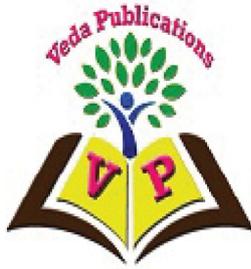


RETROSPECTIVE STUDY OF THE NEED FOR CASTE-BASED REFORMS IN INDIA, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO BABA SAHEB AMBEDKAR'S TEXT ANIHILATION OF CASTE

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ABSTRACT

Reservation on the basis of caste has been a contentious issue for India in recent years. The argument revolves mainly around the justification of caste-based reservation instead of merit or financial status. There are schools of thoughts that question the policy in terms of differentiation between the creamy layers benefitting from policies mandated for the socially and financially backward strata of society. Before arguing about the validity of caste-based reservations and its relevance in the India of today, it is important to know the background history which led to the formulation of such a policy in the country. It is important to find out what societal conditions led to the need for protecting and safeguarding the interests of a particular group or community. Without any introspection of the reason for it, it will be futile to discuss its relevance today or in the imminent future.

Keywords : Ambedkar, Caste in India, Reservations

INTRODUCTION

Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, popularly known as Babasaheb Ambedkar is nothing short of a Prophet for the backward classes of India. He was the chief architect of the Indian Constitution. A social reformist and Buddhist philosopher, Babasaheb dedicated most of his life struggling to bring in to public consideration the atrocities inflicted on the lower caste people of the Indian Society by those of the 'superior or forward' castes. He argued vehemently against the erstwhile caste system of India and was the propounder of caste-based reservations in India.

EARLY LIFE

Born and brought up in the *Mahar* caste in Madhya Pradesh, Babasaheb was one of fourteen children born to Ramji, a subedar in the Indian army posted at Mhow Cantonment. The family was considered of a lower caste; 'untouchable' to be precise, by the society because of which he faced a lot of discrimination at school from his peers as well as teachers and school staff. Due to this humiliation meted to him in early life, he took a solemn resolve to reach the root of the problem of caste system in India and find a solution to bridge the huge divide among castes.

He pursued his higher studies from United States of America. Upon being awarded his degree, he was appointed Defense secretary to the King of Baroda. His tryst with the rigid caste system was not restricted to his early life alone. Despite holding an office of profit, he faced humiliation at the hands of his subordinates. With staff throwing files at his desk instead of handing them over and helpers refusing to bring him even a glass of water. He left the job out of this humiliation and went to England to pursue higher studies.

After his return, he started taking active part in the fight of the socially backward against discrimination meted to them. He started expressing his views freely and openly in *Mooknayak* (Literally, Leader of the Silent). Babasaheb strongly believed that social inequality will jeopardize political freedom and democracy. So the first step towards an inclusive society would be annihilation of a rigid caste system (Raj 260).

DISCUSSION

GENESIS OF THE STRUGGLE

In the words of Babasaheb, "As long as caste in India does exist, Hindus will hardly intermarry or have any social intercourse with outsiders; and if Hindus migrate to other regions on earth, Indian caste would become a world problem." In his paper entitled, *Caste in India, Their mechanism, Genesis & Development*, read at a Seminar in Columbia University, Babasaheb took to anthropology to explain the complex caste system in India which is often simply put as a division on the basis of Labor when indeed it is much more complex than that in nature. He characterizes caste as a closed system that follows endogamy to restrict intermingling of different castes or systems (Ambedkar 6).

Babasaheb through his paper entitled *Annihilation of Caste*, talks about the atrocities inflicted upon the people of the backward classes by the forward classes of the same society. He mentions one particular case of Balais (considered untouchable) in some villages of the Indore district, who were asked to give up certain practices of their lifestyle including wearing gold and silver, and provide service without asking for remuneration. Upon non-acceptance they were asked by the other forward class residents to vacate the villages where they resided. The matter was reported in the *The Times of India* on January 4th, 1928 (Ambedkar 39).

Tragically, this wasn't a singular case of such an atrocity meted to people in the name of untouchability. It was this sad state of affairs that prompted Babasaheb to advocate social reforms. While Mahatma Gandhi was actively protesting against untouchability, he wasn't against the entire system of caste. He in fact saw virtue in the caste system. Babasaheb on the other hand, talked about complete annihilation of caste system and not just untouchability (Mehta 256).

CRISIS & RESOLUTION

'DALIT' & THE NEED FOR SOCIAL REFORM

The term Dalit was first coined by Jyotirao Phule in the Nineteenth Century. Literally, the word derives from Sanskrit root word *Dal* meaning cracked or crushed. Dalit word is used for denoting the

oppressed castes of the Indian social system. The community does not classify under any other religion such as Islam or Christianity. The atrocities meted to the Dalits across the globe demanded reform in some or the other form (Mehta 7).

Surprisingly, Babasaheb wasn't averse to the arrival of Indian Statutory Commission or popularly known as the Simon Commission in India in 1928. He believed that the problems of untouchables are different from the problems of the Forward castes. He resented the fact that Dalits were not given adequate representation in education, society or prospects unlike the rest. He in fact, called for the protection of depressed classes through adequate representation and social reforms (Gramsci 86). Babasaheb advocated social reforms through his unreleased speech titled *Annihilation of Caste*. His argument was based on the fact that a political revolution is not dissociated from social needs and gaps.

THE CONSTITUTION & SCHEDULED CASTE & TRIBES

T.T. Krishnamachari in his speech delivered in the Constituent Assembly November 1948 stated that Babasaheb was undoubtedly the chief architect of the Indian Constitution. Surprisingly, out of the seven members nominated by the Constituent Assembly, it was Babasaheb who was burdened with the entire responsibility as the rest of them were not working for some or the other reason (Constitutional Debates 973).

In the words of Babasaheb, *"On 26th of January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we have equality and in social and economic life we have inequalities. In politics we will be recognizing the principles of one man one vote and one vote one value. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man, one vote. How long shall we continue to live this life of contradiction?"* (Mehta 1)

As the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, Babasaheb clearly understood the nature and complexities of the Indian social system. He made sure that the Constitutional provisions protected the

oppressed classes as well as gave them equality of opportunity in all spheres. The provisions of the Constitution ensured, in principle, that the menace of untouchability be abolished from all spheres of the Indian society (Gramsci 110).

PROVISIONS FOR SAFEGUARD IN THE CONSTITUTION

The Fundamental Rights listed in the Indian Constitution principally talk of about equality of opportunity for all sections of the society irrespective of caste, creed, color, sect or sex. Fundamentally, Article 17 of the Indian Constitution states,

"Untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of "Untouchability" shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law."

Another Fundamental right, Article 16 (4) of the Indian constitution empowers the State to make *"any provision for the reservation in appointments, or posts in favor of any backward class of citizens", and "provision for reservation in matters of promotion to any class or classes of posts, in the services under the State in favor of the SCs and STs."*

A strong move in the direction of emancipation was the legislation of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of atrocities) Act, 1989, popularly known as the SC/ST Act or simply the Atrocities Act. It was enacted with a vision to help the social inclusion of the oppressed classes or Dalits in mainstream Indian society.

There are several other legislations in this regard that were envisioned not only to protect the oppressed classes of any atrocities meted to them by the higher caste people but also to ensure representation in all spheres of life.

CONCLUSION

Babasaheb played a twin role when India, the Nation, was in its initial building stages. For one, he had the giant responsibility to frame the country's rule book (The Constitution). On the other hand, he took upon himself to ensure the representation and emancipation of depressed classes into the mainstream of the Indian society. The latter was a necessary step as the political/economic condition of

a country is not independent of the social conditions. A socialist himself, he knew the pragmatics of bringing about a social reform; which is exactly how he framed the Constitution of India to be the principal rule book.

Today, India stands on a different paradigm altogether. Modern education has changed mind sets. But to believe that complete emancipation has been achieved would be an exaggeration. There still are atrocities meted against Dalits in the country. Additionally there is a school of thought opposing the very existence of reservations in India. However, the dream of a pragmatic socialist such as Babasaheb may very soon become a reality in Modern India.

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