International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

Beyond Caste as a Social Construct: Ideology, Rhetoric, and Social Transformation in Ambedkar's Writings

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Abstract

Caste is part of religious and social unit in Indian society, and since ancient times given us a system which has been followed by all. Indian scriptures has given the Chaturvarna system which classifies the people into four main clans or caste, first are the Brahmins, second Kshatriyas, third Vaishya and the last Shudras. And the classification is in respective order, Brahmins being the top ranked among all while the Shudras are ranked lowest, because of which they faced discrimination and were not even permitted to get educated or perform any religious activities or gatherings. They were out-casted of several communal and social rights in the basis of the ideology that they are the lowest and performs menial labor task for the other clans. Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, one of the leading figures of modern India, also belonged to the lower Hindu caste and faced inhuman behavior, deprived of basic life amenities and denied for education; always had a different thought against this caste division and the opposed the discrimination based on it. He completed his education against all odds and dedicated his career for the upliftment of India, especially the downtrodden caste of Indian society. In this article we are examining writings of Ambedkar, where he tries to break the ideological construct of caste, through rhetoric, counter-narrative and social transformation. His some major works such as Who were Shudras? How they came to be the Fourth Varna in the Indi-Aryan Society, Annihilation of Caste, Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development, Buddha and his Dhamma to evaluate how he re-examines the origin of caste system, how it became an ideology and how he uses rhetoric to persuade his readers to think beyond the caste construct, and have a dignified life by social transformation.

Keywords: Reinterpretation, Varna System, Degradation, Social Transform.

Introduction

Caste system is a social arrangement in which a community is organized by assigning different occupation to different caste groups, where the Caste identity of an individual is inherited by birth. Each caste has been historically associated with the inhered social status, interaction and behavior and assigned occupation. The Indian Caste System is a closed system of stratification classifying people into a hierarchy of four ranked castes called Varna, supplemented by unranked outcastes at the bottom, and subdivided into specialized sub-castes called jatis [1]. Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, also known as Baba Saheb, stands as one of the most prominent figures of modern Indian and the chief architect of constitution of India, has always been a steadfast critic of this caste system in India. Caste system has made an unjustified

division and the Baba Saheb has done numerous efforts in shaping the modern India. Born into a Mahar family—a community marginalized and deprived of social, educational, and political rights—Ambedkar's life was a testament to the struggle for dignity and justice [3]. His multifaceted career as a jurist, economist, writer, and social reformer was driven by a commitment to securing rights for the downtrodden castes.
He has strongly rebelled against the origin of caste system from the sacrificial dismemberment of the divine man, the Virat Purusha Shukta, whose various limbs gave birth to the various castes in the following order --- mouth became the Brahmin or priestly class; arms became the Kshatriya or warrior; thighs became the Vaishya or artisan and the feet became the Shudra or servant [2]. The Indian caste system is characterized by repulsion, hierarchy, and hereditary specialization, enforcing strict rules related to endogamy (marriage within one's caste), occupational restriction, adherence to diet laws (such as Pacca and Kachcha food), and maintaining purity/avoiding pollution, which collectively restrict social interaction and caste mobility [1]. This paper seeks to analyse Ambedkar's critic of caste as ideological construct and not just a social order in some major works of Ambedkar such as, Annihilation of Caste, Mooknayak, Who Were Shudras?, Buddha and his Dhamma, Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development. Further the paper analyses how his writings provides a rhetorical methods; logos, ethos, pathos to critique caste system, challenges dominant narratives and accepted beliefs, uses d authorial intrusion to persuade his readers and social reform against this unjust hierarchical order that is deep rooted in evert individuals who believes it without questioning.

Methodology

The research article examines qualitative, interpretive approach based on close textual analysis of selected writings of Dr. B. R Ambedkar. Primary text such as, Annihilation of Caste and Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development that analyses argumentative and rhetoric writing to critic the established ideologies and authorial voice and audience relation to persuade readers and counter-narrative to question the legitimacy of the social order. Further it examines Mooknayak and Buddha and his Dhamma that extends the analysis to articulate the alternatives to caste-based social relations. The primary sources are contextualized and are link between the study's interpretation and previous research is evaluated through secondary research. The study is still text-based and makes no attempt to gage modern people's psychological sentiments.

Critique of Caste

The Caste order or system of Varna has been part of social and political discrimination since ancient times. The caste system delegates professions, social rights, and spiritual capacities inherited by birth, it does not merely assigns a social arrangement, and it also asserts that persons belonging to different castes possess fundamentally different natures. That means the Brahmin is not just who performs priestly functions but they are priests at their core. The Sudra is not only assigned menial labour but are constituted for servitude and slavery [4]. In India, caste-based discrimination has historically been associated with the hierarchical social order represented through the Chaturvarna that Classifies the Varnas into four different groups. Ambedkar has always rejected the classification based on caste calling it "indifferentism," which he characterized as the "worst kind of disease that can infect a people" [3]. Born into a Mahar family—a community marginalized and deprived of social, educational, and political rights—Ambedkar's life was a testament to the struggle for dignity and justice [3]. His multifaceted career as a jurist, economist, writer, and social reformer was driven by a commitment to securing rights for the downtrodden castes. The

stratification of caste to him is actually a division of labour based on profession; on the basis of their works, it categorises people into different groups creating a division that prioritizes themselves over others, creating prejudice among the different groups. But this stratification is unjust that leads to unequal distribution of resources, social rights, influences social behaviours, job and social harmony. Not just this, it also suppress the ones lowest and marginalizes them to the fringes of society, denying them access to basic needs such as education, clean and dignified living, social exclusion, to live and roam freely. It discriminates the people belonging to particular caste or creates a difference because of the work they do, as assigned by the Varnas and divides the labourers or workers not just the labour or work. That is why he calls it a division of labourers and not labour [3].He not just criticizes the caste division but he challenged the ideology or belief of the system that created the division. His pragmatic study of Purusha Sukta, a hymn that tells the origin of the four social groups of the caste system written in Vedic scriptures, particularly the Rig Veda. Purusha was a mighty being and his different body parts symbolised four social groups or caste of the Hindu religion. The Brahmins came from his mouth, the Kshatriyas from his arms, the Vaishya from his thighs and the Shudras, from his feet. By linking each group to a part of the body this special picture shows a society that has an order [2]. The hierarchical ordering of these groups provided an ideological basis for distinctions of status, privilege, and social interaction, providing the credibility to the division of caste and inherited occupation on the basis of it. Ambedkar by this argument, does not merely describe the division of caste system as division based on occupation but challenges the system by questioning the heredity of occupation and discrimination based on caste. And logically unfolds the classification of caste based on work which initially is done to organise the society is unjustifiable. And his arguments written is such a logical manner that encourages readers to critically re-examine the inherited social construct of caste system and the hidden inequality in it.

Caste system is not just a division of occupation that constructs a social management, but a systemic ideological formation. In his explanation of caste system as unjust, Ambedkar systematically used his writings to change the dominant ideological constructs of hind scriptures. He examines Vedic literature, including the Purusha Sukta, and questions the explanations of history of Shudras and provides a counter-narrative to challenge the dominant religious ideologies of Caste hierarchy. He noted that in the Indo-Aryan culture, Shudras were originally a specific racial group, but ongoing conflict with Brahmin rishi, Vashishtha, and Shudra King, Shudas, eventually led to their marginalization as an "untouchable" class [p. 14o/160, 8]. In his view, the caste system is a harmful institution because it establishes an unexplained and rigid hierarchy, leading to the marginalization of the Shudras (lower-class Hindus) [3]. Ambedkar enquires the fourth position of Shudras in the Varna system and provides a historical analysis of the term "Shudra" and questioned the unexplained dominance of “Brahmins.” The Manu Smriti says: “He (Brahmin) may not dwell in the kingdom of a Shudra nor in one full of unrighteous people, nor in one invaded by hosts of heretics nor in one possessed by low-born men. A Brahmin who performs a sacrifice for a Shudra should not be invited to dine with other Brahmins at a Shraddha ceremony. His company will destroy all merit that which may otherwise be obtained from such a dinner [p.45/64, 8]. And by his arguments he tries to explain that Brahmins due to prejudice not just denied to communicate with Shudras or as mentioned low-born men, but also condemned those who interacted or performed religious rituals for them. Through an epistemic manner the Shudras were placed at the lowest position in this hierarchy and were assigned the role of serving the other three groups and were denied several religious practices as well. Ambedkar challenges this dominant narrative of hierarchical order of caste that constructed this ideology that Brahmins are the top-most Varna and Shudras are the lowest by questioning the authority,

of religious scriptures, such as Manusmriti that asserts this hierarchy, rather than just accepting it as natural or sacred, he examines how such beliefs support unequal social relationships.

As Varna system is seen as archaic, divine and inherited in Indian society it is considered as gospel truth. Ambedkar through his logical arguments tries to challenge this divine adaptation of caste division. He examine several Brahminical religious literature to demonstrate the restrictions imposed on Shudras in religious practices. According to the Kathaka Samhita and the Maitrayani Samhita, a Shudra was not permitted to milk a cow whose milk was intended for the Agnihotra sacrifice. Similarly, the Satapatha Brahmana, the Maitrayani Samhita, and the Panchavimsha Brahmana contain restrictions concerning the participation of Shudras in sacrificial ceremonies [8]. Ambedkar argues that the denial of *Upanayana*, the sacred-thread initiation associated with entry into Vedic learning, was a crucial mechanism in the degradation of the Shudras, as Brahmins refused to perform Upanayana ceremony for the Shudras [8]. And this lead to the discrimination and degradation of Shudras from rest of the other caste [pg. 156/176, 8].

In his own works, such as "The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why Did They Become Untouchables?" Analyse how Brahminic theology was used to manipulate social rules and maintain power over other classes. The conflict between the Brahmin rishi and Shudra king extended to hostility and denial of Upanayana for the Shudras. Ambedkar proposes this historical explanation of conflict to be the reason for the degradation of Shudras. And he dismantles the Brahmins claim for superiority over other three Varnas. Brahmins acclaimed themselves to be the teacher (guru) to all other Varnas simply because of inherited, the will determine the duties to all other Varnas and King's authority did not apply to them and several other status to themselves. To which Kshatriyas showed resistance, which led to degradation of hostility to all three Varna, to which Shudras got affected as well [p.189/208, 8]. Ambedkar contended that while Brahmins might be an educated class, they often lack the objectivity to think beyond the interests of their own class, whereas a "wise and educated Shudra" could attain a level of critical thinking that transcends such bias [5]. He depicts this social hierarchy, as a system rather than an undeniable social fact by challenging the rationales for it as well as the authority behind them. Even today his works persuade his readers to challenge the unfair order and refuse to blindly follow the conventional ideologies and make choices consciously.

According to Ambedkar, the fundamental mechanism maintaining this hierarchy is endogamy—the practice of marrying within a specific social group or clan. He argued that the "superposition of endogamy on exogamy means creation of caste" and identified endogamy as the "only characteristic that is peculiar to caste" [3]. Because of caste system endogamy has been created, that is, marrying within own group or same caste, and is artificially superimposed on exogamy, which created this rigid caste order even more closed. The religious scriptures such as Rig Veda created the division of class and Shastras and Smritis command them to preserve caste that leads to strict endogamy and closed structure of caste. He is not just blaming the Varna or the religion of imposing the caste and heredity occupation but constructs a credible argument on social mechanism such as endogamy. Ambedkar challenges the legitimacy of dominant belief with rationality and rhetoric to re-examine the social order.

Through an epistemic study of caste system and its origin, Ambedkar uses logic like questioning the heredity of caste, refutes to existing order, like hierarchy of caste system by questioning the Brahmnic superiority over others and the established narratives of Chaturvarna. He further provides a counter-narrative to dismantle the ideological construct of Varna system by analysing the historical explanation of Brahminic theology backed by Holy Scriptures. Through his writings he dismantle the Caste system as a

social construct and not a fact. And gives credibility to his statement by providing the injustice it creates socially and challenges the authority who impose caste and caste based discrimination through authorial intrusion. He writes, "The enemy you must grapple with is not the people who observe caste, but the Shastras which teach them this religion of caste" [3].

Reform according to Ambedkar

In his seminal (though undelivered) lecture "Annihilation of Caste" (1944), Ambedkar called for the complete demolition of the caste system, noting that it "killed public spirit" and "destroyed the sense of public charity" [1]. He argued that as long as the caste system exists, a true social revolution is impossible, and that Hindus must "unlearn" existing class practices to facilitate meaningful change [1]. And here he advocated for complete destruction of caste system. The caste of an individual, could determine access to education, his/her occupation, limits the social interaction amongst, their marriage, and dignity; irrespective of individual's ability or before they could exercise any choice. Political or legal equality alone would not be sufficient if social relations continued to be hierarchical [3]. Therefore he advocated for social reform over political reform. For him democratic political reform alone is not enough if society continues to run through social practices like; caste hierarchy, untouchability and inequality. Ambedkar contends that urging people to regard one another with kindness is not sufficient to eradicate caste, the social framework that gave people this classification needs to consciously change. His concern that political change should not be treated sufficient, but political democracy and social reform had to work side by side. His work examines the effects of caste system on society and persuades his readers this social construct and advocates for a reform which gives equal opportunity to every individual irrespective to their inherited caste. He advocates for complete annihilation of caste to eliminate the discrimination based on caste and bring a desired reform that promotes equality, liberty and fraternity in society.

Buddhism as an alternative ethical vision

For a reform such big, and to build a cohesive force for social change, he wanted to annihilate caste and its religious backing by Hindu religion. Ambedkar's quest for a religion that unified people and alleviated distress led him to Buddhism. In his work *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1957), he presented a scientific approach to Buddhist teachings, emphasizing rationality and compassion. He chose Buddhism because it lacked the class divisions found in Hinduism, treating all individuals as equals. This work inspired thousands of Dalits to convert to Buddhism as a means of social and personal growth.

Education as a Tool for Liberation

For Ambedkar, education was the primary weapon against social degradation. To fight against any injustice one must be aware of it and has knowledge enough to fight against it. His famous exhortation—"educate, agitate, and organize"—was not merely a slogan but a comprehensive strategy for social transformation. He defined education not just as the acquisition of degrees, but as a process of comprehensive learning that fosters critical thinking and rational enquiry.

Ambedkar viewed education as essential for developing "rational thinking" so that accurate information could be transmitted globally. He interpreted "agitation" as a mental revolution—a questioning of inappropriate traditions and customs—rather than physical violence. He believed that progress begins with scepticism, citing the example of Newton's questioning of the falling apple as a catalyst for scientific advancement. For Ambedkar, if social rules are inappropriate, they must be modified or boycotted [3].

The liberation of women was another cornerstone of Ambedkar's social vision. He famously stated, "I measure the progress of the community by the degree of progress which women have achieved" [10]. He argued that education was vital for women's liberation and self-reliance, which in turn would enhance literacy rates and national progress.

To empower women, Ambedkar advocated for the elimination of their economic dependence on male family members. He called for fundamental changes in the law to secure educational rights, equality, and property rights for women. His focus on the political literacy and education of Dalit women highlights his multidimensional approach to social justice, recognizing that empowering women is a prerequisite for the success of any society.

The Role of Journalism and Social Advocacy

Recognizing that marginalized communities often lacked a voice in mainstream discourse, Ambedkar turned to journalism. He started the Marathi newspaper *Mooknayak*, meaning "the leader of the voiceless." The publication was designed to address social discrimination and the miserable conditions of Dalits, and to motivate them to speak up against injustice.

Ambedkar observed that while India is a land of "unity in diversity," the scourge of caste discrimination remains a "curse for all of humanity." A century ago, he concluded that poverty and the gap in resource distribution were inextricably linked to this social inequality. His journalistic efforts were aimed at weakening this injustice and building a cohesive force for social change.

Ambedkar also contrasted the philosophies of Karl Marx and Buddha in his 1956 lecture "Buddha and Karl Marx" [3]. He argued that while Marxism might command the nation's growth through dictate, the Buddhist path focuses on modifying mental states and morally training individuals to become "sentinels for the kingdom of righteousness" [3]. This internal transformation allows individuals to develop the critical power necessary to fight injustice of their own will.

Conclusion

Ambekar's writings provides a strong critique to the social construct of caste and its stratification. He not just criticised the system of caste hierarchy and institutions that supported it, but provided logical and credible knowledge in such a way that makes readers question their own rationales. He dismantled the belief of caste based social order by refusing to belief that it is a fact or only truth. He questions it and calls it just a system which has become so rigid that it has become a belief, further he challenges the brahminical authority and provides a counter-narrative for the established superposition of Brahmins in society. With logos or logic he critiques the order and ethos or credibility he challenges the conventional belief and uses pathos to explain the discrimination and its effect on people belonging to the downtrodden caste, we see rhetoric in Ambedkar's writings. He also uses persuasive tone in his works such as Annihilation of Caste, to advocate for complete abolition of caste system to break free from this unfair system and live a dignified life. He also tries to provide a Counter-Narrative for this rigidity of caste system by re-examining the Vedic scriptures and providing evidence-full writing that counters the dominant narrative of the caste hierarchy. Than he calls for political democracy and social reform to change the inequality in the society. For a reform such big, he also provides a scientific and rational system of living by exploring Buddhist philosophy. Further, we learn a big lesson from his writings that is – agitate, educate and organize – which teaches readers to always try to critically analyse any order before accepting it, and educate oneself so that we are aware or any unjust and learned enough to resist it and

lastly to organize ourselves to communally live with equality, fraternity and liberty. Lastly, we learn the role of voice, to always speak up, and how he used his writings to make people aware about their condition which they thought is right as unjust, and to develop critical thinking power in them so that not just get equality but transform internally as well to get a dignified life.

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