

Social Empowerment: Some Socio-Historical Perspectives

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Abstract: *The revolutionary ideas and deep motivation of Dr. Ambedkar to ameliorate the downtrodden and weaker sections had very much positive effect on the British policy making and the Indian Constitution. He was very much a make against the caste and social prejudices having been practised since long times in India.*

Key Words: Constitution; Law; Periodicals; Varna; Jati etc

One of the important personages in India and epoch makers who championed the cause of lower castes and caste prejudices in modern India is Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. After so called crusade against caste prejudices in modern India in the British period by Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, he continued his legacy in the 20th century till his death in 1956.

He was the first Union Minister of Law in Independent India and had a considerable influence and role in the making of the Constitution of India as the Chairman of its Drafting Committee. He had been the member of the two sub-committees of the Advisory Committee (the one on fundamental rights, the other one on rights of the minorities) and of the Union Powers Committee. He had a deep understanding of India's political economy which he highlighted on different fronts in his writings and speeches.¹

Born on 14th of April, 1891 at Mhow in the erstwhile Indore state, his father Ramji Mala Janakpal was an army man and his mother Bhima Bai was a religious lady of motherly affections. His first wife whom he married in 1905, died in 1935 and thereafter he married a Hindu Saraswat girl Shradha aka Savita. His schooling upto Matriculation was from Alphinston School, Bombay in 1908 and did his Graduation from Alphinston College, Bombay in the year 1912 and in the subsequent year he was awarded a scholarship for higher studies from the Maharaja of Baroda. He did his Master's in Economics and Ph.D. from the Columbia University. Thereafter he came to England to pursue M.Sc. at London School of Economics. But due to the expiry of his scholarship, he has to abandon in between and started teaching in India in a college from 1918-20. But again having a help from a friend, he in 1921 again went to London till 1923 and received his D.Sc. degree. Thereafter he started his carrier as a barrister at Bombay High Court and thereafter entered active public life of humanity and service.

His revolutionary ideas and his deep will to ameliorate the downtrodden and weaker sections had very much positive effect on the British policy making and the Indian

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1 Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar,
Writings and Speeches,

Bombay, Government of
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Constitution. He was very much a make against the caste and social prejudices having been practised since long times in India. His ideas in his pioneer works such as the fortnightly publication *Mooknaik* (the meek spectator), and *Janta* and *Bahishkrit Bharat* and certain other books and a society named 'Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha' and 'Samat Samaj Sangh' to organise the despised people on equal fronts. And in the year he published 'Samat' magazine in 1929. But his ideas and thoughts found full expression in the crusade against the caste practices in India. It was due to his untiring efforts that the Dalits found expression and proper representation in the legislative assemblies of British India. It was he who founded Independent Labour Party and Scheduled Caste Federation in 1936. In the year this party fought and won all the reserve seats in Bombay Presidency. In the year 1942 he founded Scheduled Caste Federation. It was in his last days that he and his millions of followers took Buddhism as his religion in order to pursue the path of justice, equality and righteousness and achieve *Nirvana*. We can have a look into the Indian caste structure particularly from the general views as following:

- i) That the caste is uniquely a Indian phenomenon, the origin of *Varna* (colour) has been shown as fundamentally an outline of class differentiation.
- ii) Caste, with many significant variations, is traced in the social developments in other parts of the world. Thirdly, the historical attempts made by M.K.Gandhi, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia to solve the caste problem are briefly examined and their limitations revealed.
- iii) Some of the impetuous movements within the caste-class dichotomy in India are briefly if studied; the class essence of caste tensions is brought out.
- iv) Caste or *Varna*, for which the former, a Portuguese synonym, has come to be used in

relatively recent years, has been an invariable dimension of the social evolution in India during the last 3500 years.

We can have the ideas of the origin of such phenomena from some of the recent studies such as Vivekananda Jha who made the first presentation which sought to trace the origins of the caste and class in India. According to him the institution of caste as a hierarchy based on exploitation came into being only when classes based on appropriation of surplus and on exploitation emerged. It was during the later Vedic period of 1400 BCE-800 BCE). He stoutly disproves of the earlier theory advocated by some eminent historians that castes were in existence in the earlier Harappa civilisation. He claimed that these were speculations as the script of that civilisation had not yet been deciphered. Jha noted that the Rig Vedic period, which followed the Indus valley civilisation after a gap of 200 years, too did not show any positive signs of an ascription-based caste system. This was mainly a pastoral society and was segmentary in nature. This particular period was marked by simple division of labour, low surplus and common property. Disparities were not high because though there was uneven distribution of surplus and the means of production were not unequally distributed. Generally belongings of a man constituted the property, cattle and slaves. Manual labour was not proscribed and artisans held a high respected among the common masses. There were references to the four Varnas but professional hierarchy and endogamy were not prevalent. He further elucidate that slaves during this period were mainly womenfolk of the conquered tribes. These women mainly engaged in domestic activities and in breeding children as there were fewer men-folk due to the frequent tribal wars. There was however no indication that later slaves constituted the so-called impure castes. While the general connotation of the concept is a hierarchical stratification of society- has

remained unchanged, the specificities of the Varna order have undergone a few changes, along with changes in the socio-economic environments. Opposite to the unrefined view that the four-fold Varna division, along with the accompanying residue of 'outcaste', was a readymade scheme of social order, of (living or semi-divine origin, and that it has been an inseparable component of the so-called Hindu dharma, most Vedic scholars are in agreement that the concept of Varna had undergone changes even in the Vedic phase of history itself. The first Veda, the Rg Veda, uses the term Varna to distinguish the Arya Varna from the *dāsa* Varna. Varna means colour and "it was in this sense that the word seems to have been employed in a divergent term for the Arya and the *dāsa*, referring to their fair and dark colours respectively." During the Rg Vedic phase itself, the Aryan community had started splitting into classes. The Rg Veda frequently mentions three strata among the Aryans: Brahma, Kshatra and Vis, the first being the religious literati, the second, the warriors and last, the common people. "It is only in one of the later hymns, the celebrated Purusha Sukta,², that a reference has been made to four orders of society as stemming from the sacrifice of the Primeval Being. Brahmana, Rajanya, Vaisya and Śudra are the names given to these four orders. However, some historians and scholars have expressed doubts about the genuineness of this hymn's claim to Rg Vedic origin which seems to be a late interpolation. One may find in that, "the emergence of a distinct class structure" among the Aryans coincided with the formation of the four Varna or what we have now come to identify as castes. "The earlier division into three social groups or Varna represented division of labour and division of social product and not division into classes. Thus the schism of

class-caste division took place between the Aryans and the *dāsas* who were major local enemies of the Aryans. The production and distribution relations of were introduced anew when the conquered *dāsas* were transformed into a servile class and made the helots or servants of the tribe as a whole. The already absorbed *dāsas* accepted into the Aryan fold as the Śudra caste, who the major producers of the soil. We know that the division between master and slave class was a division based on the whole world pattern. It is also true that the pre-Aryan tribes absorbed into the Aryan folk as helots were turned into the 'base of the social pyramid and designated as the fourth, Śudras. But it may be kept in mind that prior to the absorption of the pre-Aryan, the intra-Aryan division among the three original Varnas was itself a class division. The usual three-fold Varna division of the Aryan social pedestal was the Vis or the Vaisya till the assimilation of the non-Aryan tribes in the form of the Śudras. The *Aitaraya Brahmana* describes him [the Vaisya] 'as tributary to another" and "to be suppressed at will...' Indeed, the formation of the three original Varnas was the indicative division) of the manual and mental labour. It was with the aim of creation and getting surplus produce for the maintenance of the two higher Varnas that Vis or the Vaisyas were damned to physical labour. The Kśtriyas who have been distinguished as a separate fighter layer, signified the process of the dissolution of primitive-communal system, in which wars were defensive as well as offensive in which was the common responsibility of all the able bodied tribe components. This separation representing the creation of a coercive force distinct from the collective as a whole signified a class division; the monopoly of the coercive powers in the hands of the upper stratum in turn contributed to a further consolidation of the division. The division of labour was nothing but a class division, because the division of labour

2 Rg Veda X. 90.3

implies the possibility, otherwise the fact that intellectual and material activity enjoyment and labour, production and consumption-devolve on different individuals. This type of division was based on the natural division in the family and the separation of society into single families opposed to one another. Thus we can have the brief idea of the emergence of the caste and class in the Indian traditions. But with the advent of the modern education, ideas of liberty and fraternity in the modern democratic and social systems, particularly in the 19th and 20th centuries, the anthropologists and social scientists and historians took the ideas of class and caste differentiation as a major subject of their findings. It was Dr. Ambedkar who tried to understand this unresolved problem in his life time. We may discuss some of his ideas on the subject.

His political career has particularly taken place when he appealed to the 1928 Simon Commission, which visiting India and in its report it upheld the demand of Dr. Ambedkar to keep separate seats for the depressed classes. But the main hindrance in its full implementation was the approval of any candidate from the Governor of the province before his nomination or candidature. Moreover the report did not get its approval from the mainstream, the Congress. It became a dead letter. Even the things did not bore fruit till Second Round Table Conference in 1931. Communal Award was the outcome of the same Conference in which seats were reserved for these classes. This shocked the Congress, and the jailed Gandhi who went on fast to revoke the Award.

But in the succeeding years before and after the independence Dr. Ambedkar has always sought to harmonise all the sections in the free India so that every minority or majority group could have a free environment for self development of his community. But he failed to make a strong impact on the one of his priority areas that is

personal law a key domain for the social reform. After the promulgation of the Constitution, Dr. Ambedkar militated in favour of the reform of the Hindu personal law. He wanted to implement in a revised manner the Hindu Code Bill that the British had gradually evolved. After more than one century of legislation – ranging from the Abolition of Sati (1829) to the Hindu Women's Right to Property Act (1937) – they had decided in the 1940s to consolidate in one code the reformed Hindu personal law. Among its main provisions were the facts that daughters were given a share of the inheritance along with sons after the demise of parents, the widows were granted absolute estate, monogamy was a rule of law and divorce was allowed under certain circumstances.³ The Code was introduced in the legislature in April 1947 but the political circumstances – Independence and Partition – did not allow this body to discuss the text. In 1948, Nehru entrusted the drafting of the new code to a sub-committee of the Assembly

3 Christophe Jaffrelot, 'Dr. Ambedkar's Strategies Against Untouchability and the Caste System', in *Dr. Ambedkar's Strategies Against Untouchability and the Caste System*, Working Paper Series Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, New Delhi, Vol. III, No.4,,2009, pp. 10

and nominated Dr. Ambedkar as its head⁴. The latter got written in it essential principles such as equality between men and women on the question of property and adoption, the granting of legal status to monogamous marriage only, the elimination of 'caste bar in the civil marriage' and the necessity of justifying concretely a petition for divorce – a procedure which too often until then was a case of a repudiation of the wife by her husband. This questioning of the customs governing the private life of the Hindus aroused a profound emotion, not only among the traditionalists of the Hindu Mahasabha, but also among leaders of the Congress including Rajendra Prasad, who, after being president of the Constituent Assembly had become the first President of the Indian Republic⁵. Many other Congress bosses, including the party president, Pattabhi Sita Ramayyan, opposed the bill, lest it could alienate the local notables. But in Dr Ambedkar has tried all kind of strategies during his life for eradicating caste and, more especially, for emancipating the Dalit from this oppressive social systems. In the political domain, he promoted separate electorate, party building and public policies like reservations – and did not

hesitate to collaborate with the ruler of the time – be it the British or the Congress for having things done. In the social domain, he militated in favour of reforms at the grass root level – education being his first goal – and reforms by the state – as evident from the Hindu code bill. None of his strategies really succeeded during his life time: he could not have separate electorate introduced, he could not build a Dalit or a labour party, he could not have the Hindu code bill passed – and he became a bitter man.⁶

But in the ultimate he tried to follow was the equality in the Indian sphere whether in the social or in the economic arena. But there is increasing realisation, on, the other hand, that an organised struggle against the caste system and oppression of women should accompany the class and mass movements. It is this realisation that has given rise to a controversy that in order to conduct such a struggle separate organisations of scheduled castes and tribes should be formed. Separate organisations of women of various Left parties are already in the field, though mainly led by elite urban women. There is no propriety in establishing new organisations of scheduled castes and tribes. Mass organisations of the agricultural labourers and industrial workers must devote as much energy to the struggle against the caste system as they devote to the struggle against the class system. Will castes disappear along with classes? Marx said that, though economic classes will disappear in socialism, the old ideology, sexual inequality, inequality between intellectual and manual labour, disparity between urban and rural areas, and other vestiges of thousands of years of class rule will persist. The first castes arose out of the sexual or social inequality in the classless matriarchal society. Hence, caste being basically a manifestation of even pre-class social

4 Constitution Assembly

Debates, (CAD), vol. 5,

Speech of April 9, 1948.

5 Quoted in D. Das (ed.),

Sardar Patel, Patel

Correspondence, 1945-

1950, Ahmedabad,

Navajyan, 1947, vol. VI, p.

40 a.

6 Jaffrelot, Christophe, *ibid*.

inequality, vestiges of caste will remain even after the disappearance of classes. Out of the fire of the final fight against these vestiges of caste-class system will emerge a new man, the builder of communism in India. All our energies, therefore, must be bent in conducting the present revolutionary movement against the class-caste rule with this final goal in view.⁷ Dr Ambedkar has tried all kind of strategies during his life for eradicating caste and, more especially, for emancipating the Dalit from this oppressive social systems. In the political domain, he promoted separate electorate, party building and public policies like reservations – and did not hesitate to collaborate with the ruler of the time – be it the British or the Congress for having things done. In the social domain, he militated in favour of reforms at the grass root level – education being his first goal – and reforms by the state.⁸

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8 Jaffrelot, Christophe, *ibid*.

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