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Ambedkar in Global Context: A Study from Historical Perspective

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Abstract

Dr Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar is generally understood within the Indian context. There are not many studies to contextualize Ambedkar in global history. This study aims to locate Ambedkar and Dalit movement in the global context by making a comparative study of struggles led by African-Americans and Dalit Indians for gaining social justice and equality. It studies Ambedkar's interest in African American struggles by analyzing his interaction with Du Bois and compares the struggle of Ambedkar with that of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Key Words

Afro-American, Ambedkar, Black, Caste, Dalit, Martin Luther King, Race.

Introduction

Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar is a man of global stature. His ideas and vision can be located in the global historical context by making a comparison with global leaders who involved in similar social struggles. Generally, Ambedkar is equated with Martin Luther King, Jr, of African-Americans. Any comparative study of Ambedkar and King, as well as Dalit Indians and Afro-Americans, should aim to address the core issue of social equality and dignity.

Dalit Indians and African Americans

Dalit Indian's experience is caste-based oppression in Indian society and African-American's experience is racial discrimination in the US society. Though the Major social problem in Indian society and American society resembles in the nature of historical discrimination of vulnerable communities by the dominant, the roots of social discrimination in India and US are entirely different. In India, the roots of social discrimination lie in the caste system, in the USA the roots of social discrimination lie in the racial system. Caste discrimination is birth based and racial discrimination is on the basis of skin colour. In the caste system, some castes particularly Scheduled Castes are treated low and discriminated them by depriving of economic and educational opportunities. As a result, they live without dignity. In the racial system, some races particularly the black race is regarded as inferior due to skin colour and its history of slavery. Like Dalits, they are deprived of economic and educational opportunities. As a result, Black Americans live without dignity. The struggle of Dalit Indians is inspired by Ambedkar and his vision of liberation from the caste-based oppression and the struggle of Afro-Americans is inspired by King and his vision of liberation from the race-based oppression. The greatest similarity between Dalit and Black struggles is their aim that is to strive for social equality.

In India, caste is the source of oppression and in America it is race. Hence the source of oppression and subordination is local and not global. But the object of the social struggle of these two different communities is global and even universal that is the struggle for justice and equality. Dalits in India and Blacks in America are oppressed people and not inferior people. The core purpose of the social struggles of

both communities is social liberation. Dalits strive for liberation from caste oppression and blacks strive for liberation from racial oppression. Since the social construction of nature of oppression is entirely different in Indian society and American society, the similarities in the struggles of Dalits and Blacks can be found only in their aim to achieve social dignity. Blacks in America are struggling against white supremacy and Dalits in India are struggling against social supremacy of the so-called upper castes. In other words, Dalit Indians see social dominance of so-called upper castes whom Ambedkar called caste Hindu as the source of an obstacle for their socio-economic growth, and African-Americans view white supremacy as the source of an obstacle for their socio-economic growth. Hence, the root cause for social injustice in India is the social dominance of the caste Hindu and the root cause for racial injustice in America is the social dominance of the white community. Social equality for Dalits and racial equality for Blacks are the foundations of the struggles led by Ambedkar and King.

Today the law in both countries says that all are equal citizens of the land. By the Constitution of India, Dalits have become socially equal to non-Dalits and by the constitution of America, Blacks have become racially equal to white. Then what is the problem? The problem is not about the law of the land. It is about the custom. Dalits are locked into the bottom of the social system and Blacks are in the racial system not by law but by custom. They are equal before the law but not according to the custom. The tradition of practising this kind of inhuman custom creates a social condition that discriminates humans on the basis of birth and colour. To make society civilized, the tradition of the practice of this kind of inhuman custom needs to be discontinued. This could be possible only by deconstructing the existing social condition that celebrates the superiority of some race or community. The de-construction of the de-humanising social condition could be made only by constructing a counter social narrative that all are not only equal before the law and also equal before God. Since the custom is cultural, the equality in the society can be brought only by creating the culture of equality and not by merely bringing change in the law. People do break the law but rarely the custom particularly the custom that gives them pride of being superior to a fellow human. Cultural change brings a change in social attitude. The tradition of celebrating custom that dehumanizes fellow humans could be replaced by the tradition of celebrating custom that upholds and respects the dignity of fellow humans. This is a kind of cultural transformation of human minds through societal initiatives like teaching children in schools and colleges right from childhood that all humans are equal.

Caste division and racial division both are based on the system of hierarchy. Caste system in India and the racial system in America are systems of hierarchy; these systems of hierarchy make Dalits and Blacks stay at the bottom level of the system. Both these social and racial hierarchical systems are directly in conflict with the principles of liberty, equality, fraternity and justice. Belief in social and racial hierarchies that visualises some communities as superior and others as inferior is against the culture of democracy. The core values of modernity reject the unjust system of socio-racial hierarchy. Hence, the history of Dalits and Blacks is the history of resistance to injustice with the aim to reconstruct society for social and racial justice and equality.

Martin Delany, a Black theorist felt that Blacks in the US is 'a nation within a nation.'¹ Ambedkar said every caste is a nation in itself. Dalit as a community identity of Scheduled Castes has produced social unity at the national level. Hence, Dalit though it is not a nation within a nation but certainly, a national identity representing Scheduled Castes across the Indian nation. According to the legendary Black intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois, the Black community, '... while it is no sense absolutely set off physically from its fellow Americans, has nevertheless a strong, hereditary cultural unity born of slavery, common suffering, prolonged proscription, and curtailment of political and civil rights. [...] prolonged policies of segregation and discrimination have voluntarily welded the mass almost into a nation within a nation.'² If it is applied on Dalits by paraphrasing Du Bois words, it could be constructed that the Dalit community while it is no sense absolutely set off physically from its fellow Indians, has nevertheless a strong, hereditary cultural unity born of untouchability, common suffering, prolonged proscription, and curtailment of social, educational and economic rights. Prolonged practice of untouchability and discrimination have involuntarily welded the Dalit people almost into a nation within a nation. It means Ambedkar is right in saying that every caste is a nation in itself in India. Social integration precedes national integration. Hence, Ambedkar visualised socio-cultural revolution as the primary condition for a political revolution that binds all communities in the society into one strong, and vibrant democratic nation on equal footing. Dalit thinkers like Phuley and Ambedkar laid the groundwork in modern India for a more inclusive society. They conceptualised the social narrative to redefine social borders.

Ambedkar and Du Bois

Ambedkar studied at Columbia University from 1913 to 1916 and first Dalit in history to receive a Ph.D in economics from American University. This American experience naturally made him understand the Afro-American problem in the context of the Dalit problem. Ambedkar compared untouchability with slavery in his book titled. 'Slaves and Untouchables' and he arrived at a conclusion that untouchability was an indirect form of the institution of slavery.³ Ambedkar felt that discrimination against Dalit Indians is a human rights violation, same as Du Bois felt about human rights violations in the USA. In other words, Dalit rights are human rights same as Black rights are human rights. And the violation of Dalit rights means a violation of human rights same as a violation of Black rights means a violation of human rights. In this context, Ambedkar made correspondence with Du Bois.⁴ It is important to note here that in October of 1947, Du Bois made a petition to the newly formed United Nations Organization (UNO) on behalf of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) which was founded by him to spearhead the cause of Black peoples' empowerment in America. In his letter to Du Bois that was in 1940's Ambedkar asked for a copy of the petition made by NAACP to UN. Ambedkar noted in his letter, 'I have been a student of the Negro problem and have read your writings throughout. There is so much similarity between the position of the Untouchables in India and of the position of the Negroes in America that the study of the latter is not only natural but necessary.' In his response, Du Bois stated that he would send Ambedkar a copy of the petition once it was finalized. He wrote, 'I have often heard of your name and work and of course have every sympathy with the Untouchables of India. I shall be glad to be of any service I can render if possible in the future.' Very, unfortunately, there was no further communication between them.

Ambedkar and King

Martin Luther King, Jr visited India in 1959 and was greatly influenced by Gandhi whom Ambedkar throughout his life criticised and opposed. By the time king visited India, Ambedkar was no more as he died in 1956. And also American media management by Gandhian followers helped to project Gandhi as a kind of Black leader in India instead of Ambedkar. British and White supremacists equated Black Americans with Indians as a dark race. Hence, Black Americans in fact even today are of the opinion that Indians being dark race are their supports. This made African-Americans ignore the caste discrimination faced by Dalits in India. This was the main reason even King, couldn't understand caste discrimination and Ambedkar's fight against it.

Ambedkar was born in a Dalit family in India and King was born in a Black family in the USA. Ambedkar was born on 14 April 1891 MHOW-Military Head Quarters of war, a city near Indore in the present-day Madhya Pradesh, earlier known as the Central Provinces. King was born on 15 January 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia. Ambedkar's family was a follower of *Kabir Panth*, a religious sect founded by a medieval Indian Shudra Saint Kabir in opposition to the dominant Brahmin religion. King's family was a follower of the Christian religion and one of the important members of the Atlanta Clergy. Not only had his father even king served as a pastor in the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. Ambedkar's father was an employee of the British East India Company and worked as a soldier in the beginning and retired as a subedar in the British army. Since he saw educated Britishers from near while serving in the army, Ambedkar's father put all his efforts to give the best available educational opportunities to Ambedkar. There was no conducive environment in the school and Ambedkar had to sit outside the classroom to learn lessons from teachers, because caste Hindus believed that his presence or touch pollute them.

King studied segregated Black's school and college. Dalits had no Dalit's schools or colleges. Though Dalits were allowed to study in government schools under British rule, caste Hindus hatred towards Dalits discouraged them to enter into the knowledge corridors. However, that kind of negative environment couldn't discourage Ambedkar. King got education though in segregated Black's educational institutions in fact he studied in a better educational environment in comparison to Ambedkar since there were no community based Dalit schools and colleges. Out of all difficulties Ambedkar able to complete BA in economics and political science from Elphinstone College, Bombay (Mumbai) in 1912. An overseas scholarship from Maharaja Sayaji Rao of Baroda enabled Ambedkar to join the American Ivy League's Columbia University in New York City in July 1913 and obtained an MA in political science in 1915. His MA dissertation was on *Administration and finance of the East India Company*. on 9 may 1916 at the Anthropology Seminar of A.A. Goldenweizer, he delivered a paper on 'Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development, which as eventually published in *Indian Antiquity*, May 1917, Vol. XLI. He also

submitted to Columbia University his Ph.D thesis on the topic, 'National Dividend of India - a Historical and Analytical Study'. Ambedkar was awarded Ph.D., degree by Columbia University in 1917. Later on, he revised his thesis and published it by King & Co., London in 1925 under the title *The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India*. He joined the London School of Economics and also Grey's Inn in 1916. He submitted M.Sc. dissertation on 'Provincial Decentralisation of Imperial Finance in British India' to LSE in 1921 as he took a break from studies due to financial constraints and spent in India from 1917 to 1920. In 1922 he submitted D.Sc. dissertation on the 'Problem of the Rupee; Its origin and its Solution' to LSE.

Back in India, Ambedkar published many newspapers and magazines to educate Dalit Indians and also he founded many organizations to unite his people for achieving civil rights and dignity. His organizations – '*Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha*' (Depressed Classes Welfare Association) and 'Scheduled Caste Federation' are important. He started many fortnightly magazines- *Mooknayak*, *Bahishkrit Bharat*, *Samata*, *Janata* and *Prabuddha Bharat*. He wrote several scholarly works.

Martin Luther King completed a BA degree in 1948 from Morehouse College which is the historically Black college and university (HBCU). Since he belonged to a family of pastors, after completing under graduation, he joined the Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania. It was not a Black specific seminary and it was dominated by Euro-Americans. Even then King was elected president of the senior class. This once again shows that king studied in a better social environment in America than Ambedkar in India. In 1951, King obtained a BD degree and got a fellowship to study graduation at Boston University. Like Ambedkar, King also well educated and author of numerous books and articles. The most important among them are as follows: *Stride toward freedom: The Montgomery Story* (1958), *The Measure of a Man* (1959), *Strength to Love* (1963), *Why We Can't Wait* (1963) and *Where do we go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (1967). And the most famous and highly inspiring work is his 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail', dated 16 April 1963, which became a manifesto of the Black American struggle. His speech famously known 'I have a dream', delivered in Washington, DC in 1963 in the peaceful march participated by about 2,50,000 people. He was even named Man of the Year by *Time magazine* in 1963 for his civil rights activism and now he is a legendary figure in the history of African-American movement for justice and equality.

Ambedkar faced most oppressive circumstances than King because American society was most advanced in many ways than Indian society. Though the comparison of Ambedkar and King can be made in the context of their struggle for civil rights of their own people, they never met each other and not inspired by the same source. Very interestingly King got inspiration from Gandhi whereas Ambedkar opposed Gandhi and Gandhism as Gandhi was in favour of upholding caste or varnas system.

At least king joined college maintained by the African-American community in America but Ambedkar couldn't have even that opportunity as Dalit Indian community was very poor and highly illiterate and it couldn't have any source to start its own college at that time. Ambedkar faced caste discrimination in the society and also in college, whereas King faced racial discrimination only in the public space and not in the college because unlike Dalits, Afro-Americans able to own high-quality educational institutions like Morehouse. However, both Ambedkar and King are remembered by history for their invaluable contribution for lifting the lives of their people from the caste and racial oppression respectively. Both fought for upholding the principles of liberty, equality, fraternity and justice.

To conclude, it can be said that the civil rights movement of Afro-Americans in America made an impact over Dalit movement in India particularly after Ambedkar and produced a radical movement known as Dalit Panthers movement in the 1970s on the lines of the movement led by Black Panthers Party of America.

NOTES

1. Martin Delany, *The condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of the colored people of the United States* (1852)).
2. W.E.B. Du Bois, 'Three centuries of Discrimination', *Crisis* 54 (December 1947): 362-63.
3. B.R. Ambedkar, 'Slaves and Untouchables', *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Speeches and Writings*, Vol. 5, p. 15.
4. See S.D. Kapoor, 'B.R. Ambedkar, W.E.B. Du Bois and the process of Liberation', *Economic and Political weekly* 38 (27 December 2003-2 January 2004): 5344-46. These can both be found in *The papers of W.E.B. Du Bois* (Sanford, N.C.: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1980), Reel 58, frames 00467-00468.

