What does it mean to oppose Brahmanism?

Anyone who adheres to the principles of the Indian Constitution is automatically anti-Brahmanical

A few months ago, a chilling report appeared in Deccan Herald stating that in 2017, 210 cases of atrocities against Dalits occurred in the urban districts of Bengaluru and 106 in its rural districts. Likewise, Kerala reported 883 cases of such crimes between June 2016 and April 2017. Other reports said that there has been a 66% growth in crimes against Dalits in the 10-year period of 2007-2017.

The horror of these statistics is made vivid when one examines concrete events. On April 12 this year, 200 people attacked a small group of Dalits for swimming in the Bhadra river in Karnataka. As they thrashed these people, the perpetrators screamed that the river belongs exclusively to the upper castes. Evidently, Article 15 of our Constitution is not worth the paper it is printed on. It remains toothless, impotent, ineffective.

What kind of thinking underlies these brutal attacks of social violence in which innocent folk are targeted merely because they belong to a particular caste? Since most atrocities revolve around the basic issues of land, wages and entitlements, poverty and powerlessness are viewed as the cause of such violence.

But such explanations do not go deep enough because they leave out the prime mover behind such atrocities – Brahmanism. This precisely was B.R. Ambedkar’s contention, who argued that without a robust movement against Brahmanism, Dalit emancipation is impossible. But then, we must ask what exactly is being opposed? What are the core features of Brahmanism?

Not ‘anti-Brahmin’

For a start, opposing ‘Brahmanism’ does not entail being ‘anti-Brahmin’. To do so would imply that all Brahmins are responsible for these atrocities. This is as preposterous as ascribing blame to all Muslims for any wrong committed in, say, the reign of Alauddin Khilji, or all British people for the Jallianwala Bagh massacre or, for that matter, all Hindus for the lynching of an innocent Muslim. We should not fall prey to this crude notion of collective responsibility. In a society which is riven by caste, a person may belong to the caste of Brahmins but not adhere to the core ethic of Brahmanism. He may even have morally disassociated himself from it. The resolution to burn the Manusmriti and thereby oppose Brahmanism was taken by Ambedkar jointly with G.S. Sahasrabuddhe, a chitpavan Brahmin.

Indeed, Ambedkar went even further. In a speech at the G.I.P. Railways Depressed Caste Workers’ Conference in 1938, he claimed that “when I say that Brahmanism is an enemy that must be dealt with, I do not mean the power, privilege or interests of Brahmins as a community”. On the face of it, this seems odd. For, what else could Brahmanism be except a defence of the power, privilege and interests of Brahmins as a community? In fact, this statement is not that perplexing.

Take an instance from our own history. The Rig Vedic society of 1500 BCE had a community of ritual specialists that transmitted its ritual related know-how from one generation to another. Others, the political rulers or ordinary householders, did not possess it. This group of Brahmins was granted some privilege on account of the knowledge it possessed. For satisfying the ‘religious’ needs of members of other communities, the group was even accorded respect not owed to others.

This produced an inequality but the resulting hierarchy was fluid, contingent and reversible. This contingently generated superiority of Brahmins was not systemic or integral to the structure of society, and therefore not necessarily demeaning to others. This sacrifice-centred Ved-ic Brahmanism is not to be conflated with the Brahmanism Ambedkar despised and wished to destroy. One should refuse to confute the privilege of such ritual-performing Brahmins with Brahmanism.

A deeply conservative ideology

What then is Brahmanism? It is a sociopolitical ideology that encodes a memory of an ideal past and a vision of society in the future, one in which Brahmins occupy the highest place not only as exclusive guardians of a higher, spiritual realm but also as sole providers of wisdom on virtually every practical issue of this world. They possess superior knowledge of what a well-ordered society is and how a good state must be run. More importantly, their superior position in society and their superior knowledge stems from birth. This makes them naturally, intrinsically superior to all other humans, so superior that they form a separate species (jati) altogether. Nothing can challenge or alter this fact. No one becomes a Brahmin, but is born so.

A person’s acts may determine the position he occupies in the next life, but not in this one. Of course, this is true not only of Brahmins but of every other jati. The position of each jati is unalterably fixed at birth. The ati-shudra, the ‘untouchable’, is born into and therefore must occupy the lowest, most inferior rank; no action of his can alter this fact. This sociopolitical ideology makes hierarchy necessary, rigid and irreversible.

The hierarchical social order, it follows, corresponds to the natural order of things. No one can exchange his position with that of another, or move up or down. Any attempt to do so is morally wrong. Dalits, according to this view, must remain in ‘their place’ and if they try to move up, they must be put down.

Brahmanism then is the most perfect form of conservatism, a status quoist ideology par excellence, entirely suitable to elites who wish to perpetuate their social status, power and privilege. Paradoxically, this is also the reason why it spreads everywhere in India and beyond and why it endures: regardless of your religio-philosophical world view, if you are a privileged elite, you would find this ideology irresistible.

So, there can be Brahmanical Buddhists or Jains. And those who convert to, say, Islam or Christianity may still continue to embrace this sociopolitical ideology. Many Muslims and Christians, for all practical purposes, are Brahmins or Thakurs who continue to inferiorise Muslim or Christian Dalits.

Brahmanism naturalises existing power, privilege and higher status. The kings love it, the wealthy merchants and landlords are happy with it. Indeed, because it gives them power over ati-shudras, even the high-placed shudras in this system of graded inequality are willing to acquiesce to it. In short, everyone at the top finds it appealing because everyone below is required to carry out the task as dictated by his current social position and to not ask for more. Anyone who consents to, endorses or justifies this hierarchical order, regardless of his caste, creed or gender, is then a ‘Brahmanist’.

Because this ideology is fundamentally against any kind of social mobility, it restricts individual freedom; because it is totally enamoured of hierarchy, it is ineluctably ingalitarian; and because it separates one group of human beings from another, it is deeply incompatible with any idea of fraternity. No wonder Ambedkar defined Brahmanism as the negation of the spirit of liberty, equality and fraternity. This makes Brahmanism and the Indian Constitution fundamentally opposed to one another. Anyone who sincerely adheres to the core principles of the Indian Constitution is automatically anti-Brahmanical. And one committed to Brahmanism disabled from embracing the values enshrined in the Indian Constitution.