

Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar: Messiah of Dalit Empowerment

Mohammad Arif Mir
Research scholar University of Jammu

ABSTRACT: *The religion which discriminates between two people is partial. The religion which treats cores of its adherents worse than dogs and fix upon them insufferable disabilities is no religion at all. Religion and slavery are incompatible. There cannot be more degrading system of social organization then 'chaturvarna ashram'. It is the system which legitimized notions of purity and impurity, divides humanity mere on the accident of birth regardless of any talent or virtues. Life for the untouchables was worse than the slaves as per the laws of Manu. But there came a man , known as Baba Sahib Ambedkar, who gave his life to live the Untouchables(Dalits) up from the darkness of millions years old social brutality and injustice. He gave them dignity, self respect and the will to fight for their human rights. He was a unique thinker of the world who himself suffered much humiliation, poverty and social stigma, right from childhood, yet he rose to great educational and philosophical heights. He built civic and political institutions in India and criticized ideologies and institutions that enslaved people.*

KEY WORDS: *chaturvarna ashram, slavery, untouchablity, self respect and empowerment*

I. Introduction

Empowerment has emerged as an important aspect of the ongoing socio-politico transformation in India. Empowerment of hitherto marginalized groups –those deprived in socio, economic, political, administrative and cultural terms-also happens to be a major issue in the global development discourse. In the wake of globalization, the strategy of empowerment with development has been adopted to integrate the marginalized sections into the national mainstream. Nelly stromquist, defines empowerment as a process to change the distribution both in interpersonal relations and in institutions throughout the society., while Lucy Lazo describes it as 'a process of acquiring ,providing bestowing the resources and the means or enabling the access to a control over such means and resources'(UNESCO:1995). The World Bank (2002) defines empowerment as a process which stands for 'the expansion of assets and capabilities of marginalized sections to participate in, negotiate with, influence control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives'.

II. Dalit empowerment

Accordingly, Dalit empowerment may be defined as a process of gaining control by Dalits as a community over self, ideology, material and knowledge resources, which determine power relationship in a society. As a political process, Dalit empowerment challenges the prevailing power structure of subordination and involves three crucial elements- access to information, opportunity for participation and inclusion in political process and organizing capacity to influence and gain power. In outcome oriented paradigm, the process of empowerment involves four successive steps like, consciousness, Mobilization. Organization and Control. The consciousness refers to knowledge and awareness about group identity and interests. The distinction between a conscious group and a passive group is the same distinction what Kal Marx finds between a 'class in itself and a 'class for itself. The mobilization means generating a desire and willingness to come forward to attain an objective. The organization refers to pooling human and material resources within a structural framework for making collective and sustained efforts to achieve a common goal. The control means acquiring the power and capacity to be able to decide and determine those matters which affect one's life conditions.

III. Who are Dalits?

The first question arise as to who are Dalits? And why they are called so? The term 'Dalit' is a Marathi term which means 'ground' or 'broken to pieces'. The word 'Dalit' comes from Sanskrit (Ancient Indian language) word 'Dal' which means 'to crack 'or 'to split'. Though the use of the term Dalit in public discourse is of relatively recent origin, it is supposed to have been used first by Jotirao Phule(1827-1890), leading social reformer of Maharashtra , in his attempt to champion the cause of upliftment of the downtrodden sections of society.(Mandelsohn:1998). While Ambedkar also popularize the term Dalit, his philosophy has remained a key

source of inspiration for Dalit empowerment. Ambedkar was the first Dalit leader who demanded political empowerment of the Dalits in 1930s. Marathi literary figures and neo-Buddhists began to use the word in their writings and contributed to the literary initiatives in replacing Harijan (Gandhi's term for them, means children of God) and achchuta (Vedic term for them, means untouchable) with Dalit in the 1970s. This term was highly popularized by Dalit Panthers in 1970s in Maharashtra, to refer to the scheduled caste (constitutional term for them) population. However there are some who assign a broad meaning to the term to denote to any oppressed group of people. Yet the term has become synonymous with the schedule caste people. This section of Indian society is called Dalit because they are placed at the lowest layer of social structure and suffers from various forms of deprivation and social, economic, cultural and political marginalization. The worst form of their marginalization is the scourge of the untouchably.

IV. Ambedkar and his Mission

Ambedkar himself was born in a Mahar caste, which was numerically a dominant caste in Dalit community of Maharashtra. He himself experienced numerous disabilities and deprivation associated with a member of Dalit community. He managed to get the advanced education at Columbia University with the help of scholarship granted by Sayajirao Gaekwad, the Maharaja of Baroda. Later with his own hard work he managed to study at London school of Economics. His western exposure enabled him to get the deep knowledge of economics and law among other things. Thus his ideological worldview was deeply influenced by his own experience as a member of Dalit community, ongoing social reforms undertaken by his predecessors like Jyotiba Phule and others to ameliorate the social position of Dalits, ideas of American philosopher John Dewey, British practice of parliamentary democracy, ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity propounded by French revolution, egalitarian and liberation theology of Buddhism last, but not least his deep rooted repulsion against the oppressive nature of hierarchical social order and Hinduism which sustained it. On the basis of the Ambedkar's Dalit Mission and the eclectic nature of his ideational sources, the following features of his ideological framework, relevant to the process of Dalit empowerment, are identified:

- a) First, Ambedkar was convinced that the caste system and its base Hinduism are not only repressive in nature but they systemically deny the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, which are the three fundamental bases of modern democratic society. He was deeply motivated by the three ideals of French revolution. The absence of these three principles in the caste ridden hierarchical social structure of India, generate and sustain a fragmented society, which is dangerous to the national unity and integration.
- b) Under the Indian caste system, the marginalization and deprivation is so pervasive and complete that they do not have any future, whatsoever, under the present form of this system.
- c) The caste system is so deep rooted and well entrenched and sanctioned by Brahminical religion that any amount of reform will not end the plight of Dalits. Here he differed with Mr. Gandhi. The only viable solution lies in complete annihilation of caste system or to remove away from the fold of Hinduism. For Ambedkar, 'caste system is not merely a division of labour but also the division of labourers. It is hierarchy in which the division of power is graded one above the other. This division of labourer is neither based on natural aptitude nor choice of the individual concerned, but on mere accident of birth. It is therefore, harmful in as much as it involves the subordination of man's natural powers and inclinations to the exigencies of the social rules'. (Reddy:2008) Gandhi wanted removal of untouchability through reforms but never challenge 'Varna ashram' which sanctioned this superior-subordinate human division. Ambedkar was of the view that there was no future for untouchables in the Hindu religion, as they should change their if need be. In 1935, he publically proclaimed, "I was born a Hindu because I had no control over but I shall not die a Hindu"(George:2010). Finally, he embraced Buddhism at the end of his life.
- d) The parliamentary form of democracy is the best form of government, but democracy cannot succeed without realization of social and economic equality. That is why he was chief exponent of social democracy in India. Like a true democrat, he had deep faith in the viability of peaceful methods. It was because of his unflinching faith in democratic practice that he abhorred the revolutionary zeal of Marx and his communism. However, for the success of democracy, he gave priority to the socio-economic transformation over political liberation.
- e) The process of social change involves four elements- the internal change (slave's rejection of slavery), social struggle, political dialogue and political organizing. Without access to political power, the social change cannot reach to its logical conclusion. The inclusion of political elements in the process of social change is the most singular contribution of Ambedkar to the process of Dalit empowerment in India. In order to keep the process of social change in the right track, he was convinced that the leadership of such change should be in the hands of Dalits only.
- f) He also advocated self respect and education among Dalits for their internal transformation.

The philosophy of Ambedkar is the theoretical foundation of Dalit movement in India. The ore of his political thinking is contained in two of his statements; rights are protected not by law, but by social and moral conscience of the society and a democratic form of government presupposes the democratic form of society(Kumar:2010). Thus , Ambedkar offered an alternative vision of human relationship based on equality, justice and dignity of human beings. The aim of his mission was to arouse in men and women the passion for the right human relation’.

V. Man of field: a great organizer

The above points of his ideological framework have direct bearing on the process of Dalit empowerment in India. However, he was not merely an ideologue but he was a great organizer of social struggles and restless crusader of social consciousness with deep insight for the future. If we analyze his actions, efforts and innovative capabilities to guide the course of social transformation in the light of four steps of empowerment process- consciousness, Mobilization, organization and control, his immense contribution to the cause of Dalit empowerment would be evident. His threefold strategy i.e. Educate, Agitate and Organize shares much in common with the modern notion of empowerment.

VI. Awareness and Consciousness

For generating awareness and consciousness of dalit identity, he laid due emphasis on the education and self respect of Dalits. He was critical of the British government because it could not ensure the adequate opportunity for the education of Dalits. His interpretation of the origin of Shudras and untouchability goes a long way to generate the feeling of self respect among Dalits. The interpretation is in found in his two books- ‘who are Shudras?’(1947) and ;the untouchability’(1948). His advocacy to convert to Buddhism was primarily meant to vindicate the self respect of Dalits. The first reference made by Ambedkar to a conversion of the untouchable’s dates back to 1927. During the Mahad conference, he had indeed declared:” 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” (Ambedkar 1927) he has been converted in October 1956, a few weeks before his death on 6th of December 1956. Buddhism formed the best possible choice for Ambedkar because it was as per him, an egalitarian religion born in India, not the outside creation.

VII. Social Mobilization and Struggle

He started newspapers like the ‘Mooknayak’, ‘Bahiskrit Bharat’ and Janata’ to raise their awareness and propagate his views. He was exhorted Dalits to leave their traditional and demeaning occupation, move away from villages as ‘they were sink of localism, den of ignorance, narrow mindedness and communalism’. Similarly for the mobilization of Dalits, he organized many social struggles like Mahad Tank satyagrah in 1926 and temple entry movement in 1930. He also founded some social organizations like Bahiskrit Hikarini Sabha and the All India Depressed Classes Association in 1930 with the same objective. These efforts eventually resulted in social mobilization of Dalits and strengthened the agenda of social justice.

VIII. Access to Political Power

Ambedkar was convinced that unless the marginalized sections of Indian society secured the political power, it was not possible to completely wipe out all social, legal and cultural disabilities, from which they suffered. (Desai: 1859). Thus, for the political organization and political mainstreaming of Dalits, he pleaded for their representation in legislatures in the Round Table Conferences, 1930-32, convened by British government. Both Ambedkar and the British government supported Dalit representation in the legislatures on the basis of separate electorate, which meant that in the reserved constituencies only Dalits would be allowed to vote. Gandhi and Ambedkar developed serious differences on this point, which was resolved through what is known as ‘Poona Pact’, 1932 singed between the two. With this pact, Ambedkar entered an agreement with Mr. Gandhi to ensure their legislative representation within the system of joint electorates. However, Ambedkar was not satisfied by this compromise and latter criticized Gandhi for blackmailing with his fast unto death trick and for compromising with the cause of Dalits. (Omvedt: 2012) the same principle of joint electorate is now accepted under the constitution of India. Ambedkar has played a lead role in the drafting of the constitution of free India and due to his pleadings; many provisions including the reservation in services and legislatures have been incorporated in the constitution for the empowerment of Dalit community.

IX. Political organization of Dalits

Ambedkar made serious efforts for the political organization of Dalits. He founded the independent Labor Party in 1937 and replaced it with another party, the All India Scheduled Caste Federation founded in 1942. He also laid the foundation of another political party, Republican Party of India which was founded in 1957, after his death by his followers, which advanced the agenda of Dalit empowerment in the 1950s and 1960s. Even, the formation of Dalit Panther Party in 1970 and the Bahujan Samaj Party in 1984 owe their ideological genesis to Ambedkar. The BSP, founded by Kasi Ram and now led by Kumari Mayawati was able to gain political power in Uttar Pradesh, along with substantial presence in some other parts of the country. The roots of all these facets of the ongoing empowerment of Dalits in India are found in the ideas and practice of Ambedkar.

X. Recent success of Dalit Movement

The moot question is how the recent success of Dalit empowerment, specially the political ascendance of BSP in the North, India is in the tune with the segregative approach followed by Ambedkar. In the initial phase, the BSP too followed segregative strategy in order to sharpen Dalit identity and impart a sense of solidarity among the Dalits. This was within the ideological framework laid down and articulated by Ambedkar in 1930s and 1940s. Yogindra Yadav (2012) rightly remarks, "This strategy has of course the merit of generating a sense of solidarity and political energy and has therefore been the unspoken ideology of Dalit and Backward caste politics in post-independent India." However, the BSP, in order to gain political power, gradually moved from segregative strategy to aggregative approach by bringing other marginalized groups and minorities and even high castes within its fold. This shift has come to be known as 'social engineering' which was instrumental in the BSP gaining political power in UP in 2007. This shift marks the real difference in the ideological framework as articulated by Ambedkar and the actual process of Dalit empowerment in the contemporary Indian politics. This also gives a clue to the repeated electoral failures of Ambedkar and his political outfits in the post independent India. It has now become apparent that only a selective approach of both segregative and aggregative approaches may impart viability to the process of Dalit empowerment in the present context.

XI. Conclusion

Dr Ambedkar was not the first person to initiate the process of Dalit empowerment in India ,nor was he the last person to ensure its completion. However, his Dalit mission has two distinct characteristics, not shared by other champions of social justice in contemporary India. First, his sterling contribution in this field was to advance and steer the course of Dalit empowerment and to impart to it a distinct political character, which is the core of the very notion of empowerment. Without this political core, the idea of Dalit empowerment will not be without real substance and spirit. Second, unlike other Dalit social reformers before and after his times, he advanced his mission with a sound and viable ideological framework coupled with equally strong action framework. He was not only a great theoretician but also restless activist of Dalit cause. In this respect he stands apart and much ahead from others. His life and mission was a perfect and unique blend of theory and action. His ideas are leading light and sustain the ongoing process of Dalit empowerment even today. Without his ideological foundation , the edifice of the contemporary Dalit empowerment in India will go bankrupt and lose its identity, direction and spirit.

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