

Role of B. R. Ambedkar in Indian History as a Crusader of Dalit Empowerment in India

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***Abstract:** The religion, which discriminates between two people, is partial. There cannot be more degrading system of social organization than 'chaturvarna ashram'. It is the system, which legitimized notions of purity and impurity, divides humanity mere on the accident of birth regardless of any talent or virtues. Life for the untouchables was worse than the slaves as per the laws of Manu. But there came a man, known as Baba Sahib Ambedkar, who gave his life to live the Untouchables (Dalits) up from the darkness of thousands of years old social brutality and injustice. He gave them dignity, self-respect and the will to fight for their human rights. He was a unique thinker of the world who himself suffered much humiliation, poverty and social stigma, right from childhood, yet he rose to great educational and philosophical heights. He built civic and political institutions in India and criticized ideologies and institutions that enslaved people.*

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Introduction

Indian history starts along with the history of caste system. Indian history is also based on differences according to religious beliefs. The Vedas and the Manuscript tell us about the (mythic) origin of the caste system and the duties of the various castes, but they do not reveal much about how and why untouchability came into being. The Manusmriti explains that untouchables are those born of a 'defiled womb', which means that untouchable castes originated from the intermixture of the different pure Varna 'colours'. Untouchability is the most violent form of exploitation on the surface of the earth, which survives the ever-changing forms of power structure. From a traditional Hindu point of view,

this might be sufficient explanation, but for social scientists, something is lacking in the equation. It is true that exploitation being the defining factor, but that still leaves the question, why these people were singled out for the most oppressive and degrading positions in a system of structural inequality. There is no consensus response to this question. The various answers proposed to hand in hand with different religious beliefs and interpretations of historical information. Every society has several contradictions but just because they exist, they cannot be and need not be resolved without consideration of their stages of development. The Dalit movements in contemporary India follow more than one path under different banners. Each one of them raises issues affecting the whole community or it is one or the other stratum, and expresses the Dalit identity.

There was no scope for the Dalits to organize and start movements to voice their grievances until 1920. Prior to 1920 the problems and plight of the Dalits was pathetic and unenviable and it can be neither measured nor compared to others in any part of the world. Indian Social system with its oppressive caste system is a feature that knows no parallels in the world history. Manu Dharma is the root of the evil caste system in India. The word Dalit was first used in the 1930s. Hindi and Marathi translation of the word Dalit is depressed class or caste. Depressed means low lying and broken. The word was first used by Mahatma Jyothi Rao Phuley and later by Dr. Ambedkar. An English translation of Dalit is Untouchable. If, we go back to the history of India until 1920, the conditions of Panchamas, untouchable i.e., present Schedule Castes / Dalits were in worst conditions in all walks of their life. They were excluded from the main stream of Indian society. Their dress is restricted, their food is different, and they were not allowed in to the streets, they have their separate wells and tanks, their houses are different. They were not allowed to build the houses with bricks. However, they have to serve the basic needs of the entire society with their sweat and blood. In short they were personification of dehumanized sector devoid of all unless and social status. However, from 1920 onwards remarkable changes took place not only in the history of India but also in the position of the Dalits with the latter becoming increasingly assertive and independent. Dalit is a modern term for the untouchables of India, who have been exploited and subjected to atrocities due to the social stratification of Indian society. In many cases, Dalits are easily targeted even in the independent nation where the Constitution guarantees equal rights and privileges to every citizen. Throughout the centuries they have been victimized religiously, socially, culturally and most of all economically. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), a born rebel, is the builder of modern Dalit empowerment in India. He drafted independent India's constitution. Educated in USA and UK, he is that rare combination of a scholar, revolutionary, and political leader who fought for the socio-political rights of millions of untouchables. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar shines like a luminous star in the galaxy of great men. Ambedkar rose from the lowest rung of society to reach the apex of glory by identifying himself with the ideology of the Dalit movement in India. It gives an account of Ambedkar's search for knowledge and his heroic struggle for the liberation of the Dalit masses from the elite domination.

Dalit Empowerment

Accordingly, Dalit empowerment may be defined as a process of gaining control by Dalits as a community over self, ideology, material, and knowledge resources, which determine power relationship in a society. As a political process, Dalit empowerment challenges the prevailing power structure of

subordination and involves three crucial elements- access to information, opportunity for participation and inclusion in political process and organizing capacity to influence and gain power. The process of empowerment involves four successive steps like, consciousness, Mobilization, Organization, and Control. The consciousness refers to knowledge and awareness about group identity and interests. The distinction between a conscious group and a passive group is the same distinction what Karl Marx finds between “**a class in itself and a class for itself.**” The mobilization means generating a desire and willingness to come forward to attain an objective. The organization refers to pooling human and material resources within a structural framework for making collective and sustained efforts to achieve a common goal. The control means acquiring the power and capacity to be able to decide and determine those matters, which affect one’s life conditions.

Who are Dalits?

The first question arise as to who are Dalits? And why they are called so? The term Dalit “**is a Marathi term, which means ground or broken to pieces**”. The word, Dalit comes from Sanskrit word “**Dal**” which means “**to crack or to split**”. Though the use of the term Dalit in public discourse is of relatively recent origin, it is supposed to have been used first by Jotirao Phule, a leading social reformer of Maharashtra, in his attempt to champion the cause of upliftment of the downtrodden sections of society. While Ambedkar also popularize the term Dalit, his philosophy has remained a key source of inspiration for Dalit empowerment. Ambedkar was the first Dalit leader who demanded political empowerment of the Dalits in 1930s. Marathi literary figures and neo-Buddhists began to use the word in their writings and contributed to the literary initiatives in replacing Harijan and achchuta with Dalit in the 1970s. This term was highly popularized by Dalit Panthers in 1970s in Maharashtra, to refer to the scheduled caste (constitutional term for them) population. This section of Indian society is called Dalit because they are placed at the lowest layer of social structure and suffers from various forms of deprivation and social, economic, cultural, and political marginalization. The worst form of their marginalization is the scourge of the untouchably. Untouchability is the most violent form of exploitation on the surface of the earth, which survives the ever-changing forms of power structure.

Ambedkar and his Mission

Ambedkar himself was born in a Mahar caste, which was numerically a dominant caste in Dalit community of Maharashtra. He himself experienced numerous disabilities and deprivation associated with a member of Dalit community. He managed to get the advanced education at Columbia University with the help of scholarship granted by Sayajirao Gaekwad, the Maharaja of Baroda. Later with his own hard work, he managed to study at London school of Economics. His western exposure enabled him to get the deep knowledge of economics and law among other things. Thus, his ideological worldview was deeply influenced by his own experience as a member of Dalit community. B. R. Ambedkar was deeply influenced by British practice of parliamentary democracy, ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity propounded by French revolution, egalitarian, and liberation theology of Buddhism, finally yet importantly his deep-rooted repulsion against the oppressive nature of hierarchical social order of Hinduism, which sustained it. Before he entered Indian politics, he was fully equipped with the western thought of democracy, equality, liberty, and fraternity. His study in England and America

fully revealed to him that the Hindu social system would never free the untouchables. Only the Constitutional safeguards would lead untouchable to a free life. Further Ambedkar seems to have told himself that “my qualifications mean nothing. Untouchability is an obstacle even in my professional practice. I must work for the uplift of my community. On the basis of the Ambedkar’s Dalit Mission and the diverse nature of his ideational sources, the following features of his ideological framework, relevant to the process of Dalit empowerment, are identified:

- (a) First, Ambedkar was convinced that the caste system and its base Hinduism are not only repressive in nature but they systemically deny the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, which are the three fundamental bases of modern democratic society. He was deeply motivated by the three ideals of French revolution. The absence of these three principles in the caste ridden hierarchical social structure of India, generate and sustain a fragmented society, which is dangerous to the national unity and integration.
- (b) Under the Indian caste system, the marginalization and deprivation is so omnipresent and complete that they do not have any future, whatsoever, under the present form of this system.
- (c) The caste system is so deep rooted and well entrenched and sanctioned by Brahminical religion that any amount of reform will not end the plight of Dalits. Here he differed with Mr. Gandhi. The only possible solution lies in complete annihilation of caste system or to remove away from the fold of Hinduism. For Ambedkar, “caste system is not merely a division of labour but also the division of labourers. The division of power is graded one above the other in hierarchy. This division of labourer is neither based on natural aptitude nor choice of the individual concerned, but on mere accident of birth. It is therefore, harmful in as much as it involves the subordination of man’s natural powers and inclinations to the exigencies of the social rules”. Gandhi wanted removal of untouchability through reforms but never challenge “Varna ashram” which sanctioned this superior-subordinate human division. Ambedkar was of the view that there was no future for untouchables in the Hindu religion, as they should change their if need be. In 1935, he publically proclaimed, **“I was born a Hindu because I had no control over but I shall not die a Hindu”**. Finally, he embraced Buddhism at the end of his life.
- (d) The parliamentary form of democracy is the best form of government, but democracy cannot succeed without realization of social and economic equality. That is why he was chief exponent of social democracy in India. Like a true democrat, he had deep faith in the viability of peaceful methods. It was because of his constant faith in democratic practice that he abhorred the revolutionary zeal of Marx and his communism. However, for the success of democracy, he gave priority to the socio-economic transformation over political liberation.
- (e) The process of social change involves four elements- the internal change (slave’s rejection of slavery), social struggle, political dialogue, and political organizing. Without access to political power, the social change cannot reach to its logical conclusion. The inclusion of political elements in the process of social change is the most singular contribution of Ambedkar to the process of Dalit empowerment in India. In order to keep the process of social change in the right track, he was convinced that the leadership of such change should be in the hands of Dalits only.

(f) He also advocated self-respect and education among Dalits for their internal transformation. The philosophy of Ambedkar is the theoretical foundation of Dalit movement in India. The ore of his political thinking is contained in two of his statements; rights are protected not by law, but by social and moral conscience of the society and a democratic form of government presupposes the democratic form of society. Thus, Ambedkar offered an alternative vision of human relationship based on equality, justice, and dignity of human beings. The aim of his mission was to arouse in men and women the passion for the right human relation “.

Man of Field: A Great Organizer

The above points of his ideological framework have direct bearing on the process of Dalit empowerment in India. However, he was not merely an ideologue but he was a great organizer of social struggles and restless crusader of social consciousness with deep insight for the future. If we analyze his actions, efforts and innovative capabilities to guide the course of social transformation in the light of four steps of empowerment process- consciousness, Mobilization, organization and control, his immense contribution to the cause of Dalit empowerment would be evident. His threefold strategy i.e. **Educate, Agitate and Organize** shares much in common with the modern notion of empowerment.

Awareness and Consciousness

For generating awareness and consciousness of dalit identity, he laid due emphasis on the education and self-respect of Dalits. He was critical of the British government because it could not ensure the adequate opportunity for the education of Dalits. His interpretation of the origin of Shudras and untouchability goes a long way to generate the feeling of self-respect among Dalits. The interpretation is in found in his two books- “**who are Shudras**”? (1947) and “**the untouchability**” (1948). His advocacy to convert to Buddhism was primarily meant to vindicate the self-respect of Dalits. The first reference made by Ambedkar to a conversion of the untouchable’s dates back to 1927. During the Mahad conference, he had indeed declared: “we want equal rights in society. We will achieve them as far as possible while remaining within the Hindu fold or, if necessary, by kicking away this worthless Hindu identity. And if it becomes necessary to give up Hinduism it would no longer be necessary for us to bother about temples”. He has been converted in October 1956, a few weeks before his death on 6th of December 1956. Buddhism formed the best possible choice for Ambedkar because it was as per him, an egalitarian religion born in India, not the outside creation.

Social Mobilization and Struggle

He started newspapers like the “Mooknayak”, “Bahiskrit Bharat” and Janata” to raise their awareness and propagate his views. He was exhorted Dalits to leave their traditional and demeaning occupation, move away from villages, as they were sink of localism, den of ignorance, narrow mindedness and communalism. Similarly, for the mobilization of Dalits, he organized many social struggles like Mahad Tank satyagrah in 1926 and temple entry movement in 1930. He also founded some social organizations like Bahiskrit Hitkarini Sabha on 20th July, 1924 through which he wanted to “light the fire of self-help and self-respect among the untouchables and wished to bring all untouchable under one banner”. He convened a conference of Depressed Classes at Mahad on 19th and 20th March

1927 and addressed the ten thousand delegates who attended to abandon their Watans. These efforts eventually resulted in social mobilization of Dalits and strengthened the agenda of social justice.

Access to Political Power

Ambedkar was convinced that unless the marginalized sections of Indian society secured the political power, it was not possible to completely wipe out all social, legal and cultural disabilities, from which they suffered. Thus, for the political organization and political mainstreaming of Dalits, he pleaded for their representation in legislatures in the Round Table Conferences, 1930-32, convened by British government. Both Ambedkar and the British government supported Dalit representation in the legislatures based on separate electorate, which meant that in the reserved constituencies only Dalits would be allowed to vote. Gandhi and Ambedkar developed serious differences on this point, which was resolved through what is known as “Poona Pact”, 1932 signed between the two. With this pact, Ambedkar entered an agreement with Mahatma Gandhi to ensure their legislative representation within the system of joint electorates. However, Ambedkar was not satisfied by this compromise and latter criticized Gandhi for blackmailing with his fast unto death trick and for compromising with the cause of Dalits. The same principle of joint electorate is now accepted under the constitution of India. Ambedkar has played a lead role in the drafting of the constitution of free India and due to his pleadings; many provisions including the reservation in services and legislatures have been incorporated in the constitution for the empowerment of Dalit community.

Political Organization of Dalits

Ambedkar made serious efforts for the political organization of Dalits. He founded the independent Labour Party in 1937 and replaced it with another party, the All India Scheduled Caste Federation founded in 1942. He also laid the foundation of another political party, Republican Party of India that was founded in 1957, after his death by his followers, which advanced the agenda of Dalit empowerment in the 1950s and 1960s. Even, the formation of Dalit Panther Party in 1970 and the Bahujan Samaj Party in 1984 owe their ideological genesis to Ambedkar. The BSP, founded by Kasi Ram and now led by Kumari Mayawati was able to gain political power in Uttar Pradesh, along with substantial presence in some other parts of the country. The roots of all these facets of the ongoing empowerment of Dalits in India are found in the ideas and practice of Ambedkar.¹²

Recent Success of Dalit Movement

The controversial question is how the recent success of Dalit empowerment, specially the political ascendancy of BSP has of course the merit of generating a sense of solidarity and political energy and has therefore been the unspoken ideology of Dalit and Backward caste politics in post-independent India.” However, the BSP, in order to gain political power, gradually moved from segregative strategy to aggregative approach by bringing other marginalized groups and minorities and even high castes within its fold. This shift has come to be known as “social engineering” which was instrumental in the BSP gaining political power in UP in 2007. This shift marks the real difference in the ideological framework as articulated by Ambedkar and the actual process of Dalit empowerment in the contemporary Indian politics. This also gives a clue to the repeated electoral failures of Ambedkar and his political

outfits in the post independent India. It has now become apparent that only a selective approach of both segregative and aggregative approaches may impart viability to the process of Dalit empowerment in the present context.

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