

Caste System: B. R. Ambedkar's Perspective

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Abstract

B. R. Ambedkar has received a liberal education. He was a multifaceted personality, an intellectual, a revolutionary, a philosopher, a patriot, a scholar, a writer, and the constitution maker. He has more than the talents of the average educated Indian. Outside India he is received with honour and affection, but, in India, among Hindus, at every step he is reminded that he is one of the out-castes of Hindu society. In social hierarchy, Hinduism places Brahmin at the first rank. Kshatriya is assigned the second rank. Vaishya and the Shudra have been assigned the third and fourth rank. It does not stop with mere gradation but injects the principles of graded inequality by ordaining descending scale of contempt and ascending scale of reverence. Considering the Indian social realities, caste has always been a most visible and vibrant violator of human rights. This paper focuses on Dr. B.R. Ambedkar views on caste system in the context of India and his efforts to eradicate caste system. In moderan period, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar had done very eminent contribution for the eradication of caste system after Jotiba Phule. His perspective developed by not only study but also his experience. He expressed his views through human rights perspectives and act for human development. He fought valiantly for Freedom, Equality and abolition of Untouchability.

Keywords: *Caste, Varna, Dalit, Untouchability, Ambedkar, Hinduism, Brahmin, Equality, Society.*

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The caste are hierarchically arranged in a manner that they are interlinked with each other such that rights and privileges of the high castes become the disabilities of the lower castes. The word caste comes from the Portuguese word *castas*, meaning 'pure'. This Portuguese word expresses one of the most central values of Indian society, *the idea of ritual purity*. In India, however, the word *varna*, or "color," denotes the fourfold division of Indian society. The word *varna* may have been used because each of the four castes was assigned a specific color as its emblem. The *Jatis* were grouped formally by the Brahminical texts under the four well known categories (the *varnas*): viz *Brahmins* (scholars, teachers, fire priests), *Kshatriyas* (kings, warriors, law enforcers, administrators), *Vaishyas* (agriculturists, cattle raisers, traders, bankers), *Shudras* (artisans, craftsmen, service providers). Certain people like foreigners, nomads, forest tribes and the *chandals* (who dealt with disposal of the dead) were excluded altogether and treated as untouchables. Relations among these various castes are governed by elaborate rules. Each one is very much aware of its status and duties in regard to the others.

The population of India is a mixture of Aryans, Dravidians, Mongolians and Scythians. All these stocks of people came into India from various directions and with various cultures, centuries ago, when they were in a tribal state. *Varna* was infallible like the Vedas. A measure of liberty is necessary to maintain a free democratic social order. He speaks in the sense of right to free movement, in the sense of right to life and limb. He argues to an individual's freedom to choose one's own profession.¹ The caste system is probably the longest serving hierarchial system in existence in the world today, its roots can be traced back to the period of Manusmriti, a sacred document of the Hindus, dated back to the period between 200 B.C. and 100 B.C. Within the Dalit community, there are many divisions into sub-castes. Dalits are divided into leather workers, street sweepers, cobblers, agricultural workers, and manual "scavengers".

B R Ambedkar's Views about Caste System in India

B.R. Ambedkar was born in the post-industrial period in the world, in one of the import centers of colonial oppression. He was born in an untouchable community, the curse and bane of a fragmented society. He has become an inspiring symbol, a symbol of the hopes and aspirations of India's dalits, the oppressed, deprived and disposed.

The Caste System of graded inequality is still prevailing in Indian society. No person of Indian origin, born on Indian soil can escape the influence of caste. The caste system is part and parcel of Hindu religion and Hindu society.

The Caste system creates discrimination among people at large level and violation of human rights. B.R. Ambedkar condemned the Hindu religion and Hindu

Social Order because of its inegalitarian practices. His rejection of Hinduism was essentially based on rational-humanist ground. The Hindu social system that produced casteism is in-human in nature. Manusmriti is the symbol of darkness, ignorance and inhumanity for millions of people and perpetuate untouchability and slavery of casteism. He asserted that the Hindu Varna Dharma has ruined the untouchables. This would ruin the Hindus themselves and ultimately India. To eradicate the evils of untouchability and casteism, the only remedy is the change of religion. As he believes religion is inevitable for man and society but its role can be judged in terms of the test of 'justice' and 'utility'.

The castes constituting the series were hierarchically graded, each caste being considered inferior to those above it and superior to those below it. The status of a man born in a particular caste was determined by the rank of that caste in the hierarchy. Once born in that caste, his status was pre-determined and immutable. Thus birth decided his status, which could not be altered by any talent he might show or wealth he might accumulate.² Regarding the origin of Caste, B.R. Ambedkar said that, "The study of the origin of caste must furnish us with an answer to the question- What is the class that raised this "enclosure" around itself? The customs in question were current in the Hindu society. These customs in on their strictness are obtainable only in one caste, namely the Brahmins, who occupy the highest place in the social hierarchy of the Hindu society; and as their prevalence in non-Brahmin castes is derivative of their observance are neither strict nor complete. If the prevalence of these customs in the non-Brahmin castes is derivative then it needs no argument to prove that which class is the father of the institution of caste. The strict observance of these customs and the social superiority arrogated by the priestly class in all ancient civilization are sufficient to prove that they were the originators of this "unnatural institution" founded and maintained through these unnatural means."³

According to B. R. Ambedkar, untouchability was born some time about 400 A.D. it is born out of the struggle for supremacy between Buddhism and Brahmanism which has so completely moulded by the history of India. Beef-eating is the root of untouchability and the date of birth of untouchability must be connected with the ban of cow killing and on eating beef.⁴ The caste system of Hindu society creates the sense of superiority and inferiority in relation between man and man. The problem of the downtrodden classes is basically social problem rather than politics. Self-respect and self-dependent is the motto of Ambedkar's conception of class struggle.

B.R. Ambedkar was born into the "untouchable" caste of Mahars in the Indian state of Maharashtra. Ambedkar's main battle was against the caste system.

Caste had made Hindu society stagnant. Due to the caste system, Hindu society is unable to accommodate outsiders. This drawback poses permanent problems for integration. Even internally, the Hindu society fails to satisfy the test of a homogeneous society. It is only a conglomerate of different castes. Caste is an obstacle in the growth of national spirit. Most importantly, caste system perpetrates injustice on the lower castes. It does not allow progress of the lower castes. Lower castes receive nothing but contempt. This has resulted in moral degradation and demoralization of the lower castes. The untouchables, in particular, are the constant object of injustice. They are denied education, good livelihood and human dignity. The caste system has dehumanized them thoroughly. Indian society is caste based society. Castes and sub-castes system of Hindu society is an anti-democratic and anti-humanity. In his essay entitled on “Philosophy of Hinduism” Dr. B.R. Ambedkar has described relating to fraternity. To him, “I and my neighbours are we all brothers, are we even fifteenth cousins, any I their keeper, why should I do right to them.”⁵

According to Ambedkar, caste destroyed the concept of ethics and morality. To quote him: “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 to his caste. His loyalty is restricted only to his caste. Virtue has become caste-ridden, and morality has become caste-bound.”⁶ B.R. Ambedkar and Gandhi ji view’s different about lower caste people in India. Both men recognized the power of abandoning the term “untouchable”. Gandhi proposed *Harijans*(people of God) as a substitute. B.R. Ambedkar rejected *Harijan* as patronizing, preferring the term *dalit* (oppressed). Gandhi wanted to improve the lives of Untouchables by appealing to caste Hindus to abandon untouchability. B.R. Ambedkar recognized that it was easier to change laws than to change people’s hearts and heads. He preferred to lead *dalits* in campaigns designed to improve access to education and to 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 is itself a foreign name. It was given by the Mohammedans to the natives for the purpose of distinguishing themselves. It doesn’t occur in any Sanskrit work prior to the Mohammedan invasion. ...Hindu society as such does not exist. It is only a collection of castes. ... Castes don’t even form a federation. A caste has no feeling that it is affiliated to other castes except when there is a Hindu-Muslim riot.’⁷ B.R. Ambedkar was one of the greatest builders of modern India. He was saviour of the

down trodden, chief architect of India's Constitution and the greatest pioneer of Buddhist revival in India.

It is a pity that caste even today has its defenders. It is defended on the ground that caste system is another name for division of labour and that division of labour is a necessary feature of every civilized society. Then it is argued that there is nothing wrong in the caste system. But Caste system is not merely a division of labour. It is also a division of labours. Civilized society undoubtedly needs division of labour. But in no civilized society is division of labour accompanied by this unnatural division of labours into water-tight compartments. The caste system is merely a division of laborers which is quite different from division of labour—it is a hierarchy in which the divisions of laborers are graded one above the other. In no other country is division of labour accompanied by this gradation of laborers. There is also a point of criticism against this view of the caste system.

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

B.R. Ambedkar has tried all kind of strategies during his life for eradicating caste and, more especially, for emancipating the Dalit from this oppressive social systems. Jyotiba Phule was one of the prominent social reformers of the nineteenth century India. He led the movement against the prevailing caste-restrictions in India. B.R. Ambedkar adopted the temple entry movement to mobilize the untouchables, hoping to get a place for them in Hinduism, but all his efforts were suppressed by Hindu upper caste people heavy handedly. He also realised the importance of education as a vital force for individual advancement and social change. The purpose of education, to Ambedkar, is to moralize and socialize the people. Before the Simon Commission, in 1928, B.R. Ambedkar submitted a memorandum on behalf of his association, the Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha. He argued in favour of the granting of universal franchise and a quota of seats for the Untouchables rather than for separate electorates. He explained, during his speech before a delegation of the Simon Commission at Poona, that in case universal suffrage was not being granted for the Dalits, then he would campaign for separate electorates.

B.R. Ambedkar devoted his whole life to fight for the annihilation of caste by proliferating a movement against the evils of the caste system. Being himself a Dalit, he made all his efforts to change the hierarchical structures of Indian society and restoration of equal rights/justice to the marginalized. He opted for peaceful and constitutional methods for sake of resolution of the social problems. In framing the constitution of independent India, he played a leading role. B.R. Ambedkar was a remarkable liberal crusader who realized the ideological hollowness of the Dalit movement and provided necessary ideology to it. He created awareness among

depressed classes to have a graceful life. He launched a Satyagraha on Chandan Tank for upliftment of marginalized. As a result he succeeded to seek the right to fetch water from the tank. It was his major victory. He struggled arduously to bring 14 untouchables and low castes in our society. Through his writings, speeches, mass contacts and meetings with the British bureaucracy, he supported the cause of the untouchables so that their socio-economic life could be improved. Time and again, he threw serious challenges to the custodians of Hindu society as well as sought the support sympathy of the enlightened section of society. Indeed it goes to the credit of B.R. Ambedkar that he was able to develop this concept of Reservation or Affirmative action to provide equal participation to the discriminated groups.

Osmania University, Hyderabad where Dalits had celebrated *Raavan*, as their icon, who stood against the “tyranny” of Shri Ram, an ‘upper caste’ icon, without realizing that *Raavan* was essentially a *brahmin*, until he became an *Asur* by his actions. Now, the same Dalit students are off to celebrate beef festival in the university. This just shows how Dalits have been made antagonised to Hindu and therefore in addition to the systemic changes (in term of socialistic economy, economic planning, and active role and participation of the state in economic and social governance).

The action for the abolition of caste is to begin with inter-caste dinners. This is also an inadequate remedy. There are many castes which allow inter-dining. But it is a common experience that inter-dining has not succeeded in killing the spirit of caste and the consciousness of caste. The real remedy is only inter-marriage. Fusion of blood can alone create the feeling of being kith and kin and unless this feeling of kinship, being kindred, becomes paramount, the separatist feeling of being aliens created by caste, will not vanish. He epitomized the relentless struggles of the dalit masses for human rights, dignity and freedom. He argued that the heart of the problem of untouchability was the caste system. B.R. Ambedkar successfully gave a new turn to the history of India. But till today the abolition of caste remains a mere dream. The evils of the caste system are still actively prevalent and are affecting the lives of people.

Conclusion: Since independence, India has implemented affirmative action programs for the benefit of what are officially called the “Scheduled Castes and Tribes”. In 1997, fifty years after independence, India elected its first *dalit* president—an event what would have been unthinkable during Ambedkar’s lifetime. Ambedkar’s conception of emancipatory politics proceeded beyond a comprehensive delegitimation of slavery which is another name of untouchability. India can never be truly free until the last Indian segment of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are free. B.R.

Ambedkar wanted Dalits, backwards, minorities and women to look back to their history and re-establish their supremacy by defeating the counter-revolutionary forces led by the champions of Brahminism. One of the main objectives of B.R. Ambedkar was first to unite the Dalits and, then, the Bahujan Samaj and, second to endow them with a separate identity that would offer them an alternative route out of sanskritisation.

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