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Gandhi, Ambedkar and Dalits

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Abstract:

The question of identity and representation of Dalits has been debated for long both in pre-independence as well as post-independence period. Gandhi and Ambedkar, the two great leaders in the struggle against caste discrimination and untouchability in India, viewed the issues of identity and representation of Dalits from different perspectives. While Gandhi advocated a reformatory approach towards Hinduism and focused on integration of Dalits within the Hindu fold, Ambedkar, on the other hand, called for an outright annihilation of caste system and asserted the separate and distinct identity of Dalits with his demand of separate electorates. This paper is an attempt to briefly summarize their viewpoints on the issues of identity and representation of Dalits.

Keywords: Untouchability, Dalit, Harijan, Equality, Separate Electorate

Introduction

Historically, India had been a caste-based society. Caste system may be described as the institutionalized system of social stratification that existed in traditional Indian society ranking various social groups on the basis of their birth on the purity and pollution dimension. The caste system continues to exist even today though in its modified form. Various scholars such as B.K. Sarkar, G.S. Ghurye, Radhakamal Mukerjee, Irawati Karve, Louis Dumont, etc. in their respective works have studied caste system from the classical literary sources and thus offered a 'book-view' of the caste system. Ghurye, for example, identified six distinctive features of the Indian caste system: (a) segmental division of society, (b) hierarchy, (c) restrictions on feeding and social intercourse, (d) civil and religious disabilities and privileges of different sections, (e) lack of unrestricted choice of occupation, and (f) restrictions on marriage (Ghurye, 2011: 22).

Book-view on Indian society was strongly contested and criticized by Srinivas (1962) who strongly advocated for the 'field-view'. In his response to the Indologists, Srinivas stated that their representation of caste as *varna* produced a distorted image of the Indian society. He argues that the book-view of Indian society presented an idealized or perfect picture of its institutions – marriage, family, kinship, caste and religion – dwelling more on what they were supposed to be than how they actually worked. For example, the book-view had represented caste in terms of the invariant and immutable scheme of the four *varnas* viz. *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas* and *Shudras*. The term caste, when used in this sense, is referred to as *varna* and has an all-India application. "The *varna* scheme", according to Srinivas, "refers at best only to the broad categories of the society and not to its real and effective units" (Srinivas, 2002: 168).

Field studies soon shifted the focus away from the pan-Indian four-fold scheme of *varnas* to the actual operative units of the system which were the innumerable *jatis*. Ghurye (2011) stated that in any given linguistic area there are about 200 caste groups which are further sub-divided into about 2000 subcastes. Further, in contrast to Dumont's (2010) assertion of the binary opposition of pure and impure being the axial principle of hierarchy of the caste system in India, Srinivas, with his concept of 'dominant caste' highlights the complexity of the multi-hierarchical caste structure. Srinivas asserts that secular criteria such as numerical strength, land ownership, political influence, educational and occupational status, etc. also play a significant role in determining the local caste hierarchy.

A caste may be said to be 'dominant' when it preponderates numerically over the other castes, and when it also wields preponderant economic and political power. A Large and powerful caste group can be more easily dominant if its position in the local caste hierarchy is not too low (Srinivas, 2011: 308).

India has been a caste-based society historically (Ambedkar, 2019). Unfortunately, caste continues to influence social relations to varying degrees even today. Dalits were historically referred to as Achhuts or "Untouchables" within the traditional caste system. In constitutional terms, they are recognized as Scheduled Castes in contemporary India accounting for approximately 16.6 per cent of the country's population, according to the 2011 Census. Traditionally placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy and subjected to notions of ritual purity and pollution, Dalits experienced severe forms of discrimination and exploitation for centuries. Systematic social, economic, and political marginalization over centuries have consequently left Dalits among the most socially and economically disadvantaged and oppressed communities in present-day India.

From an Indological perspective, Ghurye offers his racial theory of caste system. Ghurye argues that the early society in India was divided into two racial groups: the *Aryans* and the *Dasas*. The *arya varna* and *dasa varna* are mentioned in Rigveda. The term *Dasa* is used to refer to the original inhabitants of the subcontinent. Like Ghurye, Jotirao Govindrao Phule, a radical social reformer from western India, also believed in the *Aryan* invasion theory. Phule states

More than three thousand years may have elapsed since the advent of the rule of Brahmins in this land. They came to India from a foreign land (they were aliens to India), and they subjugated the original inhabitants of India and perpetrated a vile tyranny over them (Phule, 1991: XLI).

Ambedkar, however, rejects the racial criterion as the basis of distinction between the Hindus and the Untouchables. According to Ambedkar, "Just as Untouchability has no racial basis so also has it no occupational basis." Instead, Ambedkar proposes a theory of 'broken men' to explain the origin of the Untouchability in India.

The distinction between the Hindus and Untouchables in its original form, before the advent of Untouchability, was the distinction between Tribesmen and Broken Men from alien Tribes. It is the Broken Men who subsequently came to be treated as Untouchables (Ambedkar, 2019: 242).

Offering a systematic and sociological definition of Dalits, Kumar states Dalits can be defined as a social group who have certain key characteristics. Firstly, Dalits have a unique structural location (the lowest) in the Hindu social order (as the fifth *varna*). Secondly, they have suffered cumulative and collective social exclusion because of their low structural location. Thirdly, they are associated with an unalterable social identity and status even when they attain socio-economic, educational and political mobility. Fourthly, their consciousness and its construction is anchored in the historicity of cumulative and collective social exclusion because of their low structural location. Last but not the least, they are distinctly identified by

their leadership, symbols and language that assert the historicity and reaffirm the indigeneity of their culture in contemporary times (Kumar, 2020: 141).

Gandhi vs. Ambedkar: Debate on the Identity and Representation of Dalits

Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar are the two important leaders who vigorously participated in the discussions on the identity and representation of Dalits. Both are also well known for their struggle against caste discrimination and untouchability in India. However, both had very different perspectives towards the issue of untouchability. Gandhi strongly believed that untouchability was not an essential aspect of Hinduism and saw it as the moral corruption of the religion. He opposed untouchability and advocated social upliftment of Dalits, whom he called “Harijans.” He believed through reformatory measures untouchability could be removed from the Hindu society.

On the other hand, Ambedkar, himself being a Dalit, demanded complete social, political and economic equality in the new and independent India. Unlike Gandhi, he strongly believed that removing untouchability was not enough and called for the annihilation of the caste system. He also fought for political representation and constitutional safeguards for Dalits.

Ambedkar, in his testimony before the Southborough Committee in 1919, advocated for recognizing Untouchables (Dalits), as a separate and distinct community, like Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians, in any future constitutional framework of India. His understanding of Hindu society and the values upheld by its Brahminical leadership had convince him to conclude that genuine emancipation for Untouchables could only be achieved by asserting a distinct identity for them. This led him to demand for separate electorates for Untouchables at the committee.

Subsequently, Ambedkar, in his presentations to Indian Statutory Commission (also known as the ‘Simon Commission’) on constitutional reforms in 1928, stated “the Untouchables had essentially been excluded from public services by Brahmins who opposed their inclusion on the grounds of efficiency”. Referring to Gopal Krishna Gokhale’s demand for Indianisation of administration, implying preference for Indians over Europeans, Ambedkar argued that “such a demand was based on good, not efficient, administration”.

For Ambedkar, democracy would thrive not simply on efficient governance but also good governance and representation of various groups in the administration was a mandatory condition for that. Recognising the continuing struggles for equality – between Brahmins and non-Brahmins, Hindus and Muslims, caste Hindus and Untouchables – a non-representative administration was bound to have problems of partisanship. These ill effects could only be avoided through the mandatory expansion of administration to include diverse social groups (Kumar and Suthar, 2024: 23)

Gandhi, challenging Ambedkar’s claim to represent the Untouchables, asserted

The claims advanced on behalf of the Untouchables, that to me is the unkindest cut of all. It means the perpetual bar-sinister... I claim myself in my own person to represent the vast mass of the Untouchables. Here I speak not merely on behalf of the Congress, but I speak on my own behalf, and I claim that I would get, if there was a referendum of the Untouchables, their vote, and that I would top the poll... I would rather see that Hinduism die than that Untouchability live... I say that it is not a proper claim by Dr. Ambedkar when he seeks to speak for the whole of the Untouchables of India. It will create a division in Hinduism which I cannot possibly look forward to with any satisfaction whatsoever... I cannot possibly tolerate what is in store for Hinduism if there are two divisions set forth in the villages. Those who speak of the political rights of the Untouchables do

not know their India, do not know how Indian society is today constructed, and therefore I want to say with all the emphasis that I can command that if I was the only person to resist this thing, I would resist it with my life (Omvedt, 2008: 44).

The Poona Pact, 1932

The British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald announced Communal Award on 4th August, 1932 in the absence of any consensus on the representation of Untouchables. Thus, granting separate electorates to the Depressed Classes (Untouchables). The Award was historic in many ways. Firstly, for the first time, Depressed Classes were recognised as a minority in the country and hence granted separate electorates. Secondly, it was stated that Depressed Classes will not only vote for the election of Depressed Classes representatives but also for the Hindu candidates of General Constituencies. Thus, they will have the privilege of having two votes, i.e., double vote.

As was obvious, Gandhi rejected the MacDonald Communal Award and saw it as a serious threat to Indian unity. He regarded it as detrimental both to Hindu society and to the Depressed Classes themselves. He argues that the introduction of separate electorates would institutionalize untouchability. Hence, in protest against the Communal Award, Gandhi declared a fast unto death on 20 September 1932. In effect, according to some scholars, his fast was a pressure tactic directed against Ambedkar. However, Ambedkar's stood by his stance taken during the Second-Round Table Conference. "I do not care for political stunts", he observed. "My decision stands. If Mr. Gandhi wants to fight with his life for the interests of the Hindu community, the depressed classes will also be forced to fight for their lives to safeguard their interests" (Kumar, 1987: 95).

According to Kumar (1987), Ambedkar was under moral pressure due Gandhi's fast unto death on the issue of separate electorates for the Untouchables. He argues that different viewpoints within his community as well as likelihood of bloodshed in the event of the death of Mahatma Gandhi may have forced Ambedkar for negotiations with Gandhi. In his proposal, Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, urged Ambedkar to abandon his demand for separate electorates and instead suggested a scheme of primary and secondary elections. Though reluctantly, Ambedkar agreed to this compromise formula put forward by Sapru. Finally, on 24 September 1932, the Poona Pact was signed.

The proposal for separate electorates for the Depressed Classes was dropped under the Poona Pact and, in return, the total number of reserved seats was raised. Further, as per the Poona Pact, voters from the Depressed Classes would elect a panel of four candidates for each reserved seat, in the first stage. The final candidate would then be chosen through a joint electorate which would comprise of both Depressed Class as well as caste Hindu voters.

Conclusion

Kumar (1987) argues that the separate electorate experience with the Muslims had shown that separate electorates tended to generate more difficulties than solutions. Thus, if Gandhi's perception of Hindu society was valid, then his fears about the possible consequences of separate electorates were also probably equally valid. Untouchables, unlike Muslims, formed an inseparable, though severely marginalized, segment of Hindu society. Thus, the proposed benefit of separate electorates would have permanently entrenched their identity as Untouchables and would have restricted their social integration. Further, there was a risk of a civil war between caste Hindus and the Untouchables on account of granting of separate electorates to the latter. This, probably, was a matter of concern for Ambedkar too. Ambedkar later observed that the Poona Pact in effect made the representatives elected from reserved seats dependent on, and subject to influence by, caste Hindu voters who played a decisive role in their election. In case of multi-caste

constituencies where there is only a single representative, it is the numerical majority that ultimately determines which Dalit candidate secures office.

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