



An Endeavor to Identity Reconstruction: Kanshiram and the Idea of Bahujan.

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ABSTRACT

The caste system of India is one of the major factors that is responsible for the marginalization of the huge population. The whole caste system can be classified into two groups; the higher castes or twice-born castes and the lower castes or shudras. Shudras can be further divided into two groups the untouchables and the other backward castes. After that one major portion of society can be included in the marginalized that is the tribals. The lower caste group has always struggled for their rights and better identity. Throughout history, there have been various movements and ideas introduced by thinkers and leaders of these sections for empowering people and reconstructing their identity. Terms like Dalit, Harijan, Bahujan, and Moolnivasi have been attached to their identity. The term Bahujan is used as an umbrella term for all the marginalized sections in the caste system. Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu (1885-1975), a thinker from this section popularized the Bahujan term in northern India. Kanshiram (1934-2006) founder of various organizations like DS4, and BSP, experimented and interpreted the Bahujan term very successfully. The idea of Bahujan can be understood as an objective of uniting all marginalized groups to combat the caste system, empower them in every sphere of life, and also identify them as a single unit. This paper will deal with the idea of Bahujan in empowering the marginalized and the role of Kanshiram in

it. This paper will be divided into two parts.

Introduction

The marginalized castes of India have always been in the struggle for a better identity. Their history of rising from inhuman to human life in all spheres needs special acknowledgment. There are many figures can be seen in the history of the struggle of former untouchable castes in modern India (Like Jyotiba Phule, E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker, Ayyankali, and, DR. Bhimrao Ambedkar), who worked on various ideas for making these castes as a proud member of society. These efforts created a specific kind of revolution.

Raising a voice against inequality, giving new ideas to counter; absent religious security and pride, giving alternative ideas for religion and society which were close to mankind and, sometimes giving hard replies to the religious and social institutions, focusing on education and political empowerment these all are the various aspects of this revolution. But Identity remains the most important area to deal with through all these efforts. The identity that was given to these castes by powerful groups and dominating institutions was not up to the mark. It was the identity, which made them helpless, inferior, marginalized, and prideless. It was difficult to come out of that inferior complex. In- fact the main struggle was to establish the proper identity in society and to demolish the barriers that were responsible for restricting them in that situation.

In the colonial era, thinkers like Jyotiba Phule and Ambedkar established the base of cultural and social reformation. They also redefined the Identity of marginalized castes. Phule attempted to construct a unified identity for all lower castes. The idea of his Identity construction is based on rewriting the history of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and connecting him to the lower caste groups of Maharashtra. (Hanlon, 2002) Ambedkar on the other hand worked towards the social changes and annihilation of the caste system. DR. Ambedkar established the whole idea of dealing with the caste system by advocating that the caste system is a boon for the whole Hindu society and not just for marginalized castes. DR. Ambedkar emphasizes that caste has killed the sense of trust, charity, and sympathy and there is no sympathy for the deserving. There is no appreciation of the meritorious. There is no charity to the needy. Suffering as such calls for no response. There is charity, but it begins with the caste and ends with the caste. There is sympathy, but not for men of other castes. (Ambedkar, 1935)

DR. Ambedkar later contributed to identity reconstruction for marginalized castes in two specific ways. One is through the constitution of India, in which practicing untouchability was abolished, and the former untouchable castes received constitutional rights and a dignified identity equal to others. (The Constitution of India, As on May, 2022, 2022) The second way of identity reconstruction is through conversion to Buddhism. He finds Buddhism a proper path for all his ideas on morality, fraternity, and equality. Ambedkar's conversion raised different questions regarding the success and failure of this kind of identity reconstruction. (Baradia, 2009). After independence, the marginalized castes mostly, Dalits shifted their focus to Congress for political empowerment. Although the ideas of Jyotiba Phule and DR. Ambedkar constructed the rich intellectual wealth, the lack of education in these caste groups distanced them from these ideas. This particular gap was filled by the Kanshiram. Kanshiram not only spread the ideas of the thinkers but he also added his ideas to empower the marginalized politically as well as socially.

Kanshiram: Early life and works

Kanshiram was born on 15th March 1934 in Khabaspur village in the Ropar district of Punjab. His father, Mr. Hari Singh was a *Ramdassia* Sikh. Kanshiram was BSc. Graduate and joined as an assistant scientist in DRDO, posted in the Explosive Research and Development Laboratory, Pune in 1956. (Narayan, 2014)

There is an incident related to Kanshiram, which made him resign from his job and devote his life to social transformation. The management of the ordinance factory where Kanshiram worked, canceled the holidays of Ambedkar birth anniversary and Buddha Jayanti, which resulted in protests by the scheduled caste employees. One of the employees Mr. Deena Bhana from Rajasthan, lost his job due to this protest. Kanshiram fought the legal battle for Deena Bhana, as a result, Deena Bhana got his job back and holidays were also restored. This event is considered a turning point in the life of Kanshiram. He started to understand the mischiefs of the caste system and started reading Dr. Ambedkar. Later he resigned from his job in 1964 and started a new journey of his life, which was aimed at political and social empowerment of marginalized. (Humara Dhyey Samajik Samanta Hai, 2015). In 1978 Kanshiram founded an organization named BAMCEF (Backward and Minority Community Employees Federation), on 6th December 1981, Kanshiram founded another organization named DS4 (*Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangarsh Samiti*), which was a non-political organization. Later, on 14th April 1984, he founded the political party BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party). Through these three organizations, he aimed for political and

social transformation in all marginalized caste groups as well as minority communities. (Humara Dhyey Samajik Samanta Hai, 2015)

The Idea of Bahujan: Social, Political, and Cultural Action

Bahujan is a Hindi language word which simply understood as people in the majority. Kanshiram used this word as an umbrella term for all Dalits, Scheduled tribes, backward castes, and other minorities. In various rallies and interviews throughout his life, Kanshiram simplifies the idea of Bahujan and Bahujan samaj to common people.

The idea of Bahujan can be understood based on two major factors; one is to identify all the marginalized castes as one unit, which can create a sense of power in numbers as Kanshiram discussed in his speeches that he wanted to make *Alp Jan Se Bahujan* (from minority to majority). The second argument that Kanshiram presents is, that Bahujans are the people who are in the majority (around 85% of the population) but these are the victims of discrimination and the whole system. uniting them to eradicate the caste discrimination among them so that they can work as a single unit for empowerment. (Kewal Savarna hi Labhanvit Varg, 2015)

Kanshiram wanted to construct leadership in the marginalized castes. To conquer that, he discussed about three main solutions. First was, the short-term solution which deals with the social action approach. In this, he talked about creating awareness among marginalized castes through various resources. This awareness was all about constructing the consciousness among people to know their past and present situations so that they generate a sense of a better future. DS4 (*Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangarsh Samiti*), one of his founding organizations was dedicated to achieving this goal. *Chalta Phirta Ambedkar Mela* was one of the first of its kind fare started by Kanshiram in 1980 to spread knowledge in marginalized castes. (Chalta Phirta Ambedkar Mela, 2021) This fare reintroduced the teachings of DR. Ambedkar and other leaders who worked for Dalits. Kanshiram wanted to remove the rumors about DR. Ambedkar and wanted to awaken the people about his work.

Although academics during the 1980s started recognizing the Dalit movements and Dalit leaders, Kanshiram transferred this knowledge to common people through his activism. The second point talked about the long-term solution, which deals with the marginalized castes becoming a political power. The idea of Bahujan was successfully experimented by Kanshiram to achieve this goal. BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party) rosed as the first national party with Dalit leadership and gave the nation's first Dalit women Chief minister. The third and main idea of his works talked about the permanent solution, that,

there was a need to change the religious and cultural life of marginalized caste. In an interview, Kanshiram argued that these goals aimed toward social change through political power and country needs a new kind of *vad* to counter *Brahminvad* and Bahujan Samaj Party planning to do so. (Humara Dhyey Samajik Samanta Hai, 2015)

Idea of Bahujan Samaj and its Challenges

The idea of Bahujan worked in two aspects of life; one is political life and another is social life. In political life, Bahujan samaj means the unification of the thousands of marginalized castes in one group, which used their voting rights for common goals, and started contributing to the politics. It also means that the Bahujan Samaj should have the highest respect for the constitution of India and the political movement should be based on constitutional values.

The social life of Bahujan identity revolves around the idea of not following any type of caste discrimination and deals with the social unification of marginalized caste with common social and cultural goals. The concepts of Bahujan Nayak, Bahujano *ka Itihas*, and Bahujan Festival are the main tools to achieve this. According to Kanshiram the crises in social, religious, and cultural life are the real and fundamental problem of marginalized castes and all the other problems are the result of these fundamental crises. (Kanshiram, 2007). There are also some challenges to this idea of Bahujan identity which makes this concept unrealistic to achieve in the present scenario.

The Dalit identity talks about the former untouchables but the Bahujan Identity includes not just Dalits, but tribals, backward castes, and other minorities. These sections still have their clashes regarding caste and religion and uniting them under a common identity only be possible when these issues are resolved. Dalit Extremists considered themselves separate from the Hindu religion but some backward castes still follow the norms and practices of the Hindu religion. Not just in the matter of religion but the issue of equal and proper representation also works as a barrier in constructing the Bahujan identity. Kanshiram did acknowledge these issues very well and he applied some precautions and strategies to deal with it. In the matter of ticket distribution once he gave a ticket to a person from the Chidimaar (A Dalit caste mainly called Sansi) caste of Haryana just to encourage him to participate in a local election, even after knowing that that person's castes only have 217 voters in that local election. Kanshiram talked about this incident in a rally and said, “They always indulge in killing birds, now they have to participate in killing the oppressor.” (Kanshiram, Bahujan Sangathak, 2005). This represents the idea of equal participation.

The idea of Bahujan creates a new kind of identity among marginalized castes. Politically it was used successfully by various leaders mostly by Kanshiram. However, the social aspect of this idea cannot be achieved in the present scenario until and unless it comes out with an upgraded version that deals with equal representation in politics, a combination of liberal Hinduism and Buddhism, and a proper counterculture to the existing caste system.

Conclusion

The overall empowerment of marginalized castes can be achieved properly when these groups start creating wealth for every sphere of life including political, cultural, and economic growth. Politically Dalits and backward castes are becoming very powerful vote banks therefore political parties trying their best to influence these sections. Culturally, the history of the Dalit movement has gone through various experiments. For instance, The Adi Hindu Movement, Raidas identity, Kabeerpanthi, Conversion to Sikhism, Christianity, and now conversion to Buddhism all are various experiments done by Dalits to create and recreate identities. (Hardtmann, 2009) but the same experiments in other backward castes did not happen on that scale so it created a gap between Dalits and other backward castes in the matter of common intellectual wealth. The idea of Bahujan has so many probabilities to empower both groups (Dalits, Backward Castes) culturally and socially. Kanshiram was the first activist who successfully converted Dalits into an independent political power by uniting the different caste groups. He proposed the idea of unification of every marginalized group including Dalits, Tribal, backward castes, and minorities into a single identity in the name of Bahujan.

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