

CHAPTER - VII

CONCLUSION

According to an official estimate people belonging to the Depressed Classes numbered 60 millions in India on the eve of her independence. A large part of them were considered Untouchables by the orthodox Hindus. There were also others who though not Untouchables themselves belonged to the lower order of Hindu society and consequently were not considered as much respectable as those comprising the so-called higher castes of Hinduism. These lowly people especially the Untouchables had always rendered immense service to the Hindu society. But the tragedy with them is that they were never given due recognition and were denied of all privileges - social, economic and political to which they were most legitimately entitled as members of a civilised society. Such deprivations were believed to be ordained by God and hence there were little discontents against the institutionalised disparity.

With the introduction of colonial rule in India her people became gradually acquainted with the ideas of west including the most familiar idiom of democracy. Large scale economic changes in the country had also contributed to the growing erosion of a traditional society. The so-called lowly people of an outmoded birth-ascribed society grew more and more conscious of their worth and eventually became rivals of high caste elites whose monopoly

of power became uncertain under conditions of a competitive society. Hence emerged a new tension in Indian society-the Depressed Classes claiming share of power proportionate to the their number and the high caste people alleged to have been forestalling their demands on a number of pretexts.

At the opening of the 20th Century the colonial masters contrived to add a new dimension to the problem. First, it had granted separate representation to the Muslims (the Morley-Minto Reform Act, 1909) in the Legislature and thereby set a precedent on the basis of which the future claim for separate electorate could be built up by the newer groups aspiring power in a manner that the authority may be compelled to entertain it with almost equal validity. Secondly, it had further while undertaking the Census work in India furnished some manipulated data to show that the Hindu society was divided into various caste-groups such that it was no better than a medley of peoples each of whom deserved a differential treatment. Thus the existing social and cultural dichotomy within the Hindu society was now under a condition of colonial encouragement given a definite political shape. A conflict of socio-cultural identity was transformed into a conflict of interests.

But while always offering positive colonial inducements for the germination of a separatist spirit the Raj was also very careful to make a formal admission of the fact that division "by creeds and classes means the creation of political camps organised against each other" and that it may be "fatal to the

development of representation upon the national basis on which alone a system of responsible government can possibly be rooted".⁽¹⁾ This is clearly double dealing which became most manifest at every stage when the Raj came out with its schemes of constitutional reforms. The Simon Commission did not agree to the proposal of separate electorate for the Depressed Classes and refused to apportion reserved seats more than the three quarters of the proportion of their population to the total population of an electoral area. Once again this policy was soon changed to one of openly sympathising with the Depressed Classes when backstairs settlement was made to appease them through grant of separate electorate (Minorities Pact, November 1931) at the same time when the Round Table Conference was convened to find a solution of the question by means of a bilateral discussion. The Communal Award (1932) and the colonial pledge that the interests of the Depressed Classes would not be 'sacrificed' was a clear indication that the British Government was all serious about playing its role of the so-called saviour of the Depressed Classes. However the final somersault was yet to be demonstrated and it was only after the election both in India and England was over when that surprising announcement was made that the minority would not be allowed to stand in the way of future advancement of the majority. Thus imperialism, it can now be seen, had persistently followed a policy of sometime supporting and sometime deserting the cause of the Depressed Classes with the ulterior motive of divide and rule that constituted the very essence of Pax Britannia.

The colonial administrators and ethnographer-historians like Herbert Risley, Valentine Chirol and Rudyard Kipling and others had continually harped on the endless division of the Indian people as a justification of white men's burden in the colonies. Chirol, for example claimed that India was a 'mere geographical expression' which could never develop into a nation in the western sense of the term and that whatever political movements, with a pseudo-national character, existed in India, had their roots deep in traditional, instinctively anti-western sources. The so-called national movement headed by small elite groups had therefore, the particular interests of their own castes rather than the general interests of the people.⁽²⁾ The Depressed Classes were slowly persuaded to accept this colonial interpretation of history and being placed since long in a position of social, economic and political deprivations they were quite easily provoked to believe that the true emancipation of their community would come by way of secession from the mainstream and also by depending solely on the imperial system of dispensation of justice. This is the reason why a large section of the Depressed Classes kept themselves aloof from the struggle for independence against the Raj. Such indifference was not the least pronounced even during the days of August Revolution 1942 in which to believe Churchill, the 40 million Untouchables of India did not participate. Again this is the reason why not a few among the Depressed Classes openly avowed that they would rather prefer the continuation of the British rule to transfer of power in the hands of the

Congress which according to them would mean restoration of the oppressive Hindu raj in the country. Such an assertion although sounds very rude, even blasphemous is nevertheless a clear indication that the large bulk of depressed people would consider the alien government to be more benevolent and humane than most of their own countrymen.

In a sense the British Government was not unworthy of the faith reposed on it. It had, seemingly though, always upheld the cause of the depressed people in respect of whom its sole mission, as Lord Willingdon, Viceroy of India wrote to Secretary of State in February 1934, was "to raise them from degradation and merge them in the general level of the population".⁽³⁾ Evidently the British rulers chose to salvage this unfortunate people through a system of 'special protection' of the government. But the tools of special protection being itself discriminatory in nature was to be applied only when the basic presumption of a liberal-pluralist society is discarded outright by the government. For, under the laissez faire principle of a liberal-pluralist society an individual is chosen for economic and political rewards on the basis of his personal attainments and not at all on consideration of his group affiliation. But 'protective discrimination' being essentially in the nature of a reward making its conferment valid only on conditions of group affiliation of an individual surely brings about a change in the character of the society itself. As a result the principles of corporate pluralism began to emerge in what was previously a liberal-pluralist society only.

Both the government which offered its patronage (whether in the form of reservation of seats in the representative bodies or other kinds of special protection) and the people who were its beneficiaries had their own logic to justify the system from a supposedly sociological point of view. Till all the time before the enactment of the Morley - Minto Reforms the argument was basically one of affording some booster to the underdogs so that they may soon grow equal with others and start from the same point on the track in the nearest future. This is quite an accepted principle often applied for a harmonious growth of a society laden with much of social-economic imbalance for a long time. But there was a marked change in the attitude since when the Depressed Classes under definite colonial inducement asserted their right to such differential treatment on the ground of their being a minority of the Hindu society. The proponents of this view argued that the Untouchables being Hindu outcastes should be treated as a minority. Gandhi opposed this idea for in his perception the Untouchables although deserving protective discrimination were an integral part of the Hindu society. An historian with his hindsight may argue today that the Depressed Classes could, like the Black majority in some of the southern states of the U.S. easily consider themselves as a minority, since the concept of minority itself refers to a frame of mind which may not be always very relevant in the context of social realities. What is however very important to note in this connection is that the colonial expostulation about India's claim to nationhood

had provided the basic stimulus for the usual response of the Depressed Classes that found expression in a claim for immediate recognition of their minority status. The Depressed Classes, that is to say quite many of them therefore served the purpose of Imperialism. No wonder that injustices meted out to them by an unfeeling society had led the Depressed Classes to this strange rediscovery of their identity.

An analysis of the Depressed Classes' movement in India reveals its changing characters at different points of time. Starting as a social movement for the emancipation of the Depressed Classes under the leadership of Phoolke it assumed a political character in the 20th Century when Ambedkar and Gandhi came to champion their cause. But the movement initiated by these leaders revealed an elite-based conservative trend (in so far as it largely relied upon the support and sympathies of the government) which stood in sharp contrast with the more genuinely mass-based and radical caste movement that developed elsewhere in the country, among those who claimed to speak for the *Bahujan Samaj* in Maharashtra and among the untouchable Ezhavas of Kerala. (4)

The basically constitutionalist-loyalist movement of the Depressed Classes had its own limitations. As for example, there was no unanimity among the leaders. There were a number of caste-based associations among the Depressed Classes, such as All-India Sri Jadav Mahasabha (an association of Chamars in the United Provinces), All-Bengal Namasudra Association, All-India Prajapati Kumbhakar Association (Rajashahi), All-India Adh Dharma Mandal

(an association of the Chuhras of the Punjab) and the like. But there was rivalry between one community of the Depressed Class and another as in the case of the Mahars and Chamars of Bombay each of whom claimed superiority over other. The quarrel involving question of caste superiority could little enable the fighting communities to put a joint pressure upon the authority which was the common enemy for all of them. Thus Ambedkar's stand for a separate electorate for the Depressed Classes was opposed by B.J.Deorukhar and P.Baloo who as champions of the nationalist forum demanded joint electorate with the Hindus. However, their opposition to Ambedkar was believed to have been largely motivated by the traditional caste rivalry between the Mahars and the Chamars. At any rate even Gandhi was aware of such dissensions among the members of the Depressed Classes. It is stated that in an interview outside the Round Table Conference he said with a little bit of modest pride that Ambedkar represented only the Depressed Classes of that part of India to which he belonged, but there were others of the said class who expressed their "fullest faith in the Congress and disowning Dr. Ambedkar".⁽⁵⁾

It has already been stated that the Depressed Classes which started its campaign for social reform soon assumed a political character whereupon the important political parties of the country tried to win them over for immediate political gains. The Reform Act of 1919 had opened up the prospect of electoral politics in the land and this again had led to a recognition of the bargaining power of the backward people who had already

demonstrated their strength in Bengal in the panchayet election in the district of Midnapore.⁽⁶⁾ Naturally therefore, the political parties often came to uphold the cause of the class of people with whose support they thought they would be able to gain some extra advantage over their rival parties in the country. This is the reason why the demands of Ambedkar and Srinivasan for special representation though opposed by Gandhi was sympathetically viewed by such leaders like B.S.Moonje of the Hindu Mahasabha and the Liberal leader Sir Chimanlal Setalvad.

Moonje, President of the Hindu Mahasabha in particular entered into an agreement (23 February 1932) with M.C.Rajah, President of the All-India Depressed Classes Association which gained for the Depressed Classes more advantages than what they got under the Minorities Pact (November 1931). It may also be noted here that Ambedkar also was no less aware of the bargaining potentials of the Depressed Classes. This is clearly revealed when he took to the strategy of pressure politics by coming to an agreement (Minorities Pact 1931) with the representatives of the Muslims and a section of the Indian Christians, the Anglo-Indians and the British community. This tactical move on the part of Ambedkar led to a further realignment of powers when Congress tried to build up a counterpoise through another set of leaders of the Depressed Classes namely Deorukhar and Shankarrao M.Patil. It may be incidentally noted in this connection that in spite of the Rajah-Moonje agreement of 1932 the Hindu Mahasabha's support for the cause of the Untouchables did not go beyond interdining and temple entry. Even Ambedkar's programme for reform of Hinduism

was not taken up with enough seriousness by the Hindu Mahasabha. Ambedkar also did not have pleasant memories of the Hindu Mahasabha particularly of the Shankaracharya and N.M.Kelkar who refused to stand witness in the Mahar Satyagraha case.

As for their ideological differences it appears that Ambedkar had criticised nay even bullied Gandhi for his so-called lack of sympathies for the Untouchables which became clear since when he almost compelled them to agree with the terms of the Poona Pact in cancellation of the Communal Award which was more favourable to the Untouchables. But Ambedkar himself did not seem to be always quite sympathetic to the tribal people of India. It is said that when the *Adivasi(s)* claimed a little share of seat from the quota of the Untouchables they were told by Ambedkar that they could not be granted such share for their political consciousness had not touched the required standard. However when the same people claimed the same slice from the Muslim quota Ambedkar was quick to convey his consent. In the power sharing politics of India the culturally superior people are usually found to have always appropriated a lion's share for them. Ambedkar also acquiesced in this accustomed mode of settlement. Clearly enough this dualism in Ambedkar would scarcely justify his stand as the champion of all sections of the depressed people. This is possibly the reason why his criticism of Gandhiji often sounds so hollow in spite of their usual rhetories and flamboyance.⁽⁷⁾

But then it was Ambedkar and his community and not Gandhi who had to suffer most the humiliations that were heaped upon

them because of their being born as outcastes. In Gandhiji's perception of Hinduism people do most certainly combine although they do not mix with one another always. In the perception of Babasaheb it was unfortunately an altogether different experience—people seldom mix and do not combine at all. It would be therefore a fruitless polemic to decide who was right and who was not. Gandhiji with his vision of one India lived till the time to see that she was not. Babasaheb with his misgivings for the Hindus lived long enough to accept the offer from a Brahmin Prime Minister to become himself the architect of the liberal democratic republic of India. The post-independence India offered a curious scenario of continuity and change all at the same time.

As a matter of fact both Gandhi and Ambedkar had their own limitations. Starting as true loyalists both of them tried the usual constitutional methods for the welfare of the Depressed Classes including the Harijans. But while Ambedkar being unable to purify Hinduism grew a rebel under condition of individual psychological strain, Gandhi remained firm to his principles and refused to compromise even when universally accused of bypassing questions of utmost national interests for minor matters. Frustrated in his mission Ambedkar chose to withdraw from the mainstream of the freedom movement and then decided to renounce Hinduism in disgust. For Gandhi, however, such frustrations had only convinced him of the dire need for taking up extensive programme of Harijan welfare in the country.

But neither Ambedkar nor Gandhi could realise that reservation

instead of making a permanent solution of the problems of the Depressed Classes would only lead to group rivalry for loaves and fishes. Moreover 'protective discrimination' being also discriminatory in nature generates tension in a society whose resources are limited. Given the condition of Indian society the benefit of reservation could be availed of by those known in the recent parlance as the creamy layer of the Depressed Classes of which the largest majority still continue to remain in the same miserable condition in which they lived in the past. Any serious attempt towards bringing about a real emancipation of these people should, therefore, start with a meaningful endeavour for striking at the root of this social problem. Such an attempt would clearly reveal that an overall improvement of the condition of the Untouchables is not to be expected as long as the nation fails to adopt effective measures of land reform. Moreover the crusade against caste and untouchability in order to be successful must have necessary linkage with the general struggle of the working class including the peasantry. (8) But none of the accredited leaders of the Depressed Classes nor even any of the political parties which championed their cause made any conscious effort towards organising this movement on a wider basis. As a result a movement which ought to have started with the willing consent of the people at large drew support only from strange visionaries, distraught reformers and political opportunists. The full scale emancipation of the depressed people remains unfulfilled even today.

NOTES

1. *Report on Indian Constitutional Reforms*, Calcutta, 1918, paragraphs 229, 232.
2. Chirol V., *Indian Unrest* London, 1910, p. 203.
3. Bandyopadhyay S., *Caste, Politics and the Raj : Bengal 1872-1937*, Calcutta, 1990, p. 83
4. Sarkar S., *op.cit.*, p. 56.
5. *CWM.*, Vol. XLVIII, p. 96. Gandhi-Macdonald interview dated 30.9.1931.
6. Bandyopadhyay S., *op.cit.*, pp. 113-114.
7. Vakil A.K., *Gandhi Ambedkar Dispute : An analytic study* New Delhi.
8. Randive B.T., *Class, Caste and Property Relations*, Calcutta, 1989.