



Discipline Course-1

Semester-2

Paper: Nationalism in India

Lesson: The Caste Question: Anti-Brahminical Politics

Lesson Developer: Dr. Abdul Rahman Ansari

**College/Department: Department of Political Science,
Gargi College, University of Delhi**

Table of Contents

The Caste Question: Anti-Brahminical Politics

- **Introduction**
- **Jyotirao Phule 1827-1890**

Phule's Interpretation of History, Mythology and Origin of Caste

***Satyashodhak Samaj*: a Vision for Casteless Society**

- **Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956)**

Ambedkar: Eradication of Caste System

- **Conclusion**
- **Exercises**
- **References**

THE CASTE QUESTION: ANTI-BRAHMINICAL POLITICS

The social divisions in society in different parts of colonial India were rooted both in culture and economy. The emergence of early nationalist feeling among some of the middle to upper class Indians coincided with the emergence of revolts against the social divisions. Some of the early social reformers like Jyotiba Phule and Sri Narayan Guru questioned these social divisions and became the pioneers of anti-*Brahminical* politics of early twentieth century in India. The nature of the movement for social equality became anti-*Brahminical* because Brahmins were widely perceived to be both the founders of these divisions and its main beneficiaries. In this section we are going to see the development of the movement in some detail.

'Caste' has been present in almost all religious groups in India. However, except among the Hindus it has no sacred sanction in any other religion. Though it is difficult to define 'caste' there is a broader understanding that it was a systemic hierarchal division of social groups on the basis of purity and birth (Romila Thapar 1: 62). The original motives of the creation of the caste system are debatable among historians. Nevertheless, one thing is clear that it has divided the Hindu society socially into an ever increasing number of groups and sub-groups. Each of these groups and sub-groups (*Jatis*) were exclusive. People were divided on the basis of their profession, marriage and dining. The *Vedas* have recorded the existence of the caste system. According to the *Rigveda* and *Manusmriti*, the Hindu society has been divided into four *Varnas* on the basis of their professions namely, *Brahmins*, *Khatriya*, *Vaishyas* and *Shudras*. These were not intended to become exclusive groups on the basis of birth (*Jatis*). However, birth did

become the basis of such divisions historically. It happened due to various factors including the expansion of Aryan domination geographically, its interaction with several local racial groups and most importantly increasing complexity of social and economic lives. This last factor brought into existence new professions and activities making the traditional divisions inadequate. Hence, the four original *Varnas* broke up into various smaller castes and sub-castes or what we today know *Jatis* (Romila Thaper 1).

The hierarchy of status of all the castes were carefully arranged. *Shudras* were at the bottom of formal structure of four *Varnas* only above untouchables who were not even considered to be a part of the Hindu society. These untouchables were at the lowest rungs of the society and no interaction with them was allowed as their touch was polluting. The touch of these untouchables was polluting even for the *Shudras* (B R Ambedkar 9). The terms *Shudras* however, in modern times became a common term for the fourth *Varna* and untouchables. It was replaced by the colonial terms 'depressed classes' first and later on after 1936, by "Schedule Castes." Gandhi, rather controversially, preferred to call them '*Harijan*'- meaning God's people. Schedule Castes form about 20 per cent of the Hindu population in the country. The untouchable or *Shudras* suffered from numerous and severe treatment by the caste Hindus and were subject of inhuman restrictions. *Brahmins* monopolised the priestly occupation which also gave them an exclusive access to all forms of learning including religious and secular learning and knowledge. The second and third positions in the hierarchy of the castes were occupied by *Khatriyas* (warriors' class) and *Vaishyas* (business class) (Shekhar Bandyopadhyay 2: 343). People from *Shudra* and lower categories lived a life of social, economic and political deprivation due to the above mentioned exclusions. The untouchables were deprived any access to education and occupational independence. The rest of the society preyed on their misery. They were main source of cheap or sometimes slave labour (Romila Thaper 1). The

horrors of untouchability in different parts of India have been well documented in various works of social reformers which we will see below.

The membership to a particular *Jatis* or castes as occupational groups was determined by birth, and its exclusiveness had been maintained by rigorous rules and restrictions. Each and every caste endorsed a ritual rank, which positioned its members in explained hierarchy that captured the whole society. It has been very clear that instead of *Varnas* the concept of *Jatis* has become real defining feature of the Caste System in India. The rigidity and absoluteness of castes has mellowed down recently due to spread of education and occupational mobility provided by the modern society. However, it has not been able to completely abandon the concepts of purity and pollution among the caste hierarchies as upwardly mobile persons from the so-called lower castes have tried to imitate the customs, habits and practices of the so called upper castes. This is what M.N. Srinivas calls as '*Sanskritizing*' tendencies. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, the spread of education and opening of the opportunities of upward mobility by the colonial administration in India, led to the emergence of a small middle class among the socially deprived and untouchables which created a pan-India anti-*Brahmin* movement along with the nationalist movement. This was a movement against humiliation and for social equality.

Though we cannot say for sure that when exactly the first voices were raised against the prevalent caste system in colonial India one can be quite sure that all major social reform movements beginning with the *Brahmo Samaj* in Bengal questioned its rationale. However, the struggle against caste system was never homogeneous. People, from different parts of India spoke against the system from different angles. For example, Raja Rammohan Roy the founder of *Brahmo Samaj*, invoked the authority old religious works of the Hinduism in order to delegitimize the caste system. He was of the view that birth based division of caste system

in not only inhuman it is also not sanctioned by the religion. According to him the present form of caste system is a corrupted form of Hinduism and therefore outdated. The *Brahmo Samaj* took various campaigns throughout Bengal to mobilise the opposition to the rigid social divisions created by the caste system. The appeal against caste system was wrapped in the urges of the need of newer identities and solidarities. Keshab Chandra Sen succeeded Raja Rammohan Roy as leaders of the *Samaj*. He too was critical of caste divisions. In fact unlike Rammohan Roy he opposed the relevance of Hindu scriptures itself. By his time caste divisions were seen simply as hurdles of India's rise as a nation. Nevertheless, none of the early social reformers were definitively able to question the authority of the texts from which caste and such divisions and the social evils of untouchability allegedly derived their justifications. It was only when the second generation of the social reform movement when the fundamentals of the caste system started getting attacked both in the traditional bastions of the reform movement and elsewhere.

Keshab Chandra Sen repudiated the caste system without invoking any scriptural authority. Hence, one can argue that social reforms inaugurated by Raja Rammohan Roy under the banner of *Brahmo Samaj* took a radical step under the leadership of Keshab Chandra Sen. However; there were other such groups which were active against the evils of caste system by that time. For example, the *Prarthana Samaj* in Bombay presidency led various movements and propaganda campaigns opposing caste. Members of the *Prarthana Samaj* too were influenced by the West and its democratic cultural milieu. The caste system was seen as an undemocratic institution and therefore was thoroughly opposed.

Radical opposition of Indian cultural and social practices by the *Prarthana Samaj* and the *Brahmo Samaj* had certain limitations as majority of Indians were yet not ready to see the virtues of democratic set ups in

society based on the western model. By 1870s the racial administrative policies adopted by the British were also helping in the popularity of anti-western feelings among some sections of the Indian society. This gave birth to some reactionary movements (Tanika Sarkar 8). The *Arya Samaj* started by Swami Dayananda Saraswati was one such movement. Unlike the previously mentioned movements it propagated the preservation of the caste system. The argument put forward by it was that the revival of *Vedic* teachings will create genuine democratic space in India. This understanding was based on the belief that Indian culture was pure and most developed. In history, due to 'external influences' the great Hindu civilisation was corrupted. The western influence was seen as the latest incursion on Hinduism. The followers of the *Arya Samaj* believed that the division of the Hindu society into numerous sub-castes and practices of untouchability were alien to it. They, instead, would have liked to restore the original four fold division giving full rights to social mobility to all castes including *Shudras*. Thus, one can see that the early anti-caste movements were primarily divided among two one which wanted to do away with it (*Brahmo Samaj* and the *Prarthana Samaj*) and the other which wanted to reform it (the *Arya Samaj*).

In the early twentieth century the movement against caste became more complex and varied. At one end were organisations like All India *Harijan Sangh* (AIHS) which was founded by Gandhi and another was Sri Narayan Guru's movement in South India particularly in Kerala. AISH was also a Hindu reform movement. It tried to restore the beliefs in original Hindu scriptures. It functioned on the belief that through education, propaganda, and practical measures equal social, religious and cultural rights of the untouchables can be restored. Gandhi's focus on untouchability eradication was, however, motivated by a strong urge to maintain the *Varna* system in its original form. Gandhi insisted that caste system is necessary and it does not deprive anyone from achieving his/her aims of life. His defence of

caste system was criticised by many including the newly emerging leadership from the so called lower castes itself.

The fight against caste system took its anti-*Brahmin* form only by the late nineteenth century simultaneously in Maharashtra and Tamilnadu or Madras. According to Sumit Sarkar, "first signs of political movement among so called 'low caste' people began after the first round of census in India in 1871." According to him "it first started in south India where some of *Shudras* started movements for social recognition and dignity." He gives the examples of Tamilnadu where newly emergent mercantile class of among lower ranked Shanans and Pallis castes "claimed *Khatriyas* status" some of them began calling themselves as *Nadar* which was a term so far confined to "the owners of land and Palmyra trees" (Sumit Sarkar 3: 55). What was different in these movements from the earlier social reform movements is the class and sections which led it were from the lower castes and classes. That explains their unwillingness to share the urge to 'reform' the Hindu system. Instead they all fought for eradication of the caste system which they saw as a form of domination of Brahmins. Their assertion was not taken well by the so called upper castes. The tension between the caste groups led to different riots between upper and lower castes. E Ramaswamy Naikar Periyar's led *Vaikom Satyagraha* demanded temple entry to all untouchables in 1924. Periyar later led the Justice Party in Tamilnadu which was struggling against the Brahmin dominance in government jobs and education sectors. The 'self respect movement' launched and led by Periyar and his followers was a movement of backward castes for equality in social, economic and cultural spheres questioning any form of hierarchy and religious privileges (Bipin Chandra 8).

In 1920 this anti-*Brahmin* movement in Tamilnadu under the leadership of Periyar and others took a popular form. Though it was basically a revolt of

middle classes against the dominance of Brahmins it was joined in large numbers by *Shudras* as well. The *Mahars* of Maharashtra, later the backbone of Ambedkar's movement, were beginning to organise themselves under Gopal Baba Walangkar, by the end of the nineteenth century. The nature of Walangkars movement was not anti-*Brahmin* though. He was more worried about getting recognition as *Khatriyas* for his followers and more jobs in the army and services for this untouchable caste. Most of the *Mahars* were professionally involved in services like watchmen, local arbitrators, messengers, sweepers, etc which were considered to be inferior (Sumit Sarkar 3: 55). The coming of British had already opened the opportunity for *Mahars* to get better jobs in the army. However, "the new emphasis on north Indian 'martial races' in army recruitment provided the immediate provocation for the beginning of *Mahar* organisation" (Sumit Sarkar 3: 55).

On the whole, however, the more effective caste movements in that period tended to be connected with intermediate ranks, below the twice-born and above the untouchables, and usually included considerable landed or rich peasant elements with the capacity to produce urban educated groups. In Bombay presidency (today's Maharashtra) too there was clear *Brahmin* domination over common cultural life and all kinds of services and economic life. With rise of educated sections among the middle classes by the end of the 18th century there was emerging a great anti-*Brahmin* movement. Its first foundation was led in the 1870s by Jyotirao Phule. His book, *Ghulamgiri* (1872) and his organisation, the *Satyashodhak Samaj* (1873), "proclaimed the need to save the 'lower castes from the hypocritical *Brahmins* and their opportunistic scriptures" (Braj Ranjan Mani 4: 250). Phule was one of the first urban-educated members of the 'lowly' *Mali* (gardening) caste. The movement which he started later attracted some other peasant castes such as *Marathas*.

The spread of education among the depressed castes gradually, in the early twentieth century, brought forth a group of intellectual such as Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956). Ambedkar, through his fierce criticisms of the Hindu caste system was able to represent the sufferings of the lower castes in India. He realised and represented the disabilities caused by the caste discrimination and passionately fought for the human rights equality and dignity of his community. In order to fight for these rights he founded the All India Depressed Federation and All India Depressed Classes Association and led them.

The rigid caste system, hierarchical graded and based on birth, was the principal target of umbrella of the socio-reform movements in which anti-*Brahmin* (extreme form of non-*Brahmin* movements) takes the revolutionary shape under the leadership of the Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890) and Ambedkar. Though Gandhi too tried to mitigate the evils of caste system in India through his anti-untouchability movement his own beliefs in the virtues of *Varna* system somehow discredited his intentions. The so called lower castes looked forward to their own leaders and sometime took extreme steps to eradicate the class which they thought was responsible for their sufferings. Below we are going to see two main figures of Anti-*Brahmin* movement in colonial India in some detail without undermining the contributions of others such as Sri Narayan Guru, Savitiri Bai Phule and others.

JOTIRAO PHULE 1827-1890

Phule was born in 1827 in a so called lower caste *Mali* family which were predominantly fruit and vegetable growers in Maharashtra. He got his primary education in Marathi-medium school during 1834. Later on he also went for English medium education during 1841-7. After his graduation he realised the need for education for all and for women of his caste in particular and breaking the existing norms he established a school for girl's

child of the poor section of society in 1848. He established more schools between 1848 and 1852 in which girls from all section of society were admitted. In addition, he opened night school for the working people in 1955. He became part of the movement of widow remarriage in the 1860s. He set another milestone while opening home for illegitimate children and their mothers in 1863 and also opened the water tank for untouchables in the same year. On the other hand he wrote *Ghulamgiri* (slavery) 1873, and founded *Satyashodhak Samaj* (society of the seekers of truth) in the same year. He also became the member of Pune Municipal Council in 1876-82. He deposed before the Hunter Commission for Education on 19 October 1882 which was formed by the British administration to suggest reforms in the education system in India. On 11 May 1888 he was honoured with the title of "Mahatma" in the massive public gathering. Finally, after prolonged illness he died on 28 November 1890 (Braj Ranjan Mani 4).

As far as the prevailing social environment is concerned it was not in favour of Phule. He was a child of the oppression of his socio-historical environment. He had to face indignities and humiliations because his birth was in lower caste *Shudra* (untouchable) family. *Brahmins* in then Bombay province as in any other part of India considered themselves as the chosen caste. Acceptance of the 'divinely- ordained' superiority of the *Brahmins* was still the norm and custom. All the important positions were kept for *Brahmin* in the Peshwa administration. *Chitpavans Brahmins* were the dominant force in the society in every aspects such as in economic, administration, cultural functions and so on. Phule's movement questioned all such claims of superiority and dominance. He through his writings and through his acts was able to create a sense of confidence among the so called lower communities of Bombay province and gradually became a symbol of anti-*Brahmin* movement.

Phule's Interpretation of History, Mythology and Origin of Caste

In the above mentioned configuration of society and existing environments the main challenge for Phule was to transform and reorder it according to his own vision. The strongest challenge for him was to counter or give an alternative interpretation to the *Brahminism*. It was not easy task for him because the foundation of *Brahminism* was set in the ancient scriptures and religious literature. Therefore, he begins with different interpretations. He argued that there is nothing sacred or religious about *Brahminism*. It is urgent need to examine the basic foundation of this domination. The domination of *Brahminism* was established because the masses were ignorant. The centuries practiced culture, customs and traditions made these masses mentally bondage. In this regard *Dharma Shastras* and *Itihas-Purana* was the major sources. By observing these strong social structure, and in order to counter it Phule came up with the deferent interpretations of *Brahmin* histories, scriptures, myths and stories. He attempted to interconnect the past history with the present. His intention behind the rewriting history was to bring all suppressed and divided people together in order to fight with common adversaries (Braj Mani Ranjan 4).

For this purpose, Phule took out several prose and poetic works which had broad idea regarding the history of toiling castes in the public life. The main instruments for countering the prevailing cultural hegemony were tracts, magazines, plays and leaflets. These all were to expose how one particular caste was able to establish monopoly over education and power. Brilliantly, he projected the history of ancient India as the continuous battle between Brahmins and *Shudra-atishudras*. He gave a theoretical and analytical understanding of origin and growth of caste system in an historical and materialist perspective. This interpretation was entirely new of its kind. Phule saw *Brahminism* and the caste order as historical construction in order to pursue hegemonic structure and exploitation which must be fought and dismantled.

Phule came out with the revolutionary tracts against the *Brahminism* and rejected its philosophical foundation. His idea was to break the entire structure of exploitative system. He strongly rejected the doctrine of *karma*. According to this doctrine suffering of present days is the result of previous births of any person. He was of the view that *Brahmin* had enslaved the innocent people on the notion of *daiva* (fate), *sanchit* (accumulated merits/ demerits of previous births), and *prarabdha* (predestination). These notions were responsible for them to make ignorant about the dialectical relationship with the world which finally compelled them to surrender to the dominant social forces. He also rejected the theory of incarnation. According to incarnation theory, Vishnu incarnated different times in different forms in order to save the society from anarchy and establish peace. The theory of incarnation regarded as the heart of *Brahminic* religious system because it resolves the contradiction between polytheistic religious practices and monotheistic *Vedantist* metaphysics. According to Phule, the various incarnations of Vishnu was responsible for the Aryan onslaught which was the indigenous people. Hence, Phule attempted to uproot the basic foundation on which *Brahminism* was sustained while rejecting the two core doctrines of *Karma* and incarnation (G P Despande 5).

Phule's *Gulamgiri* was one of the attempts in this regard. By *Gulamgiri* Phule rejected the *Brahminic* caste ideology and accepted the Dravidian theory. His idea was to encounter the Aryan mythology. He gave the idea of *Bali-rajya* which was based on equality and justice while rejecting *Ram-rajya* which was based on the *Varna-dharma*. While countering *Brahminical* historiography he interpreted the Vedic Aryan as the original coloniser of the original inhabitants. He argued that the upper strata of Indian society were ancestry of the savage aliens. These aliens enslaved the peace loving original inhabitants and captured their belongings. In addition, he argued that the violent invaders imposed inhuman social and religious practices on

original inhabitants in order to keep them under continuous subjugation. Caste system, according to Phule, was an instrument through which *Brahmins* strengthened its position in the society (G P Despande 5).

According to him Shivaji was a rebellion against the caste tyranny of *Brahmin* whose ancestors were robbed of their power by the treacherous *Brahmin Peshwas*. While repudiating the Tilak's resurrection of Shivaji in the 1890s, Phule kept Shivaji within the anti-*Brahminical* tradition of Maharashtrian history and culture. Moreover, by interpreting the word *kshetra* as field or land he explained that *Kashtriyas* was the original inhabitants who were destroyed by the invasion Aryan and put under the subhuman condition from then onwards. Further he argued that those who were worked in the field were *Kashtriyas*. In addition, while putting Shivaji within the lower caste, he made him (Shivaji) as the hero of all *Shudraatishudras* (G P Despande 5).

Satyashodhak Samaj: A Vision for Casteless Society

Experiencing the whole sort of oppressions and exploitations by the hegemonic *Brahminic* organisations Phule wanted to create a casteless society based on the modern values of rationality and justice. The idea of *Satyashodhak Samaj*, was an attempt in that direction. The equality of all human beings was one of the main principles of the *Samaj*. All the members were advised to move among the people and spread truth and right-thinking. Increasing awareness about the man's natural rights and social obligations was duties of its members. All kinds of social evils and malpractices were to be targeted. Public education was given more importance. Women and children were taught by the members. Membership was not confined to any particular caste or communities but it was kept open for all section of society including *Brahmins*, *Mangs* and *Mahars*. In its starting even some of the members were Jews and Muslims (Braj Ranjan Mani 4).

Moreover, *Samaj* rejected any kinds of ritual performance by the *Brahmins* to other caste because it would validate the purity of *Brahmins*. In addition, it would mean that the only *Brahmin* priest have control in the respect of entry of divine. While keeping all theses religious practices in mind Phule advised his followers in the *Samaj* to organise and conduct religious and marriage ceremonies in people's language without *Brahmin* priests and their 'mumbo jumbo' in *Sanskrit*'. In reaction to this the radical *Brahmins* started campaign to counter *Samaj* in the form of propaganda. How would your prayers reach God if they were said in Marathi and not *Sanskrit*, they asked the innocent people? Phule had to pacify his supporters that God knew everything and understood the yearnings and prayers of every human soul; however expressed. The orthodox *Brahmins* attempted to threaten the people by arguing that their association with the *Samaj* would have disastrous impact on their family. Consequently, several *Satyashodhaks* had to bear the brunt of *Brahminic* wrath. Those who were the members of *Samaj* were harassed, and some of them were forced to leave government jobs on the various grounds by their superior officers, mostly *Brahmins*. However, all these activities were unable to break the strong will of the most *Satyashodhaks* (Braj Ranjan Mani 4).

According to G P Despande, "Phule was first thinker who interpreted the Indian Society on the basis of class. He was very clear in his idea that wealth of the society was produced by *Shudra-atishudras* as they had to suffer oppression at the hands of the elite, the bloodsucking consumers of society's resources. He tried to unite all labouring classes - *Kunbis, Malis, Dhangars, Muslims, Bhils, Kolis, Mahars* and *Mangs* -under one umbrella" (5). The idea was to start struggle against the *Brahminical* falsehood on the basis of morality and knowledge. He wanted to bring together peasants, untouchables, Muslim masses without which the common adversaries could not be fought. According to O'Hanlon (as quoted in G P

Despande 5) one of the aims of his play, *Tritiya Ratna* (1855), was to induce his audience that the heterogeneous collections of social groups which was the part of exploited did, had, common interests and a common social position, "This was to be done by the ideological construction of a social grouping that would be both socially credible and attractive. The latter was particularly important, so that elite non-*Brahmin* castes might not feel that they were losing by their association with traditionally low castes. This new social construct was to be the community of the oppressed itself, with its explanation of social evils in terms of the exploitation of all try one group, and its atmosphere of hope and striving for change."

DR. BHIMRAO RAMJI AMBEDKAR (1891-1956)

Ambedkar's is one of the most influential leaders of modern India. He is popular and respected not only among the Dalits but across all the progressive sections. He was born on 14 April, 1891. His family belonged to the so called lower caste community of *Mahar* in Bomaby presidency which is in present day Maharashtra. The *Mahars* were treated as untouchables. This particular social background created various hurdles in Ambedkar's education. He was often discriminated in the class rooms and offices he worked. Nevertheless, he was a bright and hardworking student which helped him get a scholarship from the ruler of Baroda Sayajirao Gaekwad. With this scholarship Ambedkar attended Columbia University and completed his PhD. Few years later he went on completing his another doctorate from the London School of Economics and became a barrister.

His long stays in Europe and United States and his lengthy studies made him a strong believer in western idea of social equality. When he returned from England he gradually participated in the movements against the caste system. His commitment for the upliftment of the Dalits was soon recognised by the others and they accepted him as their supreme leader eventually. Ambedkar led various movements defying the prevalent caste

norms such as temple entry and drawing of waters from the village wells and ponds. As we all know that untouchables were not allowed by the upper castes to either enter the village temple or to draw water from common well. He also formed and led various organisations such as the *Bahishkrit Hitkarni Sabha*, Independent Labour Party and later All India Scheduled Caste Federation in order to organise untouchables and mobilise them to fight for their equal rights. He realised the importance of education in creating awareness about the rights of the people. Hence, he helped in the establishment of several educational institutions. He used popular means of propaganda to disseminate his views on caste and other such issues. He edited newspapers like the *Janata*, '*Mooknayak*' and '*Bahishkrit Bharat*'. Through his articles and speeches he always attacked the *Brahminical* social and cultural institutions and questioned the blind adherence to all these ideas. He wanted to create a casteless society and was a believer in the idea of annihilation of caste.

In 1930-32 Ambedkar participated in the Round Table Conferences held in Britain to devise a new system of government despite the boycott call given by the Congress. His step was an attempt to give untouchables representation in the policy making of the country at the same time opposing the British rule in India. He played a very significant role in the framing of Indian constitution as the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constituent Assembly. Ambedkar became India's first Law Minister. Though he was never satisfied with the Hindu religion and has been contemplating to change the religion for long it was only in 1956, few years before his death that he finally chose to do that. He adopted Buddhism in front of a huge gathering of his supporters and appealed to his followers to do the same. He was convinced that reforming Hindu religion was impossible and untouchables will never be treated equally if they remain Hindu. Buddhism was considered to be the only religion which has remained uninfluenced from the problems of Caste system. His debate with Gandhi on the caste system in the context of the Poona Pact 1932 was crucial for the development of this understanding. Gandhi's defence of Varna System

as an essential part of Hinduisim was seen by Ambedkar as the sign of hopelessness.

Ambedkar was a great social thinker and scholar apart from being a great activist. He produced seminal writings on wide ranging social and political issues. Some of most celebrated works are '*Annihilation of Castes*' (1936), '*Who Were the Shudras*' (1946), '*The Untouchables*' (1948), '*Buddha and His Dharma*' (1957). Apart from his deep faith in the ideas of equity and liberty Ambedkar was also deeply influenced by the liberal philosophy of John Dewey. As we make out from his writings Jyotirao Phule and Buddha too have impressed Ambedkar's deeply. In a nutshell "his personal experiences as an untouchable, his scholarship and his continuous attention to the problem of bringing about equality for the downtrodden untouchable community form the basis of his thinking and writings" (Braj Ranjan Mani 4).

Ambedkar: Eradication of Caste System

From 1924 till the end of his life Ambedkar led various struggles against the untouchability. He had clear understanding that the progress and independence of the people could be achieved only through removing untouchability from the society and by breaking its inherent link with the caste system. According to him caste system could only be discarded by "de-legitimising its religious basis" (B R Ambedkar 6). In order to do that he studied Hindu religious scriptures and philosophies based on them and found various reasons to criticise it. He argued that *Varna System* was devised initially as a division of labour which later became as a permanent division of labour on birth benefitting the Brahmins. The ideas of purity and pollution was introduced to maintain this division and hence an amoral and inhuman practice. He appealed people to not to follow these ideas and asked them to have more and more inter-religious marriages so that the divisions on the basis of birth become irrelevant.

Ambedkar visualised the achievement of the goal of social justice as the first and foremost. Independence from foreign rule, for Ambedkar, will only mean transferring power to the upper caste Hindus. These upper caste Hindus will maintain social discrimination depriving majority of the population from real freedom. Since these upper caste Hindus are equally distant from the people the real freedom will not come until there is a commitment for the removal of social injustice and discrimination. It was this belief that led Ambedkar to demand reservation for lower castes in the legislative assemblies before the 1935 Government of India Act. He also believed in the futility of the idea that economic progress will resolve social problems. Caste, he believed survives on making people mental slaves. Caste system has created stagnation in Indian society while preventing majority of its population from acquiring education and skills and making them slaves of traditions. The caste system has prevented India from becoming one homogeneous community of nations as it has refused to accept untouchables as citizens of India. One cannot expect the lower castes to feel the love for society and nation if they face discrimination and humiliation by some members of the society. It is very natural for them to feel alienated from the fights of national freedom. Hence, it is not possible to bring any real change and unity in India "without doing away with the evil of casteism." It was argued by Ambedkar that without first bringing the social reforms there cannot be any real change in society. According to him social reform primarily consists of reforming the family system and religion. He was very critical of the practices of not letting widows marrying again and the practices of child-marriage etc. He considered the oppression of women equal to the oppression of lower castes. He supported the upliftment of women also while reforming marriage and divorce laws.

Ambedkar argued that because if the inabilities of the upper caste Hindus to accommodate the lower caste people and treat them with dignity that the latter finds British as their liberators. British, in order to rule over Indians used the divisions in society created by the upper caste and gave the lower caste opportunity to gain and feel dignified through secular laws and treatments. According to Ambedkar the demands for neutrality of the British government in India in social and religious matters was reactionary demand. The neutrality of the British means perpetuating the reactionary and oppressive social customs and institutions by the upper castes. Ambedkar, therefore, argued for strong intervention by the British in the social, political and economic life of Indians so that an objective social system based on equality before the law and liberty of individuals emerges (G S Lokhande 7).

Ambedkar believed that freedom of untouchables would automatically emancipate the Hindu society as a whole. According to him caste is worthless institution and nothing substantial can be created on its basis. Therefore a casteless society is a must. Inter-caste marriages, education and ruthless liberal laws can help bring this casteless society. He was not cosmetic changes like inter caste dinning as it helps in bringing no substantial change. Instead he supported liberating people from orthodox religious scriptures and traditions. However, Ambedkar knew that all this involve a total change in Hinduism which would take a very long time. Since society will not willingly accept these changes therefore we need to have strong laws to curb and discourage all kinds of reactionary upsurges. He believed in affirmative actions and reservations as a tool to bring that required change in society for this simple reason.

Ambedkar emphasised on education and urbanisation as two important tools of breaking caste hierarchies. He appealed to his followers not to learn traditional skills and instead to pursue modern education. He

believed in education because it makes man enlightened and makes him aware of his self-respect along with making him better able to live life materially. He urged his followers to get away from village community and it is the locale which deprives them from the knowledge of outside world and prevents them from social and economic mobility. Ambedkar proclaims that villages are “a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism” (B R Ambedkar 6).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the caste question in India played a very significant role in changing the nature of Indian national movement. It democratised the political awareness and brought a large number of people in the mainstream. People such as Phule and Ambedkar played a very crucial role in this process of democratisation of Indian national awakening. Their struggles laid the foundation of social justice in India. Phule and early critiques of caste system recognised the role of upper castes particularly *Brahmins* in the subjugation of other castes whereas Ambedkar was a staunch critique of Hindu caste system and was a great support of modern society based on equality, liberty and dignity of individuals. His greatest contribution was his idea of social justice and his showing the path for Indian people that through education and organisation one can fight and change anything.

EXERCISES

1. What was the nature of early caste movements in India? Elaborate with examples.
2. How do you define the role of Phule in the rise of nationalism in India?
3. Assess the role of Ambedkar in the Indian national movement.
4. What was Ambedkar's idea of eradication of caste?

5. Can we compare Ambedkar and Phule roles in the anti-Brahmin politics? Justify your answer.

REFERENCES

1. Romila Thaper (2002), *The Penguin History of Early India*, New Delhi: Penguin Books
2. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (2009), *From Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India*, Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan
3. Sumit Sarkar (1983), *Modern India: 1885-1947*, New Delhi: Macmillan
4. Braj Ranjan Mani (2005) *Debrahmanising History: Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society*, Delhi: Manohar Publications
5. G. P. Deshpande (2008), *Selected Writing of Jotirao Phule*, Delhi: Left Word Publications
6. Ambedkar, B. R. (1946), *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches (BAWS), Vol. 1-15*, Vasant Moon (ed), Bombay: The Education Department, Govt. of Maharashtra
7. G.S. Lokhande (1977), *Bhim Rao Ramji Ambedkar – A Study in Social Democracy*, New Delhi: Sterling Publication.
8. Bipan Chandra et al (2000), *India's Struggle for Independence*, New Delhi: Penguin Books
9. B. R. Ambedkar (2002), *The Essential Writings of B R Ambedkar*, Valerian Rodrigues (ed), New Delhi: Oxford University Press