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ARTICLE

Ambedkar: A Revolutionary beyond Communists

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Introduction

Dr. Ambedkar admired Karl Marx's philosophy of communism but in the same era the world had witnessed two brutal Communist revolutions-one in Soviet Union under Lenin and the other in China, under Mao leading to heavy loss of mankind. This extreme form of communism was against the philosophy of Dr. Ambedkar. It seemed that the world was willing to come under the Red Flag's umbrella to compete against capitalism. But its tentacles and instability was something that Dr. Ambedkar was well aware of. His apprehension proved to be prophetic as would be evident from the disintegration of the ex-Soviet Union and the fact of China leaning partially towards Capitalism. This shows the vision of Dr. Ambedkar. He gave India a constitution which has not only survived the test of its time but also has raised admiration all over the world.

Dr. Ambedkar was a leader of the depressed classes and his love for peaceful agitations and Satyagraha were his greatest pillars of strength. He condemned every form of Violence and agitation which led to loss of human lives. His love for Buddhist Philosophy; known for its message of love, peace and nonviolence, explains Dr. Ambedkar's unique revolutionary Strategy. In the process he contributed creatively and evolved a strategy befitting to Indian conditions. A reference can be made to Ambedkar's letter proposing a programme of action for the Anti-Untouchability League (AUL), written by Ambedkar in 1932 and addressed to A.V. Thakkar, Secretary of that organization. This letter, far from being polemic, is an exposition of a fiercely focused discussion of ideas about the strategy to work

for the welfare of the Depressed Classes and social reform. Ambedkar provides a brilliant critique of the Gandhian activist programme and structure through the discussion here. Ambedkar's letter provides us with some of his most profound and enduring insights regarding the structure of caste oppression, the politics of the oppressed, and the scope of social activism. Two ways of thinking about the causes of social suffering and the methods of uplift that flow logically out of each of these ways of thinking may be outlined here to put in perspective both Gandhian and Ambedkarite methods of uplift of the depressed classes. The first way is based on the thinking that a person who belongs to the depressed classes suffers because of some failing in his "personal conduct". The second way, on the other hand, suggests that if a person suffers from want and misery, it is because his environment is adverse. Ambedkar's revolutionary nature makes him profess the second way and assert that it is the task of social work to lift the Depressed Classes as a whole and not just a few individuals, as the first way would. The emphasis, here, is to change the environment in which the Depressed Classes lived in society. Though the letter of Dr. Ambedkar does not mention the name of Gandhi it is clear that Ambedkar is very critical of Gandhian focus on individual uplift. Gandhi's assumption would find the causes of social suffering of the Depressed Classes in some failing in their personal conduct. This was clearly in contrast to the thinking of Dr. Ambedkar who was categorical in criticizing a social reform or welfare initiative that moulds the conduct of an individual from the Depressed Classes as if it was that conduct which was flawed and needed improvement. Fighting the social oppression, which is the root cause of the problem, did not figure in this kind of method at all. So Ambedkar, on the contrary, launched a campaign to secure "civil rights". It would be important to note that Ambedkar's letter to the Anti Untouchability League had "civil" rights in the heading of this section whereas in the text Ambedkar used the word "civic rights" or "rights of a civic nature". The word civil is defined as belonging to citizens while civic is defined as pertaining to citizens. Such a choice of words is not only deliberate but it bears ample testimony to Ambedkar's shift from a politics of civil society to a specific kind of revolutionary politics. Civility is what belongs to a citizen almost with the force of possession. It is described as an orderliness of life, well-governedness in civil society, politeness of address, privacy, legal right, etc. But the word civic is understood here as an oath of allegiance to the new order of things, which is demanded from citizens in a revolutionary situation. These rights are, precisely, rights of entry to schools, public places, public transport and the

like. Such a programme is very different from that of an instrument to improve the conduct of the 'sinner'. For example, in case of a campaign for entry to school as a civic right education is meant to be a general programme of intellectual growth, not a method of improvement premised on the individual's flaw. Because such a programme, if carried into the villages, will bring about the necessary social revolution in Hindu Society and without which it would be well nigh impossible to provide Depressed Classes with equal social status (Ambedkar, 1932, AUL, p.135).

The depth of Ambedkar's understanding of the Indian situation and his unique revolutionary strategy are evident from when he argues in favour of the dramatic effectiveness of a civic right movement in forcing the caste Hindu to think about his/her everyday conduct. Ambedkar further maintains that caste Hindus will never think about their habitual practices of oppression unless a crisis forces them. He was never in support of other easy options such as preaching for converting the Hindu opinion through rational ideas as such methods, according to him, are certain to fail due to their inability to produce a crisis and thus compel thought (ibid: 136). So here is a great lesson that Ambedkar teaches us about activism for social justice and that is, it must produce a crisis in order to force a thought. Another piece of important creativity in Ambedkar's thinking and a great lesson for all of us today is that the change in the social environment sought by him is to come about by a shift in the dominant consensus. Because though there is a large number of thoughtless and violent followers of the dominant tradition, there is also a significant part of the dominant group that can be forced by a critical situation to see reason and enlightenment over the issue of caste. Ambedkar's pragmatism led him to reject a single overarching battle against oppression theorized according to one "primary contradiction". Ambedkar prefers to find conjunctural partners to struggle alongside the Depressed Classes against the single source (i.e. caste Hinduism) of different kinds of contradiction and different forms of oppression. The richness of Dr. Ambedkar's understanding led him to take note of the fact that the oppressed are divided and differentiated by the structural logic of caste Hindu oppression in the Indian context. So even if there is one dominant oppressor, it may be deduced here that the result of the struggle against caste Hindu oppression, even after being successful, is not a utopian community free of all struggle. On the contrary, Ambedkar had the ingenuity to suggest that another set of struggles that would arise in that emergent situation in ways which could not be theorized today.

In the first step of a campaign for civic rights Ambedkar's theorization, as has been analyzed above, problematizes Congress-Gandhian concept of service to the untouchables whereas in the second step to fight for equality of opportunity he problematizes the Marxian concept of class struggle. According to Ambedkar the logic of a contradiction and the language of a struggle against oppression have to be born of the experience of the oppressed. His position may be construed as that there is no use in trying to achieve an understanding of oppression according to a category (of class) which calls for reasoning beyond the strong experience of caste oppression. In a struggle, which is democratic, the forces must arise organically from the consciousness of the oppressed. It will regress to an authoritarianism undercutting the experiential basis of the struggle if any attempt to short circuit the consciousness of the oppressed is made with ready-made formulae of universal history. But at the same time Ambedkar pleads for a common cycle of participation in a way of life which only, can, overcome the strangeness one feels for the other. Because understanding and a sense of bonding that arise in an associated way of life will bring social unity.

Ambedkar's concept of community is very complex. He set aside all imaginary communities that find peaceful coexistence or are uniformly structured classes in their loves, understandings and antagonisms. For him communities are richly structured in their levels of oppressiveness, irrationality and sophistication. Thus according to him it is necessary to work different aspects of the community (or class, or caste) against the other, exploit the failure of the logic of community, force its inconsistency, in order to bring a change in its structure. His model of community is one which is put constantly under stress; it is always provisional unity.

Spirituality was a very important aspect of Dr Ambedkar's thinking. He believed there is something higher than what is apparent. Though he had accepted Buddhism he was deeply influenced by the thoughts of Upanishads which form the core of Hinduism. For the Marxists everything is materialistic. This is a very important motivation for the poor and the downtrodden to fall an easy prey to this ideology simply because of the fact that they are deprived of the basics.

Anand Teltumbde, a civil-rights activist and political analyst discusses the acrimonious relationship between Ambedkar and the communist party of India (CPI). He writes, "These communists have never been as arrogant and bitter against the caste system as against Ambedkar. Ambedkar's differences with the

communists only grew with the passage of time. There was a wide variance between what the CPI professed and what it practiced. The communists ideologically refused the necessity of battling caste, ignored the conceptual basis of linking other forms of (non-economic) exploitation and continued with unmindful practices vis-à-vis caste. From the time when Ambedkar was coming into prominence as the leader of the independent Dalit movement the CPI was annoyed with him. Instead of befriending him they started attacking him as the divider of the working class, misleader of Dalit masses, and opponent of the nationalist movement and a stooge of the imperialists. Ambedkar was derided as “the reformist and separatist leader” who always kept “the untouchable masses away from the general democratic movement and to foster the illusion that the lot of untouchables could be improved by reliance on imperialism”. In 1952 General Elections CPI founding member Shripad Amrit Dange asked his supporters, ‘spoil your votes but do not vote Dr. Ambedkar’. Dr. Ambedkar lost this election.

The Indian communist leader and politician B.T. Ranadive made a seething attack on Ambedkar and his organization for their failure to target British imperialism. While recognizing that the Dalits have been oppressed for years and that the oppression must come to an end his support was not categorical as he observed that this cannot happen unless the untouchables make their demands an integral part of the struggle for freedom and join other parties in securing power.

However, it was the strength of the character of a critique like Dr. Ambedkar that despite his antagonism with the communists he gave the greatest compliment of a critique by placing Marx and Buddha, whom he adored as his master, on the same plane, albeit for their goals. As a matter of fact Ambedkar never questioned the communist philosophy.

Dr. Ambedkar’s estimation of socialism was complex and chequered. This aspect of intellectual history in India is both controversial and shrouded in obscurity. The present political exigency in the country merits an engagement with Dr. Ambedkar’s thoughts on socialism and communism.

Dr. Ambedkar formed the Independent Labour Party in August, 1936. The decision of use the word ‘labour’ instead of ‘depressed classes’ or ‘scheduled castes’ was strategic. ILP though espousing the causes of the working class remained non-Marxist in its rhetoric. However in a speech delivered in January, 1938, Dr. Ambedkar said, “Really seen, there are only two castes in the world – the first that

of the rich, and the second, that of the poor”. Dr, Ambedkar added, “I feel the communist philosophy is closer to us”.

In November, 1949 while presenting the final draft of the Constitution Dr. Ambedkar stated that since the constitution guarantees recourse to constitutional methods, “bloody methods of revolution” should be discarded at once. In the same speech he strongly opposed the methods of non-cooperation, civil disobedience and Satyagraha. It’s often argued that Dr. Ambedkar turned out to be an even greater pacifist than Gandhi during this phase and subsequent dalit struggles in India rarely took to informal modes of protest, with the notable exception of Dalit Panthers.

After the elections in 1951-52 the Socialist Party merged with J B Kriplani’s Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party to form the Praja Socialist Party (PSP). It’s with the PSP that Dr. Ambedkar first started dialogues and when Dr. Lohia quit forming his own Socialist Party, he held talks with the latter. The constructiveness of these exchanges is evidenced in the by-election of 1954. During this time Dr. Ambedkar was working towards the formation of the Republican Party of India in consultation with various socialist leaders. RPI was formally established after his demise. During this time Dr. Ambedkar made a remarkable assertion –

“Before I die, I must establish a definite political direction for my people. They have remained poor, oppressed and deprived, and because of that, now a new consciousness and anger are growing among them. That is natural. But it is also natural that this type of community becomes attracted to Communism. I do not want my people to fall under the sway of communists”.

Thus even as Dr. Ambedkar was cozying up to the socialists he was dismissive of the communist project. But his assertion that such a community facing deprivation would be attracted to communist ideals became a true prophecy when through the 1990s dalit farmers and farm labourers organized under CPI Marxist Leninist engaged in bloody clashes with the Ranvir Sena of Bhumihars and Rajputs in Bihar.

George Fernandes once recounted an incident of 1970s in which a delegation of socialists held discussions with the CPI (M) politburo but talks failed since the communists refused to consider the caste question.

Can 'Jai Bhim' and 'Lal Salam' ever come together undoing historical burdens and mistrust? This has been a long standing question and in my own decade long association with students' politics, this has come back to me over and over. I have always believed that sectarian interests and hollow rhetoric from either side to a very large extent has meant 'never the twain shall meet' scenario persists.

Dr. Ambedkar had thoroughly criticised Indian communist parties. To be precise, he has written somewhere that communist parties in India are nothing more than a bunch of Brahmin boys.

In September 1938 while addressing a district conference of the Depressed Classes at Masur, Dr. Ambedkar categorically put aside any idea of his joining the labour movement led by the communists. In that speech, he was reported to have declared: 'It is absolutely impossible for me to keep relations with the communists. I am an implacable enemy of the communists.'

On the question of whether communism and democracy can work together Ambedkar feels it is utterly absurd. Because for him 'communism is like a forest fire which goes on burning and consuming anything and everything that comes in its way' (BAWS, Vol. 15, page 878).

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar has a well-considered view on the communists' and socialists' criticisms of the constitution of India. The criticism of the constitution largely comes from two quarters- the Communist Party and the Socialist Party. According to Ambedkar the Communist Party wanted a constitution based upon the principle of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. They condemn the Constitution because it is based upon parliamentary democracy. The socialists, on the other hand, want that if they come to power, the constitution must give them the freedom to nationalize or socialize all private property without payment of compensation. Another thing that the socialists want is that the Fundamental Rights mentioned in the constitution must be absolute and without any limitations so that if their party fails to come to power, they would have the unfettered freedom not merely to criticize, but also to overthrow the state.

Ambedkar summarizes a few points regarding Marxist philosophy which are very useful. They are: i) the function of philosophy is to reconstruct the world and not to waste its time in explaining the origin of the world. !

(ii) That there is a conflict of interest between class and class. !

(iii) That private ownership of property brings power to one class and sorrow to another through exploitation. !

(iv) That it is necessary for the good of society that the sorrow be removed by the abolition of private property. !

It would be very evident that Buddha and Marx's differences are about the means. The end is common to both. The Buddha was against violence. But he was also in favour of justice and where justice required he permitted the use of force but force as energy. An offender must be punished and an innocent man must be freed. If all the means of maintaining peace have failed then the responsibility for Himsa falls on him who starts war. One must never surrender to evil powers. War there may be. But it must never be for selfish ends. The achievement of an end involves the destruction of many other ends which are integral with the one that is sought to be destroyed. Thus use of force must be so regulated that it should save as many ends as possible while destroying the evil one.

Buddha would have allowed force only as energy. The communists preach himsa as an absolute principle to which Buddha is opposed and so also Ambedkar. Marxist emphasis on materialism and concern with only body and mind to the exclusion of intellect and soul i.e. the spiritual dimension of human progress is partial and lopsided. Ambedkar, by applying Buddhist means seeks to change the disposition of human beings and bring integrated development in a coordinated manner. When there is no force Dhamma will sustain it with people following the moral order voluntarily. Equality alone is meaningless if not accompanied with liberty and fraternity.

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