

B. R. Ambedkar's Perspective on Caste's System

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ABSTRACT

B.R. Ambedkar has received liberal education. He was a versatile personality, intellectual, revolutionary, philosopher, patriot, scholar, writer and constitution maker. He had talents far beyond the average educated Indian. Outside India he is received with respect and affection, but among Hindus in India he is reminded at every step that he is one of the outcast castes of Hindu society. In the social hierarchy, Hinduism places the Brahmin in the first place. The Kshatriya is given the second place. The Vaishya and the Shudra are given the third and fourth place. It is not limited to mere gradation but includes the principles of hierarchical inequality by prescribing a descending scale of contempt and an ascending scale of reverence. Considering the Indian social realities, caste has always been the most obvious and vivid violator of human rights. This paper focuses on Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar's views on caste system in the context of India and his efforts to eradicate the caste system. In the modern period, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar made a very significant contribution to the abolition of the caste system after Jothiba Phule. His viewpoint evolved not only from study but also from his experience. He expressed his views through the approach of human rights and work for human development. He fought bravely for freedom, equality and abolition of untouchability.

KEYWORDS: Caste, Varna, Dalit, Untouchability, Ambedkar, Hinduism, Brahmin, Equality, Society

1. INTRODUCTION

The castes are hierarchically arranged in such a way that they are interlinked with one another in such a way that the rights and privileges of the higher castes become the disabilities of the lower castes. The term caste comes from the Portuguese word *castas*, meaning 'pure'. This Portuguese word expresses the idea of ritual purity, one of the most central values of Indian society. However, in India, the term *varna* or "colour" refers to the fourfold division of Indian society. The term *varna* may have been used because each of the four castes was given a specific colour as its symbol. The castes were formally classified under four well-known categories (*varna*) by Brahmanical texts: viz. Brahmins (scholars, teachers, fire priests), Kshatriyas (kings, warriors, law enforcers, administrators), Vaishyas (agriculturists, cattle-keepers, traders, bankers), Shudras (artisans, craftsmen, service providers). Some people such as foreigners, nomads, forest-dwelling tribes and Chandalas (those who performed the last rites of the dead) were completely excluded and treated as

untouchables. Relations between these different castes are governed by elaborate rules. Each individual is very conscious of his position and duties in relation to others.

The population of India is a mixture of Aryans, Dravidians, Mongols and Scythians. All these people came to India from different directions and different cultures centuries ago, when they were in a tribal state. *Varna* was as infallible as the Vedas. A measure of freedom is necessary to maintain a free democratic social order. He speaks in the sense of the right to free movement, in the sense of the right to life and limb. He argues for the freedom of a person to choose his own occupation. The caste system is perhaps the longest-standing hierarchical system in the world today, its roots can be traced back to the period of Manusmriti, a sacred document of the Hindus, which dates back to the period between 200 BC and 100 BC. Within the Dalit community, there are divisions into several sub-

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castes. Dalits are divided into leather workers, street sweepers, cobblers, agricultural labourers and manual scavengers.

2. B R Ambedkar's Views about Caste System in India

B. R. Ambedkar was born in one of the major centres of colonial oppression in the post-industrial era of the world. He was born into an untouchable community, the bane and curse of a fragmented society. He has become an inspiring symbol of the hopes and aspirations of the Dalits, the oppressed, the deprived and the underprivileged of India. The caste system of hierarchical inequality is still prevalent in Indian society. No person of Indian origin, born on Indian soil, can escape the influence of caste. The caste system is an integral part of Hinduism and Hindu society. The caste system creates discrimination and violation of human rights among people on a large scale. B.R. Ambedkar condemned Hinduism and the Hindu social system because of its inequitable practices. The rejection of Hinduism was essentially based on rational-humanistic grounds. The Hindu social system which gave rise to casteism is inhuman in nature. The Manusmriti is a symbol of darkness, ignorance and inhumanity for millions of people and perpetuates the slavery of untouchability and casteism. He insisted that the Hindu varna dharma has ruined the untouchables. It will ruin the Hindus themselves and ultimately India. Religious conversion is the only remedy to eradicate the evils of untouchability and casteism. He believed that religion is indispensable to man and society, but its role can be judged on the touchstone of 'justice' and 'utility'. The castes forming the chain were classified hierarchically, each caste being inferior to the castes above it and superior to the castes below it. The status of a person born in a particular caste was determined by the rank of that caste in the hierarchy. Once born in that caste, his status was predetermined and unchangeable. Thus birth fixed his status, which could not be changed by any skill he showed or wealth he acquired.² Regarding the origin of caste, B.R. Ambedkar said that, "A study of the origin of caste will surely answer the question as to which is the class which erected this "enclosure" around itself? The customs in question were prevalent in Hindu society. These customs, in spite of their rigidity, are found only in one caste, namely the Brahmins, who occupy the highest position in the social hierarchy of Hindu society; and as their prevalence in the non-Brahmin castes is derived from their observance, they are neither strict nor absolute. If the prevalence of these customs in the non-Brahmin castes is derivative, no argument is needed

to prove which class is the originator of the institution of caste. The rigid observance of these customs and the boasted social superiority in all ancient civilizations by the priestly class is sufficient to prove that they were the originators of this "unnatural institution" established and maintained through these unnatural means."³ According to B.R. Ambedkar, untouchability originated around 400 A.D. It is born out of the struggle for supremacy between Buddhism and Brahmanism, which is completely influenced by the history of India. Beef eating is the root of untouchability and the birth date of untouchability should be linked to the ban on cow slaughter and beef eating.⁴ The caste system of Hindu society creates a feeling of superiority and inferiority in the relationship between man and man. The problem of the depressed classes is basically a social problem more than a political one. Self-respect and self-reliance is the motto of Ambedkar's concept of class struggle. B.R. Ambedkar said that beef eating is the root of untouchability and the birth date of untouchability should be linked to the ban on cow slaughter and beef eating.⁴ The caste system of Hindu society creates a feeling of superiority and inferiority in the relationship between man and man. The problem of the depressed classes is basically a social problem more than a political one. Self-respect and self-reliance is the motto of Ambedkar's concept of class struggle. Ambedkar was born in the Mahar caste in the Indian state of Maharashtra. Ambedkar's main fight was against the caste system. Caste had made Hindu society rigid. Due to the caste system, Hindu society is unable to accommodate outsiders. This deficiency creates permanent problems for integration. Even internally, Hindu society does not stand the test of a homogeneous society. It is just a group of different castes. Caste is an obstacle in the development of national sentiment. Most importantly, the caste system does injustice to the lower castes. It does not allow the lower castes to progress. The lower castes get nothing but contempt. As a result, the moral degradation and demoralization of the lower castes occurs. The untouchables, in particular, are the constant victims of injustice. They are denied education, good livelihood and human dignity. The caste system has completely dehumanized them. Indian society is a caste-based society. The caste and sub-caste system of Hindu society is anti-democratic and anti-human. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar has described matters related to brotherhood in his essay "Philosophy of Hinduism". According to him, "Me and my neighbors we are all brothers, are we even fifteenth cousins, and if I am their caretaker, why should I treat them well."

According to Ambedkar, caste has destroyed the concept of morality and virtue. In his words: "The effect of caste on the morality of Hindus is most deplorable. Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the spirit of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible. The public class of a Hindu is his caste. His responsibility is to his caste. His loyalty is confined to his caste only. Virtue has become caste-bound and morality has become caste-bound."⁶ B.R. Ambedkar and Gandhi had different views about the lower caste people in India. Both men recognised the power of abandoning the term "untouchable". Gandhi proposed Harijan (people of God) as an alternative. B.R. Ambedkar rejected Harijan as patronising and preferred the term Dalit (oppressed). Gandhi wanted to improve the lives of the untouchables by appealing to caste Hindus to abandon untouchability. B.R. Ambedkar recognised that it is easier to change laws than to change people's hearts and minds. He preferred to lead Dalits in campaigns designed to improve access to education and secure basic civil and religious rights, including the right to use the public water system and to enter temples. B. R. Ambedkar said, '... Hindu society is a myth. The name Hindu itself is a foreign name. It was given to the natives by the Muslims for the purpose of distinguishing themselves from them. It does not appear in any Sanskrit text before the invasion of the Muslims. ... Hindu society does not exist at all. It is only a collection of castes. ... Castes do not even form associations. One caste does not feel that it is connected with other castes, except when there is a Hindu-Muslim riot.'⁷ B. R. Ambedkar was one of the greatest architects of modern India. He was the saviour of the Dalits, the chief architect of the Constitution of India and the greatest pioneer of the Buddhist revival in India. It is a pity that even today there are defenders of caste. It is defended on the ground that caste system is another name for division of labour and division of labour is an essential feature of every civilised society. Then it is argued that there is nothing wrong with the caste system. But caste system is not only division of labour. It is also division of labour. Civilised society undoubtedly needs division of labour. But in no civilised society there is this unnatural division of labour along with division of labour. Caste system is only a division of labourers which is quite different from division of labour – it is a hierarchy in which division of labourers is classified one above the other. In no other country there is this classification of labourers along with division of labour. There is also a point of criticism against this view of caste system.

3. B R Ambedkar's Role to Eradicate Caste System in India

B. R. Ambedkar tried all kinds of strategies in his life to eradicate the caste system and to liberate Dalits in particular from this oppressive social system. Jyotiba Phule was one of the leading social reformers of nineteenth century India. He led the movement against the caste-restrictions prevalent in India. B.R. Ambedkar adopted the temple entry movement to organize the untouchables, hoping to get them a place in Hinduism, but all his efforts were suppressed by the Hindu upper caste people under heavy pressure. He also realized the importance of education for individual advancement and social change. According to Ambedkar, the purpose of education is to make people moral and social. Before the Simon Commission, in 1928, B.R. Ambedkar presented a memorandum on behalf of his association, the Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha. He argued in favor of universal suffrage and quota of seats for untouchables instead of separate electorates. In his speech before the Simon Commission delegation at Poona, he made it clear that if the Dalits were not being given universal suffrage, he would campaign for separate electorates. B.R. Ambedkar devoted his entire life to the abolition of caste by leading a movement against the evils of the caste system. Being a Dalit himself, he tried his best to change the hierarchical structures of Indian society and restore equal rights/justice to the marginalized. He chose peaceful and constitutional methods to solve social problems. He played a leading role in the framing of the Constitution of independent India. B.R. Ambedkar was a remarkable liberal warrior who realized the ideological hollowness of the Dalit movement and provided it with the necessary ideology. He created awareness among the downtrodden classes to lead a beautiful life. He conducted a satyagraha at Chandan pond for the upliftment of the underprivileged. As a result, he succeeded in getting the right to fetch water from the pond. This was his great victory. He struggled hard to bring the untouchables and lower castes into our society. Through his writings, speeches, mass contacts and meetings with the British bureaucracy he championed the cause of the untouchables to improve their socio-economic lives. He repeatedly posed serious challenges to the guardians of Hindu society and also won the sympathy of the enlightened sections of society. In fact it is to the credit of B.R. Ambedkar that he was able to develop the concept of reservation or affirmative action to provide equal participation to discriminated groups. In Osmania University, Hyderabad, Dalits had taken Ravana as their symbol, standing against the tyranny

of Shri Ram, an 'upper caste' symbol, without knowing that Ravana was originally a Brahmin, until he became an Asura by his actions. Now, the same Dalit students are going to celebrate beef festival in the university. This shows how much Dalits have been made antagonistic towards Hindus and hence apart from systemic changes (socialist economy, economic planning and active role and participation of the state in economic and social governance), action for caste abolition must begin with inter-caste dining. This too is an inadequate remedy. There are many castes which permit inter-caste dining. But it is a common experience that inter-caste dining has not succeeded in killing the caste feeling and caste consciousness. The real remedy is only inter-caste marriage. Only mixing of blood can create a sense of kinship and unless this sense of kinship becomes paramount, the separatist feeling created by caste will not end. He was a symbol of the relentless struggle of the Dalit masses for human rights, dignity and freedom. He argued that the caste system is the root of the problem of untouchability. B.R. Ambedkar successfully gave a new turn to the history of India. But till date the abolition of caste remains a dream. The evils of the caste system are still actively prevalent and affecting the lives of the people.

4. Conclusion

Since independence India has officially implemented affirmative action programmes for the benefit of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. In 1997, fifty years after independence, India elected its first Dalit president – an event that was unimaginable in Ambedkar's lifetime. Ambedkar's concept of the politics of liberation went beyond the comprehensive abolition of slavery, another name for untouchability. India cannot be truly independent until the last Indian section of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes is free. B.R. Ambedkar wanted the Dalits, backwards, minorities and women to look at their history and re-establish their supremacy by

defeating the counter-revolutionary forces led by the champions of Brahmanism. One of B.R. Ambedkar's main objectives was to unite first the Dalits and then the Bahujan Samaj and secondly to provide them with a separate identity that could provide them an alternative path out of Sanskritization.

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