

INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT SOCIOLOGY & HUMANITIES



ISSN 2277 – 9809 (online)

ISSN 2348 - 9359 (Print)

An Internationally Indexed Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal

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Published by iSaRa Solutions

Dr. Ambedkar Vision on the Caste Discrimination: A 21st Century Challenge for Indian Democracy

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Abstract

In this backdrop of my paper will explore the Ambedkar's vision of ideal society that should have organic filaments and an attitude of respect and equality towards fellow human beings. In his grand scheme of reconstruction of Indian society, fought for rights of representation should be based on the propionate of population, including women in all spheres of education, employment, agriculture, industry, bureaucracy and governance of this country. Despite longstanding constitutional, legislative and affirmative action measures in India, the problem persists as a challenge to Indian democracy. Ambedkar was thoroughly convinced that unless a casteless and classless society is created there would be no progress in India.

Keywords: Untouchables, Constitutional, Classless Society, Respect and Equality, Representation, Vision, Discrimination, Dalit, Caste.

Introduction

The chief architect of the Indian Constitution Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was born 14 April 1891. He was the voice of the voiceless, hope of the hopelessness, light of those in darkness and a support for those, who were deprived and exploited in the Indian society. He brought them out of the clutches of untouchability, bondage of oppression, and the leprosy of the caste system. He campaigned against social discrimination, the system of Chaturvarna and the Hindu caste system. He declared that our battle is for Freedom. Our battle is not for few economic and political gains. Our battle is for the reclamation of Human Personality, which was suppressed and mutilated. Dr. Ambedkar's whole Ideas and thought was based on Social Humanism. He took them to the feet of Buddha to give them a glimpse of apotential future, and how they can reconstruct their lives in the light of reason and on the principles of justice, liberty equality and fraternity (Keer, Dhanajay (1971: 42-44).

Ambedkar came on the scene in 1927 and led a mass movement of the untouchables to take water from a public tank at Mahad. He wanted to emancipate the untouchables and liberate them from the slavery of Hinduism. He wanted to achieve equal rights, human, civic and political, for the untouchables. Ambedkar tried to unite the untouchables under one banner in order to fight for justice and equality (Ambedkar, B.R 1987: 27).

Caste system is part and parcel of the Hindu society. It has been coming through the ages, and it and it will remain with the Hindu society forever. A caste is an endogamous group, or collection of endogamous groups, bearing a common name, membership of which is hereditary, arising from birth alone, and imposing on its members certain restrictions in the matter of social intercourse. The caste is based in a common tradition occupation or claiming a common origin, or both following such occupation and claiming such origin, and generally regarded as forming a single homogeneous community.

Discrimination means pollution by the touch of certain person by reason of their birth is a particular caste. It is practiced in Indian society only. The problem of dalits is more social than economic. The poverty of dalits is a product of social oppression. Ambedkar was strongly convinced that without change in Indian society no real change is possible. Ambedkar knew very well that in India, respect for caste is far more important than wealth, money, property, education, etc. A Brahmin's son even though he is stupid, still has a higher position in Indian society (Daniel, Aharon 2010: 63).

The UN human rights system has extensively addressed situations of caste discrimination, including through mandates and processes concerning racial discrimination. The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) defines racial discrimination as: Any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life (Ketkar, S.V. 1990: 22).

Caste discrimination as the word says is discrimination of people on the basis of their caste. In ancient times the society was divided into four categories known as Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras. Brahmins were pandits of the society. They were the people considered to be closest to God. Kshatriyas were the rulers and soldiers of the society. Vaishyas formed the businessmen group and shudras were the labour class and poor people of the society. In ancient Indian society, people considered shudras as untouchables and always-maintained distance from them. They were not allowed to take part in decisions of society. Also they were termed untouchables (Chhua-Chhoot as they call in Hindi) meaning Shudras should not be touching any one of the upper caste nor they should be sitting near to people of higher caste. Shudras were not allowed to drink water from the well or river used by Brahmins and other castes of the people. There were many more discrimination practices followed. Many people raised their voice against caste discrimination among which Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was the first

who fought in his whole against caste, untouchably and discrimination (Smith, Brian K. 1994: 31).

Caste systems are a form of social and economic governance that is based on principles and customary rules. Caste systems involve the division of people into social groups (castes) where assignments of rights are determined by birth, or fixed to hereditary. The assignment of basic rights among various castes is both unequal and hierarchical, with those at the top enjoying most rights coupled with least duties and those at the bottom performing most duties coupled with no rights. The system is maintained through the rigid enforcement of social ostracism a system of social and economic penalties in case of any deviations. Inequality is at the core of the caste system.

Those who fall outside the caste system are considered lesser human beings, impure and thus polluting to other caste groups. They are known to be untouchable and subjected to so-called untouchability practices in both public and private spheres. Untouchables are often forcibly assigned the most dirty, menial and hazardous jobs, such as cleaning human waste. The work they do add to the stigmatization they face from the surrounding society (Béteille, André 1965: 80).

The exclusion of caste-affected communities by other groups in society and the inherent structural inequality in these social relationships lead to high levels of poverty among affected population groups and exclusion from, or reduced benefits from development processes, and generally precludes their involvement in decision making and meaningful participation in public and civil life (Hampton, Andrea 2010: 22). The division of a society into castes is a global phenomena not exclusively practiced within any particular religion or belief system. In India, caste discrimination is traditionally rooted in the Hindu caste system. Supported by philosophical elements, the caste system constructs the moral, social and legal foundations of Hindu society. Dalits are outcastes or people who fall outside the four-fold caste system consisting of the Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vyasya and Shudra. Dalits are also referred to as Panchamas or people of the fifth order. However caste systems and the ensuing caste discrimination have spread into Christian, Buddhist, Muslim and Sikh communities.

Caste discrimination involves massive violations of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. It is often outlawed in countries affected by it, but a lack of implementation of legislation and caste-bias within the justice systems largely leave Dalits without protection (Bouglé, Célestin 1971: 21-24). Caste-based discrimination is the most complex human rights issue facing India today. To date, the tools used to assess its status have been divided by discipline - human rights, legal and social science. Although significant contributions toward understanding untouchability have been made in each of these areas, it is difficult to comprehend the scope and pervasiveness of the problem without combining the tools of all three. We have spent the last four years compiling quantitative, comprehensive and reliable data exposing the current state of untouchability caste-based discrimination against Dalits “untouchables” in Gujarat, India (Blunt, E. A. H. 1931: 11-13).

This report presents data on untouchability practices in 1,589 villages from 5,462 respondents in Gujarat on the issue of untouchability. In 2000, Martin Macwan of Navsarjan received the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award, initiating a long-term partnership between Navsarjan and the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice & Human Rights. In response to Navsarjan's identified need for an extensive study on caste discrimination, members of the RFK Global Advocacy Team from the University of Maryland/Kroc Institute at the University of Notre Dame, and Dartmouth College/University of Michigan joined the team. The objective was to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the topic in order to better drive Navsarjan's advocacy and intervention work (Das, Bhagwan 1979: 33).

In its efforts across Gujarat and India, Navsarjan has experienced first-hand that a deeper understanding gained by intensive data collection leads to the development of more effective strategies to address the continued practice of untouchability. Indeed, interactions with individuals across age, caste, gender and social sectors during the implementation of this study reveal that the potential for ending untouchability may exist within two large groups of people that can be seen as sources of hope. First, a large segment of Indian society, primarily of younger generation Indians, though largely ignorant about its scope and practice, appears ready and willing to learn about untouchability and work towards its true abolition (Fuller, C.J ed. 1996: 21). Second, another group of people across caste, nationality and religious affiliations have become deeply concerned about the prevalence of untouchability practices viewed from the perspective of human rights. This group of activists, advocates, donors, lawyers, students, academics, politicians and ordinary citizens has developed an awareness of untouchability as an issue of civil and human rights law.

The report presents both a general and multi-disciplinary view of current untouchability practices across rural areas in Gujarat bringing together political science, sociology, law, public policy and community organizing and provides evidence to refute the belief that untouchability is limited to remote and economically underdeveloped corners of India. The broad picture of untouchability can be used to educate Indian society about these practices and to initiate an informed national and international debate on how to address the problem. Equally important, this report presents a picture of untouchability that promotes global visibility on the continued human rights violations suffered by Dalits and provides an example to other countries on methods for identifying, understanding and eliminating discriminatory activity. We believe that a systematic approach to understanding untouchability shatters the myth that the problem is intractable (Iyer, Krishna 1989: 28-30).

Instead, we hope that the data presented here and the understanding it generates will spark new energy and commitment to the movement to end the injustice and indignity of untouchability (Arjan de Hann 2008: 28-29). Bonded Labour a significant proportion of Dalits find themselves trapped in a vicious cycle of bonded labour or other forms of contemporary slavery. Dalit Women are especially vulnerable to verbal abuse, physical assault, sexual harassment, rape, and domestic violence as a result of caste as well as gender

discrimination. Forced Prostitution many Dalit women have been forced into sexual slavery or suffer systematic sexual abuse by dominant castes (Kananaikil, Jose, ed. 1983: 18).

Discrimination in Education discrimination against Dalits in the educational system is a widespread problem, and illiteracy and dropout rates among Dalits are very high due to a number of social and physical factors. Manual Scavenging Dalits are often forced to make their living through this vile, inhuman and outlawed practice of removing human excrement from dry toilets and sewers using only basic tools. Political Participation As a result of their social marginalization, Dalits are often limited from equal and meaningful political participation. Non-Implementation of Legislation Even though legal mechanisms to protect the rights of Dalits exist, atrocities against Dalits are committed with impunity as implementation of legislation remains alarmingly weak and insufficient. Private Sectors Business operations in caste-affected countries are at a high risk of being based on the economic exploitation or seclusion of caste-affected communities and others at the low end of the caste hierarchy (Kananaikil, Jose, ed. 1983: 64).

Caste discrimination involves massive violations of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. Caste-affected communities are denied a life in dignity and equality. According to the United Nations Special Reporters on discrimination based on work and descent, a number of human rights violations occur in relation to caste discrimination:

- The right to physical security and life and the right to be free from violence
- The right to equal political participation
- The right to fair access to justice
- The right to own land
- The right to equal access to public and social services
- The right to freedom of religion
- The right to marriage on free will
- The right to education
- The right to cultural identity
- The right to equal opportunity and free choice of employment
- The right to equal, just and favorable conditions of work
- The right to be free from forced or bonded labour
- The right to be free from cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment
- The right to health
- The right to adequate food, water, sanitation, clothing and housing (Michael, S.M. 1991:13).

Impunity for the perpetrators of crimes against caste-affected groups permeates the justice and law enforcement systems. Dalit cases are often not reported, investigated or prosecuted properly. Policemen, lawyers and judges often belong to dominant castes and they are unwilling to investigate, prosecute and hear cases of crimes against Dalits. Very few cases of crimes against Dalits lead to conviction. The United Nations Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination recommends with specific reference to caste-affected communities that all states

take the necessary steps to ensure equal access to the justice system for all members of descent-based communities as well as ensure the prosecution of persons who commit crimes against members of descent-based communities and the provision of adequate compensation for the victims of such crimes (Satyapal,P.D 2010: 80).

Dr. Ambedkar explains that a human society should have organic filaments, an attitude of respect and equality towards fellow human beings. In an ideal society, there should be many interests consciously communicated and shared. There should be social endosmosis. He envisioned Nation as a social amalgamation, which elevates the low castes in to Citizens of equality. In Ambedkar's discourse, Nation is a power- homogenized fraternity and a democratic unity. He strived for Nation, as a new social Formation characterized by a consciousness of unity and fraternity leading to increased, intensified non-discriminate social exchanges (Ghurye, G. S (1969: 12).

Dr. Ambedkar in his grand scheme of reconstruction of Indian society, fought for rights of representation as democratic rights. Basing on the prorate of population, he reasoned that all sections of the society including women should get rights of representation spheres of education, employment, agriculture, industry, bureaucracy and governance of this country. Branding that the Brahmanical society is based on Culture of Reservations- keeping education, rule and economy reserved 100% for the Brahmanical castes and relegating the Bahujans to service, he wanted to usher in Democratic society based on the Culture of Representations. His memoranda to the Southborough Committee, Montague-Chelmsford committee, Muddiman Committee and his arguments in Round Table Conferences are based on the rights of representation as democratic rights (Nirmal, Arvind P., ed. 1991: 33).

Caste and Challenges for Indian Democracy

The effects of caste on the Indian society are multifarious and vicious. Caste is the mother of most of the ills that exist in the Indian society. Caste does not permit a true spirit, but promotes a narrow caste spirit. We do not have a united society, but many societies each caste being a separate society. Even in the same caste there are many sub -castes, many mini societies. The result is disastrous; endless division in society. Caste is antisocial in spirit. Caste has thwarted the emergence of what the sociologists calls consciousness of kind. It is extremely painful to know that in Indian society, some groups of people are traditionally branded as criminals. They become the first targets of the police and are suspected and often tortured by the police for a crime committed by somebody else. The cause of all this is the caste system. Many killings, kidnappings, murders, rapes and all sorts of social unrest are caused by the caste system (Ambedkar, B.R 1916: 25).

The challenges of casteism, communalism and religious fundamentalism are major threats to Indian polity. They weaken the functioning and stability of democratic system. The caste system, which presumably originated in the division of labour in the ancient society, has become a more or less rigid group classification, based on birth. Have you not experienced the role of

casteism in your own life and in your society? You will agree that the most detrimental and inhuman aspect of the caste discrimination is the practice of untouchability, which is continuing in spite of the constitutional ban imposed on it. This has led to segregation of so called low castes or Dalits, depriving them of education and other social benefits. The Dalit castes have been typically performing menial labour and some of the hardest physical work in society. Casteism has played a negative role even in the democratic political processes. In fact, casteism has become notorious as a strategy of exploitation of caste consciousness for narrow political gains. The caste system acts against the roots of democracy. The democratic facilities - like fundamental rights relating to equality, freedom of speech, expression and association, participation in the electoral process, free media and press, and even legislative forums - are misused for maintaining casteist identity (Ambedkar, B.R (1945: 44).

Casteism has also been contributing towards continuation of socio-economic inequalities. It is true that India has been an unequal society since time immemorial. The Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and backward classes have suffered down the ages from socio-economic deprivations. There are enormous inequalities in our society, which are posing a serious challenge to Indian democracy. During elections, a large number of voters give weight to the caste and religion of the candidate. Political parties also keep in mind the caste or religion of a person while distributing tickets for the election. Representatives elected on the basis of caste or religion work for the welfare of the people belonging only to their caste or religion (Hutton, J. H. 1963: 55).

Contemporary India

It is unfortunate that even after six decades of Constitutional policy, democratic ideals are yet to find firm ground among the citizens of India. Owing to illiteracy, poverty powerlessness and caste they are not in a position to make democracy work. The Fundamental rights provided to the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes in Article 15 and 16 of the Constitution, who constitute the majority. Bahujans of the country are being denied to a large extent in the pretext of dubious argument of merit. This equal opportunity legislation quite often drives the society to take emotional polemic positions. The underlying problem is that method has been confused with the policy. Providing representations or fair access or equal opportunity being the policy, the quota mechanism is a method to secure fairness. In addition, Ambedkar's practical policy of bringing unity among the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes on the basis of their common victimhood Scheduled Castes due to untouchability, Scheduled Tribes on the basis of isolation and Other Backward Castes who are socially and educationally deprived as the platform of unity has been ignored, even by the victims of caste system themselves. It is because they still continue to be influenced by the ideology of exclusion, Brahmanism which shapes their lives (Rodrigues, Valerian. ed. 2002).

Conclusion

Ambedkar was not a leader of the untouchables only, but he was a leader of national stature. A true democrat at heart, he wanted to reconstruct the Indian society on the principles of liberty, equality fraternity. He was a man of conviction. He was deeply interested in human dignity. He had the guts and courage to raise his voice against Gandhi; this speaks about his inner conviction. He wanted to educate people not for degree but to waken them so that they may know about human rights. He was a person who would not sit on anybody's bandwagon like an opportunist but he would take up challenges and fight till the end (Zelliot, Eleanor 2002: 52).

That time has come to make a humane society where all are considered human beings and respected as they are and not according to their caste or creed. The launching of human rights movements all over India would bring a radical change in society. Today, it is a positive sign that the dalits along with other backward classes are forming political parties to gain political power. They are coming up in all aspects of life. It was indeed a historical moment for India when, in 1995 a dalit woman for the first time became chief minister. It is also noteworthy that the previous president of our country was a dalit. If the dalits together with other marginalized could mobilize their forces to gain political power, sooner or later, Ambedkar's dream of the emancipation of dalits could become a reality. It is proper time for us to march with them, lead them and guide them. It is our dream to rub our shoulders with them to create a just society. The radical mobilization of people irrespective of caste and creed will create a new society in India, the foundation for which was laid by Ambedkar.

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