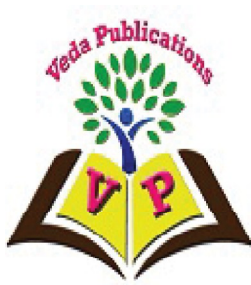


THE HUMANIST MANIFESTO: REREADING DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR'S ANNIHILATION OF CASTE

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ABSTRACT:

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was a social, political and economic reformer who advocated the ethical values of humanism i.e. liberty, equality and fraternity. He gave a great blow to the hegemony of Hinduism to rid it of the crudeness of untouchability and the impurities of social inequality. Dalit literature is based on Ambedkar's philosophy. *Annihilation of Caste, An Undelivered Speech, 1936* is the quintessence of the Ambedkarite ideology. The undelivered text is an encapsulation of his dissection of the caste system in India. His mission is to annihilate the pernicious practice of caste discrimination and his vision is to set up a casteless society. This paper is intended to show that Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was not antagonistic to Hinduism; rather his earnest endeavour, as a humanist, had been to purge Hindu religion of the impurities and incongruities.

Keywords : Dalit literature, Humanism, Exploitation, Injustice, Annihilation of Caste

“What *The Communist Manifesto* is to the capitalist world, *Annihilation of Caste* is to India”- Anand Teltumbde

Marxism which is based on dialectical progress and historical materialism is the ideology of the exploited and aims at setting up an exploitation-free and classless society. Dialectical progress proposes to destroy old form in order to bring progress and the basic tenet of historical materialism is that religion, ethics, art, literature and culture are inspired by economic forces. *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) which was written by the arch architects of Marxism, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels is about the formation of a communist society with the termination of capitalist social system through a violent class war. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar devoted his life to reform the caste-ridden Hindu society. Though Dr. B. R. Ambedkar considered Indian Marxism to be incomplete as it was not concerned with the elimination of caste discrimination and untouchability the visions and missions of both Marxism and Ambedkarism are almost alike- the formation of classless and casteless society respectively. If Marxism is a politically inspired movement Ambedkarism is a mass movement with a view to broadening and deepening the process of social awakening. Ambedkar criticized Communists for ignoring the social divide between a Brahman worker and a Dalit worker. He compared Brahminism with capitalism in terms of the conspiracy of exploitation.

Dalit literature which came into existence in 1958 in the Mumbai conference of Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha in the presence of Jyotiba Phule and Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was a manifesto of human rights which spoke against the prevalent practice of caste discrimination. Dalit literature helped formation of the Dalit identity and an alternative ideology to Brahminism. One important facet of the revolutionary project of Dalit literature, according to Sharankumar Limbale:

“is the establishment of the full humanity of the Dalit. This literature asserts the Dalits’ selfhood, history and agency. They are actors here, and not the ineffectual, helpless figures of the ‘liberal-reformist’ upper caste authors’ creation, dependent on the goodwill and

assistance of the dominant society for succour. In and through this literature, Dalits are no longer a people without history, much less the subalterns of society’s history, its demonized Ravana or violated Angulimala, Eklavya or Shurpanaka. Here, they are the central figures of their own history, and from this history they derive the confidence and the right to assert their humanity.”

Dalit literature is “writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness. The form of Dalit literature is inherent in its Dalitness, and its purpose is obvious: to inform Dalit society of its slavery, and narrate its pain and suffering to upper caste Hindus.” Great men of India strove for the upliftment of the marginalized sections of society but it was Dr. Ambedkar who felt the wounds of the deprived Dalits. He believed that a country pervaded with the rigidity of caste system is a country of stagnation and the country cannot ensure social justice and insure Dalit rights. In order to achieve social reformation, he argues, Hindu scriptures, consisting of the Vedas, Upanishads, Smritis and Puranas, including the Ramayana and the Mahabharata which validate the caste system, are to be denied as dominant discourses. In his opinion, true religion is not to have belief in one’s own method of the efficacy of prayer and worship, rather the essence of religion is to uplift individual and to deliver the messages of equality, liberty and fraternity. Ambedkar himself defined fraternity as “a sense of common brotherhood of all Indians, all Indians being one people. It is the principle which gives unity and solidarity to social life.” He was of the opinion that a person should be valued for his merits, education and spirits and not on the basis of his hereditary class position. He knew that law is a weapon to fight against discrimination and to ensure equality of opportunity. Dhananjay Keer, the biographer of Ambedkar, says:

“In his philosophy, law had a place only as a safeguard against the breaches of liberty and equality; but he did not believe that law can be a guarantee for breaches of liberty or equality. He gave the highest place to fraternity as the only real safeguard against

the denial of liberty or equality or fraternity- which was another name for brotherhood or humanity, which was again another name for religion.”

Noted Maharashtra Dalit writer Gangadhar Pantwane remarks, “Dalit is not a caste; Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution. The Dalit believes in humanism. He rejects the existence of god, rebirth of Soul, sacred books that teach discrimination, fate and heaven, because these have made him a slave”. Challenging upper caste hegemony is the ‘radical ideology’ of Babasaheb Ambedkar.

In a letter dated 12th December 1935, the secretary of the *Jat-Pat Todak Mandal*, an anti-caste Hindu reformist group invited Dr. B. R. Ambedkar to deliver their presidential address on the caste system in India at their annual conference in Lahore in 1936. His irrefutable arguments that the immortality of caste was sustained by the Vedas and Shastras and without destroying them there could be no reform, led the group to withdraw their invitation. Written in 1936, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar’s *Annihilation of Caste, An Undelivered speech* which is a daring denunciation and courageous condemnation of the hierarchical caste system of Hinduism as well as of the Hindu scriptures that legitimised the iniquitous social system is indeed his magnum opus. The address engaged the attention of enlightened high-caste Hindus who felt quite naturally a greater urge to remove enforced widowhood, child marriages etc. but who neither felt the necessity to abolish caste nor had the courage to stand up for the reform of Hindu society. Ambedkar has quoted the famous speech “On the Essence of Constitutions”, delivered by Ferdinand Lassalle on 16th April 1862 in Berlin to justify that social forces must be taken account of by the makers of political constitutions.

The constitutional questions are in the first instance not questions of right but questions of might. The actual constitution of a country has its existence only in the actual condition of force which exists in the country: hence political constitutions have value and permanence only when they accurately express those conditions of forces which exist in practice within a society.

The author provides a plethora of instances from history to substantiate his view that the emancipation of the mind and the soul is a prerequisite preliminary for the political proliferation of the people. He makes a scathing criticism of the doctrine of economic interpretation of history adopted by the socialists of India. If the source of power and authority is social and religious then social and religious reform must precede the economic reformation of equalisation of property. By means of a reasonable argument Ambedkar clarifies his thought that the materialization of economic reform is possible with a mass revolution resulting in the ‘seizure of power’ by a proletariat. But the proletariats of India will unite to organize a revolution for the equalisation of property if they are assured by the socialists of India beforehand that after the revolution is achieved, they will be treated equally, and that there will be no discrimination of caste and creed. The recognition of the inescapable problem of social reform is fundamental for the socialists if they want to make socialism a definite reality in India.

That the social order prevalent in India is a matter which a socialist must deal with; that unless he does so he cannot achieve his revolution;turn in any direction you like, caste is the monster that crosses your path. You cannot have political reform, you cannot have economic reform, unless you kill the monster.

Ambedkar is critical of the supporters who defend the caste system as another name for division of labour. Civilized society undoubtedly needs division of labour but the caste system, he argues is not merely a division of labour. *It is also a division of labourers*. Again it is not natural aptitudes or individual choice that are responsible for the division of labour rather the social status of the parents and the dogma of predestination.

What efficiency can there be in a system under which neither men’s hearts nor their minds are in their work? As an economic organization caste is therefore a harmful institution, inasmuch as it involves the subordination of man’s natural powers and inclinations to the exigencies of social rules.

In defense of caste system which is nothing but a social division of people of the same race, Heredity and eugenics are but unscientific explanations. Ambedkar is justified to say that if caste is eugenic in origin, then the origin of sub-castes must also be eugenic; and the contention that restriction in intermarrying and inter-dining between sub-castes is for the purpose of maintaining purity of race or of blood is falsification of the truth. Casteism epitomizes the egotism of a perverse section of the Hindus in whom is traced the consciousness of his caste and an utter lack of what the American sociologist Franklin Henry Giddings has termed "consciousness of kind", and Carlyle has named "organic filaments" the absolute dearth of which and the absence of integrating force or ignorance of common activity have prohibited them to form a society. Moreover, an anti-social spirit is marked among the caste; this spirit which propels the Brahmins to secure their interests against those of the non-Brahmins. The Hindus are not merely a conglomeration of castes, but are so many conflicting groups with their respective differences in selfishness which has prevented them to achieve solidarity. Instead of establishing harmony the whole life of a Hindu is devoted to the preservation, protection and possession of his caste without feeling any sense of remorse or repentance. And so long as caste prejudices remain intertwined with Hinduism, there will be neither sangathan nor shuddhikaran, for caste is not consistent with the associated mode of life and conversion. The accomplishment of an ideal society based on liberty, equality, and fraternity is impossible with the overwhelming presence of caste in society. While referring to the effects of caste on the ethics of the Hindus, Ambedkar says:

Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible. A Hindu's public is his caste. His responsibility is only to his caste. His loyalty is restricted only to his caste. Virtue has become caste-ridden, and morality has become caste-bound. There is no sympathy for the deserving. There is no appreciation of the meritorious.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar cannot reconcile himself to *chaturvarnya* of the Arya Samajists who insisted on labeling men as Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra, and in which the Shudra should accept the degrading duty to serve the masters of high-caste. The wretched caste system has so paralyzed their position depriving them of education, weapon and wealth that they remain not only ignorant of their salvation but also reconciled to "eternal servitude".

But the three agreed to beat down the Shudra. He was not allowed to acquire wealth, lest he should be independent of the three varnas. He was prohibited from acquiring knowledge, lest he should keep a steady vigil regarding his interests. He was prohibited from bearing arms, lest he should have the means to rebel against their authority.

Though *chaturvarnya* as Arya Samajists proposed is based not on birth but on worth, it is difficult to deny the definite and fixed notion about the hierarchy based on birth. More difficult it is to reduce the four thousand castes, based on birth, to the four varnas, based on worth. The accurate classification of men into four distinct classes is next to impossible. For the watertight compartments of *chaturvarnya*, the introduction and maintenance of penal system is an important requirement to punish the transgressor according to the disciplinary actions suggested in *Manusmriti* e.g. to announce penalty of death, to cut off the tongue or to pour molten lead in the ears of the Shudra who wants to be in higher caste or recites and hears the Veda. But there is a challenge for the supporters of *chaturvarnya* to make a successful classification of men and to "induce modern society in the twentieth century to re-forge the penal sanctions of the *Manusmriti*." To consider the position of the women in the *chaturvarnya* system is a source of bafflement for the supporters for they cannot understand how to classify a woman- according to her worth or to the status of her husband. The logical outcome of applying *chaturvarnya* to women, if possible, is our gradually getting accustomed to professional women priests, women brewers and women butchers etc.

If Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was not attached to Hindu social order why was he earnestly anxious to accelerate the reformation, rectification and purification of Hinduism? Why did he exert himself so enthusiastically to find out the source of deliverance and emancipation from the fetters of cursed caste? It was his fondness for Hinduism that made him declare with firm conviction that destruction of the belief in the sanctity of the shastras is the real remedy for the abolition and annihilation of caste because the shastras urge people to rely on the religion of caste. But without notional change, the destruction of caste is not possible, for the Hindus will continue regarding shastras as having divine origin. It is mandatory then, to free the minds of man and woman of the clutches of shastras by denying the authority of the shastras and the Vedas. In this regard his comment on the detection of intellectual deficiency of the reformers including Mahatma Gandhi is very pertinent:

Reformers working for the removal of untouchability, including Mahatma Gandhi, do not seem to realize that the acts of the people are merely the results of their beliefs inculcated in their minds by the shastras, and that people will not change their conduct until they cease to believe in the sanctity of the shastras on which their conduct is founded.

Hindu religion, according to Ambedkar is a combination of law, orders, and restrictions. He refuses to accept such a religion which demands servile adherence to its commanding rules, and is intended to deprive people of moral emancipation and spiritual spontaneity. He finds it intolerable that the priestly class among Hindus which is blessed to enjoy only rights and privileges is subject neither to law nor to morality. In his opinion, there should be one standard book of Hindu religion, acceptable to all Hindus and recognized by all Hindus and the authoritative voice in Vedas, shastras and Puranas should be nullified by law.

Dalit issues are social, political as well as economic. It was impossible for the Dalit minorities to demolish the inequitable economic system. In order to annihilate the unequal social system there needs to

be a convergence of Ambedkar's anti-caste thought and Marx's anti-class thought. He insisted on reforming the orthodox Hinduism and publicly burned *Manusmriti* on 25th December 1927 as the classic Hindu text that ideologically justified caste discrimination and untouchability. If Ambedkar converted to Buddhism on 14th of October 1956, it was not because of his strong aversion to Hinduism but because the strong proponents of so-called Hinduism did not respond positively to his ideology and did not feel for his religion of humanism. Buddhism embraces humanism which is indeed synonymous with Ambedkarism or Ambedkarite ideology. Thus it can be inferred that Hinduism was in his blood, Buddhism was in his mind, Marxism without violence was in his brain and Humanism was in his spirit.

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