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## DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR INTERROGATION OF GANDHI, MARXIST FRAMEWORK OF INDIAN SOCIETY: CONSTRUCTION OF DALIT AUTONOMY

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### ABSTRACT:

*In this Paper an attempt has been made to understand how Mahatma Gandhi, who is considered as our founding father of freedom movement and Indian Marxist scholars had failed to understand the Indian social reality and try to build the political history. It also focused how Ambedkar understood it and re-build the inclusive Indian political history and how his ideas became base for Dalit Autonomous struggles and to investigate different political discourses.*



**KEYWORDS:** *Dalit Autonomy, Gandhi Philosophy, Marxism, Untouchability.*

### INTRODUCTION

Caste is an un-avoidable reality in India. It is a systematized peculiar character in Indian society where a person's status and respect is attributed based on the caste. The Dalits experience with inhuman untouchability and extreme exploitation in all walks of life and discrimination in Indian society is a culturally rooted phenomenon even in the modern time. The exploitation is being continuing without much disturbance, after many legal provisions came into existence to stop those discrimination and exploitation.

It is true that, still in these days every day the Dalit, in general, Dalit women particularly becoming victims on caste lines. This historical fact is the base for scholar's to say that Indian society is caste-centred society and every act and reaction would move around caste lines. That is the reason Ambedkar opined: "the Indian society was formed with an ascending scale of reverence and descending scale of contempt and gave no scope for the growth of sentiment of equality and fraternity."<sup>1</sup> In this paper an attempt has been made to understand how Mahatma Gandhi, who is considered as our

founding father of freedom movement and Indian Marxist scholars had failed to understand the Indian social reality and try to build the political history. It also focused how Ambedkar understood it and re-build the inclusive Indian political history and how his ideas became base for Dalit Autonomous struggles and to investigate different political discourses.

In India, Charuvakas, Lokahithas, Gouthama Buddha, Vardhamaana Mahaveer in ancient, Kabeer, Chokamela, Bashava, Vemanain medieval, Phule, Periyar, Iyothyadas, Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, Bhagyareddyvarma and many other struggled against

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1B.R. Ambedkar, 'Annihilation of Caste' in *B.R. Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol.1*, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Bombay, 1989. p.47.

Brahmanical theory, discrimination and domination within their own ways in modern times. It is true that all of them have tried a lot to build an autonomous life of the Dalits and other marginalized sections of Indian society based on two important principles- conflict nature within and the nature of transformation. In colonial period apart from them, Ambedkar, who was a philosopher in all subjects and leader came forward to change the Hindu social order and resolve the problem of Dalits and other communities such as Bahujans (BC), Adivasi's (ST's) and women, who have been suffering from extreme depravation due to the caste based Hindu social structure<sup>2</sup>.

In fact, Ambedkar began his social and political struggle around early 1920s against Gandhism which had led by Gandhiji within the folds of Congress, AryaSamaj, RastriyaSvayamSevak-RSS and Communist politics and conventional understanding and justification of caste discrimination and exploitation based on sacred Hindu theology and philosophical ground and continued till his demise in 1956. Since at that time the RSS and Arya Samaj and other covered organizations were not much active, Ambedkar worked out in contain contrast of Gandhism and Marxist political theory and practice on caste question and de-construction of Hindu social order. If one looks at Ambedkar and Gandhi, and Marxist theory and practice critically, one would find that there are less similarities, but many differences in building theory and practice of Indian Social realities such as region, religion and ethnicity particularly on caste question. For Gandhiji, caste and untouchability is a positive cultural aspect and base for running the society in a peaceful manner. But for Ambedkar, caste is a negative phenomenon and source for multiple inequalities and subjugation, subordination of all marginal communities including Dalits. It means caste is a harmful political, economic and socio cultural aspect for Ambedkar. This difference between Gandhiji and Ambedkar led to independent socio political movements of their own in India in colonial time and after. In fact, one can see the ideological and commitment difference on caste and reconstruction of Indian society, which is based on Hinduthva dominant philosophy in Gandhiji and Ambedkar.

Ambedkar observed the Gandhi's sophisticated concern on untouchability and caste oppression:

'I believe that if Hindu society has been able to stand because it is founded on the caste system. Caste has a readymade means for spreading primary education, caste has a political basis. Caste can perform judicial function. I believe that interdining or intermarriages are not necessary for promoting national unity. The caste system cannot be said to be bad because it does not allow interdining or intermarriage between different castes. To destroy caste system and adopt Western European social system means that Hindus must give up principle of hereditary occupation which is the soul of caste system. The caste system is a natural order of society. This being my views I am opposed to all those who are worked out to destroy the caste system'.<sup>3</sup>

However, in 1925, Gandhiji became critical of caste system and observe:

'I gave support to caste system because it stands for restraint. But at present caste does not mean restraint, it means limitations. Restraint is glorious and helps to achieve freedom. But limitation is like a chain. It blinds. There is nothing commendable in castes as they exist today. They are contrary to the tenets of the shastras. The number of castes is infinite and there is bar against intermarriage. This is not a condition of elevation. It is a state of fall'.<sup>4</sup>

Here it is important to observe two things to examine Gandhian view on caste question: Why Gandhi opposed any alternative philosophical understanding and movement against caste before 1925 and condemned caste after 1925. Anyone who has some common sense can understand the reasons, by the time Ambedkar became national leader for Dalit movement and intellectual authority on caste and Hindu philosophy and mythology. Another thing is, by the time Gandhi wanted to make congress as

<sup>2</sup>KumaraswamyNagam, *Dalits and autonomy : Towards constriction of Dalit Movement in Andhra Pradesh*, An unpublished PhD Thesis, Dept of Political Science, Osmania university, Hyderabad, 2012. p.75.

3B.R Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, Thacker, Bombay.

1945, p.276

4Ibid, p.27.

pan-Indian organization for national movement. These are the two things might forced Gandhi to change his opinion on caste and untouchability.

And Gandhiji suggested an alternative to the caste system:

The best remedy is that small castes should fuse themselves into a big caste. There should be four such big castes so that we may reproduce the old system of four varnas.<sup>5</sup>

Here also there is nothing concrete and new, in fact Gandhiji's suggestions for caste and untouchability would not break the traditional construction of caste theology which was done by many Brahmanical thinkers. The only difference between traditional Varna theory and Gandhian view on caste polarization is that the Varna theory did not permit an individual to learn other caste profession skills.

But Gandhi's suggestions permit to learn other caste's professional skills openly, but restrict go away from one's own hierarchy and hereditary position. And Gandhiji even technically oppose practice of untouchability, always worked as a strong protector of the Hindu religion. In fact, he openly used to say that caste problem is nothing to do with Hindu religious ideology, for this in his life time, constructed his own ideas to save Hindu social structure.

On economic issues also there is difference between Ambedkar and Gandhiji. Gandhiji advocated the concept of 'trusteeship' based on private property, and harmonious class-relations.<sup>6</sup> Ambedkar, on the other hand, favored economy base on common ownership of property, at least with respect to ownership of agricultural land and key and basic industries were to remain within the jurisdiction of the public sector. Additionally he was in favor of scientific development and promotion of rationality and nationalizes insurance cover for every citizen of India.<sup>7</sup>

Gandhiji not only prepared hypocritic ground for dalit socio economic problems, but also worked a lot contrary to political autonomy of Dalits. Regarding this, one can mention the Puna pact politics. Where in which, Ambedkar was made to agree for reserved constituencies for Dalits and Adivasi's instead of double member constituency provision due to Gandhi's hunger strike in Yerawada jail. Even though, Gandhiji did not work for the benefit of Dalits in terms of socio, economic and political spheres, projected as a champion of whole Indian people leader and genuine social reformer by a nationalist, some extent, Marxist scholars in India. This is the reason many dalit, Bahujan scholars and activists started re-examination of Gandhi's theory and practice on caste and the dominate Hindu religious philosophy. In fact, the Gandhiji's ideology has become source for justification of the present political leader's and state polices, which are mostly effecting negatively on Dalits and other marginalized people.

Besides Gandhiji, Ambedkar was also moved close to Indian Communists, especially during 1930s. In those days Ambedkar worked for labourer's problems along with communist politicians, who mostly belong to Brahman community. While working with them Ambedkar had differences with communist on caste and class theory. After having experience and understood with Bombay Marxist politics Ambedkar in fact, interpreted Marxist philosophy in a true manner and cautioned the Indian communist leadership regarding application of Marxist theory in India according to Indian socio-cultural condition, especially without constructing annihilation of caste theory communist philosophy and politics will not able to get success in India.

After making clear observation of communist leadership anti attitude on Dalits struggle, he developed his own ideas on the inter-relationship between caste hierarchy and exploitation based on Buddha and Karl Marx's philosophical frame work. In the lecture on Buddha and Karl Marx, Ambedkar opined;

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5B.R Ambedkar, 'Annihilation of Caste', in Vasantha Moon, *Dr.B.R.Ambekar Writings and Speeches*, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Mumbai, 1979, Vol: 1, P.129.

6B.R Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, 1945, P.275.

7SukhadeoThorat and Aryama, Eds, *Ambedkar in Retrospect: Essays on Economics, politics and society*, Rawat Publication, New Delhi, 2007, p.7.

What remains of the Karl Marx is residue of fire, small but still very important. The residue in my view consists of four items:

1. That function of philosophy is to reconstruct the world and not to waste its time in explaining the origin of the world.
2. That there is a conflict of interest between class and class.
3. That private ownership of property brings power to one class and sorrow to another through exploitation.
4. That it is necessary for the good of society that the sorrow be removed by the abolition of private property.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, Ambedkar recognized that the conflict between people and private ownership of property rights are the root cause of the exploitation, humiliations and deprivation of the marginalized sections of any society.

In this Ambedkar also agreed with ends that Marxism looks for, that is, the socialist society. However, he differed with the Marxist means of realizing the goals of socialism. In fact he advocated several democratic means where in which, the state has to control the main natural resources like, land, major industries and other service sectors and make efforts to cultivate human values in the minds of people for the development and socialist society. It means Ambedkar was for public ownership on resources rather than mere private capitalist economy as liberalist viewed in one hand and cultural transformation processes on another hand. To put it in simple way he was for both caste and class eradication but through democratic means.

Since the inception communists in India did not think and realize that the caste is the crucial base for socio-economic exploitation and political backwardness in India. They always adopt the economic/class determination principle for the analysis of Indian socio and political problems. But Ambedkar differed with Indian communists on class - caste relationship on two grounds. Ambedkar strongly believed that the caste system is the source for exploitation and so argued for need to change the Hindu Society as a precondition for both nation and egalitarian society establishment. On the first question Ambedkar asked as to whether Indian communists could leave the problem coming out of the prevalent Hindu social system. Ambedkar observed:

“They propound that man is an economic creature, and his life is governed by economic facts, that property is the only source of power. They, therefore, preach that political reform by equalization of property must have precedence over every other kind of reform’.<sup>9</sup>

Ambedkar opined that mere economic power is not the only source and basis of power control. The social and religious hegemonic status of an individual/community can also be a source of power over other’s actions. So it has to be dealt with for socialist society. Regarding second issue Ambedkar stressed on the need of undertaking reform of Hindu social order as a primary condition for both political and socialist reforms. Ambedkar raises the many questions related to interlink of socio-political functions of Indian society:

Can any society bring the economic reforms without bringing qualitative changes in the graded social relations? It is not enough for Indian Marxist to say that they believe in social equality. In fact socialism is a reality required a commitment and practice in understanding and restructuring social ill-treatment and suppressing nature by one class over others, which provide the space to construct an egalitarian society.<sup>10</sup>

After having bitter experience with the Indian Marxist, Ambedkar firmly believed that the dalits in India will not participate whole heartedly in revolutionary struggles which promises equalisation of natural property, unless they feel that after the success of revolution there will not be any

8B.R.Ambedkar, *Buddha and Karal Marx*, in vasanta Moon ‘*Dr.B.R.Ambekar Writings and Speeches*’, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Mumbai, 1978, Vol. 3, p.441.

9B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 1979, p.107.

10Ibid, p.109.



discrimination and humiliation based on caste and religion that have equality in true spirit in all walks of the life. Further, he argued: Marxism in India must undertake each and every aspect in to consideration that the personal equality and social fraternity would be assured to all in the society where the proletarian class in our society has the discriminative caste culture within and a true revolutionary struggle needs free mind and commitment towards united struggle by working classes.<sup>11</sup>

Ambedkar further argued about Indian Marxist proletariat problems in resolving the economic and social dependent hurdles, he quotes Karl Marx and explained them:

“You have nothing to lose except your chains”. But the artful ways in which the social and religious rights are distributed among the different castes, whereby some have more and some have less, make the slogan of Karl Marx quite useless to excite the Hindus against the caste system. Castes form a graded system of sovereignties, high and low, which are jealous of their status and which know that if a general dissolution came, some of them stand to lose more of their prestige and power than others do. You cannot, therefore, have a general mobilization of the Hindus, to use a military expression, for an attack on the caste system.<sup>12</sup>

Hence, in Ambedkar’s opinion, the communists must recognize that the problem of caste based society has to reform is fundamental for Dalits participation in the socialist revolution. Ambedkar brought the social reform as case in Indian revolution;

But the base is not the building. On the basis of the economic relations a building is erected of religious, social and political institutions. This building has just as much truth (reality) as the base.

If we want to change the base, then first the building that has been constructed on it has to be knocked down. In the same way, if we want to change the economic relations of society, then first the existing social, political and other institutions will have to be destroyed.<sup>13</sup>

Ambedkar further argued:

The social system prevalent in India is an issue which socialist’s leaders must deal with, that unless they do so they cannot get revolution and by any chance if they got it they will have to face with the caste question to realize the ideal socialist principles. In other words if the socialists do not address the caste question it will remain as a problem which will not allow any reforms in political and economic spheres.<sup>14</sup>

The Indian Marxists till recent decades (1990s) did not show much concern about the problem of caste during the most part of Ambedkar’s movement (in colonial days) nor did they provide theoretical explanation for the caste class paradigm in Indian context. They mostly used economy as a basis for explanation and measure the social reality and revolution.<sup>15</sup>

Even after many decades, Indian classical and radical Marxist have not concentrated and understand what Marx and Engels said about interdependence of economic and socio-religious factors.

According to the materialist view the important determining factor of human history is production and production relations. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. Hence if anyone misuse or misquote the economic factor to say that the only economism is the determining phenomenon then he/she changes that idea in to an abstract and meaningless phrase.

The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the super-structure political forms of the class struggle and its results, constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc. judicial forms, and even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the participants, political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views, and their further development into systems of dogmas also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their form. There is an interaction of all these elements in

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11Ibid, p.47.

12Ibid, p.46.

13Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*, Sage Pulication, New Delhi 1994, p. 228.

14B.R Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 1979, p.47.

15SukhadeoThorat and Aryama, *Ambedkar in Retrospect*, 2007, p.11.

which, amidst all the endless host of accidents, the economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary.<sup>16</sup>

Engels further observed:

Marx and I ourselves sometimes got blamed for the fact that the young practitioners of socialism focusses more on the economic factor than it really requires. We had to emphasize the main principle vis-à-vis our adversaries, who denied it, and had not always the time, the place, or the opportunity to give their due to the other elements involved in the interaction. But when it came to presenting a section of history, that is, to making a practical application, it was a different matter and there no error was permissible. Unfortunately, however, it happens only too often that people think they have fully understood a new theory and can apply it without more ado from the moment they have assimilated its main principles and even those not always correctly. And I cannot exempt many of the more recent 'Marxists' from this reproach, for the most anything rubbish has been produced in this quarter'.<sup>17</sup>

Even after Karl Marx and Engels the founders of Marxism, Ambedkar clearly explained and warned about narrow interpreting and understanding Marxist philosophy long back, the Indian traditional (CPI/CPM who believe in parliamentary democracy) and radical left parties which includes the present Maoist and Janasakthi parties in India had not recognized it till recently.

The radical left parties after accepting caste is also base and for some time super structure they are not able to put it in practice within, and create awareness in the people as they are supposed to do through their cultural organizations such as JNM-Jana NatyaMandali which was formed under the leadership of Balladeer Gaddar, ArunodayaSamskruthikaSamaikya, respectively. However, Gaddar as a Marxist Ambedkariet working independently and also collaboratively with dalit and other autonomous movements in Andhra Pradesh particularly for dalit self-respect movements is an unavoidable thing. In India one must note that the Dalit Panthar Movement in Maharashtra in 1980s and in Andhra Pradesh recognize that, Comrade MarojuVeeranna founder of the Communist party of united states of India-CPUSI (DalitaBahujanShramikaVimukthi) party in his remarkable book entitled "India lo Emi Cheyali, (What has to be done in India)" constructed a Marxist theory called "caste-class identity" in other words "identity and alliance" which is a culmination of the Marxist philosophy and Phule and Ambedkarism. He was first Marxist philosopher and leader in Andhra Pradesh in early 1990's who understood and accept that without Ambedkar's philosophy help in India any Marxist revolutionary struggle will not realize in true sense. Further, MarojuVeeranna argued for any identity movement should not remain as stagnate one it should work for itself and transcending the present society into better society.<sup>18</sup> It means any identity movement should move forward towards community life while each identity has its own autonomy.

Ambedkar even though strong believer of democratic politics, he never undermines the weaknesses and hypocritical mind set of Indian ruling class's anti- people attitudes in practice. That was the primary reason why he provided economic and political rights for weaker sections constitutionally. And for reconstruction of Hindu social order Ambedkar after examining all the Western and Native moral and religious philosophy advised Buddhist philosophy as a base.

In Buddhist philosophy Ambedkar found principles called equality, justice, fraternity and individual freedom, which are essential for cultivate equal identity and autonomous living and building a true nation. Ambedkar proposed Buddhism as a solution for establishment of an egalitarian society against graded Hindu social order.

Due to Ambedkar's influence in India each state witnessed independent and collaborative dalit movements. Part of that Andhra Pradesh state historically also experiencing Dalit autonomous and sometimes collaborative struggles. Here since 1950s to 1970s dalit movement in Andhra Pradesh

<sup>16</sup>Lewis Feuer, ed., *Marx and Engels: Basic Writing on politics and philosophy*, Anchor Books, New York, 1959, p.477, cited in ThoratSukadeo and Aryama, *Ambedkar in Retrospect*, 2007, pp.11-12.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, p.478, Cited in Ibid, p.12.

<sup>18</sup>MarojuVeeranna, *India lo Emi Cheyali, May 17<sup>th</sup> Comrades.C.P.U.S.I. (Dalit BahujanaShramikaVemukti)*(Telugu), Andhra Pradesh, 2005.

appears like slow and accommodative one. But in this period the first generation dalit educated and employed section as an agency led dalit movement within the frame work of constitution at one side in which Ambedkar's statues installation programme was massively took place in towns and establishment of hostels for Dalit boys and girls. And other sides in radical Marxist (Naxalites) struggle for land and against upper castes landlordism Dalits were the major participants where in which; they got freedom from feudal exploitation.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Interview with Revolutionary Singer *Gaddar* on 11-7-2009.