

Annihilation of Caste : the force behind dalit movement

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Abstract

'Annihilating Caste' is perhaps the most eminent and desirable social and political objective that has confronted progressive forces in Indian society, especially since the country's independence in 1947. Among all political forces, Ambedkarites and communists have played a prominent role in seeking an end to caste-based oppression in the country and yet these two forces have failed to see eye to eye on most issues that fall in their political trajectories. The author uses a recent conversation that he had with an Ambedkarite friend on identity politics as a pretext to tease out tensions that exist between Ambedkarites and communists. Issues thrown up by the conversation have been elaborated upon in order to attain some understanding of the path that can be used to achieve the unfulfilled task of 'annihilating caste' to paraphrase Amedkar's immortal phrase.

Keywords caste, Ambedkar, communists, class, annihilation

Introduction

In a letter dated 12 December 1935, the secretary of the Jat-Pat Todak Mandal (Society for the Abolition of Caste system), an anti-caste Hindu reformist group organisation based in Lahore, invited B. R. Ambedkar to deliver a speech on the caste system in India at their annual conference in 1936. Ambedkar wrote the speech as an essay under the title "Annihilation of Caste" and sent in advance to the organisers in Lahore for printing and distribution. The organisers found some of the content to be objectionable towards the orthodox Hindu religion, so intemperate in the idiom and vocabulary used, and so incendiary in promoting conversion away from Hinduism, that they sought the deletion of large sections of the more controversial content endangering Brahmanical interests. They wrote to Ambedkar seeking the removal of sections which they found, in their words, "unbearable.". Ambedker declared in response that he "would not change a comma" of his text. After much deliberation, the committee of organizers decided to cancel their annual conference in its entirety, because they feared violence by orthodox Hindus at the venue if they held the event after withdrawing the invitation to him. Ambedkar subsequently published 1500 copies of the speech as a book on 15 May 1936 at his own expense as Jat-Pat Todak Mandal failed to fulfill their word.

In the essay, Ambedkar criticized the Hindu religion, its caste system and its religious texts which are male dominant and spreading hatred and suppression of female interests. He argued that inter-caste dining and inter-caste marriage is not sufficient enough to annihilate the caste system, but that "the real method of breaking up the Caste System was... to destroy the religious notions upon which caste is founded"

Many people confuse the Dalit movement with the anti-caste movement, often seeing them as one and the same thing. They forget that caste is not exclusive to Dalits. Everyone who claims to be a Hindu falls somewhere on the caste hierarchy and therefore is a part of the caste system. Dalits are at one end of this spectrum – they have experienced extreme oppression, deprivation and humiliation. But at the other end are those born in privileged families, their privilege lying in the fact that they aren't exploited on the basis of their caste identity. Instead, they often benefit from their privileged caste status. These are the people who, thus, go on denying the existence of caste, not acknowledging the role their privilege plays in cushioning their lives. As Anupama Rao puts it, being from a privileged caste offers the “luxury” of ignorance of caste. Nobody who is a Hindu is free of caste. So how can the caste system, which has trapped the entire Hindu society in its divisive structure and rigid identities, be countered by Dalits alone? How can the caste system ever be annihilated without people at all levels of the caste hierarchy fighting hard against it?

Objective:

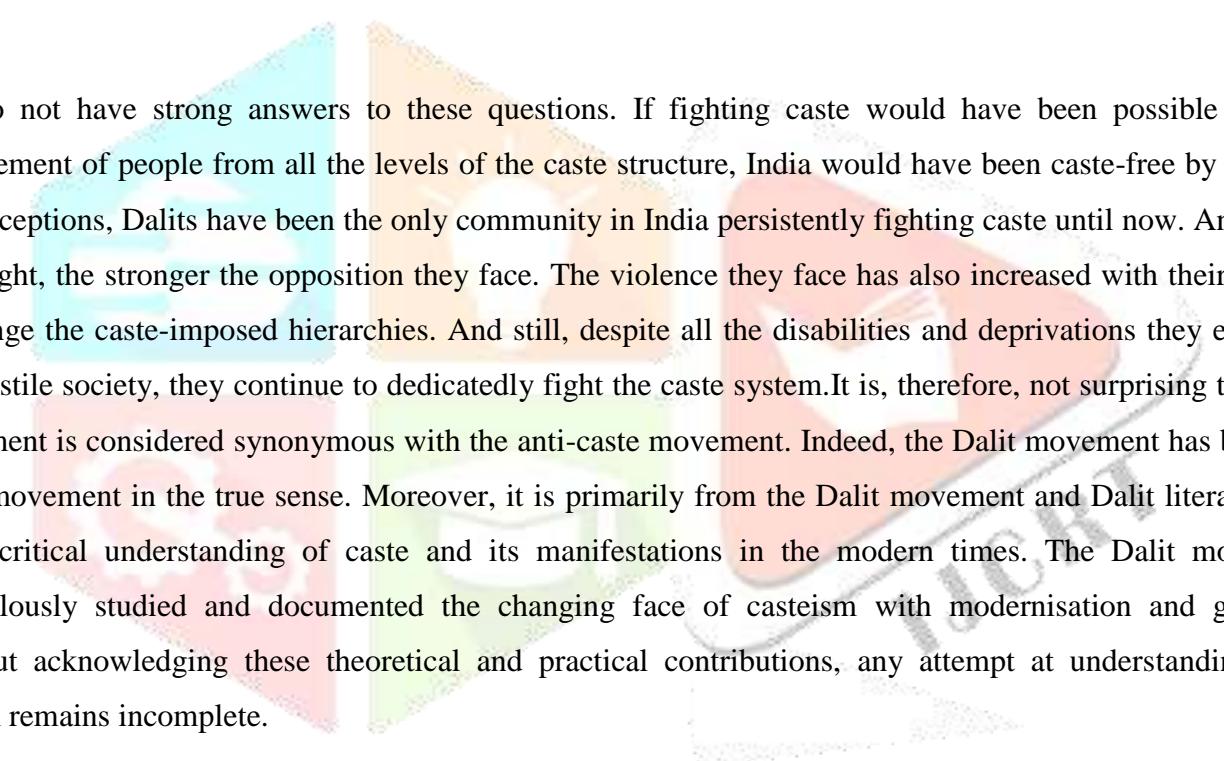
This paper intends to explore the role played by Ambedkar in general and his views enunciated in ‘Annihilation of Caste’ in particular to Dalit revival

Dalit voices in search of representative

To say that the battle to annihilate caste is to be fought by the Dalits alone is to deliberately keep this movement from reaching its full magnitude. It is also to say that the dirty problem (i.e. casteism) of about 80% of the Indian population (the proportion of the Hindu population) should be cleaned by only 17% of them (the proportion of the Scheduled Caste population), thereby re-enacting the caste system when it comes to social reform. It is, therefore, crucial to acknowledge that an anti-caste movement should not be limited to Dalits. Fighting the caste system is definitely an inherent part of the Dalit movement, but the anti-caste movement needs to grow beyond it. There are other reasons why it is more challenging for the Dalits to fight the caste system alone. Being systematically sidelined and excluded from the cardinal spaces of a Hindu society – from its celebrations, rituals, holy places, markets and settlements, intellectual endeavours and discourses, and positions of power – even strong and rational Dalit voices like Ambedkar's often get ignored.

The caste system has trained the privileged and dominant caste members to remain deaf to the voices of those they exploit and oppress. Just as a Hindi saying goes, if a horse becomes friends with the grass, what will it eat? The caste system – which is designed to appropriate the benefits of the labour of the toiling communities to a privileged few – ensures that the voices of those exploited remain unheard so as to continue the system of exploitation. To leave the responsibility of dealing with this system of exploitation to those who are most oppressed is to make it more difficult to end the caste system.

It is also important to understand that although Dalits face the worst manifestations of the caste system, it is mostly practiced and perpetuated by the privileged castes. To seek ways of caste annihilation only within the Dalit communities is like trying to treat the symptoms instead of the root cause of a problem. The root of the caste system is at the top of this hierarchy, from where the attitude of superiority and discrimination initiates. Can any outside force cause a transformation in such highly-guarded and closed communities of privileged castes that do not even welcome others into their homes? How can we make sure that caste-based endogamy stops in privileged castes without having someone from their own families argue against it? How can we make sure that such communities do not practice casteist rituals without having someone who gets to attend these rituals raise questions? How can we stop dominant castes from being abusive and violent to oppressed castes without those leading attacks acknowledging and then dealing with their own hatred? How much can we leave to government policies, their implementation, and surveillance without changing the will of the people?



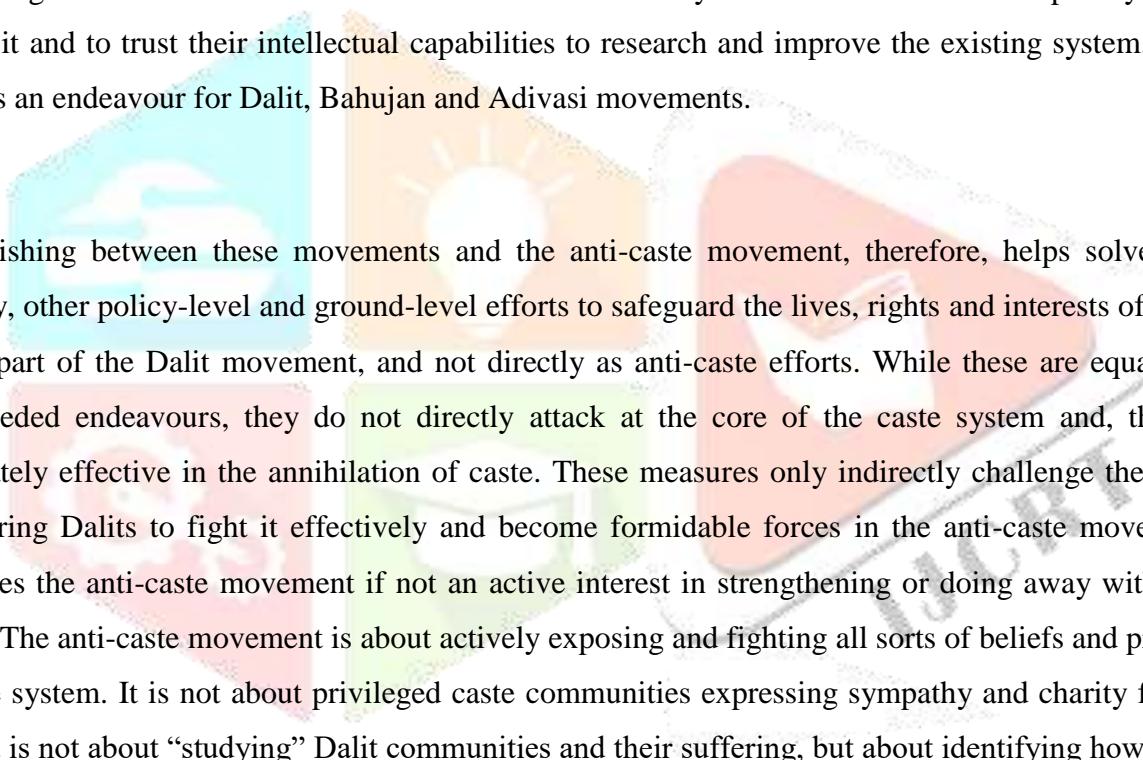
We do not have strong answers to these questions. If fighting caste would have been possible without the involvement of people from all the levels of the caste structure, India would have been caste-free by now. With a few exceptions, Dalits have been the only community in India persistently fighting caste until now. And the harder they fight, the stronger the opposition they face. The violence they face has also increased with their assertion to challenge the caste-imposed hierarchies. And still, despite all the disabilities and deprivations they experience in this hostile society, they continue to dedicatedly fight the caste system. It is, therefore, not surprising that the Dalit movement is considered synonymous with the anti-caste movement. Indeed, the Dalit movement has been an anti-caste movement in the true sense. Moreover, it is primarily from the Dalit movement and Dalit literature that we get a critical understanding of caste and its manifestations in the modern times. The Dalit movement has meticulously studied and documented the changing face of casteism with modernisation and globalisation. Without acknowledging these theoretical and practical contributions, any attempt at understanding the caste system remains incomplete.

Caste system and reservation

However, seeing the Dalit movement and the anti-caste movement as one and the same has also cost us dearly. The most flawed and yet the most common argument people use for not fighting the caste system is that the reservation system reinforces the caste system, and, therefore, the caste system cannot be done with until the reservation system exists. As a result, they instead focus all their efforts and energy on fighting against the reservation system. People forget to see that the reservation system is not a replica of the caste system, but is a response to it. The reservation system cannot even be called a solution to the caste system as it does not counter the caste system entirely and effectively. It is only a temporary safeguard for the people who are most exploited by

the caste system. And, therefore, as long as the caste system exists, measures like the reservation system are needed and will exist.

Moreover, privileged caste people who are interested in making the reservation system more efficient in the name of fighting the caste system are also mistaken. Their interference and involvement in ensuring a better functioning reservation system does not help counter the caste system. All it does is shift focus away from the casteism existing in their own communities. Only Dalits and other oppressed communities remain under scrutiny all the time. The argument to stop the top layer among SC, ST and OBC communities from accessing reservation is an example of this uncalled-for interest. Even if the reservation system is improved and made more efficient, it is only going to benefit the oppressed caste communities and not help the entire Hindu population constituting the caste structure fight it. It thus makes sense to leave the reservation system alone to be worked upon by the communities availing it and to trust their intellectual capabilities to research and improve the existing system. The reservation system is an endeavour for Dalit, Bahujan and Adivasi movements.



Distinguishing between these movements and the anti-caste movement, therefore, helps solve this confusion. Similarly, other policy-level and ground-level efforts to safeguard the lives, rights and interests of Dalits should be seen as part of the Dalit movement, and not directly as anti-caste efforts. While these are equally valuable and much-needed endeavours, they do not directly attack at the core of the caste system and, therefore, are not immediately effective in the annihilation of caste. These measures only indirectly challenge the caste system by empowering Dalits to fight it effectively and become formidable forces in the anti-caste movement. Then what constitutes the anti-caste movement if not an active interest in strengthening or doing away with the reservation system? The anti-caste movement is about actively exposing and fighting all sorts of beliefs and practices rooted in the caste system. It is not about privileged caste communities expressing sympathy and charity for the oppressed castes. It is not about “studying” Dalit communities and their suffering, but about identifying how the caste system gets practiced by the government, privileged communities, media and intelligentsia to marginalise and exclude Dalit communities from important and coveted social spaces.

For non-Dalits, it is about introspection, about initiating the process of the annihilation of caste within their own communities. And most importantly, this movement is about privileged-caste communities acknowledging and respecting the actions and leadership of Dalit activism. It is about listening to their staunch critique of the caste system in Indian society and acting to address those critiques. Such role of non-Dalits in the anti-caste movement is very important and needed for it to progress to its full potential. Any interest of non-Dalits in the anti-caste movement without exposing, questioning and destroying the caste-based beliefs and practices within their own communities and social spaces is a fraud and should be called so. It is mainly to wake non-Dalits from their

passivity when it comes to fighting the caste system that it is now important to distinguish between the Dalit movement and the anti-caste movement.

Ambekar, real and unreal

The most interesting argument however came not from Dalits but, paradoxically, an upper caste journalist (“B.R. Ambedkar, Arundhati Roy, and the politics of appropriation” by G. Sampath, Livemint , March 18, 2014). Challenging Ms. Roy, it said that if she wanted the bauxite under the Niyamgiri hills to be left to the Adivasis, why did she not leave Ambedkar who has been the only possession of Dalits to Dalits themselves? Interestingly though, the implication of the argument can be dangerous insofar as any engagement of the “other” defined as such on the basis of caste can be dismissed as illegitimate. May be, Ambedkar symbolises the cultural good of Dalits, but still, to ghettoise him to Dalits alone will mean downright disrespect to him and incalculable harm to the cause of Dalits. Niyamgiri left to the Adivasis implies a progressive interrogation of the prevailing developmental paradigm, while leaving Ambedkar to Dalits will mean retrogressive destruction of the annihilation-agenda of Babasaheb Ambedkar.

The controversy has surprisingly gone past the main point — that it is the bland business logic of the publisher that has fundamentally drawn Ms. Roy into writing the introduction. With her stature as a Booker Prize awardee, later amplified by her fearless pro-people stands on various issues on various occasions, the book was sure to go global. Moreover, it can well be imagined that her writing would certainly create a controversy, as has happened before. All this would mean a bonanza for any publisher in boosting sales of the book. Whether Navayana had consciously thought it out this way or not, these established product strategies of a publisher cannot be grudged by anyone as, after all, s/he has to follow the grammar of business. Notwithstanding the “anti-caste” tag Navayana tends to wear of late, publishing adulatory and cultish literature on Ambedkar is not the same thing as supporting the annihilation of castes. Once this controversy raked up by a few dies down, the vast majority of Dalits would rather take pride in the point that even Arundhati Roy joined them in worshipping their god. Every such form of Ambedkar adulation has indeed been reinforcing the caste identity and directly distances the annihilation project.

The acceptance of Ambedkar does not necessarily equate itself with the spread of an anti-caste ethos. Today, Ambedkar certainly outshines every other leader in terms of public acceptance. No other leader can rival him in the number of statues, pictures, congregations, books, research, organisations, songs, or any other marker of popularity of/on him. Curiously, his picture has become a fixture even in movies and television episodes. However, the incidences of casteism as indicated by cases of caste discrimination, caste atrocities, caste associations and caste discourses, etc. also show parallel growth. This paradoxical phenomenon can be explained only by separating the real Ambedkar from the unreal one, cast into the icons constructed by vested interests to thwart the consciousness of radical change ever germinating in Dalit masses. These icons package the enigmatic real

Ambedkar into a simplistic symbol: an architect of the Constitution, a great nationalist, the father of reservations, a staunch anti-communist, a liberal democrat, a great parliamentarian, a saviour of Dalits, a bodhisattva, etc. These icons of the harmless, status quo-ist Ambedkar have been proliferated all over and overshadow a possible, radical view of the real Ambedkar.

Which Ambedkar?

Notwithstanding the intrigues behind the promotion of such icons by vested interests with active support from the state, the evolution of Ambedkar, the pragmatist sans any ideological fixation, all through his life, makes him intrinsically difficult to understand. A young Ambedkar who theorised castes as the enclosed classes, the enclosure being provided by the system of endogamy and exogamy, expecting the larger Hindu society to wake up and undertake social reforms like intermarriage in order to open up castes into classes is in contrast to the post-Mahad Ambedkar, disillusioned by the rabid reactions from caste Hindus, turning his sights to politics to accomplish his objective. Were his threats of conversion to Islam for a separate political identity for Dalits, or to force caste Hindus to consider social reforms? Then there is the Ambedkar of the 1930s, anxious to expand his constituency to the working classes sans castes, who founded the Independent Labour Party (ILP), arguably the first Left party in India, and walked with the communists but at the same time one who declared his resolve to convert to some other religion to escape castes. What about the Ambedkar of the 1940s, who returns to the caste, dissolves the ILP and forms the Scheduled Castes Federation, shuns agitational politics and joins the colonial government as labour minister or the one who wrote States and Minorities , propounding state socialism be hardcoded into the proposed Constitution of free India? Or Ambedkar, the staunchest opponent of the Congress or the one who cooperated with the Congress in joining the all-party government and accepted its support to get into the Constituent Assembly? Or even the Ambedkar who developed the representation logic culminating in reservations, expecting that a few advanced elements from among Dalits would help the community progress or the one who publicly lamented that educated Dalits had let him down? Or the Ambedkar who was the architect of the Constitution and advised Dalits to adopt only constitutional methods for a resolution of their problems or the one who disowned it in the harshest possible terms and spoke of being the first person to burn it down? And finally, the Ambedkar who kept referring to Marx as a quasi benchmark to assess his decisions? Or the one who embraced Buddhism and created the ultimate bulwark against communism in India to use the words of one of his scholars, Eleanor Zelliot, or even the one who would favourably compare Buddha and Marx just a few days before bidding adieu to the world, saying their goal was the same but that they differed in the ways of achieving them — Buddha's being better than Marx's? These are just a few broad vignettes of him, problematic in typifying him in a simplistic manner. If one goes deeper, one is bound to face far more serious problems.

Ambedkar is surely needed as long as the virus of caste lingers in this land but not as a reincarnation of the old one as most Dalits emotionally reflect on. Not even in the way Ms. Roy would want him to come now and urgently.

He will have to be necessarily constructed to confront the far messier problem of contemporary castes than that obtained in his times.

Conclusion:

The Caste system is no doubt an economic institution as stated by the Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in his very famous book ‘Annihilation of Caste’ and before that he has given a very systematic and scientific analysis of the origin and growth of the caste system in India in his very important book ‘Castes in India’, are very important and relevant contributions of Dr. Ambedkar in literature. The present paper is an honest attempt to provide the economic analysis of the caste system as an economic institution given by Dr. Ambedkar especially in the first book mentioned above. Likewise the paper also presents the relevance of the economic analysis of the caste as an economic organization in the context of the present India. This paper adequately proves that Dr. Ambedkar’s economic analysis of the caste system is very much important today also, and more importantly it has lot of utility and significance in the present Indian society. But the present study is solely based on the secondary sources of the data, and it did not consider the primary sources of data and information at all. The study should also have the primary data support, which increases the scope, reliability, application and importance of the study. It is therefore there is very large scope in undertaking the number of studies on the present relevance of the economic analysis of the caste based on the primary data and information in the context of India, which is thinking of inclusive growth, and economic supreme power in the World. This is possible through the further research in the form of the number of research papers, research projects, dissertations and theses as well on this important topic.

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