

# Ambedkar's Struggle For the Emancipation of Scheduled Castes : The Birth and Growth of New Militant Ideology:

— DR. ADI H. DOCTOR.

Western India and Maharashtra in particular have had a rich tradition of social reform. Western India social reformers broadly speaking fall into two categories. The moderate, liberal and amelioristic reformers where primary interest was to reform the Hindu family and re-interpret the scriptures in the light of modern exigencies and reason and the militant reformers who attacked the very ideological basis of the Hindu social system and its institutions. The liberal-amelioristic reformers were often Brahmins, men like Ranade, Gokhale, Karve. The militant reformers belonged to the lower castes and their prime concern was to organize the dalits for reform and instill in them a new sense of identity and dignity. Jotirao Phule was the first "shudra" reformer who sought to mobilize the shudras and ati-shudras. After Phule it was only Ambedkar who once again took up the task from where Phule left it.

## Ambedkar's early struggle for Equality

Ambedkar's attack on the ideological basis of Hindu social system and institutions and his attempts to mobilize the Scheduled Castes to fight their battle themselves, commenced only after 1935, after his earlier attempts to gain equality within Hinduism had failed. When Ambedkar returned from abroad armed with a D.Sc. from Columbia University and a Bar-at-Law from Greys Inn, he was beaming with self-confidence and believed that parliamentary democracy was the means to achieve socio-economic emancipation. Ambedkar's early writings abound in appreciative references to Hindu scriptures. Thus in 1927, at the time of the Mahad Satyagraha which Ambedkar justified on the basis of the teachings of the Gita, Ambedkar claimed that the Gita was acceptable to both the touchables and the untouchables. <sup>1</sup>Next Ambedkar attempted to organize three temple entry satyagrahas but all three were unsuccessful and significantly none was supported by the All India National Congress. Ambedkar also made some futile attempts to gain equality within Hinduism by urging the Scheduled Castes to join the popular Ganpati festivals. He even arranged for a public ceremony at which the low castes donned the sacred thread and for multi-caste dinners but could not succeed in getting more than a handful of higher castes to attend these functions.

In addition to these futile attempts, two other instances in Ambedkar's life changed his early hope of winning equality for the

Scheduled Castes by staying within the Hindu fold. The first was in 1927 when at the time of the Conference of the Depressed Classes, his attempt to publicly walk to the town pond at Mahad to drink water was violently resisted by the high castes and Ambedkar and his friends were forced to abandon the plan. The second was during the year 1932 when Mahatma Gandhi forced Ambedkar to abandon his demand for separate electorates for the Scheduled Castes (conceded by the British in the famous Communal Award) by going on a fast unto death in Yerwada Prison. Ambedkar's clash with Gandhi over the issue of reservations of seats for the Scheduled Castes, not only shook Ambedkar's faith in the legal method of redressing grievances but also in parliamentary democracy being able to do justice to the Scheduled Castes. From now onwards Ambedkar began to opine that the Dalits would have to fight their battle for equality alone.

### A New Militant Ideology

Ambedkar now felt that nothing short of a new militant ideology would help the Scheduled Castes to organize for the battle for equality. In evolving a new militant ideology Ambedkar was considerably influenced by Phule. In his book on "Who Were the Shudras?" Ambedkar hails Phule as the Martin Luther of Maharashtra and "as the greatest Shudra of modern India who made the lower castes of Hindus conscious of their slavery to the higher classes and who preached the gospel that for India social democracy was more vital than independence from foreign rule".<sup>2</sup> In his other seminal work "Annihilation of Caste" Ambedkar condemns hereditary priesthood and in contrast to his earlier acceptance of the Gita, now condemns the Gita as "a political book" which is only interested in raising the Brahmins to a superior position. Ambedkar then goes on to bemoan the fact that "rationalism" as a canon for interpreting the Vedas and Smritis is absolutely condemned by Manu. He holds the doctrines of "Sadachar" and "Prayaschitta" as being responsible for the destruction of the critical faculty among Hindus. The doctrine of Sadachar ruled out reasoning by equating good conduct or behaviour with the observance of caste, customs and taboos. Likewise the doctrine of Prayaschitta or the doctrine of repentance implied not only compromising with the unethical but also non-application of reason.

### Attack on the Caste System and its Reform

Ambedkar claimed that the caste system was not based on the principle of natural division of labour since the notions of heredity and pre-destination (karma) were crucial to it. He condemned it as essentially an unwarranted and unnatural division of men into water tight compartments. Ambedkar blamed the caste system for preventing the emergence of a public spirit and a nationalist sentiment among the Hindus. Its taboos regarding marriage and inter-dining had not only demoralized Hindus, it had also given rise to such pernicious practices as sati, enforced widowhood and child marriage, all of which had emerged primarily to solve the problem of surplus men and women within caste and to maintain endogamy.

To break the pernicious hold of the caste system on the Hindus, Ambedkar suggested three measures. Firstly, it was most essential to prepare one standard book of the Hindu religion, argued Ambedkar, which would be acceptable to all Hindus. Secondly, there must be a Civil Code which would enable free consenting adults to marry any partner of their choice. Finally the hereditary priesthood must be done away with. Ambedkar argued that any Hindu who had successfully passed the examination to be conducted by the State should be given the licence or sanad to practise priestcraft. Ambedkar also wanted the State to limit the number of priests, and, most importantly, prescribe a code of ethics and conduct for them.<sup>3</sup>

Ambedkar was critical of the "bhakti" saints who, while they accepted bhaktas or disciples from all castes without any distinction, did nothing to attack the ideology underlying the caste system. He therefore warned his castemen from joining such cults of devotion which he described as "the opium of helplessness".

### **Reinterpreting History**

With a view to mobilizing and instilling a sense of pride in the Scheduled Castes, Ambedkar undertook the task of reinterpreting History. He rejected the racial theory as well as the theory of filthy occupation as false explanations for the practice of untouchability. The untouchables were part of the Aryan community, but due to continuous internal war-fare, those tribesmen who were routed and defeated become rootless or "broken men", compelled to roam in all directions for food and shelter. It was these broken tribesmen who were compelled to live outside the villages of the settled community, that became in due course the untouchables. Ambedkar opines that it was sometime in 400 AD that the practice of untouchability emerged and "was born out of the struggle for supremacy between Buddhism and Brahminism."<sup>4</sup> In support of his claim, Ambedkar cites the fact that the practice of untouchability was unknown in Vedic times.

Phule too had used the instrument of reinterpreting history to mobilize the dalits and instill a sense of pride in them. But whereas Phule considered the shudras and ati-shudras to be the original natives of the land and described the Brahmins as "Aryan invaders", Ambedkar claimed the dalits to be part of Indo-Aryan society. However, on two points, Phule and Ambedkar agreed. Firstly, both debunked the divine origin of caste or the varna theory which claimed the shudras as the lowest caste created from the feet of Brahma, while hailing the Brahmins as the highest caste originating from the mouth of Brahma. Secondly, both emphasised that the plight of the untouchables cannot be explained in terms of karma or past behaviour, but is pure accident of history.

### **Social Democracy Must Precede Political**

Ambedkar was not a freedom fighter in the sense in which say Tilak was. In Ambedkar's ideology social democracy had to precede

political democracy of self-rule. In Ambedkar's opinion caste tyranny and oppression were greater and more extensive evils in the daily lives of the dalits than rule by an alien government. Very insightfully Ambedkar observed that Rights must come first before power is set up. To reverse the order was not to work for freedom, but to perpetuate tyranny. In 1919, while giving evidence before the Reforms Committee, Ambedkar stated, "Arrangements should be made whereby the hardships and disabilities entailed by the social system" are not "reproduced and perpetuated in political institutions". Should political freedom come prematurely, claimed Ambedkar, it would simply result in the establishment of "communal read (high caste) majority rule". In fact, so uneasy was Ambedkar with the perpetuation of high caste hegemony that he felt that for India, perhaps, "an enlightened-autocracy" was preferable to democracy.<sup>5</sup> It was the same fear of the perpetuation of high caste domination and oppression that made Ambedkar oppose the Gandhian ideal of "Gram-Raj", wherein the maximum powers would vest with the Village Panchayats. In sharp contrast to Gandhi's idealised picture of the Indian village as a family. Ambedkar saw the Indian village as a den of corruption, factionalism and casteism. In this context, it should not be forgotten that it was in the villages that Ambedkar and the untouchables had suffered maximum indignities and humiliations.

### Conversion to Buddhism

As with the passage of time Ambedkar realized that his pleas for a complete overhaul of the Hindu society and Hindu theology had fallen on deaf ears and that he had not succeeded in making any significant dent on Hindu orthodoxy, his ideology become increasingly militant. His early criticism of the ideological foundations of the Hindu social system and institutions now gave way to the espousal of a new religion altogether viz. Buddhism.

The desire to use religious conversion as a strategy to fight caste oppression first struck Ambedkar in 1935 itself when he declared that if he could not help being born a Hindu he would atleast ensure that he did not die a Hindu. In 1936 he even called a Conference, attended by nearly ten thousand dalits, to debate the issue of conversion. After evaluating the costs and benefits of conversion to different faiths, Ambedkar finally decided on conversion to the Buddhist faith, because as he himself put it, he wanted to take care that "conversion will not harm the tradition or the culture and history of this land". In his book on "The Buddha and His Dhamma",<sup>6</sup> Ambedkar explained the cardinal principles of his new faith as "Prajna" which meant understanding as opposed to superstition and supernaturalism and "Samta" which meant equality. Thus in Dhamma there would be no castes and no claims to infallibility; no rituals and no sacrifices. The main objective of Dhamma was to emancipate suffering humanity.

Ambedkar claimed that Buddhism was even to be preferred to Marxism. The Marxist concept of exploitation, according to Ambedkar,

was contained in the Buddhist doctrine of *Dukkha* that is suffering or pain from which mankind has to be emancipated. Again, like Marxism, Buddhism too was against the institution of private property. What however made Buddhism distinctly superior to Marxism, stated Ambedkar, was its emphasis on superior ethical methods such as moral persuasion, teaching and love. These were morally preferable to the doctrine of class struggle and class war.

### Phule and Ambedkar: A Comparison

Both Phule and Ambedkar led low caste protest movements, the former in the 19th century and the latter in the twentieth. However the character of the protest movement did change as we move from Phule to Ambedkar. The first obvious difference is that whereas in Phule's time the Brahmin was portrayed as the single principal oppressor, by the time we come to Ambedkar all the caste Hindus are perceived by the Dalits as supporters of the oppressive caste system. Secondly, whereas Phule's mission was to create a new distinct broad identity, the Maratha community, comprising of the Kunbis and the Mahars alike (the shudras and ati-shudras), Ambedkar did not approve of such an attempt as it did not appear to him to give the central place to the Scheduled Castes.

### An Appreciation

One may differ with Ambedkar's assessment of Hinduism, his romantic view of history, even his understanding of Marxism; but one cannot deny that his central concerns were moral and that he rendered yeoman's service to Hinduism by drawing attention to the urgent need to do socio-economic justice to the oppressed castes, by insisting on placing the individual at the very centre of the social order, and by insisting that reason rather than faith should be our guiding principle in life.

### Notes:

1. Vide Dhananjay Keer, *Ambedkar Life and Mission*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1962 p. 342.
2. B. R. Ambedkar, *Who Were the Shudras and How They Came to be the Fourth Varna in Indo-Aryan Society*, Thacker and Co., Bombay 1946, p. V.
3. B. R. Ambedkar, *The Annihilation of Caste*, Jullundar, 1971.
4. B. R. Ambedkar, *The Untouchables: Who Where They and Why They Became Untouchables*, Bombay Reprint, 1970.
5. A. M. Rajasekhariah, *B. R. Ambedkar - The Politics of Emancipation*, Sindhu Publications, Bombay 1971, p. 212.
6. B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Mission*, Peoples Education Society, Bombay, 1957.