

Ambedkar's View on Caste and Social Justice

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Abstract

In this paper Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's critical views on the caste systems and his vision for social justice in India are discussed. It charts the historical roots of caste and the socio-economic implications arising from it by examining Ambedkar's arguments against caste discrimination as they appear in *Annihilation of Caste*. It brings to light Ambedkar's work advocating for the margins through education, the economy and politics. It analyses his role in embedding into the Indian constitution the principles of liberty and equality and fraternity, for example through abolition of untouchability and affirmative action. In addition, the paper assesses the transformative potential of Ambedkar's ideas for Dalit rights and the lasting significance of his thinking for contemporary campaigns in favour of caste equity and social justice. At the same time that enormous progress has been made in forestalling caste based injustice, systemic discrimination remains entrenched, and thus the importance of the vision that Ambedkar bequeathed to India in 1956 remains apt. The study strives to reaffirm that addressing caste based oppression is important in light of his philosophy and reforms by providing an in depth analysis of the philosophy, and reforms.

Keywords: Caste System. Social Justice, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, Indian Constitution

1. Introduction

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) was a towering social reformer, economist and political thinker, who is celebrated all over India for his work as the principal architect of the Indian Constitution. Ambedkar was born into the ostracised Dalit community and spent his life battling systemic oppression and discrimination by India's rigid caste system. However, despite these adversities, he rose to fame because of his academic brilliance, as well as his fierce dedication to social justice, making him a representation of strength and the fighter for equality. His life and work have remained the source of movements for caste equity and human rights in India and abroad (Dwivedi & Sinha, 2005; Kataria, 2012). Indian society is steeped in a hierarchical caste system historically structuring individuals in a rigid hierarchy that is based on birth and occupation. The Manusmriti, or similar texts like this, established the era of Dalits, who were then called "Untouchables," on the lowest rung outside of the varna (four-fold) framework. Not only did it institutionalize inequality, but it also denied Dalits their basic human rights of education, land, and political participation (Fasana, 1976; Swankhede, 2008). Untouchability practices alongside further developed into dehumanizing Dalits and alienating them socially and economically (Rokade, 2022).

Since it is a moral indictment and the blueprint to dismantle caste based hierarchy, Dr Ambedkar's critique of the caste system as it is in his seminal work *Annihilation of Caste*. Caste is a very incompatible idea with the democratic ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, he said. Ambedkar had these principles in the foundational framework of independent India, as Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution, and they were embedded in law inside India to fight caste discrimination (Misra & Mishra, 1991; Rodrigues, 2017).

Ambedkar was a major philosopher on education. He believes that education can change the work of marginalized communities and educated at esteemed institutions such as Columbia University and the London School of Economics. He campaigned not only for the elimination of untouchability (Article 17), but also for affirmative action policies for Dalits in education, employment and politics (Jadhav, 1991; Raju, 1991). Progress in India on ending caste based discrimination has been considerable, but it remains a huge problem. The unfinished nature of Ambedkar's mission is evident through reports of atrocities against Dalits, socio-economic disparities, and political marginalisation (Narain, 2017). His view of a constitutional morality and social justice egalitarian society has inspired contemporary movements for caste equity (Radhakrishnan, 1991).

2. Understanding Caste in India

Origins and Structure of the Caste System

It is the caste system of India, a kind of social stratification dating back to earliest religion and culture. It emerged from the Vedic period and was codified in texts like the Manusmriti wherein the society was explained into hierarchical groups of varnas: Brahminas (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (merchants and traders), Shudras (servants and laborers). This classification involved occupation and hereditary succession which integrated inequality into the social body. The other outside this hierarchy was a designated other with whom had been debased down to 'Untouchable' status, systematically excluded and stigmatized (Fasana 1976; Rokade 2022). Unlike varna, which theoretically had only four divisions, the practice of caste (jati) became thousands of sub-caste each having its own strict norms and roles (Swankhede, 2008). Religious doctrines were used to justify the caste system, and abuses were used to justify the power held by those in these positions of power. In fact, Hindu scriptures penned often promoted caste based difference, while Manusmriti prescribed separate duties and claims for each varna and debase Dalits for dirty and 'polluting' work (Rodrigues, 2017). Not only did these religious roots legitimize inequality but for centuries it was seen as unchallengeable.

Social, Economic, and Political Implications of Caste

The caste system has been with us in the social, economic, political term, entrenching inequality and exclusion across generations. Caste was socially castigated in every possible area of an individual's life—marriage, education, dietary practices as well as public access. In particular, the Dalit were segregated from mainstream society, had no access to schools, temples and water bodies. The practice of untouchability humanized millions, six millions simply because they had taken birth into a 'dirty' family, the term itself dehumanized millions of people that justified their exclusion of social intercourse (Radhakrishnan, 1991; Rokade, 2022).

The caste system enclosed occupational immobility economically. They were consigned to low paying labour intensive jobs like manual scavenging, rural labour, and leather work, and land ownership and trade opportunities were restricted to the dominant castes (Jadhav, 1991; Bhimraj, 2020). As a result, widespread poverty and limited upward mobility ensued, completing a cycle.

The caste system, in its political consequences, played an important part in that consolidation of power among dominant castes. Thus political institutions, as well as decision making processes, have historically been inaccessible to lower castes. They had no part in

deciding the governance and appointing the people without authority, thereby denying them a voice in issues of their own lives. Caste dynamics continued to frame electoral politics even once India was colonial and post colonial (Hebbbar 2008; Nandu 2009).

Though there are constitutional safeguards and reforms in modern India, the caste system won't budge. Stories of caste based violence, honor killings, discrimination in education and employment emphasize the residue of this hierarchal system. Slow pace of societal change: The existence of manual scavenging and prevalence of caste based atrocities shows this (Narain, 2017). Real differences between Dalits and the dominant castes continue to be very stark and the systemic nature of caste oppression remains stark. Understanding the roots of the caste system as well as its implications is important towards mitigating the effects of inequities perpetuated by the caste system. Dr. It signifies necessity of B.R. Ambedkar's critique of caste, his commitment towards social justice and vision of an equitable society. The insights regarding the castes system as a tool of oppression can be used as a basis for deconstructing its hold on society in ways that establish a society freed in liberty, equality, fraternity (Raju, 1991; Rodrigues, 2017).

3. Ambedkar's Critique of Caste

Key Arguments from *Annihilation of Caste*

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* is one of India's most incisive critiques of its caste system. This ground breaking work, originally a speech to be read out at a Hindu reformist get together, which questioned the very bedrock of the caste system, was written by Ambedkar. Fasana (1976) and also (Rodrigues, 2017) claimed that caste was not merely a division of labor but a division of laborers who are being divided by religious and social forces in order to continue inequality and exploitation. Caste, argued Ambedkar, created artificial barriers between people who ended up tearing a social fabric and weakening national unity. He categorically rejected the proposition that caste has any moral, religious or historical grounds, and called it an artificial structure created by dominant castes in the interest of their predominant role (Kataria, 2012). Ambedkar also criticized Hindu scriptures such as the Manusmriti that helped institutionalize caste based discrimination. According to him, these texts glorified social hierarchy and authorised the subjugation of minority groups, i.e. Dalits, definitely taking away their dignity and humanness (Rokade, 2022; Misra, & Mishra 1991). Ambedkar was convinced that reform of Hindu society was impossible without the *Annihilation of Caste* and that such reform needed not only political action but social as well as religious reform. According to Narain (2017), he famously proclaimed that caste could not be reformed, but needed to be eradicated entirely for India to progress as a democratic and egalitarian society — and indeed, he actively promoted violence in that cause.

Rejection of Caste-Based Hierarchy and Untouchability

Ambedkar was one of the first, and loudest, critics of untouchability, the most degrading form of caste oppression. Untouchability dehumanized millions of Dalits by reducing them to a worse than slave status (Radhakrishnan, 1991; Swankhede, 2008). It was the expression of an even larger malaise of casteism, which was a violation of liberty, equality and fraternity as they were enshrined in the theory and practice of the Constitution, according to Ambedkar. Jadhav (1991) argued that caste was fundamentally against the principles of democracy and social justice, for it was (and is) an inflexible hierarchy where some enjoy privileges while others are permanently condemned to slavery. Caste, argues Ambedkar, was more than a symbolic level of social injustice. Yet he said caste limited occupational mobility

and left economic stagnation and inequality perpetuated. Access to education, property and to entrepreneurial opportunities was denied to Dalits, leading them into cycles of poverty and dependence (Raju, 1991; Nandu, 2009). For Ambedkar, economic empowerment coupled with access to education were crucial for dismantling caste hierarchies and freeing the marginalized communities from oppression. Not only did Ambedkar reject caste, but he rejected Hinduism as an ideological basis for caste. Dalits and other downtrodden communities, he stressed, needed to shun the religion that had enslaved them, cast off a faith which kept them captive and embrace other religions that sanctified equality and compassion. He eventually converted to Buddhism in 1956 in a culmination of a final break from the caste based structures of Hindu society (Bardia, 2009; Queen, 2008).

4. Social Justice in Ambedkar's Vision

Advocacy for Equality and Empowerment of Marginalized Communities

The essence of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's vision of social justice was based on the twin idea of liberty, equality and fraternity. His advocacy was more extensive than mere legal and political reforms; it was the call for substantive equality, especially for the disadvantaged in society, namely Dalits, women and other oppressed communities. For Ambedkar, to build a society based on justice was precisely to dismantle oppressive structures like caste, patriarchy and economic inequality which continued to perpetuate both social and economic disparity (Rodrigues, 2017; Kataria, 2012).

For Ambedkar education was the most powerful tool for empowerment and social transformation. Education, he said, could free marginalized communities from the oppression of systemic discrimination and give them the tools to push back against oppressive norms and become fully participating members of society. In the course of his campaigns for free and compulsory education for all children, but most particularly for Dalits, who were historically excluded from formal education (Jadhav, 1991; Radhakrishnan, 1991), Ambedkar's emphasis was on universal access to education. The story of his own transformation from a young Dalit boy denied access to school into a globally known scholar, memorialized his solid commitment to the potential for transforming through education. We also know that Ambedkar also focused on economic empowerment as a key element of social justice. The very economic exploitation of Dalits — confined to menial work and denied access to land, capital and markets — he highlighted. According to Ambedkar, harnessing these economic disparities was necessary for creating true equality. His policies included dissassembly of structural barriers through the promotion of land reforms, fair wages and access to resources for lessening poverty and inequality (Bhimraj, 2020; Nandu, 2009).

Ambedkar used his work to emphasise the need for political representation for minority communities. But he claimed it was impossible for oppressed groups to participate in decision making processes or even to obtain policies to help address their special problems, without having representation. The reserving of seats in the legislature for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in legislative bodies, as was done by Ambedkar, was a landmark achievement on the part of Dalits and other groups who hitherto lived outside the domain of politics (Hebbbar, 2008; Swankhede, 2008).

Role in Drafting Provisions for Social Justice in the Indian Constitution

Ambedkar was the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution and was instrumental in inculcating social justice principles into India's legal frame work.

Through his work, his contributions meant that the Constitution went from being a document that achieved nothing, to a document that has transformed over the course of centuries of discrimination and inequality (Misra & Mishra, 1991; Raju, 1991).

The key provisions incorporated in Constitution were due to Ambedkar's insistence of equality. Article 15 prohibited discrimination on the basis of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth, and extended the same equality to all citizens. Article 17 abolished untouchability and considered it punishable offence. An important accomplishment on India's road to social equality, this provision directly attacked one of the most degrading aspects of the caste system (Rokade, 2022; Narain, 2017). Besides these articles, Ambedkar also advocated for affirmative action policies, such as reservations in education, employment and political representation for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes. These were meant to redress historical wrongs and to facilitate marginalized communities in achieving improved socio economic status. The idea was that such interventions could create a level playing field and allowed members of 'disadvantaged groups' to play their full part in India's socio-economic and political life (Jadhav, 1991; Queen, 2008).

Ambedkar's work was not limited to the constitution of certain provisions for the marginalised group. He played an important role in determining the broader framework of fundamental rights and directive principles of state policy, that being the government's role in advancing social and economic justice. Fasana (1976), Radhakrishnan (1991), and his vision of a welfare state, focused on education, healthcare and economic development a committed concern for society to be inclusive and egalitarian. However, even with these progressive measures, Ambedkar was aware of the challenges to social justice. He said that constitutional guarantees without societal transformation would not suffice. Rodrigues (2017) points out that the success of the Constitution depends on the moral and the ethical commitment of people in upholding its principles stated therein. Continuing his strict criticism against casteism and inequality, he cautioned against complacency.

5. Impact of Ambedkar's Ideas

Transformation of Dalit Rights and Representation

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's work contributed to altering socio political landscape of India specifically securing rights and representation to Dalits. His relentless advocacy were summed in ending caste-based oppression framed by the constitution, which was in favour of oppressed communities. With all his efforts that the Indian Constitution became a powerful instrument for social justice like Article 17 abolished untouchability and Article 15 prohibited discrimination on the basis of caste, religion, race, sex, or place of birth were also embedded (Misra & Mishra, 1991; Rodrigues, 2017).

Education and its combination with soft skill development were Ambedkar's contribution to liberating Dalits. He saw education as a means for personal liftment, and as a tool for challenging that sense of social order that had become so entrenched. Through his imbibing of rays of hope for generations of Dalits by means of passing ray of hope to them through his personal example and policy advocacy. Through the establishment of the People's Education Society in 1945, he began to provide marginalized communities with the means to access quality education and to break the cycle of poverty and dependence (Kataria, 2012; Jadhav, 1991). Ambedkar's efforts, of course, greatly expanded the political representation of the Dalits. A member of the Constituent Assembly, he got distributed the

seats reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in legislative bodies, so that the marginalised communities would have a voice in the expediency of India's democratic exercise. It not only addressed the question of dalits being represented but also set the ground work for dalits to participate in the governance and policy making. Over the decades this template has helped the rise of Dalit leaders and political movements contesting upper caste hegemony in Indian politics (Hebbbar, 2008; Swankhede, 2008).

Ambedkar's economic vision also reflected his thought on the way in which structural inequalities oppressed marginalized communities. Through advocacy of land reforms, labor rights and equal access to economic resources he aimed at destroying the economic foundations of caste based subordination. He set the groundwork for the policy of affirmative action in employment and education, opening the doors for Dalits into mainstream professions, and improving their social and economic conditions (Radhakrishnan, 1991, Bhimraj, 2020).

Influence on Contemporary Movements for Caste Equity

Ambedkar's thoughts have had a profound and lengthy influence over existing movements for caste equity and social justice. To this day, his vision of a casteless egalitarian society remains an inspiration to political parties, social organizations and movements of the people on the face of the earth dedicated to resisting caste based discrimination and struggling for the rights of the excluded, under privileged communities. Ambedkar's philosophy, vision, and the movement he inspired as a main force in postindependence India have drawn heavily from the Dalit movement (Narain, 2017; Nandu, 2009). The ideology of Ambedkar has been adopted as the foundation of the political agenda of political parties such as the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). The BSP has mobilized Dalit communities and other marginalized groups and challenged the dominance of upper castes in Indian politics — now in the hands of the same old people. His ideas are being used by the party to become successful in electoral politics and are a testimony to the fact that Ambedkar is still very influential and still relevant in the contemporary India (Swankhede, 2008; Hebbbar, 2008).

Ambedkar's legacy has led to grassroots activism against caste based violence and discrimination beyond the electoral politics. However, organizations working for Dalit rights still struggle for education and employment as well as justice for Dalit victims of cast attacks. It is the critique of caste, and Ambedkar's and contributions movements such as those against manual scavenging and for equitable land distribution, which are rooted deep in Ambedkar's critique of caste and his vision of social and economic justice (Rokade 2022; Radhakrishnan 1991). Ambedkar's work has helped cast the experience of being cast as a human rights issue internationally. Bhimraj (2020) traces how his efforts to bring caste into the global discourses on social justice have infused advocacy at United Nations forums. Outside of India, his ideas have also resonated with marginalized communities, and have offered a way to approach situations of systemic oppression and inequality worldwide (Queen 2008). However, Ambedkar's hopes for caste equity are still unfinished business. Discrimination of a Caste based nature continues to be evident in many forms — social exclusion, economic disparity, and political marginalization. In one way, Ambedkar's ideas and activism are a blueprint and rallying cry for those who continue the fight to create an inclusive and just society.

6. Conclusion

The fight against caste based discrimination waged by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in his

lifetime, along with his vision for social justice, have been etched on the communal life of Indian society. His critique of caste, articulated with intellectual rigor and moral conviction, offered a road map to bring down the protections that the system had afforded its hierarchy. Ambedkar's reforms, the abolition of untouchability and affirmative action, expanded the power of marginalized communities to break down centuries of unequal social economic hierarchies. His ideas have even since retained their appeal and underlie current caste equity and human rights campaigns. Ambedkar's legacy continues to be relevant through political representation, grassroots activism, and international recognition of caste discrimination as a human rights issue. Yet it is in examining how far his mission is from being completed that one can see the persistence of caste-based atrocities, economic disparities, and social exclusion. To honour Ambedkar's vision one needs to be constantly committed to constitutional morality, education and economic reforms for liberty, equality and fraternity for all. Ambedkar's dream of an egalitarian India can be realized by addressing systemic inequities and a more inclusive society.

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