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## Postmodernity and Ambedkarism

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**Abstract:** We are living in an age which is described as postmodern: “ours is the world that, for better or worse has been labelled as ‘post-modern’” declares Paul Lakeland. In fact the so-called postmodernism is spreading rapidly, influencing almost every sphere of our life. But its growing popularity has its ‘minus point’. It has lost its clarity and precision of meaning and implication, in the face of a cluster of multiple viewpoints. Paul Lakeland drives this home when he writes: “there are probably a thousand different self appointed commentators of postmodern phenomenon and bewildering discrepancies between the ways many of these authors understand the term postmodern and its cognates.” Thus the postmodern arena becomes somewhat like satellite T.V., which makes us look like idiots, who waste the major chunk of our time hopping from one channel to another in search of some good programme. That is why some scholars have recommended that we speak about this topic in the plural—as postmodernisms.

**Keywords:** Postmodernity, Lakeland, Ambedkar, Postmodernisms.

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## Postmodernity and Ambedkarism

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We are living in an age which is described as postmodern: “ours is the world that, for better or worse has been labelled as ‘post-modern’” declares Paul Lakeland (Lakeland 1997: ix). In fact the so-called postmodernism is spreading rapidly, influencing almost every sphere of our life. But its growing popularity has its ‘minus point’. It has lost its clarity and precision of meaning and implication, in the face of a cluster of multiple viewpoints. Paul Lakeland drives this home when he writes: “there are probably a thousand different self appointed commentators of postmodern phenomenon and bewildering discrepancies between the ways many of these authors understand the term postmodern and its cognates” (Lakeland 1997: ix-x). Thus the postmodern arena becomes somewhat like satellite T.V., which makes us look like idiots, who waste the major chunk of our time hopping from one channel to another in search of some good programme. That is why some scholars have recommended that we speak about this topic in the plural—as postmodernisms.

Amidst this diversity of views and perspectives we can still clearly find some pointers, which knit and weave it into a challenging movement. Lyotard says, “I define postmodernity as incredulity towards metanarratives.” (Sarup 1993: 4) Prof. Madan Sarup makes a similar claim when he says “philosophy with a capital ‘P’ is no longer a viable and credible enterprise” (Sarup 1993: 156). The postmodern thinkers argue that there is no magical meta-theory or universal theoretical ground that can provide a foundation for every other subsequent theory. The so-called meta-theories that evoke universal totalising claims are referred to as metanarratives. For instance, in Lyotard’s view the overarching philosophies of histories like the enlightenment story of the gradual but steady progress of reason and freedom, Hegel’s dialectic of spirit coming to know itself and more importantly Marx’s drama of the forward march of human productive capacities via class conflict culminating in the proletarian revolution are categorised as great metanarratives. Following Nietzsche, Foucault asserts that our claims to truth often represent disguised

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attempts to legitimise uses of power (Thiselton 1995: ix ).

Hence, the postmodernists ruthlessly declare that the so-called metanarrative is simply one more discourse among many others, and hence can no longer operate as legitimising structures. In its place, they uphold the legitimising structures that are at once plural, local and immanent. Hence, we can refer to postmodernity in general terms as a war against all forms of totalization.

Ambedkar in waging a war against the reigning oppressive casteist metanarrative that has shaped the lives of tens of thousands Indians for centuries has already trodden the path of postmodernity, that is emerging as an important politico-cultural current in our times. Although the term postmodernity is relatively recent, the perspective that it connotes is primarily seen as a movement or attitude rather than a kind of 'ism.' Hence, we need not limit its purview to a thought pattern that strictly arises in chronological order. One can indeed trace it in almost every period of history. Scholars have already attempted to trace postmodern underpinnings in the lives and doctrines of great personalities such as Confucius, Gautama Buddha, Gandhi etc. (Gier 1996: 261-281).

In this paper I attempt to study relation between Ambedkar and postmodern thought. I believe this exercise can provide us with great lessons as we join hands against every kind of oppression in our society.

## **1. The Person of Ambedkar**

Some dalit activists have already declared the new millennium as the

'Dalit millennium' or 'the Ambedkar era' (Thumma 2000: vii). This has indeed kindled a hope of golden future for 200 millions Dalits in India and has created a great dynamism, which appears all set to upset the power politics of the casteist elements in Hinduism. One must say that this upsurge is timely. With the reigns of political power falling into the hands of the Hindutva forces, the centuries old oppression appear to have gathered momentum and attained a new vigour. The urgency in the implementation of the (Ram Raj) Hindu Rastra agenda, the attempts at the saffronisation of education, the efforts of hinduisation of the constitution, and other legal, administrative, and academic institutions, the growing attacks and atrocities on Dalits and other minorities, the boosting of the capitalistic globalization process thorough privatization, liberalization and marketization exhibit without any doubt that oppression is looming large on the dalit community with new aggression. In this dark, gloomy period Ambekarism appears to be the need of the hour for India. Hence, we get a bird's eye view of the life of this great man who could be said to exhibit a postmodern perspective.

### ***1.1 The Man Who Saw His World with Open Eyes***

Ambedkar saw the reality of India with honesty and open eyes. His realistic analysis of his motherland becomes evident if we take pains to hear him say: "we must begin by acknowledging first, there is complete absence of two things in Indian society. One of this is equality. On the social plane we have in In-

dia a society of graded inequality, which means elevation for some and the degradation of the others. On the economic plane we have a society in which there are some who have immense wealth as against the many who are being in abject poverty” (Das 1969: 187). Faced with the prospect of political liberation, Ambedkar saw that it is like running a race where the participants have unequal starting points. Hence, he said, “On 26<sup>th</sup> January 1950 we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social life and economic life we have inequality...we must remove these contradictions at the earliest possible moments or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which this assembly has so laboriously built up” (Das 1969: 187). These prophetic words appear to have fallen on deaf ears. As a result, our motherland is already facing the prospect of disintegration from various militant, naxalite and other secessionist groups.

## ***1.2 Towards a Liberative Religion***

Ambedkar was convinced that religion was essential for human social growth. Hence, with wisdom and vigour, he fought against the secularist (western type) and Marxist attacks on or indifference to religion. He would say, “Man cannot live by bread alone. He has a mind, which needs food for thought. Religion instils hope and drive him to activity” (Keer 1991: 502). Although he advocated religion, he endorsed a religion that is liberative. He believed that liberation plays an important role in emancipating the minds and souls of people. He knew that any so-

cial change needs religion as a motivating, conscientizing, empowering and energising factor. Hence, a religion that is not liberative, a religion that breeds oppression and sanctions unjust inequalities, is no religion in his eyes. Unfortunately, it appears that Hinduism does exactly this. By idealizing the brahmins and by degrading the shudras, the untouchables, the unapproachables and the unseeables to the level of slaves, it has failed to deliver individual justice, equality, fraternity, and liberty. Hence, Ambedkar declared, “inequality is the soul of Hinduism” (Keer 1991: 66). Therefore, he himself left casteist Hinduism and embraced Buddhism and invited others to follow suit. This becomes clear when he says, “so long as we remain in a religion, which teaches a man to treat another man as a leper, the sense of discrimination, which is deeply rooted in our mind cannot go. For annihilating caste and untouchability from among the untouchables change of religion is the only antidote” (Ambedkar 1987: 7).

## ***1.3 Burning the Casteist Narkasura***

Ambedkar dedicated his entire life for the cause of the Dalits. The 1920’s saw the birth of this life long struggle. It was inaugurated by daring events, which would become glaring symbols of his entire life struggle. He along with his Mahar movement activists tried to enter the temples forbidden for the Dalits and burnt the Manusmriti, the sacred law book of Hinduism, a book that sacralised oppression and discrimination. This movement of course reached its climax in his conversion to Buddhism

and the total rejection of Hinduism (Thumma 2000: 39).

#### ***1.4 Unmasking the Casteist face of Gandhism***

Ambedkar did appreciate many of the teachings of Gandhi but he honestly strove hard to expose the hidden casteism in Gandhism. To achieve the same he used the very words of Gandhi. Ambedkar could not tolerate caste-based discrimination at any level of our society. He believed that all are born equal and should be treated as equals at all levels. Ambedkar attempted to expose the hidden caste bias in Gandhism by citing many of his sayings that were loaded with casteism. For instance, he points out that, Gandhi would say, “The object of varna system was to prevent competition and class struggle and class war. I believe in varna system because it fixes duties and occupation” (Ambedkar 1990: 279). This might appear to show that Gandhi follows the middle path, but one must bear in mind that Ambedkar, the ardent follower of the Buddha’s middle way, saw that there can be no middle path in this matter. What appears to be the middle is already on the side of the high castes. Hence, he clearly saw that Gandhi’s varna system was simply another name of caste system. Of course, Gandhi did state that the caste system was an anachronism and that he was not in favour of it. But his lack of social understanding coupled with his love of peace might be the reason for the absence of any radical solution for the evil of caste system. Hence, Ambedkar asks:

What hope can Ghandhism offer the untouchables? To the untouchables Hinduism is a veritable chamber of horrors. The sanctity and the infallibility of the Vedas, Smritis and the Shastras, the iron law of caste, the heartless law of karma and the senseless law of status of birth are to the Untouchables veritable instruments of torture which Hinduism has forged against the Untouchables. These very instruments which have mutilated, blasted and blighted the life of the Untouchables are to be found intact and untarnished in the bosom of Gandhism. How can the Untouchables say that Gandhism is a heaven and not a chamber of horrors as Hinduism has been? The only reaction and a very natural reaction of the Untouchables would be to run away from Gandhism (1990: 296-297).

#### ***1.5 The Quest for Dhamma Raj... Liberation for All***

The ultimate vision and goal of Ambedkar’s liberative struggle can be said to be a quest for the kingdom of righteousness. He says, “the kingdom of righteousness lies on earth and is to be reached by man by righteous conduct” (Ambedkar 1991: 131). Thus, one can trace the privileged status of ‘this worldly’ as against the ‘other worldly’ approach of the some of mainline religions. This Buddhist quest for *Dharma Raj* is indeed noble for it is aimed at bringing about a total and integral liberation of every human being within the framework of one’s community and nation. Hence, love, justice, and peace are the prime values of the kingdom of righteousness.

## 1. 6 The Dalit Critical Principle

Ambekar's views on the Dalits are experience-based. He did bear the stigma and the alienation of being an untouchable. Though a scholar of repute abroad he had to put up with the insults of the ignorant in his homeland. Thus, experience strengthened his commitment to Dalit liberation. Experience and critical reflection motivated and inspired all his studies and writings. Often the postmodern thinkers are said to be armchair thinkers, but he was no armchair philosopher. Action-reflection was his methodology. His Dalit hermeneutics travelled the road of Dalit movement for justice and dignity. His satyagrahas for the right to drinking water from the public lake, and the right to enter the forbidden temples, his struggle for economic and social justice, indeed all his thoughts, actions and writings were shaped and motivated by his dalit hermeneutics. He judged every event in India, every decision taken, every re-

form initiated, with his Dalit critical principle. Indeed he was a man who breathed the cause of dalit liberation every moment of his life.

## 2. Conclusion

It is clear that Amedkar did exhibit postmodern tendencies in his war against the casteist metanarrative. He understood caste system as the power game of oppressing the weak. Hence, he rejected Hinduism that legitimized and sanctioned it. His fight for the dalit cause, his rejection of the entire metanarartive of Hinduism can be a great inspiration for us. It has the power to subvert and clip the wings of the casteist agenda still growing strong under the banner of the BJP-RSS combine. In this context, I think Ambedkarism can go a long way in our fight against our highly stratified society arranged in an ascending order of reverence and descending order of contempt.

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# Dialogue as Way of Life

**An Advaitic Interfacing of Religions and Sciences  
according to Bede Griffiths**

**Kuruvilla Pandikattu SJ**

World-Life-Web & Zen Publications

Born as an Anglican, Bede Griffiths (1906-93) converted himself to the Catholic Church. After coming to India, he was fascinated by Eastern traditions and Indian monastic movement. The life of Bede Griffiths brings together dialogically the Eastern and Western cultures, Hinduism and Christianity, science and religion. Born as an Anglican he joined the Catholic Church, came to India and embraced the Eastern way of life without in any way giving up his Christian and Western roots. He has attempted to bring together modern science and contemporary mysticism leading to a fulfilling human existence. The profound Indian notion of *advaita* may be regarded as the philosophical basis for his quest. Based on the life experiences of Griffiths, we are convinced that today's world need dialogical interaction among and between sciences, religions, cultures. So we plead for a **culture of dialogue** where individual identities are affirmed, mutual differences celebrated and ongoing exchange fostered.

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