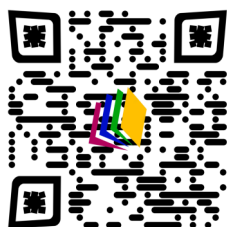




e-ISSN: 2582-502X

Asiatic Society for Social Science
Research. 2(1): June 2020, 22-31.

Research Article



www.asssr.in
(Peer Reviewed)

***Corresponding Author**

Dr. Charu Arya

Assistant Professor, Department of
English, Maharaja Agrasen Col-
lege, University of Delhi

Email: aryacharu@hotmail.com

Received on 11.06.2020

Modified on 15.06.2020

Accepted on 26.06.2020

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Studying Ambedkar's Ideologies - Movement against Caste Practices in Hinduism leading to Conversion

Dr. Charu Arya* and Mr. Naveen Kr. Gautam**

* Assistant Professor, Department of English, Maharaja Agrasen College, University of Delhi.

** Academic Counsellor, IGNOU, MAC, Delhi.

ABSTRACT:

Understanding Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar as a movement, will not be wrong. His continuous struggle for reforming social system began with his own understanding of Hindu caste system. When he began his movement against this biased evil system, he first of all educated himself by understanding the roots of caste system and strongly claimed that Shudras were not there in the beginning of this caste system but were constructed as a new caste for performing menial tasks and serving other castes. He argued about the construct of Hinduism on false prejudices. He strongly argued to re construct Hinduism by using facts instead of false myths and mysticism. His argument was constructed not around bringing other castes down to the level of Untouchables rather to uplift Untouchables by educating them and giving rights to them, social and political. He was strongly fighting for reserving their representation in the ruling party and merging them in other castes.

Present paper describes how Ambedkar constructed this social upliftment of Untouchables as a movement by arguing that Hinduism as a religion has denied human treatment to Untouchables, hence, caste system should be annihilated. Their oppression and practice of untouchability cannot be removed until all castes were allowed to engage in inter- caste activities like, eating and marriage and become caste less. The paper also argues how denial and acceptance of his ideologies by caste Hindus and years of struggle against untouchability, led him to Buddhism and he found peace in conversion. His firm ideologies did not allow him to participate in the social construct, which despite of his arguments, denied to treat Untouchables as touchable and human.

KEY WORDS: Hinduism, Caste, Oppression, Myths, Movement, Buddhism

Introduction

Constitution maker, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, an intellectual, played a significant role in challenging orthodox system and religious prejudices. When he began his progressive and radical movement of uplifting oppressed, he strongly enunciated and documented against the oppression of Depressed Castes in Hindu caste system. His struggle in the beginning years of his childhood increased importance of education in his life. A lawyer by profession, he earned high degrees with the help of scholarship given by Maharaja of Gaikwad, he could go abroad and complete his higher education in Columbia University, USA.

In precise, Dr Ambedkar's educational journey began, from his basic education in India to his going to Columbia University from 1913-16 and after doing D.Sc. from the London School of Economics to returning back to India in 1923. After the education that he earned and his wide range of reading books made him optimistic that political and economic changes like access to education, right to vote, etc., would be sufficient to bring the lower caste untouchables into mainstream. Ambedkar was born as a Mahar in Western Maharashtra. His childhood experiences were enough for him to realize the deep roots of caste system and untouchability in India. He, like many other untouchables, had experienced discrimination during his school days. He was not allowed to sit on the bench or drink water from common source. His suffering led him to fight more against this discrimination in future. Though men of his family were working under the British Government, Ambedkar could not avoid the caste discrimination. He got the reminders about his low caste identity every now and then:

‘You must remain in your assigned place.’¹

When Ambedkar challenged the monopoly of upper

castes, he considered it important to dig in further and describe how *Shudras* were not untouchables from the beginning. His curiosity to find the roots and reasons for this continuous ignominy of the Untouchables, led him to understand the history of Hindu caste structure. Ambedkar studied *Sahstras*, *Vedas*, *Bhagvad Gita*, *Manusmriti*, Jamini's *Mimamsa* and many other scriptures that preached law of Hinduism. After digging it more and relating it with the historical details, he wrote, ‘Who were the Shudras?’, this very detailed book was written by him to argue that the religious law of keeping *Shudras* in the margin and lowest in the high caste social structure was actually based on the false dictate. He discussed in detail, how *Shudras* were not born as untouchables but they were later pushed out of other castes to do the menial jobs like cleaning the dirt and eating dead animals. The critical detail in this book is a strong argument against the hierarchy set up by the Brahmins. He used many writings of explorers, sociologists and historians along with researchers who have written extensively on caste system and its origin. Ambedkar has discussed in detail religious scriptures, *Vedas*, *Puranas*, *Manusmriti*, and others that argue that *Shudras* were part of Hindu caste system and did not come from outside. In one of the assessment by Prof Max Mueller,

‘This warning equally well applies to the attempt of the Vedanta Sutra and of the Vayu Purana to make the word Shudra a derivative word suggesting that it meant a 'sorrowful people' and we must therefore reject it as being absurd and senseless.

We have, however, direct evidence in support of the proposition that Shudra is a proper name of a tribe or a clan and is not a derivative word as is sought to be made out.’² (Who were the Shudras. Pg 85)

Ambedkar found it absurd that why there has never been any strong analysis of the religious background for these castes? He argued throughout that book about the construction of social structure and discussed in detail that caste system never had a fourth caste and *Shudras* were very much part of the *Kshatriya* varna.

‘There are some scholars who maintain that the Varna system did not exist in the age of the Rig Veda. This statement is based on the view that the Purusha Sukta is an interpolation which has taken place long after the Rig Veda was closed. Even accepting that the Purusha Sukta is a later interpolation, it is not possible to accept the statement that the Varna system did not exist in the time of the Rig Veda. Such a system is in open conflict with the text of the Rig Veda. For, the Rig Veda, apart from the Purusha Sukta, does mention Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas not once but many times. The Brahmins are mentioned as a separate *Varna* fifteen times, Kshatriyas nine times. What is important is that the Rig Veda does not mention Shudra as a separate Varna. If Shudras were a separate *Varna* there is no reason why the Rig Veda should not have mentioned them. The true conclusion to be drawn from the Rig Veda is not that the Varna system did not exist, but that there were only three *Varnas* and that Shudras were not regarded as a fourth and a separate *Varna*.’³ (Who were the Shudras?, Pg 114)

In this book Ambedkar argued strongly and prove that *Shudras* were either inside the other castes or were later on pushed out of these castes and were placed as another new *varna* or they were pushed to the last level because the other castes needed them

for menial jobs in the social structure. Despite of all his efforts, his arguments went unheard as this could not force other castes to accept Untouchables as part of them. In this book he has also argued that the lowest caste Shudras were not untouchables from the beginning but were treated in worst manner because of their duties and responsibilities of doing menial jobs.

Generally, it was understood that in the social structure of Indo-Aryan, *Shudras* were the fourth *varna*, the lowest caste in the *Varnavyavastha*. They were given menial jobs. But then their future suffering and discrimination could not be foreseen. It was a social structure based on division of occupation. *Shudras* as they were placed in the bottom of *Varnavyavastha* suffered a lot of discrimination and ignominy. Then the fifth *Varna* Untouchables came into existence but then also the condition of *Shudras* could not improve and they suffered disability by the law of religion. Ambedkar was more worried about the continuous oppression and discrimination of untouchables. He wanted to ensure their place and economic independence in future.

Education for all and open use of languages like Sanskrit

Dr Ambedkar emphasised and privileged the written word. He would always make written submission before committees and commissions to negotiate. Instead of oral, his emphasis was on documenting every line that he spoke and this practice made him distinct as earlier Brahmins were. The written word enabled him to reach to larger public. The writing therefore, he says, cannot be separated from relevant texts. As he emphasised that no other form of expression can be as strong as written work. What we say might survive till our memory lasts but

what we write stays for the coming generations to read. Ambedkar as a progressive leader had started modernizing Untouchables by writing about them, their rights, their oppression and their humiliation. His approach was democratic, Brahmins could never adopt this method. He wanted Untouchables to get educated and learn every possible technique so that they could engage themselves in various jobs instead of the menial task they were doing always.

Ambedkar believed in power of writing. His emphasis led him writing many books. *Who were the Shudras, The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India, The Problem of Rupee, The Buddha and His Dhamma* were few of those writings which described his issue based writings. The writing which affected a larger readership was *The Constitution*. One of his speech that he prepared for a function organized by Jat Pat Todak Mandal, *Annihilation of Caste* was later published and it was a thought provoking description. In this he suggested complete annihilation of system of caste as he knew that caste system will never allow Untouchables to get free access to public opportunities despite the country attaining its freedom. He reflected his radical approach towards abolishing evil born of caste system. Hindu Code Bill proposed by Ambedkar was another radical reformatory attempt.

Ambedkar started a movement by speaking for their education in every platform, newspapers, conferences, meetings or speeches. His movement was to bring all weaker castes together, he was conscious of the social discrimination that they were facing, he also at the same time wanted them to be financially better so that they could grab every new opportunity coming to them. Describing

his strategy,

‘He stressed modernization, rather than Sanskritization, more than the earlier readers... . Ambedkar’s chief work within the Untouchable community was in building caste unity and morale on the foundations of the earlier movement.’⁴ (Eleanor Zelliot, P74)

He also considered the approach of making education accessible to all. Education could not be given on the basis of caste, class or gender because no caste or race is pure. Hence, education should not be given on the basis of selected caste backgrounds. His struggle to make education accessible to all and mainly the oppressed castes was one of his main agenda for reformation.

When Dr Ambedkar came back from Columbia University, he was completely influenced by John Dewey and Dr Ambedkar also wanted to follow modern science, its attitudes. It was unavoidable then to catch the temperament of science and questioning. He knew that how essential it had become to challenge the unexamined traditions and prejudices. A collective effort to raise enquiry and further examine, to find answers through evidences of nature and science when the philosophy should lead humans back to nature and science instead of false traditions followed on false beliefs of nature. Then the most deprived caste in Hinduism, the untouchables, started developing their connection with natural science where they could demystify the control of religion and dominant control of Gods. The modern natural science gave them an opportunity to step out of casteism and adopt methods and techniques of nature where untouchability could not be found, the way it is engraved in Hinduism.

What his Prof Dewey, taught him, influenced his analysis and reforms in education later. There was a new progressive neo – learning theory strongly recommended by Prof Dewey, and Ambedkar could see that it was the need of time, where his analysis can be used to restructure education and make it free from all prejudices and myths.

As in words of Prof. Dewey,

“ the content of modern scientific categories demanded rational acceptance by all people, universally, because these theories are the products of the most systematic practice of the scientific attitude.”⁵

He believed that with modern science, a new kind of knowledge was born that could replace, the supernatural, metaphysical knowledge that has been always accessible only to the pure and men with superior sect. Ambedkar believed in using scientific techniques of working on facts and data, well researched and proved, to deconstruct the idea of blind faith on supernatural powers. He knew how science and scientific techniques can strongly analyse mystery and depth. He strongly supported the argument that all religions have evolved mysteriously from doctrines and for science religion is just set of moral values that is preached to its followers. He advocated strongly to re-establish religion and its teaching from the perspective of science. What was aimed was to move out of prejudiced mysterious religion run by few and let it be open education accessible to all. This he knew will be the best method to demolish caste system which was based on religious prejudices.

Ambedkar in that need of time, suggested that intellectuals must than reconstruct the inherited

cultural values and social ethics. And for this, sole method to be adopted was science that can reconstruct the soul and spirit of value system once again so that it can be made accessible to all with strong roots into various blind believers of the religion.

This further led to complete loss of faith on any reform at the social level and he knew that complete change of value system in Hinduism is what is required.

‘The modern approach may have its faults but had much of value too and its own inbuilt corrective measures. He thought that conceptions such as *Kaliyuga* – the present being unpropitious, degenerate and deplorable – are Brahminical devices, of a self-serving nature. The modern establishes the setting for the triumph of reason, emancipating it from magic and rigid religious worldviews.’⁶

To resolve this, Dr Ambedkar emphasised on reason. Reasoning that allows you to question, to allow you to think and not live in the world of prejudices. It opens up mind to allow modern theories and systems enter into it and prepare a new outlook towards our social natural practices. Breaking the rigid religious rules becomes the priority to let reasoning function.

Ambedkar with these reasons emphasised on enlightenment – style confrontation with traditions to seek to challenge and prove false those elements of traditions that fail to the test of scientific reason. The references go back to the traditions that are followed with knowledge possessed by few and limited circulation of that knowledge. This leads to birth of prejudices and were passed on to next

generations. He believed that it was important then to learn how to learn.

Struggle for Representation of Untouchables in government

When Ambedkar started participating in dalit movement he was moving with a purpose. He wanted the Untouchables to find a powerful place in Hindu caste system or he wanted that system to cease. But then he was struggling against that strongly rooted system of caste. He planned his movement accordingly where it was important to defend Untouchables and fight powerful leaders like Gandhi who wanted caste system forever. Gandhi on one side had already started his struggle to remove untouchability completely and give a place to Untouchables by calling them 'Harijan' a term he took from Gujarati language. He also performed various acts to lead caste Hindus and define the importance of leaving evil like untouchability from Hindu social structure before India gets freedom. But then he was strongly in favour of caste structure and believed firmly that caste system is the base of Hinduism and this layered system clearly defines job of every caste.

Gandhi and Ambedkar though were on the same side in removing untouchability and give proper place to Untouchables in society, they still had difference of opinion on various issues. Gandhi wanted caste system as he wanted a Hindu to earn his living by the occupation of his caste, similarly, every body from every caste should help or learn the skill of work of other castes but at they should make living by the skills of his own caste. For example, a *Vaishya* can learn archery like a *Kshatriya* but then he should not earn living from archery. Gandhi was a strict believer in caste system but wanted to remove evil attached to it.

Gandhi also performed task like cleaning toilet in his ashram and did not allow people to live there if they will discriminate with Untouchables. But then Ambedkar had his own arguments to make he believed that untouchability is so strongly rooted in caste system that it can not be removed unless caste is abolished. He strongly advocated equality for all. While going on with his struggle and movement for the Untouchables, he gave representations on various platforms. His representation in front of Simon Commission was one such effort. Here, Ambedkar fought for adequate representation of Untouchables in the government.

'However, Ambedkar's faith in the future was hedged about with various safeguards and demands for his own people. He asked not only for fifteen seats in the Bombay legislative Council in proportion to the percentage of Depressed Class population, but also for nine more... . He requested that the education of the Depressed Classes be "the first charge on the provincial revenue."' 'He pleaded for the opening of government posts for the Depressed Classes with arrangements for minimum qualifications and an extension of the age limit; for unrestricted recruitment in army, navy and police; every district.'⁷

In *Annihilation of Caste*, Dr Ambedkar has argued strongly against division of labourers. He writes that dividing labour may be important but dividing labourers on the basis of their labour of their parents is completely unacceptable. This is against the growth of human faculty where one can educate and train to construct methodical career option. Caste system demolishes this growth, right at the time of a child's birth.

He wanted complete annihilation of caste because

upper caste Hindus refused to participate in everyday association like eating, living, working, praying together and marrying in each other's families. Those who followed this discrimination were not loggerheads or orthodox but were strictly religious as this is what their religion was and they were following only their religion. This practice in fact was based on blind faith of followers and believers of Hinduism. Intermingling of other castes with untouchables was impious for them. And this strictly followed religious set of rules was the basis of untouchability. The lower castes born within Hindu religious system couldn't escape oppression.

In many countries, those who were suppressed the most and face injustice and insult they always come together to look for values in their own culture and religion and they then are open to modernism and modern science. Modernism was an opportunity for them to open their world of establishing new cultural forms within the orthodox cultural systems. They grew faster as they were free to accept and adapt new approach towards nature and religion. But in India this could not happen because here the oppressed community could never come together and struggle for one central cause. They lacked organization and leadership to guide them towards proper mode of movement.

As a representative of the Depressed Class, Ambedkar in his speech at Round Table Conference on 20th November, 1930, spoke the harsh reality. He was aware that the British Government needs to be strongly understand truth of the time that despite of their rule in India for 150 years, they never tried to intervene and change the evil in caste system. Ambedkar argued that if this nation should have a democratic government based

on equality then-

'We hold that the problem of the Depressed Classes will never be solved unless they get political power... . problem of Depressed Classes is I submit eminently a *political problem* and must be treated as such... . We are willing that it may happen, though the idea of Swaraj recalls to the mind of many of us the tyrannies, oppressions and injustices practiced upon us in the past and fear of their recurrence under Swaraj.' ⁸

Ambedkar's speech was set on the argument that he doesn't want the freedom of country as another loss to the Depressed Classes. He emphasized on the problem of Depressed Classes as the part of political settlement. He said,

'All I will say at the present moment is that, although we want responsible Government, we do not want a Government that will only mean a change of masters.' ⁹

Ambedkar along with the political representation in the government also adopted the method to safeguard the Depressed Classes against future atrocities,

'First of all, we want a fundamental right enacted in the constitution which will declare 'untouchability' to be illegal for all public purposes... . this fundamental right must also invalidate and nullify all such disabilities and all such discriminations as may have been hitherto. Next we want legislation against the social persecution...'

¹⁰

Ambedkar wanted that security for the Untouchables where they could feel that 'Swaraj' for them as well and not bear it as another religious

phenomenon which has forgotten to treat them as equal humans.

Struggle for reformed religion that resulted in conversion to Buddhism

Ambedkar never wanted to break this nation, though he believed in building a strong nation with the help of real modernization by disposing of false religious prejudices that gave birth to evil like untouchability. He wanted a society which is equal for all and he believed that if the upper castes won't stoop and pull the Untouchables up then before freedom, the British Empire should provide them political and economic power to reach equal to other castes.

While requesting Simon Commission for proper representation in electorate and other job related benefits, Ambedkar said,

‘I do contemplate, I do desire, the time when India shall be one, and I believe that a time will come when, for instance, all these things will not be necessary; but all that would depend upon the attitude of the majority toward the minority.’¹¹

Ambedkar said in a speech to Indian Franchise committee in 1932,

‘[T]he system of caste and the system of untouchability form really the steel frame of Hindu society. This division cannot easily be wiped out for the simple reason that it is not based on rational, economic or racial grounds.... the chances are that untouchability will endure far longer into the future than the optimist reformer is likely to admit on account of the fact that it is based on religious dogma....The ordinary Hindu looks upon it as part of his

religion and there is no doubt that in adopting towards untouchables what is deemed to be an inhuman way of behavior he does so more from the sense of observing his religion than from any motive of deliberate cruelty. Based on religion, the ordinary Hindu only relaxes the rules of untouchability where he cannot observe them. He never abandons these. For abandonment of untouchability to him involves a total abandonment of the basic religious tenets of Hinduism as understood by him and the mass of Hindus...’¹²

In 1935, at the Depressed Classes Conference at Yeola, near Nasik, Ambedkar declared, ‘I will not die a Hindu.’

Faith on Hinduism was already lost for him by then. His continuous struggle for breaking this unequal evil of caste as social structure and getting a caste free society led him to the conversion. His statements in many places were indicative of his future action of conversion. He had already said that the untouchables should not be considered as part of Hindu caste structure. He had denied himself as Hindu. When Gandhi also strongly supported *Varnashram* he had known that removing untouchability will lead to another worst scenario, Ambedkar,

‘Mr. Gandhi’s anti- untouchability means that the Untouchables will be classed as Shudras instead of being classed as Ati-Shudras [extreme-Shudras, meaning beyond Shudras]. Mr. Gandhi has not considered the question whether the old Shudras will accept the new Shudras into their folds.’¹³

In *Annihilation of Caste* he has strongly argued how Hinduism is advocated by the benefitted castes and

how they are so rigid in not allowing deserving people to get what they should. He argued that within caste system, individual is signified as part of a caste and hence, he becomes important for others of his caste but not for other castes.

‘The effect of caste on the ethics of the Hindus is simply deplorable. Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible. A Hindu’s public is his caste. His responsibility is only to his caste. His loyalty restricted only to his caste. Virtue has become caste-ridden and morality has become caste bound.’¹⁴

Ambedkar suggested that reform of the Hindu Social order can be done with few selected reforms- To abolish sub-castes. As the manner in which sub castes are treated is very similar to the treatment of main castes. To begin inter-caste dinners and inter-caste marriage. Fusion of blood can bring the feeling of kith and kin.

Ambedkar’s notion of liberty was similar to T.H.Green, where he wanted equality not only before law but also stronger notions such as equality of consideration, equality of respect and equality of dignity. He also was strongly inspired by the demand for fraternity in the French Revolution. He wanted this to be similarly adopted for the affected communities in India, hence, he included this in the preamble of the Indian Constitution. His belief in Buddhism was also the loss of faith in Hinduism.

‘The Buddha, he argued, strove for building communities while Brahminism attempted to fragment them.’¹⁵

Conclusion

While understanding Ambedkar as a ‘Radical Progressive’, his continuous struggle at various fronts and as an emancipator for the Untouchables, he argued against the caste system which was unable to accommodate sections of lower castes within their own caste system. He argued and channelized his ideologies, not only with the religious preachers but adopted all round technique to provide equal opportunities to all oppressed. His struggle was accompanied with his radical approach and bringing at the table aspects religious, political, economic or social for the discussion leading to resolutions for a nation that will adopt equality and freedom and fraternity as its base of democratic establishment. This he was aware cannot be achieved by keeping intact heterogeneous caste system, which never allows shifting or changing castes.

This rigid religious conduct that legally considered untouchability as a method for purification was completely denied by Ambedkar. His conversion to a Buddhist was the outcome of his rift with this firmly rooted prejudiced system which treated humans worse than animals.

He wanted not a religion but the freedom from the boundaries of Hinduism which never treated Untouchables as humans. As Ambedkar had already declared that he will not die a Hindu, many other sects wanted him to join them. But as Eleanor Zelliot says,

‘Lokanatha’s statement that the Untouchables had been Buddhistst may have added weight to the theory in Ambedkar’s mind. The idea that Untouchables were former Buddhists forms the basis of Ambedkar’s book, *The Untouchables*.’¹⁶

Ambedkar after years of struggle had understood that caste system will follow practicing untouchability as their faith in Hinduism. This system discriminated against Untouchables and still considered them part of their caste structure. Years of atrocities on Untouchables could not be removed until the religion is reconstructed without this evil practice or without coating caste within religious wrapping and calling it only a system for comfortably dividing occupation. Occupation could be changed and skills of other castes may be learnt. This would have created a more harmonious caste structure based on good moral practices.

Understanding his conversion as a surrender or defeat will be incorrect, though he strongly sent a message that even by moving into Buddhism, he was actually following his ideologies of equality, freedom and fraternity more strongly. He demolished the concept of caste completely by changing his religion before his death because shifting from your caste was otherwise not allowed in Hinduisim, His challenge to the prejudiced caste system was completed by this conversion.

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