

Redefining Religious Paradigm and Ensuing Freedom.

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Abstract

Babasaheb Ambedkar believed that untouchability was an expression of caste system. He prescribed total annihilation of caste. While Gandhi fought for freedom from colonial rule, Ambedkar's fight was for a greater liberation from exploitation and oppression. Dr. Ambedkar aligned himself with this movement embodied by Gandhi and chose finally to leave the Hindu system. Ironically, he adopted religion as the point of reference for his new identity and used Buddhist concepts of society to redefine the social status of the Untouchables. The mass conversions to Buddhism in 1956, after decades of political action, as well as the moves which he made in the war of ideologies, are indeed interesting. He had tried his best to create a legitimate place for the depressed Classes in the Hindu society, but the privileged had not budged. Frustrated, he contemplated changing his religion. Ambedkar did not force the depressed and his followers but he was quick to view that Gandhiji should allow the Dalits to chalk out their own line of action. He that Sympathy, Equality and Fraternity are indispensable prerequisites for a society to survive and prosper but Hinduism can hardly assure these elements to all and everyone. Thus, for the annihilation of caste and untouchability from among the untouchables, a change of religion is the only antidote.

Keywords: Caste, Equality, religion, Buddhism.

The centrality of the caste question in Ambedkar's thought cannot be over-emphasised. And yet, he believed that untouchability was an expression of caste system. Therefore, Ambedkar chose to study the caste system and critically analyse the justification it received from Hindu scriptures. He did not merely believe in the removal of untouchability but he prescribed total annihilation of caste. In the words of Gail Omvedt, "if Gandhi was the father of the society in which he tried to inject equality while maintaining the Hindu Framework, Ambedkar was Baba to his people and the great liberator from that very framework. While Gandhi fought for freedom from colonial rule, Ambedkar's fight was for a greater liberation from exploitation and oppression" [1].

The caste system is deeply rooted in Hindu metaphysics. For centuries, it has provided a rationale for preserving order in society by maintaining hierarchy. There have been challenges to this hierarchy in the form of various anti-Hindu feeling. Ambedkar's work in pre-Independence India was a sharp reaction against the dehumanizing consequences of the Hindu social system. His politico-religious activity came towards the end of the age of swaraj and reform, when the historical urge was a regenerative return to origins was felt, for the purpose of abolishing social and political oppression. Dr. Ambedkar aligned himself with this movement embodied by Gandhi, and chose finally to leave

the Hindu system. Ironically, he adopted religion as the point of reference for his new identity, and used Buddhist concepts of society to redefine the social status of the Untouchables. The mass conversions to Buddhism in 1956, after decades of political action, as well as the moves which he made in the war of ideologies, are interesting, as specimens of anti-religious strategies which find their telos (moral justification) in religion.

The fierce attacks on caste and Brahman dominance of the movements in the early 20th century had appealed to young Ambedkar. However, though he was antagonized by Shinde and the Depressed Class Mission [2] such was not the case with Shahu [3]. Shahu met Ambedkar in 1920 regarding a bimonthly *Mookayak*. Later Shahu also helped Ambedkar monetarily at crucial times. Even in those early days when Shinde proposed for franchise for untouchables to the Borough Committee set up by Montagu - Chelmsford reforms, Ambedkar was in favour of separate electorates or he believed the untouchables would be ruled by the upper castes. It was through the Bahiskrut Hitakarni Sabha that Ambedkar emerged as a mass organizer. Being a powerful speaker highlighting the Dalit problems he was at times impulsive and emotional. The first mass struggle was on the issue of water rights. Later incidents in Mahad, and through *Bahiskrit Bharat* [4] Ambedkar had already ventured upon criticising Gandhi's effort to maintain untouchables within the fold of Hinduism. The Samta Samaj Sangh was formed that campaigned for inter caste meals and inter caste marriages [5]. Though it was not so fruitful and the 1920s ended with Simon Commission and the proposal for Round Table conferences for a new constitutional framework for India.

Even in the first round Table conference that's boycotted by Gandhi and Congress Ambedkar reiterated the problems of the depressed classes. Indian society according to him is a gradation of castes forming an ascending scale of reverence and descending scale of contempt-where equality and fraternity is hardly entertained, the features so very necessary for an administrative form of Government. He refused to accept the fact that the problem of the depressed classes is a social problem but one very much political and hence should be treated as such. "Depressed by the Government, suppressed by the Hindu and disregarded by the Muslim, we are left in an almost intolerable position of utter helplessness to which I am sure there is no parallel.....". In fact, he was in favour of such political and constitutional safeguards that would not allow the upper caste Ministers to do anything prejudicial to the minorities or to neglect their interests. Though concerned about the untouchables and not satisfied with Hindu codes of discipline he however emerged as a true nationalist and viewed that independence from the British was a precondition for an egalitarian caste free society

In the second round table conference, he entered into a bitter argument with Gandhiji. Gandhiji was strongly against any separate constitutional safeguards for the untouchables whom he believed were an indelible part of the Hindu community and even claimed to represent them. Ambedkar took everyone by surprise when he said the depressed classes were not in favour of the

transfer of power under the present circumstances, a remarkable shift from his earlier position in the first session of the round table conference. The government however waited for the report of the Lothian Committee. In his submission to the Lothian Committee along with various other issues, Ambedkar viewed that abandonment of Untouchability to him involves a total abandonment of basic religious tenets of Hinduism. Hindus look upon the persistence of untouchability as an act of religious merit and non-observance of it as sin. Thus, it seemed impossible for him to remove untouchability as long as such notions dominated Indian society.

Gandhiji's attitude to the demands of the untouchables, to recognize that of the Muslims and Sikhs and refuse it to the untouchables was very surprising. In spite of Gandhiji's warning to Sir Samuel Hoare about his fast unto death, if demands for a separate electorate were granted, the Communal Award granting separate electorates to the depressed classes was announced. The Poona Pact was a compromise and Ambedkar believed that it would not ameliorate the condition of the untouchables who would continue to live under the mercy of the upper castes. Further after the Poona Pact the movement seems to lose momentum. Ambedkar seemed to be frustrated and even contemplated to live politics. However, this ultimate decision did not materialize and returned with greater zeal, persuasiveness and commitment. It was then that he came up with his famous quote, "I will not die a Hindu" He had tried his best to create a legitimate place for the depressed Classes in the Hindu society, but the privileged had not budged. Frustrated, he contemplated changing his religion. Born a Hindu untouchable, he had very little choice but he was free to discard it and refused to live under ignoble and humiliating condition. The depressed are advised by him to seek solace and self-respect in another religion but warned them to be careful about choosing their new faith. Their choice should ensure equality, in status and opportunities.

Ambedkar's decision to renounce Hinduism sent out shock waves throughout the country. Some criticized it while others appreciated the strength of his character. For Gandhiji religion was not like a house or cloak that can be changed at will. Religion bids oneself to his creator and continues even after death. In his words "I prefer to retain the label of my forefathers so long as it does not cramp my growth and does not debar me from assimilating all that is good anywhere else"[6].

For Ambedkar it was an individual's choice, but "they" were sure that Hinduism was not for them. The choice lay before millions of Dalits. Ambedkar did not force them but he was quick to view that Gandhiji should allow the Dalits to chalk out their own line of action. In his essay *Mukti Kaun Pathe* [7] he dealt with the reasons why Dalits should not remain within the fold of Hinduism. Conversion is always two dimensional: social as well as religious; Material as well as Spiritual. The matter of untouchability is class struggle-between Caste Hindus and untouchables and according to him injustice is always being done against one class against another. Such conflicts appear when one demands equal treatment. This inequality is eternal in the religion which places you at the lowest rungs of its hierarchy. He speaks of three types of Strength that enables one to fight, manpower,

Wealth and mental strength. Being minority, downtrodden he believed one may possess some manpower but finance “they” have none. Being suppressed, dominated insulted these poor people lost their power to retort, to protest and were used to accept tyranny and oppression as their destiny. Hence one cannot face tyranny without strength and one has no strength to face tyranny. Thus, empowerment was essential from some other source. Help in this country is extended not to all and everyone but only to those who belongs to one’s own caste or religion. Thus, conversion is necessary for one’s own spiritual well-being. It is religion that holds people together, socially, culturally and sometimes politically. It is perhaps something that gives one identity and ultimate happiness as an individual contributing to the society in a positive way. Individual welfare and progress should be the ultimate aim of any religion. However unfortunately Hinduism does not preach equality but hierarchy. Knowledge in this religion is confined to a particular class. According to Ambedkar religion which allows one class to bear arms while preventing another is hardly a true religion, but an excuse to keep the other in eternal slavery. “Religion must mainly be a matter of principles only. It cannot be a matter of rules. The moment it degenerates into rules, it ceases to be a religion, as it kills responsibility which is an essence of the true religious act”[8].

Ambedkar believed that Sympathy, Equality and Fraternity are indispensable prerequisites for a society to survive and prosper but Hinduism can hardly assure these elements to all and everyone. Christianity, Islam emphasizes humanity and brotherhood, and not inequality. Frustrated with the Hindus and Hinduism he believed that they are hypocrites and their words and actions hardly have any similarity. Christians and Muslims too fear to treat them equally as their own position will be jeopardized. Thus, for annihilation of caste and untouchability from among the untouchables, a change of religion is the only antidote [9].

If Equality was to be achieved while remaining within the fold of Hinduism then Brahmanic religion and cultures should be uprooted, which seems impossible. Thus, it is conversion that remains to be the only option to achieve freedom and equality. It is neither the path of escapism, nor an example of cowardice but true wisdom to ensure equality, liberty and fraternity and which in turn lead to mutual love and affection among all, thus in the process strengthening the country, independent of colonial rule, free from social hindrances and marching forward to stand the challenges ahead.

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