

Aquinas and Ambedkar: An Exploration

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Abstract

The present research is intended to explore the lives of Thomas Aquinas and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. This exploration research paper is a unique attempt to understand, uncover, discover, and above all engage with the philosophies of Aquinas and Ambedkar. Although there was no such attempt made to explore Aquinas and Ambedkar in a single research paper but this exploration would give ample direction to move forward in this direction. It is important to note that both the scholars come from different ideological, philosophical, and above all lifestyles but this research paper explores the possibility of attempting to analyze their perspectives. Aquinas and Ambedkar although belonging to different backgrounds had a similar struggle, challenging times which have shaped them and led them to reformation and transformation. This exploration is a much-needed engagement that gives the right direction in discovering further unexplored aspects in Aquinas and Ambedkar.

Keywords

Thomas Aquinas, Ambedkar, History of Philosophy, Medieval Philosophy, Scholasticism, Comparative studies in Philosophy, Casteism, Dalit Identity, Dalit History. Dalit Struggle.

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Introduction

Although it may seem quite astounding to begin such a challenging initiative which may look arduous task and also maybe a new path-breaking pattern of looking towards a goal that might not have a unified intention but it is always adventurous in starting a journey where one does not really end up in defined patterns. The present brief study focuses primarily on various aspects which are similar, different, and above all ideologies of Aquinas and Ambedkar will be dealt with in this exploration. Most of the writings on these prominent personalities have developed in a particular situation which might not be exactly similar but one can understand that both emerged from difficult situations in their respective lives. The decisions that they have made because of the prevailing situations and the path that they have chosen brings them to the forefront of prominent personalities in human history.

An Anthology of Early Struggle

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was one of the most influential personalities not only in India but also in the world. His life has always inspired many people in India and abroad. Every part of his life drew a significant experience that was imprinted in his mind. It is important to know that the family of Ambedkar which belonged to Hindu Religion but still had its roots ingrained in the bhakti schools. Dhananjay Keer rightly states that, “The family (Ambedkar’s) belonged to the devotional Kabir school of thought. This bhakti school of thought found consolation in the human attributes like compassion, benevolence, and resignation to God. But the most humanizing and broadening effect on their mind was that the followers of this bhakti school had abolished the rigidity of the caste system, as Kabir, the founder of the school, had roundly condemned it.”¹ Bhakti schools in India emerged in all almost all religious practices. These schools have given a new direction to the existing conditions and one may even observe that these schools portrayed the longing for liberation in the hearts of the oppressed people and seek God’s help.

The first encounter remains deeply imprinted into the core of the mind and remains as an unforgettable incident in anyone’s life. “From evening till midnight the boys traveled with their mouths parched with thirst; but nowhere could they get drinking water on the way. Every time people either pointed to the filthy water or asked them to go away. This was the first rude and shattered shock to the budding mind of Bhim (Ambedkar), that day he knew that he belonged to a family that was untouchable, degraded to drink and eat filthy things.”² Such experience is encountered by Ambedkar in his childhood while traveling to visit his father. This first encounter, especially the reactions of the Casteism on Ambedkar made a deep impact on the very psyche of his thinking. He began to understand the harsh reality of the society and its outlook on him.

On the other hand, when one looks deeper into the life of St. Thomas Aquinas, although he hailed from an affluent family he did not choose the riches or comfort of the family. Right from his childhood, he chooses an ascetic life. He was not attracted to the pomp and show of the family, he did not delight himself with the materialistic things but his mind wandered to achieve other important things which gave life its true meaning. “Thomas of Aquinas, the son of a noble family in the kingdom of Naples, preferring the peaceful pleasures of study to the adventurous life of a feudal lord, entered the order of St. Dominic, in spite of the formal protests of the father. On the eve of departure from Italy to Paris, he was kidnapped by his brothers and imprisoned in the paternal castle, from which he managed to escape.”³³ This was a turning point in the life of Aquinas, as he could live a life of domination. Domination was not his cup of tea. The young mind was influenced by another way of life. Domination, power, and authority could not influence his mind rather a life of servitude was more important to him. It is important to understand that Aquinas was not after a better life in terms of worldly standards. “The Dominicans were mendicants, who kept themselves by begging. By certain contemporary standards, they were not very respectable. They were especially committed to studying, teaching, and preaching.”³⁴ Although one may imagine that one would definitely seek something better from the existing conditions but here as one observes that Aquinas chose an ascetic life that will neither guarantee comfort nor happiness. It was totally a life of renunciation of every joy and happiness according to the worldly standards. A life living completely on the mercy of others.

In one sense both Ambedkar and Aquinas through their experiences of life which taught them one of the most important aspects is a concern for humanity, the human condition, and human liberation. Here, we see both living in different periods of time, living in different contexts, living different lifestyles made a similar decision. This was not the end of their lives but each step, each context would bring much more difficult than they ever imagined but still their mindset never changed it remained constant.

The Path Defining Turbulence

The education system in India was dominated by the casteists and very few had access to it with great difficulty. Keer sums up: “Yet the school life of Bhim (Ambedkar) was to receive its unkindest cut. The cut was so deep which all his life afterward he remembered with the strongest aversion. During his High School days, both Bhim’s elder brother and he were not allowed to take up Sanskrit as a second language. It was the key to the study of the Vedas which were neither to be heard nor to be read by the Shudras and the Atishudras-the Untouchables. This was another

pill of poison that was rammed down the unwilling throats of the two Hindu boys by the defenders of Hinduism.”⁵This was one of the strongest imprints which were laid on the young mind of Ambedkar. Access to study especially to Sanskrit was one of the important areas in which Ambedkar was interested. Sanskrit was colonized by the Casteists and was never accessible other than Brahmins. This was one of the most important strategies to dominate and subjugate downtrodden people.

It brings to one of the most significant vectors of Ambedkar’s life where he encounters the truth of his existence and this is where he makes a clear decision about the future. “After his (Ambedkar’s) Graduation, he was appointed to the post of lieutenant in the Baroda state forces. This acceptance of a post on the part of Bhimrao Ambedkar might be a shrewd step probably taken with full knowledge of the unbearable situation that might have come in the smooth working of Bhimrao as a government official in British India where the offices were mostly manned by the orthodox Hindu upper classes.”⁶ The caste-ridden society never allowed anyone from other than their strata to excel forward in education. Even though education had given him an ability to stand and to know the different dynamics of Casteism which would eventually take any form to subjugate and oppress at every level. This stage and platform gave him a clear thought and understanding that there should be an ideology to resist such indifference at every level.

Only a few who really understand Aquinas’s life would definitely understand that he was a revolutionary who went against the dominant system. Brian Davies states that: “The University of Naples (known at the time as a studium generale) was something of a novelty when Aquinas went to study there. Established by Frederick II, and highly cosmopolitan, its origins were secular rather than ecclesiastical. It was founded as a rival to the papal university in Bologna and was the first university established by civil charter. It was also a place where the works of Aristotle (384–322 BC) were studied seriously.”⁷ Aquinas gained access to Aristotle through his teacher Albert the great and change in education policy gave him full access. It was at an important juncture in the history of humankind that the education system which was basically controlled and dominated by the sacred authorities now began to lose its grip on it. Slowly there was a growing need from the people from all walks of life who understood the value of education. Earlier as one would definitely understand that the education was available only for the affluent and the dominant. This was a great change, which led to various differences in the society.

This new development could not be concealed for a longer period because of the controlling attitude of the dominant.”In the late 1270s, rumors of theological controversy reached the ears of Pope John XXI. He responded by asking the bishop

of Paris (Stephen Tempier) to set up an inquiry and to produce a full report. The bishop set up a commission to examine 'errors' current in the Arts Faculty at the University of Paris. On 7 March 1277, he condemned a long list of propositions supposed to derive from the faculty. Attention was subsequently focused on the work of certain theologians, one of whom was Thomas Aquinas.⁸ Each university was carefully monitored because the entire system of education was in the purview of the dominant. These authorities were well versed in handling such situations. Therefore, one can truly understand the course of action which prevailed in dealing with such contexts. One would definitely expect the repercussions for going against the dominant as the history reveals that either they would be executed or be treated as heretics ultimately treating the entire issue as a controversy. Aquinas was in this situation but he never withdrew himself from exploring new perspectives especially Aristotle. Here Aquinas was against the very system which he was part of which brings to the attention that he was a revolutionary who would like to transform the system.

This was a similar situation where Ambedkar and Aquinas did not step back even when their contexts were alarming. They pursued further without worrying about the consequences.

Road to Reformation

This was a particular juncture in history where it was a defining moment for reformers like Aquinas to step in and voice out his stand. In this pursuit of expressing his vision of change as observed earlier the process of censure was set in motion and Aquinas and his thoughts about change were neglected and even went to the extent of treating his notions as 'errors'. Here one has to understand that the position of Aquinas in the whole system was at stake and he did not refrain from moving forward. Aquinas had spent quality time in comprehending constitutions. "St. Thomas had the advantage some of the realism that Aristotle had derived from personal association with royalty and from 158 different practical constitutions involved in the Aristotelian synthesis to which St. Thomas devoted about three years of study."⁹ This gave him an opportunity to frame new thoughts on the constitution this also gave him an idea of the working system and also to a major extent understand the pro and cons of the various laws. This experience which he had did not give him a utopian ideology rather than it gave him a realistic experience to comprehend the ground reality of the people. This was crucial because it gives the opportunity to be grounded on the systems which have ample positive outcome."With a thorough knowledge of political processes as well as man's ultimate destiny, therefore St. Thomas statesmanship marked progress toward the destination. Comprehending the forces of good and evil in their accurate proportions, he functioned as a realistic philosopher

rather than as the cynical intriguer of the Machiavellian pattern.”¹⁰ There were many before Aquinas and many after him but the way in which his comprehension was closer to reality.

Aquinas believed in an inclusive system that gives space for the other. Of course, one would definitely understand that this inclusive system cannot be achieved in simple terms, it has to be made law and enforced by the ruler or government. A space that gives scope to breathe, express, and above all live life to the fullest without disturbing or subjugating others. “St. Thomas did write from realistic experience in practical statesmanship, and his political realism projected high-minded social principles of everlasting value rather than the expedient intrigue of transient opportunism.”¹¹ The world did not believe in such philosophy it believed that only through power and authority one would lead a happy and successful life. The yardstick was prepared and everything was weighed according to it and anything against it would be strange.

On the other hand, Ambedkar began the revolution through various opportunities available in his particular context. He had to be very clear about his position on the revolution. “The revolution was already in the preliminary stage by the upper caste sympathizers like Phule and V R Shinde.”¹² Ambedkar had to embark on a struggling journey where a clear position had to be emphasized keeping in view of the untouchables. This problem arose because the earlier reformers could not primarily focus on the untouchables because they focused more on the collective effort other than the Brahmins. This created a bleak picture of the future for untouchables, as the other caste groups along with Brahmins practiced untouchability. Even though the other groups in the caste system had some privileges and enjoyed certain positions but “The untouchables, on the other hand, were denied access to education, and were compelled to stick to their lowly occupations. They were totally debarred from any opportunity for self-development.”¹³ This was an important observation that is pivotal in establishing the groaning need for liberation of the untouchables. Ambedkar carved out a separate identity for the untouchables so that their voice should be heard, their struggles should be acknowledged and above all their future should be secured. He began to voice out his opinions in the fortnightly ‘Mooknayak’ and began to enlighten people. This was echoed in his writings especially when the independence movement gained momentum. The Gore States that:

“Ambedkar pursued this point in the third issue and stated categorically that freedom or self-government must mean freedom and security for the individual, the recognition of his right to property, equality before the law, freedom to act in consonance with one’s conscience, the right to be represented in the legislatures and the right of opportunity to employment in public or governmental agencies. He wanted

to be assured that the untouchables would also have a share in such self-government. Without it, self-government would mean government over the already depressed.”¹⁴

Ambedkar was very much aware that the position of the Dalits was never taken into consideration seriously either before independence or after independence and even in the constitution. “He could not be unaware of the fact that from the viewpoint of the oppressed and Dalits, except for the reservations, the constitution was not making any material difference.”¹⁵ The constitution could not acknowledge, affirm or even address the dark reality of the age-old oppression super-imposed on Dalits. A small enclosure of ‘reservation’ would not imply any reformation instead it always becomes a new force and new weapon to further oppress the already oppressed people. Further, if one carefully observes the whole movement of Dalit liberation was caricatured as ‘reservation’. This was a careful, pre-meditated, and controlled outcome of the leadership. By keeping Ambedkar part of the creation of the constitution it was backstabbing not only him but also the entire movement and above all Dalits. Anand Teltumbde asserts that “The existing socio-economic structure was kept intact in the constitution underneath the western democracy which proclaimed the principle of ‘one vote, one value’ in the political arena. Ambedkar could not hide his discomfort at this dichotomy and had to burst out in his famous warning that if equality in the socio-economic sphere is not achieved within a reasonable time, the disadvantaged people would blast off the structure of the political democracy.”¹⁶ The constitution could not create any space for the upliftment of the Dalits. The entire process had to be simply seen especially becoming a mute spectator especially by allowing all the existing oppressive norms to gain legitimacy. Ambedkar foresaw this illusion and could not bear the legitimacy of the oppressive system, as a radical and a revolutionary thinker he expected that the people would respond, he expected that people would take a radical and revolutionary path to liberate themselves.

Conclusion

In this exploration attempt has been made to discover the various facets of Aquinas and Ambedkar’s life. This was an exploration into their lives to carefully examine the defining factors which led to them to their respective endeavors. One may even go to a certain extent where both had certain driving aspects which rekindled their passion for the reformation.

Aquinas continued to move in a direction that was against the very system which he was part of it. He mastered not only fathoming the past but also the present and envisioned a future that would create enough ripples to shake the very foundations of the system. Aquinas is a pioneer in assessing the rising need for change and not only that he was neither a mute spectator rather he involved himself in producing

one of the most spectacular transformations. The Catholic Church gave him the title 'Angelic Doctor' because of the inspiration of new direction through him. Many would refrain from acknowledging the immense contribution of Aquinas but his writings continue to inspire.

On the other hand, Ambedkar, a man with a great passion for the upliftment of the Dalits. He was not only a reformer but also a radical and revolutionary who broke every obstacle that came in his life. He crossed the traditional boundaries fixed from ages. He became the voice for the voiceless. He carved out a separate identity for Dalits and made people believe that Dalit lives matter. The famous slogan of Ambedkar was 'Educate, Agitate and Organize' continues to be a constant reminder and inspiration.

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