

CASTE-BASED VIOLENCE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN SOCIETY: RELEVANCE OF ‘ANNIHILATION OF CASTE’

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ABSTRACT

B.R. Ambedkar is a political figure who have been a part of the anti-caste movement in India and whose ideas are still relevant today. His text “Annihilation of Caste” tried to present his thoughts about how caste is the resultant of social hierarchy in Hindu religion. The paper discusses the relevance of caste system in social and political interactions of contemporary India. With a few case studies of people who are the victims of still prevalent caste-based violence and became the examples of socio-political studies, the paper further supports the argument. Further, the paper analyses how caste is reproduced in India after its independence which was different from the traditional system of caste hierarchy. The paper also tries to delve into the possible reasons due to which the caste system is still prevalent despite the anti-caste movements and globalization. Moreover, it is significant to understand whether the people who have been the part of anti-caste movement of modern India are working towards the social reform or they have different personal goals behind it. Lastly the paper interprets the legacy of Ambedkar’s ‘Annihilation of Caste’ to understand how it can be applied and related to the present form of caste-based hierarchies and violence that leads thereafter.

Keywords- Annihilation of Caste, Contemporary India, Reservation, Legacy of Ambedkar

INTRODUCTION

‘Annihilation of Caste’ is probably the most renowned and predominant socio-political movement in India. Many political forces, especially since the Independence of India, 1947, have been part of the anti-caste movement. Among these forces, Ambedkar is one such political figure who is relevant even today. With his text, “Annihilation of Caste”, which was meant to be a speech but later turned into a book due to its controversial aspects, he tried to present his thoughts about how caste is the resultant of social hierarchy in Hindu religion. He criticised the Hindu religion, its text and argued how the religion is so male dominant and suppressive of women’s interests. He believed that annihilation of caste is not possible by just enabling inter-caste marriages, it can only be annihilated when the roots and notion of Hindu religion are destroyed. His legacy still lives on not only because of how impactful as a revolutionary he was but also because of how relevant his theories and texts on the anti-caste movement still are. In contemporary times, caste conflicts and social tensions and still very much alive and still a major source of human rights violation. It is important to note that caste still prevails in society because as addressed by Ambedkar, “*the ideas of caste is not a physical barrier, it is a state of mind. It requires a notional change to destroy caste. Hindus recognise caste not because they are inhuman or intolerant, Hindus recognise it because they are too religious.*”ⁱⁱ This could be a major reason why caste still prevails as a significant aspect of the Hindu religion because it is difficult for people to give up their religious notion.

This paper aims to analyse the caste-based violence and relevancy of BR Ambedkar’s “Annihilation of Caste” in contemporary India. “*The thoughts and opinions of Ambedkar as reflected in his writings and speeches are still relevant today.*”ⁱⁱⁱ This paper is going to interpret all those people who have accepted Ambedkar. However, whether they intend to spread the idea of anti-caste spirit, is the real question that arises.

CASTE SYSTEM PREVALENCE IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES

As it has been clear that caste still plays an important role in the political and social interactions of India. Although it can be argued that it is not as prominent as it was during Ambedkar time. The relationship between caste and hereditary in a social environment has become less

significant now, especially in urban areas.ⁱⁱⁱ however, it is also pertinent to note how the political relationships and social mobility in India have been highly affected due to the importance of caste status.

Reservation and Caste System

Reservation is a reaction to the caste system and not its replication. However, people have the notion that reservation strengthens the caste system and the only way of getting rid of the caste system is through eradicating reservation. However, reservation can also not be the permanent solution for eradicating the caste system but, it can temporarily protect the people who are being exploited by it. Moreover, most of the privileged caste people, who interfere and involve themselves to ensure that the reservation system is efficient, also fail to counter the caste system.^{iv} All it does shift the focus from casteism because only communities get affected by the reservation. In the long run, the reservation system can only help those who are under the scrutiny of reservation (SCs, STs, OBCs), but not those who are the part of entire Hindu population and struggling against the caste system still prevailing. Reservation should not be considered a weapon for the anti-caste movement because it is only availed to certain communities. A reservation only plays the role of a shield against the caste system, therefore, distinguishing between reservation and the idea of the anti-caste movement can be one step closer to the destruction of caste. If Ambedkar's "Annihilation of Caste" is interpreted, then people who are fighting against caste would understand that targeting reservation will not counter the casteism because the caste system reproduced reservation and not vice versa.

Case studies of caste-based violence in 21st century

The relevance of caste in modern India forced scholars to analyze and study the contours of the caste system especially after social and historical transformations in modern India. Some of them help in contextualizing the Dalit lives in postcolonial times. One such study is presented by Anupam Rao in "*Death of a Kotwal: The Violence of Recognition*" in the book 'The Caste and Question: Dalit and the politics of Modern India'. It is about a murder case of a *kotwal* named Ambadas Sawane where everyone *agreed* about one common point that he was murdered because he was Dalit. Justice Adharkar, in the judgement, addressed that it was a caste crime against Sawane. However, he focused the judgement on the fact that the crime was committed in retaliation for Sawane's attempts to install an Ambedkar statue in the village. He

said that it was drawing attention to how Dalit politicization had affected the context of caste sociality.^v

Her analysis of the caste atrocity was based on two arguments, “*First, the failure of justice derives not solely from the monumental problems of implementation, but also from the understanding of vulnerable personhood that drives exceptional laws, that is, from the fact that Dalit equality is set up to operate through legal exceptionalism. Second, we can best make sense of the violence surrounding this exceptional subject by addressing the displacements between law, politics, and everyday life that make a violent act, an atrocity, the occasion for further politicization.*”^{vi} Rao’s main emphasis was on political context and transformation of Dalit politics, and immortalizing violence that how violence becomes significant for Dalit politics. Despite the constitutional procedures that exist to control the disparities between Dalits and the upper caste population, the hostility rises by legal structures of recognition that emphasized the oppressive nature of caste interaction between victim and perpetrator making Dalit prone to future violence.

Furthermore, Anand Teltumde, another Indian scholar wrote a book called “*The Persistence of Caste: The Khairlanji Murders and India’s hidden apartheid*”. He uses the case of Khairlanji, a Dalit family of four members who were brutally murdered in 2006. Surekha Bhotmange and her daughter Priyanka were battered, paraded naked, raped several times by a Hindu mob. Surekha’s sons Roshan and Sudhir were also tortured and murdered while saving their mother and sister. Following this, Bhaiyalal Bhotmange. The case has been pending in Supreme Court since 2008 and convicts were held guilty in 2019. Teltumbde, in his book, aims to break the myth that caste does not matter anymore. He locates the said crime in the political economy of post-independent India as well as the global population and tries to redefine the existence of caste in the society. In one of the chapters called “*Atrocities by the state: Neoliberalism, Naxalism and Dalits*”, he explores how the state apparatus responsible for protecting Dalits from societal prejudice itself becomes a major perpetrator of caste crime.^{vii} He also argues that the administration might claim to be anti-caste by nature, or it may be dominated by OBCs or *brahmins*, the character of the administration will never change from being caste biased as he says is illustrated in the case of Khairlanji. He also argues that when Dalit’s conflict with higher castes or dominant castes, the police not only do not act sufficiently but also connive against the Dalits.^{viii}

The policies made by the people in power, in modern times, neglecting the caste oppression, reflect that no such discrimination against some communities would occur upon establishing these policies. However, during the implementation of such policies, it is witnessed that the policies and laws fall short of the expectations when cases like the Khairlanji massacre and Ambadas Sawane murder take place. It is like the question that Ambedkar asks while questioning socialists, “*whether socialists mind one class ill-treating and suppressing another class as a matter of system, as a matter of principle and thus allow tyranny and oppression to continue to divide one class from another.*”^{ix}

Social change and Reproduction of Caste after India’s Independence

It has been clear till now that rural Dalits still go through caste-based violence and on the other hand, upper-class Dalits make a stand about their everyday life as one with humiliation and discrimination instead of just simple social diversity or cultural differences. Although there is evidence to prove that caste-based violence and discrimination still exists, there also exists a lot of evidence to prove that the caste-based hierarchies, as well as economic dependency, have been lessened down over the years. However, despite this modern time secularization of caste, it continues to shape social inequality. The economic disparity between dominant caste and those who lie on the lower end of caste-based hierarchy shows the existence of caste and caste-based discrimination in contemporary times. On one hand, the people who belong to the lower end of the traditional hierarchy of caste are represented among the poor and marginalized. On the other hand, the people belonging to the higher end of the caste-based hierarchy tend to be benefitted financially and less likely to go through economic depressions.^x However, as Marxian or Weberian traditional theories suggest, economic deprivations or privileges will not disclose the realities of caste that is embedded in the Hindu population today.

WHY CASTE SYSTEM STILL PREVALENT IN THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY DESPITE THE ANTI-CASTE MOVEMENTS

It has been quite clear from above that Caste-system is still relevant in the 21st century. However, before understanding the role of Ambedkar’s “Annihilation of Caste” in modern time

caste and caste-based violence, it is important to first understand the reasons behind this prevalence.

The assumption that modernization will automatically abolish caste

The most interesting thing that caste shows is the fact that despite the political, economic and sociological evidence that suggest that the caste system weakened over the years, it has been reproduced in more complex ways now more than ever. Many scholars in their fieldwork noticed that capitalist development has made the traditional framework of agriculture production quite superfluous. However, this does not prove that the caste-based disparities have been dissolved because of this change in the process. In addition to this, the economic inequalities across all the caste groups imply that the escalation from the anti-caste movement has been quite further.^{xi} Their mere agrarian economic dependence has indeed been eliminated and, they are enabled to be a part of democratic political processes like equal citizens. Nonetheless, their entitlements over local resources have been restricted by the position they hold in the traditional, old system of caste hierarchy. Those belonging to the lower end when trying to fight over it and trying to claim over the common resources of the village. These resources have been in control of dominant caste groups and these contentions are not considered by these groups and it, often, leads to violence.

This concludes that the assumption or hypothesis that economic developments would turn the caste-based differences into class-based differences among citizens, is erroneous. It is pertinent to note that differences bring out *‘stereotypes and prejudices more actively when competition increases or intensifies in the economic or political fields become possible. With the growing participation of Dalits and OBC communities, competition in the domain of democratic politics has indeed become a reality for the erstwhile dominant groups. They had taken their power for granted and feel extremely resentful about the change and democratization.’*^{xii}

Hindu population, especially privileged castes still attached to the notions of the Hindu religion

Being a part of the anti-caste movement is not just exclusive to the castes that have been most affected by caste discrimination or caste-based violence. Everyone who falls under the category of Hindus, they are a part of the caste hierarchy. Therefore, if the caste has to be eliminated, the whole population of the Hindu religion ought to be part of the movement, whether

privileged castes or lower castes. There is one end of the caste hierarchy which are most oppressed, and the other end of the hierarchy is for the privileged castes, whose privilege is the fact that they are not exploited based on their caste identity. The privileged castes are instead, benefitted from this traditional system of caste hierarchy. Anupama Rao states, “*being from a privileged caste offers the “luxury” of ignorance of caste. Nobody who is a Hindu is free of caste. So how can the caste system, which has trapped the entire Hindu society in its divisive structure and rigid identities, be countered by Dalits alone? How can the caste system ever be annihilated without people at all levels of the caste hierarchy fighting hard against it?*”^{xiii}

When the abolition of the caste system is discussed, it is generally forgotten that if caste gets eliminated from the Hindu religion, the most affected community in the Hindu religion would be ‘*brahmins*’ or dominant caste groups. Considering that, it would be erroneous to assume that the dominant caste group would wish to be a part of the movement which can result in the loss of power that dominant caste groups possess.

LEGACY OF AMBEDKAR AND HIS TEXT ‘ANNIHILATION OF CASTE’

These are not the most ordinary times to analyze the caste system in the light of Ambedkar’s ‘Annihilation of Caste’. On one end, the country is under disturbance among young Dalits, murder of Rohit Vemula, for instance, and mass movement following that. On the other end, there are several Dalit leaders paying homage to traditionalist leaders. The caste prevailing in India around these times is quite complex and understated, which is quite different from the time in which Ambedkar and other scholars started anti-caste movements. On one hand, there are slogans of *Lal salaam* and *Jai Bhim* are being raised among youth and on the other hand, Ambedkar’s theories are being marginalized and mythologized.^{xiv} Many scholars, in contemporary times, have also argued that globalization and capitalism could be the cure of caste. Although it is a fact that in modern times there are signs of disregarding of *emancipatory thrust*^{xv}. There is no doubt that Ambedkar also had apprehensions and cautioned his followers to this effect. It is known that Ambedkar is rightfully called the chief architect of the constitution of India. However, the constitution was made amidst many corrections by pressures or compromises between the contending forces. Ambedkar himself presented some

of the limitations concerning the constitution. He says, “Indians today are governed by two ideologies. Their political ideal set in the preamble of the Constitution affirms a life of liberty, equality and fraternity whereas their social ideal embedded in their religion denies it to them.”^{xvi}

This is the limitation of the constitution that we still face today. In his other writing of ‘*States and Minorities: What are Their Rights and How to Secure them in the Constitution of Free India*’, he addresses that ‘state shall not recognize any religion as state religion’ and ‘state shall guarantee to every citizen liberty of conscience’.^{xvii} The type of India that we have before us, as quoted by Achin Vanaik, is where, “[t]he centre of gravity has shifted perhaps decisively to the right, in three crucial spheres: economy, secularism and democracy”^{xviii} Here, the centre is fixated on majoritarianism of Hindutva supremacy with an agenda of neo-liberalism and oversimplified idea of development. As a result, it seems to have a coordinated attack being unleashed on the minorities of backward sections of caste. Therefore, applying Ambedkar’s ideas in modern times the state shall not recognise any religion as ‘state religion’. The state shall be against any idea of majoritarianism, especially preventing the majority groups of caste from forming a type of government that resists minorities to have any kind of say in it. This could be one step closer to the annihilation of caste as caste is embedded in the Hindu religion and if it is a state religion, the caste becomes a significant part of the state.

There can be only one explanation behind the parallel growth of caste discrimination, caste-based violence in modern times where there are instances that prove that Ambedkar is the most prominent figure in terms of public acceptance. The explanation is that there exists one real Ambedkar and an unreal Ambedkar. The unreal is the one which is used by the Dalit masses with the consciousness of radical change replacing Ambedkar with Ambedkar’s icons. The icons which make him a symbol: the architect of the constitution, the defender of Dalits, great nationalist, etc. Here, it can be noticed that Ambedkar has become the prominent figure among the masses in a way that masses use his icons and as a symbol. The acceptance of this Ambedkar is not the same as spreading the spirit anti-caste movement. These icons of Ambedkar have overshadowed the face of possible radical change which was the view of Ambedkar.

CONCLUSION

It has been said by Ambedkar that to maintain social order, social reform is equally important. Social reform is even more important than political, economic and religious reform. It is important to understand that to achieve that social reform, the Hindu religion needs to be reconstructed. The hypothesis that capitalism or modernization would vanish caste automatically from the country is the reason why there are so many families that face caste-based atrocities or are oppressed in an understated way in their everyday lives. As also critiqued by Ambedkar that constitutional principles, even if made to establish equality, liberty and fraternity, would not be sufficient to eradicate the caste because it is reproduced by a religion that is still respected by the Hindu population. The evidence of this can be witnessed in the murder of *kotwal* 'Ambadas Sawane' where the justice only focused more on the fact that Sawane attempted to install an Ambedkar statue in the village than the crime committed based on caste. Although the caste in contemporary times is more understated and complex, because of which it is much different from how Ambedkar saw caste oppression during his time. However, it would not be wrong to contend that 'Annihilation of Caste' and especially, Ambedkar's apprehensions for the future are still very essential in these times, to have a point of view for a radical change.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Ambedkar BR, *Annihilation of Caste*, India, p.68.

ⁱⁱ *Id.* at p.xiii

ⁱⁱⁱ Sekhon Joti, *Modern India* (McGraw-Hill 2000)

^{iv} Sateesh V. Jyoti, '*Annihilation of Caste: the force behind dalit movement*', 5 IJCRT 4, (2017)

<https://www.ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT1807497.pdf>

^v Rao A, "Death of a Kotwal: The Violence of Recognition," *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*, 241-264, (2009).

^{vi} *Id.*, at 242.

^{vii} Anand Teltumbde, *The Persistence of Caste: The Khairlanji Massacres and India's Hidden Apartheid* (London and New York: Zed Books) (2010).

^{viii} *Id.*

^{ix} Ambedkar, *supra* note 1, at 46

^x Surendra Jodhka, *Ascriptive hierarchies: Caste and its reproduction in contemporary India*, 1 *Curr. Sociol.* 11, (2015)

^{xi} *Id.*

^{xii} *Id.* at 11.

^{xiii} Jyoti, *supra* note 4.

^{xiv} Subash Gatade, *DALIT VISION FOR OUR TIMES: For a New Rendezvous with Dr. Ambedkar*, 43 *IIC Quarterly* 70, (2016).

^{xv} *Id.*

^{xvi} Keer D, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission* (Popular Prakashan 1990)

^{xvii} Ambedkar BR, *States and Minorities: What are Their Rights and how to Secure Them in the Constitution of Free India* (1947)

^{xviii} Gatade, *supra* note 14, at 81.

