

AMBEDKAR: THE QUESTION OF CASTE AND CONVERSION

Aditi Chaudhary*
Anjali Kumari**

ABSTRACT

*The paper aims to understand how a section of people known as 'Brahmanas' were labeled as 'elite' whereas, another was termed as 'Untouchables' due to division into four varnas as described in **Manusmriti**. Due to this caste division, we will analyze Ambedkar's conversion to Buddha dhamma and his views on the inclusion of socially excluded classes. The central theme of the paper revolves around the inquiry: does conversion result in the inclusion of the excluded classes? By going through incidents recorded in historical case studies, we will try to understand the gravity of the situation. Our motive through this paper is to figure out how the struggle for equality that began in pre-independent India continues.*

Keywords: Caste, Untouchability, Religion, Conversion.

Introduction

"Though, I was born a Hindu, I solemnly assure you that I will not die as a Hindu"

"B.R. Ambedkar, Writings, and Speeches: A Ready Reference Manual"

Every day through newspapers, magazines and various online resources we come across cases of violence committed in the name of caste, religion, ethnicity and so on against the people belonging to lower castes in the society, degrading pictures of manual scavengers dying in the sewer, the mob lynchings, atrocities against Dalits and communal riots is the new normal. The religion which discriminates between two people is thought to be partial yet, in India, every religion has a caste-based division, those who are considered to be from lower strata or "Untouchables" in their religion are being discriminated against and hence, excluded from the society. In India, it has been practiced from ancient times that in a society a person is not identified as an individual but rather on his/her caste. Indian society is divided into many groups, having its grounds based on social, economic, caste, class, ethnicity, and religion.

On the one hand, the constitution of India, which bestows upon every citizen the fundamental right to equality, the abolition of untouchability, the right to freedom of religion, cultural and educational rights which according to the framers of our constitution were supposed to bring out the best in our society and make it an ideal one. The formation of the constitutionality of these rights came from the experiences of colonial India and the long history of injustice before it. India was constitutionally a democratic country but little was known to the leaders that this dream was far from achievement due to orthodox mindset of the inhabitants.

The father of our constitution Dr. BR Ambedkar, who was born in an untouchable Hindu family, had to face discrimination and inequality because of the caste system which is present in our Indian society which later led to his conversion into Buddha Dhamma. As stated in multiple of his writings and books or through his undelivered speech, "Annihilation of caste" he talked about the evils prevalent in Indian society and caste as the greatest of them all. The various instances where caste atrocities were inflicted upon the people who belonged to a lower caste namely, "untouchables" by the high caste Hindus found a mention by Ambedkar in his speech.

* PhD Student, Career Point University, Kota, Rajasthan, India.

** MA (Political Science), Delhi University, Delhi, India.

The origin of the institution of caste could be traced from the ancient Hindu text **Manusmriti** where a division of the society into four varnas can be seen into the brahmins, kshatriya, vaishya, and Shudras. The hierarchical order was based on the purity or pollution in comparison to others. This division of society as said by many scholars was originally not based on birth but over time, it gained a rigid structure that resulted in discrimination based on birth in a certain caste. Some people were not given a place even into the fourth varna and therefore, were known as "Untouchables", the lowest of all.

Dr. Ambedkar is seen as a reformer in true sense as he for forty years of his life struggled with this pain of inequality and discrimination, a practice commonly followed by all high caste Hindus against their subordinates.

What is Social Exclusion?

The belief in the concept of freedom, justice, equality, and fraternity became the dominant ideology after the American and French revolution which led to the development of the concept of 'social exclusion' vis-a-vis 'social inclusion'. In our country people were excluded or included in jobs of economic importance such as production or distribution of various goods of mass consumption according to the caste they belonged to. As supported by various scholars it was thought that during the British colonial rule there was a spread of print media, expansion of communication network, the reach of railways to remotest areas which helped in mobilization of caste groups and strengthening their bases. For example, even during 'British Raj' those who were employed by them were given priorities based on their religion and if they were a Hindu they were preferred based on the caste they belonged to and if a person belonged to a lower section they were treated like garbage. According to the literature provided by social science, "social exclusion" was defined as, "the process through which individuals belonging to some groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society in which they live". The consequences had the same adverse effect on unfavourable inclusions as that which were met by unfavourable inclusions. When it comes to justifying the exclusion of people from lower classes of the society and then branding them as "untouchables" religious justifications were put to use claiming that they were supposed to suffer on the basis of their "karma" and "dharma". Despite the use of religious texts it was often said the "untouchables" faced what they were ought to according to their nature.

In 1947 after India had its freedom and worldwide declared itself to be a democratic state which had adopted a putdown constitution stating that if "untouchability" is practiced under any form or in any circumstance it would be treated as an offence which would not go unpunished under articles 17 and 18 and on the other hand, various provisions were made to safeguard the "Depressed Classes" from facing discrimination in any form. Despite the formation of new laws, it was noticed that social exclusion and on the same ground discrimination continued to be in action in one or the other form with newer strategies wearing a political mask at times.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and his conversion to Buddha Dhamma

"This conversion has given me enormous satisfaction and pleasure unimaginable. I feel as if I have been liberated from hell".

According to Ambedkar, "the word religion is an indefinite word with no fixed meaning rather it has many meanings". Most natural phenomenon's such as lightning in the sky, rain, and flood or famine the occurrence of which were beyond the comprehension of the primitive man were explained justifying it as the ways of God to men i.e using religious texts. Religion thus was regarded as magic.

Dr. Ambedkar chose Buddha Dhamma on the pretext that he thought it had elements that were desirable of a religion. Religion is believed to be unique and thus differs from an individual to another individual in terms of understanding and therefore, it should be kept to oneself. One must not allow it to play its part in public life leading it towards a creation of destruction of a society's peace. Contrary to this Buddha Dhamma is seen as social, fundamental and essential. Dhamma was defined as, "it is righteousness; this means the right relations between man and man in all spheres of life". Dr. Ambedkar found the path through which he could develop the essential "social and moral conscience" of the society through which he was about to establish a democratic society through Buddhism. He was of the opinion that the spirit of Buddhism did not lay in the elimination of suffering - which only brings negativity and is incidental in nature, but in the path towards the attainment of excellency, which often resulted as positive and fundamental - i.e. through these basic idea Dr. Ambedkar aimed at the establishment of a democratic society. With a motive of making India a better country Dr. Ambedkar declared his mission to make India as "Prabuddha Bharat, an Enlightened India".

It was because of such liberated identity of Buddhist people who were free from all the shackles of caste they had the liberty to choose their sphere of work against the Hindu notion of society, where a man, when born in a certain caste, was forced to do the work assigned to that caste only. Thus, we can see that the freedom to choose one's way of life was absent in this caste-based Hindu society.

When in 1927 "Mahad Satyagraha" was ongoing the aim of the movement as declared by Dr. Ambedkar was, "not only removing our disabilities but also at bringing about a social revolution that will remove all man-made barriers of caste by providing equal opportunities to all to rise to the highest position and making no distinction between man and man and also, so far as civic rights are concerned".

Questions by Hindu over Caste

There were counter questions asked by higher-caste Hindus regarding the division and why were only Hindus blamed for it, to which Ambedkar said that the castes existed even in Christians, Mahomedans, and Sikhs. So if we were to look into the differences between the two, the ties between a non- Hindu were existent and strong whereas in the case of caste Hindus it was absent. In the case of a Mahomedan or a Sikh, a person from their caste is Mahomedan or a Sikh unlike how in Hinduism you were bound to find the caste of a person. Being a Hindu was not enough of an identity. The most important point of difference between the two is that in the case of a non- Hindu caste there was no religious dogma. He countered the arguments given by Prof S. Radhakrishnan in his "Hindu View of Life".

Prof Radhakrishnan: says that the religion (Hinduism) has survived for so many years, this shows that the "Hindu culture possesses some vitality". Ambedkar here stated that it is not the question of survival or death but the question of how the community survives. Is it honorable?

Ambedkar on the Inclusion of Excluded

The cared for aspiration for the inclusion of all as equals in a society has not come true yet, and the reasons were well known for Ambedkar. The absolute contradictions prevalent in our society led to a result towards a situation where the laws are made in a manner that the laws show as if they are on the side of equality whereas, the customs that come into practice in the daily lives of the people are on the side of inequality. (From Dowry to several forms of corruption, Caste violence, and Gender violence, etc..)

For the explanation of the irony of the situation a term known as "incompatibility of ideologies" was used. "Indians today are governed by two different ideologies. Their political ideal set out in the preamble of the Constitution affirms a life of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Their social ideal embodied in their religion denies them" (Keer,p. 459). He warned that "political democracy cannot succeed where there is no social and economic democracy (Das, Vol-I.30)".

Religion: Socially Excluded Class

A struggle for equality that has been in action for a long time now, India's "depressed class", or "untouchables", have often exercised the possibility of conversion from Hinduism to any other religion like Islam or Christianity or Buddhism with the aspiration of doing better in their lives. They had to believe that in Hinduism the caste division that was based on "varna ashrams" had been the cause of the maltreatment and marginalisation met by them from the hands of the society. But later upon conversion, when the same mistreatment was seen in other forms in other religions, they had a realisation that even this step of conversion could not let them far off better in their lives. In a letter which was written by M. Mary John, president of "The Dalit Christian Liberation Movement" to Pope John Paul II during the visit in 1999 to India spoke of the multitude of demeanour met by the "Dalit Christians" within the churches in India. The "depressed classes" were subject to oppression and persecution by "the hierarchy, the congregation, the authorities and the institution of the Catholic churches". Even though denunciation of such practices by the "Catholic Bishop Conference" of India there was a persistence of caste discrimination among Christian communities. As pointed out by the State Commission that they size twice the amount of discrimination as compared to other castes. When they are being motivated to convert to a different religion they are shown a false Utopian society where they are tricked into believing that they are being welcomed into an egalitarian society which is free from the shackles of "untouchability and caste".

Separation of quarters can be seen in Sikh worship places for "Dalit Sikhs". When it comes to marriage a high-caste Muslim is not allowed to marry one below their caste especially "Dalit Muslims". Social mobility in church is not possible for a "Dalit Christian" where they are not even allowed to occupy the pews which are meant for high-caste Christians. When it comes to Buddhist Monasteries even they are unable to help the converts against the distinctions based on the practices that are still in continuation.

When “Depressed classes” take the decision of conversion they make the common mistake of safeguarding themselves from the laws made for their protection by the Indian Constitution in a hurry to free themselves from the clutches of Hinduism. The above statement can be evidenced by giving the example of what happened in 1981, when in Southern parts of India several people coming from “Depressed classes” mass converted to Islam in order to free from social victimization only to later realize that they have given up the few privileges provided to them as “Schedule Caste Hindus”. Now after conversion they fight for what was provided to them earlier. The futility of the exercise comes to notice when even after conversion they have rebranded themselves as “Dalits” to fight for some special rights and privileges. After conversion the population of “Depressed classes” as Hindus is 82%, 12% as Muslims and the remaining less than 3% as Christians. This social status that has been assigned to them has not provided any solution to the economic problems of unemployment and poverty that they have to live in. This justification to social discrimination has been given by stating that they are entitled to live in such conditions because it has been justified in different religions in different forms.

Impact of Exclusion on “Depressed Classes”

Ever since the times of Vedic culture the impact of exclusion faced by “Depressed classes” has had an adverse effect on them making them suffer from an inferiority complex which led to a psychological baggage they have carried till the present time which led them to depend on people from other high caste for their sustenance. Even in contemporary times people still remain ignorant towards the “Social exclusion” in various spheres of life faced by a person belonging to a “depressed class” leading to “social injustice”. To make people aware, recently a movie was released to showcase the downtrodden condition faced by these people. To justify my research I quote a study made in 2006 on the “untouchables” in the rural parts of the country covering 565 villages in 11 states showed the vast areas to which this practice was still inculcated into daily lives despite being officially banned by the Indian Constitution.

In Religion and Rites

- 64% of dalits are restricted from entering the hindu temples.
- 50% of village dalits prevented from accessing discrimination grounds.
- In private spheres,
- 73% of village dalits were not permitted to enter non-dalit homes.
- 35.8% of dalits were denied entry into village shops.

Crimes Against Dalits

According to official Indian crime statistics averaged over the period 2001-2005.

- 27 cases of atrocities against dalits every day.
- 13 dalits are murdered every week.
- 5 dalits homes burnt every week.
- 6 dalits kidnapped or abducted every week.
- 3 dalit women raped every day.
- 11 dalits beaten every hour and a crime committed against a dalit every 18 minutes.

Analysis

As Antonio Gramsci has mentioned, any revolution in a country is started by the intellectuals of that state, the “organic individuals” who rise from the masses and provide theories and leadership to the mass revolution and a leadership to the revolution against oppression and the injustices. In India, the intellectual class is Brahmins yet that is not the case as people from other castes are working equally hard to achieve their life goals. It seems impossible that the brahmins will let anyone challenge and disregard their authority. Also, the graded inequality makes it even harder because every caste enjoys its authority over the other. Reasons and morality are the two most important things for bringing social reform, but Hinduism does not allow any Hindus to possess those. Hinduism is not a religion with principles but a religion with rules, and on one hand, principles are guided by reason the other hand rules are merely to follow.

Conclusion

The paper concludes that the caste system that has been prevalent for so many years in the past cannot be changed in a period of two-three years or by converting to any other religion. It is a tag that sticks to the people from their birth to their death. It is a punishment given to lower caste people for

no reason. This society has followed and will continue to follow the mob mentality (habit) to discriminate against the lower caste people. Anyone who tried to raise their voice against the discrimination has always been silenced by suppression. Since this practice is approximately 3000 years old, it will take time to eliminate but how much time?

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