

The Modern Social Revolutionaries Thanthai Periyar and Babasaheb Ambedkar

B. Mathivanan, M.Sc., M.Ed., M.Phil.,

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Periyar Maniammai Institute of Science and Technology, (Deemed to be University)
Thanjavur – 613 403, Tamil Nadu.

Dr. D. Aarthi Saravanan.

Head, Department of Political Science,

Periyar Maniammai Institute of Science and Technology, (Deemed to be University)
Thanjavur – 613 403, Tamil Nadu.

Abstract

Hinduism – Brahminism – Social Status of Depressed Peoples in the nineteenth century – *Four Varna Based Caste System* – Ambedkar Views on Hinduism, Social Justice and Human Rights – Ambedkar’s Social Justice – Social Analyst and Policy Maker – Periyar’s Rationalism and Self-Respect – *Four Varna Based Caste System* – Untouchability – Periyar Fight for Egalitarian Society through Communal Representation – Ambedkar Rejects Varna System and birth based casteism – “Caste” – once depression of Mind – Essential Need for Reforming Hinduism.

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I. Introduction

This article narrates the inequality prevailed on the basis of caste, religion and by birth are removed of the two social revolutionary leaders Periyar E.V.R. and Dr.B.R. Ambedkar.

Hinduism

“The main religious and social system of India, including belief in reincarnation, the worship of gods, and a caste system as the basis of society”. There are considerable differences in the deities worshipped, the scriptures used, the caste structure and the festivals etc.

The review of the diversity in Hindu religion should not be constructed as a unity in diversity, but in fact, Hindu religion is more fundamental than the element of diversity. This fundamentalism of Hinduism has been a critical point for social reformers in India. The social system of Hinduism includes casteism, untouchability, superstitious beliefs, women slavery, class system in the Hindu society were another field for criticism from rationalists and social reformers.

There was a revolt against caste system and Brahmins who were regarded as being interested in perpetuating it. The depressed classes suffered unimaginable indignities by occupying the lowest rungs in the social hierarchy of casteism.¹

The basic ideas of Hinduism were rooted in the system of varnasharma dharma. Periyar’s opinions and views on the puranic religion, the institution of caste and Brahminism formed the core of the principles.²

Brahminism

While the Indian political parties were at logger heads to seek posts and power, the greatest social reformer of 20th century, Periyar without the least regard for any selfish gains, launched fierce agitation in

¹ K.K. Pillai, “A Social History of the Tamils”, Vol. I: p.522.

² Indre Beteille, *Caste, Class and Power*, p-45.

regaining communal and social justice to the traditionally oppressed, suppressed and exploited Non-Brahmin communities.

The supremacy of the Brahmins who dictated and guided the society on account of their position in the society was also cruel.³ Hence, inter-caste marriages, inter-dining and other socially approved inter-course between various caste rigidity kept each caste within its limits.

In the Hindu society, women were always treated as inferior to man, though the scriptures spoke about equality and superiority with or over men. The practice of treating women as bitterhalf and cruel customs of 'sati', child marriages, and devadasi system, were all practised in Thanjavur district also. The institution of Devadasi system is a practice of dedicating the girls to the deities and gods of the temple. The girls were married to the deity in the temples which was called 'Pottu-kattuthal' and then they became public women carrying on prostitution in the name of God.⁴

Social Status of Depressed Peoples

As wells and tanks in the caste Hindu villages were inaccessible to the depressed classes, every effort was made to improve their position by providing facilities for water supply. There were places where the depressed classes were prevented access to the main roads except through private lands over which they could pass on suffering.⁵

Manusmriti and some other "Shastras" mention four varnas:

- the Brahmins (Teachers, scholars, and priests),
- the Kshatriyas (King and Warriors),
- the Vaishyas (Agriculturists and traders) and shudras (service provides and artisans).

This theoretical system postulated varna and artisans of endogamous. "Jathis" actually prevailing as being the historical of intermarriage among the "pure" varnas – varna sankara. Including foreigners, tribals and nomads, didn't subscribe to the norms of the Hindu society; were contagious and untouchables. "Untouchables"- self described as depressed or downtroddens. Whereas downtrodden, considered either the lower section of shudras or outside of caste system altogether. Passages from scriptures such as Manusmriti indicate, the varna system was non-hereditary one.⁶

Four Varna Based Caste System

Caste has been considered as a fundamental unit of social structure of Hindu societies with various forms of communities.

Periyar states that caste is only rooted in the four broad divisions, viz., Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras which are the inventions of the Brahmins. They are keeping different status as per the hierarchical caste system prescribed by the Brahmins. Because, they consider themselves the law givers to the society. The non-brahmins accept all of the sects of them as one constituted group and the panchamas as inferior to them.

Periyar opposes identifying of occupation by birth. He wrote in the effective functioning of a society need not depend upon the birth based professionals but on efficiency based professionals. He asserts that the caste difference is enforced by the Brahmins under the full authority of the Manu dharma Shastras.

Periyar views that hierarchy, inequality, caste based avocation and the like are the evils associated the caste.

He wrote that the Brahmins kept the highest position subjugating the non-brahmins. This has happened at the expense of culture of the non-brahmins.

³ S. Saraswathi, & E.Sa. Viswanathan "The Political Career of E.V. Ramasamy Naicker, p-9.

⁴ Aasiriyar Dr.K. Veermani, collected works of Periyar E.V.R., PSRPI, Chennai-7, Fourth Edition-2007, p-23 and Periyar E.V.R., "Golden saying of Periyar", A Publication of Dravidar Kazhagam, Chennai-7, First Edition, 2015, p-29.

⁵ Dr. Patwardham, M.V., "Manusmriti, the Ideal Democracy Republic of Manu", pp.7-8.

⁶ J.H. Hutton, **Caste in India, Its Nature, Function and Origins**, London: Oxford University Press, 1963, p.47.

He views that Hinduism is reinforcing caste. He states, "truly and primarily my endeavour is to abolish caste." This matter of abolishing caste has made me speak about the abolition of God and religion.

Untouchability is the practice of prejudicial treatment meted out to human beings on the basis of their high and low births. The untouchables or depressed class has constituted a major percentage among the total population in India. The lower caste people are considered as the meanest people and hence the untouchables. They have been deprived of their rights and ill-treated by the *Brahmins*.⁷

The problem is that Hinduism is enmeshed with *vedas*, *puranas* and other religious literature, which are clubbed with the God.

Ambedkar Views on Hinduism, Social Justice and Human Rights

The Hinduism one can find both social inequality and religious inequality embedded in its philosophy. This is not all. For Manu does not stop with the non-recognition of human personality. He advocates a deliberate debasement of human personality.

Manu will not tolerate the Shudra to have the comfort of a high sounding name. He must be contemptible both in fact and in name. Enough has been said to show how Hinduism is denial of equality both social as well as religious and how it is also a degradation of human personality. Only a step in the process of this analysis will show how Manu by prohibiting literacy was responsible for the general ignorance in which the masses came to be enveloped. Thus Hinduism far from encouraging spread of knowledge is a gospel of darkness. Taking these facts into consideration Hinduism is opposed to the conditions in which liberty can thrive.

Ambedkar's Social Justice

The social problems like, dowry, widow remarriage, age of consent etc. The problem of quite different nature in as much as it is a problem of securing to a minority liberty and equality of opportunity etc.⁸

Justice means a mode of life to give every man his right place in society. Its percepts may be to live honourably, to give respect to all, to injure no one and to give every man his due without any artificial discrimination in mind and unnatural classification in society. The concept of social justice in Ambedkar's view is problem not merely of distributing the material abundance among the people but basically a mode of life based on mutual respect and regard, a feeling of fellowship as equal member of a society.⁹

He had himself experienced the pangs of social justice, faced its difficulties (experienced) and not only tolerated the crucial onslaught of injustice, but also boldly fought against them.

Ambedkar had himself answered what fraternity means and had stated that fraternity means a sense of common brother-hood of all Indians, all Indian being one. He did not find any reason to accept divine laws as the sustainer of social justice in human society.

Ambedkar felt that equality before God was a very remote proposition to be realized, to ideals of social justice is to be effected here so, that the interests of the weak and lowly could be protected by constitution and not by any divine dispensation.

One may still be curious to know what exactly constitutes the essence of Ambedkar's concept of social justice. It may be explained here that the unity and equality of all human beings the equal worth of man and women, the respect of the weak and lowly, the regards for human rights, mutual love, sympathy, tolerance and charity towards fellow beings, human treatment in all cases, the dignity of citizens, the abolition of caste distinction, education and properly for all, good-will of gentleness are the contents of Ambedkar concept of social justice.¹⁰

⁷ N. Velusamy, **Periyar the Social Scientist**, Salam: Saroja Publishers, 1999, pp.75-80.

⁸ Gandhi, M.K., "**Hindu Dharma**" Orient Paperback, 1993, p-56.

⁹ Ambedkar, B.R., **Riddles in Hinduism**" Vol. IV, p-8 and 9.

¹⁰ Jatava, D.R., "**Ambedkar Code of Conduct**", ABD Publishers, Jaipur-5, (Rajasthan), 2005, p-101.

Ambedkar - Social Analyst and Policy Maker

According to Ambedkar, what was worst and unparalleled, was that the Hindu Dharmashastras gave legitimacy to the doctrine of the chaturvarnya, four-fold division of the society and the caste-system.¹¹

The infamous Manusmriti dehumanized the shudras and untouchables, Ambedkar publically burn the Manusmriti on the occasion of his historical Mahad Satyagraha in 1927 (Maharashtra) for establishing the right of the untouchables to drink water of the chawdar tank.

Ambedkar painfully maintained that the Hindu society has been a collection of castes, fixed in watertight compartments with graded hierarchy, that made for the Hindus an associated corporate like virtually impossible.

But most importantly, according to Ambedkar, caste destroyed the concept of ethics and morality.¹² “The effects of caste on the ethics of Hindu is simply deplorable. Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity”. Though, the caste is an extremely complex phenomenon, Ambedkar ultimately suggested that inter-caste marriage resulting into the fusion of blood, is the remedy to destroy caste. Ambedkar, an ardent patriot, always thought that abolition of untouchability and annihilation of caste.

Periyar’s Rationalism and Self-Respect

Progressive society should be rational In Tamil, rationalism is called “*pagutharivu*” which means power to reason or ability to think independently, Periyar’s philosophy of self-respect is based on rationalism. He expresses that the progress of Indian society has been slackened due to irrational Hinduism. He says that rationalism and religion are going together and that religion prevents rationalism. He believes atheism can rejuvenate rationalism. The word rationalism referred to a system or behaviour regulated by reason or logic but not by notion or belief.¹³

Periyar addressed in the Self-Respect Conference held at Viruthunagar on August 1931, when he expressed that foolish and superstitious beliefs made the society irrational.¹⁴ He explained that the Tamil society should try to discard irrational ideas and practices. Further, he noted that Hindu customs were like devils they should be driven away as they involved unproductive expenditure of money, time and energy.¹⁵

He attacked popular Hindu festivals such as Vaikunta Ekadasi, Maha Sivarathiri, Vinayaga Chaturthi, Deepavali, Karthigai Deepam, Mariyamman Festival, Mahamagam, Kandha Shasti, Tamil New Year, etc.

The philosophy of self-respect, as Periyar has felt, diminishes the influence of religion on education and the day today activities of man. He considers that self-respect is the mechanism that accelerates the process of modernisation.

The major objectives behind the movement are propagating atheism, popularizing self-respect ideologies, conducting priestless marriages, advocating women liberation and making the non-Brahmin society rational in all walks of life.

He calls these two concepts “self-respect” and “rationalism” in Tamil as: “manamum arivum”. These two are the basic tenets of his social reform activities and he uses these two concepts interchangeably.¹⁶

Periyar’s movement objective is to do away with all kinds of needless customs, and superstitions in society and to put an end to the social system in which caste, religion and traditional occupations, based on the accident of birth. It has chained the mass of people, created superior and inferior classes, and given people unequal rights.¹⁷

¹¹ Khabde, Dr. Dinker, “**Dr. Ambedkar and Western Thinkers**”, Sugatta Prakasham, Pune, 1989, p-85.

¹² Premkumar Shinde, “**Dalits and Human Rights**” (Editor) (in 3 Volumes) Published: Jsha Books, India, 2005, p-180-181.

¹³ **The Revolt**, March 5, 1929.

¹⁴ **Kudi Arasu**, 24 August, 1931.

¹⁵ **Viduthalai**, 12 May, 1972.

¹⁶ E.V.Ramasamy, **The Genesis of The Self-Respect Movement** Chennai : The Periyar Self-Respect Propaganda Institution, 1985, pp.4-21.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.21-32.

Priyar Fight for Egalitarian Society through Communal Representation

To sum up, while referring to the thoughts of Periyar pertaining to the Hinduism and caste based evils, he aspires that the Hindu society should discard all the irrational brahminic practices he suggests for the implementation of some of the thoughts and practices such as self-respect marriage, inter-caste marriage, community dinner and communal representation.¹⁸

Ambedkar Rejects Varna System

Ambedkar believed that most of the evils in the Hindu society were due to traditional social system, which had been prevailing for centuries long. He vehemently attacked the evils such as *chaturvarna*, caste system and untouchability.

Ambedkar as a social reformer finds fault with the varna system or *chaturvama* which has completely denied the ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity. As per the *varna* system Brahmins are placed above *Kshatriyas*, the *Kshatriyas* above *Vaishayas* and the *Vaishayas* above *Shudras* and the *Shudras* at the bottom of all. Of the four, the first three are regarded as twice born and the fourth is identified with the untouchables. The justification of this social scheme is found in the *Purushasukta*, a part of *Rig-veda*. The *Purushasukta* advocates the principle of graded inequality and discrimination.¹⁹

“Caste” - Depression of Mind

According to him, "untouchability is worse than slavery. Slavery is never obligatory' However, untouchability is obligatory. A person is permitted to hold another as his slave. There is no compulsion on him if he does not want to. But an untouchable has no option. Once he is born as an untouchable, he is subjected to all the disabilities of an untouchable".²⁰ According to him, "the law of slavery permits emancipation, but not the law of untouchable. Once man becomes untouchable, he is always an untouchable. That should not be the fate of the untouchables".²¹

Essential Need for Reforming Hinduism

Hinduism refers to a religion and its related customs of the Hindus. According to Ambedkar, Hinduism totally lacks the basic conditions of liberty such as social equality, economic security and availability of knowledge to all. Apart from upholding social inequality and privilege, it ordains man's vocation, unrelated to inclination, the purpose of birth as serving the twice born, and permanent economic dependence of the *Shudras*. The prerequisites of progress, knowledge, literacy and formal education have a very limited character in Hinduism.²²

As far as Hinduism is concerned, it denies the individual dignity and justice. Ambedkar says that inequality is deep rooted in Hinduism. He rejects Hinduism because he feels that Hinduism is *Brahminism* and *Brahminism* is the reason for the fragmentation and gradation of the Indian society.

Ambedkar considers Hinduism is more defective as it has introduced *chaturvarna*, caste system and untouchability in the Hindu society. He writes, "to the untouchables. Hinduism is a veritable chamber of horrors. The sanctity and infallibility of vedas, smritis and shastras, the iron law or caste, the heartless law of karma (action) and the senseless law of status by birth are to the untouchables' variables, instruments of torture which Hinduism has gorged against the untouchables".²³

Being influenced by Dhamma, Ambedkar and his men embraced Buddhism on October 14, 1956 in Nagpur by discarding Hinduism. In that a way, they themselves freed from the evils of Hinduism.²⁴

¹⁸ **Kudi Arasu**, 15 November, 1929.

¹⁹ G.S. Lokhande, **Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar: A Study in Social Democracy**, New Delhi: Intellectual Publishing House, 1982, p.68.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.112.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Vol. IX, p.130-139.

²² Vasant Moon (ed.) **Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches**, Vol. III, Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1987, pp.65-77.

²³ B.R. Ambedkar, **Who Were the Sudras? How They Became to be the Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society**, Bombay: Thacker and Co. Ltd., 1946, pp.14-15.

²⁴ Oneil Biswas, *Op.cit.*, 155.

II. Conclusion

From this findings, “The Modern Social Revolutionaries Thanthai Periyar and Babasaheb Ambedkar” the different views and activities of Hinduism. Periyar’s Self-Respect Movement has participation in the First two Human Right Agitations in India are broadly discussed. Ambedkar’s view on Hinduism, Communism human rights, social justice and supernaturalism were neatly studied. Ambedkar’s principle on Dhamma was also discussed. Periyar’s Rationalism and Self-Respect Movement played much role in the life of illiterate poor, depressed and down trodden. Four varnas/class basis caste System, Brahminism, Human Rights and Social justice activities of Ambedkar’s rejection of Chaturvarna Manu-dharma shastras are also explained. Contribution of communal representation for SC/ST/OBC peoples in Hindu religion and fight for social justice for untouchables (Scheduled castes) from these are discussed.

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