Understanding the Indian Caste System: Ambedkar's Perspective

Dr. Manu Kumar

ITEP (Pol. Sci.) Teacher, Deptt of Education, MDU Rohtak

mamtadevi.polsc@mdurohtak.ac.in

Dr. Mamta Devi

Assistant Professor, Deptt of Political Science, MDU Rohtak

manukhanna8282@gmail.com

Abstract

According to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the Indian caste system is an oppressive, hierarchical, and inflexible social structure that stems from inequalities. He said that caste was more than just a division of work; it was a division of labourers in which movement was restricted and social rank was determined by birth. Ambedkar said in his landmark book Annihilation of Caste that caste undermined democracy, fraternity, and social cohesion by imposing graduated inequality, in which each caste denigrated those under it. He vehemently condemned Hindu holy books, particularly the Manusmriti, for endorsing untouchability and caste discrimination. Ambedkar felt that caste's theological and ideological underpinnings had to be destroyed in order to accomplish social revolution. He promoted logic, intercaste marriage, education, and legal protections as means of eradicating caste. In the end, Ambedkar believed that caste was incompatible with contemporary ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity and that its abolition was necessary for India to achieve real social justice and democracy.

Keywords: Manusmriti, Varna, Aryans, Kulam, Gotra-System

Introduction

We intend to analyse and illustrate the philosophical and theological viewpoints of the Indian caste system in this sequel. The Hindu religion created the Indian caste system. We must thus address the Indian caste system in relation to Hinduism in order to comprehend its intellectual and theological viewpoint. The word "Hindu" comes from the ancient river Sindhu.

The Vedas are said to be the source of modern Hinduism. The rain god Indra claimed to be the "destroyer of cities" and the "releaser of water" in many of the Aryans' early poems, although most archaeologists today doubt that the Aryans were the primary cause of this civilization's demise. In any event, the religion practised by these monadic clans was not what we now refer to as Hinduism. Only at the time of the Megadha-Mauryan state's establishment, from the Upanishads and the development of Vedic philosophy to the solidification of the social structure embodied in the Manusmriti, did this start to take shape. Hinduism was referred to as Brahmanic, in contrast to Buddhism and Jainism. Hinduism was once known as Brahmanism, which was modified and included several native customs. From the sixth to the eleventh century, it achieved social and political dominance and frequently faced opposition from Buddhism and Jainism. Buddhism and Jainism do not have caste discrimination or disparity. However, caste hierarchy and injustice were really fostered by Hinduism as a religion. The two

main branches of what would eventually be termed Hinduism were known as Shaivism and Vaishnavism in the south, and their influence spread as distinct traditions across southeast Asia. The identification of orthodoxy with acceptance of the authority of the Vedas and the Brahmans, as well as the notion of varnashrama dharma—the fourfold system of castes and stages of life—as the ideal social structure, constituted the philosophy of the central themes of Brahmanic Hinduism, or simply Brahmanism. The preferred philosophy was Advaita, which identified each person's self or atman with the universal "Brahman." As long as dissident elements accepted their position within a caste structure, Brahmanism had enormous absorptive The village productive system of caste, jajmani, and untouchability served as the material foundation for this social structure. It is quite unlikely that the majority of individuals at this period considered themselves to be Hindus. The era gave rise to bhakti, or devotional cults, which fought against caste hierarchy and Brahman dominance. Numerous local gods and goddesses are still at the focus of popular religious life today. Many of them eventually evolved into religious lineages that openly identify as non-Hindu. Examples include Sikhism, Veerasaivism, etc. So how is Hinduism constructed? The Indian aristocracy were largely responsible for the development of Hinduism. During the 19th century, individuals such as Lokmanya Tilak embraced the "Aryan theory of race," said that upper-caste Indians were descended from white people, and acknowledged the Vedas as their primary source of knowledge. Additionally, Tilak was the first to attempt to organize a sizable portion of the populace behind Brahmanical leadership. Hindu conservatives launched a full-scale assault on their upper-caste reformist opponents at the end of the 19th century, accusing them of being anti-national. But as time went on, "Hinduism as nationalism" became more and more associated with the religious community. Gandhi even claimed to be a Hindu. Hindu texts include the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, as well as the Vedas, Upanishads, Smritis, and Puranas. Gandhi disapproves of everything that does not align with his spiritual beliefs. Nothing that cannot be verified by reason or experienced spontaneously may be regarded as the word of God.

This historical and intellectual acceptance of the Hindu identity inevitably led to the assimilation of the caste component of this identity.

According to Ambedkar, caste is detrimental to both spiritual and natural development and has nothing to do with religion. Ashrama and Varna are organizations unrelated to caste. According to the rule of Varna, each of us must follow our ancestors' vocation in order to earn our bread. The calling of a scavenger and a Brahman, or spiritual instructor, is equivalent, and their proper accomplishment carries equal merit before God and, at one point, appears to have brought equal recompense before man.

Therefore, the Hindu religion's philosophy was a formulation that acknowledged a human being's place in a hierarchy and would undoubtedly be rejected by militant lower castes. Gandhi was eventually not just a Hindu but also an indirect spokesperson for upper-caste interests due to his vision and "Ram raj" ideology. Naturally, Gandhi's greatest ambitions, conflicts, and setbacks related to the caste issue. His disagreement with Ambedkar during the Second Round Table Conference made it abundantly evident that he prioritized his Hindu identity over his

role as a national leader. Gandhi's anti-communal Hinduism ultimately alienated many of the lower castes, as seen by Ambedkar's statement that "this Gandhi age is the dark age of Indian politics."

According to Ambedkar, this is a time when people are going back to the hard past rather than pursuing their goals for the future. Nehru took the existence of a Hindu identity for granted, much like Gandhi. Gandhi, on the other hand, believed that identity was completely unnecessary in the modern world and that it should be ignored in the construction of a modern India. Nehru stated, "In my opinion, a meaningful solution can only come when economic difficulties, affecting all religious groups and cutting across communal borders, arise...Regretfully, I am unable to become enthusiastic about this social issue, despite its temporary importance. In the grand scheme of things, it can't really matter because it's a side problem. The philosophical part of the Brahmanic stream was mostly found among forest recluses, while the ceremonial side was found among the rising rulers' intellectual advisors. Though not all of them resided in forests, Buddhists and other Shramanatreands found their spiritual base among individuals who had given up all worldly pleasures. Many laboring peasants and the growing merchant classes supported their way of thought. This applied to both Buddhism and Jainism. At this time, caste was only a projection of Brahmanic concepts.

A Brahman is who? A Brahmin is a person who is born into a Brahman family seven times or who exhibits noble behavior either by birth (jati) or by deed (kamma). Therefore, it appears that Hinduism recognizes human biological diversity. Buddha, on the other hand, rejected all biological (jati) distinctions between people and defined a person by their actions.

According to one of the Buddhist jatakas (tales), the Buddha, who was born into a Naga family—possibly a metaphor for a tribal obligated family—argues against the idea that a relative is praising Brahmanism.

The Brahmanic and Buddhist conceptions of society and the state were very different. Enforcing the prohibition against varna-sankara, or the mingling of castes, was the Brahmanic ruler's primary responsibility. Buddhism was adamantly against caste. Not only did he reject it, but Buddhist writings also portray the Chandalas, the untouchables of the era, as having a prominent role. The Vaselasutta, which is the opposite of the Vasetthasutta in the Sutta Nipatta, tells the story of the old Matanga, a magnificent spiritual hero who was revered by brahmans and lords. Brahmans are always shown as the foes of the Chandalas.

Buddhism took the lead in challenging Brahmanism's definition of social order, giving untouchables a significant part in the process. The iconic term "bahujansukaya, bahujanhitaya" was used to describe the Buddha's societal goal: a universal compassion, pursuing everyone's well-being. The core of the Buddha's teachings was embodied in his final words, "be your own lamp, be your own refuge." Thus, Buddhism turned out to be ephemeral in "India"

Indian Caste System

India's caste structure is based on the partition of varna or the caste system. Caste distinctions have an impact on both the ideal system of values and real social interactions in Hindu culture. It is assumed that people from various castes will behave differently and hold distinct beliefs

and values. The Hindu faith approves of these distinctions. Hinduism holds that a person's place in the caste system is predetermined at birth and is hence somewhat unchangeable. In the past, being born into a specific caste determined not only one's ceremonial rank but also, for the most part, their political and economic standing.

Caste is still crucial in establishing political and economic boundaries, even if we now have distinct economic and political positions regardless of one's caste of birth.

Therefore, a philosophical examination of the term "caste" is necessary. What is the caste system's underlying philosophy? Why does everything seem to be determined by the caste system, including political, social, and economic rights? Is it something more than just a convention? From a philosophical standpoint, we may argue that caste has a different meaning in everyday life than it does in classical literature. Sometimes the term "caste" refers to a tiny, relatively isolated group, while other times it refers to a group of similar groupings.

One of the fundamental characteristics of the caste system is reflected in this ambiguity in the term's use. The term "caste" in English roughly correlates to what is known locally as "jati" or "kulam." Furthermore, a large number of the villagers—especially the Brahmins—are acquainted with the idea of varna.

Despite the fact that the terms "jati" and "varna" often refer to separate items, the distinction is not continuously kept up. One of the four primary groups into which Hindu society is customarily separated is known as varna. In general, the term "Jati" refers to a considerably smaller group. The term "caste" in English is employed to indicate both.

Therefore, there isn't a true conflict between varna and jati. As a result, it is not uncommon for someone to claim that someone is a Brahmin or even a Kshatriya based on their jati. Such usage is understandable in a certain context. Nonetheless, some have attempted to address the issue by referring to basic divisions and their sub-divisions as "caste" and "sub-caste." However, because the caste system is defined by the division of many orders, this is not totally adequate. Hindus are given a segmentary character by the caste system because "a caste group cannot be considered as a self-contained whole – as a society in itself – but only as a segmentary, or structural, group in the entire system." It will now be evident that, just as the entire system can be divided into several castes, these castes may also be grouped together into a few major divisions. These fundamental distinctions are quite important from a sociological perspective, and understanding their nature is an excellent place to start. In addition to being in various regions of Sripuram, the Brahmins, Non-Brahmins, and Adi Dravidas all historically and religiously consider themselves to have distinct identities.

They have historically held various roles within the village's economic hierarchy, and these distinctions still exist now. In addition to holding somewhat diverse places in the political, economic, and ceremonial systems, the three caste groups are often thought to have distinct characteristics. The most obvious distinction between Brahmins and non-Brahmins and Adi-Dravidas is how they look. One of the many well-known proverbs that encapsulate the distinction is as follows: Parppankaruppumparaiyanschappumahadu. It implies that bright Paraiyas and dark Brahmins are inappropriate. A popular perception of Brahmins is that they are fair, have sharp noses, and

generally have more refined features. These distinctions are important because, not only in Sripuram but across Tamil society and all of India, pale skin and certain characteristics are highly valued. The Brahmins are quite aware of how fair they look, and they frequently compare it to the Kallas' "black" skin. Because it is hard to find a partner for a dark-skinned Brahmin girl, she is frequently a burden to the family. Fair complexion has historically been linked to the "Aryans," from whom Brahmins claim ancestry and who are currently recognized by leaders of several separatist political organizations.

A crucial component of the Brahmin social structure is the gotrasystem, which connects all of them by purported ancestry to another guru, the gotra's namesake. Additionally, clothing is sometimes indicative of caste in a more general sense. It is customary for males who are Brahmins to wear the eight-cubit piece of fabric upon initiation.

Philosophy of Hinduism

What does Ambedkar mean when he refers to Hindu philosophy? Does Hindu philosophy differ from religious philosophy? Philosophy is not definitive, but religion is. The theologian accused the philosopher of being "like a blind man in a dark room, looking for a black cat which was not there" during their argument, according to the account. The theologian was accused by the philosopher of being "like a blind man in the dark room, looking for a black cat which was not there but he declared to have found there."

Plato once referred to philosophy as the "synoptic view of things."

Thus, philosophy makes an effort to see things as a whole, keeping in mind all the major aspects of the universe and understanding them in connection to one another as components of a single whole. As a result, it makes final judgments on the nature of the world-ground and the world-process. Therefore, the philosophy of religion is to be understood as an interpretation and study of the experience based on the perspective of man and his environment. Thus, historical information revealed by the history of religion is used to support philosophy of religion.

According to Tiele, "all religions of the civilized and uncivilized world, dead and living" are apsychological and historical phenomena in all of their forms. According to Ambedkar, if this is philosophy of religion, it seems to me that it is just another term for the field of study known as comparative religion, with the added name of finding a common principle in the many forms of religion. Ambedkar's interpretation of philosophy differs from the conventional definition. According to Ambedkar, philosophy has two meanings: first, it refers to instruction; second, it refers to the use of critical reasoning in making decisions about objects and occurrences.

In this sense, Ambedkar distinguishes himself from the two conventional forms of theology, such as mythological theology and civil theology, and interprets the term "religion" in terms of theology. As a fundamental component of the philosophy of nature, Ambedkar promotes natural theology, which is the belief in God and the divine.

Revealed theology is a different kind of theology in addition to natural theology.

According to Ambedkar, studying the revolutions that religion has experienced is the greatest way to determine the standard by which to evaluate its philosophy. One religious revolution is known to history students. The domain of religion and the scope of its power were important to the revolution.

Religion used to include everything of human knowledge and assert that its teachings were infallible. According to history, astronomy was liberated from religious rule by the Copernican Revolution. Geology and biology were liberated from the constraints of religion by the Darwanian Revolution. This religious transformation has undoubtedly been a huge gift. It has fostered intellectual independence that is absent from the Hindu faith. It has made it possible for society "to assume control of itself, making its own the world it once shared with superstition, facing undaunted the things of its former fears, and so craving out for itself, from the realm of mystery in which it lies."

Conclusion

Therefore, it appears to me that the Hindu religion supported the caste system in one way or another. It is founded on the spiritualist philosophy, which is predicated on the religious conviction that there is life after death. The soul is everlasting and immortal. The cycle of birth and reincarnation is sustained by the fruitfulness of Karma. Hindu spiritualism, a kind of philosophy, also holds that there is a divine journey that cannot be used to determine the meaning of existence. There are spiritualistic lifestyles that are comparable to materialistic lifestyles. The cleansing of the soul is the foundation of such life's holiness. As a result, Hinduism's philosophy asserts that one may always improve their life by acting in a selfless manner. As a result, if a Shudra behaves in accordance with Hindu philosophy, there is always a chance that they will be born into a higher caste. This is the point at which Hinduism's philosophy truly becomes relevant.

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