

A SOCIOLOGICAL INSIGHT INTO B.R. AMBEDKAR'S APPROACH TOWARDS RELIGION

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ABSTRACT

Sociologists are interested in studying religion primarily for two reasons. First, religion is very important to many people. Religious practices are important parts of many individuals' lives. Religious values influence many people's actions, and religious meanings help them interpret their experiences. Sociologists seek to understand the meaning of religion to believers themselves. Second, religion is an important object for sociological study because of its influence on society and society's impact on religion. Analysis of this dynamic relationship requires examining the interdependence of religion and other aspects of society. Often this means questioning taken-for-granted ways of understanding social action. From the earliest foundations of the discipline, sociologists have sought to understand the larger society through examining religion and its influence. The present paper gives a deeper insight on the sociological approaches towards religion put forward by B.R. Ambedkar within the arena of the Indian society.

Keywords: Dhamma, Hinduism, Buddhism, Dalit, religion

B.R. AMBEDKAR- A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

The nineteenth century India has produced a galaxy of thinkers, poets, philosophers and mystics. It is known as the golden age of spiritual renaissance. Bhimrao Ambedkar popularly known as B.R. Ambedkar is a true product of the Indian spiritual and cultural renaissance. He is a high priest of that renaissance and also he is a social crusader and a true nationalist. As an ardent lover and true patriot he wanted national integration and social stability. Like Gandhiji, Binoba Bhabhe etc. he was a messiah of the untouchables. He was an erudite scholar and a mighty genius. Dr. Ambedkar who was the maker of the Indian constitution had differences with Gandhiji but Gandhiji, however, had the greatest reward for the young Turk, the young revolutionary and the firebrand politician (Mukhopadhyay & Paul, 2005).

IDEOLOGY REFLECTED IN THE WRITINGS OF AMBEDKAR

The ideas and ideals of John Dewey, Edwin R.A.Seligman, the Fabians and the British idealists had a deep impact on Ambedkar. He described himself as a progressive radical and occasionally as a 'progressive conservative.' The qualification 'progressive', being generally present, distinguishing himself from the liberals and the communists depending on the case. He saw the Directive principles of State Policy of the Indian Constitution as upholding economic democracy. His notion of liberty was avowedly that of the T.H. Green kind. Although he talked of equality before law and considered it as a major contribution of the British rule in India, he was not satisfied with this notion and advanced stronger notions such as equality of consideration, equality of respect, and equality of dignity. He was sensitive to the notion of respect and the notion of community was central in his consideration. The demand for 'fraternity' in the French Revolution was seen by him as a call for 'community'. The Buddha, he argued, strove for building communities while Brahminism attempted to fragment them. At the same time, Ambedkar recognized the critical role of the state, the legacies of Columbia University, London School of Economics and the colonial state in India being in consonance with such recognition. He strongly defended a developmental and ameliorative, and consequently an interventionist approach, as against the Gandhians and the Liberals. The state was invested with a pivotal role in the economy. But, whenever such pivotal role for the state is alluded to, it is based on the premise of a regime of rights that suggested the reasons and limits of interventions. He was deeply suspicious of embedded identities asserting themselves in the name of ethnic, linguistic and cultural claims relating such assertions to the problem of majorities and minorities. When identity assertions took place, he felt that the minorities are likely to be the victims. He qualified majoritarianism with strong grids of the rule of law, special privileges to minorities, and the existence of a civil society which could nurture democracy as a civic virtue. His opinion that politics and institutions deeply affect the question of representation, found expression in his suggestion before the Simon Commission, that if adult franchise was introduced, he would favour a joint electorate with reservation for depressed classes and if limited franchise was continued he would demand a separate electorate. One of Ambedkar's most important arguments against Hinduism was that caste and untouchability did not let Hindus act as a community. There is an emphasis on moral order. He rarely gave a deductive picture of religions but went into the sociological moorings that threw up a diversity of beliefs and practices. At the same time, he admitted that a commonly held religious belief has an impact on socially differentiated constituencies. He found a lot of doctrinal cleavages within Hinduism. He had no great fascination for bhakti with which he was nourished in his childhood, castigating the bhakti saints for failing to attract the Shastras, which provided the normative and sacred grids for sustaining and justifying unjust social institutions (Nagla, 2008).

Nagla (2008) also mentioned that Ambedkar showed an extraordinary interest in Marxism, particularly in the 1950s. All his major writings during this period, i.e. Buddha and the Future of his Religion, The Buddha and his Dhamma and Buddha and Karl Marx refer to Marx as the central figure. He identified certain crucial areas on which he agreed with Karl Marx: the task of philosophy is to transform the world; there is conflict between class and class; private ownership of property begets sorrow and exploitation; and good society requires that private property be collectivized. He found that on all these four issues Buddha is in agreement with Marx. He, however, rejected the inevitability of socialism, the economic interpretation of history, the thesis on the pauperization of the proletariat, withering away of the state and the strategy of violence as a means to seize power. He felt that the Buddhism, which called for self-control and a moral foundation for society could provide the missing dimensions for a socialist project and for the purpose, called for a dialogue between Marxism and Buddhism. Therefore, while liberal and modernist alliances of Buddhism were taking place elsewhere, Ambedkar wanted to relocate Buddhism in the trajectory of Marxism and vice-versa.

AMBEDKAR'S PERSPECTIVES ON RELIGION

“Some people think that religion is not essential to society. I do not hold this view. I consider the foundations of religion to be essential to life and practices of society.” In all his writings and speeches Ambedkar has maintained the necessity of religion. According to him, “religion is a part of one’s inheritance”. In a Depressed Classes Youth Conference he observed: “It pains me to see youths growing indifferent to religion. Religion is not an opium as it is held by some. What good things I have in me or whatever have been the benefits of my education to society I owe them to the religious feelings in me. I want religion, but I do not want hypocrisy in the name of religion.” He further added that material comfort was by no means the solvent of all human ills. Religion to him was the driving force for 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”. Ambedkar regarded slavery as an antithesis of a religious society. To him religion was for the service of man and not man as a means to religion. He remarked: “The religion which discriminates between two followers is partial and the religion which treats crores of its adherents worse than dogs and criminals and inflicts upon them insufferable disabilities is no religion at all. Religion is not the appellation for such an unjust order.” According to him, “Religion must be judged by social standards, based on social ethics.” He linked religion with the social wellbeing of the people. To him religion, social status and property were all sources of power and authority. He wanted to have a religion in the sense 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”.

He treated religion as a source of social and spiritual unity. But his reason and his religious conviction were circumscribed by social environment, the decaying and degenerate condition of his fellow brethren. His religious attitudes were the manifestations of a political man always vigilant for the civic rights of untouchables whose cause he expounded in his life. He remarked, "Religion and slavery are incompatible." 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."

According to him, religion has undergone four stages: in its original form religion was a 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, men worshipped those personalities who satisfied the wants of their lives; and in its last stage it worshipped a person who performed miracles. He defined religion as something that offered you prosperity or elevation first in this world and then salvation. Where there was unity there was a good cause. Ambedkar ascribed the origin of this philosophy to the Bhagavadgita, the most important book on Hindu religion and philosophy. According to him its main theme was satyagraha. He cited examples from the Bhagavadgita because he said, it was acceptable to both the touchables and the untouchables. In his view Arjun, the Bharatiya warrior, was justified in resorting to arms in defence of a just cause. According to Ambedkar, the ideas of hero-worship, deification and neglect of duty have ruined Hindu society and were responsible for the degradation of our country. At the appearance of a national calamity god was supposed to descend down and save the people from danger. He remarked that the result of this ideology was that instead of taking a united action against their enemies people awaited the arrival of an incarnation to do this job for them. He instilled strong optimistic values in the minds of people and discarded the orthodox religious attitude; because he held that man is exonerated out and out from social responsibility by the traditional belief in incarnation. He accepted that the centre of religion should not be between man and god, but between man and man. He raised the question: "What advantage can there be in believing god? and he answered it in an emphatic 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. He remarked that by singing the songs of Rama people would not get a concession in rent from the landlords. Ambedkar's opposition to supernaturalism was born out of a rational approach towards life. According to him, there was no use of man's intelligence if he continued to believe supernatural values. He agreed with Buddha's repudiation of supernaturalism. He had three objects in his mind: to lead man to the path of rationalism, to free man to go in search of truth, and to remove the most potent source of superstition. In his view, the belief in soul was far better than the belief in god. He thought that it created priesthood and gave priesthood complete control over man from birth to death. By denying the existence of the soul and god, he ruled out the possibility of the past karmas i.e acts done in previous lives as the regulator of human existence. To him, the law of past actions as formulated in the Hindu way of life sapped completely the spirit of revolt. 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 would not save the untouchables from starvation. He impressed upon their minds that to them bread was better than the worship of god. According to Ambedkar, the religious conceptions in this country were so vast that they covered every aspect of life from birth to death. He stressed the need to strive hereafter to limit the definition of religion in such a manner that we should not extend it beyond beliefs and such rituals as may be connected with ceremonials which were essentially religious. He emphasized that the laws relating to tenancy on succession should not be governed by religion. The professing of a particular religion carried with it the personal law. Ambedkar has upheld the sovereign authority of parliament to interfere in their personal law. During the debates on the Hindu Code Bill, he asserted that under the Constitution of India, the state has retained all along in article 25 of the right to interfere in the personal law of any community in this country". He warned, "Let no community be in a state of mind that they are immune from the sovereign authority of this parliament" (Kuber, 1973/2017).

In the views of Kuber (1973/2017), though Ambedkar regarded Hindutva as a joint product of touchables and untouchables, he appealed the enlightened to initiate the means for ridding India of the evil of priest-craft. The Hindu priestly classes stood in no way superior ethically, educationally or otherwise to the average member of Parsi priesthood. "He (officiating Brahmin) practises the shame of being a middleman between the unseen powers and the helpless man and makes a living by it. He said: "Hinduism is a riddle of the contradictions between dignified thoughts and base behaviour. To him, Hindu religion was nothing but a multitude of commands and prohibitions. Ambedkar in a clear-cut way enumerated the evils of Hindu religion: (1) It tends to deprive moral life of freedom and 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 was nothing irreligious 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 or amendment must be urged. Ambedkar was not against the very existence of Hinduism and Hindu leaders, but was against its wrong ideals and the tenacity with which the Hindu leaders adhered to them. According to him, Hinduism gave no support to social unity. "Hinduism and social union are incompatible. Hinduism as the traditional social structure is the greatest obstacle to Hindu unity. Hinduism creates an eagerness to separate." On this social unity depended socialistic feeling, national integration, democratic ideal and spiritual fellowship. He accepted that Hinduism was once a "missionary religion". According to him, caste was incompatible with conversion. It dragged Hinduism into a "religion of inequality". What was required was to purge it of the doctrine of varna system. It was wrong to think that he wanted to destroy Hinduism. His main concern was to reform and reconstruct it. He said: "The Hindu society should be reorganized on two main principles: equality and the absence of casteism." "Without such internal strength, swaraj for Hindus may turn out to be only a step towards slavery. He regarded that Vedantic idealism was nothing but a Brahminical counterpoise to the liberalizing role of the Buddhist movement. To him Buddhism was a revolt against "parasitic luxury", and it prepared the foundations of a prosperous and glorious civilization". Religion, as Ambedkar conceived, was a rational one, a moral one and a spiritual one. It was secular and not extramundane. He regarded Dhamma as religion. He observed that "Religion is personal...contrary to this, Dhamma is social. His view of religion was social and secular and morality was the key-note of it. He remarked that "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. He described Dhamma righteousness, right relations between man and man 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, ceremonial 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. 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 paths: the Buddhist way for the laity and the Buddhist way for the bhikkus; these included the whole range of moral behaviour patterns in Buddhist society that Ambedkar strove for. According to him, 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 foundations. By stressing the unity of individuals on a social and political level he endeavoured 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 organisation 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, ninety percent of Christianity was copied from Buddhism, both in substance and in form. He regarded only 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. To him Rama, Krishna and Gandhi were the apostles of Brahminic religion. They were of no use to establish democracy. Only Buddha can be of any use in this respect. According to him, democracy and chaturvarnya are mutually exclusive. To eradicate chaturvarnya, there was no other medicine except the philosophy of Buddha. In order to purify the currents in politics Ambedkar suggested that all Hindus should observe birth-day celebrations of Buddha. Ambedkar looked for harmony between the principles of religion and the laws of the land. There should be no contradiction and antagonism between religion and law. This was, to him, essential for the betterment of human society. He wanted that no individual should be compelled to pay taxes, the proceeds of which were specifically for the use of any religious community of which he was not a member. He did not favour any religious coercion either by some community or by the state. State coercion especially in religious matters was least desirable in Ambedkar's scheme of social and political life. To law, all religions were respectable. He had a strong faith in the principle of secularism. Smith and Luthera have dealt with this problem of secularism in India. Luthera concluded that India is not and cannot be a secular state. Smith disagreed with this conclusion because it proceeds from too narrow a definition of the secular state and takes too static a view of Hindu religion. The separation of state and religion and other provisions as defended by Ambedkar show that the general content of secularism was contained in his thought. His secularism was of a radical type and rebelled against any religious ii-treatment, hatred and discrimination.

CONCLUSION

Religion has been viewed by Ambedkar as a part of one's inheritance. He regarded slavery as an antithesis of a religious society. To him religion was for the service of man and not man as

a means to religion. Ambedkar 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”. He treated religion as a source of social and spiritual unity. Though Ambedkar regarded Hindutva as a joint product of touchables and untouchables, he appealed the enlightened to initiate the means for ridding India of the evil of priest-craft. The Hindu priestly classes stood in no way superior ethically, educationally or otherwise to the average member of Parsi priesthood. Ambedkar was not against the very existence of Hinduism and Hindu leaders, but was against its wrong ideals and the tenacity with which the Hindu leaders adhered to them. According to him, Hinduism gave no support to social unity. He regarded Buddha’s Dhamma as true religion, the purpose of which was to reconstruct the world by establishing right relations among human beings.

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