

Contemporary Relevance of Dr. Ambedkar's Perspective for the Upliftment of the Rural Poor

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The present paper is aimed to analyse the contemporary relevance of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's perspective for the upliftment of rural poor in Indian society. The paper is divided into three parts. The first part delineates Dr. Ambedkar's views on caste system. In second part, Dr. Ambedkar's views on economic Reforms are discussed. Finally, contemporary relevance of Dr. Ambedkar's perspective for the development of rural poor are discussed.

DR. AMBEDKAR'S VIEWS ON CASTE SYSTEM

Dr. Ambedkar was very critical of Hindu caste system and he advocated for the abolition of caste and sub-caste from the Indian society as it had been solely responsible for the under-development of a large section of the population in India and is the root cause of the problems like untouchability and poverty (Ambedkar, 1946; 1948). He expressed his views on caste and caste system in a number of his writings and speeches. But one of his best works on caste systems is considered his speech which was originally prepared for the 1936 conference of *Jat-Pat Todak Mandal* of Lahore, but not delivered owing to the cancellation of the conference by the Reception Committee on the ground that the views expressed in the speech would be unbearable to the conference (Chanchreek & Prasad, 1991 : 23). Later on this speech was published in a book form for wide circulation.

In this work Ambedkar criticised the defenders of caste who defended it on the ground that the caste system is but another name for division of labour and if division of labour is a necessary feature of every civilised society then it is argued that there is nothing wrong in the caste system. In Ambedkar's views, caste system is not merely division of labour but it is also a *division of labourers*. It is not merely unnatural division of labourers into water tight compartments which is quite different from other forms of division of labour, it is an hierarchy in which the labourers are graded one above the other. Moreover, this division of labour is not spontaneous, it is not based on natural aptitudes. As a form of division of labour the caste system suffers from another serious defect. The division of labour brought about by the caste system is not a division of labour based on choice. Individual sentiments and individual preference have no place in it. It is based on the dogma of predestination.

Thus, as an economic organisation caste is a harmful institution, in as much as it involves the subordination of man's natural powers and inclinations to the exigencies of social rules (Ambedkar, 1991 : 36).

He also examined biological trench given in the defence of the caste system. It is said that the object of caste was to preserve purity of race and purity of blood. In his view, the caste system cannot be said to have given as a means of preventing the admixture of races or as a means of maintaining purity of blood. In fact, caste system does not demarcate racial division. Caste system is a social division of people of the same race. He also refuted the argument that the caste system was in accord with the basic principle of eugenics. To argue, the caste system was eugenic in its conception is to attribute to the forefathers of present day Hindus a knowledge of heredity which even the modern scientists do not possess. Thus, it is a social system which embodies the arrogance and selfishness of a perverse section of the Hindus who were superior enough in social status to set it in fashion and who had authority to force it on their inferiors (Ambedkar 1991 : 38-39).

In his view, "Caste does not result in economic efficiency. Caste can not and has not improved the race. Caste has, however, done one thing. It has completely disorganised and demoralised the Hindus"(Ambedkar 1991 : 39). In fact, the concept of Hindu society is a myth. Hindu society as such does not exist. It is only a collection of castes. There is an utter lack among the Hindus of what is called "consciousness of kind". There is no Hindu consciousness of kind. In every Hindu the consciousness that exist is the consciousness of his castes, that is the reason why Hindus can not be said to form a society or a nation. To form a society it is necessary for a man to share and participate in a common activity so that the same emotions are aroused in him that animate the other. Making the individual a share or partner in the associated activity so that he feels its success as his success, its failure as his failure is the real thing that binds men and makes a society of them. But on the contrary, the caste system prevents common activity and by preventing common activity it has prevented the Hindus from becoming a society with a unified life and a consciousness of its own being (Ambedkar 1991 : 40)

In his view, the economic disabilities of the untouchables were originated from the laws of *Manu Smriti* which restricted equality of opportunity for a large section of Indian society and transformed the Indian social system into a closed system in which mobility in social, economic and political spheres was highly restricted. Therefore, the first and foremost idea that came to Ambedkar's mind was the abolition of caste. He examined the suggestions already forwarded by others and refuted the idea of abolition of sub-castes for abolishing castes because instead of abolishing castes it may turn castes into more powerful and mischievous (Ambedkar 1944 : 96). He also refuted the strategy of allowing inter-dining for abolition of castes because, according to him, "there are many castes which allow inter-dining. But it is a common experience that inter-dining has not succeeded in killing the spirit of castes and the consciousness of Castes" (Ambedkar 1944 : 57). But he strongly advocated the idea of inter-marriage to abolish castes. In his view, the real

remedy for the breaking of the caste is inter-marriage. Inter-dining could only supplement it. But it was very difficult to attain this goal because inter-dining and inter-marriage are repugnant to the belief and dogmas which the Hindus regard sacred. Therefore, the real problem lies in the religion rather than in the caste.

Thus, in Ambedkar's view the caste system and religious sanctions of the Hinduism are mainly responsible for the evil of untouchability. In order to eradicate it, mere abolition of sub-castes is not sufficient, even inter-dining may not resolve this problem. The only solution of this problem is inter-caste marriages. But he was also aware that religious ideology supports caste system. Therefore, he rejected shastras (religious books) which gave sanction to the evil of caste and untouchability and suggested that these must be destroyed.

Ambedkar was very much aware about the fact that since the high caste Hindus had nothing to gain but much to lose by the abolition of caste and untouchability, his reforms related to caste system would not be supported by these section of the society. Therefore, after very careful consideration he adopted an alternative strategy for the upliftment of the poor section of the society. He said that "the depressed classes think that the surest way to their elevation lies in higher employment and better ways of earning a living. Once they become well placed in the scheme of social life, they would become respectable, the religious outlook of the orthodox is sure to undergo change and if this did not happen it could do no injury to their material interests" (Ambedkar 1945 : 110). He suggested a threefold scheme of reforms at social, economic and political levels.

At the social levels, he considered *education, organisation and agitation* as three main tools for the social upliftment of the depressed classes and used these words as a slogan of his movement.

The importance of education was very much relied by Ambedkar. He was aware about the fact that the education may only serve as a means of achieving social justice if it is applied to the lower strata of the Indian society. It would raise their spirit of rebellion. And once their eyes were opened they would be ready to fight the caste system. Therefore, he emphasised on education at a large scale in favour of the depressed classes.

Apart from his emphasis on education, he equally stressed upon the organisation of these classes to agitate against the social evils of caste system and untouchability.

Thus, Ambedkar was very clear in his perspective on caste system and his emphasis on spread of education among the depressed classes was aimed to bring social change at the ideological level. In other words, his strategy was of modernising the society through modern education.

AMBEDKAR'S VIEWS ON ECONOMIC REFORMS

Ambedkar's scheme of economic reforms includes his ideas on small land holdings, rural industrialization and his conception of state socialism. In his view, the loss of economic power created a situation of helplessness for these castes against the twice-born castes of Hindu social system and their exploitation at every level pushed them back to the status of downtrodden class. Therefore, the gain of economic power is essential condition for the progress of the under-privileged classes of the society (Ambedkar 1946 : 45-51). He visualised better prospects for untouchables when they become economically better off with adequate political power in their hands.

Ambedkar considered farming as the most important industry of India. He had written a paper entitled " Small Holdings In India and their Remedies" (Ambedkar 1998). In this paper, he examined the problem of small land holdings in India and their remedies. The major problem in this regard was that out of the vastness of land under tillage, so little land was cultivated in proportion to India's population. Thus, a large part of agricultural population was idle, superfluous and exerted a great pressure on land. This pressure was the chief cause of the sub-division of land resulting in small holding and the accruing inefficiency of Indian agriculture. Another factor responsible for this feature was the laws of inheritance amongst the Hindus and Muslims.

He emphasized on the need of industrialization of India and he considered it as a universal remedy for the economic ill of the depressed classes. In his own words, "If we succeed in spurring off the idle labour in non-agricultural channels of production, we will at one stroke lessen the pressure and destroy the premium that at present weighs heavily on land in India. Besides, this labour when productively employed will cease to live by predation as it does today, and not only earn its keep but will give us surplus and more surplus is more capital. In short, strange though it may seem, industrilization of India is the soundest remedy for the agricultural problems of India and also, it is evident of the untouchable landless labourers" (Ambedker 1918 : 19). His argument for the industrialisation of India was perhaps influenced by convergence theory of development which claims that "the process of Industrialization produces common and uniform political, social and cultural characteristics in societies which prior to industrialization, may have different historical backgrounds and social structures" (Nicholas et el. 1984 : 53).

Ambedkar advocated for the ideal of state socialism in order to achieve the goal of industrialization. His firm belief was that only state socialism rather than private enterprise could ensure rapid industrialization of India. He was not very hopeful about the results of tenancy legislation or consolidation of holdings because most of the untouchables were landless labourers. Therefore, the land reforms would be more beneficial for the upper and middle order of castes while depressed classes would remain downtrodden. He had drawn a complete plan of the type of state socialism he desired for India and incorporated it in the memorandum, he submitted to the Constituent Assembly in 1947

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(Ambedkar 1947 : 14-16). Some of the salient features of this plan were as follows: (i) that both key industries and basic industries shall be owned and run by the state or by corporations established by the state; (ii) that the agriculture shall be a state industry, (iii) that state insurance shall be a monopoly of the state and the state shall compel every adult citizen to take out a life insurance policy commensurate with his wages as may be prescribed by the legislature, (iv) that state shall acquire the subsisting rights in such industries, insurance and agricultural land held by private individuals, whether as owners, tenants and mortgages and pay them compensation in the form of debentures equal to the value of his or her right in the land (v) agricultural industry shall be organised on the following line in Ambedkar's scheme: (a) The state shall divide the land acquired into forms of standard size and let out farms for cultivation to the residents of the village as tenants to cultivate on certain conditions such as - (i) the farm shall be cultivated as a collection farm; (ii) the farm shall be cultivated in accordance with rules and directions issued by Government, (iii) the tenants shall share among themselves in the manner prescribed the produce of the farm left after the payment of charges properly leviable on the farm; (b) The land shall be let out to villagers without distinction of caste or creed and in such manner that there will be no landlord, no tenant and landless labourer; (c) It shall be the obligation of the state to finance the cultivation of the collective farms by the supply of water, draft animals, implements, manure, seeds etc. (d) The state shall be entitled to levy the following charges on the produce of the farm; (i) a portion for land revenue; (ii) a portion to pay the debenture-holders; (iii) a portion to pay for the use of capital goods supplied; and (iv) to prescribe penalties against tenants who break the conditions of tenancy or willfully neglect to make the best use of the means of cultivation offered by the state or otherwise act prejudicially to the scheme of collective farming.

CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF DR. AMBEDKAR'S PERSPECTIVE

Dr. Ambedkar's perspective has a great relevance for the upliftment of poor sections in contemporary Indian society. In the foregoing sections, it has been delineated that Ambedkar had foreseen that the caste system is not only the root cause of social evils like untouchability, but it also restricts mobility in other spheres of life. Therefore, for the upliftment of the poor classes, education shall play the role of modernizing agent. by means of organization and agitation they have to generate class-consciousness among them. Because the new social order will be based on class system.

At the economic level, he emphasized on rapid industrialization of Indian society which has its own bearings on the traditional social structure. As a result of industrialization, the caste forces may be weakened in Indian society and it may provide a passage for the class based society, an open social system in which mobility at individual level would be possible through personal attainments rather than ascriptive criteria. Ambedkar was also aware about the evils of capitalism. Therefore, he suggested that the key and basic

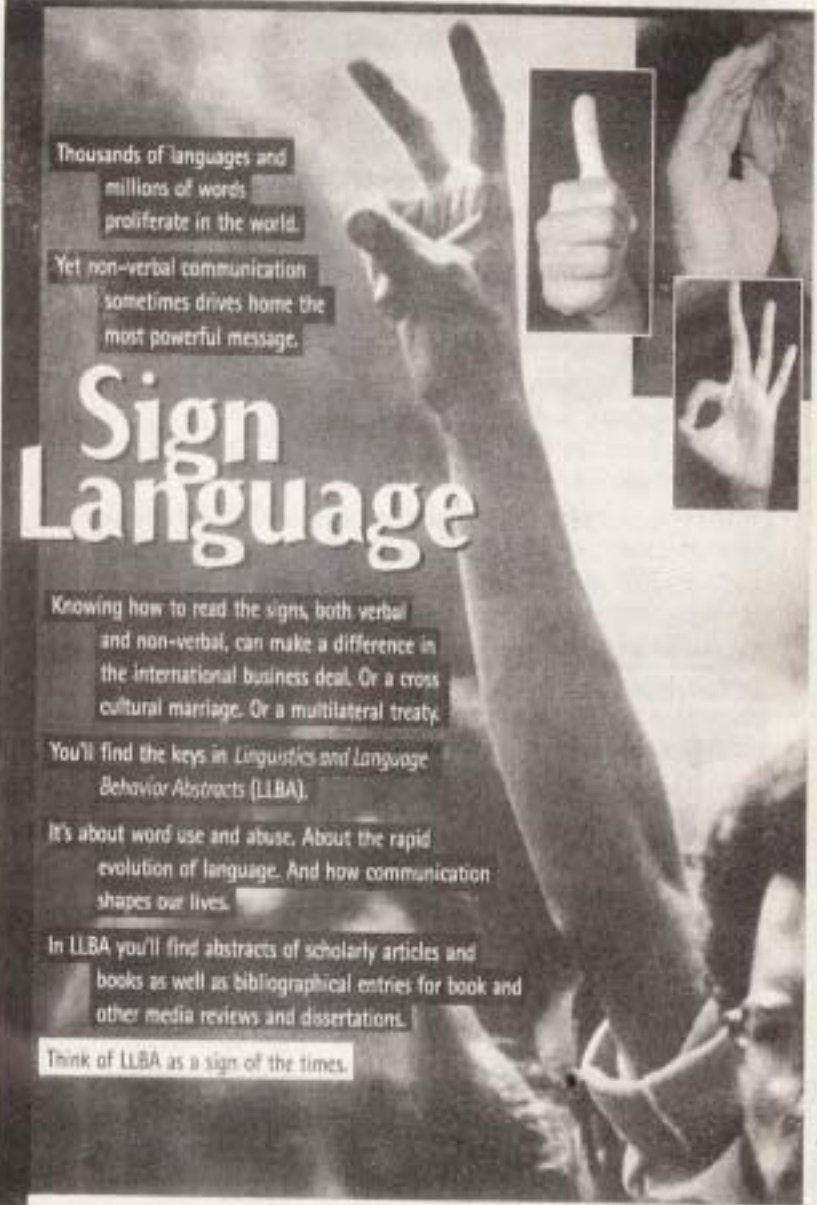
industries and agricultural farming on acquired land should be under control of the state because in private sectors, the upper castes will again exploit the depressed classes.

His perspective on these issues is in coherence with the recent developments in the sociological theory of development. The development theories of nineteenth century and early twentieth century relied more on convergence theory which was based on the experiences of development process in the Europe and other Western societies where rapid industrialization was accompanied by smooth transformation of the traditional social structure into dynamic modern social structure. But the experience of the present day 'Third World' countries compelled the development theorists to modify their view point. In developing societies, traditional social structure is proved to be very powerful as it has a very close association with religion. It creates hindrances in the process of social change at ideological level. Therefore, modernization of traditional values and belief system seems to be a pre-requisite of the process of social change in these societies. Moreover, the process of industrialization is also very slow in want of financial resources and modern technology. Therefore, the impact of industrialization is very limited i.e., only upto the urban centres where caste ties have been weakened to some extent. These theoretical elements were already present in Ambedkar's thoughts. Unfortunately, our strategy of development after independence has been a victim of adhocism (Maithani and Singh 1987; Singh 1985). We have not made any serious attempt to modernise our rural population, particularly the weaker section through massive programme of education which could have been the first and foremost task after independence (Singh : 19994). Even after about five decades our half of the population is illiterate. Naturally, most of the illiterate persons would be from the depressed classes. Without rational and scientific education the cultural backwardness and vicious circles of caste system cannot be broken down. Moreover, our rural development plans hardly made any serious effort for rapid industrialization particularly the development of agro-based industries in the rural areas. The industrial development in India has been confined merely to urban centres and has a very negligible impact on the rural society. The programmes like Integrated Rural Development Programme and Jawahar Rojgar Yojna not only fell through to eradicate the poverty from rural areas but also led towards corruption and cynicism (Singh 1994 : 14).

The new economic policy which over emphasizes on the processes of Globalization, Liberalisation and Privatisation, is not at all in coherence with the perspective of Dr. Ambedkar who laid emphasis on state intervention both in agricultural and industrial sectors of Indian society. The fruits of the capitalist development in near future will have to be extracted by big industrialists in collaboration with the multi-national companies of the developed world. The depressed classes both in rural and urban areas have to face very serious problems in near future in the form of poverty, and unemployment. It suggests that there is a need to reformulate the development policy in the light of the perspective of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and other modern thinkers.

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