccessful five year campaign to gain the right to enter Hindu temples, Dr. Ambedkar decided if you can't beat them, leave them. Dr Ambedkar's struggle from 1920-1940 made him think how to emancipate untouchables from the ritual system known as Hinduism and following from that how to create a society based on the values of liberty, equality and fraternity. Caste and the rules underlying caste which were justified in tradition by such law books as Manusmriti were the central, institutionalized expression of this problem. For most of his life this was conceived as social problem requiring a political solution. This does not mean that it has no moral dimension but on the contrary the moral issue was fundamental for Dr. Ambedkar. He consistently argued that the moral issue would receive no recognition at all from those who controlled power in India until the untouchables themselves had defined a separate political constituency. It was only by defining themselves as a distinct political constituency with a common set of political interests and objectives that the untouchables and the depressed classes could negotiate with the various parties from a basis of power. Dr. Ambedkar argued that untouchables, were as much a separate and distinct oppressed minority as Muslims. He believed that the emergence of politically conscious classes might act as an agent for fundamental change in the Indian society. In his view the oppressors of untouchables were mainly the high caste Brahmans who controlled Congress party and who put the Independence of India above genuine reform. Dr. Ambedkar saw the non Brahman high caste reformers (like M.K. Gandhi) to be the another group as the enemy of untouchables. Though Gandhi was not Brahman, his influence on Congress party and non-Brahman reformers was considerable. Social reformers believed that untouchability could be eradicated on the basis of high caste goodwill alone. But Dr. Ambedkar did not agree to this because he himself had experienced the effects of caste system. He believed that only through a programme of radical political democratization, involving a revolution in the sphere of values and subsequent abolition of caste could untouchability be removed. Finally, Gandhi (Mohan Dass Karam Chand Gandhi) called Father of Indian Nation and Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru (First Prime Minister of Independent India from Congress Party) invited Dr. Ambedkar to chair the Constitutional Committee, which despite his differences with them on their approach, he did outstanding brilliance in constituting the constitution by giving reservation to the untouchables in the system so that they can also be treated equally. Thus his pragmatism and idealism prompted him to work for a new social order based on justice and equality so that the future of Indian democracy would be strong and stable.

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