

Why was BR Ambedkar so important to the fight against casteism?

Celebrating Ambedkar, not Compulsive Ambedkarism

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On Dr B.R. Ambedkar's birth anniversary, a message to his followers: Don't make the mistake of reducing Ambedkar to an infallible God - a similar mistake that many Gandhians did with Gandhi.

On Dr B.R. Ambedkar's birth anniversary, as I pay homage to him, I must confess that I began to engage with him much later in life. Even though Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore and Karl Marx occupied my politico-cognitive universe, Ambedkar did not fascinate me for quite some time.

As I begin to reflect, I feel that there are primarily two reasons for this. First, because of my accidental birth in a brahmin family, I did not experience the stigma of caste hierarchy and associated violence; possibly, as it is said these days, caste, for a 'privileged' person like me, remained 'invisible'; and hence I could afford to remain indifferent to Ambedkar's vehement critique of the caste system. Second, there was some sort of philosophic anxiety relating to 'representation' that the university culture generated. As an 'oppressive outsider', I was told, I would never be able to understand the experiential domain of a Dalit; and hence, my engagement with Ambedkar is likely to become diplomatic, strategic, a clever attempt at appropriation and falsification.

However, the human story is that we evolve, we learn and unlearn, we seek to overcome all sorts of constraints, and we expand our horizons. Yes, as a seeker I read Ambedkar, and have begun to celebrate him. However, I have a sense of discomfort with compulsive Ambedkarism. Even though these days the strange logic of political competitiveness and even academic radicalism compels everyone to see Ambedkar as absolute/unproblematic god, my journey is somewhat different. I admire him, and I see his limitations.

This philosopher cum social activist came with a hammer and debunked the caste system, and this shock, I believe, was necessary for people like us to be disturbed, and rise up for radical existential and cultural transformation. But then, for praising Ambedkar I need not limit myself, and devalue the significance of Gandhi, or, for that matter, Marx. In other words, I distinguish enabling Ambedkar from constraining Ambedkarism.

Caste question: emancipatory Ambedkar

The state of amnesia induced a state of stupor, discouraging the painful effort of building a new culture along with the rejection of the old. Dr. Ambedkar could never tolerate this cultural inertia, and his entire life can be summed up as a relentless battle against such a mental state.

- D.R. Nagraj

Even though caste seems to be all pervading – from marital alliances to political mobilisation, from official classifications to ritualistic practices, from sociological narratives to identity politics, the fact is that caste as an institution with its hierarchical consciousness, graded inequality, purity-pollution dichotomy and psychology of violence implicit in its exclusionary practices needs to be abolished.

Yes, in a complex religious system with multiple voices, there was a seed of anti-caste consciousness in a revealing spiritual discourse of love, non-dualism and oneness, and even forward caste social reformers like Swami Vivekananda were not altogether indifferent to the evils of caste. But then, as I see, there was great intensity and authenticity in Ambedkar's plea for the annihilation of caste. To understand the appeal of Ambedkar – the powerful assertion from below – is to appreciate three sets of arguments he made against caste.

First, he critiqued caste (or a text like *Manusmriti* that sanctified it) through the paradigm of modernity: its three principles of socio-political revolution – liberty, equality and fraternity. In the scheme of Manu, as Ambedkar pointed out, each man has his vocation preordained; and it has no relation to capacity or to inclination. Moreover, the Shudra, as this *dharmashastra* suggests, is born to serve the others. In a way, as Ambedkar argued, the shudra is a slave because 'a slave as defined by Plato means a person who accepts from another the purposes which control his conduct'. No wonder, caste goes against the principle of liberty. Likewise, caste is against equality because 'Manu made inequality the vital force of life as different castes are placed in a vertical series one above the other'. And there is no question of fraternity because there is no 'fellow feeling', and 'joys and sorrows of one caste are not the joys and sorrows of another'.

Second, he made economic/utilitarian arguments against caste. Modern industry needs innovative individuals who can change their occupations and cope with technological advances. However, caste as a system of 'division of labourers' is a 'harmful institution for modern/industrial economy'. The reason is that the division of labour/labourers is not a division based on choice or aptitude. With its fixity based on ascriptive status it blocks one's creativity and efficiency. 'What efficiency can there be in a system', asked Ambedkar, 'in which neither men's hearts nor their minds are in their work?' Finally, it is important to understand the psychic arguments he made against caste.

Interestingly, he contrasted 'weak/meek Hindus' with enthusiastic 'Sikhs and Mohammedans' filled with a great deal of strength, vitality and community power. In the absence of fraternity or fellow feeling, Hindus fail to develop a sense of togetherness and hence courage emanating from group solidarity. To use Ambedkar's words, 'being one and fated to be alone a Hindu remains powerless, develops timidity and cowardice and in a fight surrenders or runs away'.

The immensely meaningful life he led – from Mahad satyagraha to his conversion into Buddhism, from his constant reminder (particularly, to the otherwise undisputed pan-Indian charismatic figure like Gandhi) of the need to take into account the fragments and cleavages within the nation to the making of the Constitution – inspired many, aroused confidence in the political agency of the marginalised, and prepared the ground for a counter-hegemonic struggle. In his search for 'egalitarian Buddhism', his 'no' to Brahminical Hinduism as a 'religion of rules' was immensely radical. Even though it is possible to say that Manusmriti is only a segment of Hindu philosophy, and Ambedkar was not at his best in his understanding of the dialogic/dissenting traditions within Hinduism, I admit that his critique of Brahminism was as radical as Marx' critique of capitalism or Gandhi's critique of colonialism.

Limits to Ambedkarism

When two months after Gandhi's death, Ambedkar married Sharada Kabir, a Brahmin doctor, (his first wife, Ramabai had died in 1935), Vallabhbhai Patel wrote to him, 'I am sure if Bapu were alive he

would have given you his blessings.’ Ambedkar replied, ‘I agree that Bapu, if he had been alive, would have blessed it.’

- Rajmohan Gandhi

Even though Ambedkar’s scholarship is amazing and his contributions are irrefutable, Ambedkarism as a closed/reductionist doctrine is not necessarily liberating. In this context, I wish to make three arguments.

My first argument is related to Gandhi. It is sad that Ambedkarism as a school of thought often simplifies Gandhi, reduces him into a conspirator or a casteist. The fact is that Gandhi evolved continually. True, despite his sharp critique of untouchability as a ‘sin’, there was a time (I recall an essay written by him in 1920) when he contrasted caste in its present form with all sorts of inequality from the four divisions of varna which he romanticised as ‘fundamental, natural and essential’. He was not favourable to inter-dining, inter-drinking and intermarrying.

However, the ‘experimental’ Gandhi did not remain static in his view on caste. In 1930s, we see a sharper and radical critique of caste. In an article in the *Harijan* in 1935, he seemed to be rather clear. He could say that caste has to go. He publicly affirmed his acceptance of inter-dining and inter-marriage. In fact, just before Independence, he said that he would give his blessings for a wedding between a Dalit and a non-Dalit.

Furthermore, Gandhi’s practice was more radical than his words. His own engagement with labour and dirt in his ashrams, his interrogation of the Brahminical ‘purity-pollution’ duality, his constant reminder that ‘caste Hindus have to atone for the sin of untouchability’, and, as the turbulent days of Noakhali suggest, his extraordinary affinity with ‘washermen, fishermen, cobblers and weavers’ – the rhythm of his life indicates his sadhana for self-purification. I would, therefore, say that Ambedkar’s harsh words against Gandhi (“The grace in Gandhism is a curse in its worst form; the virtue of the anti-Untouchability plank in Gandhism is quite illusory; there is no substance in it”) were unjust and anti-Buddhist in tone.

Hence, unlike the rigidity of Ambedkarism I would plead for the fusion of horizons: Gandhi’s conscience and Ambedkar’s critique, Gandhi’s urge to humanise the caste Hindus and Ambedkar’s communion with the Dalits, Gandhi’s Bhagavad Gita and Ambedkar’s Buddhism, Ambedkar’s modernist sensibilities and Gandhi’s *sarvadaya*. Ambedkar without Gandhi, I fear, would remain ghettoised – merely a ‘Dalit icon’. Ambedkar, his followers should realise, deserves more.

My second argument is related to a form reductionism that suspects the intention or ability of all non-Dalits to understand the pain of the marginalised. Quite often, it leads to a notion of ‘Dalit literature’ or ‘Dalit aesthetics’ distinctively different from the way the privileged castes look at the world. It is true that the ‘cultural capital’ of the privileged classes and castes tends to monopolise the domain of art and aesthetics, and there is reason for the Dalits to be apprehensive, and strive for their own space, style and articulation. Yet, if you overdo it, you become simplistic and reductionist. The domain of human creativity, we should not forget, is endowed with the ability to transcend the constraints of socially constituted identities.

I, therefore, refuse to judge the aesthetics of art on the basis of the creator’s caste/class. I have, therefore, no hesitation in learning, say, from both Om Prakash Valmiki’s *Joothan* – a powerful Dalit autobiography, and ‘forward caste’ Bimal Roy’s remarkably sensitive film *Sujata* – a film that depicts the inner turmoil of an untouchable woman and her relationship with a ‘forward caste’ man.

My third and final argument is related to the complex interplay of caste and class. Yes, we do know that Ambedkar chose Buddha not Marx. And we also know that he did not give his consent to the Marxian doctrine of the revolutionary proletariat because they too, for him, were divided on the basis of caste. 'Can it be said that the proletariat in India, poor as it is, recognises no such distinctions of caste or creed, high or low?' asked Ambedkar.

Well, Ambedkar was not entirely wrong because in a caste-ridden society the notion of ritualistic status affects even the poor. But then, Ambedkar did not ask a counter question: is there any reason to believe that the rich Dalits (even if there are not many) would necessarily come forward with the struggle of the poor Dalits? I think we should ask this question, and realise that there is a dialectical interplay of caste and class, and it would be naïve to think that class/gender cleavages do not affect the Dalit community.

Moreover, without working on property, land relations and economic situations, is it possible to alter the psychology of ritualistic hierarchy? It is not a question of either/or; caste and class inequality need to be fought together. And communists need not necessarily be seen as 'a bunch of Brahmins'. This sort of determinism closes one's eyes, and devalues all those who speak a different language.

While I celebrate Ambedkar as an extraordinary emancipator, I would appeal to his stubborn followers: Don't make the mistake of reducing him to an infallible god - a similar mistake that many Gandhians did with Gandhi. Instead, spread your hands, embrace Gandhi and Marx, and evolve a more nuanced and comprehensive philosophy and practice of social justice, ecological modernity, spiritual sensibilities and economic equality.

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P.S.

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