

AMBEDKAR' CRITIQUE OF THE INDIAN SOCIAL SYSTEM

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INTRODUCTION

Among the many problems our country, India, still faces is the problem of caste discrimination—a system which has devalued the human dignity of Sudras and the Untouchables. As a result, they have remained socially degraded, economically impoverished and excluded from educational and cultural opportunities. Ambedkar being a rationalist thinker questioned the traditional social order of the Hindu society in order to build a just and egalitarian society.

His ideas, ideals and philosophy revolved around the welfare of humans to be achieved through social and political means. He fought against social and political injustice. His struggle was to consolidate Dalits and to make them aware that they too were human beings and have the right to lead a happy life in society. Nevertheless, the practice of caste system jeopardized their free association with the rest of the society. They bore tyranny and insults without a complaint.

Therefore, to restore their human dignity and give them a respectable place in society, Ambedkar struggled for about forty years and sought a religion that could deliver the depressed classes from the bondage of social evil. He looked for a religion, which could really recognize, understand their sufferings and misery and give respect to their humanity. He wanted respect for Dalits not as philanthropy but as a right and wanted to create the spirit of independence and self-reliance among the Untouchables. He wanted to see the birth of a new society—the birth of free human beings.

Persons like Vivekananda, Gandhi etc., who wanted social reform, failed because they did not want to change the caste system. Ambedkar was the first person in India to tell the world that untouchability is a part of the caste system and caste is the foundation on which the Hindu religion stands. If you touch the caste system, the whole edifice of

Hinduism will collapse, because Hinduism is nothing but caste (Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* 4).

Ambedkar was also the first in India to challenge the Marxist's theory that a person's status is determined by his property relation. To them, property is the only source of power. But this is contrary to the facts in India. Here the rulers and the rich landlord are governed by the dictates of the priestly class. Even gods are governed by the priest. The priest may be poorer than the rulers or the landlords but he ranks above everybody else. This rule prevails even to this day. It is caste that decides the social status and not the person's property. It is true to a large extent that the upper castes of India belong to the upper class. Today caste is the other name for class. Still there are people in India who harp on the point that there are many poor people among the upper castes. But in India economic status does not deprive a person's social status, which comes with his birth. The Marxists have ignored this basic fact—not because they do not know the fact—but because the Marxist leadership comes from the upper caste. It is inconvenient for them to admit the thesis of Ambedkar (Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* 6).

Moreover, Ambedkar is one of the few Indian leaders whose work attracts the scholars of today. The problem, which he struggled to solve, still defies solution. Ambedkar's goal was to raise the Untouchables to their rightful status. He criticized the social neglect of the depressed classes, blamed the British for the Dalit's political and economic backwardness and stood as the unrivalled champion of the depressed classes, dedicating his life to the cause of the Untouchables.

Further Ambedkar was also India's first thinker to make the point clear that India is not yet a nation, but a nation in the making. Whether the upper castes like it or not the "nationality question" is coming to the fore once again. The oppressed classes in India are seeking for an identity of their own. Ambedkar had rightly realized the urgent need to fulfill the social aspiration of these people in the interest of maintaining the unity of India—which can be preserved only if its diversity is recognized. Ambedkar was India's first to recognize this and incorporated it in the Constitution of India (Ambedkar,

Annihilation of caste 5). It was an attempt to make the Hindu society aware of its defects and shortcomings. Ambedkar says:

I do not care for the credit, which every progressive society must give to its rebels. I shall be satisfied if I make the Hindus realize that they are the sick men of India and that their sickness is causing danger to the health and happiness of other Indians (Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* 7).

The topic of this dissertation may appear simple but at the same time it is very important in the Indian context. Many students of philosophy have done their dissertations on similar themes. However, I am confident that my dissertation can deepen the understanding of “Ambedkar’s Critique of the Indian Social System”. I have chosen this aspect of his philosophy precisely to deepen my understanding about the caste system in India—the system which has divided people into higher castes, lower castes and Untouchables.

During my childhood, I had a vague idea of the caste system almost in a positive sense. My relief work among the victims of the Gujarat earthquake in 2001 was an eyeopener for me. Whichever village I visited, I could feel a strong sense of the traditional caste system being practiced. In each village the so called “Untouchables” were pushed to the outskirts of the village and were treated inhumanly. It was a great shock for me. I hope my work on this topic would extend my knowledge of Ambedkar’s understanding of the caste system and the struggles faced by him and his community.

In this dissertation, I shall attempt to reflect upon some aspects of his struggle to liberate the Untouchables from their bondage. The sources used are some of the original writings and sayings of Ambedkar, studies done on Ambedkar, and information gathered from the books and journals on caste system and untouchability.

Given the scope of the paper, it would hardly seem possible to attempt an in-depth analysis of Ambedkar’s undertakings. This dissertation is therefore limited to a few important concepts. The first chapter contains a brief historical background, which highlights some of the early attempts made to enhance social reform. The second chapter

deals with the Hindu social system, which shows the condition of the Scheduled Castes in the Indian society. The third chapter is devoted to Ambedkar's understanding of caste system and his social struggles. The fourth chapter mainly focuses on his criticism of the caste system and lays emphasis on his ideal society. The fifth chapter finally summarizes Ambedkar's views about religion stressing conversion to Buddhism as the ultimate solution for the oppressed people to achieve their dignity in the society.

CHAPTER I

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

One of the challenging tasks of modern India is to face creatively the tension that exists between castes. The caste system has already existed for more than 3000 years in order to maintain the so-called “social” system.

At the top of the caste system are the Brahmins, the priests and arbitrators of what is right and wrong in matters of religion and society. Then follow the Kshatriyas, who are soldiers and administrators. The Vaisyas are the artisan and commercial class, and finally, the Sudras, which comprises of farmers and peasant class. These four castes are said to have come from Brahma’s mouth, arms, thigh and feet respectively. Beneath the four main castes is a fifth group. They literally have no caste; they are the Untouchables or the Dalits, the oppressed, the downtrodden and the exploited.

The Untouchables form the lowest stratum of the Hindu society. They were in that position for centuries together. They were forbidden to keep animals, to use certain metals for ornaments, and had to live in unhygienic conditions at the outskirts of villages. They were denied the use of public wells, and their children were not admitted to schools attended by the children of caste Hindus. All temples were closed to them. They could not get service even from the barbers and the washer men. They were treated as subhuman by the caste Hindus. Public services, including police and military services, were closed to them. Naturally they followed hereditary occupations and trades of a degrading order. The social segregation kept them Untouchable throughout their life (Kuber 1).

We shall see how these classes continued to suffer upto the recent times, which led Dr. Ambedkar to adopt a particular line of thought and action.

1.1 ANCIENT PERIOD

For centuries, the Untouchables were the lowest stratum of Hindu society. They remained socially degenerated, economically impoverished, politically deprived and permanently excluded from educational and cultural opportunities (Kuber 1).

Attempts to free Hindu society from the evil of untouchability was going on since the time of Buddha (500 B. C.) and Mahavira, who emphasized the ideal of *Maitri* or human brotherhood. Both of them stood against the corrupted and degenerated form of Hinduism, especially against the Brahmanic priesthood and its social supremacy.

Jainism occupied an important position among the religio-philosophical systems of India. But in comparison to Buddhism, it was not very active against social tyranny and injustice, whose main concern was to launch a revolt against inequality, traditionalism and orthodoxy. Buddha has broken down the barriers of caste and preached the equality of all mankind (Kuber 1).

It was the Buddha, who for the first time examined the social laws of Hindu society. He rejected the theory of *Chaturvarnas* because of its inherent tendency to degenerate into casteism, social tyranny and oppression. He demanded liberty and equality for the oppressed and the downtrodden. His powerful movement arose not only with a body of doctrine, but also with “the formation of a society bound by certain rules.” The creed of the Buddha was not only a protest, but also a challenge to the whole of Hindu society’s unfair behavior-patterns. In fact, Buddhism challenged “the whole of it in principle”. Thus, the Buddha sought to raise the social status of the servile classes to bring spiritual reforms, which the poor, the fallen and the weak were seeking (Jatava 9).

1.2 MEDIEVAL PERIOD

In this period, Islam came to India, which claimed to be characterized by a keen sense of equality. Many people who were victims of caste system accepted Islam. They found Islam as solution for their sufferings. But even in the Islamic period rigidities and age-old caste and untouchability continued. This was because of some ongoing grave social evils prevalent among the Muslim themselves. For example, the well-known

historian J. S. Grewal tells how the Muslims society during the above period was divided into different grades. He identified three clear classes: (a) first strata of Muslim nobles (social elite), (b) the middle strata which included peasants, soldiers, traders, scholars, writers, the *sayyids*, the *shaikzadas* and the administrative personnel and (c) the lowest strata comprising of the craftsmen, personal servants and domestic slaves (both male and female). The word *quam* in its application to social groups among the Muslims was almost the equivalent of caste (qtd. in Massey 32). Kuber in his book *Dr. Ambedkar – A Critical Study* says:

In the Islamic medieval period, the Sudras and the Untouchables were denied the human rights of education, and equality. The Muslim rulers created *sardars* or noblemen from the caste Hindus; they did not confer these privileges on Untouchables. Thus, Islamic message ended in despair (Kuber 2).

From time to time, protests were launched against the artificial social behaviour-patterns in Hindu and Islamic societies by saints like Chakradhar, Ramanand, Kabir, Nanak, Chaitanya, Eknath, Tukaram, Ravidas, Chokhamela. Even then, the conditions of the servile classes—the Sudras and the Untouchables, continued to deteriorate (Jatava10).

1.3 MODERN PERIOD

1.3.1 Christianity

Christianity is believed to have come to India sometime after the crucifixion of Jesus, brought by St. Thomas, a disciple of Jesus Christ. Gradually many well-known bands of missionaries like the British, Dutch, German, Portuguese, Belgian and American came to India to spread Christianity.

Christianity had a massive appeal among Dalits, Scheduled Caste and Schedule Tribes. First it brought them education and then, medical care and importantly the values of humanitarianism like justice and equal opportunity in life. All these were to improve their living standard. Jesus' message of for universal love, compassion, equality, fellowship and liberation of human society, from superstition and blind faith had a ready appeal and acceptance, as it touched the basic problems of the oppressed. Though it is

said that Christianity is based on love, sympathy and democracy, the advent of Christianity did not, in practice, bring any radical change in the condition of the Untouchables. The socio-economic conditions of the Untouchables remained stagnant and continued to be vitiated by casteism and touch-me-not-ism up to the last hours of the British regime. Thus, the Christian missionaries totally failed to eliminate caste tyranny, economic exploitation and political slavery (Jatava 11).

1.3.2 Role of Prarthana Samaj

The Prarthana Samaj was one of the Hindu reform movements. Its main object was to abolish caste and to eradicate untouchability. Its founder, Justice Ranade sought to rationalize and modernize Hindu society. He struggled to create “rights” and wished to vitalize the conscience of Hindu society. He insisted upon reforming the moral tone of Indian society because his aim was to cleanse the old order and build a new one.

Despite the best effort made by the saints, seers and by the other reform movements, in the ancient, medieval and the modern period, the Sudras and the Untouchables were denied the use of public wells and were condemned to drink filthy water wherever they could find some. Their children were not admitted to schools, attended by the caste Hindu children. Though these Untouchables worshiped the some Hindu gods and goddesses and observed the same festivals, yet the Hindu temples were closed to them. The caste Hindus did not show any sympathy for them; even barbers and washer men refused to render service to them. They were denied admission to all public services including police and military services. Thus, being deprived of “social,” “religious” and “civic rights,” they had no opportunities of bettering their conditions. In short, there was utter lack of social humanism in the relations between the strata of the Indian society and the Untouchables. They were born as Untouchables; they lived as Untouchables; they died as Untouchables.

1.4 A BRIEF LIFE SKETCH OF AMBEDKAR

B. R. Ambedkar was born in a middle class Untouchable family on 14 April 1891. His grandfather, Maloji was a Havuldar in the Bombay army of the East India

Company. His father, Ramji Sakpal, also joined the army as a civilian teacher and became Headmaster with the rank of “Subedar Major.” Bhim Rao, as the boy was named, was the fourteenth child of his parents. Of the fourteen children of Ramji and Bhimabai, only five survived—three sons and two daughters. Young Bhim Rao received his early education at the Government High School, Satara. He was a promising student and showed excellence in his studies.

Being an Untouchable by birth, Bhim as a child faced and experienced the same humiliation and difficulties, which every Untouchable had to face in those days. At school, he was insulted and treated indifferently. Many a times he had to go without water not because there was no water but because being an Untouchable he had no right to drink from the common source. Bhim and his brother, Anandrao, were made to sit in a corner of the class on a piece of gunny bag, which they carried to school. Some of the teachers would not touch their notebooks nor put questions to them for the fear of being polluted. The Sanskrit teacher went a step further by refusing to teach Sanskrit to the Untouchables. As such, Bhim was forced to take Persian as the second language in the high school. In his later life, however, Dr. Ambedkar studied Sanskrit and became a scholar of the forbidden language.

He passed his High School examination in 1907 and soon after that joined the Elphinstone College, a prestigious institution. Inspired by his ardent zeal to study, the Maharaja of Baroda awarded him a stipend of twenty-five rupees per month. This greatly encouraged him in his studies. In 1913, Ambedkar joined the Columbia University, again with the patronage of Maharaja of Baroda.

Ambedkar completed his studies as planned. On 2 June 1915, he was awarded the degree of Master of Arts for his thesis “Ancient Indian Commerce.” A year later, in June 1916, his Ph. D. Thesis “National Dividend for India: A Historic and Analytical Study” was accepted by the Columbia University.

While studying in America, Ambedkar read a paper titled “Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development” before the Anthropology Seminar of Dr. A. A. Goldenweirz at Columbia University, New York, on 9 May 1916. First published in the

“Indian Antiquary,” May 1917, Volume XLI, it dealt with the subject of caste system from the Anthropological point of view.

From New York, Ambedkar came to London to complete his dissertation on the financial history of India. While doing so, he joined London School of Economics and Political Science for the degree of M.Sc. and D. se. (Economics) in October 1916. He also joined Gray’s Inn for Law for the degree of Bar- at-Law. His admission into these prestigious institutions in London was greatly facilitated by the introductory letters given by his kind Columbian Professor R. A. Seligman to Professor Edwin Cannan and Sydney Webb.

On completion of his dissertation, Ambedkar was awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by Columbia University on 8 June 1917. In the meanwhile, the Maharaja of Baroda, his benefactor, called him back as the duration of the scholarship granted to him was over. According to the bond, he was to serve the Baroda State for ten years. He was appointed as Military Secretary to Maharaja Sayajirao Gaikwad. The Maharaja’s intention was to appoint Ambedkar as his finance minister after some experience. But soon Ambedkar had to leave Baroda in sheer disgust in view of the continued harassment and ill treatment at the hands of the caste-ridden society. Even as a man of learning and a high official in the state administration, he was subjected to inhuman treatment merely because he was born as an Untouchable. Drinking water was not available to him in the office. His subordinates kept a distance from him. Even the peons, fearful of pollution, threw files and papers onto his desk from a height. Recalling one such experience, Dr. Ambedkar later said, “As a man in the Accountant General’s Office at Baroda, papers had to be rolled back lest the higher castes stood on the same material as I stood on”. At Baroda again, no one was willing to give him an accommodation to him. As the Dewan of Baroda expressed his inability to do anything in the matter, Ambedkar resigned and left Baroda in disgust. So, in November 1917 he returned to Bombay.

In November 1918, Ambedkar was appointed Professor of Political Economy in the Sydenham College of Commerce and Economics, Bombay, at a salary of Rs. 450 per month. Even here in the temple of learning, he was treated badly by the caste Hindu professors and was not allowed to drink water from the pot kept in the professors’ common room.

There are many groups among the Untouchables, which form the lowest strata of Hindu society. Before the adaptation of the present constitution of this country, the Untouchables were divided into three categories—"Untouchables," "unapproachables," and "unseeables." Such was the social and historical background in India on the eve of the birth of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (Jatava 12-13). Ambedkar was well conversant with the socio-economic condition of the backward community of the subcontinent. He wished to do something substantial for them through legislation and social pressure. The way he acted showed his dedication to the common man who had an insignificant social position. By his incessant hard work, he took up their cause, gave a severe jolt to the social structure and achieved success in the existing circumstances (Bakshi 1-4).

CHAPTER II

THE HINDU SOCIAL SYSTEM

We have considered so far the historical background that served to set the stage for the present social system in India. The inhuman social conditions of the servile classes—the Sudras and the Untouchables—stirred Ambedkar’s sensitive mind and he devoted his life to discovering the causes, which led to the development of the social system in India with its attendant evils of caste and untouchability, so that people could get rid of it. The relevant data, having a bearing on this aspect of his life and work, are presented here.

2.1 DEFINITION OF CASTE

The English word “Caste” has a Spanish and Portuguese origin. Caste means lineage or race. It is derived from the Latin word “Custus,” which means pure. The Spaniards were the first to use it. But its Indian application comes from the Portuguese, who had used it for the first time in the middle of the fifteenth century. The current spelling of the word is after the French word “Caste,” which appears in 1800 in the “academies” and is hardly found before 1740. The Spanish word “Caste” was applied to the mixed breed of Europeans, Native American and Negroes. But “Caste” was not used in its Indian sense until the seventeenth century. As the Indians idea of caste was but vaguely understood, this was loosely applied to the hereditary classes of Europe resembling the castes of India, who kept themselves socially distinct. Darwin has applied this word to different classes of social insects (Ketkar 12).

2.2 THE ORIGIN OF CASTE SYSTEM

In Hindu society, caste is still the most powerful factor in determining the person’s dignity. The caste system is the result of the Hindu belief in reincarnation and karma. The four castes eventually developed into a social mosaic of 3000 sub castes, with the Untouchables at the bottom of the list or more precisely outside the list. Such a rigid caste system is not found anywhere in the world outside India. A person is born into a caste. Once born in that caste, his status is determined and immutable. The birth decides one’s status and this cannot be altered irrespective of any talent that a person may develop or wealth a person may accumulate. Similarly, the caste in which a person

is born predetermines what vocation the person will pursue. One has no choice. Birth decides the occupation of the person in question. Here are the four-major castes:

- a. *The Brahmins*, the priestly class, came from the head of God. They are eligible for learning, teaching and performing sacrifices. The other cannot teach and perform sacrifices.
- b. *The Ksatriyas*, the warrior class, came from the shoulder of God. They are eligible for learning. Their work is to protect the people by waging war against the enemy.
- c. *The Vaisyas*, the trading class, came from the thigh of God. Their work is to trade and feed the above two classes.
- d. *The Sudras*, the servant, came from the feet of God and their work is to do all menial jobs in order to serve the other three classes. They are not entitled to learn anything (Massey 41).

Each Varna had its own duties. This view is associated with the division of labour according to aptitude, liking and capacity of the individual. Its original aim was to promote organic unity among the Hindus. Each one could get, as Dr. B. L. Atreya says, a suitable vocation and facilities for carrying on the allotted work, each one serving the society in accordance with the best that each one could give and getting the delight consequent upon performing one's duty in the best way. This is known, as the social ideal of *Chaturvarnya* and it was prevalent in the Vedic period. (Jatava 7 - 8).

But in actual practice, this original principle of division of labor based on talent and inclination did not sustain itself long, so much so that even the most ignorant, fallen Brahmin continued to be regarded as some one next to god. Whereas a man from the lowest class, however high his qualifications, was condemned as a degraded person. Thus in practice, the social behavior pattern tended towards caste behavior, based on supremacy of one class over the other, which amounted to a denial of what had brought the Hindu social ideal into existence. That is to say, it became the negation of its original meaning and purpose. The scourge of Untouchability, too, emerged against the Sudras. The servile classes, then, began to suffer most terribly because of the Varna system (Jatava 8 - 9).

2.3 LITERARY EVIDENCE OF THE CASTE SYSTEM

Here are a few of the earliest literary sources available to us, which speak of caste system.

2.3.1 Rig Vedas (1500-1000 B.C.)

The Rigveda is prior to 1000 B.C. and is followed by the Upanishadic period, which begins around 800 B.C. and closes towards the end of the sixth century. There are differences and testimonies in the text of the Upanishads that by the time these texts came into existence, the problem of the Dalits was becoming deeper and clearer. For example, the famous *Chandogya* Upanishad not only refers to the first three upper castes but also compares *Chandala* (Outcaste), with a dog or swine. In tenth *Khanda*, verse 7 reads as follows:

Accordingly, those who are of pleasant conduct hear the prospect is, indeed, that they will enter a pleasant womb, either the womb of a Brahmin, or the womb of Kshatriya or the womb of a Vaishya. But those who are of stinking conduct here, the prospect is, indeed, that they will enter a stinking womb either the womb of a dog or the womb of a swine or the womb of an outcaste [*Chandala*] (qtd. in Massey 28).

In the above quoted verse from the Upanishad, we see not only the existence of caste but also the ways an outcaste is compared to a dog or a swine and the description in which the “womb” of the upper caste is said to be a “pleasant one” while that of an outcaste a “stinking one.” Of course, as per this reference from now onwards the status of caste also depends upon bad conduct and good conduct. The verse from the Upanishad above also seems to hint that the Dalits and the fourth caste, Sudras, are same, as it refers only to the first three upper castes and no reference has been made to the Sudras. Instead of that, it refers only to *Chandala*, which commonly is understood as one of the titles given to the Dalits by their oppressors (Massey 28-9).

2.3.2 Ramayana

During the time of Lord Rama only the upper three castes were allowed to do *Tapas* (penance and meditation). Now it so happened that one of the low caste, a Sudra,

undertook penance in order to attain divinity. As soon as Lord Rama heard this, he killed the Sudra, for such presumption.

2.3.3 Mahabharata

It describes the story of Ekalavya, an indigenous boy, who has to lose the thumb of his right hand because he learnt archery and had come to be no less skilled than Arjuna in this art. This shows the rigidity of caste system and that education was meant only for the upper castes. (Massey 28-30).

2.3.4 Bhagvad Gita

In Bhagvad Gita, chapter XVIII Verses 41-8, Lord Krishna tells that everyone has to do the duty prescribed for his Varna and no other and warns those who worship him and are his devotees that they will not obtain salvation by mere devotion but by devotion accompanied by observance of duty laid down for his Varna. In short, a Sudra however great he may be as a devotee will not get salvation if he has transgressed the duty of the Sudra—namely to live and die in the service of the higher classes (Rodrigues 198).

2.4 PRACTICE OF CASTE SYSTEM AND UNTOUCHABILITY

The practice of the caste system and untouchability was the corner stone of the Hindu society. Brahmins considered themselves superior to other sections of the people. Hence, they enjoyed all privilege in society. *Manu* declared, “The Brahmin is the Lord of all Varnas because of his superiority of birth and observation of rituals and sacraments” (Michael 64). They themselves behaved as if they were god on earth. They prohibited the Sudras from pursuing knowledge, engaging in economic enterprises and marrying from the upper castes. In short, caste system paralyzed and crippled the people. Keer in his book on *Dr. Ambedkar’s Life and Mission* says:

The Untouchables form the lowest stratum of Hindu society. They were considered as a source of pollution. Practice of it is peculiar to the Hindu system. For them, the word Antya (which means the end of the village) is frequently used. Thus, it was a name given to those who lived in the outskirts of the villages. The Untouchables were called outcaste, unapproachable etc. They hardly had any

respectable place in society. Even then, they themselves felt that they are not human beings. They were denied the use of the public wealth and their children were not admitted to schools attended by the caste Hindu children. All temples were close to them. They could not get service even from Barbers and washer men. They were treated as sub human. They could not think of public service including police and military. Day by day, their condition became miserable (Keer 2).

2.5 THE STATUS OF BRAHMINS

The Brahmins, according to Manu, are the lords of his whole creation because they are produced from the purest part of the Supreme Being, namely, the mouth. They are the most exalted among men, so much so, that by their mere birth as Brahmins, they become living embodiments of the eternal law. A Brahmin alone can become one with Brahman for only he, of all the Varnas, is entitled to enter the fourth stage of life, viz. asceticism. Feeding the Brahmins is one of the acknowledged ways of gaining religious merit. A Brahmin is entitled to whatever exists in the world. In fact, the whole world is his property and others live on his charity. According to Shatapatha Brahmana, one of the Hindu religious scripts, the property of Brahmins should be exempt from the royal claim. They are, according to *Gautama*, exempt from corporal punishment. They are intermediaries between men and gods. Vishnu, another Hindu law-giver, likes to enthrone them as the equals of gods. He observes that the gods are invisible deities, the Brahmins are visible deities. The Brahmins sustain the world. It is by the favor of the Brahmins that the gods reside in the heavens. A speech uttered by a Brahmin never fails to come true. When the visible gods are pleased the invisible gods are surely pleased as well. Although all these statements are the divine utterance of various Hindu saints at different periods of time, the common fact of all this is that the Brahmins had been given a very high social status in the Hindu social order (Massey 83-4).

2.6 THE STATUS OF SUDRAS

The status given to the Sudras is ironically just the opposite to the status given to the Brahmins. The Sudras main duty is to serve others. Servitude is proclaimed to be a permanent condition of a Sudra. The food prepared by a Sudra is unfit for the Brahmin's

consumption. A Sudra must not acquire wealth because thereby he causes pain to the Brahmins. A person who dies with a Sudra's food in the stomach will be born again as a pig or a Sudra. If after partaking of such food a Brahmin be so unwise as to have a conjugal intercourse, the offspring will belong to the Sudra and the Brahmin cannot have him ascend to heaven. Manu declares that a Sudra cannot commit an offense causing loss to his caste, so degraded was he. A Sudra is regarded to be beyond the pale of moral influence. A householder, when sipping water for personal purification, must not use it if brought by a Sudra. Any member of the first three castes must not travel in the company of Sudras. Sudras are considered to impart some sort of defilement to objects like bed and seat by their touch (Massey 84 - 5).

2.7 THE STATUS OF DALITS

Having understood the given status of the Brahmins and the Sudras envisaged by the Hindu scriptures like the *Manusmriti*, it is now easy to understand the status of the Dalits. As stated earlier, the Dalits are those who are traditionally known as the Chandalas, the Untouchables. According to the *Manusmriti*, they are the offspring of the union of Brahmin females and Sudra males. Their very presence seems to pollute everything around them. They are the most despised section. Their interaction with other caste groups was prohibited. Kautilya upholds Manu's position by prescribing that the Chandalas shall live beyond the burial grounds. A Brahmin, drinking water from the vessel of a Chandala has to undergo the penance of living on a cow's urine for a number of days. Manu declares the Chandala's and others like them to be worthy of being settled outside the town limits. According to Ushanas, the Chandala is to enter a village only for sweeping etc. in the first half of the day, carrying a broom under his armpit and a small pot hanging around his neck. Illicit intercourse with females of lower castes by males of higher caste was not regarded in the nature of a serious offense. Only adultery with a high caste woman is condemned as a heinous crime. The punishment for which was either banishment or degradation to the caste of woman (Massey 85).

Such dogmatic religious teachings were put into practice over centuries. As a result, these religious practices have enslaved the minds of millions of Dalits who would have otherwise been liberal and rational in their thinking and would have also developed an urge to fight for their rights, self-respect and dignity. But unfortunately, in the name

of religion, the Dalits have been massified into an unthinking agglomeration. The impact of the caste system is so strong that even today especially in rural areas most of the Brahmins think that they are the gods on earth. Ironically, the Dalits on the other hand feel that they are inferior to others and not worthy of entering temples or for that matter even the residential areas of high caste people. Even the gods and the goddesses worshipped by the Dalits are discriminated by Brahmins. No Brahmin priest is willing to be the priest in the temple of the Dalits (Massey 85).

In post independence India, the Brahmins became the rulers of the nation, which according to all the Hindu religious scriptures is the prime duty of the Kshatriyas. In the name of religion and God, even today these rulers are the cause of communalism and terrorism, corruption and exploitation in the Indian body politic.

CHAPTER III

AMBEDKAR AND CASTE SYSTEM

After studying the early attempts of dealing with the problem of caste and examining the social system that forms the fabric of Indian society, we need to develop into the mind of Ambedkar—to understand his views on caste, the Sudras and Untouchables.

People are divided into different groups depending on their relative wealth, the sort of work they do or their family background. In India, these divisions have been strongly emphasized by the system of caste. This fixed the position of each social group or caste within society as a whole. It laid down rules about how people belonging to one caste should behave towards those of the other ones. It suppressed the enthusiasm and the aspirations of the downtrodden. Ambedkar not only saw their misery, but also experienced it personally from his school days onwards. He said, “Though I had a desire to learn Sanskrit, I was compelled to leave it on account of the narrow attitude of our teachers” (Bakshi 1).

Ambedkar experienced the same humiliation and tribulation, which every Untouchables had to face in those days. In schools, colleges, or institutions, wherever he went, he was humiliated. He continuously underwent the experience of untouchability. Undoubtedly, he traced the cause of all these misery to the existing social order or the caste system.

3.1 AMBEDKAR’S UNDERSTANDING OF CASTE

According to Ambedkar, it is pity that caste even today has its defenders. The defenses are many. It is defended on the ground that the caste system is nothing but another name for the division of labour and if division of labour is a necessary feature of every civilized society then it is argued that there is nothing wrong in the caste system. Now the first thing against this view is that caste system is not merely a division of labour but it is also a division of labourers. Civilized society undoubtedly needs division of labour. But in no civilized society is division of labour accompanied by this unnatural

division of labourers into watertight compartments. Caste system is not, merely a division of labourers, which is quite different from division of labour—it is a hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other. In no other country is the division of labour accompanied by this gradation of labourers (Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* 36).

3.2 AMBEDKAR'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE SUDRAS

It is said that the *Purusa Sukta*, a part of the *Rig-veda*, is unique. The principal ground for its uniqueness is, in the opinion of some scholars, the theory of social organization, the ideal of *Chaturvarnya*, which it upholds. This social organization, as the *Purusa Sukta* indicates, exists from the beginning and consists of the four Varnas. These Varnas are divinely ordained and have their own duties in a hierarchical order. The Sudras are included in the lowest level as those who belong to the servile class.

Concerning the origin of the Sudra, Dr. Ambedkar hotly contests the view of the purusasukta that from the very beginning, there have been four Varnas (in the Indo-Aryan society). According to him, there were, at first, only three Varnas – Brahmana, Kshatria and Vaisya. It is the *purusasukta*, which refers to and justifies the existence of the fourth Varna, i.e. the Sudra. Dr. Ambedkar observes that the *purusasukta* is a late production, which was composed, long after the age of the *Rigvedas* was over. The Vedas do not say anything about the origin of Sudras, only the *purusukta* dilates on them. That it is an 'interpolation' is the opinion of many scholars (Jatava 33).

According to Ambedkar the origin of Sudra may be traced back to the well-known struggle for supremacy, that took place in the ancient past, between the Brahmanas and the Kshatriyas. A struggle, which is reflected in the allegorical story of the many long wars between Vasistha and Visvamitra and their supporters. Both of them were priests, a Brahmana priest and a Kshatriya priest. There was hostility between them because each one claimed priority or superiority in matters relating to the institution of priesthood. In these conflicts and wars the key position was for a long time, occupied by Raja Sudas, the strong supporter of Visvamitra. At the end, however, victory went to Vasistha and his Brahmana supporters. They celebrated their triumph by condemning the progeny of the Sudras to menial tasks, making them occupy the lowest rung of the

social ladder. They were so degraded that they became the lowest class— Sudras; degraded people in the Indo-Aryan society.

Dr.Ambedkar's theory of the origin of the Sudras may be summarized as follows: The Sudras were one of the Aryan communities of the solar race and ranked as the Kshatriya Varna in the Indo-Aryan society. There was a time, when the Aryan society recognized only three Varnas, namely, the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas. The Sudras were not a separate Varna, but a part of the Kshatriya Varna. There was a continuous feud between the Sudra kings and the Brahmins, in which the latter were subjected to many tyrannies and indignities. As a result of the hatred towards the Sudras, generated by their tyrannies and oppressions, the Brahmins refused to perform the Upanayana (ceremonies) of the Sudras. Owing to this denial, the Sudras became socially degraded, fell below the rank of the Vaishyas and thus came to form the fourth Varna (Jatava 33-8).

3.3 AMBEDKAR'S VIEW ON THE ORIGIN OF THE UNTOUCHABLES

Untouchability was being practiced in the Hindu society for centuries. Various reasons are given justifying the practice. Main causes were the obsession of the Brahmins to maintain purity and to avoid pollution. Endogamy is the essence of the caste system. Brahmins introduced an elaborate system to preserve their purity. They married among themselves and if they had sexual relations with women of lower castes like the Kshatriyas, Vaishya or Sudras, the progeny was not entitled to the privileges allowed to those who were born of Brahmin women's womb. In order to maintain purity, all relations with lower castes were prescribed. Those who opposed the Bramin religion or rebelled against the caste system were branded as Untouchable and thrown out of the society (Massey 58-9).

But according to Ambedkar in primitive society there were nomadic communities – the tribal communities based on blood relationship. In modern society, there are settled communities and local communities based on territorial affiliation. The primitive society was nomadic, not because of any migratory instinct, but it was the result of the fact that the earliest form of wealth held by primitive society were cattles. Cattle had the migratory character. This society became a settled community when a new kind of

wealth was discovered. It was land. The progress of agriculture became the main source round which the whole society became settled.

In the course of time, there was continuous trouble and warfare. As a result of it the problem of defeated tribes arose. A defeated tribe became broken into bits. It was a floating population consisting of groups of broken tribesmen roaming in all directions. They had to live as stray individuals, shelter and protection became a problem for these broken men. The settled communities and broken men struck a bargain whereby the broken men agreed to do the work of watch and ward for the settled tribes and the settled tribes agreed to give them food and shelter. As the broken men were aliens, they began to live outside the village. This explained why it was natural to suppose that the Untouchables from the very beginning lived outside and Untouchability had nothing to do with their living outside the village (Kuber 39-40).

3.3.1 The Term “Dalit”

Dalit is a recent term adopted by the Dalits themselves to indicate the fact that they are the most oppressed, exploited and dehumanized section of the Indian society. The term “Dalit” has roots in Sanskrit, where the root “dal” means to split, crack, and open. So the term “Dalit” has come to mean things or persons who are cut, split, broken or torn asunder, scattered or crushed and destroyed. By coincidence, there is in Hebrew a root “dal” meaning low, weak, and poor. The Hebrew root of the term “dal” has a relationship with the Akkadian term “dalulu” (be weak) and close to that is the Assyrian, “dalalu” (be weak or humble).

In the Bible, different forms of this term have been used to describe people who have been reduced to nothingness or helplessness. The present usage of the term Dalit goes back to the nineteenth century, when a Marathi Social revolutionary, Mahatma Jyotirao Phule used it to describe the Outcastes and the Untouchables as the oppressed and the broken victims of our caste-ridden society. Under the charismatic leadership of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, this term gained greater importance and popularity. During the 1970s the followers of the Dalit Panther Movement of Maharashtra gave currency to the term “Dalit” as a constant reminder of their age-old oppression, denoting both their state of deprivation and the people who are oppressed. For them, this term is not a mere name or a title; it is an expression of hope. The term has gained a new connotation with a more

positive meaning. It must be remembered that “Dalit” does not mean caste or low-caste or poor; it refers to the deplorable state or condition to which a large group of people has been reduced by social convention and in which they are now living (Massey 6).

3.3.2 Different Names for the Dalits

The Dalits were called by different names in different parts of the country given by caste people as expressions of contempt. These names include: Dasa, Dasyu, Raksasa, Asura, AVarna, Nisada, Panchma, Chandala, Harijan, and Untouchables. Each of these names has a history and a background. Besides these names there are a number of other titles, which have been given to them at the level of the regional language. For example, *Chura* in Punjabi (North-west India), *Bangi* or *Lal-Beghi* in Hindi (North India), *Mahar* in Marathi (Central India), *Mala* and *Madiga* in Telugu, *Paraiya* in Tamil and *Pulayan* in Malayalam (South India).

These names carry within them the two-term contrast of “we—the Pure” and “you—the Impure”. In response to these insulting labels, the Untouchables have chosen to give themselves the name “Dalit” which refers to the hardship of their condition of life. This name is a constant reminder of the age-old oppression to which they have been subjected. If today the Dalits are reduced to a life of abject poverty and treated as polluted human beings, the non-Dalit must be seen as the agent of their dehumanization. The British named the Dalits “the depressed classes” and “the Schedule Castes,” in the Schedule Caste act of India, 1935. They used the term “depressed class” to identify all the working classes. Mahatma Gandhi named them “Harijan,” which means “children of god,” but the Dalits did not welcome this term because it did not adequately describe their condition (Massey 7).

3.4 ORIGIN OF THE DALITS ACCORDING TO STANLEY RICE

According to Stanley Rice, the origin of Untouchability is due to two factors—Race and Occupation.

3.4.1 The Racial Theory

This theory of the origin of untouchability says:

- A. That the Untouchables are non-Aryans, non-Dravidian aboriginals.
- B. That they were conquered and subjugated by the Dravidians.

This theory holds that the “Dravidians” conquered the “non-Dravidians,” the aboriginals—the ancestors of the Untouchables and they made them the Untouchables. The Aryans invaded India and conquered the Dravidians. Rice, however, does not indicate how the conquering Aryans treated the conquered Dravidians. Ambedkar believes that, this theory, supplies the missing link in the chain of events. This theory raises the whole question of the invasions of India by foreign invaders, the conquests made by them and the social-cultural consequences that have resulted there from. According to Ambedkar the theory is too mechanical, a mere speculation and too simple to explain a complicated set of facts relating to the origin of the Sudras and the Untouchables (Jatava 43 - 4).

3.4.2 The Occupational Theory of Untouchability

Mr. Rice also gives a occupational theory for the origin of untouchability. The clue is to be found in the “unclean” and “filthy” occupations of the Untouchables (Jatava 44). However, Dr Ambedkar does not agree with the view that such occupations are the cause of untouchability.

3.4.3 Ambedkar’s Refutation of the Occupational Theory

Ambedkar does not agree with the view that such occupations are the cause of Untouchability. He argues that the “unclean and filthy” occupations, which the Untouchables perform, are common to all human societies. That is, in every society there are people who perform these occupations. Why are such people not treated as Untouchables in other parts of the world? Perhaps, Rice, Dr. Ambedkar thinks, cannot give a concrete answer. Even the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas, do the work of scavengers, which is the “filthiest” of the filthy occupations. As Ambedkar states:

The origin of untouchability is to be found in the unclean and the filthy occupations of the Untouchables. This theory is a very plausible one. However,

there are certain difficulties in the way of its being accepted as a true explanation of the origin of untouchability. The filthy and unclean occupations, which the Untouchables perform, are common to all human societies. In every human society, there are people who perform these occupations. Why were such people not treated as Untouchables in other parts of the world? The second question is: Did the Dravidians have nausea against such callings or against persons engaged in them? (Ambedkar, *Occupational Origin of Untouchability* 305).

We have seen Dr. Ambedkar views on the origins of the servile classes—the Sudras and the Untouchables, and also on the origin of the caste system. These are sociological theories largely involving historical facts. It is, honestly speaking, the task of historians or of sociologists to examine them thoroughly. But what ethical significance these theories have, is a question that we are directly concerned with. We can only say that whatever might have been the motive behind the struggle for supremacy between the different casts in Indian society, there was a lack of the social harmony—social humanism, democracy—liberty, equality and fraternity. Kant’s principle, “Treat every human being as an end and never a means”, was obviously violated, and this resulted in tragic social behavior-patterns and iniquitous human relationships based on caste and untouchability (Jatava 52 – 3).

CHAPTER IV

CALL FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

There have been tremendous efforts on the part of social reformers and religious leaders to improve the lot of the Dalits. However, it should be noted that although most of the social reformers like Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Ramana Maharishi, Aurobindo, and Gandhi condemned the practice of untouchability, they upheld the caste system and considered it to be an essential part of the Indian society for its smooth functioning. Their efforts did not go beyond condemning the caste Hindus for perpetuating atrocities on the Dalits. They did not carry out any specific programme to release the Dalits from the clutches of the caste system. The role of Christian missionaries and western education not only helped the Dalit in economic terms but also made them aware of their plight.

However, Dr. Ambedkar perceived the problems of Dalits in an altogether different perspective. He believed that any effort to improve the lot of the Dalits should be directed towards uprooting the very caste system itself. Dr. Ambedkar was of the view that as long there would be a caste system, there would also be outcaste. He fought against the tyranny of the caste system in all possible ways. He mobilized the Dalits under the banner of “educate, agitate and unite.” He inculcated in their minds the value of self-respect, dignity, and an urge to fight for their rights (Massey 88).

4.1 AMBEDKAR’S REJECTION OF HINDUISM

Hinduism is one of the living religions of the world. Hinduism is known as *Arya dharma*. Dharma is a key word in Hinduism and means duty, right virtue, morality, law, truth and righteousness. Dharma is the way that leads to salvation or liberation (Brown 61). A majority of Indians profess this faith. However, its fundamental scriptures, the *Manusmriti* and the Vedas, advocate caste system as a divine institution, which led to the suffering of the lower classes. Ambedkar condemned Hinduism in his *Annihilation of Caste* as “a religion of rules, compendium of rituals, regulations which are based on the caste ideology of hierarchy and untouchability” (Ambedkar 120). Ambedkar in a clear cut way enumerated the evils of Hindu religion:

1. It tends to deprive moral life, freedom, spontaneity and to reduce it to a more or less anxious and servile conformity to externally imposed rules.
2. There is no loyalty to ideas, there is only conformity to commands.
3. The laws are iniquitous in that they are not the same for one class as for another. The laws are prescribed to be the same for all generations.
4. The laws are not made by certain persons called prophets or law-givers.
5. This code has been invested with the character of finality and fixity.

He concluded that this religion must be destroyed and there is nothing wrong in working for the destruction of such a religion. He emphasized that people must be enabled to realize that what they are told was not religion but that it was really law and its abolition and amendment must be urged (Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* 73 – 4).

Hindu religion dominated every sphere of life in India. It did not teach virtues like liberty, equality and fraternity and could not bring about the well being of the people. For Ambedkar a true religion is meant for the upliftment of the individual irrespective of caste, creed, sex, etc. But the Hindu religion instead of giving humanitarian service, treated people, especially the backward classes, unjustly. It did not safeguard their interests. Hence this religion did not appeal to Ambedkar's conscience. Defining the term "religion" as that which holds the people together, he said, "The religion which does not recognize the individuality of man is not acceptable to me" (Kadam 45).

This struggle led to his decision to quit Hinduism. From then onwards he was on the search to find a religion, which could serve as a means for the upliftment of the Untouchables. On 13 October 1935, a provincial conference of the depressed classes was held at Yeola in Nasik district. In his presidential address he announced his decision to leave Hinduism and said, "I was born in Hinduism but I will not die as a Hindu" (Kuber 23).

He mapped out the evil practice of caste Hinduism. In a way he was conscientizing not only the oppressed but also the oppressors. More than sympathy, equality and liberty are needed for the well-being of the Untouchables. And it was not possible unless this Hindu religion be discarded. Ambedkar said:

If you have to get rid of this same shameful condition, if you have to cleanse this filth and make use of this precious life, there is only one way and that is to throw off the shackles of Hindu religion and the Hindu society in which you are bound (Ambedkar 17).

4.2 AMBEDKAR'S CRITICISM OF CASTE SYSTEM

According to Ambedkar, the first and foremost thing that must be recognized is that Hindu society is a myth. The name Hindu is itself a foreign name (Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 40). It was given by the Mohammedans to the natives for the purpose of distinguishing themselves. It does not occur in any Sanskrit work prior to the Mohammedans 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. It is only a collection of castes (Ibid., 40).

The caste system cannot be said to have grown as a means of preventing the admixture of the races or as a means of maintaining purity of blood. As a matter of fact caste system came into being long after different races of India had commingled in blood and culture. To hold that distinctions of castes are really distinctions of race and to treat different castes as though they were so many different races is a gross perversion of facts. What racial affinity is there between the Brahmin of the Punjab and the Brahmins of Madras? What racial affinity is there between the Untouchable of Bengal and the Untouchable of Madras? What racial difference is there between the Brahmin of Punjab and Chamar of Punjab? What racial difference is there between Brahmin of Madras and Dalit of Madras? The Brahmin of Punjab is racially of the same stock as the Chamar of Punjab and the Brahmin of Madras is the same race as the Dalit of Madras. Caste system does not demarcate racial division. Caste system is a social division of people of the same race (Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* 38).

Caste system is a negative thing. It merely prohibits persons belonging to different castes from inter-marrying. It is not a positive method of selecting which among a given caste should marry. If caste is eugenic in origin then the origin of sub-castes must also be eugenic. But can anyone seriously maintain that the origin of sub-castes is eugenic? I think it would be absurd to contend for such a proposition and for a

very obvious reason. If caste means race then differences of sub-castes cannot mean differences of race because sub-castes would then become a subdivision of one and the same race. Consequently the bar against intermarrying and interdining between sub-castes cannot be for the purpose of maintaining purity of race or blood. If sub-castes cannot be eugenic in origin there cannot be any substance in the contention that caste is eugenic in origin. Again, if caste is eugenic in origin one can understand the bar against intermarriage. But what is the purpose of the interdict placed on interdining between castes and sub-castes alike? Interdining cannot infect blood and therefore cannot be the cause either of the improvement or of deterioration of race. This shows that caste has no scientific origin and that those who are attempting to give it a eugenic basis are trying to support by science what is grossly unscientific. This shows that the caste system does not embody the eugenic of modern scientists. It is a social system which embodies the arrogance and selfishness of a perverse section of the Hindus who were superior in social status to set it in fashion and who had authority to force it on their inferiors.

There is also a criticism against the Occupational theory of the origin of caste system. This division of labour is not spontaneous; it is not based on natural aptitudes. Social and individual efficiency requires us to develop the capacity of an individual to the point of competency to choose and to make his own career. This principle is violated in the caste system in so far as it involves an attempt to appoint tasks to individuals in advance, selected not on the basis of trained original capacities, but on that of the social status of the parents. Looked at from another point of view this stratification of occupations, which is the result of the caste system, is positively dangerous. Industry is never static. It undergoes rapid and abrupt changes. With such changes, an individual must be free to change his occupation. Without such freedom to adjust to changing circumstances it would be impossible to gain a livelihood. Now the caste system does not allow Hindus to take to occupations where they are wanted if they do not belong to them by heredity. If a Hindu is seen to starve rather than take to new occupations not assigned to his caste, the reason is to be found in the caste system. By not permitting readjustment of occupations, caste becomes a direct cause of much of the unemployment we see in the country (Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* 37).

As a form of division of labour the caste system suffers from another serious defect. The division of labour brought about by the caste system is not a division based on choice. Individual sentiment, individual preference has no place in it. It is based on the dogma of predestination. As an economic organization, caste is therefore a harmful institution, inasmuch as; it involves the subordination of man's natural powers. (Ibid., 37).

4.3 AMBEDKAR'S POLITICAL IDEAS

Dr. Ambedkar assigns the function of government to various departments in order that it may work with the utmost ease, effectiveness and justice for the betterment of the existing society. His political views are imaginative and not doctrinal. They are firmly grounded in human experience and needs. He regards human rights as natural and inherent in the individual, i.e., the individual has certain inalienable rights. He builds his theory of social and political organization around his central concept of the individual and his rights. Ambedkar says that no government should violate the fundamental rights of people. For some rights are so fundamental that no human society can be prosperous without them (Jatava 111).

From a humanistic viewpoint, he was opposed to all kinds of discrimination in administration, even in private factories and commercial concerns, on the grounds of race, creed and social status. He insists that some kind of government is essential for peace and prosperity among people particularly, when people fail to abide by law and order. Such is, according to him, the mission of a good government. And in fact without such quality, a true democratic society cannot be established (Jatava 112).

4.4 DEMOCRACY AS A WAY OF LIFE

There are many forms of government—oligarchy, monarchy, democracy, dictatorship etc., Ambedkar favors democracy and condemns anarchy and dictatorship. “In anarchy and dictatorship”, he tells us, “Liberty is lost”. Thus, he has as much disregard for dictatorship, totalitarianism or authoritarianism as for anarchy (Jatava 112 - 3).

Dr. Ambedkar regards democracy as a way of life. To him, “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 fellowmen” (Jatava 123). By this, he means that certain political rights alone do not constitute the basis of democracy. It has to be both social and moral. It must be based on love, friendship and dignity. Sociability and morality are the important elements of his concept of democracy.

According to him, “A Democracy is a mode of associated living. The roots of Democracy are to be searched in social relationships, in terms of the associated life between the people, who form the society” (Ibid., 128). This view of democracy puts emphasis on the basic equality of all human beings. In his social and political democracy, all persons have equal rights. Every individual is to be given adequate chance to develop and grow. Equality of opportunity is considered an important factor in democracy, *pro bono publico*, though complete equality in all respects is not possible (Ibid., 128).

4.5 AMBEDKAR’S IDEAL SOCIETY

According to Ambedkar, an ideal society must be based on liberty, equality and fraternity. He holds that a democratic way of life cannot be conceived without an ideal society. These qualities are enumerated below.

4.5.1 Fraternity

An ideal society must be mobile, should be full of channels for conveying a change taking place in one part to other parts. 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 respect and reverence towards fellow human beings.

4.5.2 Liberty

According to Ambedkar, few object to liberty in the sense of a right to free movement, in the sense of a right to life and limb. There is no objection to liberty in the sense of a right to property, tools and materials as being necessary for earning a living to keep the body in due state of health. The supporters of caste who would allow liberty in the sense of a right to life, limb and property and would not readily consent to liberty inasmuch as it involves liberty to choose one's profession. And in the caste system some persons are compelled to carry on certain prescribed things which are not of their choice.

4.5.3 Equality

This has obviously been the most contentious part of the slogan of the French Revolution. Equality may be an unattainable reality but nonetheless one must accept it as the governing principle. A man's power is dependent upon (1) physical heredity, (2) social inheritance or endowment in the form of parental care, education, accumulation of scientific knowledge, everything which enables him to be more efficient than the savage, and finally, (3) on his own efforts. In all these three respects, people are undoubtedly unequal. However, the question is, whether we should consider them unequal as human beings because they occupy different positions in this society (Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 48-9).

4.6 POLITICAL AWAKENING

Political power is the key to all social progress and the Scheduled Castes can achieve their salvation if they capture this power by organizing themselves into a political party and holding the balance of power between the rival political parties. Ambedkar said:

I ask you to ponder over the cause of your sufferings extending over a long period of thousands of years. The Hindu Dharma is the main cause for your suffering. Of all religions in the world, it is Hinduism that recognizes Caste distinctions and untouchability. This was the cover, the cloak for all injustices perpetrated on the Scheduled Castes by the Caste Hindus. The position even today, I regret to say, is that in villages they cannot live with self-respect. We must discard Hinduism and refuse to submit to indignities any longer. What struck me most was that my community still continues to accept a position of

humiliation only because Caste Hindus persist in dominating over them. You must rely on your own strength; shake off the notion that you are in anyway inferior to any community (Bakshi 58 – 9).

He emphasized that there was an urgent need for building up organizational strength behind the political body of the Scheduled Castes Federation. To share political power the Scheduled castes had to be organized as one solid unit before fighting for the rights in the future governances of the country. Unless they had the political power in their hands, they would not hope to bring about the desired improvement in the condition of their poverty- stricken people. Ambedkar resolved:

...in the free India of the future, we will be a ruling race. We refuse to continue to play a role of subservience or accept position in which we should be treated as servants, not masters. The days of domination of one community over another were certainly over and I want to make it known that the Scheduled Castes are determined to fight for their rights and claim their due share in the administration of the country (Ibid., 58).

After analyzing the Hindu social system in India Ambedkar felt that a mere political awakening would not ensure equal status for the Untouchables in Indian society. He proposed a different alternative—that of religious conversion. Looking from this perspective conversion became a path for strengthening the political safeguards rather than a hindrance. This is what will be seen in the following chapter.

CHAPTER V

CONVERSION FOR LIBERATION

A simple understanding of religion is believing in God as the center of all reality. It helps individual to build up a relationship between God and oneself. However, Ambedkar, while explaining the meaning of religion, did not mention God in his understanding of religion. He tried to understand religion from a social perspective. Keeping this in mind, he examined and analyzed the different major religions of the world.

5.1 AMBEDKAR'S VIEW REGARDING RELIGION

In all his writings and speeches, Ambedkar has maintained the importance and necessity of religion. According to him, religion is a part of once inheritance. He further added that material comfort was by no means the solvent of all human ills. Religion to him was the driving force of human activities. He remarked, "Man cannot live by bread alone. He has a mind which needs food for thought" and added, "Religion instills hope in man and drives him to activity" (Kuber 75, qtd. in Keer 462, 499). Ambedkar regarded slavery as the antithesis of a religious society. To him religion was for the service of man and not man a means of religion.

His understanding of religion is very unique. For him, "a true religion was the upliftment of the individual. It should teach the virtues of fellow-feeling, equality and liberty" (Keer 273-4). Religion must be judged by social standards, based on social ethics. He linked religion with the social well-being of the people. To him religion, social status and property were all sources of power and authority. He wanted to have a religion of "spiritual principles" truly "universal", applicable to all countries and to all races. He treated Hinduism as "a mass of sacrificial, social, political and sanitary rules and regulations; all mixed up". He called it, a "law" or "legalized class-ethics".

Ambedkar has given four characteristics of religion:

- 1) "Religion in the sense of morality must, therefore, remain the governing principle in every society."

- 2) Religion if it is to function must be in accord with reason which is merely another name for science.
- 3) Its moral code must recognize the fundamental tenets of liberty, equality and fraternity. Unless a religion recognizes these three fundamental principles of social life, religion will be doomed.
- 4) Religion must not sanctify or ennoble poverty (Kuber 76).

According to Ambedkar, religion has undergone four stages: in its original form religion was the matter of personal salvation of man's soul; in its second stage it meant the maintenance of human brotherhood based on moral rules governing the conduct of human beings towards each other; in its third stage, people worshipped those personalities who satisfied the wants of their lives; and in its last stage it worshipped a person who performed miracles (Keer 449). He defined religion as something that offered you prosperity or elevation first in this world and then salvation. In his view, the belief in soul was far better than the belief in God (Kuber 78).

He believed that the center of religion should not be the relation between human beings and god, but between human beings. He raised the question: "What advantage can there be in believing God?" And he answered it in an empathetic way:

Belief in God gave rise to the belief in the efficacy of worship and prayer, and the efficacy of worship and prayer gave rise to the office of the priest and the priest was the evil genius who created all superstitions and thereby destroyed the growth of right view (Kuber 76).

He thought religion created priesthood and gave priests complete control over people, from birth to death. By denying the existence of soul and God, he ruled out the possibility of past karmas as the regulator of human existence. On one occasion, he appealed to his people not to depend on God or superman for the abolition of untouchability. He said that the salvation of Untouchables lay in political powers and not in making pilgrimages and observances of fasts. The religious fasts, austerities and penances could not save the Untouchables from salvation. He impressed upon their minds that to them bread was better than the worship of God (Kuber 77-8).

5.2 AMBEDKAR AND CHRISTIANITY

Ambedkar loved Christian teaching. He was a devoted student of the Bible and possessed large collection of biblical literatures. In his comparative study of religions, he confessed that Christ captivated him with his love towards the poor and marginalized. Christianity always took side of the oppressed, downtrodden. It helped people, especially the Dalits, the Untouchables, to find an identity and live a better life. According to P. Nirmal, “The Indian church is a Dalit Church and hence, Jesus is its Messiah for the Dalits and their families, and the Dalit communities in the country.” All these services to humanity by Christianity influenced Ambedkar. Ambedkar believed in the teachings of Christ and the message of liberation. He said, “It could be a dynamic, strong enough, to lift us up out of our present degraded position”. With this sentiment, he came very close to Christianity yet moved so far from it due to various other factors. The churches created by the Christianity produced different feelings (Wilkinson & Thomas 60).

Ambedkar found that Christian missionaries wanted to convert upper castes and to establish educational institutions. He also saw that the Christianity of south India observed the caste system in the churches. Though Ambedkar liked Christ’s teachings of love and compassion, yet he rejected Christianity as a solution for caste system.

5.3 AMBEDKAR AND ISLAM

In terms of social strength, Islam was no doubt a viable alternative for consideration. But he did not like to convert into Islam. Mohammed claimed that he was the last messenger of God. Therefore, what he taught was the word of God and infallible, and beyond question (Chalam 47). Ambedkar did not like this kind of absolute claim of Mohammed because he wanted religion, which could give importance to the individual. Indian Muslims, he felt, did not take to social reorganization. Their old social systems were still prevalent. Thus, social stagnation remained. Ambedkar argued that Islamic section of India because of its fanatic religious spirit, felt, irresistible separatist feeling. Due to this fanatic spirit, they are more aggressive.

Referring to the Muslim religion Ambedkar said, “If there is any people with whom religious sentiment and practices make it extremely risky to interfere, they are the Muslims.” (Rajshekar 54). Due to their aggressive nature, they are unable to form

universal brotherhood of people. And if at all, there is brotherhood of people, then it is the brotherhood of Muslim alone. Ambedkar said, “There are many sects among them and the bond of one single religion has hardly helped forge any unity among them. Many have been killed in the Shia-Sunni riots in Lucknow, though both are Muslim. Religion, even if it is Islam, has never been a unifying force. More wars have been fought in the name of religion” (Rajsekar 71).

With respect to caste and slavery, Islam speaks of brotherhood and one infers that Islam must be free from slavery and caste. As for caste, facts from the provinces of India gathered from the census reports are enough to show that Mohammedans observed not only castes but also untouchability. Ambedkar’s conclusion is: there can be no manner of doubt that [the] Muslim society in India is afflicted by the same social evil as [that] afflicts the Hindu society. Indeed, Muslims have all the social evils of Hindus and something more. That something more is the compulsory system of Purdah for Muslim women (Wilkinson & Thomas 54).

According to Ambedkar, “Islam has set its seal of inferiority upon her and has given the sanction of religion to social custom which have deprived her of the full opportunity for self-expression and development of personality” (qtd. in Ambedkar, 226). These are some of the factors due to which Ambedkar did not appreciate Islam.

5.4 AMBEDKAR AND SIKHISM

Ambedkar had a positive attitude towards Sikhism. He examined whether Sikhism could assure the dignity of the Untouchables. He met many Sikh leaders. They thought that Ambedkar would convert into Sikhism. Therefore, Sardar Dilip Singh Doabri, the vice president of the Golden Temple Managing Committee, wired to Ambedkar, saying that, “Sikhism fulfills the requirements of Ambedkar in view of conversion. The Sikh religion is monotheistic and all loving and provides for equal treatment of all its adherents” (Wilkinson and Tomas 55). This made Ambedkar to think about the Sikhism. For this very purpose on January 30, 1936 he attended a Sikh Bhajan. In mid April 1936 he went to attend a Sikh mission conference. The Conference was well attended by Sikhs and the depressed class of people from Punjab, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. The Sikh leaders stressed in their speeches the need for

missionary and developmental work among the depressed classes. Dr. Ambedkar replied that he approved the principle of equality, but had not made up his mind as to which religion to follow.

5.5 AMBEDKAR AND JAINISM

Ambedkar felt that Jainism, which advocated ahimsa, was not a powerful religion. Buddha did not make ahimsa a matter of rule, but enunciated it as a matter of principle or way of life, where as Jainism made it a matter of rule. Buddha's doctrine does not say; "kill not," it says, "love all" (qtd. in Rajesheker 34).

Many different religious leaders approached him to urge him to convert into their respective religion but Ambedkar ignored them all. Finally, he embraced Buddhism as he found it the most appropriate religion. According to him, this was a religion of equality, liberty, and fraternity. This religion provides love, compassion and sympathy. It is based on social democracy as well as secularism. And that is what people needed most.

5.6 AMBEDKAR AND BUDDHISM

Ambedkar was always in search of a religion, which could really shoulder the responsibility for the betterment of the depressed classes. Buddhism was the best option for him. In one of his talks, which was broadcasted in May 1956, by the British Broadcasting Corporation, he said: "Buddhism gives three principles in combination which no other religion does. Buddhism teaches prajna (understanding) as against superstition and supernaturalism, karuna (love) and samata (equality)...Neither God nor soul can save the society" (Kuber 92). To him Buddhism was a revolt against "parasitic luxury", and prepared the foundations of a prosperous and glorious civilization (Kuber 80).

Religion, as Ambedkar conceived, was a rational one, a moral one and spiritual one. It was secular and not extra mundane. He regarded Dhamma as religion. He observed: "Religion is personal...contrary to this Dhamma is social. In Dhamma, there is no place for prayers, pilgrimages, rituals, ceremonies or sacrifices. Morality is the essence of Dhamma; without it there is no Dhamma" (Keer 323). He describes Dhamma as righteousness; right relations between human beings in all spheres of life. One man, if

he is alone, does not need Dhamma. But “society cannot do without Dhamma, i.e. right relations”. Dhamma as religion thus rejects belief in God, belief in soul, worship of God, curing of the erring soul, propitiating god by prayers, ceremonies, sacrifices, etc. In short, he regarded Buddha’s Dhamma as true religion, the purpose of which was to reconstruct the world by establishing right relations among human beings (Keer 376).

It was based on ethics and the Buddha acted as a guide and not as a God whereas Krishna said that he was the God of gods; Christ said he was God’s son and Mohammed Paigamber said he was the last messenger of God. Except the Buddha, all founders of religion claimed for themselves the role of *mokshadata* (deliverer) and claimed infallibility for themselves, while the Buddha was satisfied with the role of *margadata* (guide). According to him, the religion of the Buddha was morality. Dharma to Brahmins was yajnas and sacrifices to god. In place of *karma* the Buddha substituted morality as the essence of Dharma. The social gospel of Hinduism was inequality whereas Buddhism was equality (Kuber 90 – 1).

According to Ambedkar, Buddhism was a true religion because it led to a life guided by the three principle: knowledge, right path and compassion. In Buddhism, he discovered a ray of hope and light for all communities. He contended that the Buddha sought to raise the social status of the servile classes and he believed in the necessity and urgency of the social and religious reforms, which the poor, the fallen and the weak needed. The creed of Buddha was not only a protest but a challenge to the whole Hindu society’s unfair behavior-patterns. And for the individual he said, “Buddhism teaches social freedom, intellectual freedom, economic freedom and political freedom...equality not between man and man only but between man and woman (Kuber 94).

The Buddhist way of life, thus, aimed at the moral regeneration and social emancipation of human beings; each member of society had to strive for his own moral progress as well as that of other individuals. The Buddhist way of life was further divided into two parts: the Buddhist way for the laity and the Buddhist way for the *Bhikkus*; these included the whole range of moral behavior patterns in Buddhist society.

According to Ambedkar the Buddhist social approach was more comprehensive and humanistic than the Marxist view of man and society. Buddha’s teaching, he

thought, was more suited to the needs of practical social life. Buddha tried to blend the socio-economic and political ideas on the basis of moral foundation. By stressing the unity of individuals on a social and political level he endeavored to transform human life into an ideal one based on equality and liberty, love and sympathy. Moral and religious life, as he conceived it, was based on the social organization and the conduct of man in society. Inspired by Buddha's sense of love and kindness, he went forward to do the great work of service to humanity. According to him, 90% of Christianity was copied from Buddhism, both in substance and in form. Among the four preceptors: Shri Krishna, Buddha, Christ and Mohammed. Buddha appealed to him most as he always preached that his disciples should not obey his commands but should follow the dictates of their conscience. There was no god in Buddhism, but the place of God was taken by morality (Kuber 81).

5.7 AMBEDKAR AND CONVERSION

According to Ambedkar, conversion is a change from one religion to another with the purpose of gaining spiritual, psychological, social and economical satisfaction for people who want to live a life of dignity and respect in their social surroundings; to make use of whatever talents people possess and to make their lives meaningful. One does not like to profess that faith or religion that does not recognize one's desires and aspirations.

According to Buddha, merits of Buddhist philosophy were as follows:

- a. Buddhism demanded living experience and a life divine attainable here and now, not after death.
- b. It was a realism and never an idealism.
- c. It upheld liberty, equality, truth and justice; it emphasized humanity, love and peace.
- d. It was dynamic, scientific and all-embracing.
- e. Its explanation of life and its meaning and purpose of birth and death and its afterdeath were very clear, intelligible and logical.
- f. Above all, man was the center of his study and examination and not anything outside of him (Kuber 90).

5.7 KINDS OF CONVERSION

5.7.1 Spiritual Conversion

It implies throwing out the old habits that affects the well-being and growth of a person. The person decides to lead a good life to make one's life beautiful. In doing so, a person becomes a new creature. The person changes his life to help others and follows the norms of the society. It is also like psychological conversion to get rid of one's own fear, tension and anxiety. The fruit of spiritual conversion is liberty of mind (Ambedkar, *Why Go for Conversion?* 14).

5.7.2 Religious Conversion

Religious conversion too is treated as a social conversion. A person converts into another religion to get his or her social status so that he or she can live life gracefully. They can perform their religious duties well and bring joy and happiness to the people (Ibid., 15).

Conversion had become necessary for Ambedkar because his people's strength had been taken away. Ambedkar knew that in any struggle one who holds strength becomes victorious, and one who has no strength loses. Therefore, he recommended conversion as the only solution to the problem of untouchability. Ambedkar said:

To reform the Hindu society is neither our aim nor our field of action. Our aim is to gain social freedom. We have nothing to do with anything else. If we can gain our freedom by conversion, why should we shoulder the responsibility of reforming the Hindu religion? And why should we sacrifice our strength and property for that? None should misunderstand the object of our movement as being Hindu social reform. The object of our movement is to achieve social freedom for the Untouchables. It is equally true that the freedom cannot be secured without conversion (qtd. in *Why to go for Conversion?* 5).

Though Ambedkar made up his mind and called upon his followers to renounce Hinduism and embrace any other religion than Hinduism, he was swayed by Buddhism. The shadow of Buddhism was lurking over him. Since his boyhood he was interested in Buddhism, and regarded Buddha as a preceptor. In his speeches he had outlined the

struggle between Brahminism and Buddhism and the counterrevolution led by Brahminism. The quarrel was on one issue and that was “what is truth?” Analysing some of the aspects of the Vedas he said that, “certain portions of the Vedas were a forgery introduced at a later stage. Today we are in the grip of counterrevolutionaries and if some very quick action is not taken, we might bring great disaster to the country” (Kuber 89).

Ambedkar saw that Hindu society was static. Untouchability was recognized by Hindu religion and caste was the corner stone to the arch of Hinduism. He weighed the merits of the Hindu dharma as against the merits of Buddhism and finally resolved to embrace Buddhism. The reasons why Ambedkar embraced Buddhism can be summarized thus:

1. He tried to prove that the Untouchables were Buddhists. In his thesis on the *Origin of Untouchability*, he made it clear that today’s Untouchables were once Buddhists.
2. Buddhism was an Indian religion and the Buddha was nearer to the Untouchable masses.
3. Buddhism could withstand even the severest scientific test and had the power and capacity to direct the destinies of the modern world.
4. The Untouchables would join with the world Buddhists and thus pave the way for world brotherhood (Kuber 90).

According to Ambedkar, Buddhism could be a universal religion. He said in the interview on 13 October 1956 at Nagpur that he would not remain a member of the Scheduled Castes Federation after conversion to Buddhism. In the Buddha Sangh all were equal. There were no different castes. After his conversion to Buddhism on 14 October 1956, he said that by discarding the ancient religion which stood for inequality and oppression he was reborn and felt as if released from the hell. He was deeply moved when he said: “I renounce Hinduism” (qtd. in Kuber 95). He denounced Hinduism, its customs and traditions and declared that from that moment onwards he would strive for the spread of equality among human beings. “Conversion of religion was no solution,” said Rajbhoj, who was Ambedkar’s secretary. Ambedkar reminded him of his vow taken in 1935: “Even though I am born a Hindu, I will not die a Hindu” (Ibid.)

Ambedkar’s religious conversion was not inspired by any material motive. Conversion may not improve the economic status of converts, but it must be noted that

poverty is never the problem of Untouchables. Nowhere our people have complained of poverty. Their problem is the denial of human rights, dignity and self-respect. And conversion instantly restores all these. The revolt which Ambedkar mobilized culminated in Buddhist movement. It was indeed a liberating force. Conversion, therefore, has become the first step in the long march of Untouchables towards social freedom. In his book *Why go for Conversion?* Ambedkar makes a clarion call to the oppressed classes:

The Untouchables will remain Untouchables as long as they remain within “Hinduism”. Conversion is not the lasting solution but it certainly is a step towards solution—the first step to destroy the caste. Therefore, we call upon all Untouchables to get out of Hinduism as urgently as possible (8).

CONCLUSION

Despite decades of struggle and conflict, the scheduled castes in India continue to face widespread discrimination and inhumane treatment from a society even today. Call them Untouchables, Harijans or Dalits; the plight of these 200 million continues to challenge our credential as a democratic society which claims to be concerned about the well being of all its citizens.

Dr. Ambedkar was a many-sided genius. He was a distinguished economist, a professor, a brilliant lawyer, a reputed author and a great political leader. But above all he showed us to how one could attain the heights of glory through hard work and faith in oneself. He was one of the highly gifted and qualified Untouchables ever born in India. At a very early stage of his career, he realized the pitiable plight of Untouchables. He made up his mind to devote his whole life for their socio-economic upliftment. He was of the view that, “One must distinguish between the freedom of a country and the freedom of the people in the country” (Bakshi 258).

There were some early attempts made for the upliftment of the Untouchables. Nevertheless, those selfless works were in vain because of the rigid and traditional Hindu social system. People belonging to the higher castes made the social system their weapon to dominate over the lower castes.

Ambedkar stood firmly in the midst of storms, and continuously thought of the Untouchables and fought for their equality and social freedom in the Indian society. For him, the Hindu society was nothing but a collection of castes, which is based on labourers than the labour. He criticized the caste system by saying, “Hindu society gives more importance to the division of people and not the work. In other words, there is no place for the individual in the Hindu society” (Ambedkar, *Why go for Conversion?* 16).

Ambedkar also asserted, along with the need of social reform, the urgency of political awakening for the servile classes. In his own words, “I therefore, appeal to you to act and utilize what little political power is coming into your hands. If you are indifferent and do not try to use it properly, your worries will have no end” (qtd. in Jatava 17). Ambedkar stressed a democratic form of government. According to him,

“Political democracy must be based on social democracy.” “A democratic form of government, he says, presupposes a democratic form of society” (Bakshi 258).

As an Untouchable, Ambedkar experienced material suffering and intellectual agony. After a careful and deep consideration he believed that religious conversion was essential to rouse the rational consciousness of the Untouchables. Thus, he found refuge in the Buddha’s *Dhamma* as a real remedy for the ills of Untouchables. In Buddhism, he found equality, liberty, fraternity and a ray of hope and light for all the communities.

How far has this conversion to Buddhism helped in changing the condition of the Untouchables? Even today the high castes continue to exploit the lower castes, psychologically, economically, socially and politically. The incident in the recent past in which the Dalits were forced to eat human excreta and drink urine as a punishment for engaging in human rights activities shows their plight. Such inhuman treatment is meted out to the Dalits not only by the Caste Hindus but also by police department, which is supposed to protect them from such atrocities (The Week, Oct. 25-31, 1987; Hindustan Times, May 24, 1988). The number of crimes committed against Dalits amounts to 14269 in 1989 alone (Times of India, May 3, 1990). All such crimes are committed by the caste Hindus in the name of being loyal to their *Varnashrama Dharma* and in the name of protecting the sanctity of the Hindu religion. Thus, needless to say, caste is the quintessence of Hinduism and caste discrimination and practice of untouchability are the day-to-day phenomenon among the Hindus all over India (Massey 87).

For the Hindus, the social system is divinely ordained and part and parcel of their tradition, it cannot be destroyed. Upper caste Hindus have a vested interest in maintaining and perpetuating caste. If caste goes, Hinduism will die. With the Untouchables it is just the opposite. Caste is the greatest obstacle in the way of their progress and social freedom. If they do not destroy caste, caste will destroy them (Massey 75).

Human beings are essentially social animals. They are by nature interrelated and interdependent. A person can develop his or her personality only in the human society. For this purpose every human being, above all, needs the recognition that befits a human being. Caste society cannot provide the atmosphere and space required for authentic human development.

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