

A CONTEXTUAL NEGOTIATION BETWEEN AMBEDKAR AND THE INDIAN MARXISTS

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I

Ambedkar was born on 14th April 1891 in a poor *Mahar* family in Maharashtra. The *Mahar* community, in traditional Hindu society, is considered to be *abarṇa*, i.e., the community is deprived of its space even in the lowest rank of the society! The traditional Hindu society, as we see, considers the community as untouchable but it is an irony that such communities have never been considered as *a-Hindu*! They have been related to Hindu society in *some way* and that is, in terms of social hatred! So it is quite natural that a boy from such a community has to keep a safe distance from his classmates even in the academic institution governed by the caste *Hindus*. The hatred went to that extreme as not to allow a little boy to quench his thirst from the common source of drinking water! The *Manusmriti* oriented Hindu society deprived him even of his right to learn Sanskrit and he had to keep himself satisfied only by learning *Farsi*. The age-old tradition of exploitation of the upper-class *Hindus* over the lower castes was intensified and got a new dimension by using the said book as an ethical foundation of social practice. The text prescribed that for the same crime, a person, outside the caste (*atiśudra*) is entitled to face more severe punishment than a *Brahmin*! So we may say that it was the very instinct for survival which motivated Dr Ambedkar to challenge not only the *Manusmriti* but also any political endeavour from a charity for the *Dalits*.

Ambedkar achieved his D.Sc. degree from London School of Economics and was awarded the PhD degree from the Columbia University of United States for his work on state economics. His direct contact with the modern western intellectual world made him aware of the concept of liberalism, republicanism and humanism. He came upon the realisation that those ethical ideals, originated from the bourgeois revolution, are the weapons for fighting against the social evils causing deprivation and agony of the downtrodden. The concept of welfare state encouraged him to hope that the social problem of the *Dalits* may be solved by the political intervention of a just and powerful state. However, later he had the experience of another kind of development of bourgeois civilization and that is capitalism followed by imperialism and colonialism. As a citizen of a British colony, he soon recognised the colonial rule

as the greatest enemy of nationalist spirit as well as of individual liberty. The recognition of such naked truth, coupled with his political sensitivity, made him join India's struggle for freedom. But the irony was that, in that India, the social and political space of Bhim Rao and his community was always being challenged! His nationalist spirit realised that what the anti-colonial nationalist movement needs for its success is an integrated Indian identity which should not be fragmented at any cost by racism, casteism or religious fanaticism. At the same time, his exploited *Dalit* self was very much anxious about the result of that success! Just like the Indian Marxists, he predicted that the nature of post-independent India would no way be of the people, by the people and for the people.

It was a great challenge for the Indian Communist Party, since its foundation in 1920 at Tashkent, to influence the Indian mass by the ideal of socialism and to motivate them towards socialist revolution since they had already been integrated by the ideal of nationalism. The primary goal of both the nationalists and the socialists was to make India free from the British colonial rule. However, the communists were more concerned about the future structure of post-independent India than the nationalists. To the communists, one of the chief aims for India's freedom was the emancipation and empowerment of the exploited working class. The nationalist leaders were blamed for not treating the issue with due importance. The controversy over the question of priority between those two aims made the Indian communists divide into two groups. Similarly, Ambedkar was torn apart between two kinds of interests. If he had to give priority to the interest of his class he had to go against the domination of the upper class in the nationalist movement at the cost of the interest of the nationalist movement as a whole. On the other hand, his full surrender to the interest of the nationalist movement meant treachery to his community! When the Marxists were predicting the dominance of bourgeois elite class in independent India, Ambedkar was always being suffered from the anxiety of the dominance of upper caste and *Hindu sanātanism*! Such a dilemma seems to be the central cause of misinterpretation and controversy on the role of Ambedkar as well as of the Marxists in the anti-colonial movement, which is labelled as 'the nationalist movement'.

However, the nationalist leaders before the Gandhi-era, came upon the realisation that the political freedom for the high-caste educated Indians was

depending on the social freedom to their low-caste counterparts.¹ Though some extremist leaders including Tilak showed their reluctance to social issues, leaders like Lajpat Roy devoted his life for various kinds of social reforms including the abolition of casteism and untouchability.² The issue got a serious focus in the literary creation too. Rabindranath Tagore focussed the practice of casteism and untouchability as a foe to the spirit of humanity³ and against untouchability he wrote his famous lines: “Oh, my unfortunate Motherland! Those whom you have insulted would drag you down to their same level”.

The Bengali Essayist Pramathanath Chowdhury attacked the nationalist leaders in the esteemed Bengali magazine *Sabuj Patra* declaring that the nationalists wanted political liberty but they were frightened when the same principle was applied in social matters!⁴The changing political scenario, it seems, made Congress pass a resolution in 1917 urging people to remove all the disabilities imposed by the evil customs on the downtrodden.⁵ Leaders like B. J. Desai and Aruna Asaf Ali criticized the unjust social privileges of the high-class Indian elites. Later, in 1921, it became mandatory for a person, willing to work as a congress volunteer, to sign in a declaration for fighting against untouchability. But it was the year 1917, which is also the year of the great conquer of the proletariat class in Russia, told quite a different story in Ambedkar’s life as detailed below.⁶

Being appointed as the military secretary to the Maharaja of Baroda, Ambedkar descended in the Baroda Railway Station and after a long wait, when nobody came to receive him despite the prior royal order, he realised that his education abroad had nothing to do with his social status as an untouchable! Circumstances made him find shelter not in any *Hindu* hotel but in a *Parsi* inn hoping that the Zoroastrian community, without having any caste system, would not harass him. But the caretaker asked him to leave just after hearing his name which bore a *Hindu* inheritance! Desperate Ambedkar registered himself under a *Parsi* name and started to go to his office from there. His experience in the workplace too was depressingly humiliating! The insolent subordinates made him remember in every moment that he was untouchable! He was not supplied drinking water and in the officer’s club, he had to maintain physical distance from his colleagues. The alienated scholar began to enrich himself by the books on political and economic subjects in the public library of Baroda. But the situation got worst when on one morning the

Parsis of the city identified him and attacked him with sticks and harsh words. They ordered him to vacate the inn immediately and went to that extreme to challenge his life! Spending the day at a public garden, the lone fighter left for Bombay in that night. In his later life, Ambedkar could never recall this story of his life without tears and this incident, as many scholars' claims, is one of the most important turning points of his life which made him an untiring soldier to fight against casteism and other social injustice at any cost.

II

Gandhi's struggle against untouchability did not go against the caste system which is considered to be the foundation of casteism and untouchability. Claiming himself as a '*Sanatani Hindu*' he claimed the *Hindu* caste system as the very foundation of *Hindu* society. His arguments for caste division, as expressed in *Navajivan*, are as follows:⁷

- Different castes are like the different section of a military division.
- The seeds of *swaraj* are to be found in the caste system.
- The caste system is proof of the unique power of the organization of a community.
- For spreading primary education caste can act as a readymade means.

However, he was not ready to accept inter-caste marriage since it was not necessary for promoting national unity. Besides this, his argument for preventing two individuals from different castes from the path of inter-caste marriage was that children of brothers do not intermarry. So caste relationship, in Gandhi's view, is a relationship of siblings! If so, we cannot but comment that those siblings have no equal position in their family still now! However, Ambedkar demanded that though in 1922 Gandhi defended caste system, in 1925, there was a change in his view and he became a defender of *Varṇa* system since he realised that the meaning of caste had been changed from as a medium for restraint to a chain of limitation. The caste system was no longer a way of elevation but a state of fall. So he prescribed for the revival of four big *Varṇas* so that the small castes may fuse themselves into one big caste. He praised the *Varṇa*-system since, despite its foundation in human birth; it does not impose any prohibition on a *Śūdra* from acquiring knowledge or studying

military art. But Gandhi was not ready to accept the interchange of occupation between the different *Varnas*.

Ambedkar assessed such a view, which attacks untouchability but supports the traditional division of caste, as based not on any historical observation but political prudence! Ambedkar showed that caste division is not merely a division of labour but a division among the labourers too!⁸ Division of labour, in the caste system, is not a natural but an arbitrary hierarchical division where the potentiality and skill of a person is not the basis of his occupation! His occupation is determined by the social rank of his parents. So, division of labour is based on the caste system and not the vice versa! It is that casteism, as we see, the inhuman application of which resisted a starving man to change his occupation for a better living!⁹ The ultimate aim of Gandhi's battle against untouchability, marked by inconsistencies, contradictions and context-sensitive surrenders and advances, was not the emancipation of the *Dalits* but the success of his political programme.¹⁰ Gandhi's reservation against inter-marriage and inter-dining between Hindus and the untouchables and his explanation of the meaning of untouchability as merely the act of classifying the untouchables as *Śudras*, instead of *Ati-Śudras*¹¹, support Ambedkar's claim that *Mahātmā* was not ready to lose the support of the conservative upper-caste *Hindus* in his political venture. On the other hand, his act of christening the untouchables with a new name *Harijan* attest the fact, as Ambedkar observed, that he had predicted that the *Śudras* would resist in assimilating the untouchables in their community! Such paradoxes in theory and practice are the cause of Gandhi's failure in eradicating untouchability. In this context, Ambedkar showed three reasons¹²:

- i. Gandhi's reputation as '*Mahatma*' was built up not on his spiritual prophecy but on his image as a herald of political freedom and so, the *Hindus*, to whom he appealed to remove untouchability, were much interested in his political enterprises than to his social appeal. They did not respond to his anti-untouchability campaign.
- ii. Gandhi was not ready to antagonise *Hindus* even when his anti-untouchability programme demanded such action. Gandhi reserved his *Satyagraha* only for the political resistance against the foreign ruler. When the untouchables went to use the same weapon against the tyranny of the upper caste *Hindus*, it was Gandhiji who condemned those

Satyāgrahis on the ground that *Satyāgraha* cannot be used against one's own kindred or countryman! History shows that Gandhi himself used the path of Satyagraha to resist the separate electorate for the untouchables creating tremendous pressure on Ambedkar and his community. Some of the untouchable leaders like M.C. Rajah predicted that the *Dalits* might lose all kinds of social and political sympathy and would have to face a severe antagonism from the *Hindus* in case of Gandhi's euthanasia. Ambedkar had to surrender to the situation the result of which was Poona Pact [1932]. In Ambedkar's language, it was "A mean deal."¹³ It minimised Ambedkar's tireless effort to the upliftment of his class and highlighted Gandhi as the greatest patron of the *Dalits*. The incident of *Kavitha* - a village in Gujarat, shows the Gandhian paradox.¹⁴ The *Dalit* demand for admitting their children in the common village school was resisted by the *Hindus* in the way of various kinds of social boycott leading them to starvation. Gandhi neither took any stance to prosecute the *Hindus* nor did he help the *Dalits* to vindicate their right. Rather, he prescribed them to vacate the village, since he considered self-help as the best help!

- iii. Gandhiji did not want the actual unity and empowerment of the untouchables from the fear that it would make them independent which would result in weakening the rank of the *Hindus*. So his *Harijan Sevak Sangha*, as felt by Ambedkar, was acting the role of *Putanā* by showing charity and thus creating a slave mentality among them instead of inspiring them to win their fate!¹⁵

III

We have discussed in the first section that the main cause of the dilemma of Indian communists was their concern about the exploited working class. Some of the Marxist thinkers projected the National movement as an alliance of the working class along with bourgeoisie. Despite his severe criticism against Gandhiji, R.P. Dutt, in his thesis with Bain Bradley, represents such view. Criticizing that view, which has been expressed in Nambudripad's writings too, Irfan Habib, the eminent Marxist historian, comments that it is incorrect to assume that the working class had the same attitude

towards national movement in the 1940s as it was in 1920s.¹⁶ Though Gandhi might claim his success in organising the Indian mass against the British colonial rule, their political consciousness developed with time and the socialist influence of Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose, along with the peasant organizations built by the leftists, brought a massive change in their attitude towards the national movement. So we see that the Gandhian way lost much of its importance in the nineteen forties in the question of the emancipation of the exploited class. And it seems that it was partly because he treated them as means, not as an aim of his political venture! Ambedkar was very much concerned about the class division in society but had not taken class struggle as the ultimate force behind social change. He was not ready to believe either that socialist revolution in India can remove all kinds of exploitation or that the end of class- exploitation means the end of caste- exploitation and untouchability. In Marxist interpretation, caste is seen to be an economic and historical phenomenon which is used as a mechanism of class exploitation since it denies the status of the mobility of the lowest elements of the society, reduces labour costs and facilitates in the extraction of surplus.¹⁷ In *Communist Manifesto*, it is shown that the Bourgeois society has simplified the class antagonisms and has divided society into two great antagonistic camps - the Bourgeoisie and the proletariat, but the earlier societies show complicated arrangements into various orders and a manifold gradation of social ranks.¹⁸ So caste is seen to be one of the older versions of class exploitation. Ambedkar, as we see, did not consider the Marxist explanation of history as adequate, mainly in the context of the problems and they are of the downtrodden in modern Indian Society. A critical exposure of some of his important points of arguments¹⁹ seems imperative at this juncture.

If our aim of emancipation is freedom and if we mean by the term the abolition of mastery and domination on one by another person, what we see, as Ambedkar vehemently declared, is that, the source of power is the religion and social status which regulates the freedom of people. These two factors act in a mutual manner being relative to the social stage. So the socialist claim that an economic revolution, followed by economic equality, is the priority or that the political and social reformation is a great illusion, as estimated by Ambedkar, is an incorrect exposition of society.²⁰ However, the Marxists may demand in this context that economic relationship, as has been claimed in their thesis, is the main but not the only

and ultimate motivating force of human history.²¹ Historical Materialism is not confined within the explanation of the mode of production - the economic base of society and social development. It is also concerned with other social factors such as state, opinions, various beliefs and so on. Though this superstructure is dependent on the base, i.e. the economic structure, its development is not entirely controlled by its base. The development of the mode of production which is a combination of productive forces and production relation of a given period is originated and conditioned by the historical need of human development and so, in this sense, it is independent of human will. On the other hand, the superstructure is developed by conscious human being for his spiritual urge, so, naturally, its characteristics are complicated and manifold. It is an incorrect way to interpret the Marxist socialist approach to society by oversimplified equations taking the remarks of the thinkers only at face value. The dependency of the superstructure to the base does not entail any economic determinism as claimed by many western thinkers. Marx was very much concerned about the difference between the two expressions: 'to influence' and 'to determine' and he used the first.²² So, Marxism, as we see, never encourages any one-dimensional analysis of social phenomena. Social and political reformation, for which Ambedkar struggled throughout his life, is also a serious issue in Marxist theory and practice. However, the Marxists believe that hunger is the primary and most severe hindrance to all kinds of development. So, they want to start their struggle for a better human society by eradicating the anxiety of starvation at the very outset. The economic reformations in post-revolution Soviet Russia, followed by various kinds of social reformations including mother and child welfare and extermination of prostitution attest this line of reasoning.

Ambedkar accepted some truth in Marx's analysis of society but was not ready to accept it as a complete analysis of the same since it sees the objective force as the ultimate cause of social change. Ambedkar attacks Marx on the ground that he had denied the role of a conscious human being in the development of society. In this context, I am sorry to say that Ambedkar's assessment of Marx and his thought is to some extent, incomplete. The first guiding principle of Historical Materialism indeed says that change and development in society, as in nature, takes place according to the objective laws and the conscious motives behind any activity and the activities themselves are conditioned by the laws of economic development.²³ However, the

Marxist concept of social laws denies any kind of fatalism and always highlights the fact that people can and do change their society through their efforts. Though it shows that the ideas and the role of the individual leaders are the product of the material condition of society and that they always represent a class, it does not deny their role altogether. They act as catalysts in social change. The success and failure of the person Ambedkar in his struggle against untouchability seems to attest this very claim! When the second guiding principle of Historical Materialism claims that social ideas are the product of material conditions of life, the third principle shows that those ideas themselves play an active role in the development of material life.²⁴ Was Babasaheb ready to deny the practical facts attesting these claims? The human subject and subjectivity which is one of the most important points of Dialectical Materialism are by and by proving itself to be a serious issue of research among many of the contemporary Marxist thinkers.

The Marxists, especially the Indians, however, may feel quite an uneasiness facing Ambedkar's very pertinent question on the proletariat revolution in India! The issue, with its ever-increasing importance in contemporary Indian politics, has established itself as one of the most controversial points in the praxis of Marxism. If all the conditions remain the same, as Ambedkar claimed, there remains only one factor which has the power to unite the people and that is the realisation that the fellow man, with whom one steps into the path of revolution, is influenced by the same ideal of equality, fraternity and justice.²⁵ He came upon the realisation that none will join the movement unless he is assured that after the revolution, he will be treated with the same status and will not be treated differently due to his caste.²⁶ It seems that Ambedkar had no doubt on the sincerity of the socialist leaders and he believed that they were influenced by the ideas mentioned above, but his doubt was on the possibility of the actualisation of the very idea! The Marxists, as we see, have shown their apathy to caste-based politics. But it is also a hard truth that a fraction of contemporary Marxists is now interpreting such apathy as the cause of their failure to emerge in northern states.²⁷ They claim that due to this apathy the Indian Marxists failed to achieve any prudent political revenue from this region. Class consciousness has failed to establish its reciprocal relationship with caste consciousness in Indian society. The caste-based politics has established its relevance in Indian politics, may it be in North India or South India. Ambedkar's bitter realisation followed from his

political view that economic status is not enough for procuring social status and this view is gathering more and more supportive evidence in Indian politics. However, Marxism, as we have seen, always leaves an open space for criticism, re-evaluation and acceptance of previous errors in its praxis. The mentioned phenomenon cannot prove Marxism as wrong or obsolete but demands a sincere and context-sensitive analysis from the Indian Marxists.

There is another face of this caste-based politics which has begun to challenge the proper upliftment of the *Dalits*. A new type of demarcation line is being developed from the central decision of reservation in promotion of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in government service.²⁸ The decision has developed serious antagonism between the *Dalits* and the backward communities. However, the saffron politics, with many of its leaders from backward communities, seems to favour the backward interest which is not at all a good sign for the *Dalits*! In this situation, the Marxists have every opportunity to prove their worth.

Besides the traditional casteism, elitist casteism, often based on linguistic chauvinism - a legacy of colonial India, challenges a *Dalit's* due space in the academic and cultural arena. Irfan Habib claims that it is very important to study the origin of Indian intellectuals.²⁹ He has shown that there are two channels of development. The village schools and colleges, as Habib observed, produce intellectuals influenced not only by bourgeois ideologies but also by various kinds of reactionary prejudices of pre-capitalist society including casteism and communalism. On the other hand, the elite colleges of metropolitan cities produce another kind of westernised intellectuals who occupy the top ranks in society and are comfortable with bourgeois ideologies in their private life. Both kinds of intellectuals may play an antagonistic role in a *Dalit's* struggle for socio-cultural space - the former in a crude manner and the latter in a sophisticated but more harmful way! So what we see is that each kind of intellectuals represents a particular class. The Marxist intellectuals, as Habib claims, never form a social class, but a social '*strata*' which, in accordance to the prevailing social structure and the particular specific circumstances may have a link with different classes.³⁰ A Marxist intellectual is not simply an intellectual but an intellectual with the sense of duty to organise and lead the masses. Ambedkar had always a high estimation for the positive role of the intellectuals. But he was also depressed by the fact that many of Indian intellectuals neither maintained rationality

nor did they maintain their mobility. The Marxist intellectuals, with their dialectical process of thinking and commitment to the mass, may play a promising role in the actualisation of Ambedkar's dream.

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