
UNIT 11 CRITIQUE OF ECONOMIC ASPECT OF CASTE

Structure

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11.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit would enable you to understand:

- Ambedkar's theorisation on the origin, genesis and development of caste system;
- The economic interpretation of the caste system;
- The interrelationship between economic problems of India and the caste system; and
- The probable ways to arrest and counter economic problems.

11.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we will discuss about Ambedkar's theorisation on the origin, genesis and development of caste system and the interrelationship between economic problems of India and the caste system. Caste is an important social institution of Indian society. Many scholars and theorists have understood caste mostly as a phenomenon unique to India. Using religious and social texts and perspectives, some scholars have seen caste as an institution that fulfills certain functions of the Indian society. But rarely anybody has evaluated caste on economic ground. Ambedkar was the first to interpret the caste system as an economic institution, apart from its social context. He theorized that the caste system provides a framework for an economic system and performs many economic functions, such as the consumption, production, allocation, distribution, and utilisation of productive resources. As a whole, caste can also function as a means for distribution of goods and services among the people of the society. Ambedkar's ideas and interpretation of the caste system had its roots in the origin, mechanism and development of castes in India, progressed through research, theorization and several seminars, culminating in his suggestion for its annihilation, as the presidential address for the annual conference of a Hindu reformist group. He went much ahead of his contemporaries and believed that the economic functions performed by the caste system in the society were dominantly economically

exploitative for the lower castes of India. Whereas scholars like Karl Marx believed that the caste system had kept India outside the grasp of capitalism, Ambedkar exposed the marginality, exploitation and discrimination that had been carried out against the lower castes due to the caste system in India for a long time.

11.2 AMBEDKAR'S INTERPRETATION OF CASTE SYSTEM

Ambedkar's understanding and theorisation of the Indian caste system has been articulated in the famous article titled "Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development" which was published in 1916. In this article, he systematically analysed the origin and development of castes in India. To define the meaning of a caste, he analysed definitions put forward by scholars like Nesfield and Risley and criticized them extensively for not focusing on the main aspect of caste. He appreciated the definition given by Ketkar and argued that only an insider can understand the true characteristic of caste. Ambedkar says that the true characteristic of caste is endogamy. He opines that endogamy is the only characteristic that is peculiar to caste and if we succeed in showing how endogamy is maintained, we shall practically have proved the genesis and mechanism of caste. The super imposition of endogamy on exogamy means the creation of Caste (Ambedkar 1916, p.9).

Ambedkar goes on to say that when a group wants to be a caste then the group must provide its members with marriageable partners so that the members do not break the boundary and go out and marry someone from other groups. Therefore the group needs to get rid of the numerical disparity between two sexes. According to him, there were four means by which numerical equivalence between sexes could be maintained:

- burning the widow with her deceased husband (sati),
- ensuring compulsory widowhood,
- imposing celibacy on the widower, and
- wedding a man to a girl who is yet to attain marriageable age.

Sati, enforced widowhood and girl marriage are customs that were prominently intended to solve the problem of the surplus man and surplus woman in a caste and to maintain its endogamy. These are means to maintain the caste system and were honoured because they were practiced (ibid, pp.13-14)

While discussing the development and spread of castes in India, Ambedkar elaborates that Manu is only a lawgiver of India but he did not give the law of caste, because caste existed long before Manu. He just upheld the caste system. Thus the Great Man Theory does not help in solving the spread of castes in India. There was a time when the Hindu society was composed of classes such as Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. This kind of sub-division of a society is quite natural. But the unnatural thing about the sub- divisions is that they have lost the open-door character of the class system and have become self enclosed units called castes. The question is: were they compelled to close their doors and become endogamous or did they close them of their own accord? There is a double line of answer: some closed the door: others found it closed against them. The one is a psychological interpretation and the other is mechanistic, but they

are complementary and both are necessary to explain the phenomena of caste formation in its entirety. It was the Brahmins who first closed their doors and others found it closed against them. Moreover, there was “infection of imitation” that led other people to imitate the Brahmins and the result was the formation of caste system (ibid, pp.17-18).

The Hindu social order is based on the following three interrelated principles:

- i) pre-determination of social, religious and economic rights of each caste based on birth,
- ii) the unequal and hierarchical (graded) divisions of these rights among the castes, and
- iii) provision of strong, religious and economic ostracism supported by social and religious ideology to maintain the Hindu social order. According to Ambedkar, the doctrine of inequality is the core of the Hindu social order (Ambedkar 1987).

The caste system is governed by rank and gradation where the rights and privileges increase in ascending order from Untouchables to Brahmins. It is a hierarchically interlined system. In this context, caste cannot exist in singular, it always exists in plural numbers. No caste can be looked at in isolation. The castes can only be viewed as a pyramidal structure with Brahmins at the top and Untouchables at the bottom. So castes are required to be understood as a ‘system’ of societal governance, which are interlinked in unequal measures of cultural, social, religious and economic relations with each other (ibid).

11.3 ECONOMIC ANALYSIS OF THE CASTE SYSTEM

Along with the social understanding of the caste system, Ambedkar also provided us with an economic analysis of the caste system. He put forward the economic analysis of caste in his famous and debatable article titled, “Annihilation of Caste” published in 1936. According to him, the caste system is an economic institution and performs a number of economic functions in Indian society. He says “caste is nothing but an enclosed class.” During his period, the Orientalist understanding of caste was dominant and caste was not seen as another form class, rather caste was understood as being opposite to class. In this connection Karl Marx, who popularized the concept of class, was of the opinion that India has remained outside the purview of capitalism due to its unique mode of production and division of labour based on caste system. Marx even went on to claim that Asiatic mode of production based on caste system was not exploitative and discriminatory. Max Weber also talked of caste as status groups. There are numerous other understandings of caste on religious grounds? But Ambedkar’s interpretation of caste was different. By defining caste as an enclosed class, Ambedkar shows that exploitative, marginalized and discriminatory factors are present within the caste system. He further argues that class is found in almost all societies but caste is a more degraded form of social stratification as it is based on one’s birth and one is not allowed to choose his/ her preferred means of livelihood.

Ambedkar in his “*Annihilation of Caste*” says that caste is not merely a division of labour, it is also a “division of labourers.” He accepts that any civilized society

that needs to develop economically needs division of labour, but caste is the division of labour accompanied by an “unnatural division of labourers into water-tight compartments.” “It is a hierarchy in which the division of labourers is graded one above the other.” Ambedkar argues that the caste system and its division of labourers restrict individual aptitudes because of which India has not progressed economically. Any society that wants to develop economically and socially must give freedom and liberty to individuals to develop their competency and make their own career. But this principle is violated in the caste system as it “appoints tasks to individuals in advance, and tasks are not selected on the basis of trained original capacities, but on social status of the parents.” Ambedkar strongly states that this stratification of occupations as a result of the caste system is not spontaneous and is “positively pernicious” (Ambedkar 1936).

The caste system’s fundamental characteristic is that each caste has fixed economic rights, with restrictions on change that induces forced exclusion of one caste from the rights of other castes. In this context, Ambedkar putting forth the conditions and requirements of an industrial society articulates that industry is not static and undergoes rapid and abrupt transformations and changes. Given this kind of a dynamic structure, an individual must be free to change his occupation. If the individual does not have the liberty to change his occupation with the change in circumstances, then he will be devoid of his livelihood. But caste system is an institution that does not allow an individual to change his or her occupation as it is given and decided by one’s birth and caste. In addition, Ambedkar here addresses the issue of poverty, deprivation and unemployment in the Hindu society of India. He says many Hindus are seen starving rather than taking up a new profession because the caste system and its structure disallow people to take up occupations not assigned to their caste. Thus, the caste system, by not permitting readjustment of occupations has become the direct cause of the acute problem of unemployment in the Indian society (ibid).

Since the rights of each caste are fixed and compulsory, the caste system as a social structure engages in forced exclusion and thereby unequal and hierarchical assignments of economic rights. This has created inter-caste inequalities that may lead to deprivation and poverty. Deprivation and poverty are avoidable if each and every caste individual has access to a reasonable source of livelihood in his or her ordained occupation. But here in case of untouchables, exclusion is so severe that it leads to poverty and deprivation as they are denied all resources and sources of livelihood except performing the task of manual labour which is considered to be polluting and inferior.

Furthermore, Ambedkar says that this unique form of division of labour under the caste system suffers from another serious problem. The division of labour structured by the caste system is not a division of labour based on choice and individual sentiment; preference has no place in it. This form of division of labour given by caste is based on predestination. Against this backdrop, “there are many occupations in India which, on account of this fact are regarded as degraded by the Hindus and provoke aversion for those who are engaged in them” (Ambedkar 1936, p. 48). This forced division of labour does not bring efficiency to the work as people enter into the occupation without any interest or choice. Ambedkar says,

there is a constant desire to evade and escape from such occupations which arises solely because of the blighting effect which they produce upon those

who follow them owing to the slight and stigma cast upon them by Hindu religion. What efficiency can there be in a system under which neither men's heart nor their minds are in their work? As an economic institution, in as much as, it involves the subordination of man's natural powers and inclinations to the exigencies of social rules. (Ambedkar 1936, p. 48).

According to Ambedkar, the caste system reduces the mobility of labour. Not only that, it also restricts mobility of capital, thereby creating inefficiencies in production and impeding economic growth. Change is the essence of the process of economic development and a continuous change in the socio-economic structures is essential for development. But the caste system in India perpetuates traditional socio-economic patterns which are detrimental to economic development.

Ambedkar also denounced untouchability. Untouchability, perpetuated by the caste system, is a complete violation of human rights. According to him, untouchability was not only a religious system but also an economic system that was worse than slavery. In slavery, the master at least had the responsibility to feed, clothe, house and keep the slave in good condition or else the market value of the slave might come down. In contrast, under the system of untouchability, the upper castes take no responsibility for the maintenance of the untouchables. Ambedkar observes in his "What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables" that "as an economic system, it [the caste system] permits exploitation without obligation. Untouchability is not only a system of unmitigated economic exploitation but is also a system of uncontrolled economic exploitation" (ibid, pp. 196-97). In another book, *The Untouchables*, Ambedkar argued that the caste system was a "diabolical contrivance to suppress and enslave humanity. Its proper name would be infamy" (ibid, p. ix).

11.4 AMBEDKAR ON PATHWAYS OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Ambedkar was also a social reformer. He not only brought out the economic problems of the nation and its people but also suggested and formulated ideas and strategies to curb it. Ambedkar believed that India's economic development should give prime importance to end exploitation, eradication of inequalities and poverty among the people. In this respect, Ambedkar shared Marx's views that exploitation exists in the world, where poor are exploited by the rich and masses are enslaved by the privileged minority which leads to suffering and poverty. But Ambedkar did not believe in Marx's paradigm of development. Ambedkar's understanding of communism was different from that of Marx which is articulated in his essay "Buddhism and Communism". Unlike Marx, he believed that economic relationships are not the be-all and end-all of human life. He elaborated that it is not always economic motive that drives all forms of power in human activity, rather exploitation has many more dimensions that includes economic as well as social, political and religious.

Ambedkar believed that communism involves revolutionary methods to overcome the dictatorship of the capitalists on the proletariat. But Ambedkar was against any form of violent methods and believed that Indian constitutional provisions and democratic means should be relied upon for the needed reformation. He championed human rights and democracy as the ideal social order. Unlike Marx,

he did not believe that the abolition of private property would bring an end to poverty and suffering of the have-nots. Furthermore, he did not believe that eventually the state was going to wither away, rather he gave importance to the state apparatus. Ambedkar dreamt and believed in a classless society but not in a stateless society.

In his article “States and Minorities”, he argues that the state will remain as long as human society exists. He elaborated “an obligation on the state to plan the economic life of the people on line which would lead to highest point of productivity without closing every avenue to private enterprise, and also provide for equitable distribution of wealth” (ibid, p.34). Ambedkar believed in the active engagement of the government in economic development without succumbing to the Marxian view of totalitarianism and state monopoly. He was of the opinion that there should be state ownership of agricultural lands based on the tenets of democratic collectivism. The government should also have a limited control of industries. He believed in the idea of State Socialism where the economic development would be shared and looked after by the state. That would ensure demands of the poor strata be met by the industries, maintenance of productive resources by the state and a just distribution of the common produce among the different people without any distinction of caste or creed. For him, state should have a well-defined role and intervene as necessary in economic matters of the country.

But his overall idea of social reform to eradicate all forms of inequalities and marginalization stem from his critique of caste system. He believed that economic development of the Indian society and its common masses is only possible when the Indian society does away with the caste system. The root cause of economic stagnation, underdevelopment, poverty and inequality are the inherent characteristics of the caste system. If only the downtrodden masses of the Indian society who are mostly afflicted by the caste system could be pulled out of the iron grasp of the caste system and hence from their acute state of misery, then India could develop as it should. Therefore, according to him, in order to promote economic progress, India should eradicate caste system and in this process the state and the Constitution, based on the principles of democracy, should ensure distributive justice and follow an inclusive policy where the marginalized sections play an active role in society.

11.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we discussed the economic aspect of the caste system in India as understood by B. R. Ambedkar, who stressed that the caste system should be understood in economic terms, along with other terms such as social, religious and political. We also studied that the root cause of India’s economic problems like unemployment, poverty and deprivation was interwoven in the caste system of the Hindu social order. Furthermore, we also dealt with alternative paths of development guided by the philosopher, social reformer and economist B.R. Ambedkar.

11.6 QUESTIONS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- 1) Discuss the understanding of caste system as elaborated by B. R. Ambedkar.

- 2) Why and how the caste system is a degraded form of division of labour?
- 3) What are the reasons behind the economic problems of India? Elaborate it.
- 4) How B. R. Ambedkar defined the path of development?

SUGGESTED READINGS

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