

Caste And Democracy

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India became a nation under the British regime. 400 years of Mughal rule and then British Raj, brought a lot of changes in India, whether administrative reforms or institutionalization of democratic process yet one thing that remained unchanged was the caste discrimination. Prior to British, the stream of Sufi saints rejected the brahmanical system and injustice meted to Dalits but their focus was more making people aware of themselves and tried to take shelter in a seemingly egalitarian religion by terming God does not discriminate, he is one and omnipresent and omnipotent.

But the real changes came when in the 19th century, when the approach of the leaders of deprived castes became not only of a revolt against the values and thoughts imposed by the High Caste Hindus led by the Brahmins but an assertion in the belief of modernity which resulted in the democratization process in Europe, United States as well as Eastern European Countries, which many might not like at the moment.

Democracy is essentially a practice of alliance building. And the first such grand alliance of farmers, marginalized communities and the deprived communities was forged by Jyotiba Phule, as he termed these communities as 'Bahujan' and felt that those ruling India were really minorities leaders of the high caste Hindus.

But Dr Ambedkar who got educated in United States, UK and Germany did not really feel the same way. His concerns were really about the constitutional provisions for the Dalits. He realized that Democracy was broadly a majoritarian concept and cannot really be confined to electoral exercise and therefore a mere political alliance of communities which lead to political power can not be the only objective of a democratic exercise. Instead, he felt that Indian institutions should be strong enough to protect the constitutional provisions made for the most marginalized communities. He knew that the communities that he was leading did not understand much about discrimination and rights as it was thoroughly a disempowered one. He knew that communities which remain in enslavement and hunger because of various rituals and ideologies and philosophies injected in their minds that they would not be able to understand what their rights are? Many of them still feel that what they have been doing was perfectly divine and nobody has a right to stop that. The theory of *karma*, that what people are today because of their bad *karmas* in the previous birth hence to undo that one must stick to his/her duties. Ambedkar said that Karma theory did the maximum damage to the rights of the depressed classes most commonly known as Untouchables or Dalits.

For one thing Ambedkar approached the Dalits problem through a minority viewpoint. He wanted to ensure constitutional rights so that the Dalits do not become victim of majoritarian assertion during the elections. That is why he fought for the separate electorate for them in 1932 and which was justifiably awarded by the British that time known as communal award. In all his life time,

Ambedkar addressed the issue of the untouchables from the view point of a democratic polity and not just politics.

After India got independence and Ambedkar led the drafting of the Indian constitution, Dalits got 17.5% seats reserved in parliament and state assemblies. Actually Ambedkar never asked for this reservation as he feared that the leadership that would emerge after this would be serving more to the high caste Hindus who form the majority than the Dalits. And this resulted in defeat of Ambedkar in the very first election he contested from Mumbai, Maharashtra as all the high caste Hindus ganged up against him and got him defeated.

Ambedkar could not live more but the Dalits became vote bank of the ruling party. Many leaders were elected and became ministers and governors and chief ministers of the state but the overall condition of the Dalits was a matter of great concern. However, there were a few symbolic exceptions which were utilized to mobilize the Dalit opinion for a particular political formation.

It's more relevant to recall to what Ambedkar said about Indian democracy in an interview to Voice of America on May 20th, 1956. He asks this question whether there is a democracy in India and he says: 'Democracy is quite different from a Republic as well as from parliamentary Government. The roots of democracy lie not in the form of Government, Parliamentary or otherwise. A democracy is more than a form of government. It is primarily a mode of associated living. The roots of democracy are to be searched in the social relationship, in the terms of associated life between people who form a society.'

And to further his cause he points out : "The Indian society does not consist of individuals. It consists of innumerable collection of castes, which are exclusive in their life and have no common experience to share and have no bond of sympathy. The existence of caste system is a standing denial of the existence of those ideals of society and therefore of democracy. An Indian cannot eat or marry with an Indian simply because he or she does not belong to his or her caste. An Indian simply cannot touch an Indian because he or she does belong to his or her caste." Ambedkar questions the political system and how Congress party field its candidates and how they are selected carefully on the basis of their caste. Ambedkar says : "How does an Indian vote in an election? He votes for a candidate who belongs to his own caste and no other. Further he considers caste system as a bane to democracy. Castes are not equal in their status. They are standing one above another. They are jealous of one another. It is an ascending scale of hatred and descending scale of contempt. The feature of caste system has most pernicious consequences. It destroys willing and helpful cooperation."

Unfortunately, after Ambedkar's death his legacy was claimed by certain leaders for their own purposes. Ambedkar ideals were kept in books and what was projected as his themes and views which were suitable to various political leaders. What they failed to understand that Ambedkar grew up over a period of time and many of his views changed. If he had bitter experience on the issue of questioning the religious text with Gandhi and on the issue of empowerment of the Dalits, he joined the constitution making process to empower the community leaving his bitterness aside. Post 1940s he was more into positive action and send many Dalit scholars abroad at his own expenses.

Never in his life did Ambedkar resort to identity of caste for political purposes. He formed Indian Labour Party. He formed Depressed Classes League and he formed Republican Party of India, all showing his concerns and ideals of how he wished to fight the question of discrimination. To eradicate the caste identity of different Dalit communities or Scheduled Castes, as they are called constitutionally, Ambedkar redefined Buddhism in a radical humanist way and termed it as *Navayana*. Ambedkar's quest for a progressive Dalit identity beyond caste has not been properly followed up by those who claim his legacy purely on the basis of his caste.

For the parties claiming his legacy he was 'their' leader only. For the Hindu upper caste parties, he became a 'Dalit leader' therefore relegating him to the confinement in urban slums and Dalitwadās of the villages. The irony was that a modern man like Ambedkar whose democratic spirit could have been the meeting ground for the forces of change, became victim of caste identities in India.

In the parliamentary democracy of First Past the Post System, which Ambedkar himself actually felt inadequate to protect the interest of the Dalits, the politics is fast turning into a game of identities where the minority identity issues have no meaning. It is fast merging with the broader majoritarian identity as the slogan grew up in the air 'jisaki jitani sankhya bhari uski utni sajhedari.. the more numbers you have, the bigger the share in power structure'. Nowhere, it has any insurance for the minorities. It claims to reserve seats for them according to their number but the fact is that the concept of this kind of politics has fragmented the Dalit politics further, with more and more leaders focusing on their primary caste identities to get into vote bank politics. Hence, those whose castes have more numbers get the leverage of power and those who do not have suffered in this process despite their efforts. Many Dalit leaders who have focused on their issues more than any other political leaders and getting marginalized in the process because the sheer number of their castes. What is this? It may be called depoliticisation of the Dalits and their issues which is very dangerous as those who really do not work and are expert manipulators can get elected in their names. More so because, the democracy is actually going in the hands of those forces which are anti-democratic and have no faith in it. Dalits who got their legitimate rights through democratic means today feel betrayed by this. As people use symbol to tell the world that the Dalits have been empowered in India, it is time to look into the ugly realities of the process.

One can see the process of political changes in two most populous states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Both were the first one where the National parties got thoroughly marginalized and a large number of the Dalit-OBC (the Other Backward communities, artisan-peasantry) dominated the political process since 1990. But this broader unity of Dalit-Bahujan could have changed the entire polity in India but because the individual leaders and their egos became bigger than their political parties which became one man/woman show and no internal democracy in these parties resulted in collapsing these forces. Added on this was the attempt by the intellectual and leaders of these forces equating every one who is a non Dalit-or OBC as Manu-wadi-or Brahmanical while purely ignoring or conspicuously sidetracking the issue of their political leaders hobnobbing with right wing Hindu Nationalist party BJP.

