

DR. B. R. Ambedkar on India's Agrarian Problems

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Abstract

The foregoing discussion would show that initially Dr. Ambedkar analyzed India's agrarian problems merely from the view point on an economist. His main concern then was surplus labour and resultant superfluous employment in agriculture scarcity of capital goods culminating in low agricultural productivity and slow generation of surplus ultimately effecting adversely the process of overall economic growth. In this context Dr. Ambedkar suggested that speedy Industrialization was soundest remedy for all the above mention ills of Indian agriculture. Thus Dr. Ambedkar's view on India's agrarian problem proved not only to be prophetic, but reflect his Inflicting commitment to democracy based on Liberty and Equality as well.

Keywords: liberty, equality, agrarian problems, dr. b. r. ambedkar

Introduction

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar waged a relentless struggle against the caste system in India. The evil and pernicious effects of the system on the Shudras in general and the untouchables in particular are too well known to bear repetition. The caste system deprived the untouchables for centuries of the basic human rights that an individual must enjoy even for his bare existence, let alone accessibility to power, wealth and prestige. Dr. Ambedkar, born he as an untouchable, therefore, rebelled against the caste system and sought its total destruction^[1]. He fought it on each level: social, political and intellectual with the sole aim of the 'emancipation of untouchables'^[2]. It is therefore natural that Dr. Ambedkar came to be known as a 'Social Revolutionary'^[3]. Further as Chairman of Drafting Committee. Dr. Ambedkar played a pivotal role in the making of the 'Constitution of India.' Hence he is admired as the architect of the Constitution. He founded the 'Peoples Education Society in 1946 that enabled hundreds and thousands and of students belonging to poorer strata of the society and those earners –learners who would otherwise have found it beyond their reach to acquire higher education. Dr. Ambedkar had tremendous insights into the intricacies of the education problems. His contribution to the debates in the 'Bombay Legislative Council on the University of Bombay Act Amendment Bill (1927)' and the 'Bombay Primary Education Act Amendment Bill (1938)' is a testimony of his being a top ranging educationist^[4]. For some time he was a Professor of Political Economy and also practiced Law. He was thus a multidimensional personality.

One aspect of Dr. Ambedkar's electric personality, however, does not seem to have attracted enough attention. He was an eminent economist. He extensively contributed to various economic themes which included theoretical issues as well as concrete economic problems. Further what is creditable to Dr. Ambedkar is that, though almost his entire economic writings related to the pre –Independence period they reflect not only unique freshness but also his deep insights into the problems. He approached and examined the problems with such foresight that his analysis and treatment of some of them is very much relevant even today.

The present paper is a modest attempt towards integrating his views on the agrarian problem of India. For the sake of convenience the discussion is organized into four parts. The first part deals with his views on small holdings in India and the remedies for their problems. In this context we shall also bring out the relevance of his analysis against the 'Khoti System' and the celebrated 'Khoti Abolition Bill' which he introduced in the Bombay Legislative Council will be presented in the third part we shall enunciate the rationale he provided for collective farming an integral part of what he called 'State Socialism.' Thus an attempt is made to focus on the evolution of his ideas on India's agrarian problem. In the fourth and final part a brief summary will be provided.

Small Holdings

'Small Holdings in India and their Remedies' is Dr. Ambedkar's seminal contribution to the theme of India's agrarian problem. The essay was first published in 1918. Since then Indian agriculture them being the Land Reforms they were enacted and implemented though haltingly in the 1950's; and the Green Revolution that took place in the mid -1960's. However what is gratifying to observe is that not only does Indian agriculture continue to suffer from the problems that Dr. Ambedkar addressed to in the present essay, or that the problems are becoming more intense with the passage of time but also that his analysis of the problem is relevant perhaps more today it was seven decades ago.

The problem facing Indian agriculture was not only that the holdings were small but that they were also scattered. For example the average size of holding varied from 25.9 acres in Bombay presidency to one acre or two in Pimpala, Saudgar near Poona^[5]. Again as mentioned above these small holdings were fragmented. For example in Ratnagiri District a holding of 20 gunthas was fragmented into 3 plots in Thane District a holding of one acre and nine gunthas consisted of six plots while in Surat District a holding if an acre consisted of as many as 14 plots^[6]. The examples can be multiplied. The small size and fragmentation of holding resulted in inefficient use of resources which by raising the cost of production, ultimately culminated in low agricultural productivity. Thus

on the one hand overwhelmingly large population depended on agriculture that being a major national industry; and on the others its productivity was low. Now since the small and scattered holdings were said to be a cause of low productivity, enlargement and consolidation of holdings was considered a natural solution.

It is in this background that Dr. Ambedkar's view on 'Small Holdings' should be examined. In this context he raised the following questions:

- (A) Why do the agricultural holdings get fragmented despite the fact that fragmentation results in inefficient use of resources?
- (B) Are large holdings necessarily efficient and small ones inefficient? In other words, what is an economic holding?
- (C) What is the ultimate remedy for solving India's problem of small and scattered holdings?

Dr. Ambedkar did not agree with the view that the law of inheritance was the chief cause of subdivision of land. He attributed it mainly to an enormous pressure of population on land. He held that 'when farming was the only occupation to get a small piece of land was better than to have none ^[7].' Dr. Ambedkar thus went to the root of the problem. He argued; the grievance (of small holdings) lies in the circumstances which put a premium on these small pieces of land. The premium is no doubt due to the large population depending solely on agriculture to eke out its living. It is not therefore the law of inheritance that is the evil it is the high pressure (of population) on land which brings it into operation. People cultivate the small piece not because their standard of living is low but because it is the only profitable thing for them to do at present. It they had something more profitable to do they would never prefer the small piece ^[8]."

This does not however mean that Dr. Ambedkar was opposed to enlargement and consolidation of holdings. He was only striving to show that due to lack of alternative means of subsistence agriculture was overcrowded which made sustenance of enlarged and consolidated addressed holding at a particular size impossible.

He then naturally addressed the second question viz. what is an economic holding? According to him and rightly so the question was pertinent from the view point of organization of agriculture as an enterprise.

Dr. Ambedkar did not favor the definition of 'economic holding' from the stand –point of consumption ^[9]." He argued that any definition of an economic holding leaning on consumption 'would mistake the nature of an economic holding which is essentially an enterprise of production ^[10].'" It thus follows that for Dr. Ambedkar 'economic holding' was to be determined from the stand –point of production. It is in this context that he argued that agriculture being an economic enterprise 'there could be no such thing as a large or small holding. To a farmer a holding is too small or too large in relation in the other factors of production at his disposal necessary for carrying on the cultivation of his holding as an economic enterprise. Mere size of land is empty of all economic connotations. Consequently it cannot possibly be the language of economic science to say that a large holding is economic while a small holding is uneconomic. It is the right or wrong proportion of other factors of production to a unit of land that renders the latter economic or uneconomic. Thus a small farm may be economic as well as a large farm for economic or uneconomic does not depend upon the size of

land but upon the due proportion among all the factors including land ^[11].'" (Emphasis added) According to Dr. Ambedkar therefore an economic holding consists of optimum combination of land capital and labor etc. in a proportion such that the prorated contribution of each in conjunction with the rest is the highest ^[12].'" Thus an economic holding is not a matter of the size of land alone but is a matter of the adjustment of a piece of land to the necessary equipment for its efficient cultivation ^[13].'" (Emphasis added) consequently he argued 'the remedy for the ills of agriculture in India did not lie primarily in the matter of enlarging holding but in the matter of increasing capital and capital goods. That capital arises from the saving and that saving is possible where there is surplus is a commonplace of political economic ^[14].'" Thus according to Dr. Ambedkar the basic problem of Indian agriculture was that it was not capable of generating a surplus which ultimately created scarcity of capital. This made excessive use of labor in cultivation inevitable. Secondly despite the vastness of land under village the land under cultivation was small in proportion to the population of the country. For example in 1985, per agriculture inhabitant in India just one acre of land was cultivated as against 1.75, acres in Italy, 2.30, acres in France, 3.30 acres in Ireland, 5.60, in Russia and 8.90, acres in USA ^[15].'" Dr. Ambedkar therefore argued that a large agriculture population with the lowest proportion of land in actual cultivation meant that a large part of the agricultural population was superfluous and idle ^[16].'" In other words this idle labor was not performing any productive activity. Thus 35 years before Nurkse ^[17].'" Dr. Ambedkar talked about superfluous employment.

Dr. Ambedkar went a step further. He drew a fine distinction between idle labor and idle capital. He argued that capital exists but labor lives. He elaborated that though idle capital does not earn, it does not also consume much to keep itself. But labor earning or not consume in order to live ^[18].'" He therefore concluded that idle labor is a calamity; for instead of contributing to the national income it drags on reducing the already meager surplus which in turn depresses the process of capital formation.

But even if we go for intensive cultivation by using more capital (and all other equipment) with a given plot of land so as to increase production would it not happen that agriculture will require even less labor than before? Dr. Ambedkar was aware of this problem. He argued that even if we enlarged the existing holdings and procured capital and capital goods to make them economic we will not only be not advocating the proper remedy but will end in aggravating the evils by adding to our stock of idle labor; for capitalistic agriculture will not need as many hands as are now required by our present day methods of cultivation ^[19].'" How to overcome this predicament? Dr. Ambedkar's answer was; industrialization. He argued that industrialization will have cumulative effects. Firstly it will enable us to sponge off idle labor in non –agriculture channels of production. When productively employed idle labor will not only cease to live by predation but will earn its own maintenance and also give us surplus. Secondly it will destroy the premium on –land and reduce the pressure on it. Constituently the necessity of sub –division and fragmentation will be checked. Lastly a declining pressure of population on land and increasing use of capital and capital goods will forcibly create an economic necessity of enlarging the holding ^[20].'" Dr. Ambedkar talked about superfluous employment.

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Dr. Ambedkar thus argued that ‘industrialization of India was the soundest remedy for the agriculture problems of India ^[21].’

Abolition of the Khoti System

On September 17, 1937 Dr. Ambedkar introduced in the Bombay Legislative Council a bill seeking the abolition of the Khoti System. The Khoti System related to minor land tenures in the Bombay Presidency. It prevailed in some parts of Ratnagiri District and also in some parts of Kolaba (now Raigad) and Thane District. The Khoti tenure differed from the ordinary Ryotwari in as much as in the latter the occupants of the land were directly responsible to the Government for the payment of revenue while in the former the Government employed the services of the Khot for the purpose of collection of revenue. The Khot was called a superior holder while a tenant (i.e. occupant of the land) was referred to as an inferior holder. The Khoti System thus to some extent resembled Zamindari System prevailing under the Permanent Settlement Act.

Under the Khoti System the Khot was obliged to collect revenue from the tenants and to pay a certain part of it to the Government. Once such payment was made the Khot enjoyed unrestricted freedom to do whatever he liked to the tenants. The Khots generally misused the freedom and subjected the tenants to all kinds of exaction. The result was that the tenants were reduced to the state of object poverty. This agitated the tenants. They demanded the abolition of the unjust system of Khoti. The relations between the Khoti and the tenants were so strained that three Khots were murdered by them. The system thus disturbed the peace and tranquility in the presidency and therefore, Dr. Ambedkar held it was imperative to abolish it.

Thus, by introducing the bill to abolish the Khoti System Dr. Ambedkar sought to put an end to the exploitation of the actual tillers of the land and establish a direct relationship between them and the Government. In the bill he also made the provision of paying reasonable compensation to the Khots. Dr. Ambedkar ‘s bill on the abolition of the Khoti System thus proved to be a fore under to the Land Reforms Legislation in the post –independence India ^[22].’

Collective Farming

It is undoubtedly true that Dr. Ambedkar concentrated almost his entire energy for improving the lot of the untouchables, because they were the most exploited in each and every walk of social life. Still it would be erroneous to consider him as a champion of the untouchables alone. He was against exploitation. Therefore his thinking horizon was never confined to untouchables but embraced the whole oppressed fraternity. One can cite a number of glorious illustrations in support of this argument. We have just discussed above the bill that he introduced to abolish the Khoti System. Below we discuss his arguments in favor of collective farming.

On behalf of the ‘All –India Scheduled Castes Federation’ Dr. Ambedkar submitted to the Constituent Assembly in the year 1946 a memorandum enunciating the safeguards for the minorities in general and Scheduled Castes in particular. The memorandum is known as ‘State and Minorities.’

According to Dr. Ambedkar; Political democracy rests on the four basic premises:

- (A) The individual is an end in him.
- (B) The individual has certain inalienable rights which must be guaranteed to him by the Constitution.

- (C) The individual shall not be required to relinquish any of his Constitutional rights as a condition precedent to the receipt of a privilege.
- (D) The State shall not delegate powers to private person to govern others ^[23].’

In view of the content of political democracy expressed above. Dr. Ambedkar criticized the Constitutional Experts who argued in favor of minimum State intervention in economic and social affairs. Though he agreed that whatever remains after State intervention is liberty, he immediately raised a fundamental question which must confront every serious student of political democracy. He asked; to whom and for whom is this freedom?

To put it differently, Dr. Ambedkar argued that if political democracy is to be translated into reality. He maintained that if the state does not regulate the economic affairs the private employer will do the task. Under such circumstances, he argued that some persons (employers) will use their liberty to govern others wage earners. Thus when economic affairs are unregulated by the state the landlords will use their liberty to increase rents capitalist to increase hours of work and reduce wages. He therefore cautioned the advocates of minimum state intervention that liberty from the control of state is another name for the dictatorship of the private employed ^[24].’

Thus for the realization of the goal of economic democracy. Dr. Ambedkar advocated in the above mentioned memorandum. State intervention particularly in the organization of industry and agriculture. Here we are concerned only with the latter.

For Dr. Ambedkar agriculture was to be a State Industry. He recommended that the State should acquire (along with the key and basic industries and insurance) all the agriculture land held by private individual whether as owners tenants or mortgages and pay them compensation equal to the value of the land. Further the State should divide the land acquired into farms of standard size and should let out the farms for cultivation to residents of the village on the following conditions.

1. The farm was to be cultivated as collective farm according to the rules and directions issued by the Government.
2. The land was to be let out to villagers without distinction of caste or creed and in such manner that there would be no landlord, no tenant, and no landless laborer
3. The state was obliged to finance the cultivation of collective farms by supplying draft animals, implements, and manure. Seeds, etc.
4. The tenants were to share among themselves the produce of the farm left after the payment of charges properly livable on the farm.

- (a) To levy the following charges on the produce of the farm:
 - 1 A portion for land revenue.
 - 2 A portion to pay the compensation to the landlord, and
 - 3 A portion to pay for the use of capital supplied.

- (b) To prescribe penalties against tenants violating the conditions of collective farming or working in any way pre –judicial to the scheme of the collective farming ^[25].’

Dr. Ambedkar called his scheme ‘State Socialism’ and wanted it to come into operation as early as possible but in any case within ten years after the Constitution came into operation.

The foregoing discussion would make it clear that Dr. Ambedkar the economic structure was to form an integral part of the Constitution law. Why?

He argued that under the practice of Parliamentary Democracy if the establishment of State Socialism is left to the ordinary law to be passed by the Legislature and further if an anti – State Socialism political party wins the majority it can pass legislation to undo State Socialism which however must be on a permanent basis. For such permanence the only alternative is Dictatorship negates Democracy. Dr. Ambedkar therefore concluded.

‘The problems are to have State Socialism without Dictatorship, to have State Socialism with Parliamentary Democracy. The way out seems to be to retain Parliamentary Democracy and to prescribe State Socialism by the Law of the Constitution so that it will be beyond the reach of a Parliamentary majority to suspend, amend or abrogate it. It is only by this that one can achieve the triple object namely to establish socialism retain Parliamentary Democracy and avoid Dictatorship [26].’

References

1. For brilliant exposition see his ‘Annihilation of Caste’. Dr. Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Government of Maharashtra, Education Department Hereafter, Writings and Speeches 1979; 1:23-96.
2. Emancipation of the Untouchables was the title of the paper that Dr. Ambedkar submitted to the institute of Pacific Relations in Canada. The paper was published by Thacker and Co. Ltd. In, 1943.
3. In this context see, ‘Dr. B.R. Ambedkar: A Social Revolutionary, in prime Movers: Role of the Individual in History by Limaye, Madhu, Radiant Publisher, New Delhi, 1985.
4. Writings and Speeches, 2, 39-66.
5. Writings and Speeches. In this context it would be pertinent to observe that the recent period in all the states as well as at the all India level, see Appendix-1, 1, 45.
6. Ibid. In this regard see Appendix-2 contents of which are self –explanatory. In sum, it indicates the worsening situation in respect of fragmentation and thus forcefully brings out the relevance of Dr. Ambedkar’s views on small holdings expressed even decades ago, 457-458.
7. Writings and Speeches, 1, 474.
8. Ibid, 474.
9. Ibid, 466-468.
10. Ibid, 460
11. Ibid, 468
12. Ibid, 468.
13. Ibid, 470.
14. Ibid. While determining the size of economic holding we have to also take into account the technological factors the soil and climate condition the extent of irrigation etc, 472.
15. Ibid. see table on, 472
16. Ibid, 473.
17. Nurkse, Ragnar: Problems of Capital Formation in Underdeveloped Countries. University of Oxford Press, London, 1953, ‘Disguised unemployment’ implies that ‘a certain number of the labor force could be dispensed with without making any difference to the volume of output’, p.33. Thus, Dr. Ambedkar concept of superfluous

employment is synonymous with Nurkse’s concept of ‘disguised unemployment’.

18. Writings and Speeches, op.cit, 474.
19. Ibid, 475.
20. Ibid, 477
21. Ibid, 477
22. Writings and Speeches, 2, 96-103
23. Writings and Speeches, 1, 409
24. Ibid., 410
25. Ibid., 396-397
26. Ibid, 412.