

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR'S "ANNIHILATION OF CASTE"

Kritika

Paper Received On: 25 DECEMBER 2022

Peer Reviewed On: 31 DECEMBER 2022

Published On: 01 JANUARY 2023

Abstract

Paper titled "Textual analysis of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Annihilation of Caste", analyses Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's stand on social evils which prevailed in the society. He was a social reformer in a true sense as he had strongly criticized caste system and its exploitative practices justifying the social evil like untouchability. Paper includes analysis of Ambedkar's views on Caste system, Brahmanism, Untouchability, Capitalism and Political rights which he had discussed at great length in his speeches and writings. One of the major writings was "Annihilation of Caste", which was supposed to be delivered as a lecture at Forum for Break-up Caste of Lahore in 1936. However, with the stern stand taken by Ambedkar on Caste system and Brahmanism, he was not allowed to deliver his lecture at the conference. This compelled him to publish this lecture in the form of a book titled "Annihilation of Caste", which got published in 1936.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was firm on his stand against untouchability which plagued the society and how it was hampering the growth of people, society and nation. In his critique of Caste system and Capitalism, he seems to come closer to Karl Marx on few significant points. Caste distinctions and consequential graded inequality in the society had impacted economic structure as well. Untouchables were given menial jobs and were accorded an inferior status in the society. They lacked political voice as they tend to accept their inferior status in the society. Ambedkar stressed on the importance of education which can liberate depressed classes, that is, untouchables from the clutches of oppressive caste system and bring about a transformational change in their social standing. Moreover, he highlights the issue of unemployment among untouchables through his critique on capitalism and socialists who have failed to eliminate inequality from the society. He has also discussed extensively on the idea of democracy and importance of political rights along with socio-economic rights to establish a just social order.

Keywords: Caste system, Brahmanism, Untouchability, Rights, Capitalism



Scholarly Research Journal's is licensed Based on a work at www.srjis.com

Introduction

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar is considered to be a social architect who had formulated his opinions on societal evils that existed and crippled the growth of nation and its

people. His ideas have proven to be relevant in contemporary times as well because still there have been recorded cases of violence against people belonging to lower caste. In “*Annihilation of Caste*” he had discussed at a great length how caste system had restricted people from taking desired actions and prevented them to become part of decision-making process. Caste system is a rigid system which is based on birth and not on one’s worth and hinders the social mobility of people. Caste system has prevailed in Indian society since ancient times when structure of the society evolved on the basis of four varnas mentioned in an early text “*Manusmriti*”. In caste system one’s status in society is determined according to the caste he is born into.

Ambedkar’s views on Caste system

In his work “*Annihilation of Caste*”, Ambedkar included the letters he had received from the organization and his replies to those letters. In one of the letters he shared, it mentioned how “unnecessarily provocative and pinching” the contents of the speech were and he was accused of “unnecessarily attacking the morality and reasonableness of the Vedas and other religious books...” Ambedkar, in reply to this letter stated that “One cannot have any respect or regard for men who take the position of the reformer and then refuse even to see the logical consequences of the position, let alone following them out in action.”[1] He expressed his complete disregard for caste system because it has led to the continuation of untouchability which renders a particular section of society being excluded from rest of the society.

Untouchability can be defined as “a social institution that legitimizes and enforces practices that are discriminatory, humiliating, exclusionary and exploitative against people belonging to certain social groups” [9]. This has created divisions in the society as a specific social group faces discrimination at the hands of upper caste people. In Section 2.8 of “*Annihilation of Caste*”, he describes the injustice Depressed classes, that is, untouchables, faced. He writes, “Untouchable was not allowed to use the public streets if Hindu was coming along, lest he should pollute the Hindus by his shadow...Untouchable was required to carry, strung from his waist, a broom to sweep away from behind himself the dust he trod on, lest Hindu walking on the same dust should be polluted.”--indicating how these discriminatory practices have deprived this section of society from enjoying basic civil rights. Question he raises is what kind of social reform is being carried out when one section of the society is left to live in seclusion, deprived of basic human rights.

Ambedkar questions the votaries of social reform movement by highlighting incidents that took place against depressed classes. One such incident was that where an untouchable who came back from pilgrimage was not allowed to serve dinner to his fellow untouchables as food was cooked in ghee and ghee was considered to be “a luxury for rich.” A group of Hindus came and “despoiled the food”, “belaboured the untouchables who left the food ran for their lives.” [1] Numerous uncounted incidents have taken place against depressed classes, they were either denied getting education or availing respectable jobs. Hence, it became more important for Ambedkar to do a comprehensive study on eradication of caste system and untouchability from society.

Ambedkar did not distinguish between Varna system and Caste system, for him both the systems have led to the perpetuation of inequality. He presents a critique of “*Manusmriti*”, or “*Manava- Dharmasashtra*” which dictates the laws and rules for Hindus. It is an authoritative text which lays down the code for each social group that they have to scrupulously follow. For instance, Manu has classified society in four varnas or social classes and each Varna has its own duty to perform. This Varna system and duty accorded to each class should be followed strictly which in turn justifies the caste system putting Brahmans at the top of social hierarchy. This led to establishment of a rigid caste system as Brahmans being at the superior position ensured that society is following the rules laid down in religious texts. Ambedkar out rightly criticizes Manu as “founder of slavery” because in the Varna system, which Manu talked about in his authoritative text characterized untouchables as “polluted class” and that untouchables should keep a distance from upper classes.

Moreover, Ambedkar expresses his dissent with Gandhi on his acceptance of Varna system impelling him to condemn Varna system and how this repressive system had deprived untouchables to access their basic political and socio-economic rights. Ambedkar notes that referring untouchables as “Harijan” would not benefit untouchables and they have to rather empower themselves through education. This section of society has to have their own intellectual class who can vehemently raise their voice against injustice and demand their political rights. He felt apprehensive about using words like “Harijan” for untouchables as this could render untouchables to “occupy the lowest rung of society as a layer of shudras”, without having their own respectable place in society. He clearly expresses his concern in Section 5.8, where he writes, “Hindus who were superior enough in social status ... had the authority to force it on their inferiors.”[1]

Ambedkar reinforces his critique against caste system by citing some incidents that led to the subjugation of untouchables. In Section 2.9, Ambedkar talks about the discrimination faced by Balais, “an untouchable community” – as they had to conform to certain rules set up by upper community, one of which was “whatever the remuneration for work they did for upper caste, they have to accept it.” And if they did not follow the rules, they had to evict the village. They were not allowed to fetch water from the wells and had no access to their fields, which ultimately forced them to remain inferior to upper caste people. In Section 2.13, Ambedkar raises questions to those who were in political power, that is, if they are fit for the political position they held because they have failed in taking a strong stand against the exploitation of depressed classes.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in “*Annihilation of Caste*” has differentiated between caste and class, and states that society should give importance to class not caste as the former is based on merit and not birth. As against the caste system, which is a rigid system, class system allows people to move up the social ladder according to their merit, thus establishing a flexible system. While comparing these two systems, Ambedkar suggests that it is through education only, that depressed classes will be able to uplift themselves. Throughout “*Annihilation of Caste*”, he talks about how depressed people are deprived of their basic human rights such as “right to work”, “right to education”, “freedom of opinion and expression” and many more. [3] This has led to the inhuman treatment of untouchables.

In Section 2.11 of the text, he shares an incident that took place in Kavitha situated in Gujarat. “Hindus of Kavitha ordered the Untouchables not to insist upon sending their children to the common village school maintained by the government.”[1] Access to education, which is a basic human right, was denied to untouchables. Ambedkar asserts that in order to bring untouchables out of this sorry state of affairs, they must be provided with education because only when they will get education, they will be in a better position to reason and demand socio-economic rights. Education leads to empowerment of the people, and especially for those who are living in abject state. Without education they would be forced to live in deprivation and have to accept whatever upper class provides to them.

Ambedkar’s views on Capitalism

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar being an economist as well gave insightful suggestions that State should adopt in order to ensure social and economic justice in the society. While he had written quite a few books on economics, he had briefly mentioned about the issue of

Copyright © 2022, Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies

unemployment and exploitation untouchables faced at the hands of upper caste which was also the capitalist class.

Ambedkar identified the implications of social evils like untouchability that existed in the society—untouchables were not allowed to own means of production and were denied work at the same time; upper caste subdued untouchables to a position that they had no other means of employment which made them live in an impoverished state.

Ambedkar highlights the issue of unemployment among depressed classes. Though he was in favour of industrialization as it creates job opportunities, he was well aware of the “ill-effects of capitalism”. He believed that capitalism survives on profit and this profit is gained through exploitation of the working class—people belonging to lower rung of society forms the majority of it. Here, Ambedkar’s views on capitalism seem to be quite similar to Marx’s critique on capitalism. However, there is difference of opinion among two, while former talks about State controlled economy with social justice, latter talks about complete overthrow of capitalism by bringing about revolution thereby suggesting violent means to attain the desired goal. And Ambedkar was against violence. N. Sukumar in his essay “*Ambedkar: Democracy and Economic Theory*”, has noted that, “Ambedkar’s slogan ‘*Tell the slave that he is a slave and he will revolt against the slavery*’ generated consciousness in the untouchables and the downtrodden about their plight and the need to secure their human right.”[4] This consciousness could only come through education as it aids people to help themselves. In Ambedkar’s words, “self help is best help”, that is, if democracy has to be achieved in true sense then it is important to educate masses. Educated masses can raise their voice against social inequalities and bring about transformational change in their social status. Also, education renders person not to accept the position in accordance with the birth as “divine dispensation”. Ambedkar in one of his speeches said that, “Power behind which there is no consciousness, is no power...become conscious of the power they have got and will begin to put it to wise and effective use in order to secure their social emancipation...” [2], thus, he emphasizes on developing that consciousness of being exploited by getting educated and developing reason to refute the accorded inferior status.

Ambedkar goes on to criticize socialists in Section 3 of the text. He criticizes socialists for their lack of understanding of social order as they failed to abolish caste system from society and caste distinctions still exist among various sections of the society. He questions whether it is possible to bring about economic reforms without bringing about

Copyright © 2022, Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies

social reform. He states that social reform to take place, what is needed is the “mental attitude of the compatriots towards one another in their spirit of personal equality and fraternity.”[1] He called for “resolute mass action to bring about a good society” based on the principles of “liberty”, “equality” and “fraternity”. Social reform is important to take place; people have to forgo the prejudices like that of “polluted caste”, clean or unclean, pure or impure caste.

In Section 4.1, he writes about caste system as “not merely the division of labour but also division of labourers.” Caste system fails to give credit to merit and hold birth status as principal basis of one’s position in society. In words of Ambedkar, “Individual sentiment, individual preference, has no place in it. It is based on the dogma of predestination.”[1] He believes that caste system acts like a “monster” as it undermines the merit of an individual and discourages individual to work to his/her full potential. His birth status determines the work that individual is going to perform, thereby denying his right to live a life of dignity and freedom of choice. For him both “civil and political rights and social and economic rights” are crucial to establish a just society.

In Great Indian Peninsular Railway Depressed Classes Workmen’s Conference (GIP) which took place in 1938 in Nasik, Maharashtra, he reiterated that how untouchables are being exploited by the upper caste people. He brings to light the discriminatory attitude towards untouchables while recruiting them for various posts in Railways. Clearly, they have been denied their economic rights, that is, right to work. One of the many examples cited by Ambedkar to describe the plight of untouchables --“In Railways work as a gangman. Day in day out all his life he works as gangman with no prospects to raise.”[2] It has been noted that one who owns the means of production has the power to frame rules which favours the capitalist class. Since, untouchables have been denied of the same, they are abstained from actively engaging in the decision-making process and are unable to demand equal rights. He specifies that, “the two enemies are Brahmanism and Capitalism...By Brahmanism I mean the negation of the spirit of *Liberty, Equality and Fraternity*” [2]. According to him, Brahmanism justified the exploitation of untouchables by upper caste that enjoys a privileged position in the society, thereby, denying untouchables, equality of opportunity. Basic civil rights like access to public wells, temple entry, so on, were denied to untouchables. Thus, Ambedkar emphasized on the importance of raising a collective voice against this unjust system. He believed in the stronger notions like “equality of consideration”, “equality of respect” and “equality of dignity”. [5]

Moreover, Ambedkar writes in Section 5.8 that “It is a social system which embodies the arrogance and selfishness of perverse section of the Hindus who were **superior** enough in social status to set it in fashion, and who had the authority to force it on their **inferiors**.”[1] Words like “superior” and “inferior” indicate the inequality that existed in the society because of the oppressive caste system. Though Ambedkar does not explicitly uses the word “subaltern” but it seems that he had tried to give voice to the concerns of untouchables which can be considered as a “subaltern class”. Being inferior in status, untouchables were brutally suppressed by the superior class, that is, upper caste people not only in political domain but social and economic as well. Even though people belonging to lower caste make up the majority of the population they still lack political voice and are not given equal opportunity to actively engage in decision-making process.

According to Ambedkar an ideal society or good society is the one that “would be based on **liberty, equality and fraternity**....an ideal society should be **mobile**, should be full of channels for conveying a change taking place in one part to other parts.”[6] “Liberty”, “equality” and “Fraternity” make the foundation of Indian Constitution and seen as “golden trinity” of fundamental rights by Ambedkar. However, caste system being prevalent in Indian Society has undermined these constitutional values which are necessary to maintain a just social order and failed to give “equal respect” to each section of the society. He emphasizes on social equality which could be ensured only when social reformers would take strong measures to eliminate graded inequality through destruction of caste system.

Conclusion

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in “*Annihilation of Caste*” has strongly opposed caste system as it has not only crippled the growth of individuals but also nation. Social reform, religious reform and economic reform are all necessary to bring harmony and solidarity in the society so that people are not divided amongst each other on the basis of caste. As an economist he has talked about implications of caste system on economy and how it proved to be “impracticable” as it led to unemployment among masses. The rigid Chatur-varna system had prohibited people belonging from lower community that is, ‘Shudras’ to attain education which in turn led to their lower participation in economic activities. Ambedkar has stated that not letting one section of society flourish and denying them socio-cultural rights, hampers growth of society as a whole. When one section of the society, which also forms the majority, does not have the liberty to participate in socio-economic activities equally, it deters the

Copyright © 2022, Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies

growth of society and its people. As a social reformer, he calls for elimination of graded inequality from society and establishment of just social order whereby each section of the society enjoys civil liberties along with socio-economic rights equally without any discrimination. Thus, Ambedkar in his work “*Annihilation of Caste*” asks Hindu social reformers to take strong actions to “annihilate the caste” from social fabric as it has proven to be detrimental in maintaining a just social order and should establish “a new social order based on ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity.”

Works Cited

- Ambedkar, B.R. *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition*. S.Anand. 2015.Print.
- ‘Dr. Ambedkar’s Speech at G.I.P. Railway Depressed Class Workmen’s Conference, Nashik’. Valiveda.2017 <<https://velivada.com/2017/06/03/dr-ambedkars-speech-depressed-class-workmens-conference-nashik/>>
- ‘Peace, dignity and equality on a healthy planet’ <<https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>>
- Singh,M.P., Roy,Himanshu. *Indian Political Thought: Themes and Thinkers*.Pearson.2020.Print.
- Indira Gandhi National Open University, School of Social Sciences. *Social and Political Thought in Modern India*. July 2022: (Pages: 160-166). Print.
- Moon,Vasant. *Dr. B.R. Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches (Volume 1)*.Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India.2014.Print.
- Bhattacharya,Pramit, ‘The economics of Ambedkar’, Live Mint, 9 April 2016, <<https://www.livemint.com/Sundayapp/lzpPlO5wsmQENPeXNWvwck/The-economics-of-Ambedkar.html>>
- Manu-smriti | Hindu law, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Manu-smriti>>
- Untouchability – Wikipedia <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Untouchability>>