

## **AMBEDKAR'S POSTMODERN VISION\***

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Though Ambedkar belongs to the Indian Contemporary world and Postmodernism is a trend of the western contemporary world but they have some surprising similarities between their thoughts. Now the question arises that 'Is India postmodern or not?' For me the answer is paradoxical. I believe that India is traditional, at the same time it is modern and also postmodern. For instance, in many areas, we still follow the traditional worldview in our lives and at the same time follow the modern trend. Aafter analyzing Ambedkar's thought in relation to postmodern thought, comparison of these two ways of thought bring many points of similarities which will reveal many interesting areas. But before delving this issue, let us try to analyze the concept of postmodernism.

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Postmodernism, the western contemporary and intellectual movement has affected the entire socio-cultural and political milieu of our times. The influence of postmodernism is reflected almost in every sphere of life in literary circles and in scientific movements and also in the spectrum of academic disciplines. It questions the trust of modernity and calls for the affirmation of plurality and diversity. The term postmodernism is widely used to denote the number of philosophical views developed in France in the late 60s. Postmodernist argues in any objective universal meanings of words or texts or any such permanent structures that are at the foundation of human consciousness. So, it is claimed that socio-cultural structures are a burden to humanity and unless we get rid from our traditional cultural discourse we can't live our lives with freedom and creativity in its fullness. They hardly believe in any universal structures or categories of thought that form the human self. According to those philosophers cultures do not create man, rather man creates his cultures. Actually, postmodernism expresses its radical views on different spheres of life even beyond philosophy. The student revolution of the late 60s in Europe played a crucial role in making of a postmodern sub-culture.

So, the history of postmodernism in the 70s and 80s is basically one of widespread acceptance of the ideas spread by different philosophers. This trend criticizes the notion of 'presence' or 'presentation' in knowledge and also criticizes the effort of rational inquiry to examine the origin of the source of all human knowledge. It focuses on the marginalized, the outlawed and the abnormal of society. It calls for a critical analysis of our smug complacency towards accepted norms and traditions. However, it is difficult to define postmodernism. It is an umbrella term drawing within its fold different disciplines like philosophy, history, literary theory, art etc. Postmodernism as a movement is largely a reaction against the philosophical assumptions, values, and worldview of the modern period, roughly the period of scientific revolution from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries till mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Many of the doctrines typically associated with postmodernism can be fairly described as the denial of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment faith in human reason and in the pursuit of science and technology.

Postmodernism denies there is an objective reality. They treat objective reality as a kind of conceptual construct. There is no such thing as absolute truth in philosophy, science or history. It questions the universal validity of reason and logic and distrusts science and technology as instruments of human progress. Hence, postmodernism is a response to the horrors of the holocaust and the dangers of an atomic age. Many of them believe that reason and logic is oppressive as they have been used to destroy others. It holds that there is no intrinsic human nature, it is completely socially determined. According to them, language does not represent the reality outside us; it is not a “mirror of the universe”. It is semantically self-contained or self-referential. The meaning of a word is a series of contrasts and differences with the meanings of other words in the system.

According to them, there is no magical meta-theory or universal theoretical ground that can provide a foundation for every other subsequent theory. Meta-theories are referred to as meta-narratives or very similar to ‘philosophy with a capital ‘P’. It is no longer a viable and credible enterprise. Thus, it reveals that postmodernity in general terms is a war against all forms of tantalization. It dismisses any totalizing systems of thought in man’s social, historical, biological development as a grand meta-narrative. Such grand narratives keep some social groups in power and others out of it. From Christian redemption to Marxism and political narrative of nationalism are all ‘meta-narrative’. If there are no absolute objective truths in metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics, then such truths are constructed by discourses. A discourse is a set of interlocking and mutually supporting statements used to define and describe a subject matter, e.g., the discursive practices of law, medicine, and aesthetic and so on. Some postmodernist hold that the prevailing discourses in any society are always influenced by power relations. They reveal the interest and values of the powerful, dominant elite groups.

There are lots of thoughtful remarks about postmodernism, which we find in ‘Of Grammatology’ and in many other books about postmodernism. Like, Norris says that postmodernism is a period of playful freedom, a kind of consumer choice. For him, it’s just an unfortunate mistake. Lyotard sees postmodernism as conditions. Cannor views it as a culture. For Jameson, it’s a cultural domination and even Eagleton narrates it as an illusion. American literary critic Ihab Hassan in his book

*The Dismemberment of Orpheus: toward a Postmodern Literature* in 1982 introduces a list of difference between modernism and postmodernism. But in this paper, it has been discussed briefly. After pointing out some of the remarks about postmodernism it's time to compare Ambedkar's vision and postmodernism.

As postmodernism stands against any kind of 'ism', likewise Ambedkar stands against any kind of 'ism'. The reason behind this is that any kind of 'ism' has been framed with rigid rules and principles which may not be reshuffled in the course of time and according to the needs and demand of transparent society. This happened in so many philosophical theories against which postmodernism are vocal. The position of Ambedkar is similar to this. Although he was born as a Hindu but in 1935 he quit Hinduism. He adopted Buddhism on 14<sup>th</sup> October at Deekshabhoomi, Nagpur with his followers.

Ambedkar was struggling against Hinduism because it is based on some rigid rules and principles which are not transparent in any situation. Hinduism is dictated by God's will and what is termed as God's will cannot be negated by any means. He was victimized as untouchable and has been exploited and humiliated by the default of caste system prevailing in Hinduism. In 1935 he gave an important speech where he told his followers "After giving deep thought to the problem, everybody will have to admit that conversion is necessary to the Untouchables as self-government is to India. The ultimate object of both is the same. There is not the slightest difference in their ultimate goal. This ultimate aim is to attain freedom. And if the freedom is necessary for the life of mankind, conversion of Untouchables which brings them complete freedom cannot be called worthless by any speech of imagination."<sup>1</sup> Ambedkar throughout his life has struggled against the rigidity of *Varnavyavastha* prevailing in Hinduism. However, he eventually failed to do it because it is based on uncharacteristic 'ism'. Thus, Ambedkar's outlook towards Hinduism is post-modernistic in nature.

On the foundation of Indian democracy his views on caste, individualism, constitutionalism, economic and religion also gave a profound impact. Ambedkar with the great support of 20 million Dalits brought back a 'new millennium' and a

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<sup>1</sup> See 'Why go for conversion?' Held on 30<sup>th</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup> May, 1936 in Mumbai.

new hope of a golden future for the depressed class in India. This was made possible because of the dynamicity of his thinking. The post dynamicity of great Ambedkar actually robs the power politics of the casteist elements in Hinduism. The urgency of the implementation of the *Hindu Rastra* agenda, the attempts at the saffronisation of education, the growing attacks and atrocities on Dalits and other minorities, the boosting of the capitalistic globalization process through privatization, liberalization exhibit that oppression is intimidating on the Dalit community with a new aggressiveness. This was the gloomy and dark period of the Dalit and at that time the appearance of Ambedkar as the savior of the Dalit community was a pleasant surprise. At that time the presence of Ambedkar was the need of the hour of India. To attribute the significance of Ambedkar as a reformer of Dalit, Victor Ferrao remarks, "Hence, we get a bird's eye-view of the life of this great man who could be said to exhibit a postmodern approach."<sup>2</sup>

Ambedkar visualizes the true reality of India with honesty and open eyes. He was shocked by realizing that motherland fails to provide two important things, such as equality and liberty. He felt that liberty, equality, and fraternity are three concepts on the basis of which a just society can be built up. According to him, on a social plan, the Indian society runs with graded inequality and on the economic plane even though we have immense wealth but due to social inequality there are 'many who are being in abject poverty'. Ambedkar says, "On 26<sup>th</sup> January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics, we will have equality and in social life and economic life we have inequality...we must remove these contradictions at the earliest possible moments or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which this assembly has so laboriously built up."<sup>3</sup>

Being a postmodernist, Ambedkar felt that religion was essential for human social growth. He said, "Man cannot live by bread alone. He has a mind, which needs food for thought. Religion instills hope and drives him to activity."<sup>4</sup> However, Ambedkar advocated a liberalized religion which according to him plays an important role in emancipating the minds and souls of people. In his view the religion that is not

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<sup>2</sup> Lakeland, Paul, 1997, p.59.

<sup>3</sup> Das, Bhagvan, 1969, p. 187.

<sup>4</sup> See, Keer, 1991, p.502.

liberal, that breeds oppression and sanctions unjust inequalities is not true religion. Unfortunately, Hinduism belongs to this category by robbing human rights in the true sense of the term. He declared, “Inequality is the soul of Hinduism”<sup>5</sup>. Eventually, he left Hinduism and embraced Buddhism because behind this Hinduism failed to secure basic human rights. For him, Buddha Dhamma was the best and it was the most scientific religion. Ambedkar said in the hymns of Rig Veda “we see man’s thoughts turned outwards, away from himself, to the world of the Gods.”<sup>6</sup> It is full of praise, worship, and prayer. But Buddhism is “directed man’s search inwards to the potentiality hidden within himself”<sup>7</sup>. He invited others to follow suit. He becomes clear when he says, “So long as we remain in a religion, which teaches a man to treat another man as a leper, the sense of discrimination which is deeply rooted in our mind cannot go. For annihilating caste and untouchability from among the untouchables change of religion is the only antidote.”<sup>8</sup>

According to Ambedkar, the actual fact is, a person is untouchable because he or she has been born of an untouchable parent. That is why he or she was polluted not in some special conditions but under all conditions and permanently. For him, it is something which is inherited. He realized that the main problem of Hinduism is the caste system, which belongs to the four castes; Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Here Brahmins are the highest caste. They are separated from other and teachers of the other caste, not only that but also they are the custodians of the Vedas and all other scriptures. Even they called themselves ‘Bhudevas’ means equal to God. These each caste was described in *Purusha Sukta*.

There was another outcaste besides these four castes are untouchable. Although in caste system shudras are occupied the lowest position but the untouchables were more suffering. According to Ambedkar, “they were born impure; they were impure while they lived, they died in the death of the impure, and they gave birth to children who were born with a stigma of untouchability affixed to them.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p.66

<sup>6</sup> *Why Dr. Ambedkar left Hinduism and Chose Buddhism*, 6<sup>th</sup> Dec, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> See, Ambedkar, 1987, p.7.

It is a case of permanent, hereditary stain which nothing can cleanse.”<sup>9</sup> Like Hinduism, Muslim and Christian religion also believe their religious injunctions and customs. But against these superstitious practices and beliefs, Buddhism was a revolt. Here Gautama Buddha could not tolerate this evil practices.

The other important dimension of Ambedkar’s postmodernism is that he often criticised Gandhian ‘ism’. Even though Gandhi was non-committal regarding caste system, but he was an ardent advocator of *Varna system*. Ambedkar, however, thought that the Varna system of Gandhi actually invited the caste system of Hinduism. Therefore, Ambedkar simplistically drew the conclusion that “The only reaction and a very natural reaction of the Untouchables would be to run away from Gandhism.”<sup>10</sup> Ambedkar thus quests for the kingdom of righteousness through righteous conduct. It aims at bringing about a total and integral liberation of every human being. Ambedkar felt that love, justice, and peace are the prime value of the kingdom of righteousness. Thus, by establishing the kingdom of righteousness, Ambedkar eventually breathed the cause of Dalit liberation.

In conclusion, we can say that Postmodernism is a war against all forms of totalization. Even though postmodernism as a theory did not appear in the time of Ambedkar, but one should look back to the past history to trace the relevance of postmodernism. In this regard, the relevance of Ambedkar, Buddhism, and Gandhi are noteworthy. Ambedkar has treaded the path of postmodernism through his socio-political thinking. The movement that Ambedkar had adopted against Hinduism and against all kinds of social injustice was based on rationality and science, but not based on rigid God based dictum and verdict which according to him was a social trauma. Just postmodernism stands against every kind of philosophical doctrine totalization, Ambedkar stood against every kind of social oppression based on any kind of rigid ‘ism’. Ambedkar’s postmodern technique of dismantling and reassembling of different ideas is found specially in 1948 publication *The Untouchable*. Gail Omvedt, an American Scholar, makes an important remark in her narration that although Ambedkar subscribed to certain Marxist descriptions of ideology and economic

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<sup>9</sup> Ambedkar, 1990, p. 266.

<sup>10</sup> Ambedkar, 1990, p.296-297.

relations, he reversed the base-superstructure model to give primacy to the superstructure, of which religious factors were fundamentally important. Instead of falling back on a theory of caste oppression as determined by economic disparities, Ambedkar interpreted religious difference as having an equally material effect in explaining the nature of social oppression.

Ambedkar did exhibit postmodern tendency in his lifelong struggle against the casteist metanarrative just like the postmodernism has been struggling over the years against philosophical 'isms'. Ambedkar struggle against metanarrative of Hinduism, everybody should be inspired by this lesson.