

A Study of Dr. B.R Ambedkar's Idea of Nationalism in the Context of India's Freedom Movement

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Abstract: B.R. Ambedkar's notion of nationalism and his understanding of the Indian national movement have rarely received adequate academic consideration either from the liberal or radical scholars and the historians in India. This study attempts to analyze Ambedkar's self generated vision of nationalism and also evaluate why he and dalits did not participate directly in the Indian national movement as directed by the congress which is a question that needs to be analyzed along with current debate raised by Arun Shourie criticizing the Ambedkar's feeling of nationalism. It is true that Ambedkar never keenly participated in India's national movement, rather he opposed the mainstream national movement, but this kind of attitude indirectly contributed much by laying the broad social foundation on which the present Indian nation state stands.

I. INTRODUCTION

This study enclosing Ambedkar's self generated idea on nationalism and the social structure and political system and vision of Ambedkar on this particular issue that continues to confront us as critical, will help in unfolding the various dimensions related to the contemporary society and its polity. The canvas of Ambedkar's work is vast but the issues discussed in this study are a modest attempt to mirror the breadth of his idea on nationalism in Indian perspective.

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956), the great Indian Constitution maker and 'a symbol of revolt' (as mentioned by Jawaharlal Nehru, The first Prime Minister of India), was one of the leading nation-builders of modern India. The reactions of *Dalits* (untouchables) to the criticism on Ambedkar's role in the freedom struggle of India and its construction of the national movement have led to a reconsideration of his ideas of nationalism. Ambedkar's thought in general and nationalism in particular is not merely ideas or opinions of a great thinker. These are aspects of a collective ideology which are operating as a motor force, in struggle with other ideologies in the fast changing society. Of all the modern Indian ideologies, it is Ambedkar who alone attempted to elaborate a full-fledged theory of nationalism and sought to apply it critically to the Indian situation. But, it is a pity that theoretical reflections and justifications were virtually non-existent within the nationalist movement in India. One section asserted that India as Hindu has been eternal and the Indian nation is waking up from its long stupor, imposed on it by its external enemies, other section treated it the phase 'nation-in-the making' whenever

difficulties arose. As against this, Ambedkar grappled with this ideology of nineteenth century Europe, deconstructed it as to what is perennial and peripheral in it and showed how it could be critically applied to the peculiarities of the colonial Indian situation.

II. VISION OF SIR B.R. AMBEDKAR REGARDING NATIONALISM

This section analyses the self generated vision of Ambedkar regarding nationalism critically. Nationalism is an ideology based on devotion to love of one's country either by birth or by choice which focuses upon the attitude that the members of a nation have when they care about their national identity and actions that the members of a nation take when seeking to achieve some form of political sovereignty. Nationalism, in a wider sense, is any complex of attitudes, claims and directives for action ascribing a fundamental political, moral, cultural value to nations and nationality and deriving special obligations and permissions from this ascribed value. Nationalism in Ambedkar initiated to object internal oppression as well as external domination. He wanted equality and civil rights for those who for centuries deprived of them. Indian society, in view of Ambedkar, was a system which gave no scope for the growth of the sentiment of equality and fraternity which are essential for a democratic form of government. Many people were deprived of the basic human rights. He wanted constitutional safeguards to protect oppressed. Ambedkar was of the outlook that Indian society was nothing but gradation of caste which consists of ascending scale of reverence and descending scale of contempt. Ambedkar's view was very transparent regarding foreign domination. Ambedkar viewed that inspite of realizing the necessity of removing some social evils which had horrified the lives of down-trodden people, British attitude was indifferent in eradicating some social evils simply because of the reason that its intervention in the-then existing code of social and economic life would give rise to resistance. Ambedkar's spirit of nationalism took a proper shape through the struggle against such British rule although foreign rule had been the potential force in the country like India.

Nationalism in Ambedkar stems from his spirit of dignity both for the people and for the country. He had profound feeling for the poor and untouchables which induced him to fight against denial of basic human rights. Such attitudes of

Ambedkar were called by some congress leader as anti-national, but in true sense, it was nothing but expression of humanism and nationalism to which he sincerely devoted himself.

Those who blamed Ambedkar for his opposition to congress-led freedom struggle failed to understand that freedom from alien rule was no more significant than freedom from internal form of slavery and exploitation. To Ambedkar, if freedom of a country cannot be distinguished from freedom of its people, true freedom would be misleading concept. To him, “philosophically, it may be possible to consider a nation as a unit but sociologically, it cannot be regarded as consisting of many classes and freedom of the nation, if it is to be a reality, must vouchsafe the freedom of the different classes comprised in it, particularly of those who are treated as the servile classes”. In true sense, Ambedkar gave due weight age on the emancipation of oppressed people who for years remained enslaved by *Varna Hindus*. If nation is to be considered as co-extensive with the ruling class, it is to be truly representative of all people. This is only possible when these people are quite free from fear, oppression and exploitation resulting real freedom of the people. According to Ambedkar, a nation consists of whole society i.e. groups and classes, varied ranges of life in one hand and on the other hand area of soil which is the physical features of the land this social classes occupy. He laid stress on the freedom of people, although he did not have any contrary view regarding India’s physical freedom. This created a misunderstanding in the mind of those who could not make such a distinction between these two things. It is well-known that nationalist leader in general and the Hindu nationalists in particular laid excessive emphasis on the political freedom ignoring the social aspects of nationalism. Ambedkar’s argument was that in the absence of complete freedom of the people, nationalism becomes a conduit of internal slavery, organized tyranny for the poor and depressed classes.

In view of Ambedkar, nationalism means expression of inner unity of a people and it is a process of social assimilation. Therefore, irrespective of caste, colour and creed, nationalism gets perfect harmony if social brotherhood of men prevails everywhere within a nation. To Ambedkar, nationalism is negation of caste spirit and caste spirit is nothing but deep-rooted communalism. He emphasized to fight against casteism, linguism, communalism and separatism because he was of the opinion that these social evils divide the people into small social units which are against the spirit of nationalism. In view of Ambedkar, communalism being one form of groupism is a threat to national integration which may hamper the way for equality and fraternity. In short, Ambedkar viewed nationalism as a spiritual phenomenon rooted in humanism.

Ambedkar’s view of nationalism and patriotism creates a strong sense of social brotherhood in doing justice and good

to the needy, lowly who live in the same country but are not treated as full man. Ordinarily, nationalism is a feeling of attachment to national society whereas patriotism is a feeling of attachment to the very soil of the “land of our birth”. To Ambedkar, patriotism and nationalism are of utmost need for democracy and equality. Ambedkar’s view regarding this is that patriotism demand action in right direction and reaction against all wrong and a nationalist leader should have deep faith in himself to eradicate imperialism, social tyranny, casteism, communalism, forced labour etc. In a word, Ambedkar’s idea of nationalism creates a spirit of social brotherhood, feeling of oneness and a firm determination to improve the lot of people who remain oppressed in the same country.

Ambedkar, the believer of one nationalism, advocates for religious tolerance and condemns all kinds of hypocrisy and oppression in the name of religion and nationalism. Amidst diversity of religions in Indian nation, he aspires that “religion should be the force which deepens the solidarity of human society” which can bring people together for social and emotional unity, can lead the people to military unity and political stability. To him, “the divine right of the majority to rule the minorities according to the wishes of the majority”

is an example of irrationalism and such monopoly of power and prestige by majority religious or political group is not nationalism, rather anti-nationalism. Accepting different religions in Indian society having religious differences, Ambedkar believes that these religions should be binding forces behind creating national spirit and in no situation, these religions should be a symbol of inhuman treatment and ignominy. Otherwise, it will hamper the development of strong sense of national unity.

Recognizing the demerits of diversity of language in a country, Ambedkar opined that different language should not obstruct the growth and spirit of nationalism and in favour of his opinion, he cited examples of Canada, Switzerland and South Africa which have diversified languages. Yet, Ambedkar laid stresses on the need of a common language in order to strengthen the unity and spirit of nationalism as well as to remove racial and cultural conflicts. Through one common language, Ambedkar wanted to have a strong sense of unity and a deep feeling of nationalism. He had the arguments in support of his claim that people speaking different languages might not be able to exchange thoughts and actions for development and happiness of all men irrespective of race, caste and religion. Moreover, one language could not only tighten the sense of human unity in a nation but also remove racial and cultural tension.

The indifferent attitude of British towards establishing social equality and civic liberty made Ambedkar very much vocal. The spirit of strong nationalism roused in him to struggle against foreign rule with a view to bring freedom for men as well as to restore rights of the depressed classes. In view of

Ambedkar, unless and until the Indian people secure political power and unless that power was concentrated in the hands of the socially suppressed section of the Indian society, it would not be possible to completely eradicate all social, legal and cultural disabilities under which that section suffered. He was not only against British imperialism but also advocated for self Government. As a result, he said 'We must have a government in which the men in power will give their undivided allegiance to the best interest of the country.' In Ambedkar's political thought, it is explicitly apparent that he attempted to awaken social and national consciousness against British neutralism which proved fatal to the social emancipation of people.

Though nationality and nationalism are two different psychological states of human mind, there can not be nationalism without the feeling of nationality. In view of Ambedkar, nationality is 'a feeling of consciousness of kind which is on one hand binds together to those who have it, so strongly that it overrides all differences arising out of economic conflicts or social gradations and on the other hand, severs them from those who are not their kind. It is a feeling not to belong to any other group. This is the essence of what is called a nationality and national feeling'. He opined that nationality may turn into nationalism when two conditions are satisfied:

- a) There must arise the desire to live as a nation and nationalism is a dynamic expression of that desire.
- b) There must be a territory which nationalism could occupy and make it a state as well

as a cultural home of the nation. Therefore, Ambedkar is of the opinion that nationalism should be based on a strong will to live as a nation and deep feeling to make a state or cultural home with definite territory. Political unity will not alone bring about such kind of nationalism rather social unity would be more congenial for bringing about a sense of human brotherhood which induces a sense of oneness. In order to bring about a sense of human brotherhood, Ambedkar laid stress on spiritual unity of the people regardless of communal inhibition and discouraged all kinds of heterogeneity, doubts and differences. With the object of establishing all-round harmony among the people, spiritual harmony was thought to be much nobler task to him than making conflict with British Government. Ambedkar warned people against the spirit of blind hero-worship because he thought that the service to the people of a nation is nobler than the worship of political heroes. He was of the opinion that '*Bhakti*' is a path to the salvation of the soul, but in politics, *Bhakti* or hero worship is a sure road to degradation and eventual dictatorship. He has argument in support of his opinion that the worship of political heroes has killed public conscience because the heroes think only of their worshippers and neglect the common cause of mankind. Rather, he attempted to solve the political, social and religious problems of India through his

democratic humanistic method. Though educated and impressed by western culture, he laid stress on the need of cultural regeneration preserving the best elements of our culture and civilization.

Within Ambedkar's thought, the concept as well as the reality of nation looms very large. Nation is an ideal-typical construct, a social category built around certain principles. A serious and ideological commitment engendering an equally serious change in social and societal relations at least is a necessary prerequisite to actualize the nation as a political entity. In the concrete of the subcontinent, this demands that caste in all its dimensions, both the system and spirit whether understood in its pristine *vedic-shastraic purity* or in its degraded and distorted nineteenth-century form, be renounced once and for all as an ideology and principle of social order and organization; and socio-politically move towards and aspire to another form of society and social relations. This ideological renunciation and a 're-socialization' is the condition for the desire to constitute an independent polity.

Nationalism for Ambedkar is 'the desire for a separate national existence for those bound by this tie of kinship.' It is a will to live as a nation in the full sense of the term not only socially but also politically. Nationalism as an ideology and a movement succeeds the nation as the corporate feeling. It is a praise-worthy desire for those bound by this tie of kinship. Ambedkar is categorically on this point: 'there cannot be nationalism without the feeling of nationality in existence'. It is precisely this feeling of corporate and communicative oneness that legitimizes the demand for self-determination and then the claim for nation-statehood becomes irresistible.

Within the small group of marginalized intellectuals who have kept the flame of thoughts of Ambedkar alive with regard to nationalism, they all also remain to be defensive protesting that Babasaheb Ambedkar also was national in the same sense or within the same nationalist paradigm as that of the mainstream leaders that Ambedkar too was anti-British, that he also desired independence as an absolute value and that he considered when compared to *swarjya* beneficial to the masses, particularly the lower castes. Therefore, comparing with the onslaught of the dominant ideology of the nationalist leaders, Ambedkar's nationalism and patriotism in the traditional sense could not be made to appear vibrant.

Nationalism in Ambedkar began in protest both against external domination and internal oppression. Indian society, according to him, was a gradation of castes forming an ascending scale of reverence and descending scale of contempt.

To Ambedkar, Gandhiji's aim in joining the temple entry movement was to destroy the basis of the claim of the untouchables for political rights by destroying the barrier between them and the Hindus which made them separate from

the Hindus. He characterized Gandhiji's temple entry movement as a strange game of political acrobatics. The indifferent attitude of British towards establishing social equality and civic liberty made Ambedkar very much vocal. Hindu had to lose much by the abolition of untouchability. The system of untouchability was a gold mine to the Hindus. In this society, there was a master class and a servile class. Untouchability was more than a religious system. It was an economic system which was worse than slavery. Hindus belonged to the exploiting class where Hindus gained economic advantage by perpetuating untouchability. He thought that in *Swaraj*, the untouchables would get no privileges but the perpetuation of slavery. He was not only against British imperialism but also advocated for self Government. He had realized that nationality had a most intimate connection with the claim for self-government. He knew that by the end of the 19th century, it had become an accepted principle that the people, who constituted a nation, were entitled on that account to self- government and that any patriot, who asked for self-government for his people, had to prove that they were a nation. He never cared to reason whether nationality was merely a question of calling a people a nation or was a question of the people being a nation.

III. CRITICISM ON AMBEDKAR'S POSITION IN INDIA'S FREEDOM MOVEMENT

Ambedkar's notion of Nationalism and his understanding of the Indian national movement have seldom received adequate intellectual attention either from the liberal or radical scholars and the historians in India. The failure to situate Ambedkar in a proper historical and nationalist perspective has left the ground quite wide open for people like Arun Shourie to launch ruthless attack on Ambedkar. Arun Shourie, who was appointed minister of disinvestment in A.B.Bajpayee's government in 2003, has been leading the charge against Ambedkar's growing popularity for sometime. For Shourie, this popularity is unwanted because it is blind; a standpoint reflected in the title of this book, published in 1997, *Worshipping False Gods: Ambedkar and the Facts which have been erased*. The hidden facts that Shourie wishes Indians to recall are divided into three categories which in turn are reflected in the books three sections: the first concerns Ambedkar's long association with the British; the second, the counter productive nature of his methods in relation to upper caste social reformers ; and last, his role in the drafting of the Indian constitution.

Arun Shourie finds fault with Ambedkar's for opposing the National Movement. According to Shourie, Ambedkar played into the hands of the British because he was motivated by selfish careerist interests, regardless of any nationalist sentiment. Ambedkar's appointment to the Viceroy's Council in 1942 thus allowed the colonial power to benefit from the support of some Indians while simultaneously harshly repressing the quit India movement¹¹. For Shourie, ‘

Ambedkar and Jinnah became not just compliances of imperial politics ; they became the best of agents, agents who had been so flattered into the importance that they did not see that they had made the cause of the Imperial rulers their own' Shourie insists on placing Ambedkar and Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan, on the same footing .He highlights that the first participated in meeting with the second during 'Deliverance Day' when the Muslim League celebrated the dismissal of the congress governments in 1939. He depicts Ambedkar as a collaborator devoid not only of any nationalist sense but above all of any sense of right and wrong. It is true that Ambedkar was weighed down by financial difficulties throughout his life, but this does certainly not allow Shourie to assert that he was prepared to betray his caste fellows and that his struggle to free Untouchables was not the reason why Ambedkar supported the British . If his true motives had been careerist, he would not have resigned from Nehru's government in 1951. Arun Shourie analysis in his book "Worshipping False God" about Ambedkar maintained had been misled by congress propaganda into supporting the demand of this so-called Fight for Freedom, Ambedkar says that "It is a pity that they do not seem to distinguish the case of the tyrant who is held down and who pleads for liberty because he wants to regain his right to oppress and the case of an oppressed class seeking to be free from the oppression of the tyrant In their hurry to bring freedom to India they have no time to realize that siding with the congress what they are doing is not to make India safe for democracy but to free the tyrant to practice his tyrannies. Is it necessary to tell them that to support the congress is to let tyranny have freedom to enslave?

According to Shourie, it is because the untouchables see this truth that they are not and have never been part of this sham "Fight for Freedom" Ambedkar claims. The reason they have not joined this sham "Fight", Ambedkar maintains, "is not because they are the tools of British imperialism but because they fear that freedom of India will establish Hindu domination which is sure to close to them and forever all prospect of life, liberty and pursuit of happiness and that they will be made the hewers of wood and drawers of water." .Shourie says "they have from the beginning been the loyal supporters of and the beneficiaries of

British rule in India, he says "until the advent of the British, the untouchables were content to remain untouchables." It has been noticed also that there was no obfuscation at that time: Ambedkar repeatedly and explicitly declares that neither he nor the untouchables on whose behalf he always claims the sole authority to speak have or have ever had anything to do with the freedom struggle. His whole effort is to manufacture reasons to justify opposing that Moment and for the pejoratives which he has continually hurled at Gandhiji for twenty years.

Shourie's accusation regarding Ambedkar's lack of nationalist commitment drew a passionate response from Dalits and their supporters. S.M.Gaikwad underlines that Ambedkar 'never opposed to India gaining freedom at any time', turned down any form of independence that did not guarantee political representation to untouchables. Moreover, Ambedkar contributed to nation building, given that he favoured the elimination of caste considerations, such as untouchability, 'which was preventing India from constituting itself as a unified and a modern nation.' Gaikwad also hits back by arguing that Congress "represented the Indian national bourgeoisie's drive for an overall political and economic control; while people like Ambedkar representing the most underdeveloped, servile segment of the 'Indian nation', tried desperately to secure for themselves some foothold in the newly emerging power structure. At most, Congress was only an elitist movement whereas Ambedkar launched a politicization of the masses without which the Indian nation would never have been able to move forward."

Arun Shourie's cruel judgment of Ambedkar is primarily a response to the increasing popularity of *Ambedkarism* and to the recent rise to power of untouchables who question the social *status quo*. Indeed, the parties who look to Ambedkar for inspiration, after having shown themselves long incapable of playing a significant political role, achieved an electoral breakthrough of major proportions in the 1990s.

A deep study reveals many things which go against Shourie's very comments. There are some major political reasons, which, according to Gopal Guru, seem to have led Shourie to attack Ambedkar and the dalits in this country.

First, Shourie's allegation that Ambedkar's did not participate in the freedom struggle of India would highlight the message that dalits in this country should now live under the obligation of Hindus who, according to Shourie, achieved independence for this country. Shourie's argument also suggests that since Ambedkar's and dalits did not participate in the freedom struggle, they are morally inferior to those who fought for India's freedom. According to this construction of nationalist struggle in India, Shourie appears to suggest that it is only the Hindus who can legitimately claim the tradition of freedom struggle and the dalits are the silent objects of the nationalist discourse in India.

Second, of late, dalits in India are relating themselves to Ambedkar's more intensively than ever before and this wider claim on Ambedkar's as a cultural symbol is going to become an important rallying factor in the post-independent politics of consolidation of *Dalit-Bahujan* power particularly against the *Hindutva* forces representing *Brahman-Bania* nexus with the global capital. These forces which form the core of the *Hindutva* have now realized that their '*soft Hindutva*' is no more effective in attracting the dalits to their fold. However, Shourie's book unfortunately does not cover the various aspects of Ambedkar's political thinking.

Shourie's assault on Ambedkar in his recent book '*Worshipping the False God*' has led to describing of complex set of responses from different section of society. Some *dalit* political leaders, MPs have reacted by demanding a ban on the book and some have burnt torn copies of book in the Parliament. In this situation, it is interesting that this has put the RSS and the *Hindutva forces* on the defensive. The RSS which tactically approved of Shourie's book came out with public statement in a leading Marathi newspaper that the RSS have nothing to do with Shourie and his book. He also says that it is also interesting that the *Sena-BJP* combined Government which otherwise does not have any record of protecting the freedom of expression and infact, has been intolerant to such traditions this time however lost no time in taking a rather interesting position.

According to Gaikwad, the general under-development of Indian nationalism might have been due to the fact that a major thrust for its rapid growth came mainly from the anti-imperialist sentiments which, in general reflected rather instinctive dislike and hatred of foreign rule. The overall failure of the Indian ruling class to absorb successfully the emergent socio-economic forces released by the underdeveloped capitalist development created the base for the eventual rise of Ambedkar's and his scheduled caste politics. He says: it would be impossible to ignore Ambedkar's role in the complex and protracted process of interaction between the mainstream nationalists and their opponents which exercised considerable influence on the development of the Indian nationalism through 1930s and 1940s. True, Ambedkar's never participated in the freedom struggle, in fact he opposed it. But it is also true that his opposition helped to widen the internal scope of the freedom, thus making it really meaningful for hundreds of thousand oppressed and enslaved people.

IV. CONCLUSION

Ambedkar's notion of nationalism results primarily from the dichotomy between the political and the social. As it is well known, the nationalist leaders like Gandhi and more particularly the Hindu nationalists laid excessive emphasis on the political almost ignoring the social aspect of the nationalism. Ambedkar's argument was that in the absence of any comprehensive critique of the caste system and Hinduism, the political is bound to suggest that the local/indigenous tyrants are preferable on 'Patriotic ground'.

It is true that Ambedkar's never participated in the freedom struggle rather he opposed it. But, it is indeed a fact that his opposition helped to widen the internal scope of the freedom which made it really significant for thousands of oppressed people. Nationalism is not is a blind worship of the motherland. It is true that Ambedkar opposed the mainstream national movement, but this kind of attitude indirectly contributed much by laying the broad social foundation on

which the present Indian nation state stands. Without Ambedkar's intervention to bring about some measures of material empowerment of the former untouchables, they would have been unable to their rightful place in national life. The above mentioned interaction made it possible the proper understanding of the true significance of the scheduled caste problems. Ultimately, this influenced Gandhiji's unhesitant decision to accept the request of the scheduled caste members of the constituent assembly that Ambedkar's should be included in India's first Government. It was Ambedkar's political challenge which compelled congress to appreciate the national significance of the problem of the scheduled castes and to adopt certain measures which significantly contributed towards broadening and strengthening the social base of Indian nationalism.

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