CHAPTER I

INIAN SOCIAL SETTING

The central theme of Ambedkar’s life and thought revolves round the evils of the Hindu religion and social organization. He was concerned throughout his life with the eradication of these evils and usher in a humanitarian social order based on justice, equality and fair play. Ambedkar criticized Hindu religion and society rather vehemently. It is therefore necessary to have a look about Indian Society.

WHAT IS HINDUISM?

It is not easy to define Hinduism. The term is supposed to have originated from the word ‘Sindhu’ which was pronounced by the Persians as ‘Hindu’. It became synonym for the people inhabiting the land of the river ‘Sindhu’. Thus, the term ‘Hindu’ is essentially a geographical
connotation. Hinduism refers to the beliefs, ideas and institutions developed by these people. It stands for a way of life. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan has rightly remarked about the nature of Hinduism: “Hinduism is an inheritance of thought and aspiration living and moving with the movement of life itself, an inheritance to which every race in India has made its distinct and specific contribution. Its culture has a certain unity, though on examination it dissolves into a variety of shades and colours. The differences are not yet completely resolved, though ever since the dawn of reflection the dream of unity has hovered over the scene and haunted the imagination of the leaders. To improve the present condition of Indian society, to reshape its life in fashion equal to the magnitude of the times, we must rediscover its soul, what we have in our blood by inheritance—those wordless ideals, the things that lie in the depths of our being as permanent potentialities. Our values do not change, but the ways and means of impressing them change. India puts spiritual values higher than others”.

ORIGIN

The word ‘Hindu’ does not occur in the Vedic literature. The term used there is Arya for the race and ‘Arya Varta’ for their country. As stated above, the word ‘Hindu’ is derived from the ‘Sindhu’ or ‘Sindh’, which in Sanskrit simply means the ‘river’. The Sindhu River was the western boundary of the Aryan settlements. When the Persians came into contact with the people living beyond ‘Sindhu’ they pronounced it as ‘Hindu’.
Hindustan became the land of the Hindus. The Greeks called the river Indus and the country for them became India.

According to professor Ghurye the outstanding features of Hindu society are: (1) segmental division of society, (2) hierarchy, (3) restrictions on feeding and social intercourse; (4) civil and religious disabilities and privileges of the different sections, (5) lack of unrestricted choice of occupation, and (6) restrictions on marriage—'endogamy as the essence of the caste system'.

The structural basis of Hindu society is caste. Caste is not merely a principle of social division, but a comprehensive system of life dealing with food, marriage, education, association and worship. Caste is defined as a hereditary, endogamous, usually localized group, having a traditional association with an occupation, and a particular position in the local hierarchy of castes. Relations between castes are governed, among other things, by the concept of pollution and purity, and generally commensality occurs within the caste.

According to Dr. M.N. Srinivas, the three main axes of power in the caste system are the ritual, the economic and the political ones and the possession of power in any one sphere usually leads to the acquisition of power in the other two.

The basic principles of caste can be summarized as under: (1) inequality of mankind based on birth, (2) inequality of professions, and (3) absolute and rigid social exclusion between the four main castes and the equally
rigid sub-divisions between themselves. The whole system permeates the dogma of Brahmanic superiority. In short, "caste is social imperialism perfected by experience and maintained by religious sanction." This system functioned best in a feudal, stationary economy with minimal occupational and spatial mobility. It is completely accepted by all, and it is everywhere the unit of social action.

Untouchability is a corollary of the institution of caste, and not a separate institution. The untouchable formed lowest stratum of Hindu society. They were in that position for centuries together. The touch or shadow or even voice of an untouchable was deemed by caste Hindus as polluting. They were forbidden to keep certain domestic animals, to use certain metals for ornaments; were obliged to wear a particular type of dress, to eat a particular type of food, to use a particular type of footwear and were forced to occupy the dirty, dingy and unhygienic outskirts of villages and towns for habitation where they lived in dark, insanitary and miserable smoky shanties or cottages. The dress of the male consisted of a turban, a staff in the hand, a rough blanket on the shoulder and a piece of loin cloth. The women wore bodices and rough sarees barely reaching the knees. Their condition was miserable. They were denied the use of public wells, and their children were not admitted to schools attended by caste Hindu children. Though they worshipped the gods of Hindus, observed the same festivals, the Hindu temples were closed to them. They could not get service even from barbers and washermen. They were treated by caste
Hindus as subhuman. Public services, including police and military services, were closed to them. Naturally, they followed hereditary occupations and trades of a degrading order. The social segregation kept them untouchable throughout their life. They remained socially degenerated; economically impoverished; politically servants of the upper classes; and were permanently excluded from educational and cultural opportunities. They were born as untouchables; they lived and died as untouchables. This picture is still true of villages and small towns. Cities have now mostly overcome this prejudice.

The Brahmins were regarded as the gods on earth. The exemption of property from royal claim, freedom from being killed and such others were the privileges of the Brahmins. The four orders of society as seen in the Purushasukta denoted not only the origin of the classes but also a divine justification of the order of society. According to Ghurye special rights for the higher classes and disabilities for the lower ones were almost a universal feature of a class society. The dominance of religion was manifest in every sphere. Social life lay for the most part outside the sphere of state activities.

In the Islamic medieval period, the Shudras and the untouchables were denied the “human” rights of education, equality and liberty. The Muslim rulers created sardars or noblemen from the caste Hindus, but did not confer these privileges on untouchables. The rulers thought that they would have to face opposition of the caste Hindus if they conferred privileges on the untouchables. In the Maratha Empire also, though the untouchables,
especially Mahars, fought heroically against the Mohammedans, they were deprived of these privileges. Even the great Shivaji could not abolish the system of untouchability.

Energetic attempts to free Hindu society from the evil system of untouchability were going on since the time of the Buddha (500 B.C.). The ideological and spiritual attempts to abolish untouchability and establish social equality went on for centuries. Chakradhar, Ramanand, Chaitanya, Kabir, Ekanath, and other saints succeeded to a great extent in establishing spiritual equality and the *bhakti* (devotion) cult.

The advent of Christianity, however, did not improve the lot of the untouchables. The socio-economic conditions of the untouchables remained stagnant and continued to be vitiated by casteism up to the last hours of the British regime. The Christian missionaries totally failed to eliminate the caste tyranny, economic exploitation and political slavery.

It was only during the British period that the untouchables became a problem for the Hindu social organization. The western impact was not confined to politics narrowly defined. The social institution of caste came under attack as being incompatible with the idea of democracy. The western notion of representative institutions was based on adult franchise. What democracy asserts is equality of rights, privileges and opportunities and not the equality in respect of talent or character.

The Indian social reform movement began with the introduction of new sects. The leaders of these new sects were influenced by ideas of liberty, a
belief in the parliamentary system and the conviction that all men had equal rights before God and the law. Reformers had a vision of the new social structure based on social equality. Social reformers pointed out that the undemocratic institution of caste was not compatible with political democracy. According to Tagore, so long as society remained unjust there could be no justice in politics. Social reformers wanted the higher and the lower castes to have equal rights in law, education, politics and in every other matter. Under British rule, the Brahmin as well as the Shudra had equal status in the law courts.

This meant that a social change was brought about. But in the new context what is meant by social change? “Social change may be defined as the process in which is discernible significant alteration in the structure and functioning of a particular social system”.

According to Srinivas, social change is brought about by sanskritisation and westernization. These are linked processes in modern India and it is not possible to understand one without reference to the other. Sanskritisation is both a part of the process of social mobility as well as the idiom in which mobility expresses itself. When there is sanskritisation mobility may be said to occur within the framework of caste, whereas westernization implies mobility outside the framework of caste. Sanskritisation can also occur independently of the acquisition of political and economic power. According to Srinivas, the introduction by the British of a western political institution like parliamentary democracy has also contributed to the increased
sanskritisation of the country. But sanskritisation does not always result in higher status for the sanskritised caste; and this is clearly exemplified by the untouchables.6

According to Srinivas, when the leaders of the dominant castes are sensitive to economic and political opportunities they are socially conservative. They do not, for instance, like the condition of Harijans to improve. They have a vested interest in keeping Harijans poor and ignorant. At the present time the Harijans are their most important source of agricultural labour and if they become educated and conscious of their rights they will be a threat to the position of the dominant castes.7 The leaders of the upper castes claim equality for themselves with the Brahmin or Vaishya, but so far as the Harijans are concerned, they seem determined to keep them where they are at the present moment.8

It was during British rule that India became a single political entity. The technological developments of the last 150 years or more made it possible to create an administrative communications network extending over the whole of India. British rule set in motion economic forces, which upset the traditional hierarchy and increased economic mobility and led to increased social mobility. The increased economic benefits went to the castes which were already at the top of hierarchy. According to M.N.Srinivas, the policy pursued by the British government in India of giving preference to the low castes was in accord with humanitarian sentiments. It also had the effect of making the lower castes look up to the British for protection. It drove a
wedge between the higher and the lower castes. The British policy was to perpetuate the regime of social medievalism in India because that would strengthen the foundations of their political rule.

The removal of untouchability and all disabilities from which the depressed classes suffered formed an important item in the programmes of all socio-religious movements that sprang up in India during British rule. The attitude of the rulers, though not antagonistic, was not favourable to the untouchables. The government was careful not to antagonize the upper classes. It always sidetracked the issue as far as possible.

The attitude of the British rulers, who had just abolished slavery in their own land, towards these age-long sufferers in Hindustan, was quite indifferent. Frankly, theirs was an imperialistic alien rule and their neutral role in respect of the Untouchables was in effect a negative support to the caste Hindu oppressors. The Britishers were a shrewd race. After the fall of the Maratta Empire they set about stabilizing their newly acquired Empire in a manner so as to drain the people slowly, fleece them safely, and exploit them softly and methodically. Statesmanly enough they first took up the cause of the Brahmins who had suffered tremendously by the change of Government. For enlivening their hearts the Bombay Government began to educate them in order to enable them to be useful in the service of the new Government. The intellectual renaissance of India has been a great causal factor in the rise of modern Indian nationalism. The renaissance in India was
characterized primarily by moral and spiritual aspirations. Revivalism was
dominant in the renaissance movement. One of the greatest renascent
forces was the Brahmo Samaj which was regarded as a synthesis of
Hinduism and Christianity. Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), Debendranath
Thakur (1817-1905) and Keshav Chandra Sen (1838-1884) were the leaders
of the Brahmo Samaj movement 'which was based on a synthesis of stern
monotheism, intellectual rationalism, the monism of the Upanishads and the
religious devoutness of Christianity.' It tried to establish a brotherhood
wherein man would not be divided from man because of caste. The
Prarthana Samaj (Prayer Cult) was established in Bombay and it threw caste
overboard. Swami Dayanand Saraswati established the Arya Samaj which
tried to revive the ancient purity of the Vedic Society. It was opposed to the
rigidity of caste distinctions based on birth. It championed social reform.
The ideological influence of the Ramkrishna Mission’s charitable work and
the Theosophical Society must be mentioned in this context. All these
movements rendered valuable service in their own way in reforming the
behaviour patterns in Hindu society. The main problems that confronted
the leaders, along with the political backwardness, where the caste system,
untouchability, child marriage, widow marriage and emancipation of
women. A bitter controversy arose whether social reforms should precede
political reforms. The topmost men participated in that controversy. Men
like Ranade, Agarkar, and Dr. Bhandarkar actively propagated the views of
the social reformers. Tilak was on the side of political reformers.
The policy of the ‘Occidental’ school under Macaulay’s leadership triumphed in the field of education. Western education created the foundations of a new type of intellectual and political life in India. Bhandarkar, M.G. Ranade, Chiploankar, Tilak, Agarkar, Gokhale in Maharashtra; Tagore, Aurobindo, Vivekananda, J.C. Bose, P.C. Roy in Bengal; Vijayaraghavacharya, Pantulu, Rangaiah Naidu, G. Subramania Iyer in Madras and Hansraj, Shraddhananda, Lala Lajpat Rai in Punjab were some of the notable figures with western education who took leading part in the socio-religious movements of the country. In Maharashtra, Jyotiba Phooley carried on his movement for social equality. He founded the Satyashodhak Samaj (Society of the Seekers of Truth) in 1873. Phooley’s was a revolt against caste, so far as caste denied ordinary human rights to all the members of Hindu society. He was the first man who inspired self-confidence in the masses.

The democratic awakening of the depressed classes and increasing consciousness of their basic rights was a part of the general national democratic awakening that had taken place among the Indian people during the British rule. The humanitarian activity of the members of the upper castes reinforcing the rebellious struggles of the submerged sections constituted the social reform movement in India. Removal of untouchability became one of the programmes of the nationalist movement. Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi declared in 1920 “untouchability cannot be
given a secondary place in the programme. Without the removal of that taint, Swaraj is a meaningless term.”

The introduction of railways and buses, modern industries recruiting their labour from both touchables and untouchables, restaurants where all people met and the newly developed class-consciousness supplanting caste-consciousness, where some of the factors that helped to liquidate caste-inequalities and caste-distinctions. The spread of education accelerated this process. It brought forth a group of intellectuals and passionate fighters for their elementary human rights and political demands.

The Depressed Classes Mission Society of India was formed under the chairmanship of Justice Sir N.G.Chandavarkar on October 18, 1906. On November 11, 1917, a Conference of the depressed classes was convened under the chairmanship of Sir Chandavarkar. The Conference placed the demands of the untouchables before government. In 1917, a resolution incorporating these demands was passed at the Calcutta session on the Congress. Social workers before 1920 were under the influence of humanitarian ideas. V.R.Shinde and Shivram Kamble did pioneering work in promoting the movement for the abolition of untouchability. Maharaja Sayajirao of Baroda and Shahu Chhatrapati of Kolhapur helped the movement from its inception.
REFERENCE


2. M.N.Srinivas, Caste in Modern India and Other Essays, Asia publishing House, Bombay, 1962. p.44.


7. Ibid. p.91.


9. Ibid, p.19
