

**Perspectives on Priesthood:
An Analysis on B. R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste***

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Introduction:

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar has been Dalit icon for all Dalit scholars and has been an inspiration as far as research is concerned. Has anyone done research on Hinduism as much as Ambedkar? After reading his volumes of *Speeches and Writings*, one is amazed and aghast the kind of sources and references that he makes to prove his argument on each issue. One among the essays is “Annihilation of Caste”. Many of you may or may not have read it. The basic arguments to annihilate the caste consciousness, in his opinion is that one needs to practice inter-dining and inter-marriage which many Ambedkarites have been practicing/following/adopting in their real life. Apart from those ideas, he also makes an interesting observation on Hinduism and priesthood. The appeal that he makes to all Hindus is that there must be reforms in the Hindu scriptures, *Smritis* and other holy books. There must be only one holy book. After that he makes an observation that priesthood should not be on hereditary basis but it should be based on the degree.

Scope of Paper:

This paper will try to focus on the arguments presented by Ambedkar on priesthood of Hinduism. We all know that this paper that was written by Ambedkar which was not allowed to be presented by the Jat-Pat-Todak of Lahore in the view that Ambedkar was overtly criticizing Hinduism and priesthood. However, the unpublished paper then was a huge hit in India. I think this is the only paper which was not allowed to be presented in the conference. How ironic the same paper has its huge impact not only on Dalits but also on non-Dalits.

Hypothesis:

- (a) What impact did it make?
- (b) Have Non-Brahmins been appointed as priests in temples?
- (c) Have the states made the profession priesthood official?
- (d) Have the educational institutions started courses on priesthood?
- (e) Has the impact of reforms in Hinduism happened both directly and indirectly?

It has been speculated that Ambedkar's comments on priesthood have been implemented in terms of reforms directly and indirectly without acknowledging his criticism.

Research Questions:

The direct impact was that many Dalits left Hindu religion and had embraced Christianity and Buddhism. The reforms that Ambedkar spoke became reality indirectly. There is no direct acknowledgement; however, there has been a lot of impact and influence on Hinduism and its practices.

Review of Literature:

There are only two texts which I could gather to examine the issue on priesthood. If there any more texts I invite suggestions from the audience to add to my list. Let me quote what Ambedkar says on priesthood in "Annihilation of Caste":

While I condemn a Religion of Rules, I must not be misunderstood to hold the opinion that there is no necessity for a religion. On the contrary, I agree with Burke when he says that, "True religion is the foundation of society, the basis on which all true Civil Government rests, and both their sanction." Consequently, when I urge that these ancient rules of life be annulled, I am anxious that its place shall be taken by a Religion of Principles, which alone can lay claim to being a true Religion. Indeed, I am so convinced of the necessity of Religion that I feel I ought to tell you in

outline what I regard as necessary items in this religious reform. The following in my opinion should be the cardinal items in this reform: (1) There should be one and only one standard book of Hindu religion, acceptable to all Hindus and recognized by all Hindus. This of course means that all other books of Hindu religion such as *Vedas*, *Shastras* and *Puranas*, which are treated as sacred and authoritative, must by law cease to be so and the preaching of any doctrine, religious or social contained in these books should be penalized. (2) It should be better if priesthood among Hindus was abolished. But as this seems to be impossible, the priesthood must at least cease to be hereditary. Every person who professes to be a Hindu must be eligible for being a priest. It should be provided by law that no Hindu shall be entitled to be a priest unless he has passed an examination prescribed by the State and holds a *sanad* from the State permitting him to practice. (3) No ceremony performed by a priest who does not hold a *sanad* shall be deemed to be valid in law and it should be made penal for a person who has no *sanad* to officiate as a priest. (4) A priest should be the servant of the state and should be subject to the disciplinary action by the State in the matter of his morals, beliefs and worship, in addition to his being subject along with other citizens to the ordinary law of the land. (5) The number of priests should be limited by law according to the requirement of the State as is done in the case of the I.C.S. To some this may sound radical. But to my mind there is nothing revolutionary in this. Every profession in India is regulated. Engineers must show proficiency, Doctors must show proficiency, Lawyers must show proficiency, before they are allowed to practice their professions. ...The priest's is the only profession where proficiency is not required. The profession of a Hindu priest is the only profession which is not subject to any code. Mentally a priest may be an idiot, physically a priest may be suffering from a foul disease, such as syphilis or gonorrhoea, morally he may be a

wreck. But he is fit to officiate at solemn ceremonies, to enter the *Sanctum Sanctorum* of a Hindu temple and worship the Hindu God. All this becomes possible among the Hindus because for a priest it is enough to be born in a priestly caste. The whole thing is abominable and is due to the fact that the priestly class among Hindus is subject neither to law nor to morality. It knows only of rights and privileges. It is a pest which divinity seems to have let loose on the masses for their mental and moral degradation. The priestly class must be brought under control by some such legislation as I have mentioned above. It will prevent it from doing mischief and from misguiding people. It will democratize it by throwing it open to everyone. It will certainly help to kill the Brahminism and will also help to kill Caste, which is nothing but Brahminism incarnate. Brahminism is the poison which has spoiled Hinduism. You will succeed in saving Hinduism if you will kill Brahminism. (76-77)

The second source in which Ambedkar speaks about priesthood is none other than his own book. As far as I know there is nobody who has talked about Ambedkar's perspective on priesthood. However, Ambedkar himself has raised this issue in another occasion in his own essay *Writings and Speeches* Volume 17, Part Two, entitled "Religion and Priest be brought under Proper control". He says that priesthood has to be abolished as he had indicted in his "Annihilation" and said it is impossible. Further he takes the example how it has been banned/abolished among Parsi community in Bombay which he heard when he was in Belgaum. Ambedkar has his own reasons why it should be abolished. The first reason is that "in the name of superstitious beliefs a lot of wasteful offerings to gods and goddesses, long mourning and multiple ceremonies at births, deaths and marriages, insensate caste dinners are some of the senseless and meaningless practices in which priest delights" (Ambedkar 2014: 4). The second reason he gives is that Parsis in India have successfully abolished priesthood as a caste, therefore, Ambedkar requests "all the enlightened Hindus, Mahomedans and

Christians will join this heroic and noble task of cleansing priesthood... (Ambedkar 4)
Further, he critically comments on the Hindu priestly classes that they “stand in no way superior ethically, educationally or otherwise to the average member of the Parsi priesthood” (Ambedkar 2014: 3).

Kancha Ilaiah in one of his chapters entitled “Marriage, Market and Social Relations” of his book *Why I am not a Hindu* (2007) in a para entitled “The Priest and the People” brings in the concept of priesthood and how Dalitbahujans get into contact at the time of marriage and death. Ilaiah brings in and comments critically on the Brahmin priests saying that the Dalitbahujans do not see that the priest had come to educate them rather to acquire wealth; treats the Dalitbahujans as “outsiders” of his religion; there is no spirituality at all; the relationship is between the exploiter and exploited; the Dalitbahujans’ society is coerced to behave in accordance with the wishes of the priest. (Ilaiah 21-24)

After commenting on the Brahmin priests, he also brings in the Dalitbahujans who have their own temples in which there is no need of a priest between the God/Goddess and the people. I quote his words: “Between the people (Dalitbahujans) and Pochamma (Goddess) there is no priest”. In fact there is no need of a priest at all in the worships of our Gods and Goddesses. (Ilaiah 2007: 9) Further he says: “As she is the Goddess of the people, she regards the habits of the people with sympathy. As there is no notion of priesthood among Dalitbahujans, everybody prays to Pochamma in his/her own way. (Ilaiah 2007: 92)

Radhika Santhanam and Sruthisagar Yamuna report in the article that they wrote for *The Hindu*. I quote the beginning and end of the article.

In 1971, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) government in Tamil Nadu introduced an amendment to the Tamil Nadu Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Act, paving the way for abolitions of hereditary appointment as

priests to Hindu temples. This implied that the sanctum sanctorum of temples was now open to non-Brahmins....

If the Supreme Court upholds the 2006 order of Tamil Nadu, it would indeed be a landmark judgment for social equality. What is to be seen is whether the court will go the extra mile and take a stance in favour of appointment of women as priests, something that could pave the way for reforms, even if not state-initiated, in other faiths as well. (*The Hindu*: 11)

Vira Sathidar is of the view that Ambedkar has been projected as an anti-muslim, anti-communist, *samriddhavadi* (prosperous) Ambedkar, a Social reformer of Hinduism, a saffron Ambedkar is being erected. It is our responsibility that we project what he actually was, a radical Ambedkar. Only a radical Ambedkar can give us mukti. (Sathidar *The Hindu* 2015).

Arguments:

I would like to draw the second argument that Ambedkar speaks in “Annihilation of Caste”. The priesthood should not be hereditary. Though it is continued to be hereditary in small places or temples, however, in major temples, it has been applied that degree of priesthood is mandatory. There is a tough competition within the Brahmins. Who gives degrees on priesthood? In my research I have come to know that Tirupathi Tirumala Devasthanam “an independent trust that manages the Venkateswara temple opened its Vedic school to Dalits” (P.3) in Tirupati Town of Chittoor District, Andhra Pradesh. “Its aim: to train Dalits as priests”. (Divya: 2006: P.3) The TTD has an institution to offer priesthood course for any community. Sanskrit Vidya Peet offers courses to all communities.

This reminds me of Ramanujacharya who did bring in reforms in Hinduism as back as in 11th century itself. He gave a mantra to all communities called “Namo Narayanaya Namah”. Ramnujacharya had an idea that Hinduism should spread to all communities which

Ambedkar also acknowledged along with Kabir in the same essay. Ambedkar says: “There have been many who have worked in the cause of abolition of Caste and Untouchability. Of those, who can be mentioned, Ramanuja, Kabir and others stand out prominently”. (p.74) Ramanujacharya had propagated Visistha Advaita philosophy in contrast to Advaita Philosophy of Shankara. An interesting story is that Dalits have a special scheme called “Dalita Govindam”. There was an objection to this scheme by Dalit Organizations. The reason was that in the reforms; how can we have a separate programme for Dalits and other programmes for non-Dalits?

Even recently formed Telangana government also insists that an appointed priest should have a degree. It is no longer based on caste but based on a degree. Is it not an indirect impact of Ambedkar and his essay? Do Telangana and Andhra Pradesh governments acknowledge Ambedkar in implementing such laws? They cannot. That is because their prestige is at stake.

The Gujarat Institutions such as Soal Bhagvat Vidyapith and Somnath Sanskrit University have also come forward “to train manual scavengers, termed as ‘safai karmadars’ will now be trained in Vedic rituals. The move is expected to bring in huge support for the populist choice- Modi who himself belongs to the OBC Community. (Zeenews Bureau published on online on Saturday, February 23, 2013)

In Uttarakhand the Brahmins refused to perform pujas for the Dalits. As a result they have started their own priesthood by attaining a Sanskrit Diksha Course from Haridwar in 2000. The Dalit priest named Pratap Ram Arya (37) a native of Runibata Tok Village under Kapkot Assembly constituency of Bageshwar district, started his priesthood at the marriage of his sister-in-law. Today, he gets around Rs. 3000 for performing marriage rituals. He looks like a Brahmin priest, complete with a Kanghi mala, tilak and chjoti. Arya visits villages like Jakkhra, Jakhi, Malsona, Sehri and Jarti. Arya says that “the demand for Dalit priest is very

high; I have also started sending my son Shankar to perform religious rituals”. (Singh 2013: 1)

So far we have seen good things about Dalits being priests; however, there are repercussions of being the priest. One such instance is from Tamil Nadu. S. Nagamuthu , 23 years old Dalit, who has been performing as a priest in the Kailasnathar temple at Kalluputti village, was prevented from entering a temple as a result he had committed suicide. Nagamuthu was threatened by some non-Dalit members of temple administration committee and police officers. They also pestered him to withdraw the case against them which he had filed earlier. After the threat he had committed suicide. (Saju 2012: 1)

Divya in her article asks this question: “Is India on the threshold of real change in that most regressive monopolies, the priesthood?” ... Will it really? The answers that she finds are as follows:

In Tamil Nadu ... a batch of 207 priests, including 76 OBCs and 34 Dalits, graduated from the state-run priesthood training institute. They are now getting inducted in some of the 36,000 temples run by the government under a 69% job quota for backward and Dalit priests.

Further the Dalits say:

“We are ready to storm into Brahmin bastion” says one of them, sporting a thick vermilion mark on this forehead. The Tamil experiment in inclusiveness comes as part of the DMK government ‘s 2006 order that all Hindus, whatever their caste, would be allowed to become priests if they were “qualified” to be”.

(P.1)

According to news reporter Divya in a news item on Dalit priests she says: “Interestingly, there is evidence that Dalits were priests as far back as 1929. Hindu Scholar and Member of Parliament of Rajya Sabha, Dr. Karan Singh says: “My father had employed

Dalit priests in Kashmir. This is a small, step-by-step initiative towards a larger socio-political change”’. (2009: 2)

In Bihar many Dalits have been appointed as Priests in the temples. They are as follows:

On 26th February 2006 Acharya Kishore Kunal (under ageis of Bihar Board of Religious Trusts) appointed a Dalit, Shri Chandeshwar Paswan, as a priest in the magnificent Visha Nath Temple at Hajipur in Vaishali District.

On 14th January 2007 Kunal appointed yet another Dalit, Shri Jamuna Das as a priest in the historical Shiva temple in Patna District, Bihar State. Thousands of devotees belonging to all sections of society participated in the installation ritual.

Similarly on 30th June 2007, Kunal appointed Sri Janardhan Manji who comes from Musahar community which is the poorest among depressed classes as another priest in the famous Ram Janaki Temple at Paligunj in the presence of a large number of devotees and traditional Brahmin priests. This was reported in India Today (October 8, 2007): 58-59.

On 14th January 2008 he appointed dalit priest Deepak Das in famous Jagannath Mandir at Bodh Gaya.

Another Dalit Shri Jagdish Das was appointed in the prominent Maniari temple of Muzzaffarpur district in 2008. (Manohar: 39-40)

In Andhra Pradesh and Telangana the Dalit priests are Mala Dasu/ Mala Dasari and Mittal Ayyalwar respectively have been practising priesthood for last 800 years. They have been suppressed by the Brahmins in priesthood branding them as untouchable priests. How can a priest be an untouchable? I had done a lengthy project on this subject with the help of Major Research Project supported by UGC. E. D. Thurston in his book *Castes and Tribes of South India* (1909) is the first person to document on Mala Dasaris in his book. He has written only based on the information he gathered and the people of Mala Dasaris told him.

However, he has not gone to the roots of Mala Dasaris such as Tiruppani Alwar who was much before than Sri Ramunauja himself. In fact the Mala Dasari was immersed embraced by Lord Vishnu and relieved from the material life. He has been elevated to the highest attainment.

Thurston mentions about Mala Dasari, based on his field work, how he takes the role of priest during the marriage ceremony. He says during the marriage:

The scene is now taken away, and priest, a Dasari, asks whether the elders, the Mala people generally, and the village as a whole, are in favour of the marriage. This he asks three times. Probably, in former times, it was possible to stop a marriage at this point, but now it is never done, and the marriage is practically binding after Pedda Tambulam has been gone through. (Thurston 1909: 360)

In Andhra Pradesh Mala Dasaris have been priests for not only Dalits but also for all castes. It has been reported in a Sunday magazine:

As latest as on 26th August 2012 in a magazine of Eenadu daily Telugu newspaper published the importance of Dalit Hindus as priests of the temple in Undi Mandal, Uppuluru Village, West Godavari District, Andhra Pradesh and an article by Gotteti Narayana Rao (2012) in the temple how the Dalit Hindus have been reciting the slokas. One need not think only Brahmins can do this but there are Mala Dasaris who are competent enough and eligible, [thanks to Krishna Devaraya's poem *Amuktamalyada* in which he depicts Mala Dasari, Tiruppani Alwar another play entitled *Munivahana* that was written by Kolikuluri Enoch] from whose descendency these people come from, to perform all sorts of pujas at the temple and serving the village and other surrounding areas. (Manohar 45)

Scope for Further Research:

Independent research can be done on various sub-castes belonging to SC/ST/OBCs on their profession of priesthood. Each sub-caste has some role to play in priesthood. There are many sub-castes which perform priesthood in this country. They have to be brought into limelight in order to bring democratic principles of the country. It also proves that hegemony does not rest with brahmins alone.

Conclusion:

Look how Ambedkar impacted on the judiciary. In 2002, the supreme Court ruled that Dalits could be appointed as priests in temples so long as they were qualified to conduct the ritual. (Divya: 2)

Having examined various sources where it is mentioned that Dalits, OBCs and others could become priests at various states which made training, obtaining a degree in the field mandatory. Unfortunately no state or institution does acknowledge the person who was instrumental in bringing this revolutionary idea into the society. Vira Sathidar can feel happy that it was Ambedkar's revolutionary and radical ideas only brought this change in across states of India.

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Both Dr. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi agreed that caste based discrimination and the age old custom of untouchability in India was unjust, evil and criminal and deserved a purge [1]. Both ran separate mass movements to help eradicate this societal menace including temple entry agitations in western and central parts of India [2] by Dr. Ambedkar [3] and eastern and southern [4] parts of India by Mahatma Gandhi [5]. Both also claimed to represent the interest of the people belonging to the so called lower castes in India [6].

Differences. Being from an upper caste, Gandhi left every priviledge. Christophe Jaffrelot, author of *Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analysing and Fighting Caste*. Those who have read *Annihilation of Caste* many times before will still read this work for the sake of the annotations and reference-based clarifications of Ambedkar's thoughts. This edition will foster a more critical engagement among readers.

Ayyathurai Gajendran, anthropologist. The second part of the book is Ambedkar's essay on the annihilation of caste which was scheduled to be delivered to the Jaat-Paat Todak Mandal but was ultimately canceled because it was deemed too provocative. The Jaat-Paat Todak Mandal (which translates roughly to "the abolition of caste committee") was a group of Hindu reformers seeking to radically reform the religion to eliminate caste entirely. Ambedkar had printed copies of his speech under the name, *Annihilation of Caste*. The publishing again posed a challenge for Ambedkar.

Annihilation of Caste, Introduction: The caste system in India has existed from ancient times, however as time passed and we entered into the medieval period, early-modern period and then finally in today's modern period, it has established its presence permanently. No one, willingly or even unwillingly can escape from its shackles. It has become the basis on which any man is given his position in our hierarchical society. It is a system established by the so-called "Hindus", where the "Brahmans" are considered to be the elites and the Sudras the untouchables or say the "Dalits".

To explain th Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, popularly known as Babasaheb Ambedkar, was one of the main architects of the Indian Constitution. He was a very well known political leader, philosopher, writer, economist, scholar and a social reformer who dedicated his life to eradicating untouchability and other social inequality in India.

In Babasaheb Ambedkar's perspective, Constitutional morality would mean effective coordination between conflicting interests of different people and administrative cooperation. It will help to resolve the conflict amicably without any confrontation amongst the various groups working for the realization of their ends at any cost.

The caste system has made Hindu society stagnant which creates hurdles in integration with outsiders. The paper focuses on Ambedkar's views on untouchable, he is champion of untouchable movement in India. The paper highlights, what is untouchability ?, varna system in India, Vernas namely, the Brahmin, the Kshatriya, the Vaishya and the Shudra. origin of caste system, and The classes of untouchable. i. e Chamars, Busadh, Dom Halalkor, Hari, Mochi, Mushahar. And also represents the different outcastes, Hindus, social system and emancipation of the untouchables.