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**Study Material**

**Course 402**

**Unit II**

**Importance of B.R Ambedkar’s Ideas For Indian Environmentalism**

Historically, Indian environmentalism has been mainly dominated by a nationalist perception of ecology. Under its persistent advocacy, community centric resource management policies gained prominence in the form of joint forest management, water management, grass land management, etc. Theoretically the implementation process of these varied reforms required inclusive participation of all stakeholders and equitable distribution of benefits, however it has been observed that it is at this juncture that the reform process is unable to impact and usher any substantial changes. This fundamental predicament is termed by some studies as being a problem of second generation policy reforms in the domain of natural resources management. The impact of social divisions on policy performance within this domain is being identified as one of the key impediments and utmost reasons for underperformance. Within such a context, it has become imperative for Indian environmental discourse to turn to and probably incorporate ideas of dalit intellectuals who advocate for an inclusive Indian society based upon the principles of equity .

**Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar**, who is known as the architect of the Indian Constitution and as a lifelong champion of civil rights for the "untouchable" dalit caste, received his PhD in Economics from Columbia University in 1927 and an honorary degree in 1952 as "a great social reformer and a valiant upholder of human rights. Ambedkhar was the first highly educated, politically prominent member of the Hindu "untouchable" caste. He is best remembered today for leading colonial India's only autonomous struggle for Dalit rights and social recognition; for his extensive writings that reprised caste as a form of inequality and historical injustice; and for his role as Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution, which allowed him to leave a profound and enduring mark on Indian trajectories of democratic justice and affirmative action policy. Ambedkar throughout his life remained committed to modernist values and did not subscribe to the traditional Hindu values. He takes a different position on village eco-system than that of Gandhi. He does not hold any romantic perception about Indian village system. For him village is an embodiment of primitive life and abode of exploitation of the week by might. In nutshell village system for Ambedkar is a typical reflection of the fish law in human society wherein powerful consumes the week. For Ambedkar, village system essentially means a space in which domination of upper strata of Hindu over Dalits takes place. The following reasons are cited by Ambedkar why he did not prefer Indian village system: denial of access to resources such as land, water, village commons etc to Dalits and denial of dignified life to Dalits by the way of segregating the dwelling places outside of villages. Ambedkar proposed that Indian villages are breeding centres for anti-Dalit feelings and oppressive practices practiced by upper caste Hindus. The very existence of Dalit self for Ambedkar denied by village based socioeconomic and cultural system. He proposes that Hindu social system exclude Dalits from having a meaningful life. He gives the following reasons: 1) The untouchables must live in separate quarters sway from habitation of Hindus. 2) The untouchables must observe the rule of distance pollution or shadow or pollution as the case may be. 3) It is offence for the untouchable to possess land and cattle. 4) It is offence for the Untouchable to possess ornaments and good cloths. 5) It is offence for the untouchable if he happens to come into the village on a sacred day . These denials according to Ambedkar made Dalits as semi-human beings which means more of animals and less of human beings. Besides this, Ambedkar also presents the occupational structure of Untouchables in villages. Those as follows: 1) Untouchables should carry the massage of any event took place in the House of Hindus. 2) Untouchables should carry on occupations such as carrying dead animals, cleaning streets, etc. 3) Untouchables mush work when any occasion in House of Hindus 4) On certain festivities, the untouchables must submit their women to members of village community to be made the object of indecent fun . The problems of untouchables in the rural areas summed up by Ambedkar in the following statement: ‘there is no trade in which they are engaged themselves as a means of earning a livelihood. They have not the capital for it and even if they had, no one would buy from them’. On account of these problems Ambedkar did not prefer villages to be a basic unit of future India as envisaged by Gandhi. The main opposition of Ambedkar against the Indian village system was its denial of share to Dalits in terms of resources, culture, social intercourse and common life process. On account of these problems village eco-system according to Ambedkar was paradise for touchable Hindus and hell for untouchables. He thus takes a strong position against village system and opted for industrial modernity which is based in urban centres for emancipation of Dalits and subaltern groups in India. Ambedkar was keenly aware of the caste based disabilities in accessing resources required for sustenance of Dalits. Access to drinking water has traditionally been prohibited to Dalit communities all over India. This problem is particularly acute in water shortage areas. Ambedkar fought against this problem in the Mahad Satyagraha. It is remarkable to see a mass movement for access to water in colonial period under the leadership of Ambedkar.

However, Ambedkar’s ideas and interventions on village, land, agriculture, water, community, industry, technology and science can be brought together to form a collage of his agrarian and environment philosophy – where environment is not disentangled from the ugliness of caste injustices; where development of rural landscape is not disconnected from social relations and structures of power in which it is embedded; and where ecology has to confront the transitions to democracy. Ambedkar also saw modernity differently, where Dalits were outside the ecological space and intellectual universe, as lived by high-caste Indians. Ambedkar’s thought can be seen as heralding a new tradition of Dalit development and environmental thought – a tradition deeply critical to the dominant discourse; and yet characterized by a distinct concern with how the ‘natural world’ can be transformed to address the problems generated in a social world of caste oppression. Ambedkar’s ‘natural’ and social world surrounding the childhood and youth of Ambedkar was cursed by injustice: ‘You must remain in your assigned place’ seemed to be the constant refrain of the rest of the world (Rodrigues 2002: 7), even when Ambedkar lived in the army cantonment in his early age.

For Ambedkar, his Mahar caste and village were inherently unequal for the untouchables, posing physical and moral infirmities for them: every village, almost without exception, in the Marathi-speaking area of west-central India, had its *maharwada* (Mahar quarters). The traditional role of the Mahar caste was that of the village ‘inferior village servant’ – according to the term coined by the British. Mahars were seen as having no special skills or crafts, and had to perform several ‘necessary’ duties for the villages For Ambedkar, water had a definite caste, as it turned ‘polluted’ as soon as a Dalit touched it:

For Ambedkar, the built-in environment of rural and urban India – landscapes of office buildings and houses, schools, streets and subways — were the places for caste oppression, as well as Dalit aspiration. In his school, Ambedkar was usually made to squat in a corner of the class on a piece of gunny cloth, which he carried to school. When he came to Baroda, no hotel or hostel accepted Ambedkar and his eldest brother who had accompanied him. When he started working for the Baroda state, his subordinates flung the bundles of files and hurled papers at his desk to avoid his touch.

Ambedkar’s environmental experiences were distinctive, with many stories of horrors and hardships that passed through generations. Nearly every aspect of his experience put him in contact with the natural environment, bestowing him with practical knowledge. All aspects of his relationship with the environment were necessarily mediated through ties of caste, while also being social and political in nature. At the same time, Ambedkar’s understanding of nature was more complex, going beyond his personal experience of the natural world. Throughout, he dealt with three broad but complexly interconnected meanings of nature. The first was the External Nature, or the unmediated material world, which, through society’s interaction with nature, provided a strong foundation for basic material production. It converted nature into a purposefully useful process, by transforming it, and impacting society and human relationships. Ambedkar described this external nature as ‘useful material from the earth, the soil or water and take the form of hunting, fishing, stock-raising, lumbering and mining… extract from the physical world useful materials which become the original sources of man’s subsistence. The second was the Universal Nature, or the all-encompassing ‘natural’ things which dominated society, in which supposed ‘naturalness’ and ‘natural laws’ determined the structure of society, which was often detrimental for the untouchables. This was ‘the Hindu scheme of divine governance enshrined in a written constitution… a divine Code which lays down the rules which govern the religious, ritualistic and social life of the Hindus in minute detail’ And the third was the Social Nature, which meant the nature of social exclusion, in which the ‘traditional’ aligned with the ‘natural’, and nature was thus characterized by exclusion, discrimination and injustice. Ambedkar referred to it as the untouchables’ ‘isolation, discrimination and the unfriendliness of the social environment’. In Ambedkar, these external, universal and social manifestations of nature deeply impact its interrelationship with humans. In such an understanding, nature, as a contested social reality, is a rich archive for constructing histories of human activities. Simultaneously, the notion of ‘human’ is based here on natural equality, which enables man to make and re-make nature. Unambiguously, for Ambedkar, human encompasses nature, and nature is governed by social relationships. In so far, and in as much, nature has been socialized and converted into human’s social body, it has lead to far-reaching transformations. Such an understanding essentially alters the ‘natural’ course of various processes, including that of the biosphere, or the biological, animate part of nature. Ambedkar was very critical of ideologies of universal and social nature, as they often concealed the past and politics of exploitative casteist relations.

*Ambedkar’s views on Village and Community*

Central to Ambedkar’s relationship with the natural world was the way in which he perceived the village and the community, which according to him, together imposed control on nature and human labour. The influence of the village community concept has been quite pervasive, informing a substantial segment of Indian environmental thought and movement. Influenced by the above, and combined with Gandhian perspectives, they have often romanticised the Indian village, regarding it as an embodiment of tradition, and an ideal place of homogeneity and harmony. The allure of the village has also provided a powerful medium to challenge urbanization and development. Amidst such perspectives, Ambedkar’s viewpoint provides a divergent understanding of the village. Jodhka remarks that out of Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar, the three important ideologues and leaders of the freedom movement, Ambedkar was the only one who had a first-hand experience of village life, and that too of looking at it from below as a Dalit child Ambedkar’s brilliant accounts of Indian villages present them as a model of Hindu social organization, a microcosm, ‘the working plant of the Hindu social order, where one could see the Hindu social order in operation in full swing. Controlling habitations, natural resources and economy of a village is seen as central, not only to the continuity of the Hindu social order, but also to its political and economic standing. Ambedkar saw the village as not a single social unit, but as divided into two sections – touchables and untouchables — where touchables live inside the village and the untouchables outside it. Economically, the touchables form a strong and powerful community, while the untouchables are a poor and a dependent community. Ambedkar thus fundamentally questioned the notion of village community as a natural fact, as an innate little republic of Indian civilization. As an untouchable, and from that standpoint, he raised critical concerns on the linkages drawn between nature and village. From his earlier writings on village, to his responses to the debates in the constituent assembly, Ambedkar highlighted a different, less celebratory theme in Indian thought, conceptualizing the Indian rural landscape not as golden, harmonious and innocent but as a land of Hindu oppression and command, which should not be treated as a basic unit of Indian civilization or constitution.

Ambedkar offered a critical perspective on community, its condition and meaning in a caste society, and what it should look like for untouchables in a democratic society. Environmentalists have also often located community as a natural preserve of tradition, as outside modernity, as emblematic of egalitarianism, homogeneity and cooperation, and as offering an effective challenge to developmental model. Quixotic imaginations of community are repeatedly reiterated, without interweaving it with questions of caste hierarchies and imbalanced shares in nature. Ambedkar focused on how caste and untouchability has affected community, and how Hindu society as such is not a community but only a collection of castes. From a political standpoint, his understanding of community can be read as a defence of untouchables, which he treats as critical for the Indian society. Ambedkar is attempting to find a new community. Conversion is proposed by him as one of the means for searching and building this new community for and of untouchables. He states: ‘The one and the only way to end their social isolation is for the Untouchables to establish kinship with and get themselves incorporated into another community which is free from the spirit of caste’ .

From a philosophical standpoint, however, his ideas are an attempt to understand the meaning of community, a way of life seemingly at odds with the values on which a society should depend. Thus he raises critical questions: What kind of community can be forged in a unified society, where our common activity, communication and consciousness promote a new solidarity? Will conversion spell the end of discrimination, and what other kind of social entity might arise in its stead? Will technology, science and development weaken community and caste society, by freeing and empowering individuals? Simultaneously, Ambedkar explores diverse ideas and visions to forge a new community.

Ambedkar too, often explicitly rejected a romanticized vision of rural life, in favour of a hard-headed social, political and economic analysis. He also usually framed his concerns on natural resources as civil rights issues. These expressed a belief that environmental resources and freedom from environmental inequalities are critical to a good life and should be available to all – an assumption that informs the contemporary environmental justice movement as well. Democratic agrarianism has diverse traditions in India. Historically drawing on what we can recognize as basic democratic agrarian principles – rights over natural resources, moral and economic value of labour, demand for economic and political equality, and value of individual independence – Ambedkar laid the grounds for a democratic rural development, by launching a general attack on caste society and the colours of nature.

Land and agriculture were crucial in Ambedkar’s thought, for the transformation of Indian agrarianism. Since his early political activities till the very end, he was a prominent proponent of a set of ideas and actions designed to change systems of land holdings, revenue, distribution, records and forest land from the perspective of landless, farmers and untouchables. Ambedkar’s focus on land ownership developed and strengthened a major strand of Indian intellectual and agrarian tradition, reworking the basic economic and moral thoughts underlying the agrarianism he inherited from his Indian past. For example, he made various efforts in the assembly and outside, through meetings, resolutions and legislation, to abolish the oppressive Watandar Mahar system in Maharashtra. Similarly, he began to challenge the khoti system, a land tenure system in the Bombay Presidency.

Ambedkar developed complex political and economic arguments on issues of land revenue, land holdings, land acquisition, land records, forest land, small farms and farmers, and cooperative farming, which taken together can be read as his future vision for a rural society with an ecological sensibility. For instance, regarding the problems of scattered and small farms, Ambedkar had serious concerns about the excessive sub-division and fragmentation of agricultural holdings, which according to him, must be met by a comprehensive scheme of consolidation. However, he also stated that whether the farm is economic or uneconomic does not necessarily depend upon its size. The economics varies with other factors of production like labour and capital. He stated: ‘’Ours is an agricultural country and our soil is exhausted.… the salvation lies not in increasing the size of farms, but in having intensive cultivation that is employing more capital and more labour on the farms such as we have’’.

He raised his voice on the acquisition and improvement of land for village sites. He wanted the tracts of forest land to be allotted to the depressed classes. He was concerned about the availability of grazing land. He emphasized the necessity of land records. He questioned the advent of chemical fertilizers and artificial manures, and complained about the insufficiency of useful cattle and organic manures. He advocated that state should own the agriculture sector, where farms can be cultivated as collective farms, and the state can finance cultivation through the supply of water, implements, manure and seeds. His legacy was counted upon in the massive land *satyagraha*and ‘anti-starvation’ protests in Maharashtra during the late 1950s and 60s. His quest for agrarian justice centred on land, so much so that it led to political action for revitalizing society. Mahad *satyagraha*and the burning of *Manusmriti*are emblematic of Dalits’ and Ambedkar’s struggles with water. Mahad *satyagraha*, at the core of which was the assertion of untouchables’ rights to take water from the public watering places, was one of the defining moments in Ambedkar’s political thought and action. Thought provoking interpretations of Mahad *satyagraha,*however, can be complimented through the lens of ‘democratic agrarianism’ and environmental egalitarianism. This struggle also symbolized a marriage between untouchables, agrarian ethos and environmental traditions.

For Ambedkar the essence of true India lies in Buddhist tradition. For him Brahmanism is an anti-thesis to humanistic values and nature’s biological ethics. He upholds the views of Buddha on conservation of animals and all life forms from destruction. While invoking the ideas of Buddha, Ambedkar condemned the killing of animals in the following passage: ‘that sacrifice neither were nay oxen slain, neither goats, nor fowls, nor fatted pigs, nor were any kinds of living creatures put to death. No trees were cut down to be used as posts, no Dabbha grasses mown to strew around the sacrificial spot’. This bitter critique on nature’s exploitation was launched by Buddha against Brahmanism more than thousand years back and it was recalled by Ambedkar with his Neo-Buddhism.