

Ambedkar and the Dalit Identity in Indian Polity

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's aim was the welfare of the poor classes, ending inequality based on socio-economic characters, reorganizing the political economy for the benefit of all, maintaining full employment and education, providing social security for the weak and sick and finally rebuilding the Indian society on the foundation of co-operation, love, friendship rather than division of men into rigid social barriers. Politics is reflection of the society. If casteism, regionalism and communalism are part of society, they will go into politics also. Those who are born and die in discriminatory environment, how is it possible for them to have different mindset? Hence the study seeks to ascertain Dr. Ambedkar's commitment to towards political liberalization of Dalits. The political resistance of Dalits can be measured in terms of how successful they have been in expanding the meaning of democracy; in other words, in forcing civil society to acknowledge their presence and to embrace their identity.

Keywords: Dr. B.R Ambedkar, Dalit identity, Indian Polity, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.

INTRODUCTION

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar had envisaged a society where there would be no caste; no inequality; no superiority; no inferiority; no suppression; and no exploitation; all persons are equal. To him, the new society should be reorganized on the basis of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. In his philosophy self-respect and human dignity had a pivotal importance. He espoused the noble cause of equality of status and opportunity to every Indian, assuring the dignity of the individual and unity of the nation. He sacrificed his whole life for the dignity and uplift of the poorest of the poor and was committed to the cause of those who suffered from slavery, injustice, and inhuman exploitation. His vision of Independent India would be free from the cultural and social inheritance of Varnashram Dharma and built on the Buddhist principles of liberty, equality and fraternity.

A very large number of people in India were treated as Untouchables, Unapproachable and Unseables. Finally they were called as Scheduled Castes. But they have chosen to be called as Dalits. The term "Dalit" is a Sanskrit word. It has been derived from the root 'Dal' which means to crack open, split, broken, scattered, crushed and destroyed. In the Hindu Varna structure the *Shudras* and *Ati-Shudras* were called Outcastes, *Pariahs*, *Panchamas*, *Chandals*, *Avarnas*, *Antayajashor* *Dasasor* *Dasyus* and *Nama Shudras*. The root of this word Dalit is 'Dal'. The adjective of 'Dal' is *Dalit*. We find this word 'Dal' on page 471 of the Oxford Sanskrit Dictionary, new edition, 1964, edited by the world-famous Sanskrit scholar, Sir Monier Williams. Even "Dalit" is found in many Indian Languages and even a Dravidian language. The meaning given to "Dalit" in the dictionary is: burst, split, scattered, dispersed, broken, destroyed, and crushed. All these English words sum up the exact position of the Indian Untouchables and also Tribes.¹ In an 1831 Dictionary the word is defined as 'ground' or broken or reduced to pieces generally (Molesworth's Marathi-English dictionary). It was seemingly first used in the context of Caste oppression by the great nineteenth century Social reformer Jyotiba Phule. It is also said that the term 'Dalit' was first coined by Dr. Ambedkar to describe the Scheduled Caste community in an explicitly Caste context. This term became applicable only to members of the Mahar community in Maharashtra. But later it was used to the Scheduled Castes as a whole.² Dr. Ambedkar in the beginning referred to describe them as Non-Caste Hindus, the Protestant Hindus, Non-Conformist Hindus, Excluded Castes and Exterior Cases. After 1935, the Government of India grouped them under the names as Scheduled Cases and Scheduled Tribes. In recent times, the term 'Dalit' was used and popularized by the Dalit Panthers—a militant organisation of Untouchable Youths of the early 1970s in Maharashtra. They defined the term with broader connotations and used it for the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Neo-Buddhists working class landless poor peasants, women and all those economically exploited.³ Dalit literature not only strives to encompass the life of Dalits as a particular caste groups like Mahar, Chama, Mang,

Dhor, Berad, Kaikadi, etc. but also include all the socio- culturally marginalised and suppressed Tribes, Backward Classes and Minorities.

In the Hindu society caste plays an important part. Being an Untouchable, Ambedkar had to face social ostracism and isolation. Early in life he realized that a large section of his countrymen had been denied of their legitimate rights by the oppressive social customs. Equipped with an almost encyclopedic knowledge of human society in general and Hindu society in particular, he started the task of reconstructing Hindu society; on the one side he criticized the society, and on the other he suggested its reorganization. He came to the conclusion that a democratic society in India could be established only when the Untouchables and other weaker sections of society would be given the opportunity to enjoy the basic human rights. The plight picture of the Untouchables is given below in his own words:

"The Hindu society insists on segregation of the quarters of the Untouchables. The Hindu will not live in the quarters of the Untouchables and will not allow the Untouchables to live inside Hindu quarters. This is a fundamental feature of untouchability as it is practised by the Hindus. It is not a case of social separation, a mere stoppage of intercourse for a temporary period. It is a case of territorial segregation and of a cordon sanitation putting the impure inside a barbed wire, into a sort of a cage. Every Hindu village has a ghetto. The Hindus live in the village and the Untouchables in the ghetto".⁴

Dr. Ambedkar's thought concerning Dalit Identity in Indian Polity

The political philosophy of Ambedkar may aid in renegotiating the predicament of western political theory in particular and leading the fights of the masses in general. People can observe Ambedkar's association with the grand political streams such as liberal, radical or conservative through his writings. At the same time, he distinguishes himself with these three dominant political traditions. Ambedkar's philosophy is fundamentally ethical and religious. According to him, the social precedes the political. Social morality is main focus to his political philosophy. He is neither a violent individualist nor a traditional communitarian. His ideas of democracy internalize the principles of equality, liberty, and fraternity in their true spirit.

During the freedom struggle against the British imperialism, the object of Congress was to gain political freedom in bringing Swaraj for people of India. And in Post-independence India, the Congress Party controlled the political power whose leadership was predominantly high Castes (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Rajputs, Vaishyas) who had monopolized democratic institutions like Administration, Legislature, Judiciary, Bureaucracy, Ownership of land, Educational institutions and the media. From top to bottom it is controlled by the Caste Hindus. Dr. Ambedkar believes that there is no department which is not dominated by them, and that under Swaraj Government the Untouchables will have no way of escape from the destiny of degradation. Ambedkar was convinced that the Scheduled Castes cannot capture political power by joining the Congress as it is a big organisation and their entry into the Congress will be a mere drop in the ocean. Nevertheless, he was very much pragmatic and wanted his people 'to be a ruling Community' in this country with separate Political Party. For him, it is not enough to be electors only, but it is necessary to be law-maker. Hence, he strived hard to evolve untouchables into a formidable force on the political landscape of India. He located the political power in the people. Political power, to him, is the key to all social progress and the Dalits and Tribals can achieve their salvation by capturing political power and organizing themselves into a third party. However, he understood that the remedy lies in their own hands and therefore they should 'capture the political power', which was their life blood. They should develop into a ruling race and guard their rights; otherwise their rights would remain only on paper.

Political Power and Social Progress:

Dr. Ambedkar exhorted the Untouchables to capture political power, as political power is the key that can open all locks and doors in the society and government. He also warned the Depressed people to be their own guard against any verbal and rosy promises, and urged them to believe only those leaders who had experienced their woes. Dr. Ambedkar, while speaking in Minorities Sub-Committee of the Round Table Conference on 20th November 1930, said before the British about the loathsome conditions of the Untouchables... that nobody can remove our grievances as well as we can, and we cannot remove these unless we get political power in our own hands.⁵ Addressing on the last day of two-day fifth Conference of the then United Province of Scheduled Castes Federation on April 25, 1948, in Lucknow, Dr. Ambedkar said:

"political power is the key to all social progress and the Scheduled Castes can achieve their salvation if they captured this power by organizing themselves into third party and holding the balance of power between the rival political parties-Congress and Socialists. The Scheduled Castes cannot capture political power by joining the Congress."⁶

He further said:

“We must have government in which the men in power will give their undivided allegiance to the best interest of the country. We must have the government in which men in power knowing where obedience will end and resistance will begin will no be afraid to amend the social and economic code of life which the dictates of justice and expediency so urgently call for. This role the British government will never be able to play. It is only the government which is of the people, for the people and by the people in other words, it is the Swaraj Government that will make it possible.”⁷

He asked them to keep before their eyes the fate of the touchable leaders like Gautam Buddha and Ramanuja who had struggled to better their condition and to remove the stain of Untouchability.⁸ Ambedkar also pointed out that political reform must precede social reform and without political power to the Depressed Classes their status would not improve. Though his striving for the good of Depressed Classes alone might be considered selfish, it could be justified in view of the great injustice done to them by the nation hitherto.⁹ In the views of Ambedkar, politics is nothing if not realistic. Here is very little in it that is academic. It, therefore, follows that before passing any judgments on any scheme of politics it is essential that one must consider the ground plan. And the ground plan means the social structure of a political community to which the political plane is sought to be applied. Politics in India has become a matter of numbers. It is numbers which give political advantage to one community over another.¹⁰ Dr. Ambedkar remarked: We must resolve that in a free India of the future we will be a ruling race. We refuse to continue to play a role of subservience or accept a position in which we would be treated as servants, not matters.¹¹ Answering to the critics those who asked him to join Congress, he points out, “I regard as more important the freedom of the Scheduled Castes in India, the community which has been the victim of domination and oppression for over 2000 years”.¹² He said clearly “we cannot be part of the Hindu society, but we want to be partners in running the government of this country. We want partition of political rights. Our political rights must be recognised distinctly from those of the Hindus separately”.¹³

While addressing the All India Depressed Classes Conference at Kamptee in 1932, Dr. Ambedkar further said: It is very necessary that the political reins should come in the hands of Untouchables. For that, all of us should unite and secure a political status. Untouchability in India will not be eradicated so long as the Untouchables do not control the political strings.¹⁴ Expressing his anguish over the inactiveness of educated Dalit brethren, Babasaheb remarked, “I have not been able to fulfill my life’s mission. I wanted to see my people as governing class sharing the political power in terms of equality with other communities. Whatever I have been able to achieve is being enjoyed by the educated few, who with their deceitful performance, have proved to be the worthless lot, with no sympathies for their down-trodden brethren. They have surpassed my imagination; they live for themselves and their personal gains. Not one of them is prepared to do social work. They are treading the path of their ruination. I now wanted to divert my attention towards the vast illiterate masses in the villages who continue to suffer and remain almost unchanged economically.”¹⁵

Dr. Ambedkar rightly saw the remedy of the social stigma and other disadvantages in political power. When Dr. Ambedkar got Adult Franchise (Right to vote) for the Untouchables and Bahujans, he said, “Go and write on your walls that you are going to be the rulers of this country. Let all of you bear in mind and also write it on the walls of your houses so that every day you should remember that the aspirations which we cherish, and the cause, which we are having is not a cause of a petty character. It is the biggest cause that we ever cherish in our hearts. That is to see that we are recognised as the Governing Community. If you realise that, you will recognise what tremendous effort we have to make in order to carry it into effect. Mere words will not count; mere resolutions will not count”.¹⁶ Moreover, Babasaheb Ambedkar had mentioned that three things are necessary for the success of a party- (a) a leader, (b) a good organisation and, (c) a clear and definite objective and Programme. He expressed that true democracy in India could be safe only in the hands of the Non-Brahmin Party. It was necessary not only for members of the particular communities but also in the interest of democracy in India that the Non-Brahmin Party should rebuild itself and become a power.¹⁷

During the decisive phases of India’s freedom struggle, Dr. Ambedkar had fought for a correlated but different freedom struggle, one for the liberation of the most oppressed sections of Indian society. This was a liberation movement wider and deeper than that of fighting colonialism; focusing on the kind of new nation that was to be built. It was understandable that Ambedkar emerging from the lowest section of India’s Caste-oppressed gained an education that few could equal, would take a stand not as a proponent of a revitalized, Vedic and Vedantic-centred tradition but of revolution, the revolution of ‘liberty, equality and fraternity’ first echoed in the French Revolution and that he found in the message of the Buddha proclaimed thousands of years before.¹⁸ Dr. Ambedkar, until 1935, took three directions: the most visibly successful was the awakening and organizing of the Untouchables- through newspapers of their own, social and cultural institutes, and widely attended conferences, then called ‘Depressed Classes’ Conferences. He also participated in every opportunity to petition the British government for political representation for Untouchables, and these opportunities were many: the Southborough Committee on Franchise,

the Simon Commission to evaluate the reforms and the famous Round Table Conferences at London. Ambedkar also served in the Bombay Legislature in which his efforts had won token representation for the Untouchables. The third direction his work took was that of encouraging education among the lower classes, first by exhortation and founding of hostels so that they could have a place to stay while attending school, and eventually by establishing a still-growing network of colleges under the Peoples Education Society.¹⁹ He lamented seeing the plights of the lower sections of the Indian society and urged them in the following words:

*You must have a firm belief in the sacredness of your goal. Noble is your aim sublime and glorious is your mission. Blessed are those who are awakened to their duty to those among whom they are born. Glory to those who devote their time, talents and their all to the annihilation of slavery. Glory to those who would keep on their struggles for the liberation of the enslaved in spite of heavy odds, humiliations, storms and dangers till the down-trodden secure their human rights.*²⁰

Dr. Ambedkar's messages to his people, "whatever I have done, I have been able to do after passing through crushing miseries and endless trouble all my life and fighting with my opponents. With great difficulty I have brought this 'Caravan' where it is seen today. Let the Caravan march on despite the hurdles that may come in its way. If my lieutenants are not able to take the Caravan ahead they should leave it there, but in no circumstances should they allow the caravan to go back. This is the message to my people."²¹ On the question of leadership of the Dalit-Bahujan movement he never depended on anybody. He believed in the principle of self-help. Dr. Ambedkar had no confusion in his mind. He never considered it possible for the oppressors to become the liberator of the oppressed. "Lost rights are never regained", Ambedkar encouraged his followers, "by begging, and by appeals to the conscience of usurpers, but by relentless struggle".²² He views that nothing is achieved without sacrifice. To get a thing you have to pay something. Therefore, Babasaheb advised his people to be courageous, brave and lion-hearted. He clarified: "Goats are used for sacrificial offerings and not lions".²³ Thus, his Final Words of advice was 'Educate, Agitate and Organise', have faith in yourselves and never lose hope. I shall always be with you as I know you will be with me.²⁴ Dr. Ambedkar said:

*I have built the house for you and it is up to you to maintain it in proper order. I have planted the tree, if you water it, you will enjoy the fruits and you will be able to enjoy its shade, if not, you will have to sit in the sun. Our community will be ruined. So every Scheduled Caste should come under the banner of the Scheduled Caste Federation and make it more powerful. Only if we unite, we can achieve something. United we stand and divided we fall.*²⁵

CONCLUSION

Thus the vision of Ambedkar expected that we must have a government in which the men in power will give their undivided allegiance to the best interest of the country. We must have a government in which men in power knowing where obedience will end and resistance will begin will not be afraid to amend the social and economic code of life which dictates of justice and expediency so urgently call for. This was the real aim of state socialism, through which he tried to fulfil the betterment of millions of poor.

By any standard Ambedkar may be regarded as the shining star among the revolutionaries of our time. Babasaheb Ambedkar was a great political thinker and social revolutionary that modern India had produced. His pragmatic approaches to political and social problems enabled him to become the greatest revolutionary of this century. But his revolution is not to be delivered through war and violence; it is to come through law and democracy.²⁶ The entire philosophical, ethical and religious reflections of Ambedkar are grounded in humanism, because the proper object of his study is man, the empirical man, who lives and behaves in society. The inherent idea of his thought is that man is the measure of all things, i.e., the true measure of man is worth, not birth.²⁷

Dr. Ambedkar whose earnest effort made India a Democratic, Social and Secular country which is today known as one of the best successful democratic country and also the Largest Democracy of the world. He presented the country a temple like the Constitution. And he entrusted the people of India with the task of protecting this temple. He accepted the Buddhist religion as the Indian religion based on equality, liberty and fraternity.

Finally, he had the vision of to unite the down-trodden, the oppressed in a manner which no other social reformer in India had thought of before. He interpreted justice and social equality as inalienable human right that a state must ensure for its citizens. For the first time, the great mass of India's poverty-stricken, illiterate, oppressed, tortured and absolutely marginalized millions were united as citizens, with all the citizenship rights acquired to them after their denial to them that went unquestioned in the thousands of years of Indian history. This was Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's greatest contribution to the nation and whose far-reaching implications will be felt in the coming years with the emergence of a new India where the Dalit-Bahujan mass will be increasingly able to develop themselves, shape their own destiny by following the concrete paths shown by Dr. Ambedkar and be able to steer

the country to new horizons. As implied by Eleanor Zelliott, Ambedkar has become a symbol of total commitment against social injustice and also achievement against all odds, including non-Dalit social causes.²⁸ The true assessment of Ambedkar's movement is that it has shown how a social impossibility, in the framework of a very rigid social system, can have success in altering the socio-political set-up within such a small span of time. In a way, the Dalits in India have gained more due to the political rights granted to them by the constitution the drafting of which was mostly prepared and coordinated by Dr. Ambedkar, than the blacks in the USA have gained through the Civil rights movements. It is known that even after the passing of many Civil rights, the racial problems in the United States could not be solved entirely because of the still existing undercurrents of colour prejudices among the whites reflected in various private sectors. The new identity that the Ambedkar ideology gifts to the Dalits not only has earned a socio-political discourse of its own, but has also been able to cut across the national boundaries to accommodate every oppressed groups giving them courage to challenge any oppressive world systems.

¹ Dalit Voice, English Fortnightly, 15th June, 1983 & Dalit Voice, April 16-30, 2006, p.23.

² Murugkar Lata, Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra. A Sociological Appraisal, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1991, p.6.

³ Jogdand P.G, Dalit movement in Maharashtra, Kanaka Publication, New Delhi, 1999, p-71. Dalit Voice, April 16-30, 2006, p.23.

⁴ Gupta C.B., 'The Harijan in Rebellion: Case For the Removal of Untouchability', (Bombay: D.B. Taraporewala Sons & Co., (1934).

⁵ Moon Vasant, ed, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Higher Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Mumbai, Vol-2, 1882, pp.303-305.

⁶ Narake Hari, ed, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, op. cit., vol- 17, part-3, 2003, pp-388-389/ Janata, dated 1st May.

⁷ Ibid., p.48/ Moon Vasant, ed, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, op. cit., Vol-2, 1882, pp.503-505.

⁸ Keer Dhananjay, Dr. Ambedkar Life and Mission, Popular Prakashan, Mumbai, 2003, p.196.

⁹ Narake Hari, ed, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, op. cit., vol- 17, prt-3, p.82.

¹⁰ Ambedkar, Mr. Gandhi And the Emancipation of the Untouchables, Bheem Patrica publications, jullandhar, 1945, p.9.

¹¹ Narake Hari, ed, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, op. cit., vol- 17, part-3, p.306.

¹² Ibid., pp.306.

¹³ Ibid., p.236.

¹⁴ Narake Hari, ed, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, op. cit., vol- 17, prt-3, p.79/ Janata, dated 14th May 1932.

¹⁵ Keer, Dr. Ambedkar, op. cit., p.191.

¹⁶ Narake Hari, ed, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, op. cit., vol- 17, part-3, p.332.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.298.

¹⁸ Omvedt Gail, Ambedkar, Toward an Enlightened World, Viking Penguin Books P Ltd, New Delhi, 2004, pp.157-8.

¹⁹ Zelliott Eleanor, 'The Social and Political Thought of B.R. Ambedkar', in Thomas Pantham and Kenneth L. Deutsch ed, Political Thought in Modern India, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1986 pp.162-163.

²⁰ Keer Dhananjay, Dr. Ambedkar, Life and Mission, Popular Prakashan, Mumbai, 2003, p.465.

²¹ Ibid, pp.494-495.

²² Ibid, p.470.

²³ Ibid, p.82.

²⁴ Narake Hari, ed, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Higher Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Mumbai, vol-17, part-III, 2003, pp.275-76

²⁵ Ibid, op. cit, vol-17, Part- III, p.421.

²⁶ Ahluwalia B.K and Shashied, B.R. Ambedkar and Human Rights, Vivek Publishing Co. Delhi, 1981, pp.97-98.

²⁷ Jatava D.R, Social Philosophy of B.R. Ambedkar, National Publishing House, 1997, Jaipur, p.252.

²⁸ Zelliott Eleanor, 'The meaning of Ambedkar,' in Ghanshyam Shah ed, Dalit Identity and Politics, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2001, p.139.