

B. R. Ambedkar: “A Torchbearer of Humanism”

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ABSTRACT: From the time of Postcolonialism, the superiors became more superior and inferior became more inferior. The first person to understand the injustice to the scheduled caste was the Dalit leader Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. In a speech broadcast by All India Radio on 3rd October 1954, in the series of ‘My Personal Philosophy’ Babasaheb said:

“Positively, my social philosophy may be said to be enshrined in three words: liberty, equality and fraternity. Let no one however say that I have borrowed my philosophy from the French Revolution. I have not. My philosophy has roots in religion and not in political science.” (Keer, 1987)

The above quoted expression of Babasaheb established him as social reformer with all inclusive humanistic approach. A strong opponent of Hindu Caste System and an ardent supporter of Buddhist philosophy of caste and gender free society. He believes humanity is the greatest religion. For the sake of caste free society Jyotiba Phule was the pioneer leader of the movement. Ambedkar joined the hands with Jyotiba Phule and Chokhemela in his approach to Dalits and women. He asserted that “the real inspiration of literature is common people”. Being a leader of untouchables he asserted to know the pain and sorrow of marginalized peoples because true humanity resides there. Throughout his life he made an attempt to deconstruct/ re/construct the caste system and provides the voice to the suffering and yet silenced humanity. His clear, honest and out-spoken views about Indian society paved the way for a new literature called Dalit literature. He vocally said “Educate, Agitate and Unite”. The real empowerment comes through education. There is no other way for the emancipation of Dalit. The paper proposes to calculate Ambedkar’s contribution in the creation of a new India, which is progressive and just.

Keywords: Caste system, education, empowerment, marginalized, humanity.

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We’ll set fire to the divisions of Caste
 We’ll debate philosophical questions in the market place,
 We’ll have dealings with despised households,
 We’ll go around in different paths. (Kailaspati, 391)

Postcolonial world allow us to interrogate the relationship between power and social construct. Postcolonial voices are mostly the “voices of resistance” challenges the canonical authorial dominance. Subaltern historiography in India draws attention to the exclusion and marginalization of the Dalits, women and working class. Kancha Ilaiah once suggested that:

Unless the oppressed learn to hegemonies their own self, unless the culture and consciousness of the oppressed is put forward visibly in public debate, unless this culture is prepared to clash with the culture and consciousness of the enemy in public, a society of equals will remain an illusion.(Ilaiah. 168)

All over the world oppressed groups considered “others” or “margins” are at present engaged in serious explorations of history and interrogations of culture. They try to retrieve their lost pride and honour with the intention of redefining their sense of self respect.

In India it is centuries old belief that caste-system is a divine construct and not a human construct. Due to this belief hierarchical *Varnashrama* is considered sacrosanct which cannot be challenged. As a result production and distribution of knowledge remained in the hands of three upper castes of the society. The “knowledge” was controlled by Brahmins the highest among social order. The “politics of knowledge” has silenced the voices of Eklavyas and Shambukas. The truth of/about oppressed remained excluded from human history. Conditions are ripe today for the outbreak of “marginal studies”. They are able to create their “space” and “voices” in human history. The desire is not to be lost in grandeur of past but to understand the problem of the day and to work towards a more humane future of the world. Dalits in India and African American in U.S. are asking two main questions to the dominant classes. They are:

- 1) Do we have role to play in the ever changing scenario in which history and the future are both fast evolving?
- 2) Social invisibility and political powerlessness continue to haunt our destiny leaving us in perpetual wretchedness and humiliation?

The purpose of marginal literature is to open the channels of dialogue with the “center” to create harmonious co-existence.

The man who remained a source of inspiration and a guiding force for Dalits was Dr. B. R. Ambedkar the “architect of Indian Constitution”. Hari Sharan Chabra a biographer of Ambedkar describes him as:

Tall, well-built and dark he is known for defines and agility of mind. An intellectual giant he has a rough exterior but he is intensively humane from within. (Hari Charan, 142)

He is the first untouchable formally educated to the highest level. He obtained his Ph.D from U.S. Despite his achievement he remained true to his originality. Inspired by thirteen century poet Chokhamela and Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, he has decided to fight against the injustice and inequality towards untouchables. His study in the West provided him with the democratic Socialist ideology. He was also influenced by Booker T. Washington the founder of the Tuskegee Institute who prompted Education as a means of African American emancipation. He also believed in egalitarian individualism of Thomas Paine. As Zelliott points out:

Ambedkar acquired in the United State a strong unwavering belief in the power of democratic institutions to bring about social equality. (Zelliott. 28)

He turned as a political fighter and leader of untouchables with Mahar agitation regarding Chavadar Lake. In his speech “We too are human” he said:

It is not as if drinking the water of the Chavadar Lake will make us immortal. We have survived well enough all these days without drinking it. We are not going to the Chavadar Lake merely to drink its water. We are going to the Lake to assert that we too are human beings like others. It must be clear that this meeting has been called to set up the norm of equality. (Ambedkar. 24)

The bitter experiences of Caste injustice and inequality convinced Ambedkar to leave his own ancient religion, and he converted to Buddhism in 1956. He adhered to the value of Enlightenments. According to Ambedkar, “Buddhism was more susceptible to reinterpretation and adaptation to the modern world.” (Jafferlot, 133) Buddhism certainly offered the best possible choice because it was an egalitarian religion entertaining relations with Hinduism. During an All India Radio broadcast on October 3, 1954 he declared:

Positively my social philosophy may be enshrined in three words: Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Let no one however say that I borrowed my philosophy from the French Revolution. I have not. My philosophy has roots in religion and not in political science. I have derived them from the teachings of my master, the Buddha. My philosophy has a mission. I have to do the work of conversion to Buddhism. (K.N.Kadam.1)

By converting himself to Buddhism he has taken the oaths which fulfilled his dream of Enlighten India “Prabuddha Bharat”. He along with his thousands of followers have taken the following oaths.

- 1) I believe that all human beings are equal.
- 2) I shall endeavor to establish equality.
- 3) I shall follow the eight fold path of Buddha.
- 4) I shall lead my life striving to cultivate a harmonious blend of the three basic principles of Buddhism Enlightenment Percepts and Compassion.
- 5) By my embracing Buddhism I am being reborn.
- 6) I shall be compassionate to all living beings and I shall nurture them with care.

It is said that nothing comes out of nothing. There are always social and historical contexts responsible for a new science, discipline or new form of literature. The beginnings of Dalit literature are traced back to Ambedkar’s struggle for Dalit emancipation in the early twentieth century. Dalits’ victimization of social and cultural inequality gave a birth to an alternative revolutionary literature which is known as “protest literature”.

Ambedkar has transformed the understanding of untouchability, caste and the nature of Indian society and politics. Dalit studies mainly focuses on the retrieval of Dalit traditions and knowledge. It challenges the objectivity of knowledge and endorses the view that different belief system and contradictory interpretations are possible. Dalit literature is the representation of “collective experiences and collective voices”. Ambedkar accorded an extremely important place to humanity in his thought system. According to Limbale,

“Humanism is synonymous with Ambedkarism because Ambedkarite thought is creative thought about fighting against the devaluation of human beings.” (Limbale. 5)

Ambedkar’s all inclusive approach to liberty and equality are the key concepts to evaluate Dalit literature. He says:

Fraternity and liberty are really derivative notions. The basic and fundamental conceptions are equality and respect for human personality. Fraternity and liberty take their roots in these two fundamental conceptions. Digging further down it may be said that equality is the original notion and respect for human personality is a reflection of it. So that where equality is denied, everything else may be taken to be denied. (Ambedkar. 36)

Dalit literature remains humanistic since its inception. The agenda of this new literature is the centrality of human beings. Limbale rightly observes:

“Recognizing the centrality of the human being, this literature is thoroughly saturated with humanity’s joys and sorrows. It regards human being as supreme, and leads them towards total revolution.” (Limbale. 30)

Dalit literature’s realistic, life-affirming and humanistic perceptions clearly reflected in the advice of Ambedkar to the young budding Dalit writers. He says:

Through your literary creations cleanse the stated values of life and culture. Don’t have a limited objective. Transform the light of your pen so that the darkness of village is removed. Do not forget that in our country the world of Dalits and ignored class is extremely large. Get to know intimately their pain and sorrows and try through your literature to bring progress in their lives. (Ambedkar. 8)

Throughout his life Bharat Ratna Ambedkar remained a Dalit symbol par excellence. Dalit finds their presence in India’s public political and literary space due to Ambedkar. It was not by chance that Ambedkar became the first Pan Indian Untouchable Leader. His intelligence, his energy and socio, religious contexts played a key role in shaping his destiny. He is an all time great visionary who has written the future of millions of untouchables in India. Dalit poet Hingonekar’s poem describes the silver lining for Dalits in India. He writes:

If You had kept Your thumb
History would have happened
somehow differently.
But... You gave your thumb
and history also
became theirs.
Eklavya,
since that day they

have not even given you a glance.

Forgive me, Eklavya. I won't be fooled now

by their sweet words.

My Thumb

will never be broken. (Hingonekar, 101)

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