

Ambedkar and untouchables

By M. J. Audi

Ambedkar is one of the few Indian leaders whose work attracts the scholars. He was a thinker and activist. His activities have influenced India's development. The problem which he struggled to solve still defies solution. It is linked with unity and prosperity of Indians. Born as untouchable, he had intimate knowledge of disabilities, humiliations and sufferings of the untouchables. Ambedkar laboured to liberate them from bondage. His goal was to raise the untouchables to their rightful status. Two phases mark his activities: the colonial phase from 1924 to 1947 and the Swaraj phase from 1947 till he died in 1956. This is an attempt to reflect upon some aspects of his struggle for untouchables.

On caste

Literature on caste system is enormous and its origin varies with the writer. Caste system is the corruption of *Chatur Varna* mentioned in the *Purusha Sukta* in the *Rig Veda*. They are: the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas, and the Shudras. Ambedkar himself probed the caste system. His three tracts are: *Annihilation of Caste*; *Who were the Shudras?* and *The Untouchables*. His findings were as follows. Initially the Varna was based on worth. In course of time, worth was replaced by birth and the four *Varnas* became four castes. "The principle of graded in-equality" fixed the terms of contact between the castes. The Hindu society was formed with an ascending scale of reverence and descending scale of contempt with the Brahmins lording it over. Ambedkar concluded that the untouchability was "born out of the struggle for supremacy between Buddhism and Brahmanism".

The general trend is to hold Hindu religion responsible for caste system and untouchability. Gandhiji rejected it outright and contended that "caste has nothing to do with religion". Gandhiji's contention is rational. The caste system was nothing but an economic device by the vested interests of the time. Under it, the worst occupations and the least incomes went to the lowest castes and the untouchables. True, subsequently religion was pressed into service to stabilize the system. Then, as now, there is no source better than religion to give legitimacy to exploitation.

Conversions

Internal divisions is a major weakness of Hindu society. India's enemies have always profited from it. This was not grasped by caste - Hindus and the untouchables. When the orthodox refused to change with changing times, the leader of untouchables decided to retaliate by changing the faith. At the Yeola Conference in 1935, Ambedkar advised the

untouchables to leave Hindu religion and embrace the faith that will give them equality denied by caste - Hindus. The advice delighted the religions that prosper through conversions.

Did Ambedkar sincerely believe that the new faith would bestow equality upon untouchables in true sense of term? It has been found that conversion by itself does not establish equality. Hutton found that "even a change of religion does not destroy the caste system, for Muslims are often found to observe it in practice" and Srinivas notes that "conversion to Christianity often only changed the faith but not the standing of the converts in the society". Instead of being untouchables in Hindi religion they became untouchables elsewhere because every religion that exists on the face of earth practises inequality. Amusingly, it is now demanded that the privileges enjoyed by the Scheduled Castes should be extended to the "Dalit Christians".

It must be admitted that Ambedkar's weakness for office impaired his cause. In 1946, Ambedkar found no place in the Interim Cabinet. The Congress chose Jagjivan Ram to represent the untouchables. The Viceroy's announcement was a "terrific disappointment" for Ambedkar. In the name of adequate representation, Ambedkar demanded one more seat for untouchables.

When the Muslim League joined the Interim Cabinet, Jogendranath Mandal was included. The untouchables got two seats but Ambedkar was kept out. In the 1952 general elections, Ambedkar contested for the Lok Sabha and was defeated. The things were arranged and Ambedkar was elected to the Rajya Sabha for the Bombay State.

Minority politics

The political climate, which then prevailed, encouraged Ambedkar to think in terms of minority politics to accomplish his objectives. Britain pursued a policy of granting political privileges and economic benefits to the minority in India. Minority was recognized on the basis of religion. As Hindu was the religion of untouchables, Ambedkar was, perforce, obliged to separate them. It was not an easy task. He had an adversary in the Indian National Congress led by Gandhiji. Gandhiji resolutely opposed all attempts to separate untouchables from the Hindus and their recognition as distinct minority.

The grievances of untouchables against the Indian National Congress were genuine and legitimate. The Congress leadership, during the freedom movement, demanded the ending of segregation in South Africa but did nothing concrete to end segregation within India. It could be very well accused of double standards.

Like European Sisters of Charity in Calcutta today, Indian National Congress then failed to perceive that charity always begins at home. The Congress, under Gandhiji, took interest in the untouchables. However, it was prudent propaganda step to extend the Congress influence to untouchables. It could be argued that but for Ambedkar's struggle, the Congress would have continued to ignore the untouchables. Though Gandhiji gave the Congress a mass base, the Congress organization had been always controlled by the vested interests whom even Gandhiji could not defeat.

The Communal Award offered to the untouchables separate seats in the provincial legislatures and double vote; they were to elect their own representatives and representatives from general constituencies. As *Bombay Chronicle* put it the aim of Award was "to turn the national majority of the Hindus into a minority". Asserting that the untouchables and caste - Hindus were "one and indivisible", Gandhiji, from Yeravada Jail, decided to resist the Award with his life. He went on fast-unto-death. The public opinion compelled Ambedkar to accept an agreement to save Gandhiji's life. The Poona Pact gave to untouchables more seats but took away their separate electorates and double vote. Later, Ambedkar grieved over the loss. Once again, Gandhiji struck at the weakest among the lot. Ambedkar rightly complained that Gandhiji "singled out" only the untouchables. The most powerful weapon in the armour of *Satyagrahi* should have been used to bring the notorious prodigals to their senses. The real testing-ground for the philosophy of *Satyagraha* was minority politics. Curiously, Gandhiji did not apply it where it was the most appropriate. In a memorandum to the Cabinet Mission, Ambedkar again demanded "separate electorates" and recognition as "minority". The untouchables were never recognized as a "minority" during the British raj. Looking back it appears to be an unwise move on Ambedkar's part. The minority status was not in the interests of the untouchables, touchables and India. Division of people of India into permanent majority and minorities on the basis of religion is an outright intellectual chicanery.

The Constitution of the Republic of India has a series of provisions to protect the untouchables. It abolishes untouchability. The Scheduled Castes enjoy special protection as regards the reservation of seats in Parliament and State Legislatures and their claims are taken into account whilst making appointments to the administrative services of the

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State. Originally, the reservations were to be only for ten years from the commencement of the Constitution. However., the period has been continuously extended. Such is the position for four decades. What is their outcome?

There is no fundamental change in the condition of untouchables. Tragically, they are as far away from "self-help and self-respect" — the twin goals of Ambedkar — as ever before. In case of innocents among the untouchables, the constitutional umbrella has become paternalism of sorts; in case of calculating amongst them, it has led to opportunism. It is time to realize that existing system of reservations and so-called *open competition based on merit* have ruined the people of India.

Ambedkar correctly grasped that "there will be outcastes as long as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of caste system". Economic equality between citizen and citizen is the only sure and certain means to destroy castes and outcastes. It alone makes political and social equality meaningful. Without economic equality, democracy degenerates into oligarchy.

Ambedkar grasped the importance of economic equality. As early as 1937, he pointed out that the Indian National Congress lacked courage "to proclaim the ideal of social and economic

equality, enabling the common man to get leisure and liberty to develop himself. In the Constituent Assembly none was better qualified and more competent than Ambedkar to press for economic equality. It was unfortunate that he allowed himself to be lost in the rhetoric of rights. The scheme of Fundamental Rights drafted by Ambedkar has not at all worked to the advantage of the underdogs of Indian society. Only the topdogs have prospered and are prospering under it. The working of Constitution has not at all abolished "inequalities" that existed before; it has created more inequalities.

Ambedkar rendered yeoman service to India by exposing the defects of Hindu society. His services would have been greater and more enduring if he had handled the problem of untouchability within the framework of poverty which tortures the people of India regardless of their religion. Ambedkar did not go to the "root of things". Neglect of virtual economic equality between citizen and citizen is the root cause of the sufferings of all including the untouchables. It is true that Ambedkar would not have been successful, but he would have successfully shown the vested interests, which controlled the constitution-making, in their true colours and exposed the hypocrisy of our so-called great "idealists and humanists".