

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar a subaltern thinker: Study of his ideas on the origin and reform of the Dalits

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Abstract: Ambedkar was one of the chief thinkers of “Subaltern Perspective” and the term “Subaltern” refers to the vision from the bottom of society which means the view of those people who belong to deprived, depressed and downtrodden section of the society like Dalits, Women, Tribes, etc. Ambedkar himself was a dalit and he traced the origin of the dalit’s to what he called “**Broken Men**”. Ambedkar believed that the primitive societies consisted of nomadic tribes who were cattle breeders but later became settled agriculturalist. There were a warfare between the already settled people and the nomadic communities and the defeated tribes were broken into groups who had nothing of their own and so agreed to do the work of guards for settled tribes in exchange for food and shelter. These broken men had to settle outside the village becoming the antya in Ambedkar’s term. Ambedkar’s socio-political thought began with his criticism of Hindu religion because its evil practices of caste system and reforms of the dalit’s. The liberation of the dalit’s and safeguarding their rights and interests centred to his political and social ideas. Ambedkar said that caste system as such is not merely division of labour but it is also a division of labourers. Because it is not based on individual choice but it is hereditary. Moreover, it is a hierarchy in which the division of labourers are graded one above the other. Caste is harmful because it is not natural division of labour but it is religiously imposed. Caste cannot be reformed within Hindu religious framework and so caste can be reform only by reforming Hinduism. This paper is an attempt to explain the origin of the dalit’s and their reform in Ambedkar’s term which form the basis for his own struggle for the emancipation of dalit’s and reform of Hinduism.

Key Words: Broken Men, Deprived, Depressed, Caste System, Antya

1. INTRODUCTION:

Ambedkar was the foremost philosopher of “Subaltern Perspective”. The term Subaltern was adopted by Antonio Gramsci which refers to those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes. In Oxford dictionary the word subaltern stands for the general attribute of subordination, which is expressed in terms of a caste, class, age gender, office or any other way. In this way Subaltern refers to those groups which are subjected to subordination. Thus, subaltern perspective conveys ‘view from below’, i.e., a view or understanding from the bottom of society that is from those who are subordinated, underprivileged, dejected and oppressed (Nagla, 2008). The followers of subaltern perspective focused upon Dalits, Women and Tribals etc. and viewed them not as an ‘object’ of history but treat them as a makers of their own history (Puja, 2017). Ambedkar belongs to the subaltern perspective and focuses upon the deprived and depressed condition of the dalits.

2. Origin of Dalits:

Tracing the origin of Dalit’s, Ambedkar believed that in every village there was a group of people who were residing in its outer part and were known as broken men (dalit’s today). He believed that the primitive societies consisted of the nomadic tribes and they had cattle as their wealth. These cattle were moving from one place to other and so these people also moved with them. As the time passed the art of farming developed people were started to settle down at one place and accumulated land and emerged as a settled communities. There was always warfare between already settled peoples and the nomadic tribes in which the later were defeated and these defeated tribes were broken into small parts and scattered into different areas. In breaking up, these tribes as a rule give birth to a peripheral group that he calls the Broken Men. Then there was an agreement between the settled peoples and the broken men in which the broken men accepted the work of guards in exchange of food and shelter. Since the broken men were the foreigners they had to live outside the village. Ambedkar says that the dalit’s of today are the descendent of these broken men and so of the original resident of this country. Ambedkar also calls dalit’s as *antya* because according to him they had to live at the end of the village (Ambedkar Babasaheb, 1990, p. 278).

3. Origin of Caste and Untouchability:

Caste system among Hindus divided the Hindu community into four major groups which are hierarchically graded and based on birth (Bano, 2016, p. 935). It can be defined differently by different thinkers some of the major definitions are:

According to *Senart*, a French authority, caste is defined as 'a close cooperation, in theory at any rate rigorously hereditary: equipped with a certain traditional and independent organisation, including a chief and a council, meeting on occasion in assemblies of more or less plenary authority and joining together at certain festivals: bound together by common occupations, which related more particularly to marriage and to food and to question of ceremonial pollution, and ruling its members by the exercise of jurisdiction, the extent of which varies, but which succeeds in making the authority of the community more felt by the section of certain penalties and above all, by final irrevocable exclusion from the group'.

According to *Nesfield* caste is a 'class of the community which disowns any connection with any other class and can neither intermarry nor eat or drink with any but person of their own community' (Ambedkar, 1979).

According to *Sir H. Risley* 'a caste may be defined as a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name which usually denotes or is associated with specific occupation, claiming common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine, profession to follow the same professional calling and are regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community' (Ambedkar, 1979).

According to *Ketkar* caste is 'a social group having two characteristics: (i) membership is confined to those who are born of members and includes all persons so born; (ii) the members are forbidden by an inexorable social law to marry outside the group' (Ambedkar, 1979).

Ambedkar said that after reviewing all above definition it can be noticed that all the definitions are discussed only some of the characteristics of the caste system not it as a whole. He said that the mistakes of the above thinkers is that they define caste as an isolated unit by itself, and not as a group within, and with definite relations to, the system of caste as a whole (Ambedkar, 1979). In his view the caste system has either been imposed upon the docile population of India by a law giver as divine dispensation or it has developed according to some law of social growth to the Indian people.

For the concept of Untouchability, Ambedkar said that there were two reasons for the prevalence of untouchability and these are as follows: 1. Buddhism and 2. Beef eating. The concept of untouchability came into existence during the reign of Gupta's when a large number of people were reconverted from Buddhism to Hinduism. Those who did not convert to Hinduism such as Broken Men were treated with contempt and hated by newly converted Hindus especially by the Brahmins. In support of his reason Ambedkar quoted *Nikant's* book **Prayaschit Mahuka** in which *Nikant* quoted the verses from **Manu** which says "if a person touches a Buddhist or a flower of Panchapat, Lokayataka, Nastikha and Mahapathaki, he shall purify by a bath". In this way it is easy to say that the origin of untouchability may be traced to the contempt and hatred of the Brahmins against the Buddhists (Babasaheb Ambedkar, 1977).

Another reason for untouchability given by Ambedkar was the continuing habit of beef eating after the rest of the society had given up this practice. The Brahmins hated the beef eaters and declared as untouchable all those who ate beef. There were many groups among primitive tribes in India who were beef eaters and all of them became untouchable in this way (Babasaheb Ambedkar, 1977)

4. Problems of Dalits:

Ambedkar was deeply aware of the atrocities on untouchables by caste Hindus some of which he himself suffered and he has given an account of these cruelties in the following words. He said that "under the rule of Peshwas in the Maratha country the untouchable was not allowed to use the public streets if a Hindu was coming along, lest he should pollute the Hindu by his shadow. The untouchable was required to have a black thread either on his wrist or in his neck as a sign or a mark to prevent the Hindus from getting themselves polluted by his touch through mistake. In Poona, the capital of Peshwa, the untouchables was required to carry, stung from his waist, a broom to sweep away from behind the dust he treaded on, lest a Hindu walking on the same should be polluted. In Poona, the untouchable was required to carry an earthen pot, hung in his neck where ever he went, for holding his spit, lest his spit falling on earth should pollute a Hindu who might unknowingly happen to tread on it" (Babasaheb Ambedkar, 1974).

Another example he gave was of *Balai* an untouchable community central India, he said that the high caste Hindus warned the Balais that if they want to live in their villages they were compelled to follow certain rules and regulation which were as follows:

- 1) Balais women must not wear the gold and silver ornament and Balais men must not wear the pugrees having golden lace.
- 2) Balais men must not wear the dhotis with coloured or fancy borders.
- 3) They must convey the intimation of the death of any Hindu to relative of the deceased- no matter how far away these relatives may be living.

- 4) In all Hindu marriages, Balais must play music before the processions and during the marriage.
- 5) Balais women must attend all cases of confinement of Hindu women.
- 6) Balais must rendered the services without demanding remuneration and must accept whatever a Hindu is pleased to give.
- 7) If the Balais do not agree to abide by these terms they must clear out of the villages.

When the Balais refused to comply the upper caste proceeded against them and persecuted them by not allowing to get water from the village well, they were not allowed to let go their cattle to graze, they were prohibited from passing through land owned by the upper castes, the upper caste people let their cattle graze on the field of Balais. So, Balais were obliged to leave the place with their families and moved to adjoining state(Babasaheb Ambedkar, 1974).

Ambedkar gave another example of the Chakwara village of Jaipur state. In which an untouchable wanted to give a feast to the members of his community after his return from pilgrimage. The host served them a lavish meal cooked in the *Ghee* (Butter) but they were attacked by caste Hindus armed with lathis (Bamboo sticks) because food cooked in *Ghee* was confined to those who have high status and untouchables were not allowed to have it(Babasaheb Ambedkar, 1974).

Ambedkar said that all over the country the untouchables were denied water from public wells, not allowed to attend the public schools, prohibited from using public streets, they were not permitted to eat certain kind of food or to wear certain kind of ornament and dresses and banned from entering Hindu temples(Babasaheb Ambedkar, 1974).

5. Measures for the Eradication of Untouchability:

For Ambedkar eradication of untouchability had to precede fight for the freedom of the country. In his editorial “**Bahishkrit Bharat**” Ambedkar wrote that “if *Tilak* has been born amongst the untouchables he would not have raised the slogan ‘Swaraj is my birth right’, he would have raised the slogan ‘Annihilation of Untouchability is my birth right’”(Ambedkar, 1927; Kheer, 1990).

In pursued of this goal, Ambedkar assume the role of an activist deliberately violating the centuries old restrictions which the untouchable were condemned to obey. For the abolition of untouchability Ambedkar started campaigns with his followers for forcefully taken water from public wells and forcefully entering Hindu temples. These campaigns did not make any dent in the prohibition imposed by caste Hindus upon untouchables but certainly led to awareness among untouchables about their depressed and deprived situation and the need to do something about it. Then Ambedkar suggested a four pronged strategy for eradicating the untouchability and these are as follows:

- 1) There should be a share in political power and in the administrative apparatus to be given to the untouchables in proportion to their percentage in population.
- 2) The untouchables should be given a fair share in the economic life of the country.
- 3) There should be a frontal attack on the concept of Chaturvarna which legitimize untouchability and also the Hindu sacred books which support this criminal custom.
- 4) There should be a mass movement encouraging inter-caste marriages, because untouchability cannot be eradicated without the eradication of caste system(Harold R. Isaacs, 1994, p. 37).

The important among all these four pronged strategy is last one which came into existence because of the factor of endogamy. Ambedkar said that in primitive society exogamy was so common that nobody needed any explanation for it but when the time change exogamy lost its importance and people were confined to marriage within their own blood kins. In Ambedkar’s view the law of exogamy was beneficial for the Indian society because Indian society is still a savour of clan system and this can be easily seen in the law of marriage which revolved around the exogamy, marriage between *sapindas* (blood kins) as well as *sagotras*(of the same class) was prohibited. He further said that endogamy was foreign element for the people of India. There is no exaggeration to say that for Indian people exogamy was a testament and no one dare to violate it. He believed that the violation of exogamy had more rigorous penalties then the violation of endogamy. He found that the origin of the caste was in endogamy and so, by abolishing the endogamy it was possible to abolish caste and untouchability(Ambedkar, 1979).

Therefore, in his view the real remedy for abolishing the untouchability was the fusion of blood that is; inter-marriage because he said that unless the feeling of kinship or of being kindred, become paramount the separatist feeling or of the feeling of being aliens created by caste will not vanished. He further said that among the Hindus, inter-marriage is a greater force in social life then the life of the non-Hindus. Where society is already well knit by other ties, marriage is an ordinary incident of life. But where society is not well knit, marriage is the only way to bind them together.(Babasaheb Ambedkar, 1974).

6. CONCLUSION:

Ambedkar was a multifaceted personality, an intellectual, a revolutionary, a philosopher, a patriot, a scholar, a writer, and the constitution maker. He created awareness among Dalits and inspired them to fight against

untouchability because in his view untouchability was not imposed by the Brahma but it was a legacy of Brahmins. He said that in Shastras society is divided on the basis of work that is; those who work as a teacher or priest came under the Brahmin class, those who were indulged in the work of soldier was came in the Kshatriya class, those who work as a traders or businessman was came under the Vaishya class, those work as a labourer came under the Shudras class and the last those who work as scavengers, sweepers, disposing of death bodies, removal of carcasses etc, came under the Dalits. This fivefold division of Hindu society was initially based on class and so it was open but later on the Brahmins converted them into caste which was closed and hereditary. He spent his whole life for the emancipation of the downtrodden section of the society especially Dalits.

Ambedkar tried all kind of strategies during his life for eradicating caste and untouchability which had oppressed the Dalits most. These strategies were political, legal, economic, religious and social. In the political, he promoted the strategy of party building and pressure group of the untouchables for articulating their demands and making proposal for the emancipation. In the legal domain, he promoted the policy of a reservation of seats in legislatures, in administration and in educational institutions according to their percentage in the population. In the economic domain, dalit will provide fair share of bank credit and government funds. In the religious domain, he condemns the concept of caste and untouchability which were the part of the Smritis and Shastras. In the social domain, he pleaded for the abolition of caste and untouchability by violating the practice of endogamy which he felt was at its roots. In this view, the real remedy was inter-marriage because this was the only way in which the feeling of distinction engendered by caste can be remove. In Ambedkar words “*The real remedy for breaking caste is inter-marriage. Nothing else will serve as the solvent of caste*”(Babasaheb Ambedkar, 1974).

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