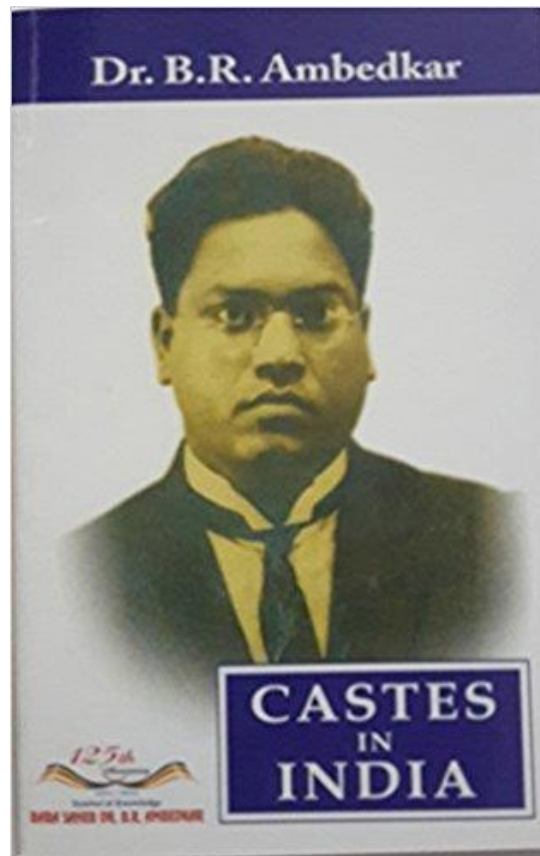


**Emancipation of Humanity and Annihilation of Caste:  
An Examination of Ambedkarite Influence on  
the Subaltern Discourse**

**Bhagya Lakshmi Vijayan, Ph.D. Research Scholar**

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**Introduction**

The ‘subaltern’ constitutes the section of the society which was obscured in the socio-political history of the world. The term subaltern owes its origin to Antoni Gramsci. Gramsci identifies the subaltern as the group that is excluded from the society’s established institutions. As Gayathri Spivak observes, the subaltern is a largely muted group, they are able to speak however, the society is not ready to listen to them. Hence their grievances often become cries in wilderness. Being a land of diversities, the Indian subaltern constitutes a variety of groups. The women, the dalits, the tribals, etc. can be said to constitute the subalterns in India. The

emancipation of the downtrodden was one of the major motives of the Indian leaders immediately after the independence. Ambedkar stands out as a luminary who fought for the cause the downtrodden and the under privileged. The paper attempts to make an analysis of the influence of Ambedkar on the subaltern discourse

Caste based subalternity is the major matter of concern in this paper. Caste may be defined as a stratified system of categorization based on a status conferred at birth (ascribed status) due to a person's descent from a particular lineage. As D N Mujumdar and T N Madan observes, caste is a closed system in India. Caste has been a unique feature of India which divides humans on the basis of birth alone. Though caste system is glorified as the hall mark of Indian culture, the evils of the system has crept into our social lives.

### **Ambedkarism and Caste in India**

There are different theories about the origin of caste system in India. According to the political theory on caste by Nibey Dubais, caste was a system created by the Brahmins to maintain their superiority over others. This theory was also supported by the Indian thinkers like Dr. Ghurey. The occupational theory observes that caste originated on the basis of occupations. Irrespective of the numerous theories about the origin of caste system, the caste has become a striking aspect of Indian social life today. It has become a way to maintain the 'superiority' of certain classes over the others. There have been numerous attempts to revive the social system from its evils. Some of the significant movements which fought against conventional caste system in India were the Bhakthi movement, Lingayatism, Periyar's Self-respect movement, Prarthana Samaj, Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha, Vaikam Sathyagraha, Namanta Antholan, etc.

Ambedkarism, based on the thoughts and ideologies of Dr. B R Ambedkar, is a movement which continues its fight against casteism in India. Dr. Baba sahib Ambedkar was a revolutionary who wanted to bring about total revolution in India, which includes the social, political, economic, cultural, intellectual aspects of Indian society.

The earliest works which depicts Ambekarian ideology on casteism was his paper, 'Caste in India: Their mechanism, Genesis and Development' which was presented at an Anthropology seminar at Columbia university. Several of his major ideas on caste is evident in this paper.

Ambedkar reveals his opposition to the ideas proposed by Manu, the law giver. He observes, "Manu, the law giver of India, if he did really exist, was certainly an audacious person, if the story that he gave the law of caste is credited, then Manu must have been a dare devil fellow" Ambedkar also observes that caste have existed much before Manu, He was only an upholder of it. "His job ended with the codification of these laws and the preaching of caste dharma". Ambedkar also expresses his negation of Brahmanism in this paper. He speaks about the role of Brahmins in perpetuating this unjust social system.

### **Annihilation of Caste**

Ambedkar's prominent speech 'Annihilation of caste' is indeed a revolution in Indian intellectualism. The text offers an unparalleled critique of Hinduism and its manifold evils.

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Annihilation of caste was literally an affirmation of humanity and severe negation of caste. It was a speech which was supposed to be delivered at the annual conference of Jat-Pat-todak Mandal. Mandal, which was a radical faction of Hindu reformist Arya Samaj, was founded in 1922 by in Hindus who mostly belonged to the privileged groups. Many portions of the text were found highly objectionable to the so called 'radical organization' and hence they suggested Ambedkar to make certain amendments. It was criticized that Ambedkar has unnecessarily attacked the morality, and reasonableness of the Vedas and other religious books of the Hindus. Ambedkar was not ready to make any amendments and hence the speech was never delivered before the audience. However, Ambedkar published the work on his own expense and the work has provided an excellent critique of casteism which has influenced generations.

Ambedkar puts forward many relevant issues before the civil society through this speech. To quote him, "The path of social reform is like a path to heaven is strewn with many difficulties. Social reform in India has few friends and many critics." Conscious and ceaseless efforts need to be taken in order to eradicate the evils from Hinduism. Ambedkar's criticism points out some of the significant errors in the history of Indian social reform. He questions the nature of the progressive social reformist organizations. It is a notable fact that many of the torch bearers of Indian renaissance belonged to the upper caste and hence were Brahmanical in ideology. They fought against social evils like sati, child marriage etc... However, none of them were concerned about the abolition of caste system in India. Their aim was the betterment of their families and not the betterment of Indian society as a whole. In spite of the noble aspirations of the reformers, they were not ready to give up their caste status.

### **Caste-Based Oppression**

Ambedkar's speech gives a picture of the brutal caste-based oppression. The fascist nature of Indian upper caste managed to prescribe the do's and don'ts for the lower caste. Ambedkar strongly affirms that as no country has the right to exert authority over any other caste on any basis. Caste is an unjust social system which cannot be justified. Ambedkar pities the critics who justifies caste system by attaching it to Indian occupational structure. Caste is said to be a system which eases the division of labor. Every civilized society needs division of labor, but the caste-based division of labor is merely based on social hierarchy and not based on merit of individuals. Here an utter dismissal of individual interest and capability takes place. This in fact leads to large scale unemployment too. Ambedkar dismisses the concept of purity of blood claimed by the upholders of caste system. He questions the racial affinity between a Punjabi Brahmin and a Brahmin from Madras. The concept of racial affinity is a mere myth. Caste system is not a racial demarcation but merely a division among people of the same race. It narrows down individual choices in significant matters like marriage Caste system doesn't have a scientific origin.

### **Warring Groups of Castes**

Caste has completely disorganized and demoralized the Hindus. According to Ambedkar, the concept of Hindu society itself is a myth. The name was given by the Muslim invaders and the word doesn't appear in any text before the invasion of the Mohammedans. Hindu society as such does not exist. It is only a collection of castes. Each caste is conscious of its existence.

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There is no Hindu consciousness among the Hindus, their consciousness is only based on their caste. They are even conscious about their sub caste identity and maintain proper distance from people belonging to different sub castes. The primary aim of the Brahmins is to keep their interest alive always. And the interest of the non-Brahmins is to protect their interests against the Brahmins. Thus, the Hindus constitutes warring groups of castes.

Ambedkar accuse that though Hinduism has been here for a long time, the religion hasn't taken any initiatives to upgrade the situation of the fellow beings. He cites the case of the tribal groups who still lives in primitive uncivilized state. Hinduism wasn't able to bring them out of this. "Civilizing the aborigines means adopting them as your own, living in their midst, and cultivating fellow-feeling—in short, loving them. How is it possible for a Hindu to do this? His whole life is one anxious effort to preserve his caste. Caste is his precious possession which he must save at any cost". Not only has the Hindu made no effort for the humanitarian cause of civilizing the savages, the higher caste Hindus has prevented the lower caste from rising to the cultural level of the higher caste.

Hinduism failed to be a missionary religion because of the existence of casteism. The mode of life practiced by other religions like Sikhism and Islam produces a fellow feeling which is absent in Hinduism. Though the Hindus claim tolerance, this is not a tolerant religion. Ambedkar criticizes the immense power that caste has over the individuals. Caste even has unquestionable right to ex-communicate anybody who has gone against the caste rules. Caste in the hands of the orthodox has been a powerful weapon to persecute reformers and to kill reform. Caste has ethically degenerated Hinduism. It has destroyed the sense of public charity. A Hindu's public is his caste. It has made public opinion impossible. Usually Hindus accepts only leaders from their own caste except in the case of Gandhi. Their morality and ethics is the morality and ethics propagated by their caste.

### **Warring Groups of Castes**

According to Ambedkar, an ideal society is a society based on liberty, equality and fraternity.

"In an ideal society there should be many interests consciously communicated and shared. There should be varied and free points of contact with other modes of association. In other words, there must be social endosmosis. This is fraternity, which is only another name for democracy. Democracy is not merely a form of government. It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. It is essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellow men."

### **Chaturvarnya**

However, the concept of casteism is against the idea of equality and fraternity. It is a system which divides fellow human on different lines. Ambedkar criticizes the concept of Chaturvarnya which divides human on the basis of birth and not on merit and capability. Ambedkar critically examines the historical concept of chaturvarnya which divided humans into different varnna on the basis of birth and lineage. Here, merit was not a matter of

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consideration. The Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas survived by pleasing each other. But, the Sudra community was ill-treated by the rest in many ways. There were no social revolutions against this unjust system because the lower class of Indians were completely disabled for any direct action.

There cannot be a more degrading system of social organization than the caste system. It is the system which deadens, paralyses, and cripples the people, from helpful activity. This is no exaggeration. History bears ample evidence. You cannot build up anything on the foundations of caste. You cannot build up a nation, you cannot build up amorality. Anything that you build on the foundation of caste will crack and will never be a whole. The essential question to be addressed is about reforming the Hindu social order. The first step of this is to abolish sub caste. The caste status and occupations vary from one region to another. However, the abolition of sub castes may only lead to the strengthening of caste system. Another option is to encourage inter-dining. Many castes allow inter dining, but it hasn't led to the weakening of caste system. Hence, this is not a practical solution. Ambedkar is convinced that the real remedy is inter-marriage. Fusion of blood alone can create the feeling of being kith and kin and unless this feeling of kinship, of being kindred becomes paramount, the separatist feeling, the feeling of being aliens will not vanish.

According to Ambedkar,

“Caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire which prevents the Hindus from commingling and which has, therefore, to be pulled down. Caste is a notion; it is a state of mind. The destruction of caste does not therefore mean the destruction of a physical barrier. It means a notional change ... In order to reform the social order, it is important to deny the efficacy of the sastras ... You must take the stand that Buddha took. You must take the stand which Guru Nanak took. You must not only discard the shastras, you must deny their authority, as did Buddha and Nanak. You must have courage to tell the Hindus that what is wrong with them is their religion—the religion which has produced in them this notion of the sacredness of caste. Will you show that courage? ... The destruction of caste is a reform which falls under the third category. To ask people to give up caste is to ask them to go contrary to their fundamental religious notions. It is obvious that the first and second species of reform are easy. But the third is a stupendous task, well-nigh impossible. The Hindus hold to the sacredness of the social order. Caste has a divine basis. You must therefore destroy the sacredness and divinity with which caste has become invested. In the last analysis, this means you must destroy the authority of the shastras and the Vedas.”

The Brahmins will never be ready to undertake a social reform movement to abolish caste. Because such an act would wipe away their caste superiority. Even the so called secular Brahmins won't come up with such a reform.

### **Caste is an Irrational System**

Caste is an irrational system. Reason has no role to play in this. A Hindu is supposed to follow 'Veda', 'sruthi' or 'sadachar'. Hindu religion is nothing but a set of principles, and a

mass of sacrificial, social, political and sanitary rules and regulations, all mixed up. For a Hindu, dharma means commands and prohibitions is clear from the way the word dharma is used in the Vedas and Smritis and understood by the commentators. Ambedkar ends the speech with a proclamation that he will leave the fold of Hinduism as it serves him no purpose. Even though he will leave the fold, he will be around watching the movement with active sympathy and will give his assistance in whatever be worth it as this is a national cause. Though caste is based on Hinduism, it has spread over other religions in India. The reformation in Hinduism is more difficult than the other national cause, namely, *Swaraj*. In the fight for swaraj, the whole nation fights together, however the fight for social reform in Hinduism has a lot of critics.

### **Annihilation of Caste, the Myth and the Reality**

It has been 70 years since Ambedkar published this revolutionary speech. The influence of this ideology in the contemporary society is matter that needs to be investigated. Fifty years since his revolutionary document, has caste been annihilated in India? Do we continue to judge people on the basis of caste, the ascribed status? This can be inferred by looking around the civil society today. Yes, India is a sovereign, 'socialist', 'secular', 'democratic' republic today. Yet, we continue to attach caste names in our surnames, we look for caste status while providing appointments, especially in organizations run by caste-based institutions. We look for caste when arranging marriages to our children. Honor killings takes place in this land for marrying from other communities. Yet we say we are secularists we are not casteist.

Caste is still a monolithic structure in India which continues to influence our civic life in visible and invisible ways. Is caste strengthening day by day or is it getting weakened is a question which needs to be critically analyzed. Today almost all castes have caste organizations which fights to preserve their caste identity and to protect the rights of their caste members. Caste organizations toils to preserve the caste name and to keep the system going on. Caste taboos are still observed and inter caste relationships, especially inter caste marriages are strictly dissuaded. Caste is often given priority than merit while making appointments. Another notable feature in India is new cult keeps coming up, even in the name of the reformers who fought against caste. It is ironical that the men who fought against caste becomes the reason behind fights and factions based on caste. India badly needs religion and cannot think outside caste and religion. Hence secularism remains an unrealized goal for Indian democracy.

### **Rebuilding Society without Caste**

Yet there are attempts by the youth in India to rebuild the Indian social system by reformulating the caste. The well-educated metropolitan families are ready to move away from the caste taboos and accept liberal ideas. In a way it can be seen that caste is giving way to class. Yet, empowerment happens only among the higher class who are able to receive the benefits of education and empowerment. The inter caste marriages between high profile caste groups may not matter much, but a 'anuloma' or 'pratiloma' marriages between two individuals who belong to two different rungs of the society definitely causes a huge sound and fury. The rural India still cannot think outside their caste. The underprivileged are still not able to receive the benefits of education and empowerment.

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## To Conclude

Thus, it can be seen that caste has not been annihilated from India. However, there are some positive changes happening around. Conscious efforts need to be taken in order to annihilate caste from India. Caste is an unjust social system which differentiates people on the basis of their birth in a particular community. It only helps in creating unnecessary distinction among the people. It needs to be understood that humans are mere 'Homosapiens' who are equal in every sense. Humanity should be our caste. Empathy among fellow beings is very important. If we need to realize the dream of developed nation, we must be able to shatter the barriers which acts as a hindrance to the development of our nation. Annihilation of caste is very significant in attaining this.

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