



Theorizing Caste: An Examination of Ambedkar's Views

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Ambedkar's Anthropological Theory of Caste:

Ambedkar had propounded a theory of caste in his research paper entitled “Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development”. It was read before the Anthropology Seminar on May 9, 1916 chaired by Dr. A.A. Goldenweizer at Columbia University, New York. Later it was published in *The Indian Antiquary, A Journal of Oriental Research*, vol. XLVI – 1917. Ambedkar was convinced that several mistakes were made by students of caste, in the past. For instance, the European students had unduly emphasized the role of color in the caste system. In his belief, those European students, themselves being impregnated with the color prejudices, had readily accepted the color to be the chief factor. In this respect, he agreed with Ketkar who observed: “Whether a tribe or a family was really Aryan or Dravidian was a question which never troubled the people of India, until foreign scholars came in and began to draw the line. The color of the skin had long ceased to be a matter of importance.”¹

Coming to his theory of caste, Ambedkar agreed with the general proposition of ethnologists that the “population of India is a mixture of Aryans, Dravidians, Mongolians and Scythians. All these stocks of people came into India from various directions, centuries ago, when they were in a tribal state.”² When the dust settled down after the initial skirmishes and fierce battles, the process of amalgamation of these groups started which eventually culminated into perfect homogeneity through cultural unity. Ambedkar, therefore, confidently proclaimed: “Taking this for granted, I venture to say that there is no country that can rival the Indian peninsula with respect to the unity of its culture.”³ Senart laid emphasis on the “idea of pollution” as a characteristic of caste. Ambedkar disagreed with Senart and said that the idea of pollution is by no means a peculiarity of caste as such. According to him, it originates in “ceremonialism” associated with priestly caste. Thus the “ideas of pollution” is a characteristic of caste only in so far as caste has a religious fervor. In Ambedkar's view, the caste being an enclosed unit has the

inherent tendency to “exclusiveness”, i.e., to limit social intercourse, including interdining and intermarriage. Thus, there was no positive prohibition but it was the natural result of the caste. However, in due course of time, it must have assumed ‘prohibitory character of religious injunction’.⁴

Ambedkar felt that Ketkar was incorrect in holding that ‘prohibition of intermarriage and Membership by Autogeny’ were two characteristics of caste. In his view, both of them were two sides of the same coin. His view was based on the reasoning that prohibition of intermarriage would automatically mean limiting the membership to those born within the group. The essence of caste, to him, is endogamy, i.e. absence of intermarriage. In a system where intermarriage is prohibited, such a system tends to alienate itself from others and convert itself into an enclosed social unit having an independent identity of its own. Ambedkar, therefore, defined caste in India as “an artificial chipping off of the population into fixed and definite units each one prevented from fusing into another through the custom of endogamy.”⁵

Origin and Creation of Caste:

Dr. Ambedkar maintained that when endogamy is superpositioned on exogamy, castes are created. Making an inquiry into the origin of caste, Ambedkar endeavors to explain it with the help of an illustration where an imaginary group is taken for study. Suppose this imaginary group desired to make itself into a caste, it would be absolutely essential “to circumscribe a circle outside which people should not contract marriages.” He further holds that the prevention of marriages outside one’s own group would be beset with stiff resistance unless parity between the marriageable units of the two sexes was maintained. Absolute parity is an impossibility, for to maintain parity a couple should die simultaneously, which the experience shows it does not happen. Therefore, a situation would arise where *a surplus woman* was created when her husband died and likewise a *surplus man* was created when his wife died. These surplus men and women constitute a menace to the caste. Not finding the suitable partners inside the caste they have to find for them in other groups which meant transgression of the boundary.⁶ Therefore, they have to be dealt with in the following manner.

(a) A Surplus Woman:

There is a two-fold danger, illustrates Ambedkar, in keeping a surplus woman within the caste. Firstly, she may remarry outside the caste in violation of endogamy; and secondly, she may remarry within the caste thereby marring the chances of the potential brides in the caste. This double danger can be solved by burning the surplus woman along with her deceased husband. But, this is a cruel and uncivilized remedy. The other remedy is to enforce compulsory widowhood. This is also fraught with danger. There is every likelihood of the widow indulging in immoral conduct. Therefore, she is thrown into such a condition that she is no longer a source

of allurements. This led to prohibiting her use of jewellery and colored clothes, and shaving of her head.

(b) A Surplus Man:

Man has always been regarded as a dominant figure. He is the source of all the social, economic, political and religious injunctions. Therefore, burning him along with his deceased wife is out of question on two counts – (i) firstly, it is inhuman; and (ii) secondly, the caste cannot afford to lose the important asset which increases its numerical strength. In view of this, he has to remain in the caste as an active participator in the group activities. However, he may either follow the path of self-imposed celibacy or renounce the world. Human nature being what it is, he cannot be expected to go along that path. Therefore, the other course left to him is either to remarry a woman of another caste or of the same caste. There is a danger inherent in the former in that he would be violating endogamy; and the latter would create a situation wherein he would become a competitor to the other men. Hence, he is to be “provided with a wife only by recruiting a bride from the ranks of those not yet marriageable in order to tie him down to the group.”⁷ It serves the under-mentioned three purposes:

- (i) he is kept within the caste;
- (ii) the numerical depletion through constant outflow is checked; and
- (iii) preservation of morals is ensured.

This general mechanism of a caste in a system of castes is followed in letter and spirit in the Hindu society. The existence of customs such as *Sati* or burning of the widow on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband, and child marriage of girls prove this point.⁸ Ambedkar maintained that the existence of classes in the society is inevitable but it hardly implies the simultaneous presence of ‘class-conflict’ in society. Caste and class being next door neighbors; it is the class which converts itself into caste. Thus, caste, to him, is nothing but an enclosed class. As to the question, which class raised this enclosure around itself first, Ambedkar replies that it was the priestly class (in India Brahmins) which raised this enclosure in the first instance around itself and has become the father of the institution of caste.⁹

Obscurantism of Growth and Development of Caste:

Ambedkar was one of the earliest historiographers to pen down both the recorded and mythical history of ancient India with such an anthropological acumen. He was keen on unraveling the mystery shrouded around the origin and development of caste system as well as its infectious spread among the rest of the non-Brahmin population of the Hindu society. He suggests two possibilities:

- (a) either it must have been imposed on the docile population by a law;
- (b) or it has grown according to some law of social growth peculiar to India.

The possibility as mentioned at (a) above, is based on the Great man theory. There has been the common belief that Manu has been the originator or inventor of the caste system. Ambedkar disagreed with this theory. In his view, Manu could not have been the inventor of the caste system. It is significant to note that in every country, it is believed, that law is handed down either by an avatar (as in Hinduism), a prophet (as in Islam), son of God (as in Christianity), a tyrant or a dictator. Manu cannot be classified in any of these categories cited above. That being the factual position, Manu did not give the law of caste and he could not have done so. Therefore, Ambedkar held that the caste existed even before Manu had come into the scene. But, one thing is certain that it was Manu who codified the Caste System in his Manusmriti. Refusing to hold the Brahmins guilty of imposing the Caste System, Ambedkar said “The Brahmins may have been guilty of many things, and I dare say they were, but the imposing of the caste system on the non-Brahmin population was beyond their mettle. They may have helped the process by their glib philosophy, but they certainly could not have pushed their scheme beyond their own confines.”¹⁰

Ambedkar’s theory of caste proceeds with the basic premise that like any other society, Hindu society was formed initially as a class system based on the principle of division of labor with four classes with the following labels:

- (a) Brahmins: the priestly class;
- (b) Kshatriyas: the military class;
- (c) Vaishyas: the merchant class;
- (d) Shudras: the artisan or menial class.

In the initial class system, the members could freely change their class labels, if qualified. As pointed out earlier, the priestly class in every country has been kept at the highest pedestal and usually alienated themselves from other classes. India is no exception to this. However, the peculiar feature in India is that in due course of time endogamy was enforced by the priestly class which meant total exclusiveness leading to caste. Being subject to law of social division of labor, the other classes underwent differentiation. To put it in the words of the learned Doctor, “At sometime in the history of Hindus, the priestly class socially detached itself from the rest of the body of the people and through a closed door policy became a caste by itself. The other

classes being subject to the law of social division of labor underwent differentiation, some into large, other into very minute groups.”¹¹

Principle of Imitation as the Basis for Formation of Caste:

Ambedkar then proceeds to explain the source of numerous castes and sub-castes of today. According to him, Vaishyas and Shudras were the original ‘inchoate plasm’ which formed the source of numerous castes in India. Such sub-division was quite a natural phenomenon. But formation of endogamous divisions was something unnatural about them. This made them lose their open door policy and enable them to become self-enclosed units known as castes.¹² The pertinent question in this connection is whether these classes closed their doors voluntarily or whether they were compelled to do so. Ambedkar answered it saying that “some closed the door; others found it closed against them.”¹³

Babasaheb offered the theory of imitation based on psychological interpretation. Since the Brahmins adopted a closed-door policy, it has become a fashion with other classes to toe their line. In other words, the endogamy practiced by the Brahmins was imitated by other classes, who in turn, became endogamous castes.¹⁴ In this connection, Ambedkar observed, “It is ‘the infection of imitation’ that caught all these sub-divisions on their onward march of differentiation and has turned them into caste. The propensity to imitate is a deep seated one in the human mind and need not be deemed an inadequate explanation for the formation of the various castes in India.”¹⁵ There are three attributes to the law of imitation as expounded by Gabriel Tarde. They are as follows:

- (a) imitation flows from higher to lower;
- (b) the extent or intensity of imitation varies inversely in proportion to distance which is used in sociological sense; and
- (c) the thing that is most imitated is the most superior one or those that are nearest.

Ambedkar had built the superstructure of his theory of caste on the foundation of the above cited law of imitation in so far as it relates to the spread of caste to other classes of the Hindu society. To prove his thesis, Ambedkar invited his attention to the conditions of imitation and applied them to the castes in India. The conditions of imitation as enumerated by Ambedkar are as under:

- (a) “that the source of imitation must enjoy prestige in the group”, and
- (b) “that there must be numerous and daily relations among members of the group”.¹⁶

Ambedkar had applied these two conditions to the Hindu society in order to establish the spread of Caste System to non-Brahmin classes by means of the law of imitation. As per the above-mentioned principle, the imitation flows from higher to lower class. In Hindu society, a Brahmin is not only venerated but also treated as a semi-god or demi-god, i.e., Bhoodevata. It is no doubt that such a person shall be worthy of imitation. If he lives in an endogamous enclosure, the other classes automatically imitate him, for “imitation is easy and invention is difficult.”¹⁷ The other proof shown in respect of the operation of the law of imitation with reference to the caste in India is the observance of the customs such as *sati*, enforced widowhood, and girl (child) marriage. It is noticed that “the observance of these customs varies directly with the distance that separates the castes.”¹⁸

To amplify it further, it may be stated that those castes that are nearest to the Brahmin caste have imitated all the three customs. The Kshatriya and Vaishyas castes fall in this category. Ambedkar, therefore, observed: “Those castes that are nearest to the Brahmins have imitated all the three customs and insist on strict observance thereof. Those that are less near have imitated enforced widowhood and girl marriage; others, a little farther off, have only girl marriage and those farthest off have imitated only the belief in caste principle. This imperfect imitation, I dare say, is due partly to what Tarde calls ‘distance’ and partly to the barbarous character of these customs. This phenomenon is the complete illustration of Tarde’s law and leaves no doubt that the whole process of caste-formation in India is a process of imitation of the higher to the lower.”¹⁹ The above analysis makes it abundantly clear that the non-Brahmin classes became castes on the pattern of the Brahmin caste. The reason for adopting the pattern of the Brahmin caste is the theocratic nature of the Hindu society wherein the priestly class is venerated and imitated, due to its supposed proximity to God.

Theory of Mechanistic Process of the Formation of Caste:

There are some classes who closed their doors which resulted in being closed out. Ambedkar called this process as mechanistic process of the formation of caste. He called it ‘mechanistic’ because it is inevitable in nature. It is pertinent to note that this aspect had escaped the notice of earlier scholars who attempted to evolve the theories of caste. The basic premise on which Ambedkar proceeded to advocate the theory of mechanistic process of the formation of caste was “that caste in the singular number is an unreality. Castes exist only in the plural number.”²⁰ In other words, according to him there is no such thing as ‘a caste’; there are always ‘castes’. Human beings being what they are, ‘fissiparous’ tendencies are common in every society which antagonize the ethical, religious, and social code of the caste. Such recalcitrant behavior on the part of certain members of the caste invites the wrath of the rest of its members which leads to excommunication. The excommunicated members form themselves into a new caste. The reason for forming a new caste is that after being excommunicated by one caste, they would not get entry or admission into another existing caste due to its endogamous nature. Thus, these excommunicated members are shown the door by their own caste men and the other castes shut

their doors against them. Therefore, they have no other way than to form a new caste. This is the inevitable result of excommunication.²¹

Concluding Ambedkar's theory of caste, it can be said that in all humility and with true spirit of a scholar, he did not consider his theory of caste as infallible. This is what he said: "I am not, however, so presumptuous as to think them in any final or anything more than a contribution to a discussion on the subject. For myself I shall find as much pleasure in a positive destruction of my own ideology, as in a rational disagreement on a topic, which, notwithstanding many learned disquisitions, is likely to remain controversial forever. To conclude, while I am ambitious to advance a theory of caste, if it can be shown to be untenable I shall be equally willing to give it up."²²

Notes

1. Quoted from Ketkar's History of Caste, (p. 82) by Ambedkar in his "Castes in India", Bheem Patrika Publication, Jalandhar, 1977, pp. 31.

2. Ibid., pp. 3.

3. Ibid., pp. 4.

4. Busi, S.N. – "Mahatma Gandhi and Babasaheb Ambedkar", 1997, pp. 3-4.

5. Ambedkar, B.R. – "Castes in India", op. cit., pp. 8.

6. Busi, S.N. – "Mahatma Gandhi and Babasaheb Ambedkar", 1997, pp. 4-5.

7. Ambedkar, B.R. – "Castes in India", op. cit., pp. 15.

8. Ibid., pp. 16.

9. Ibid., pp. 20.

10. Ibid., pp. 22.

11. Ibid., pp. 24.

12. Ibid., pp.25.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., pp. 27.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., pp. 28.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., pp. 29.

21. Busi, S.N. – “Mahatma Gandhi and Babasaheb Ambedkar”, 1997, pp. 11.

22. Ibid., pp. 12.