

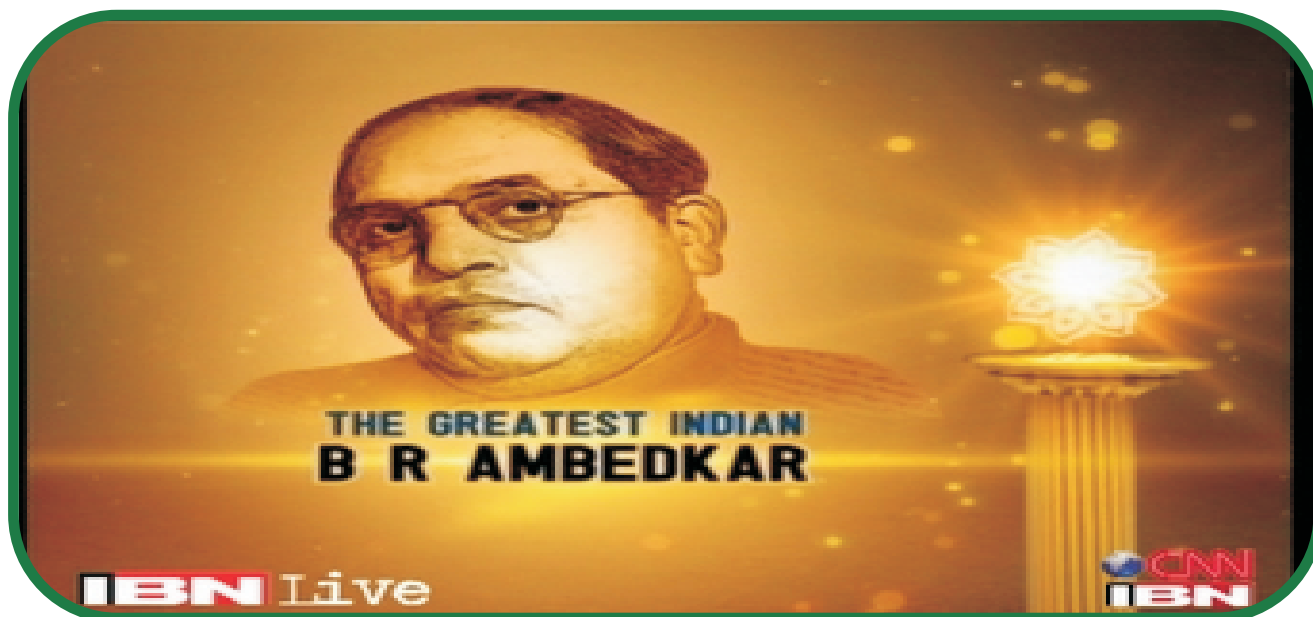
A CRITIQUE ON THE HISTORICAL WORKS OF AMBEDKAR

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Abstract:-

Ambedkar was a learned scholar, an astute political statesman and a revolutionary social reformer who had written on varied issues concerning economy, history, society, polity, law, dalits, women and on education. One would see a gradual transformation in his writings with ever increasing involvement and confrontations that he had with his adversaries. From attempting to change the heart of the caste Hindus to the destruction of the sanctity behind the shastras, Ambedkar's writings shaped the character and mind



of the society that he lived in. The paper attempts to explore this transition in his writings and the reason for this transformation.

Keywords:

Ambedkar, Mahad tank, Kalaram temple, Untouchability, Caste, Yeola declaration, Round table conference, Shastras, Hinduism, Buddhism, Brahmanism, Shudras, Varnas.

INTRODUCTION :-

Ambedkar's writings are an offshoot of his lifelong struggle and in-depth understanding of the Indian social maladies. His writings are hence derived from the combination of his mind and heart. His reflections are addressed from deep down the bottom of his heart. Hence, the writings such as this one and its historiography are more apt for study on account of its relevance. It is relevant in the context of the movement that he led and in the context of India's socio-political dynamics.

Ambedkar's most heartfelt feeling was "a leader without a paper is like a bird without wings."¹ Ambedkar was greatly in need of a popular medium to convey effectively the strength of his lifelong learning. He seems to have realized that his learning should reach broadly three kinds of readers. 1) Those who read through scholarly pursuit. 2) For the upper caste people to offer an opportunity to understand in the right perspective the various malice haunting India – a nation in the making. 3) Solely for the exploited lower castes for the purpose of creating an awareness so as to invigorate their energies to swim across the tide of challenges confronting them.

Ambedkar found the necessity to answer all the three target groups. For the purpose of dealing with the intellectual class he ensued a debate through journals and by the publication of research articles and books. For the purpose of reaching out to the common man, be it the upper classes or the depressed classes, he choose the most common medium – the newspapers, both in Marathi and in English in order to bring to bare the ongoing debates related to his countrymen.

Ambedkar being a scholar, an astute political statesman and a social reformer leading a movement shows gradual transformation in his writings with ever increasing involvement and confrontation that he had with his adversaries. Naturally his writings were shaped in the context of his dreadful personal experience since childhood and in the background of every socio-political conflict that raged between him and the society.

Ambedkar's early attempts in public life were oriented more towards social reform, intended, to convince the caste Hindus for a change of heart with regard to the practice of Untouchability. He endeavoured to make them realize of their wrong doings. This was followed by an assertion of the constitutional rights of the depressed classes by heading an activist movement like using the water of the Mahad Tank and entering the Kalam Temple. Movements such as this one, only provided opportunity to organize and educate the oppressed classes of the society, for it had not brought any necessary impact or change on the people of the upper caste groups. This also provided an opportunity of display, where he successfully established before the world that his community was treated worse than the animals by denying them even the basic necessities of life, both material and spiritual.

In all the essays of Ambedkar written in the period between 1916 and 1948, there is a gradual transition in the ideas expressed by him. In his first ever-major research, he investigates into the nature and structure of the Hindu society. But here he stops merely with the analysis of the technicalities involved in the super imposition of endogamy on exogamy resulting in the formation of caste. His early writings thus dealt more with the explanations concerning the technical and theoretical aspects involved in the construction of society and of Untouchability as it existed today. This is very clearly represented in his paper that he read at the Columbia University in 1916, entitled '*Castes in India their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*'. In this he declared that caste is the result of "superposition of endogamy on exogamy."² Then he goes to examine the origin of the Mechanism of endogamy, where the problem of caste, is ultimately resolved into one of repairing the disparity between the marriageable units of the two sexes leading to the problem of surplus man and surplus women. Finally he says, to preserve endogamy, sati, enforced widowhood, girl marriage and sanyasa were primarily intended to solve the problem of the surplus man and surplus woman in a caste.

The next important work of Ambedkar was the '*Annihilation of caste*', a presidential address meant to be delivered before the audience in 1936. After 1930's and the Round Table Conferences, Ambedkar had switched on from attempting to convince the caste Hindus for a change of heart, to that of political activism as a means of ameliorating the exploited class. In fact by 1935 he had openly vindicated his stand of continuing to be a Hindu by declaring not to die a Hindu.³ This polemic is well established in his writings, which he undertook after the Yeola Declaration in Nasik. As his confrontation with his contemporaries in particular with Gandhi raged new height, with new twists and turns in political expediencies, Ambedkar began a strong polemical attack on caste and theorized a scheme to annihilate it, which was in fact brought about in his essay on *Annihilation of Caste* in 1936. Ambedkar here says, that the real method of breaking caste system was not by organizing inter-caste marriages and inter-caste dinners but rather by destroying the religious notions on which caste was founded.⁴ He had concluded that it was religion that had compelled the Hindus to treat isolation and segregation of castes as a virtue.⁵ Hindus observed caste not because they were inhuman. They happened to observe caste because they were deeply religious. Therefore what was wrong in their religion was that it had inculcated in them this notion of caste. He thereby concluded that it is the sanctity behind the Shastras that need to be destroyed. "People will not change their conduct until they cease to believe in the

sanctity of the Shastras,"⁶ he affirmed.

So his writings brought to bare during those crucial years of political reform, that in the making of a constitution, they could not ignore the "problem arising out of the prevailing social order."⁷ It is here that he describes that caste system as not merely division of labour, but as also to mean a division of labourers. He takes great care to expose the fact that caste system is inconsistent with social organization, as it is with economic efficiency. Therefore, he intends to conclude that there was a need to change the social order of the Hindus and for him change could not be accomplished without the destruction of the Shastras was very well proved here. Having learnt that to a fallen humanity no amount of sense of duty could enable him to overcome his duty to preserve his caste, he turns his attention towards reconstruction of society but without failing to point the inconsistencies in the existing system.

Although Ambedkar's obsession with reconstruction of society was not a new one, as could be seen from his essay on *Mr. Russell and the Reconstruction of society*, 1918. Ambedkar during the mid 1930s, in fact makes a brief mention of the necessity of "reorganization and reconstruction of the Hindu society."⁸ This was increasingly brought about into a theoretical form, later on. In order to resurrect a new scheme of organization, it was essential for him to deconstruct the Historical past of India. This he did very efficiently in his essays on the *Philosophy of Hinduism*, *The Hindu social order: Its Essential principles*, *The Hindu social order: Its unique Features*, *Symbol of Hinduism*, *Ancient India on Exhumation*, *Reformers and their Fate*, *The Decline and Fall of Buddhism*, *Literature of Brahmanism*, *The Triumph of Brahmanism*, *The morals of the House*, *Brahmins versus Kshatriyas*, *Shudras and the counter-Revolution*, *The woman and the counter-revolution and finally in his work on The Riddles in Hinduism*.

The 'philosophy of Hinduism' and 'Riddles in Hinduism', expose the sunken phase of India under the hegemony of Brahmanism, thereby challenging the ploy of the Brahmins to perpetuate degeneration on the one hand, and to expose the calumny of the Brahmanic conspiracy on the other.

By 1940's Ambedkar's attempt to deconstruct the past seemed complete, so during mid 1940s he endeavoured to resurrect a past that would secure a place of pride to the hitherto ignoble past of the Untouchables and the Shudras. In his work *who were the Shudras?* Which was published in 1946, Ambedkar begins the process of reconstructing the edifice of the Shudras. As he himself says, "You cannot renovate a dilapidated house; you have to bring it down all together before it could be reconstructed."⁹ So up to 1940 his purpose of deconstructing the Hindu society was fully achieved. So logically now he had began the reconstruction of its history – The history of the Untouchables and of the Shudras.

In his work 'who were the Shudras' he explicitly goes to prove that:

1. The Shudras were one of the Aryan communities of the solar race.
 2. There was a time when the Aryan society recognized only three Varna's, namely, Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas.
 3. The Shudras did not form a separate Varna. They ranked as part of the Kshatriya Varna in the Indo-Aryan society.
 4. There was a continuous feud between the Shudra kings and the Brahmins in which the Brahmin were subjected to many tyrannies and indignities.
 5. As a result of the hatred towards the Shudras generated by their tyrannies and oppressions, the Brahmins refused to perform the Upanayana of the Shudras.
 6. Owing to the denial of Upanayana, the Shudras who were Kshatriyas became socially degraded, fell below the rank of the Vaishyas and thus came to form the forth varna.¹⁰
- These explanations in fact give a pre-eminent status to the Shudras on account of tracing their origin to the Kshatriya Varna.

Furthermore, Ambedkar in his work, *The Untouchables: Who were they and why they became Untouchables?* seems to be even more interested, in tracing the origin of the Untouchables and in the narration of the facts, which made them Untouchables. In both these works Ambedkar is trying to reconstruct a history that was hitherto despised by the Shudras and the Untouchables of not being worthy of recollection, to the one that could be securely and certainly be claimed with pride.

Ambedkar further firstly rejects the much-accepted view of Stanley Rice that the origin of Untouchability was to be found in Race and occupation. According to the racial theory of Rice, the Untouchables were non-Aryan; non-Dravidian aboriginal and that they were conquered and subjugated by the Dravidians.¹¹ By accepting racial differentiation Ambedkar should have felt that it would weaken his claim of justful association with the rest of the people of India and of representation in the social and political movement that he had programmed.

Therefore it was now for him to prove that the Untouchables were of the same race as the other people of India and that historically they had been unjustly deprived of needful opportunities by means of socio-political injunctions whereby they were reduced to the status of untouchables. Therefore now it was for

him to set right the wrongs of the past ages by bringing to bear modern democratic principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. It was also the time for him to dispel the fear among Untouchables of having an ignominious past.

The magnum opus, *'Who were the Shudras?'* and *'The Untouchables'* were also intended together with enlightening the masses, to prove the extent to which damage was caused by adhering to false ideals of society. He makes use of these expositions to say how, hereditary Untouchability had affected 50-60 millions of people which was unparalleled by reason of its colossal numbers which even exceeded the population of a great many nations in Asia as well as in Europe.¹² During the 1940's his writings are seen with much exertions in appealing to the untouchables to rise to the occasion of India gaining political freedom, to resolve themselves for a concerted action in order to liberate themselves. Here he explicitly describes the reason behind writing these works were to enlighten the ignorant and uninformed Shudras and Untouchables, who did not know the cause for what they were today. So he appeals to them to make a full harvest of the material in checking the communal advances of the caste Hindus. This also meant that for all their exploitations the untouchables were subjected to over the years they will have to be given a rightful share. Even from the point of view of their numerical strength this meant that they no longer could be ignored. So his call was for the establishment of a right order based on liberty, equality and fraternity.

Ambedkar knew, fully well, that the responsibility of the intellectual class was, to foresee, to advice and give a lead to the society. Having fully recognized this responsibility it is with great sincerity of purpose that he goes to perform his duty as a historian. The first important thing that Ambedkar does was to cast of the burden of history. Not many were able to do this miracle. Not even great historians of repute like Will Durant, Spengler and Toynbee were able to do it. Even when this was done, it was only to a limited extent. This 'Burden of History' meant two important things:

- 1) The untouchables having a hoary past with a history they didn't want to recollect, they were in a state of amnesia, but bearing burden of the brunt of caste Hindus.
- 2) To transfer the past to the present by a series of reconstruction to be utilized as a source of strength, to mould the future prospects of the country.

To shake the burden of a hoary past was an undaunting task for which he utilized all his skill and scholarship to recast a new identity, a new history projecting their honour for future posterity.

For this specific purpose Ambedkar makes use of all the literary sources concerning the ancient period to prove his credentials and to substantiate his argument. He makes use of the Vedas, the Manu Smriti, Gita, Vedanta sutras, Mahabharata, Ramayana and the Puranas to build his argument. It is not without sufficient reason that he uses these sources. For primarily these were the only sources that many leaders of India like Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Gokhale, Tilak, Aurobindo, Savarkar, Gandhi and a host of other luminaries, had utilized to glorify the ancient history, religion and culture of India in their negation of the attack leveled against them by European Missionaries and scholars. Their attempts at glorifying the past was assisted by the interpretations given by Nationalist Historians of the day like R.G. Bhandarkar, G.S. Sardesai, J.N. Sarkar, S.K. Iyengar, R.C. Majumdar, K.A. Nilakanta Sastri etc. So it was imperative for Ambedkar to use the same resources to describe the past as quite something different from the image the nationalist historians had constructed and construed to be. For Ambedkar the ancient and distant past of India after the establishment of the Mauryan Empire was a "period of defeat and darkness. This was the period when Chaturvarnya flourished to the damnation of the greater part of the people of the country."¹³

From the point of view of the masses also it was important to construct analogy from the past literature because, it was to these past literatures that they owed all their actions to. Whether it was with regard to the practice of Untouchability or the Chaturvarnya system, the acts of the people were merely the result of their beliefs in the sanctity of the Shastras. So, for the destruction of the belief in the Shastras, the sacredness of the Shastras had to be destroyed.

This Ambedkar was able to establish by his exposition and re-narration of past historical events. He knew, what mattered most was how the people had understood the Shastras. He advocated the people through his writings, to adopt the stand taken by Buddha. For he said, you must not only discard the Shastras, you must have courage to tell the Hindus, what is wrong with them and their religion – the religion, which has produced in them this notion of the sacredness of caste.¹⁴ He showed how through the manufacture and adoption of Puranas and Shastras the Brahmins used to "befool, beguile and swindle the common mass of poor illiterate and superstitious Hindus."¹⁵

It is in this context that the statement made by Sir John Dewey to whom Ambedkar owed so much, becomes relevant. Speaking of the past Dewey had said: "The study of the past will not help us to understand the present. Knowledge of the past and its heritage is of great significance when it enters into the present, but not otherwise."¹⁶

It is to this importance that Ambedkar had suitably served his teacher, by transforming and transferring the knowledge of the past to suit the present with at most dexterity. In this Ambedkar was greatly impelled by polemical motives as is clearly visible in the ultimate analysis. For Ambedkar, Buddhism was an indispensable tool for re-constructing the history of ancient India, which the Brahmins had systematically tried to mystify. Buddhism in fact he says, attempted to bring about a total revolution in India on humanistic lines. It attempted to do nothing less than uproot the Brahmanical system and its caste hierarchy and male dominance. Ambedkar's strategy in appropriating history was to give his vision and theory a credibility to upsurge the masses for a radical restructuring of Indian society. His scholarships enabled him to conceptualize his ideal and his vision and eventually convert them into a pragmatic political agenda. There is no parallel to him in this extra-ordinary fusion of scholar-intellectual and political activist. Not even Gandhi could be a match to Ambedkar in this regard. For "no matter how much we may now intellectualize and re-interpret Gandhi as a theoretical resource, it remains a fact that Gandhi had neither the time nor inclination to engage in an explicitly intellectual-theoretical work. Today's social science being engaged in the philosophical debate of subjectivity and objectivity, Ambedkar's writings provide a septum of truth in weaving both subjectivity and objectivity in the writing of history.

CONCLUSION:

The efforts of Ambedkar were received with great satisfaction by the Untouchables while it was time for them to gear up their self-esteem, which they had hitherto spent in a life of shame. A time had come for them to revitalize themselves and of their claim to a proper share in every aspect of evolutionary developments that was engulfing the country.

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