

Hinduism and Social Reforms: Quest for Social Equality

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❖ Introduction

Every society has its own particular social structure and system which has linkages with the religious virtues. The stratification is determined on the basis of economic as well as social status. Mostly, the base of social stratification is economic, therefore, it divides society on class basis. However, in India, the base of social stratification is not class but 'caste'. The caste system exhibits the peculiar characteristic of Hinduism. During colonial times, social reforms became imperative agent in search of social equality. However, earlier social reforms belonged to reforms in Hindu family. The removal of caste based discrimination, the efforts of Jyotiba Phule, B.R. Ambedkar and E. V. R. Periyar gets importance. The paper intends to analyse the contribution of these three social reformers and their efforts to implement social equality.

❖ Social reforms in Hinduism:

As a religion, Hinduism has its own journey from Vedic religion to recognition of indigenous inhabitants as Hindus by foreigners. The British begun to define Indian community by their religious belief, and thereafter, 'Hinduism' had come in limelight. Western scholars and orientalist started to define and formulating or re-formulating Hindu tradition and culture with translation of various Sanskrit texts. Hinduism term is constituted of 'Hindu' and 'ism' where the term Hindu derives from the term 'Sindu' – an Indus river name. The use of the term Hindu can be found in Zed Avesta. The term also gets reference from Persia during Achaemenid Empire. Moreover, *Hidu* was included in the list of subject countries in an inscription of Darius I (Sharma, 2002: 2).

The orientalist and philologists translated and re-formulated Vedic literature and that brought Hindu tradition, and culture in a central stage. However, the process has another side. The British rule – colonial period, administration also rectified many social imbalance,

hierarchy, and injustice within Hindu society itself. Therefore, to create social harmony and abolish discrimination, social reforms took place. Western education, British administration, efforts of social reformers, and various newly started social institutions had their significant role in changing nature of Hinduism and society.

Indian social reformers who contributed to remove such unreasonable aspects from Hindu society, one can recognise the contribution of Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891), Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-1884). These people struggled to legalise social-religious reform and improvement of status of Indian women. However, here the focus is on those social reformers who questioned discriminatory form of Hindu society. For this purpose, one can recognise the contribution of M.G. Ranade, Jyotiba Phule, B. R. Ambedkar, Periyar etc.

There can be two attributes of social change in colonial India. Firstly, the social movement that started by upper class- caste social reformers in order to create social harmony and practice virtues like equality. Therefore, their focus was to question those social customs which reflected orthodox patriarchal nature of Hindu society. They endeavoured to eradicate such customs like prohibition on child marriage, sati immolation, prohibition on widow re marriages and so on. However, these kind of reforms were restricted to reforms in Hindu family only. As Ambedkar argued that social reformers effort for reforming Hindu society was limited to reforms that only related to Hindu family. But they did not endeavour to eradicate such an injustice practice of Hindu society i.e. the practice of caste system (Ambedkar, 1935).

❖ The Quest of Social equality: Contribution of Phule, Ambedkar and Periyar

Due to the hierarchical structure of Hindu society, lower caste people are subjugated by the privileges caste. During colonial period, various organizations and movements took in order to create social harmony and balance. As already, earlier section have discussed social reformers did not helpful to brake the system because somehow they had faith in Hindu tradition that gives sanctions to the caste system. The result was that the people who are oppressed begun to struggle against this system. They fought against caste based discrimination and lunched emancipation movements. The contribution of Jotirao Phule, Periyar and B. R. Ambedkar is significant in the struggle of Dalit for emancipation.

Dalit liberation movements' aimed at to protest against Brahmanism, Hinduism and colonialism. As Ambedkar pointed out that Brahmanism and capitalism both are enemy of

dalits. During colonial period, when social movements led by upper caste-class reformers did not achieve equal status, Dalits begun to agitate against Brahmanism. Apart from the movement led by Phule, E. V. R and Ambedkar, Dalit liberation movement took place viz. 'Ad-Dharma movement in Punjab, the Namashtudra movement in Bengal, the Adi-Andhra movement (1917), the Adi Dravida movement in Tamil Nadu, Adi Hindu movement in UP (centred around Kanpur) and Adi Karnataka Movement' (Patanka and Omvedt, 1979: 415).

One of the pioneer of who struggled for the oppressed was Jatirao Govindrao Phule (1827-1890). Phule was born in Pune (Deccan). The contribution in social reform stars with the foundation of schools for the girls and the lower caste children. From 1860s, he was engaged in reform campaigns. His significant and radical step was to open 'Home for the prevention of infanticide' in 1863. Here, pregnant high caste widow could come and give birth to child in secrete and return to their families. The home collected thirty five infants however, survival rate among them was very poor. From 1869 to 1870 period was important in terms of literally work of Phule. Between this period, three major work published i.e. *A Ballad of the Raja Chatrapati Shivaji Bhosale*, *Priestcraft Exposed* and *Slavery* (O'Hanlon, 1985).

For Phule, caste was slavery. He reinvented Aryan race theory and stated that, "...they [Aryans] originally settled on the banks of the Ganges whence they spread gradually over the whole of India. In order, however, to keep a better hold on the people they devised that weird system of mythology, the ordination of caste, and the code of crude and inhuman laws to which we can find no parallel among the other nations (cited in Omvedt, 2011: 23). Phule enunciated the ancient Aryans being source of all kind of religious oppression and domination. By re-interpreting mythology and Aryan race theory, Phule had recognized rakshasas as heroes. His criticism involved in-equalitarian religious philosophy and gave religious alternative in his last work, *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma* (Omvedt, 2011). He had launch struggle against Brahminical domination as well as British colonialism.

Phule founded *Satyasodhak Samaj* (Truth seeking society) in 1873. The organisation was belonged the lower caste and purpose was to the upliftment of the lower caste people and fight against Brahmanism. Phule termed as *Shudras* and *ati-Shudras*, were in a need of the upliftment. Samaj had clear twenty-eight rule for its members to follow. The ninth rule exhibits to take vows for its members (O'Hanlon, 1985). The philosophy of *Satyasodhak Samaj* was mirror image of Phule's religious radicalism and opposition to Brahminical Hinduism.

Phule was more radical in thought with providing non-Aryan theory. However, he was not successful to arrange economic alternative or analysis and political institution which can carry forward his revolutionary ideas and activities. Therefore, his vision of liberation movement was taking step back after his death. Nevertheless, Phule's movement and radicalism played a vital role in inspiring untouchable's movement (Omvedt, 1971).

Western India became the centre of political and social activism through the activities of social reformers and Hindu nationalists by 1920s. The similar way, in south anti-caste movement and agitation were taking shape. The non-Brahmin movement and anti-caste movement arose in Tamil Nadu. One of the significant leaders of anti Brahminical and anti-caste movement was E. V. R, Periyar, was former congressman but became critic of the position of congress, Gandhi and caste Hindus on the issue of caste reform.

E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker (1879-1973) prominent leader of Tamil Nadu who gave voice to Dalits of south. 'Periyar' name was given to him by Tamilians during his political struggles which literally means 'Great man'. He entered into politics as a supporter of Gandhi and congress in 1919. One of the important events was Vaikom Satyagraha on the issue of temple entry of Ezhavas (lower caste). Vaikom Satyagraha was a booster for the congress in south which was demoralised after Mappila rebellion. However, after the realisation of congress and Gandhi's unambiguity regarding social reforms, E. V. R. left the agitation (Dirks, 2002).

Vaikom agitation brought rupture and soon after the question emerged on the separate dining of non-Brahmin and Brahmin students of *Gurukulam* School near madras which was congress sponsored school. E. v. r raised voice against separate dining and further he took the issue of to expand non Brahmins representation in the All India Spinner Association, Tamil Nadu branch. He had dispute with Brahmin leaders over school issue and communal resolution. In the end, late 1925, he decided to leave the congress. After the separation from the congress, he took atheist stand and declared his political agenda viz. "no god, no religion, no Gandhi, no congress and no Brahmins" (Dirks, 2002: 258- 259).

E. V. R. left the Congress in 1925. Later, after two years, Gandhi visited south India, when in his speech in madras (1927) he defended model of *varnashramadharma*. E. V. R. strongly reacted on Gandhi's advice. He met Gandhi in September 1927 but the conversation did not resolve differentiations between them. He came to the conclusion that India would not acquire true freedom until the destruction of Indian National Congress, the domination of Brahmanism and Hinduism (Dirks, 2002; Omvedt: 2011).

He lunched self-respect movement in 1926. The movement spread all over Tamil Nadu. The self-respect league had the first conference in 1929. E. V. R. had utilised his newspaper *Kudi Arasu* as the mouthpiece that radically criticised Brahmanism and the Congress's ostensible effort for social reform. The philosophy of self-respect movement advocated to oppose Hinduism, Brahmin priesthood, eradication of caste system and urged for women emancipation (Omvedt: 2011; Dirks, 2002).

He was impressed by atheistic socialism during his tour of Soviet Union in 1932. After returning to India, he and Singaravelu formed new programme for self-respect activism. Due to new development, a political party was formed titled as *Samadharm* (the word constitutes closest Tamil equivalent of socialism). By 1934, the differences emerged between Singaravelu wanted to rename party as socialist party rather than working in shadow, it should be openly claimed. The real difference came during 1934 election, that to support the Justice party or congress. In 1936, Singaravelu was ordered by the communist party of India, resolve all organisations and join the congress socialist party. E. V. R. had clashed with 'Brahminic left' and after the split, there was no scope for class-caste struggle. He identified himself with linguistic nationalism. He revived the Justice party and renamed it as Dravida Kazhagam (DK) in 1944. This gave rise to Tamil nationalism that related with anti-caste movement. The south is a witness of strong non Brahmin movement and effort to vanished Brahminical Hinduism. However, it did not successful, for that splits between Dalits and non-Brahmin and communists and Dravidians can be considered as one of the causes (Omvedt, 2011).

E. V. R died in 1973. He explained his life struggle and work like this,

“Though I have endeavoured all along to abolish caste, as far as this country is concerned, this has meant I carry out propoganda for the abolition of god, religion, the shastras and Brahmins. For caste will disappear only when these four disappear, even if one of these were to remain, caste will not be abolished in its entirety...because caste has been constructed out of these four...only after man has become a slave and a fool would caste have thus been imposed on society” (cited in Geetha, 1998: WS9).

E. V. R. was sensitive to caste issue and he considered caste as a system of cruelty and inequality. Atheism, anti-caste radicalism and equalitarianism constitute the philosophical framework of E. V. R. Apart from E. V. R. another prominent figure who struggled to fight against caste discrimination and rights of Dalits i.e. B. R. Ambedkar. The

person took systematic attempt to theorise caste and envisaged method to eradicate caste system that he elaborated in his work of *Annihilation of Caste*.

After completing doctorate degree, he return to India, and thereafter, his struggle for the untouchables had begun. He faced abominable behaviours of high caste Hindus during his service in Baroda. He returned to Bombay and settled as a professor at Sydenham College. In his initial stage, he got accompanied of Shahu Maharaj of Kolapur. One of the major concerns was the accession of education for Dalits. *The Bahistrit Hitkarni Sabha* (the Depressed Class institute) was founded in 1924 in Bombay. The objectives of the Sabha included spread of education and improve economic condition of the depressed class. By late 1920s, Ambedkar became a prominent speaker of the oppressed class through his writings and speeches. Ambedkar's first newspaper was *Muknayak* started in 1920. Another newspapers were *Bahishkrit Bharat* and *Janata* begun in 1927 and 1929 respectively (Omvedt, 2011; Zelliott, 2004).

The three major issues took the shape the politics and movement of Ambedkar. These issues were, eradication of traditional duties imposed upon Mahars, the accession of common water and temple entry for Dalits. He launched Mahad Satyagraha in 1927 with the aim of to drink water from high caste tank and access their right to have common accession of water. Later on, the tank was purified by orthodox Hindus through traditional rituals. The Mahad Styagraha was not successful in getting water but can be considered as the first untouchable liberation movement. The year of 1927 had dramatic end with the burning of *Manusmruti* (Dirks, 2002; Zelliott, 2004).

Another effort of Ambedkar was the temple entry movement. There were three sites for temple entry movements i.e. Amraoti, Poona and Nasik. Temple entry movement at Bear, was the first attempt. The movement at Parvati in Poona had significance in terms of claiming right to enter in the temple. Parvati is a hill, surrounded by temples and considered a holy place. A group of twelve Satyagrahis climbed up the hill to the main gate of the temple. Other Dalits were gathered at foot of the hill. A group of Satyagrahis was prevented and attacked by Hindus. After getting protection from police, they sat before the door but the temple door was remained close for four months and gradually Satyagraha was abandoned. Nasik Satyagraha was started on 4th March, 1930. The aim was to enter in the Kalaram temple, which considered as place of pilgrimage along with legendry of Ramayana. Initially, it was succeeded with getting right for Dalits to pull the chariot in temple. Later on, caste Hindus denied to give this right to Dalits and protested that resulted in a riot. The temple was closed

but Satyagraha was going on. Smaller groups were sitting before temple throughout the year (except in rainy season). The Satyagraha came to an end with the announcement of Ambedkar that he will not die as Hindu in 1935 (Zelliot, 2004).

Ambedkar was emerged as a prominent Dalit leader, therefore, invited to the Round Table Conference. It was the beginning of the clash between Gandhi, the Congress and Ambedkar. In second Round Table Conference, Gandhi himself being the Congress representative, gradually supported separate electorates of Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and Anglo Indians, except the untouchables – Dalits with claiming the representation of Hindu community included the Dalits. Nevertheless, the Communal Award (17th August, 1932) granted Ambedkar's demand of separate electorate for the Dalits. In the response of the Award, Gandhi announced fast unto the death. The changed atmosphere forced Ambedkar to compromise that resulted in Poona Pact of 1932. Gandhi toured ten months in India, for campaign to remove untouchability and collect money for the upliftment of untouchables, later founded an organisation that would work for it. The organisation was All India Anti Untouchability League. It renamed as Servants of Untouchables society i.e. *Harijan Sevek Sangh*. Gandhi also begun his newspaper Harijan in Poona (Feb. 1933) and then transformed to Ahmedabad (Omvedt, 2011; Dirks, 2002; Zelliot, 2004).

Ambedkar was bitter regarding Gandhi and the Congress's reform attitude toward the Dalits and came out against the temple entry bill which was proposed by the Congressmen in various legislative councils. According to Ambedkar, Gandhi who opposed temple entry of the Dalits, and later support that can be seen as plank of the constructive programme. The engagement of the congress and Gandhi in the temple entry movement "was destroy the basis of the claim of the Untouchables for political rights by destroying the barrier between them and the Hindus which makes them separate from the Hindus" (Ambedkar cited in Dirks, 2002: 269). He believed that temple entry movement was a symbolic, but education, employment and economic advancement are more important concerns for the Dalits rather than Hindu rituals.

Dalits are economically and socially depressed class therefore, achievement of political power, education and economic stability became a vital for the upliftment. The first political party was the Independent Labour Party (ILP) was founded after two months of the announcement of leaving Hinduism by Ambedkar. It became opposition party in the Bombay council. The main object was welfare of the scheduled caste through legislative but did not successful. Later on, all India Scheduled Castes Federation was formed in 1942, with

claiming separation from caste Hindus and the congress. The party received failure in the election of 1946. Due to his denouncement to Gandhi, Nehru and the Congress, he did not get much support. At the last, he announced a new party i.e. the National Republic Party in 1956 (Omvedt, 2011; Zelliot, 2004).

Ironically, Ambedkar had rectified the nature of Hindu social reformers and the status of Dalits in Hinduism. He was against the Congress's type of reforms and charity for the dalits. Indeed, Ambedkar saw it as just ostensible act and political purpose of them so it retains Hindu majority. Ambedkar had recognised *Harijan Sevak Sangh* as one of the techniques of Gandhi. Further he remarked that the Congress and Gandhi declared struggle against the British but it is not true fight, it is a struggle to acquire power (Ambedkar, 2009).

Ambedkar had also described non Aryan theory as Phule did. He clearly stated caste as abominable system of Hindu society based on hierarchy. He proposed the method to eradicate the caste system viz. inter dining and inter caste marriages. However, further, he stated that Hindus do observe the caste system due to it gets sanction from religious texts and Vedas. Therefore, ultimate solution he declared to vanish Vedas and religious texts like Manusmriti which justify the discriminatory caste system (Ambedkar, 1935). His solution to annihilate caste was unbearable for caste Hindus who were reformers and running the organisation called *Jat Pat Todal Mandal*. In addition, his announcement to leave Hinduism had implicit response from other communities. Nonetheless, Ambedkar influenced large number of Dalits and he emerged as the most prominent leader. He himself adopted Buddhism before the death and justified his remark that will not die as a Hindu. His religious stand contributed in conversion of many Dalits into Buddhism. In independent India, served as law minister and continued his struggle for Dalits in political representation as well as economic advancement. The person who implicitly criticised the theory of Hindu lawgiver Manu, became Independent India's lawgiver.

❖ **Conclusion:**

British colonialism has multiple influences on Indian society. Along with Indian women's subordinate position, it also gave indirection boost (western education and democratic virtue like equality) to raise a protest against unjustified discrimination in Hindu society i.e. caste discrimination. It is also right that western orientalism plays a vital role in the construction of Hinduism. Earlier, Indians were identified through caste, religious belief, sects and region wise. The newly constructed Hinduism wanted all Hindus to be part of Hindu society. Therefore, the social reformers begun their campaign against untouchability

and caste discrimination. It resulted in shuddhi i.e. purification programme. However, along with religious, it had political aspect to include Dalits in a Hindu fold. When India became a nation state, political representation got importance in terms of getting power.

The most radical Dalit emancipation movements were taking shape due to failure of the reform movement. Phule, Periyar and Ambedkar contributed in the struggle of Dalits. They spoke against Brahmanism and Hinduism which discriminates people. Anti Brahminical struggle carried ways with temple entry movement. Ambedkar aimed at to achieve political power. Along with political, he also urged Dalits for education. Ambedkar had realised that Hindu observes untouchability because it is sanctioned through religious texts and Hindu scriptures. Therefore, if one Hindu will not observe the caste rules and untouchability, it means that one is denying her or his own religion. Caste Hindu will not stop observe untouchability, just because it is inhuman or it is not just. It made Ambedkar to leave Hinduism. Even tough, the constitution has given rights, due to religious orthodoxy and caste identity, Dalits have to suffer. They do not have resources to be uplifted and empowered. It is wrongly conceptualise, the theory of Varna by merit. Because in a democratic country like India, one's identity determines through her or his social and economic status as caste relates with heredity of occupation. The social structure of Hindu society is the caste system. Therefore, there is an unbreakable relationship between caste and Hinduism. *Hinduism without the caste system* is a utopian concept.

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