



Social

UNTOUCHABILITY-THE PLIGHT OF DALITS: IN THE WORKS OF DALIT WRITERS, DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR AND OM PRAKASH VALMIKI

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Abstract

The right to live a dignified life is one of the basic necessities of human beings. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, self-esteem and being respected takes almost the topmost position in a person's psychological needs. Women's suffragette, the civil movements for equality of African-American's and other such movements in history are a testament of the same. However, Indian history reeks of a dark past, a past that not only differentiated amongst people, but treated them worse than animals. The Indian society's 'Chaturvarna' system placed the untouchables in the lowest social category. They are also called 'Dalits', which literally translates to 'broken men'. The untouchables were forced to inhumane treatment and atrocities for no fault of their own. Basic rights such as drinking water, food, proper accommodation and even walking on roads were not allowed to them. With the efforts of visionaries and social workers, the condition improved; but it is still not a complete victory.

This paper is but a feeble light shining on the struggles that come with unfair castigation of this social hierarchy. It also points out how plight of Dalits is addressed in writings of the Dalit writers. Dalit writers suggested that the plight of Dalits can only be addressed through social consciousness, which can only come with education and legal empowerment.

Keywords: Dalits; Untouchable; Hindu; Chaturvarna; Caste System.

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1. Introduction

To be born a 'Dalit' or an 'Untouchable' in India can be an extremely painful, horrifying and absolutely unfair experience. The Indian society's 'Chaturvarna' system places the untouchables in the lowest social category. They are also called 'Dalits', which literally translates to 'broken men', the untouchables were forced to inhumane treatment and atrocities for no fault of their own. Basic rights such as drinking water, food, proper accommodation and even walking on roads were not allowed to them. In the words of famous Marathi Poet,

*“Turning their backs to the sun, they journeyed through centuries.
Now, now we must refuse to be pilgrims of darkness.
That one, our father, carrying, carrying the darkness is now bent;
Now, now we must lift the burden from his back.
Our blood was spilled for his glorious city
And what we got was the right to eat stones
Now, now we must explode the building that kisses the sky!
After a thousand years we were blessed with sunflower giving fakir;
Now, now, we must like sunflowers turning our faces to the sun.” (1)*

The pilgrims were the Dalit communities, who had experienced brutal caste injustice for a long time in our society and poet is referring to Dr. B.R Ambedkar as their liberator.

Dr Ambedkar was a social prophet for the Dalits. His rise in Indian politics was not less important than Gandhi. We owe it to the efforts of Dr. Ambedkar, the chief architect of Indian constitution and a visionary, that Article 17 of the constitution, which abolished the practice of untouchability and forbade its practice in any form. Before India became an independent country, almost 16% of its untouchable population lived in tyranny of the upper caste Hindus. Some reformers (including Mahatma Gandhi) did speak for them, but in a subtle voice that yielded little or no result.

In one of his articles, published by the D.A.F. (Dr. Ambedkar Foundation), Ambedkar argues that it is a common practice of the people to utter “we must do something for the untouchables.” (2)

However, it is almost never heard that the touchable Hindu must be changed in order to change the scenario. It is almost as if being untouchable is the problem, a disease, and a cure to this disease needs to be found out. A person sound in mind, morals and conduct becomes an issue merely by being born in a certain family. In his essay on the sources of untouchability, Dr. Ambedkar explains this situation by the example of his friend’s dog Paddy. Paddy, who has an inherent hostility towards Scotch Terriers, attacks one who may be peacefully engaged in smelling the neighborhood. However, Paddy’s owner believes that this is actually the fault of the Scotch Terriers, who incite Paddy by their existence. This is exactly how the dalits ‘pollute’ upper caste Hindus by their very being. (3)

“Dr Ambedkar was merciless in his denunciation of pettiness, perversities and the hypocrisies of Brahminism which to him was a wicked and mischievous agent of social exploitation of the backward and untouchable section of Hindu society.” (4)

In his work, *‘Who Were the Shudras?’* Ambedkar attempted to explain the formation of Untouchables. He saw the Shudras, who are from the lowest caste in the ritual hierarchy of the Hindu caste system, as being separate from Untouchables. In his 1948 sequel to *‘Who Were the Shudras’*, which he titled *‘The Untouchables: A thesis on the Origins of Untouchability’*, Dr. Ambedkar said that:

“The Hindu Civilizationis a diabolical contrivance to suppress and enslave humanity. Its proper name would be infamy. What else can be said of a civilization which produced a mass of peoplewho are treated as an entity beyond human intercourse and whose mere touch is enough to cause pollution?.”(5)

In this book Ambedkar argues that the Shudras were originally Aryans belonging to the Kshatriya class.

Untouchables suffered extreme humiliation everywhere, but the condition of pre-independence villages was much worse. In a basic outline of the ‘duties’ that a Dalit had to follow, Ambedkar tells us that the untouchables had to live in separate quarters, away from the village habitation. They had no access to village ponds or rivers. They were forced to observe a distance from touchable Hindus. It was considered offensive for an untouchable to acquire wealth or give higher education to his children. They were bound to wear dirty clothes, speak in an uncouth language, salute high caste Hindus, work in their homes and wear outward signs of being an untouchable. They were also not allowed to burn their dead; rather, they had to bury them even if it was against their wishes. The list of atrocities does not end. An extremely shocking example of the sadistic and barbaric treatment, which was meted out to them is the wages that they received. This was ‘Gobaraha’. When bullocks would swallow excessive corn, it would often come out in their dung. This corn was separated and strained and was given to the untouchables as their wages. This was their only means of subsistence! Another source of income, says Ambedkar, is begging. He says that one can go to any village around or after dinner time and would encounter a group of untouchables standing and begging for leftovers.

One may think that after independence, the assurances of various leaders, the relentless efforts of Dr. Ambedkar and the implementation of Indian constitution (which prohibits the practice of untouchability after 1950), conditions would have been much better. But surprisingly Omprakash Valmiki in his book ‘JOO THAN’, which was published almost fifty years after independence, seems to be echoing exactly what Ambedkar recorded. Born in the ‘Chuhra’ community of untouchables, Valmiki notes how the people from his community would sit outside the caste Hindus’ wedding with baskets in their hands. In these baskets, the wedding guests would drop their leftovers and these leftovers were not only eaten but also relished by the Chuhras. These leftovers were discussed as a rare treat. Some leftovers were also dried up and saved to be eaten on days when they would not receive any wages. What bothers Valmiki about these memories is the complete lack of repentance or shame in his community on living in such humiliating conditions. It seems that after years of debasement, people actually turned into dehumanized, sterile beings. Another incident that strongly reminds us of Ambedkar’s recorded experiences is Valmiki’s memories of the rainy days in his childhood. Because they were forced to live in mud houses, outside the folds of civilization, their houses would fall and belongings destroyed in harsh rains. In a very poignant statement, Valmiki says:

“Literature can only imagine hell. For us the rainy season was a living hell.”(6)

The very fact that Valmiki chose ‘Joothan’ as the title of his autobiography shows that an untouchable’s entire life can be summarized under an offensive, derogatory word, which is the ‘discarded leftovers’ of others. Valmiki chose to write an autobiography to pour out the firsthand

experience of inhumanity dished out to his community. Autobiography is the most famous genre among the Dalit writers because it helps them reconstruct their history and would inspire their future generations. We again see a reflection of Ambedkar after years of independence when Valmiki writes:

“Untouchability was so rampant that while it was considered all right to touch dogs and cats or cows and buffaloes, if one happened to touch a Chuhra, one got contaminated or polluted. The Chuhras were not seen as human. They were simply things for use. Their utility lasted until the work was done.”(7)

After eight years of independence, a child Valmiki faced hideous abuse at the hands of his ‘educated’ teachers, who were against a Chuhra child getting education. Valmiki’s father is so enraged at this incident, that he calls the teacher a ‘Dronacharya’, (the mythic guru who was so biased towards his upper caste student Arjuna that not only did he refuse to teach the tribal Eklavya, but also asked for his thumb as his fees leaving him incapable of practicing archery ever again.). Another shocking revelation comes when Valmiki tells us that in his twelve years of schooling, he had never heard about Ambedkar. This highlights the fact that Ambedkar or his struggles for untouchables has never been glorified. Later in the book, he gives another such example of a Brahmin teacher who asked his students to tear the chapter regarding Ambedkar from their books, more disturbing is the fact that no action was taken against that teacher. Valmiki encounters such ignorance again in the form of the ‘Mehtars’ of Maharashtra, who were similar to Valmiki’s own caste of Chuhras. Much more jolting to him was, how unaware these people were of Dr. Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism and his reasons behind it. They were not convinced by the new Dalit leaders and because of the lack of education and guidance, remained attached to brutal Hindu reign.

Valmiki also often draws attention to the fact that both his family and friends insist on changing his name. They are ashamed of their caste and a last name such as ‘Valmiki’, gives it away. He narrates various incidences of his ‘educated’ friends getting very uncomfortable on hearing his name. The common identity of ‘Dalit’ too points to their pain. The untouchables chose this identity, because it is a symbol of their constant suffering. An acknowledgement of their pathetic condition will inspire them to fight. While Valmiki himself says that he finds it impossible for one to overcome his caste, he also gives a counter to this when he presents the figure of his mother who after feeling insulted, refuses to accept ‘joothan’ from an upper caste. She walks out of his house and never goes out to beg for leftovers again.

In his writings, Ambedkar gives us a probable reason of the continuation of such an oppressive and malicious order. It can be traced back to ‘Manusmriti’ or ‘The Book of Manu’. The lawgiver Manu laid certain rules for the Hindu society to follow. These rules are not only offensive but also highly disturbing. They ensure that the untouchable caste remains downtrodden and suppressed. Some of these highly abusive rules were- A shudra (untouchable), will have his tongue cut off if he dare insult a high caste man; If an untouchable teaches a Brahmin his duties, he should have molten metal poured into his ears; if an untouchable sits with a high caste man, he should be branded on the hips and banished; if he tries to take the name of high caste men, hot iron nails must be thrust in his mouth. More than laws, they seem to be the twisted workings of a disturbed mind. These punishments are so bestial and repulsive, that no society could ever think of working on such principles. Yet the Hindu society regarded Manu as the ultimate lawgiver.

Ambedkar goes as far as comparing the Indian untouchables to the slaves of Rome. Slaves in Rome were war booty, brought in by the countries that Rome annexed. According to Ambedkar, the Augustan Rome had the system of slavery, however, these slaves could work hard to save money and buy for themselves land, property and freedom itself. Often slaves would save money to invest it in a blooming business or re-invest it in their master's business to yield profits. The educated slaves were involved in different commercial practices too. They could become small-scale shopkeepers, curators, boot makers etc. They had to serve their masters too, whom they could pay back by the above mentioned means to attain freedom. Once freed, they were allowed to live as free men and pursue whatever trade they wished to follow. The most remarkable feature of the Roman state, were the social positions that these slaves occupied. They could become tutors, doctors, artists, librarians, writers and grammarians. The freed ones were given a number of subordinate clerk and financial officer positions. The only area from which they were excluded was the army. Also, in an enslaved state, the slave became a valued property of the master and the master became bound to take care of the health and well-being of his slave. The disadvantage of being a slave made a slave being cared for. The responsibility of a slave's accommodation, clothing and meals were all the responsibility of the master for whom the slave was an investment. A good and healthy slave would get high price in the market. Also as educated beings, these slaves would serve a hoard of purposes for the owners. They could manage accounts and even become partners in business with the masters.

The untouchables of India on the other hand, had to live a life worse than that of Roman slaves. Dr. Ambedkar remarks that none of the untouchables could ever dream of taking up respectable jobs like those of the slaves. Their very touch was considered impure and they had to live on the outskirts of town thereby denying any opportunity for a respectable position. Ambedkar further argues that slavery is not a just social order, but neither is untouchability. Slavery never was an obligatory system. A Roman was free to hold another slave, or free him if he wanted to. Moreover, slaves had the chance of emancipating themselves if they collected enough money. There never was any such hope for untouchables. Once an untouchable, he/she had no hope for redemption, the untouchables were caught in a quagmire that had no outlet to give them a free or dignified social life. Unlike slaves, untouchables had no one to take care of their clothing and housing needs. No one would take care of the untouchable's health. They had to compete with others for work and had an unfair shortcoming as compared to others. Unlike slaves, they were not valued property, rather filthy beings that the caste Hindus wanted to get rid of. They had all the disadvantages of a society with slavery and no advantage of a free social order. Even without slavery, oppression and cruelty showed its darkest colors in the life of untouchables. Ambedkar believed this to be enslavement, where the slaves were not even aware of their enslaved condition. The social set up was depriving the untouchables of their freedom and yet they were not conscious of it, and because they were not aware of their enslaved state, they never fought against it.

Ambedkar also compares the Gentile and Jew antagonism to that of caste Hindus and the untouchables. The biggest contrast that exists between the Gentile and Jews is their creed. Because they belong to different creeds, the Gentiles and Jews did not wish to mingle. However, the caste Hindus has no such reason for shunning the lower caste. They are of the same religion and belong to the same locality. The most probable explanation that Ambedkar gives for the antipathy between the Jews and the gentiles is that the Jews themselves do not wish to merge with the Gentiles. He gives two examples when this has been proved. Napoleon was resolved to consider the assimilation

of Jews. He called an assembly of eminent Jewish citizens of Italy, France and Germany to discuss the elements of Judaism and their compatibility with the citizenship rules. This assembly also contemplated over the idea of marriages between Jews and non-Jews. With the efforts of Napoleon, a charter like document was adopted which encouraged the Jews for inter marriages with Christians and the acceptance of France as their nation. The Jews however, refused to sanction such marriages. The second example that he cites is of 1975, when the Batavian republic was established. Some radical and progressive Jews made demands for equal rights and opposed the disabilities that they had to tolerate. Oddly though, these demands were opposed by the members of Amsterdam community itself. They felt that if these demands were granted, the newly gained civil equality would instigate people to change their religion and convert against Judaism. The Jews therefore, themselves wanted to live as a segregated group.

Ambedkar says that the Gentiles could argue that the Jews themselves do not wish to become a part of their community. The Hindus on the other hand cannot claim any such thing. There can be no justification for hostility towards untouchables who want equality and assimilation with the high caste Hindus. Unlike Gentiles, the high caste Hindus had made no such attempt to uplift the untouchables. The untouchables have been castigated on no logical grounds. The untouchables are not morally corrupt or of different creed, the gap between these groups is on the basis of religious antagonism, which cannot be filled.

The revolution or social change that both Ambedkar and Valmiki propose can only come with a social consciousness. This consciousness can only come with education and legal empowerment. As Valmiki recalls, that it was only after reading about Ambedkar and his struggles that he found courage to fight against social set up. Similarly, Ambedkar too insisted on education and social consciousness. It is only when people become aware of their rights, they can fight for it. The just and dignified social order that Ambedkar dreamt of bringing, requires much more efforts and sacrifices.

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