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Ambedkar's Philosophy against Degradation of the Human Dignity

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Abstract: Ambedkar's philosophy on human dignity and his critique of the caste system and untouchability of Hindu religion has brought about a new life in the conscience of the downtrodden of the society as it gives them the motivation to assert one's right to dignity and social justice. Ambedkar questioned the fundamental degrading elements in Hindu society related to untouchability and the caste systems. Understanding the origin and the reasons for the continuation of such practices is vital to put an end to them and take a profound step to promote the universal brotherhood with the fellow human being.

Keywords: Human dignity, Defilement, Untouchability, *Manu Smriti*, Caste system, *Rig Veda*, Religion and caste.

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Introduction

THE CORE PROBLEM of untouchability and caste system in India has a degrading effect on the lives of people, especially the downtrodden masses. In the scenario, the so-called low caste people - as defined by Hinduism - have their rights manipulated and violated at will by the so-called upper caste people. The philosophy of Dr Ambedkar is a guiding force for the people who want to live their life with human dignity.

Life and Works of Ambedkar

Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, also popularly known as Babasaheb Ambedkar, was born in Madhya Pradesh to Ramji Sakpal and Bhimabai. His father was a Subedar in the Indian Army. Dr Ambedkar witnessed a harsh reality with the bitter stigma of caste discrimination because he belonged to the Hindu Mahar caste which was considered as

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‘untouchable’ by the upper classes. Humiliation and degradation haunted the childhood of Ambedkar. When he joined the army school, the teachers would segregate the students of upper and lower classes (Cultural India, n.d.).

From among the lower caste, Ambedkar was the first to graduate high school and study BA in Economics and Politics from Bombay University. Later he studied at universities in the United States, Britain and Germany. He also became an active leader for the Dalits and wrote in several journals about them. Consequently, he obtained a special representative chair on their behalf in the legislative councils of the government and also became the head of the drafting committee of the Constitution of India. Dr B. R. Ambedkar died at his home in Delhi on 6

October 1956 (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020). His important works are *Caste in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*; *The Annihilation of Caste*; *The Untouchables and Who Were the Shudras*.

Ambedkar's Philosophy on Human Dignity

Ambedkar's political philosophy was influenced by some of the major political practices of that time, namely, left, conservative and radical which he transcended significantly and brought about a synthetic understanding in his philosophy. Some of the thinkers like John Dewey, Edwin R.A. Seligman and Edmund Burke inspired his way of thinking. The most basic theme of Ambedkar's ideology was theological and ethical where he researched the beliefs and metaphysical structures of Indian society. His political ideas are based on the theme of freedom, equality and brotherhood. At the same time, he was highly critical of Hindu authoritarianism and caste institutions and insisted that Hinduism is not a community (Dubey, 2020).

One of the most exceptional aspects of the intellectual life of Ambedkar was not the solution he proposed but the questions he raised. His questions dealt with the very core of the societal injustice within the systems and practices. The significance of Ambedkar was that he posed questions on the untouchability and the caste systems of the Hindus which nobody dared to speak about at that time (Lonkar, 2019).

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Untouchability and the Idea of Defilement

The fundamental question according to Ambedkar in his writing is *who are untouchables?* In explaining the origin of untouchability Ambedkar refers to Stanley Rice and says that there is a probability that the untouchables were outcasts, the survivors of the conquered people who were divided into castes which tend to coincide with their occupation like drum-beating, leather-working and other farm labouring classes working under landlords (Ambedkar, 1948).

According to Ambedkar the reason for the untouchability in India comes from the *Vedas*, specifically from the *Manu Smriti* which recognizes both physical defilement and also notional defilement. *Manu* treated birth, death and menstruation as a source of impurity. Among these, the defilement from death was regarded as having extensive implications, for death causes defilement not only to the family members and close relatives but also remote relatives, teacher, and also to those who touched the corpse. The idea of defilement in *Manu* is real and not merely notional as it also makes the food unacceptable if offered by the polluted person. However, *Manu* also prescribes the period of defilement which significantly varies from person to person. There is also a purification ceremony in *Manu Smriti* prescribed for the person tainted by three types of defilement, namely, from physical defilement; notional or psychological defilement and ethical defilement (Ambedkar, 1948).

But the interesting thing Ambedkar points out in the whole aspect of defilement or untouchability is that these cases of defilement and untouchability were present not only among Hindus but also in primitive and ancient societies. Hence, the concept of untouchability was common in the history of the ancient world but the idea of untouchability in Hinduism went far ahead of its notion of

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defilement, impurity and purification, for there came about another form of ‘untouchability in the Hindu system which was hereditary in nature. And this is the sole reason that untouchability in India still persists (Ambedkar, 1948).

Caste System

The caste system is one of the biggest problems in the country today. The growing consciousness of Hindu identity in the present time affirms the age-old practice of the caste system. Ambedkar vehemently opposed this practice which takes away the individual and collective dignity of human beings. However, the caste system has deeper implications in society.

A Religious Notion of the Caste

The history of the caste system in India is attributed to the religious theories of *Rig Veda*, an ancient Hindu Scripture that describes that the primal man or the *Purush* destroyed himself to create a human society also known as *varnas*, namely, the *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas* and the

Shudras. The caste system can also be defined as an endogamous and hereditary subdivision of any ethnic unit which occupies a position of higher or lower order in the society in comparison with other such subdivisions (Deshpande, 2010).

Ambedkar in his writing on the *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development* highlights the fundamentals of the caste systems deeply rooted in the Indian society. He states that the problem of the caste system is very vast both theoretically and practically. The caste system can be said as a local problem but is capable of big mischief because as long as the caste system exists, Hindus will scarcely marry any outsiders. Caste consciousness is also a kind of institution that indicates tremendous consequence because if Hindus migrate to other regions Indian caste would become a world problem (Ambedkar, 1916).

Ambedkar's Definition of Caste

To understand the mechanism of the caste system Ambedkar analyses three definitions of Mr Sanart, Mr Nesfield and Dr Ketkar who have done extensive study on the caste systems respectively; First, Ambedkar draws the idea of pollution from Mr Sanart as a characteristic of caste in India. The notion of pollution as the core of the caste system is only because the high priestly class enjoys the highest rank in society. This also indicates that pollution in the caste system survives so far as it has the religious notion. Second, from the definition of Nesfield, Ambedkar points out that the caste system emerged from the notion of the exclusiveness of the particular group. The ideology of the group was not to mess with another which essentially came from the prohibitory elements of the religious injunctions. Third, the caste system can be explained from the prohibition of intermarriage and membership by autogeny as the two fundamental characteristics of caste as defined by Ketkar. However, Ambedkar says that they are the same thing, what is

common is the prohibition of intermarriage to outsiders (Ambedkar, 1916).

Superposition of Endogamy Behind the Mystery of Caste

Ambedkar claims that the reason for the existence and its continuation of the caste system in India is the practice of endogamy within the groups. Ambedkar himself asserts “endogamy as a key to the mystery of the caste system” (Ambedkar, 1916). According to the history claimed by Ambedkar, the people in India were actually exogamous, and endogamy was completely foreign to them. In fact, exogamy was a creed that no one dared to infringe. But later with the superposition of endogamy over exogamy, there was the creation of caste. This practice of endogamy to preserve the number of the caste also gave birth to other crucial problems like *sati* (*Sati* or *suttee* was a Hindu practice, in which a widow sacrifices herself by sitting atop her deceased husband’s funeral pyre) or lifelong widowhood for women which were highly degrading to the importance of the lives of women in India (Ambedkar, 1916).

Annihilation of Caste: Call for the Destruction of Religion

In his book *Annihilation of Caste* Ambedkar suggests a holistic approach to human dignity by the destruction of the caste system. He states that the real method of breaking up the caste system is not to bring about inter-caste meals and inter-caste marriages but to destroy the religious notions on which caste is founded. The caste system still scurries in India for the very reason that it is interlinked with religious teachings. Therefore, if we have to get rid of the degrading practice we need to destroy the religion (Ambedkar, 1915).

Ambedkar claims that Hindu religion as contained in the *Vedas* and the *Smriti* is nothing but a mixture of a mass of sacrificial, social, political and sanitary rules and regulations. Hinduism as a religion is nothing but a multitude of instructions and prohibitions. In short, Hinduism can be classified as a religion with legalized class ethics. Therefore, Ambedkar calls for the destruction of such a religion for he says that there is nothing irreligious in destroying such religion. However, Ambedkar does not deny the necessity for religion. Rather he asserts that religion as mentioned by Burke should be the foundation of society on which all true Civil Government rests (Ambedkar, 1915).

Conclusion

We have come a long way since the movement of Ambedkar's philosophy on human dignity. His critique of the foundations of Hinduism and its teachings on untouchability and caste system very much reflects in the Constitution of India as the sovereign, socialist and democratic country which still remains relevant in today's India. Ambedkar's philosophy uplifts human life. The philosophy of Ambedkar calls for a deeper understanding of human dignity. For human life cannot be that of the exclusiveness of caste and creed but it is about celebrating life in communion. Untouchability does not mean only the degradation of other's dignity but it also reveals one's spirituality or the lack of it.

The questions on religious teaching and its religiousness are highly significant in Ambedkar's philosophy. It is indeed the teaching of religion that becomes too rigid at times that it causes divisions in society and humanity at large. At the same time, a true religion nourishes human life, community and universality. It has been more than half a century since the birth of Ambedkar's movement, but India still faces the cruelty of caste and untouchability in many parts of the country. One of such

examples is the recent case of Hathras gangrape where the lower caste girl was brutally raped by the upper caste.

Today the philosophy of Ambedkar has significantly changed the conscience of the suppressed castes as they are awakening and raising their voices for their rights and dignities. In recent times, the voices of Dalits against the caste system has been witnessed all over the country as they take inspiration from the philosophy of Dr B. R. Ambedkar. His philosophy will always remain a foundational guiding principle for the suppressed people in the country.

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Samskaras: Their Significance and Benefits

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Abstract: *Samskara* is a process of purifying the human person and adding goodness as well in various times of life. It is not only making oneself good but also making others even good. It is a way to happy living. It is also known as a well-planned action. *Samskara* helps one to grow spiritually in life at the same it helps in the physical growth of the human person as well. *Samskara* also has to play a key role in moulding every society. Along with this purpose, there are also various other purposes for *samskara* on earth. *Samskara* also motivates our thoughts, communication, actions etc. Also, *Samskara* can take the negative to positive. The *Samskara* were a conscious effort to meet this need in life. From birth to death, it is a series of incidents from the desire to live, to enjoy, to think and ultimately to retire.

Keywords: Samskara, Hostile Influences, Favourable Influence, Significance of Samskaras

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