

Revisiting Ambedkar's Assertion and Vindication of Conversion in *Away from the Hindus*

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Abstract

Dr.B.R. Ambedkar's radical critique of caste-ridden Hinduism was based on his position on temple entry. Though the question of religious conversion is a contentious issue but it becomes nonetheless pertinent to address it since conversion is a moment where one moves from the position of passivity to subjectivity as it can signify the convert as someone who is capable of dissent as well as of assent or in other words as someone who can willfully choose or reject a set of beliefs and thus can be termed as someone engaged in practices of cultural criticism, knowledge production and self-fashioning.

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Introduction

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was born on 14 April 1891 in a family of Mahars, and was himself a Dalit. It was Dr. Ambedkar's defiance and rebellious spirit in the face of all oddities and discriminatory practices that allowed him to exercise influence not only as an educationist or a legal expert but also as a social activist and a respected leader of Dalits across India. He subjected religious perceptions and organizations to scrutiny in a logical and transparent manner, and embraced Buddhism towards the end of his socio-political career so as to emancipate Dalits from the abyss of caste-based discrimination.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Socio-religious Activism

Though the question of religious conversion is a contentious issue but it becomes nonetheless pertinent to address it since conversion is a moment where one moves from the position of passivity to subjectivity as it can signify the convert as someone who is capable of dissent as well as of assent or in other words as someone who can willfully choose or reject a set of beliefs and thus can be termed as someone engaged in practices of cultural criticism, knowledge production and self-fashioning. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's radical critique of caste Hinduism was based on his position on temple entry. Ironically, he could not reject the temple as the structure epitomizes the very object that untouchables were fighting against; the Hinduism. Ambedkar failed to cease from demanding access to the temple as he ultimately saw the temple as a symbol representing the whole of India and not just Hinduism. He made several attempts to gain religious and social rights for the untouchables, by using the Gandhian method of Satyagraha; drinking water from a public tank in Mahad (1927), and attempts at temple entry (1929). The failure of all efforts to rise in the traditional way, i.e. the process of Sanskritization and the failure of these movements demonstrated that untouchables were not really a part of Hinduism and would never be accepted as equals by Hindus within that framework. Thus from a position of questioning the Brahminical social structure, Ambedkar moved towards its rejection and raised the issue of conversion by the untouchables in the Mahar's conference held in Bombay(Mumbai) on 31st May 1936.

There was another reason for Ambedkar's critical position on nationalist politics; he was a Mahar, the largest untouchable caste in Maharashtra. When someone is a part of a structure then he tends to legitimize it but Ambedkar, being an outcaste or an *ati-shudra*, considers himself to be outside the Hindu fold and feels no obligation to legitimize the social structure and exhorts the untouchables to de-internalize the religious texts that teach stratification of individuals based on caste system. Hinduism's failure to claim Ambedkar has enabled him to demystify

and ostracize it. Commenting on the declaration made by Ambedkar, Mahatma Gandhi called it unfortunate and added that religion “is not like a house or a cloak, which can be changed at will” (qtd. in Keer 255). Vinayak Damodar Savarkar also warned the Depressed Classes against conversion by asserting that there was no possibility of receiving equal treatment under Islam or Christianity in India by pointing to the persistent riots between touchable and untouchable Christians in Travancore. Responding to Gandhi, Ambedkar agreed with Gandhi that religion was necessary but asserted that their decision to move out of the Hindu fold was a deliberate one since the Hindu religion ordains graded inequality and the Depressed classes cannot cling on to it based on it being an ancestral religion as that religion is repugnant to his notions of a religion that paves way for their advancement and well-being. In addition to it, caste has made it impossible to initiate *shuddhi* or conversion to the Hindu religion as there is always that pertinent question as to which caste would allow the converts entry into their ranks, thereby, Ambedkar also warns Hindus of the dwindling numbers and a potential threat of solidifying other religions. In Ambedkar’s terms religion signifies a process of universalizing social values that, “brings them to the mind of the individual who is required to recognize them in all his acts so that he may function as an approved member of the society” (“Away from the Hindus” 409). Ambedkar exhorted the untouchables to regard their religious identity as something they had the right to exercise their will, rather than a function of fate or pre-destination to which they are irrevocably doomed.

It is necessary to consider conversion as a process rather than an event if one is to address the complexities involved. History no doubt has recorded cases when conversions have taken place as a result of inducement, appeasements, fraud or deceit; but to gaze at all conversions from this perspective, is to insult the capacity of the people to choose. Religion is not a personal commodity to be merely centered on cults, rites, rituals, observances, beliefs and dogmas. For Ambedkar, being enlightened in the sociology of religion; theology is secondary and religion must be observed as distinct from it. Religion is rather a social fact that has a specific social purpose and function; it goes beyond personal belief and observance to the social realm. Hence, religion is not a supernatural phenomenon or a divine dispensation but a social law. All religions may seem alike but they are distinct in their functionality, propagation of ideas and in reaching out to the contours of humanity. The religious scriptures of Hinduism preach the subsistence and observance of the caste system; they are responsible for the degradation and degeneration of the untouchables. Hinduism, does not allow even the slightest of hope for the untouchables which quite explicitly means that if untouchables adhere and believe

in Hinduism, then, they have internalized the eulogized divine dispensation and accepted their status as untouchables compelling them towards eternal servitude and a degraded life. Ambedkar's main claim is that a society based on the caste system, cannot be a real community as it violates the respect and dignity of individuals. On the grounds, that Hinduism, is inconsistent with the self-respect and honor of the untouchables is vindictive of their conversion to another nobler faith. Ambedkar, is bemused that even the proponents of Hinduism could not defend it on its meritorious grounds.

Therefore, for Ambedkar and his followers, conversion is not for economic or political gain but it has accrued out of compulsion. It is a device of protest to gain social acceptance; socially the untouchables will gain absolutely and immensely. The untouchables will then be part of a religion that accentuates the universality and equality of all values of life. On the contrary, Hinduism through its observance of graded inequality has pushed untouchables to the peripheries; they have become the isolated and marginalized lot. Isolation means social segregation, humiliation, discrimination and injustice. In other words, they are not only deprived but depressed classes; dearth of confidence, assertion and identity is deeply embedded within their state of being. The only remedy is to move out of the Hindu fold and develop a kinship with a community that does not believe in casteism, which would subsequently lead to the liberation of the untouchables. Paradoxically, he adopted religion as the point of reference for his new identity as well as the moves which he made in the war of ideologies, are interesting as specimens of anti-religious strategies which find their purpose in religion. Probably, Ambedkar, was cognizant of the religious and social needs of his people but even then he waited for about twenty years before converting.

Kinship is the way of enlisting the support of the kindred community to meet the tyrannies and oppression of the caste Hindus which the untouchables have to bear as long as they remain in the Hindu fold. The bond of kinship in a community is the consequence of allegiance to a common religion and inter-dining. From this perspective, kinship is then, an antithesis of isolation and aids in eliminating it and as the new religion upholds equality, it will gradually but surely emancipate the untouchables from the inferiority complex. The sense of inferiority that has entrapped the untouchables from within is the consequence of long-nurtured discrimination and hostility towards them by the caste Hindus. Once, the untouchables move out of the realms of a religion upholding hierarchy and graded inequality, they will begin to assert their identities. Ambedkar, strongly believed that conversion would raise the social status of the untouchables.

The very name 'untouchable' is abominable and pernicious in itself as it fixates on identity and determines the social attitude of Hindus towards them. The process of protective discoloration by renaming themselves within Hinduism will not help as eventually their true identities would be detected by caste Hindus. Consequently, while adopting a new religion, an untouchable must discard his old name and identity as they are the markers of untouchability; a new name of a community outside the fold of Hinduism, besides being denunciation of Hinduism, changes the outlook of the individual and instills self-esteem within his ranks. Conversion, therefore, can mitigate and emancipate the menace of untouchability. Conversion posits belief as a choice rather than inheritance. It entails not simply a change of belief but a change of community and since conversion is a transgressive act, one that destabilizes fixed categories of ethnic and social belonging.

Ambedkar lays the premise on liberty, equality and fraternity. Equality meant not the equal status of *varnas*, but equal social, political and economic opportunity for all. Ambedkar, saw the caste system as a serious obstacle in the path of democracy. According to him, it lies not in the form of government but in terms of association between the people who form the society. Since, the Indian society is divided and graded on the basis of the caste system, particularly, in the villages, suggests that it is not democratic and on the contrary, it is the very negation of a republic. According to Mahatma Gandhi, the Indians were colonized not only politically but also ideologically and psychologically and consequently laid a premise on the valorization of the rural life as being the model for the Indian masses and celebration of the ideal *varna* system for de-internalizing the Western ideology. Ironically, the villages are the hub and domain of the caste system where the discrimination is ostensible in every sphere of life; literally a cesspool where an untouchable is marked out by his very denomination, occupation and neighborhood. It is indeed the biggest calamity for the untouchables that such a model be valorized for the populace. On the contrary, this romanticization of the village society is derogative and is borrowed from orientalist like Sir Charles Metcalfe who revered the village society in one of his revenue papers. The common belief among the proponents of this view was that the state stood for modernity and the society for tradition.

The rural social fabric then consists of the stratification of individuals into various castes and sections namely the touchables and the untouchables, forming the major and the minor community respectively. The touchable, being in a position of authority, remain potent economically whereas the untouchables are thrust with eternal servitude and unceasing dependency on their masters, irrespective of their worth and merit. Without any access to means of production and education, it is

rather impossible for the untouchables to analyze their social positioning within the confines of hegemonic Hindu society, thereby, ensuring the improbability of their emancipation. It is indeed a Caste Hindu imperialism over the untouchables and being outside the village republic, living on the peripheries they are also outside the Hindu fold; an odious vicious cycle that persists. Ironically, the caste Hindus inhabiting in villages cannot envisage and appreciate the sight of untouchables taking their destiny into their own hands and re-fashioning themselves.

Conclusion

The basic human needs of the untouchables were not only material but non-material as well; all had the right to live with dignity and self-respect. Only when untouchables are in a position of equality in social terms, they can gain materially as well. By developing a theory of oppression of the untouchables by illuminating their exploitation, marginalization and powerlessness within the confines of a village social fabric which is caste ridden; Ambedkar, highlights the structural, social and cultural relations that delimit the lives of the embattled community of the untouchables epitomizing, how the dominant meanings of our society stereotype one group. In Ambedkar's opinion, the transition from British to Hindu masters signified no emancipatory potential for the masses as the problems of the untouchables would always have a particularity that could not be subsumed under class or national mobilization and secondly the status of the untouchables was irreversible if they remained isolated within Hinduism. Therefore, he formulated their liberation in terms of political assertion through separate electorates and ideological liberation by converting to a suitable religion.

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