

Caste Hierarchy and Democracy: Dr B.R. Ambedkar's Approach

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the characteristics specific to Dr B. R. Ambedkar's understanding of caste, untouchability, and social-hierarchy and poses the following questions: 1. Under what conditions do these concepts come to occupy the centre stage? 2. How do we explain the continuing relevance of these concepts in contemporary times? 3. How we can visualize in the current juncture, the further journey of the movement envisaged by Dr Ambedkar?

KEYWORDS: *Caste, hierarchy, untouchables, Varna, Jāti, privilege, equality, freedom, fraternity, co-existence*

INTRODUCTION

Dr B. R Ambedkar was essentially a pragmatic humanist, who fostered heartfelt concern for the suffering humanity. He stood for a social system which would be based on the equal relation between all Indians in all aspects of life. He closely studied the exploitation of the Shudras and other castes who are described as having a so-called comparatively lower status than the Brahmins. This article is an attempt to examine Dr Ambedkar's observations regarding caste-based exploitation.

Caste is not an Indian word but is derived from the Portuguese word *Casta*, meaning 'pure breed'. There are various terms which approximate it in Indian languages. There is the widely used concept of *Varna*, which refers to a notional all-India fourfold division of society into estates based on occupation. Then there is the term *Jāti* which refers to named

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endogamous groups, which are usually more or less localized or at least have a regional base. In the *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, published in 1930, Kroeber cited a definition of caste as ‘an endogamous and hereditary subdivision of an ethnic unit occupying a position of superior or inferior rank or social esteem in comparison with other subdivision.’

From the inception of our *Dharmasāstras* these concepts are there, for instance, in texts such as *Manusmṛti (Manu Samhita)*, *Vedas*, *Upanisada*, *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata*. In the *Vedas*, some common duties like harmlessness, truthfulness, non-stealing, purity and self-restraint are mentioned for four castes. It is suggested that hatred, pride, worth and cruelty should be eschewed. The specific duties of all the castes namely *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaisya* and *Shudras* are mentioned and the duties are advised to be performed with great care. Among four castes in the society the supremacy of caste system was also to be maintained at the time as Manu recognized in his *Manusmṛti (Manu Samhita)* that *Brahmins* are the supreme caste among all the four castes in the society.

In *Mahābhārata*, like *Manusmṛti*, specific duties relating to the four stages of life *Āsramadharma* are also mentioned. As in *Manusmṛti*, here too *Brahmin* is recognized as the master of the society. All the castes can perform daily obligatory duties within the hierarchical system. One can, however, argue that the *Mahābhārata* was liberal enough to give a rational evaluation of the caste. One who is born into a *Brahmin* family and behaved like the *Shudras* had to be considered a *Shudra*. One who is born into a *Shudra* family but learning and acquiring knowledge and wisdom like a *Brahmin* should be considered as *Brahmin*. So the doctrine of *Karma* (merits and demerits of actions done in previous birth) provided a stabilizing ideological underpinning. The doctrine of *Karma* was certainly a conservative one, but it did not by any means ‘make the good for fortune of the privileged more enjoyable to the underprivileged’ according to Max Weber. Stability was ensured, however, by the fact that the lowest castes ‘had more to win through ritual correctness’ than any kind of social and political innovation. Similar concept is also entrenched in *Ramayana* where supremacy of *Brahmin* is also recognized. All the *epics* exercise a paramount influence upon the mind of the Indians, especially the Hindus. The word ‘Hindu’ is used differently in three different context; constitutional, religious and social.

Hindu is primarily used in a social rather than religious or constitutional context. The word has a broad meaning in its conceptual and practical applications. It includes not only one religion but several *Dharmas*, sects, sub-sects, and social group whose national interests are the same. Like any other religion, Hinduism has been reinterpreted by the theologians from time to time. Many Hindu reformers believe that Hinduism has existed during the Vedic period. Since the early nineteenth century their main agenda was to reformulate and rejuvenate Hinduism.

Around the beginning of the twentieth century, the concept of caste made a sideways transition from the colonialist discourse. It is important to note here Max Weber and Celestin Bouglè's sociological understanding of castes. According to Weber 'castes is animated by a kind of ritualism, a psychic attitude set.' It was never completely rigid since it did not prevent people working together in factories and offices in the modern world. On the other hand, in *Essay on the Caste System*, published in 1908, Bouglè stresses the systematic aspect of castes. For him this system is based on the pervasive enactment of three principles: 1. hereditary specialization of occupation, 2. hierarchical order, and 3. principle of repulsion. Hence caste system is an inseparable part of those ideologies which have been considered as Hindu ideology since the eleventh century.

Soon after from every point of view a kind of hierarchical pattern was negatively influenced, hence sacrifices from the so-called lower castes was projected as mandatory. Thus one type of oppression, slavery, and undue advantages was always supported and a kind of rigidity was maintained in the classical social system. A blind faith in the name of religious rules and regulations helped to tight this hierarchical grip over caste system then and it continues even now. Such rigidity in the caste system was first introduced at that time by the custom of endogamy. On the other hand, exogamy was highly depreciated in the society. Such custom and practices got codified in the *Dharmasāstras*, through which the practice of untouchability was perpetuated in its worst form. The interesting thing about caste in classic caste systems is that they are conceived as both different and unequal. But in the Indian caste system, the notion of "Difference" is more salient than inequality, because it is more useful.

Conditions for the rise of untouchability and caste hierarchy

To start with we must distinguish the theoretical concept of untouchability from its practical aspects. Upsurge of the untouchables essentially happened only as a weapon of the so called upper class *Brahmins* who asserted their supremacy over all other existing classes of the society. Class is an economic concept, according to Max Weber. For him, classes are not communities but exist where people share a 'specific component of their life chances', which is determined by the economic position. This weapon was required for maintaining undue authority in the society, especially in times of crisis of legitimacy. Untouchability started with endogamous marriage system. Dr Ambedkar observed that in the name of caste system people are not only exploited socially, economically or politically but are completely demoralized and dehumanized. Untouchables are an outcome of a caste system that actually gives bestial treatment to the humans. For him, *Dharmasāstras* actually degrade some human beings as slaves, makes them devoid of intellect, denies them the right of education and right to property, and forbids their performing of religious services. Undoubtedly all these show that the traditional social order was based on the discrimination and inequality, according to Dr Ambedkar. He was determined to break all the barriers imposed on human beings in the name of religion, superiority by birth, subordination etc.

He realized that the traditional caste system closes the door of education in a very subtle way. So, this is the gateway to change the condition of society. Untouchability or the caste system triggers hatred against hapless people whose basic human rights are withered from the society. A drastic shift from optimism to pessimism took place in the society due to the caste system. There was no place for creativity, freedom, equality and fraternity, but only misery, oppression, exploitation, subordination came into existence. All these inevitably arrange the condition of degradation of human being that ensures the existence of caste hierarchy.

Untouchability or caste hierarchy does not propose any social agenda to transcend the problems of people but instead causes political and economic crisis. Due to such crisis of mass identity, basic right to live, not to die due to hunger or poverty leads one to the pathway of revolution. Social stasis from the end of the so-called upper caste makes untouchability or caste hierarchy successful, while leaving behind no scope of participation

in any field, no exercise of freedom of speech, and leading to inequality and injustice for the lower castes. Untouchables are the outcome of caste hierarchy caused by the hegemony of the upper class, Brahmans. This strengthens their overall undue hegemony and monopoly in the society. Hence, under such conditions, democracy confront a severe threat. Dr Ambedkar's observation stated above about caste being conducive to the growth of inequality, injustice, and cruelty is an emphatic indication of how democracy is under threat.

The Stasis under Democracy

Let us see now how the conditions we have drawn from Dr. Ambedkar's observation stated above as being conducive to the growth of inequality, injustice and cruelty are found under a democratic society in a country like India. Castes hierarchy is the outcome of the hegemony of upper class of Brahman over the untouchables. Under such circumstances the trinity of democracy, i.e., the three principles of life—liberty, equality and fraternity are swept under the carpet. In a country like India, caste system is not taken as serious a matter of concern as it should be. Economic factors always overburden the caste system, so the actual problem is never diagnosed properly. Dr Ambedkar categorically stated that, economic democracy or political democracy will not last unless there lies at the base of it, a social democracy. For him, social relationship is the key to democracy. So, coexistence is not optional in this world; it is the very foundation of life. Diversity and inclusivity is not just toleration of difference; it is empathy, compassion and solidarity for all forms of social formation, thus making coexistence as mandatory to survive. Dr Ambedkar always searched the roots of the democracy in social relationship, in terms of association and participation between the people who form a society. Isolation and exclusiveness of one section of citizens from others cannot help in the development of democracy. Equity and inclusion are not about distributing profits and goodies among discrete individuals who are diverse from us. But it is about empathetic connections based on respect, dignity and unconditional gratitude.

Conspicuously, Dr Ambedkar observed that the people in India are compelled to live a contradictory or dual life within a democratic structure. Having equality in politics by securing the right to vote, and inequality in social and economic life with caste

hierarchy, makes democracy a farce in its true sense. Any privilege of one section on the basis of birth and religion should not be the cause of discrimination of other section. Any religious belief and custom that encourages such discrimination should be abolished. In order to establish a rational social order in the society, common men should abide by the moral code, not by any caste hierarchy or religion. So, caste system and religion in the Indian society needs to be purged by upsurging equality, liberty, fraternity, and through a religion which is wrapped up in morality. He believes in the liberating power of religion. For him religion is for man and man is not for religion. But the Hindu religion does not think of the common people but for a specific group of people. Ambedkar, therefore, made efforts to purge Hinduism by introducing the idea of a casteless religion or society. This makes his shift to Buddhism to form a casteless society—an ideal society where people get equal opportunity to exercise their freedom, creativity, and express religious belief to better their lives.

But the present-day democracy does not ensure such basic necessary conditions. The vector of caste hierarchy keeps increasing everywhere covertly or overtly. Ex-ante approaches of people towards their fellow being causes an inequality everywhere in the globalized era. Due to such ex-ante tendency towards caste system, the untouchables unfortunately became a defining characteristic of the social order in India. Here is a bird's eye view on this topic from the ancient to the present times:

1. Observation of Megasthenes' great work *Indica*.
2. India under various foreign invaders e.g. Mongal, Shah, Khilji, Pathan, East India company etc.
3. Independent India.

In the great work of Megasthenes, *Indica*, the information about caste system is mentioned. It stated that "The population of India is divided into 7 endogamous and hierarchy castes." In his description about Indian society there was no slave. On this point, the famous historian Romila Thapar says that the subtle distinction between slave and others was not understood by Megasthenes. There are lots of debates about the caste system given by Megasthenes in *Indica*. The Indian texts mentioned only four social classes or Varna while Megasthenes mentioned seven types of castes in the Indian society: 1.

Philosophers 2. Farmers 3. Herders 4. Artisans 5. Military 6. Observers, and 7. Councillors and Assessors. If we carefully observe the division or categorization about the caste or Varna given by Megasthenes, it appears to be based on economic divisions and social role, rather than privilege centric division or religious belief-based caste. So it can be inferred from the Indian textual perspective that the *Varnas* originated as economic division not as a social division. According to some historians, Megasthenes' account of caste or *Varna* system may have been misinterpreted by later authors.

Now let us concentrate on the second point. Division and subdivision among caste system in ancient India under various foreign invaders is an important factor for our analysis of the present-day caste situation. In the Indian history, colonial administration and their attitude towards the Indian caste system actually design the social, economic and political pattern of the present India. India was shaped as a multidimensional cultural land under foreign invaders like Mongal, Shah, Khilji, Pathan, East India Company etc. After that time, specifically under East India Company's diplomatic and strategic attitude and policies, affected Indian traditional caste system and other aspects from its root. Colonial legacy found out an academic and diplomatic interest in Indian society and caste system. After 1857, the first census was started in 1871 and second census was recorded in 1881. This period actually determined the fate of Indian social political ambience. A very diplomatic strategy, the census brought out an intra- and inter-caste division among the four sets of caste formation. The division of *Varna* was much primitive than caste. The introduction of a sub-division of intra and inter caste among the Hindus made the classical Indian caste system much worse at that time. So a kind of "Sudrāyan" comes to the forefront as a diplomatic outcome of colonial East India Company. This actually helps the colonial legacy to maintain their power to rule over a country like India. The strategic bifurcation in the Hindu society was discriminative and exploitative in nature. By making this subdivision among the Hindus as *Kāyastha*, *Vaishya*, *Sudra* etc., the British rulers controlled the whole society in the name of social hierarchy where no social honour was availed by the people or group of divided caste members. In this process of "Sudrāyan," the intra-inter caste hierarchy reached to its worst peak in the social order in Indian Hindu society. So, intra caste hierarchy, an outcome of Colonial British diplomacy, strengthened

the most important policy or mechanism to rule over the Indians—Divide and Rule Policy. From 1911 to 1931, in these crucial three decades, caste sentiment played a crucial role in designing and determining the social and political periphery of the Indians on socio-political ground.

After this drastic change in Indian history, social caste formation or *Varna* system, due to Colonial policies, was, in a sense, impacted negatively. *Sudrāyan* process was implemented to promote or establish undue authority and advantage over the mass not in favour of equality, freedom or fraternity. The classical *Varna* system rather got shaped as having a much more complex and non-human form than before. No behavioural changes are found in the division and subdivision of intra and inter caste formation made by Colonial rules. The caste system legitimized and perpetuated hierarchy and inequality based on birth under British colonial rule. Democratic Reformers of Indian society had to fight against the prevalent caste ideology irrespective of political ideology for the democratic transformation after colonial rule. Reformers are divided into two groups—one wished to annihilate the caste system and others wanted to reform the caste system. Second group emphasized the pattern of changing behaviour and belief system on ethical ground. On the other hand, the first group mainly wanted to change the economic and political structure to create equal opportunity for all. As a result, due to the pressures built up by the reformers and the deprived groups, British rulers were bound to provide reservations in jobs and also in political affairs too. But according to Ghanshyam Shah this was one kind of pure political strategy of British rule. “Reservation is one of the methods of state intervention to provide a helping hand to those who have been traditionally deprived in the caste structure” according to Shah. But it is not enough to reform or annihilate the caste system; the act has to be accompanied with the support of other socio-political forces.

Now let us move to the third point. Here I try to find out those reasons that play a crucial role behind the overall representation of the current social picture. The period from 1911 to 1931 was the period of caste centric-census. But after 1931, the caste sentiment in Hindu society or rather Indian society was slowly turned, diplomatically in the other measure—so called lower caste people were considered to be privileged due to their very

identity. Thus appeared reservation in the form of the 'Schedule'. The reason behind this fact may be the ideal of independence. At that time patriotic sentiment occupied the central place instead of the concerns of caste. India was united by patriotic sentiment and people just wanted to be free from colonial rule of the British at any cost. Here one needs to mention that actually no substantial changes came to the Indian society in respect of caste, even after the glorious 75 years of independence of India. The point is the clash of national and regional multi political party interests regarding the caste issue. In order to improve the condition of a caste based system in post-independent India, the maker of Indian constitution Dr Ambedkar struggled to make a casteless society by introducing reservation policy. In this regard, at that time, in 1953 Kaka Kalelkar Commission, in 1977 Mandal Commission and in 2005 Sachar Commission were formed to analyse the condition of socially educationally backward classes in Indian society.

In 1953 the Kaka Kalelkar Commission was formed to determine the criteria to be adopted in considering whether any section of people should be treated as socially and educationally backward. The committee investigated not only those difficulties that are encountered by the backward classes but also the occupations that decrease the dignity of those people. Very astonishingly in this project, the commission found 2,399 (aprox.) division and subdivision of castes and communities in India. To execute the purpose, the Kalelkar Commission mentioned some criteria to be determine as backward. These are—

1. Low social position in the caste hierarchy
2. Lack of educational progress
3. Inadequate representation in Government job service
4. Inadequate representation in the field of trade, commerce and industry

From the above findings of the committee, the investigation of caste was taken as the key factor in making a list of backward classes. According to Kalekar commission's report, the social and educational promotion of backward classes can minimize the problem of backward classes. Their recommendation includes the following:

1. Steps should be taken up to remove such difficulties and improve their social and educational condition.
2. Grants should be made available.

3. 70% of Indian population was considered backward.

In this report the emphasis is given on a group or class of people and no attempt was made to know the backwardness of individuals of a caste. However, the other view is that the individual and family should be treated as the basis of backwardness. In addition to that, according to the commission's report, everything else was assessed, like poverty, residence and occupation. The commission also recommended that the real inequality could be removed from the society by eliminating social discrimination and distinctions. The concept of the declassified was also introduced by the commission. As the concept of caste is vague and multifaceted concept, the individual and family should be the best criteria to determine the backwardness. In the report, caste is also projected as the pitfall that goes against the democracy.

In 1977, after the formation of Janata Government under the leadership of Morarji Desai, another committee—Mondal Commission was formed for the same purpose. In recent times, in 2005, Sachar Commission was formed to observe the condition of the backward classes in the society. From the historical point of view, all the above commissions' reports were not implemented according to the call of the time. The problem or clash of the interests of the centre and the states, in political and social issues, affected the adequate implementation of the recommendations in question. By replacing the Commission's recommendation, an emphasis was put on the state's demand the basic criteria for backwardness be the economic condition. So a shift was made from the main structural problem to another aspect of the society. That led to a failure of Dr Ambedkar's lifetime struggle due to statist political interests. The concept of casteless India withered from the society for the narrow socio-political interests.

All the factors, "pre" and "post" independence, go against Dr Ambedkar's intention and projection of making a casteless India. That actually gives a weak foundation of democracy of India. All we need to overcome from exploitative system and social crisis, to develop democracy is to abolish any type of hierarchy, inequality, and suppression of basic rights. Our goalposts should be changed and we must make our resources sustainable for all not for few. Democratization is not possible without the annihilation of caste in a country like India. But at the same time an inhuman fact is noticed and that is, even now

globalized Democracy, in the name of equality, reproduces a form of slave mentality. Such type of mental state brings human despondency that actually ruins the pillar of democracy. This mechanism promotes not only silence and cynicism but an elusive hegemony and monopoly, instead of the trinity of Democracy. Such situation never helps anyone to understand the power of diversity from a place of privilege. Hence, we actually detach ourselves from being “Ubuntu”. According to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, “Ubuntu” is the essence of being human. For him, Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that one cannot exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. One cannot be human all by oneself, and when one possesses this quality of Ubuntu he/she is known for generosity. Similar to this is Dr Ambedkar’s lifelong struggle which aimed at bringing out such type of humanistic approach to save not only Democracy but humanity in general. His vision made society see humanity from a new and fresh perspective. Such unforgettable contributions from Dr Ambedkar, an intellectual and untouchable leader always guide us to form a casteless system where people live their lives with unconditional empathy, dignity, respect and gratitude. The philosophy of Humanism, propounded by Dr Ambedkar, should be adopted by all societies.

Conclusion

Logical approach of Dr Ambedkar is very important but the intention and motivation to implement the same is absent in present society. May be this is the very farce of History. Ballāl Sen introduced *Koulinya*, with the *Vidhāna* or order, but that order was not at all obeyed. Dr Ambedkar also proposed to monitor the S.C. and S. T. community’s developments for a certain time span and to observe the formation of creamy layer and this idea has almost lost meaning or merit in our present society. To address the crisis, a three-step hypothesis can be drawn according to me.

1. To be free from the age old prejudices with the logical judgment of the situation in the context with historical incidents.
2. Change the behavioural pattern in every one’s personal periphery layer, and
3. The society should be free from the caste sentiment and casteist beliefs.

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