



Annihilation of Caste: A March Towards Humanity

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Dr. Ambedkar, one of the greatest national leaders of India, devoted his life for the cause of the establishment of equality in Indian society. For him, religion is a source of power, authority, and social status. Without social efficiency, no permanent progress in the other fields of activity was possible. Therefore, he felt that the need for religious reform should serve as the basis for social reform. He believes in liberty, equality, and fraternity and places social justice above the trio. He intends to say that there should be no discrimination between one community and the other on the ground of caste or creed. For him, the question of social reform that brings in its wake social equality and social justice is of seminal importance and there is no escape from it. What is urgent for the Hindus is a social revolution that aims at the abolition of the caste system.

He opines: "Caste is the monster that crosses your path. You can't have political reform; you can't have economic reform, unless you kill this monster." (Ambedkar 41-42)

In Dr. Ambedkar's view, the ideal society is the one which is based upon the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, not only in politico-economic but in social sense also. What is important in public life is the choice of the way of life which people will opt for themselves, that is, freedom in the absolute sense of the word.

For the establishment of this egalitarian society, the annihilation of caste is must. The essay "Annihilation of Caste" is actually a speech to be delivered at the conference as the presidential address but remained undelivered. It throws light on Dr. Babasaheb's dream of a just and humane society.

Keywords: equality, liberty, fraternity, religion, social justice, annihilation, caste.

Dr. Ambedkar is the emancipator of the downtrodden community in society. He abandoned Hinduism and adopted Buddhism in 1956. Millions of the Dalits embraced Buddhism following in the footsteps of Ambedkar. He is a great erudite and thinker who stood for the cause of social democracy. Dr. Ambedkar rose to political prominence as the leading representative of his caste. Throughout the 1920s, he fought tenaciously for equal treatment and was rewarded with a seat at the table in 1931 when the British summoned a "Round Table Conference" to move India closer to self-rule.

The essay titled "Annihilation of Caste" was originally designed as a speech to be delivered as a presidential address at the *Jat-Pat Todak Mandal's* conference at Lahore in 1936. The so-called speech is actually a wonderful scholarly treatise on the caste-system. But it was never delivered because of certain objections from the conveners of the conference.

Dr. Ambedkar opines: "It is not possible to break caste without annihilating the religious notion on which it is founded. And the caste-system will continue as long as the Hindu religion persists." (Ambedkar 7) For the upper-caste-Hindus, the abolition of caste simply meant the destruction of Hindu religion. According to them, Dr. Ambedkar was an iconoclast that is, an image-breaker.

Dr. Ambedkar stands for social reform and wants it to precede political reform. The path of social reform, like the path to heaven, is strewn with many difficulties. Social reform in India has few friends and many critics. The critics fall into two distinct classes. One class consists of political reformers, and the other that of the socialists. He advocates the abolition of the caste system as a measure of the social reform that aimed at the reorganization and reconstruction of Hindu society. He wanted the Hindu leaders to understand that the communal award was the Nemesis (punishment) that fell upon the Hindus for their utter neglect of social reform.

It is observed that in the pre-independence Indian society, the downtrodden people were given a worse treatment even than that of the animals. Under the rule of Peshwas in the 18th century, the untouchable was

not allowed to use the public streets if a Hindu was coming along, lest he should pollute the Hindu by his shadow. He was required to carry, a broom, hung from his waist to sweep away from behind himself the dust he trod on and an earthen pot hung around his neck for holding his spit, lest his spit falling on the earth should pollute a Hindu who might unknowingly happen to tread on it.

Dr. Ambedkar comments on the role of various conferences of the then time. He points out that the Social Conference was a body which mainly concerned itself with the reform of the high caste Hindu family. It consisted mostly of enlightened high-caste Hindus who did not feel the necessity for the abolition of caste. For them, man is an economic creature; his activities and aspirations are bound by economic facts since, property is the only source of power. They, therefore, preach that political and social reforms are but gigantic illusions, and that economic reform by equalization of property must be given priority. But Ambedkar does not agree with this point of view. He points out that religion is the source of power have been repeatedly illustrated by the history of India. Here, the priest holds an influence over the common man often greater than that of the magistrate. And even such things as strikes and elections easily take a religious turn and can be given a religious twist.

It is a pity that the caste-system is defended by the caste-Hindus as a social institution. In their view, it is based on the division of labour. But Dr. Ambedkar thinks of it on the other lines and calls it "a division of labourers." It is an unnatural division of labourers into water-tight compartments. The caste system represents a social hierarchy in which one caste is placed above the other. So, it implies a gradation of labourers also. Then, again, the factor of birth comes into decide the caste of the man and along with it his social status. Caste-wise occupations are thus decided by heredity. The caste-wise system, in this sense, is a forced division of labour. According to it, no choice can be exercised to get one's occupation. So, the division of society on the basis of the caste is unnatural, inhumane, and undemocratic.

The defenders of the caste system give a biological explanation of its origin and continuation. They have such false notion in their heads as purity of race and purity of blood. Dr. Bhandarkar is quoted to have said, "There is hardly a class, or a caste in India which has not a foreign strain in it." (Ambedkar 44) Hence, India represents different races commingled in blood and culture. The caste-system is not concerned with this racial consciousness or racial division. It pertains to the social division of people who belong to the same race. So, what is recommended is a mixture of races and blood by arranging inter-caste or inter-religious, or inter-racial marriages. The caste system, as it exists among the Hindus, is negative in conception and is opposed to the principles of heredity and eugenics. The caste-system has no scientific origin. The science of eugenics does not support its existence. It is by the use of force that the upper caste Hindus, particularly the *brahmins* and the *kshatriyas*, have imposed the caste-system on the lower-class people with its hierarchical structure.

The caste-system came into being long after the different races of India had comingled in blood and culture. So, caste system does not distinguish racial division. It is a social division of people of the same race. Men are, no doubt, divided from animals and science recognizes men and animals as two distinct species. But even scientists who believe in purity of races do not assert that the different races constitute different species of men. They are only varieties of one and the same species. As such, they can interbreed and produce an offspring which is capable of breeding and which is not sterile. Caste system is a negative thing. It merely prohibits persons belonging to different castes from intermarrying.

Caste does not play a role in economic efficiency or social development. It cannot improve, and has not improved the race. However, it is a hurdle in the way of social harmony. It has resulted into the disorganization of the people and demoralization of the Hindus. Actually, Hindu Society is a myth. The name Hindu is itself a foreign name. It was given by the Mohammedans to the natives for the purpose of distinguishing themselves from them. It does not occur in any Sanskrit work prior to the Mohammedan invasion. They did not feel the necessity of a common name, because they had no conception of their having constituted a community. Hindu society as such does not exist as one homogeneous community as a Muslim or the Christian. It is just an assemblage of castes. Each caste is conscious of its own independent existence. Thus, segregation characterizes Hinduism. So, it is the religion that divides the people into different castes. That is why Dr. Ambedkar thinks that its anti-social nature is the worst feature of the caste system.

Caste system supports the establishment, protecting the vested interest of the upper classes against the lower classes. The existence of caste system perpetuates caste-consciousness and social slavery. It goes against the humanitarian cause of civilizing the aborigine or savages. Hinduism is antithetical to conversion. It is because the Hindu religion lacks the missionary spirit. The law of caste confines its membership only to the people born in the caste. There is no place for a convert to be accommodated in any caste. A caste has an unquestioned right to excommunicate a man who is guilty of breaking the customs and traditions of the caste. For Ambedkar, excommunication has been a weapon in the hands of the leaders of the caste, mostly the orthodox section of the Hindus to preserve the interests of the high-class minority people.

Dr. Ambedkar views caste-system as anti-political, anti-moral, and anti-social. It inculcates the sense of superiority in the minds of the upper caste people and a sense of inferiority in those of the lower-caste people, particularly the shudras, and the ati-shudras. Caste consciousness kills the public spirit and destroys the sense of public charity. So, Dr. Ambedkar thinks that caste consciousness is treason against one's nation.

In the essay, Dr. Ambedkar highly criticized *Chaturvarnya* system. *Chaturvarnya* is the division of society into four classes. It is not based on birth but on worth. But history shows that birth alone has been the criterion to

decide whether one belongs to this *varna* or that. Dr. Ambedkar calls it a “snare”, a trap to divide society against itself. That is why he rises in revolt not only against the caste-system but against the *Chaturvarnya* also, because *Chaturvarnya* failed as an institution. The caste-system then replaced the *Chaturvarnya* and came into its own. The question before Dr. Ambedkar is how to reduce the four thousand castes based on birth to the four *varnas* based on the worth for centuries together.

“*Chaturvarnya* is not new. It is as old as the Vedas.” (Ambedkar 71) On this basis, the Arya Samajists ask to consider its claim. Dr. Ambedkar questions the very logic and the validity of the statement. For him, the question is not whether a community lives or dies; it is on what plane it lives. The real question is whether all can live on equally honourable life or not.

The caste-system favours the three upper-caste communities- the *brahmins*, the *kshatriyas*, the *vaishyas*. But the *shudras* and *ati-shudras* are its real victims. Therefore, the abolition of caste and eradication of untouchability are the need of the hour. For Dr. Ambedkar, Hinduism is not a religion of principles but a religion of man-made-rules.

It is noticed that the *brahmins* flattered the *kshatriyas* and both led the *vaishyas* to live in the social hierarchy and all the three *varnas* agreed to put down the *shudras* and *ati-shudras*. They were not allowed to acquire wealth, lest they should be independent of the three *varnas*. They were prohibited from acquiring knowledge lest they should keep a steady vigil regarding their rights. They were prohibited from bearing arms lest they should have the means to raise in revolt against their authority. This is how the *shudras* were ill-treated by the *tryvarnikas* as evidenced by the laws of Manu. This explains why there has been no revolution in India.

The Hindu social system has placed *brahmins* at its centre and drawn its boundary. The other three *varnas* and caste-clusters have been given placements within the boundary at varying distances from the centre. But the untouchables, pariahs, and all outcastes of different names were kept far away from the centre and beyond the edge of the Hindu social organization. And what lies beyond the perimeter of the Hindu culture? Wasteland: It is the barren land of exile filled with dirt and dust, dusk and darkness. And it is here in this exile that the *ati-shudras* were expatriated, reducing them thereby to non-entities. They were indeed the prisoners of darkness with festering wounds in their souls. Casteism is in no way better than racism. The American Negro lamented in anguish:

**“What did I do
To be so black
And blue?”** (Louis n p.)

Similarly, the untouchable cried out:

**“What did I do
To be so outcast
And through?”**

(Composed by the researchers to express pain and anguish of the Dalit Indian as alliteration to Louis Armstrong’s question.)

The fact is, he was the outcast and rejected by the caste Hindus. Since he had no words and no awakened consciousness, he could not question the authority of his oppressors. The deification of brahmanism and dehumanization of the outcastes have always been the hallmarks of the *Chaturvarnya*. There is no humanization in it; some are above the line of humanization; and some others below it.

Dr. J. M. Waghmare points out: “In the religio-cultural Wasteland, the untouchables, pariahs, and *ati-shudras* could not create the real features of their personality; nor could they achieve any identity. The untouchables existed beyond the periphery of the village. It was the existence at the sub-human level. The locale beyond the outskirts of the village and across its periphery is still a ‘no-man’s land.’ The ex-untouchable does not cherish the sense of belonging to the village which has relentlessly dehumanized him. The high-caste establishment applied to the principle of ‘separate and unequal’ which remained unquestioned and unchallenged for centuries together. It was given religious sanctity and legal sanction; and it was fortified by social acceptance.” (Waghmare 115)

The untouchable was not entitled to property and means of decent living. Untouchability is, indeed, a climax of the extreme form of inequality. It deformed the *ati-shudras*. He had no place in the history of this country. He was not allowed to claim his share in the making of the destiny of this country. He had no sense of identity. When can one have a sense of identity? A renowned American psychologist, Eric H. Erikson, has an answer to this pertinent question: “A sense of identity means a sense of being at one with oneself as one grows and develops; and it means, at the same time, a sense of affinity a community’s sense of being at one with its future as well as its history or mythology.” (Erikson 27-28)

Dalit had always been treated as ‘outsiders’ whose life could not succeed in taking their roots in this ancient land. This is the reason why Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar had told Gandhiji that he had no homeland of his own. No doubt, he had the voice of protest against the establishment. But it was very meek. During the medieval times a surge of protest had risen in the minds of the untouchables and pariah. The *Bhakti* Movement in the

medieval period of Indian history is a testimony to it. Saint Chokhamela, who occupies a place of honour in the Bhakti pantheon of Marathi saints, has expressed this protest against *Vithoba* in one of his *abhagas*:

**“If you had to give me birth,
Why give me birth at all?”** (Zelliot 138)

The saint poet is obviously troubled by his despised place in the Hindu society. He says:

**“God my caste is low; How can I serve you? They tell me to get away; How can I see you?
They call me casteless, God,
Don’t know how to serve you.”** (Kadam n p.)

Needless to mention that *Bhakti* Movement in the medieval period had given some hope to the *shudras* for creating their place in the framework of the Hindu society dominated by *brahmins*. But it failed to assure them of social justice and equal status.

Ambedkar presents to us the picture of the pre-independence society. Due to the caste system and *Chaturvarnya*, he finds the schism in the society. It was divided against itself— on the basis of caste, class, colour, creed, religion, etc. Exploitation, oppression, and suppression were the characteristics of this nation. So, the majority of people, in their motherland, behaved with fearful mind. They lacked self- esteem and self-confidence and lived a life of slavery. Knowledge in India was not for one and all; it was the monopoly of the aristocratic class. A truthful path was hard for the majority of the people to go along. As a result, they could not achieve perfection in whatever they did. People did not give up their out-dated customs and traditions; they did not have any “visions and re-visions”. Massacre and bloodshed, violence and exploitation are the permanent characteristics of Indian society since people fail to understand what “freedom” is in the true sense of that word.

With regret, one has to accept the fact that the picture remains more or less the same in the post-independence society also. This is so, because

**The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity,** (Yeats 253)

Things have gone awry and the vested interests have created hurdles in the way of reformation. Actually, what has happened in India is:

**....the rabble with their well-worn creeds,
Their large professions and their little deeds,
Mingle in selfish strife, lo, freedom weeps,
Wrong rules the land, and waiting justice sleeps.**
(Holand 174)

What is needed is a new value-system giving birth to “social democracy”; a new egalitarian social order, resting upon the five pillars of (a) emotional integration, (b) secular outlook, (c) scientific attitude, (d) social justice, and (e) freedom for all. So, the question that vexes Dr. Ambedkar’s mind is how to bring about the reform in the Hindu social order. After a long brooding, he comes to the conclusion that “the only answer to the question is the abolition of caste.” He puts forth strategies for the abolition of castes.

i. Abolition of sub-caste; ii. Fusion of sub-caste; iii. Inter-caste marriages, iv. Abolition of *Shastras* and *Vedas*.

In Ambedkar’s opinion, the conscious implementation of these strategies may be fruitful in the annihilation of the whole caste-system. No doubt it is impossible for the Hindus to give up faith in the *Shastras* or the *Vedas* or in their customs and traditions, but attempts have to be made in that direction.

Dr. Ambedkar does what he believes and speaks. He shows the path of revolution to the downtrodden people. He became a convert to Buddhism. His conversion was not just an individual conversion but a mass conversion to Buddhism in 1956. He was born a Hindu but died a Buddhist— an enlightened one. Towards the end of the book is the beginning of the readers’ consciousness.

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