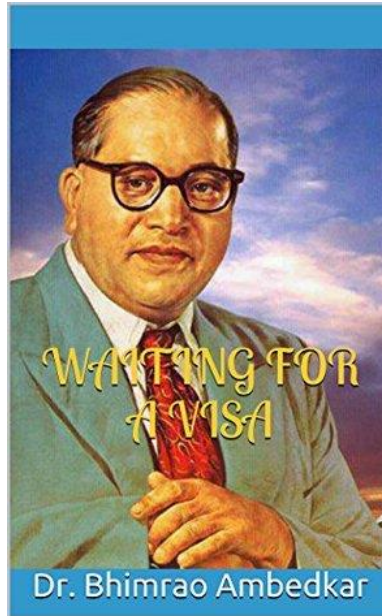


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Ambedkar's Views on Caste: Justice and National Unity
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Abstract

Caste is one of the most challenging social institutions of India. It has divided society into various rigid categories. The caste becomes a vote bank for political parties leaving no scope for individual decision-making. The political positions are decided by caste than individual. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar opposed caste, despite being a victim of this institution. His opposition to caste was not based on negative or violent reaction but it is based on humane and rational approach. Ambedkar denied accepting caste as a race or any other physical entity. Caste is not race as there is hardly any racial similarity between the same caste men of different regions. Castes can ultimately be annihilated only by inter-caste marriage, it is also imperative for every citizen to leave aside traditional religious beliefs and teachings that hold sacred and unchangeable.

Introduction



Ambedkar's reflection on caste was maybe based on his social background. Being an untouchable, Ambedkar had suffered a lot from the tyranny of the caste system. These sufferings had surfaced in some of his writings, especially in his autobiographical notes "*Waiting for Visa*", where his childhood experience were depicted. Ambedkar's first academic presentation "*Caste in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*" at

the anthropology seminar dealt with the genesis and growth of caste; where Ambedkar referred to the caste problem as a vast one, in the academic world is the exhibition of a 'Human Institution'. In "*Essays on Untouchables and Untouchability*" and in his undelivered lecture "*Annihilation of Caste*", Ambedkar described the anti-human tendencies of caste in detail and commented the caste system is not merely a division of labor but it is a *division of laborer*.

Vivekananda vs Ambedkar on Caste

Caste is still a governing institution in India and there are frequent appearances of caste atrocities, which attest its presence and its continuous inhumanity in contemporary India. Vivekananda, who is proudly remembered by Indians for his rational and humanitarian outlook, especially for his lecture at Chicago World Religion said, 'Caste has kept us alive as a nation... It is in the nature of the society to form itself into groups... Caste is natural order; I can perform one duty in social life and you another; you can govern a country and I can mend a pair of old shoes... Caste is good.

Ambedkar despite being the worst sufferer of casteism, put his own views on caste in a different way and it was based on humanism and rationality. In his judgment, Caste is unnatural, inhuman and worthless, hence its destruction is a must for the betterment of society. There are two different points in Ambedkar's conclusion; Caste is not the same as race and caste is not a permanent entity as it is commonly observed.

Caste Is Not Race

"*Caste in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*", dealt with the genesis and growth of castes in India was silent on the ideas of Aryans invasion; includes Ambedkar concludes his argument on the origin of caste by noticing its most essential feature and he defined 'Caste as an enclosed class which was created by the superimposition of endogamy over exogamy'. In his later writing, 'Who Were the Shudras', Ambedkar firmly rejected the ideas of Aryans invasion and this research concludes that Aryans were not foreign invaders and there is no evidence of imposing the lowest social status to original inhabitants.

Ambedkar completely refuted the racial explanation of caste and it was not race but priestly supremacy, which led to the creation of castes and the foundation of caste was based on the introduction of endogamy-an essential feature of caste. Ambedkar observed priest's i.e., Brahmins who first enclosed their community by becoming an endogamous class, and become a separate social unit. The direct relationship between caste and gender and observed that gender could not be seen in isolation from caste and vice versa. Ambedkar held the crafty approach of Brahmins responsible for the creation of castes.

An important difference between Ambedkar and others, who also held Brahmins responsible for this mischief. Ambedkar did not assume Brahmins as a race-people from the same racial stalk; instead he found the process in ancient India when the recruitment was being individual of different groups into particular Varnas. In Ambedkar's

conclusion, Varna is not a race and each Varna is composed of individuals of diverse segments of society and there was a time when even in Brahman Varna, people from different background could be recruited.

Caste Is Not A Permanent Entity

Caste is commonly observed as a permanent status in a predetermined social scale; the reason behind this belief is quite obvious, there is no case where an untouchable caste rose to the position of Brahmin or vice versa. In his view, caste system though always hierarchical yet at certain level it had never been so static and despite continues feeling of high and low there had there always been instance of the upward and downward mobility of different individuals and castes within the system. Ambedkar (1989; 207) showed one example, which he found in Ambattha Sutta, where the Buddha, an egoist Brahmin on the question of caste, where the Buddha, while answering an egoist Brahmin on the question of caste, started seeking the lineage of that Brahmin and showed him that despite the claim of Brahmanic superiority the Ambattha Brahmin was not in the superior status since the beginning, but had a humble origin. “If one follows up your ancient name and lineage, on the father’s and on the mother’s side, it would appear that the Shakyas trace their line back to Okkaka the Kings” said the Buddha. Buddha’s explanation was not only for the casteist Ambattha Brahmin but it is a teaching to all those who hold their lineage as pure and superior to others as the real lineage of any individual is hardly possible to know and such belief is nothing but a notion.

Indian history has a number of such cases where a lower caste/varna people gained upward mobility. There were many instance degraded into lower social scale because of diverse reason such as refuting Brahmanism by their non-belief in the Varna system, inter-marriages, relations with the lower castes, crossing the sea and importantly, by the loss of political power. Ambedkar discussed the downward mobility of castes in his book ‘Who Were the Shudras’ where he categorically proved that the Shudras were not despised in society from the very beginning, but were one of the branches of the Kshatriyas who later lost their social position owing to the refusal of sacred thread by the Brahmins.

Untouchables were Once Broken Men

Ambedkar believed that the untouchables were once Broken Men and in order to prove this argument he took references from two sources. The word *Antya and Antyaja* which are frequently referred to as synonyms of the untouchables. Ambedkar pointed out that according to the Hindu order of divine creation, it was not untouchable who was born last but it was the Shudra. This argument is absurd and does not accord with the Hindu theory of the order of creation. Ambedkar concluded Antya did not mean the end of creation. This also proves Ambedkar’s argument that the untouchable were not despised from the beginning but were one among the ruling stalk who lost their position by the tribal wars.

Referring to the point why the Broken Men became the subject of hate and abhorrence, Ambedkar searched two causes – first religious and second customary. Ambedkar brought attention to an important phase of the Indian history where Buddhism was once a prominent religion and was followed by important rulers and the masses but later lost its position and became a subject of hate. Ambedkar found instance when the Buddhists had been treated as untouchables he referred to one case from Nilkant's *Prayaschit Mayukha*. Ambedkar also quoted the dialogues of Sanskrit drama *Mrichhakatikam*, where a Buddhist monk was beaten brutally in front of Hindu crowd only because of his following of Buddha's dhamma. Buddhism suddenly became a subject of hate and contempt in the society, which was at the time governed by Brahmanic theology. The relation between untouchability and Broken Men, Ambedkar found the root in the practice of beef eating, which was once common among ancestors of the caste system. Ambedkar said that the Brahmins adopted vegetarianism only to counter Buddhism, which become so popular that it eroded the roots of Brahmanism. The continuity of beef eating by the Broken Men even after the mainstream completely abandoned.

Therefore, because of religious and political suppression, untouchability came into existence. According to Ambedkar, the untouchables are not a separate race but the Broken Men, who were once the Buddhists, and were not only distinguished citizen but also they were ruler of the principalities.

Caste Is A Notion Of Hierarchy

Ambedkar not only rejected the racial basis of caste but he also viewed that caste is not a physical object.

Caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire...Caste is a notion, it is a state of mind.

It is important that the social position in the caste system is never determined by the worth or race, but it happened in ancient India where the group that first imitated Brahmanic practice gained higher position and those who neglected it fell into lower position. Ambedkar also refers to the case of Pathare Prabhus, one of the backward castes of Maharashtra, who tried to raise their status by following Brahmanic practice of abandoning the widow – remarriage. Caste is therefore nothing but idealization of Brahmanism. Dalits owned different culture such as beef eating, no reverence to Brahmins, comparatively lesser observance of gender discrimination, they were deemed as untouchables in the Hindu society.

Ambedkar understood caste as a notion of hierarchy and he wanted to convert the unjust and hierarchical society into an egalitarian society. However, Indian social system with the theological support of Hinduism has hegemonic belief in caste. Ambedkar's conversation to Buddhism is not simply adopting new gods and new forms of worship; but more than this, it is complete change in one's outlook in every field of life. Ambedkar's Buddhism is fundamentally different from the traditional Buddhism where there is a little space for rituals, rather it is action – oriented and based on the principles

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:3 March 2018

Dr. T. Deivasigamani, Editor: *Indian Writing in English: A Subaltern Perspective*

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of liberty, equality, fraternity. Ambedkar tries to profess Buddhism as an ideology nothing short of Marxism; and he try to spread his understanding not only amongst his Indian followers but also among his international audience. Ambedkar firmly rejected any hateful move against caste Hindus. Instead, he appealed to all and especially to the sufferers of the caste system to first change their own mindset by leaving their traditional belief and religion and secondly by breaking caste through inter – caste marriages. Ambedkar’s mission is just and this shows a practical way to bring peace and harmony, which is the need of every nation.

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