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Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (April 14, 1891-December 6, 1956) was not a socialist in the typical term though he had an inclination towards evolutionary socialism; he developed his own ideas and emerged a socialist in his own way. He dissected the economic inequality and exploitation in an empirical manner. His socialism is innovative and indigenous as he analyses the exploitation of the people within the country with a social world approach. It is pragmatic, not dogmatic. It is humane, not violent.

He was an esteemed academic intellectual having earned the top qualifications from prestigious universities. He therefore looked at social problems from an academic perspective also; but to discover practical applicable solutions for these problems was his major aim. His socialism therefore is integrated with his efforts for practical social equalisation; but economic equalisation was a major prerequisite and a base in the whole of his ideational-philosophical approach which he employed for the study of Indian society.

Land reforms and taxation have always remained a critical issue in Indian political economy and agricultural society. He analysed levying of land taxes and found it to be discriminatory. During a Budget debate in the Bombay Legislative Council in 1927, he raised a relevant question.

“Every farmer, whatever may be his income, is brought under the levy of the land tax. But under the income-tax no person is called upon to pay the tax, if he has not earned any income during the year. That system does not exist as far as land revenue is concerned. Whether there is a failure of crop or abundance of crop, the poor agriculturist is called upon to pay the revenue. The income-tax is levied on the recognised principle of ability to pay. But under the land revenue system, a person is taxed at the same rate, whether he is the owner of one acre of land, or a jahagirdar or an inamdar. He has to pay the tax at the same rate. It is a proportionate tax and
not a progressive tax as it ought to be. Again, under the income-tax, holders of income below a certain minimum are exempted from levy. But under the land revenue, the tax is remorselessly collected from every one, be he rich or poor.”

The Congress Ministry had come into power in Bombay on August 17, 1937 and had issued a statement on ‘Labour Policy of the Government’. Ambedkar examined it critically during the Budget debate and elaborated the concept of a social welfare state which was more extensive because he emphasised introduction of a social security system in the then colonial India. He stated that the government had accepted what “are called the essential services—education, public health, medical relief, and water supply—there are, by common standards now prevailing in all modern countries, other duties which the Government must undertake. These duties, are unemployment benefit, sickness insurance, old-age pensions, maternity benefits and premature death benefits to dependents. Therefore, we have got to start with this position that my Government who claims to have the reins of office in its hands must look upon these duties as part of their functions.”

He expanded the role of government in eradicating poverty, the major economic problem which had made India into a ‘country of beggars and coolies’. He knew that lower castes were poverty-stricken as they were deprived of the educational opportunities and social equality and were forced to live a life of destitute and servants. He defined the role of government by proclaiming that “I do maintain, and I state it emphatically, that one of the principal duties of this Government must be to tackle the problem of poverty. The Government must see that they adopt ways and means whereby the national income of this province (Bombay) rises to some substantial level, whereby the majority of the people can live in amenities which rightly belong to all modern and civilised men.”

Ambedkar’s understanding is pragmatic as he visualises a close link between the class structure and poverty, a fact which still dominates Indian society where lower-backward castes are still trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty. To break it he analysed several policy tools. For Ambedkar, taxation was not only a fiscal tool but a tool for economic equality as well for collecting the revenues for providing the basic amenities to the people.
He therefore emphasises that more taxes need to be imposed on the rich classes, because the “poor man wants more and more. The rich man can afford to be independent of the Government. A rich man needs no school: he can keep a schoolmaster and give his son education up to B.A. or M.A. without sending him to school or college. A rich man needs no dispensary: he can call in a doctor, pay him Rs 30 and get himself, his wife and his children examined if suffering from any disease. It is the poor man who wants the Government to come to his succour; it is the poor man that needs more service. No Government worthy of its name, no Government with any sincerity, can tell the poor classes that it cannot provide these amenities because it has not the courage to levy taxes. The sooner such a Government abdicates the better for all.”

Socialism has several variants and multiple interpretations. Usually it is linked to the equalisation of wealth but has a deep meaning for the crisis-ridden social world. Ambedkar and Nehru looked at it from a social perspective, Nehru talked about providing equal opportunities to all the people as socialism but Ambedkar introduced the concept of equality of castes as an ingredient of socialism. He treated this aspect when he contrasted his views with Gandhi and inferred that the “reorganisation of the Hindu Society on the basis of Chaturvarnya is harmful because the effect of the Varna vyavastha is to degrade the masses by denying them oppor-tunity to acquire knowledge and to emasculate them by denying them the right to be armed; that the Hindu society must be reorganised on a religious basis which would recognise the principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity”.

Thus his social ideas touch the basic tenets of socialism which are common to all of its variants. Socialism focuses on the mundane world, there is no role of the divine order to establish the social world. This is a real and practical contribution of the doctrine of socialism and communism to human thought. Ambedkar too believed in the same manner. He stated that in order to achieve this object “the sense of religious sanctity behind Caste and Varna must be destroyed; that the sanctity of Caste and Varna can be destroyed only by discarding the divine authority of the Shastras.”

Ambedkar thus established that social construction was the result of the human actions and the caste system was its glaring example. He thus differed from Marx who advocated that economic forces were the only causative factor in determining the social life. Karl Marx had presented the
economic interpretation of history as the defining theory of human life. “According to him history was the result of economic forces (and) as to Buckle and Marx, while there is truth in what they say, their views do not represent the whole truth. They are quite wrong in holding that impersonal forces are everything and that man is no factor in the making of history (and) this seems to me to be quite a conclusive answer to those who deny man any place in the making of history. The crisis can be met by the discovery of a new way. Where there is no new way found, society goes under. Time may suggest possible new ways. But to step on the right one is not the work of Time. It is the work of man. Man therefore is a factor in the making of history and that environmental forces whether impersonal or social if they are the first are not the last things.”

Ambedkar thus looks at the caste system as a social problem, a product of human thinking; illogically supported by rotten religious texts. Marxist analysis fails to explain this problem.

Ambedkar accepts that state and government are real entities for human development, rejecting the stateless society conception of Marx. He defined the socialist roles for these and accepted the establishment of equality and sovereignty of people their major work objective. He argues that “a Government for the people, but not by the people, is sure to educate some into masters and others into subjects; because it is by the reflex effects of association that one can feel and measure the growth of personality. The growth of personality is the highest aim of society (and) to be specific, it is not enough to be electors only. It is necessary to be law-makers; otherwise who can be law-makers will be masters of those who can only be electors.”

Ambedkar’s ideas are reassertion of the socialist ideals but he takes a novel approach; he fuses socialism with the social evils of the Indian society and thereby expands its scope. Ambedkar is not a doctrinal Marxist or socialist. He evolves his own brand of socialism in which not only the economic aspects but also the social aspects are emphasised. This is his seminal contribution to the ideology of socialism.

References

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8. Evidence before the Southborough Committee on Franchise, Examined on: January 27, 1919. (quoted primary references from Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches Vol. 1 and 2). Dr Vivek Kumar Srivastava is the Vice Chairman, CSSP, Kanpur. He can be contacted at e-mail: vpy1000[at]yahoo.co.in