

## **The Failure of Hinduism: Ambedkar as a Microcosmic Mirror to a People Starved into Non-belief**

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B. R. Ambedkar was a man who left an indelible mark upon the social conscience of an entire nation. A jurist, economist, politician, social reformer across levels, principal author of the Constitution of India and independent India's first Minister of Law-his role in the making of India as we know it today was arguably more prolific than perhaps any single leader of the time.

He was vastly educated and a relentless student, his curiosity one that sprang from his very nature, unhindered even by early childhood experiences of discrimination, lack of equal opportunity and even oppression at the hands of those who were supposed to be imparting knowledge. On the contrary, these early hardships only sharpened his desire, pushed him further in his pursuit, and it is no surprise that he was among the most educated intellectuals in the national movement, whether it be his expertise in Law, or economics, or a number of any other fields. We also see in his example a man who wasn't satisfied with merely educating himself; his deep knowledge was utilized in the making of the Constitution of India, he served as the first Minister of Law-in his example we see a man educating himself and serving others with the power this brought him. We see not an idiosyncratic person seeking to put himself on a pedestal, but a man who had seen oppression, borne its pains, and resolved to free himself and others.

In his journey, whether it be his relentless pursuit of knowledge or his unending application of the things he learnt in order to benefit the nation, we see a man in tune with what he wanted and cognizant of how to achieve those goals for the greater good of people.

However, along this egalitarian pursuit for improved circumstances for the oppressed classes, economic goodwill, equal opportunity and other multifarious things, we also see in his person man's search for spiritual meaning.

Born into a low caste Hindu family, he was subject to such disturbing experiences as would naturally attune one away from the religion that oppressed him so. This much the Hindu class system did on its own: alienate a bright young child who would not be stopped, and not accept arbitrary labels that named him inferior. However, his rejection of Hinduism was not only a personal prejudice, but came from observing what it truly had come to represent: vertical classes based on the accident of birth, and unending rules with little consideration for a large proportion of people, said to be the lower classes. Ambedkar was merely one of countless people assigned to this fate; the only difference was that he would not acquiesce to it.

Studying Ambedkar's path as he grew to become one of the foremost figures of Indian history, one finds that while he turned away from Hinduism, he studied Sikhism, whose ideals of revolting when oppressed naturally appealed to him, and even considered converting to it. He was also a lifelong student of Buddhism, to which he converted eventually in a historic event at Nagpur on 14th October 1956, urging his supporters to also convert. He was devoutly Buddhist as well as fiercely intellectual; he even published books on what he had finally chosen as his religion. All the free-thinking in the world had not turned him anti-religious.

What is interesting here is that traumatic events in childhood did turn him from Hinduism, but did not turn him from the idea of God in itself. He was never an atheist: merely dissatisfied with the worldview presented by his religion of birth, which he saw as authoritarian, mistaken and lacking in basis. It is also worthy of note that these beliefs were not the knee-jerk reaction of an uneducated fool-he studied the vedas, he studied other religions-he knew what he believed and why.

This lesser studied aspect of Ambedkar's life can be seen as a microcosmic mirror to the problems that arise in static Hinduism, when arbitrary rules that no longer serve a purpose are upheld while forgetting the spiritual basis of the religion, and what this does to the Hindu people as a whole.

While it is beyond the scope of an academic exercise such as this paper to fairly or even competently comment on a religion as vast and ancient as Hinduism, one clearly finds a flaw that cannot be hidden: Hindus today no longer know Hinduism, nor did they when Babasaheb Ambedkar was born. Rather than being apocalyptic rambling, such a conclusion is but obvious to the observer- this ancient religion, which was the name given to the beliefs of the people of the Indus, or the Hindus, had become but a shadow of its former self. Temple-going, fast-taking, caste-classification and subsequent ill-behaviours: these abound, but not the true Sanatana Dharma, the Eternal Way of which the Bhagavad Gita speaks.

The key point to be noted here is that while Ambedkar was born into a low caste and subsequently withdrew from Hinduism, he did so only after understanding what was wrong- in no aspect of his character do we see an unreasonable man, which leads us to conclude that after all his studies, pondering and deliberation, he was forced to conclude that even if the wisdom held within the kernel was true wisdom, the outer shell was too hard for someone of his birth. His dejection with the religion, and his attraction to Sikhism and Buddhism, both religions that have in some way or the other their roots seeped in the older Hinduism, makes it clear that it was not religion he scorned, it was religion that called him dirty. This predicament begs one to think of all the countless people that have been alienated thus by rules that are basically peripheral, if that, to the central concepts of Hinduism in the first place.

Today we see in the Hindus a people that have likely not read the Bhagavad Gita, or the Vedas, or the Upanishads; we see a people that know not the generations upon generations this wisdom was distilled, preserved and spread. Today we see a people confused into believing pilgrimages, material sacrifices and poojas are all there is to this religion. And in the time of Ambedkar, before the reforms that outlawed untouchability, treating lower castes poorly was one of the things that was also inherently practiced by what we choose to call 'blind' Hindus. The paradox is that when a religion spans such vast epochs of time, it seems that people lose the lessons that need to be preserved, and preserve that which needs evolution and pruning.

While this may be bold to say even today, and one imagines it must have been outrageous in Ambedkar's lifetime, perhaps this is a failing of the human condition itself: that the faults aggregate over time and the virtues fade away. A fault then, that Hinduism, the oldest religion in the world, was bound to be afflicted with.

The caste system marginalized and alienated countless people: children, women, men, humans. Hindus. Ambedkar was one of them. Religions were plentiful in the rich land of India, Bharat, and these oppressed turned elsewhere, as did Ambedkar. In 2012, nearly half a century after he passed away in 1956, Ambedkar was voted the "Greatest Indian" in a poll organised by CNN IBN by nearly 20 million Indians, forever grateful for his contributions. In his person we see a reformer, a patriot, a genius. And we see the failure of Hinduism, a failure in seeing goodness everywhere-which, by instance, is precisely what the Hindu scriptures state one must do-see God everywhere and in everyone.