

Modernity, Untouchability and Dr. Ambedkar

— By DR. B. S. SHASTRY

Modernity and untouchability are social contradictions and therefore they cannot co-exist. None saw this contradiction more clearly than Dr. Ambedkar. He devoted his entire life to end this contradiction in terms of eradicating untouchability. The task was not easy because untouchability has been a traditional institution of the Hindu society since ages and a traditional society is very slow to change. It is, in fact, reluctant to change.

Modernity is a concept which can be understood better by looking at its components. They are rationalism, humanism, individualism, liberalism, egalitarianism, democracy, rule of law, secularism, scientific attitude and pluralism. Each of these has a profound implication for a modern society. Rationalism implies that we accept only that which is in accordance with reason. The Hindu social structure and social institutions of the times of Dr. Ambedkar were hardly according to reason as they embodied a host of socio-economic injustices towards the untouchables or the depressed classes. Humanism entails the concept of welfare of all. In fact, altruism, welfare of others before that of the self, is the mark of true humanism. However, this did not apply to the untouchables. Their interests, their welfare, their rights were hardly taken into account by the higher sections of the society. Individualism means that every individual is worth on his own like any other individual. Every one has his own individual dignity and self respect. But this was not meant for the untouchables. Dignity of an individual untouchable meant nothing for the higher ups. Did he have any right? Liberalism implies that every individual has certain fundamental, inalienable rights such as the rights to life, property, education, etc. and freedoms like those of speech and expression, of movement and association, and so on. An untouchable had hardly any right. He had no property rights; no right to education; no right to enter a temple. His rights were, one might say, his social, religious, economic and political disabilities. The rule of law means that there would be one common, uniform law for all, no matter whether one is rich or poor, prime minister or the common man in the street, man or woman. However, this was denied to the untouchable. For an identical crime committed by him and a high caste Hindu, the punishment was higher to the untouchable, but lighter to the other. There was no religious tolerance or secularism towards the untouchables. They were Hindus; but they could neither enter temples nor recite *mantras*. They could not even touch the holy literature, let alone read it. Pluralism is the modern idea in which groups tolerate each other and co-exist with all their differences. The groups may belong to different races, speak different languages, follow various religions and observe differing customs and manners; yet they would not try to oppress or suppress each other; instead they would give and take,

co-operate and live together. However, pluralism was denied to the untouchables. The higher castes would dictate to them the latter's ways of life: live away from the dwellings of the higher castes; do not touch the members of the latter; do not allow even your shadow to fall on such members; and so on.

In short, the principles of modernity were totally inapplicable to the untouchables or the depressed classes in our land. As a result they were made to suffer a number of socio-economic and political disabilities. G. S. Lokhande in his book, *Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar : A Study in Social Democracy*, (New Delhi, Intellectual Publishing House, 1982), has enumerated the social disabilities as follows:

1. The untouchables were prohibited from using certain public institutions and facilities like schools, wells and bathing ghats.
2. They were not allowed to enter temples.
3. Barbers, tailors and washermen would not render their services to them.
4. None would accept water from them.
5. They were denigrated and humiliated due to the idea of pollution by contact or proximity.

There was no economic justice also to the untouchables. Equality of opportunity with regard to Government jobs was simply out of question. They had no right to own lands, cultivable or otherwise. They tilled the soil, but always for others. The caste Hindus exploited them economically and used their own economic power to keep the untouchables where they were. Their children were employed as domestic hands or to look after the cattle, instead of being sent to schools.

It goes without saying that the untouchables had no political right of any kind before Dr. Ambedkar took up their cause in 1919, as we shall see later on.

Could the untouchables fight against these socio-economic and political injustices? They were not in a position to do so. In practically every village they constituted a small minority compared to the people belonging to other castes taken together. Any attempt to get rid of these disabilities on the part of the minority was strongly opposed and prevented by the majority. The principle of pluralism did not apply to them, particularly when they tried to change their social status. If any untouchable tried to exercise his natural right, he was boycotted socially and economically by the caste Hindus. He was denied the use of village path; no shop keeper would sell him anything. Such boycotts were taken recourse to on trivial grounds. For instance, he was humiliated and boycotted if he dared to put on a turban or a gold ornament or rode on horse back.

The untouchables were thus helpless and voiceless. Dr. Ambedkar gave them strength. His loud protests and articulated pronouncements became the voice of the voiceless. He launched upon a crusade against untouchability which weakened the latter for good.

Dr. Ambedkar belonged to the class of untouchables and suffered its humiliating consequences in spite of the fact that he was highly educated, having obtained a Ph.D. and a D.Sc. from well known universities abroad. He had a good position in the service of the Maharaja of Baroda and then practised law in Bombay, after a stint of professorship and principalship at a law college. As a result of personal humiliations and also the indignities meted out to the people of his community, his life mission was to emancipate the untouchables. He launched upon a number of successful movements in order to uphold their legitimate rights. In fighting for them he combined in himself the roles of a social reformer, a political leader, and a spiritual guide. He aimed at shaping their mind and political outlook. He endeavoured to put an end to their economic exploitation by the caste Hindus, to create in them a sense of self respect and individual dignity. He wanted them to be educated so that they would become aware of their status and fight for its improvement.

In 1919 he demanded political rights for the depressed classes while giving evidence before the Franchise Committee. In 1927 he launched a *satyagraha* movement in Mahad to achieve for them the right to draw water from a public tank. The case was taken to the court which finally gave a verdict in favour of the untouchables in 1937. The Kalam *satyagraha* of 1930 in Nasik was designed to achieve the right to enter temples. He made a bonfire of the *Manusmiriti* in Mahad, declaring the work of Manu as the charter of privileges of the caste Hindus and at the same time a charter of slavery of the untouchables. It attracted the attention of the Hindu some of whom approved of his action, though the orthodox section condemned it. He told the untouchables that they should live with self respect and never think of themselves as untouchables, and that they should live a clean life and dress like any other. He urged them to educate themselves, organise and agitate for their rights.

He established an institution known as the Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha in 1924. Its objectives were:

- (a) Promotion of education among the depressed classes by opening schools, colleges, hostels, etc.
- (b) Promotion of culture among them by providing for libraries, social centres, study circles, etc.
- (c) Advancement of economic conditions of the depressed classes by starting industrial and agricultural schools.
- (d) Articulation of their grievances.

In keeping with these objectives, Dr. Ambedkar opened several schools and colleges. He set up four boarding houses in Bombay and other places for untouchable students. This was during the years 1925-30.

He published a number of journals, voicing the grievances of the untouchables and demanding remedies. Among such journals were (i) *Mooka Nayaka* in Marathi, fortnightly, 1920. (ii) *Bahishkrit Bharat* in Marathi, fortnightly, 1927. (iii) *Janata*, weekly, 1930.

He also founded several associations and parties. The Samaj Samata Sangh was instituted in 1927 to advocate social equality between the untouchables and the caste Hindus. The Independent Labour Party of India was founded in 1936 to get representation for the depressed classes in the elections of 1937. The All India Scheduled Castes Federation was established in 1942 as a political party. The Republican Party of India was organised after Dr. Ambedkar resigned from the Indian Cabinet in 1952. In the meantime, the People's Education Society had been founded in 1945. It established a number of colleges in the Bombay Presidency for the depressed classes.

A persistent demand which Dr. Ambedkar made for the depressed classes was the demand for political rights. He favoured a separate electorate for them. Mahatma Gandhi was opposed to this idea. He regarded it a divisive policy - separation of the depressed classes from the Hindu community. The British government however agreed with Dr. Ambedkar and issued in 1932 the well known Communal Award. Gandhiji opposed the Award and undertook a fast unto death to force the British to revoke the provision of a separate electorate for the depressed classes. The British did not care; but he and Dr. Ambedkar agreed upon a compromise vide the Poona Pact of 1932. The depressed classes got weightage with the reservation of 148 seats in the various provincial legislatures and 18 per cent of the general seats in the Central Legislature. Besides, funds were earmarked in the educational budgets of the government for the education of the depressed class students.

One of the constant appeals of Dr. Ambedkar to the Hindus was to abolish the entire caste system and reorganise their social structure. However, none listened, not even Gandhiji. The latter was certainly against untouchability and he wanted to get rid of it stock, lock and barrel. But he favoured the retention of the caste system with suitable modifications. He feared that there would ensue chaos and confusion in the country if the caste structure as such was done away with. It may be mentioned here that even Swami Vivekananda was against the total abolition of the caste system. After all, the system is so deep rooted and pervasive in our country that we have even Brahmin Christians, Kshatriya Christians, and so on, with practically all the caste practices and customs built into the life of the Christians in Goa.

Dr. Ambedkar wanted political influence for the depressed classes. He would not trust political leaders outside their section as capable of protecting their rights and promoting the welfare of these people, not even a leader of the stature of Gandhiji who did actually do so much for the upliftment of the untouchables. Dr. Ambedkar declared once, "I can never consent to deliver my people bound hand and feet to the

caste Hindus for generations to come." Probably he was right in the light of what has been done to the untouchables from time to time in certain parts of the north in independent India in the form of mass rape, murder and burning down of their dwellings.

Dr. Ambedkar was nominated a member of the Constituent Assembly of India by the Indian National Congress. He was elected Chairman of the drafting committee of the Constitution, taking into account his legal acumen. In this capacity he was responsible for including several of the provisions in the Constitution for protection of the rights of the depressed classes and promotion of their socio-economic well being. Article 15(2) provides for access to shops, public restaurants, hostels and places of public entertainment to all citizens. It also provides for the use of wells, tanks, bathing ghats, roads and places of public resort to all citizens without discrimination on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them. These provisions have given a mortal blow to the earlier practice of not allowing these facilities to the untouchables who could not enter a hotel or draw water from a public well. If these social disabilities are continued or imposed, the persons concerned could be legally punished. For, under Article 17, 'Untouchability' is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of 'Untouchability' is an offence punishable in accordance with law. Equality before the law or equal protection of the laws provided under Article 14 is applicable to the depressed classes. So also does apply the principle of equality of opportunity in matters relating to employment in government services provided for under Article 16 with the added provision that a certain percentage of vacancies would be reserved for the depressed classes.

Beggar and other forms of forced labour were commonly enforced on the untouchables in the past. Article 23 of the Constitution prohibits all kinds of forced labour. Similarly, Article 46 directs the State to promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the depressed classes and to protect the latter from social injustice and all forms of exploitation.

During the course of the six years since the adoption of the Constitution of India in 1950, Dr. Ambedkar (who died in 1956) was very much disheartened at the way the depressed classes suffered in spite of the provisions of the Constitution to protect their rights and promote their socio-economic welfare. The untouchables suffered as ever; they were exploited economically or otherwise as before. A large number of them remained poor and uneducated. Equality before the law, equal protection of the laws, and other rights are not properly implemented or exercised owing to the dominant caste Hindus who virtually refuse to help the depressed classes. On the contrary, they seem to search for ways and means to deprive the untouchables what is their due. Otherwise there is no explanation of the periodical mass murders, burning of huts, etc. of the untouchables.

Dr. Ambedkar became increasingly disillusioned with the Hindus and the Hindu society. He decided to change his religion along with his followers in large numbers. He had thought of Sikhism in 1935; but embraced Buddhism in 1956, a couple of months before his death, along with 3,00,000 of his followers among the depressed classes. Many more lakhs joined Buddhism since then.

Why did Dr. Ambedkar join Buddhism? Why did he not join Islam or Christianity? He did not join Islam because he did not want to strengthen Muslims vis-a-vis the Hindus. He did not join Christianity because it might strengthen the British.

He regarded the Buddha as his political 'guru'. Buddhism provided for liberty, equality and fraternity. Hinduism, however, had no regard for these principles. Hinduism perpetuated the principle of inequality interweaving it into the caste system, status of women, and so on.

Dr. Ambedkar was influenced by Mahatma Phule also. Both of them belonged to the class of untouchables and both of them were angry at the humiliation and denigration meted out to them by the high caste Hindus. Both of them therefore fought not only against untouchability but also against the entire caste system. To be sure others also had worked against the caste system and untouchability before them right from the days of the Buddha, and including the leaders of the Bhakti movement all over India; but unfortunately the institution of untouchability has survived. May be, it has lost much of its sharpness and rigidity; may be, it is blunted a little; but it is there and there is no indication of its total disappearance in a near future.

