

DR. B.R.AMBEDKAR

Babasaheb Ambedkar is one of the foremost thinkers of modern India. He is a unique thinker of the world who himself suffered much humiliation, poverty and social stigma, yet he rose to great educational and philosophical heights. He was a revolutionary social reformer who demonstrated great faith in democracy and the moral basis of a society. He was one of the principal critics of India's national movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. His advent into the socio-political scenario of India led to his emergence as the messiah of the depressed classes, which he decided to fight to its logical end. His major role was to bring about a transformation in the consciousness of the downtrodden, and attacked the very basis of sociological institutions.

Among the galaxy of thinkers in modern India, DR. B.R. Ambedkar stands on a pedestal quite different from others for a variety of reasons. First, his personality exemplifies the unique saga of an untouchable being able to fight the massive social disabilities by sheer formidable courage never-say-attitude to life to become an eminent constitutionalist, distinguished parliamentarian, scholar and jurist, and above all, the leader of the Depressed Classes. Second, he reinvented the entire notion of anti-untouchability and social reform movement not only in Maharashtra but the whole of India by evolving a flexible, well-reasoned and multi-pronged strategy to argue with and fight against all those who mattered but resisted the struggle of the untouchables to secure a dignified and respectful place in the Indian society. Third, recognizing him as an innovator of sorts, Ambedkar may be credited with reconceptualising the whole notion of emancipating untouchables in India by broadening the horizons of the concept of emancipation of untouchables to include within its ambit certain other critical aspects of empowerment which remained largely out of its ambit till date.

Ambedkar was born in the untouchable Mahar caste in Maharashtra on 14th April, 1891. His father and grandfather served in the army and were of well-to-do family, but the stigma of their being

members of Mahar community continued to influence their position into the caste-ridden society of Maharashtra. It is believed that Mahars were the original inhabitants of Maharashtra. The term Maharashtra was coined on the basis of Mahar Rashtra. However, Mahars were treated as untouchables by the caste Hindus. Hence, he suffered all kinds of social humiliations in childhood as well as his subsequent life on account of the stigma of untouchability. In the classroom he was not allowed to sit along with the rest of the students. In spite of all these hurdles, he successfully completed his matriculation certificate at Elphinstone High school in Bombay. He then enrolled, thanks to a scholarship, at the prestigious Elphinstone College, from which he graduated in 1912 with a BA Degree. Then he won another scholarship to pursue post graduate studies in the United States. He secured an MA from Columbia University in New York and then left in 1916 for London where he was admitted to Grays Inn to study law. He was influenced by the liberal and radical thought currents in America and Europe, more particularly with the thought he emerged following the French revolution. His MA dissertation on Administration and Finance of the East India Company and his PhD thesis on the Evolution of the Provincial Finance in British India at Columbia University were brilliant contributions to the analysis of colonial economy and politics and to anti-colonial economic thought.

He then tried to settle down as a lawyer in Bombay but as an untouchable found it hard to attract clients. Deeply hurt, he decided to devote his life to campaign against the evils of caste system and in July 1924 set up an association for the welfare of the Ostracized which he held till 1928. The 1930s marked Ambedker's transition to party politics. He demanded from the British a separate electorate for the untouchables. The British government partly concurred with his arguments in the arbitration which it announced on August 14, 1932. Gandhi, who feared that the measure would threaten Hindu unity, immediately went on a fast in jail at Poona. This move forced Ambedkar to relinquish his demand for separate electorates and to sign the Poona pact on September 24, 1932. In 1936 Ambedkar created his first Political party, the Independent Labour Party which contested 17 seats in the

elections of 1937 in the Bombay province and won 15 of them. The Second World War and the demand of the Muslim League for Pakistan introduced new and complex issues in the national movement. 1942, he established a new organization known as the Scheduled Castes Federation replacing the Independent Labour party.

Ambedkar was elected to the constituent Assembly from Bengal and in the Assembly, made a plea for a united India with the Congress and the Muslim League working together. He was appointed as the chairman of the Drafting committee of the Indian constitution and became the law Minister in the Nehru cabinet in August 1947. In both these capacities he conceptualized, formulated and defended a free and equalitarian framework for public life in India with extensive safeguard for the minorities and marginalized sections. He resigned from the Nehru cabinet in 1951 and strove to work out an alternative to the lack of social and economic democracy in India and the inability of the constitutional democracy to effectively function in its absence. Such a search eventually led him to conversion to Buddhism and the proposal for the establishment of the Republican Party of India. He died on 6 December, 1956.

SOCIO -POLITICAL IDEAS OF AMBEDKAR

The social thought of Ambedkar basically revolves around the idea of understanding the dynamics of caste system in India and waging a tireless crusade against the curse of untouchability. Drawn from his own experience in being subjected to numerous kinds of social indignities and discrimination at various stages and different walks of his life, he was convinced of the purpose of his life for which he remained steadfastly committed. Ambedkar, therefore, oscillated between the promotion of the untouchables in Hindu society or in the Indian nation as a whole, and the strategy of a break that could take the form of a separate electorate, or of a separate Dalit party and / or of conversion outside Hinduism. He searched for solutions, explored strategies and in doing so set the Dalits on the path of arduous emancipation.

VIEWS ON SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

As a liberal thinker, Ambedkar was a hardcore in the value of constitutional democracy having irrevocable elements of social and economic democracies, in additions to political democracy. Indeed the notion of social democracy situated in the framework of the constitutional democracy appeared dearer to him than political democracy, presumably because of the fact that it was the thing he found for thought out his life. According to him, social democracy means a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity which are not to be treated as separate items in trinity. They form a union of trinity in the sense that to divorce one from the other is to defeat the very purpose of democracy. Liberty cannot be divorced from equality; equality cannot be divorced from liberty. Nor can liberty and equality be divorced from fraternity.

The complex web of democracy, thus, for Ambedkar was expected to consist of not only the sterile inputs mainly political in nature but also the dynamic elements of social and economic democracies with the balance weighing heavily in the favour of social democracy. Though as a framework of life, Ambedkar emphasized the social component of democracy as a system of government, he explicitly expressed himself in favour of British parliamentary model of democracy. Taking it as the system of providing a ample scope for reconciliation of the individual good and the social good, he was keen on imbibing the basic liberal values which underpin the functioning of parliamentary democracy.

On the basis of his extensive study and knowledge of the evolution of human society and social institutions, Ambedkar was convinced that democracy was the only form of government which ensured liberty and equality in the society. Addressing the first session of the round Table conference in 1930, he said, the bureaucratic form of government in India should be replaced by a government which will be the government of the people by the people and for the people.' Speaking on behalf of the depressed classes and denial of political rights to them, he said thus: "No share of political power can come, to us so long as the British

government remains as it is. It is only in a Sawaraj constitution that we stand any chance of getting political power in our own hands without which we cannot bring salvation to our people”.

To Explain his notion of democratic society, Ambedkar holds the view that democracy is more than a government. It is a form of the organization of society. There are two essential conditions which characterize democratically constituted society;

1. Absence of stratifications of society into classes;
2. A social habit on the part of the individual and groups which are ready for continuous readjustment or recognition of reciprocity of interests.

According to Ambedkar, even a democratic government would not be able to do anything if Indian society remained divided into classes and subclasses as each individual in such society would place class interest above everything and there would be no justice and fair play in the functioning of the government. Democratic government requires democratic attitude of mind and proper socialization.

Ambedkar was a protagonist of the idea of social justice as an inalienable part of the constitutional democratic framework in India. Ambedkar's notion of social justice was based on the concept of social democracy. Social democracy means a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life. Social justice refers to a distinct aspect of the socio economic and political system of the country through which concerted and coordinated measures are initiated aimed at eliminating the disadvantaged position of the depressed classes in society. A unique point of the notion of social justice as propagated by Ambedkar was his insistence on providing statutory basis to such measures so that they become the policy compulsion of the government.

HINDUISM, CASTE AND UNTOUCHABILITY

The basic issue lying at the core of the Gandhi Ambedkar intellectual acrimony appears to be the fundamental differences between the perspective of the two leaders regarding the probable solution to the problems of untouchability and the other vices of caste system. Both Gandhi and Ambedkar stood for equality, justice and freedom to all, regardless of caste, creed or sense. Yet one finds serious differences on how such a social order could be achieved. Gandhi's views about caste or varna system were quite different from those of Ambedkar. Interpreting Hinduism Gandhiji said, "Caste has nothing to do with religion. It is a custom whose origin I do not know and do not need to know for the satisfaction of my spiritual hunger.....There is nothing in the law of varna to warrant a belief in untouchability".

'Dr. Ambedkar, totally disagreed with Gandhian notion of caste system. He maintained that caste system completely ruined the Hindu society. Reorganization of Hindu society on the basis of varna system was not possible because it was likely to degenerate into a caste system without proper legal control. Moreover, reorganization of Hindus on the basis of four varnas could prove harmful as it would have a degrading effect on the mass by denying them opportunity to acquire knowledge. During the 1920's and early 1930's, when the problem of untouchability was being sought to be resolved through the political empowerment of the untouchables, Gandhi evolved and persisted with a socio-humanist approach to the problem. Through his writings in Young India, he forcefully decried the practice of untouchability and asserted that no occupation attributes a social status to the people. Thus, his approach to the problem of untouchability rested on its eradication through self-enlightenment of the people which was in sharp contrast to the Ambedkar's approach of waging struggles for the same. Interestingly, even by 1940s, when Gandhi seemed willing to accept intermarriage as a means of eradicating the vices of caste system, he did not support the eradication of caste as a social unit which brought him in conflict with Ambedkar whose historical call for the annihilation of caste had presumably become one of his cherished goals of his life. Sympathetic to

the plight of the untouchables, Gandhi took a variety of measures. Hence, he declared that the untouchables are not inferior and they should be regarded as 'Harijans' or 'Gods people'.

In September 1932, under the patronage and supervision of Gandhi, an All India Anti-Untouchability League was formed which was later on renamed as Harijan Sevak Sangh. However, Dr Ambedkar did not appreciate the move. While Gandhiji wanted Hindu society to put an end to untouchability and revert to the origin system of four Varnas, Ambedkar had serious differences with Gandhiji on this matters. In protest against Anti-Untouchability League, Ambedkar formed a parallel organization known as the Samata Saink Dal.

DIFFERENCES ON SEPARATE ELECTORATE

Ambedkar had differences with Gandhiji on the question of separate electorate and reservation of seats for the depressed classes. Ambedkar openly argued that as there was no link between the Hindus and the depressed classes, they must be regarded as a distinct and independent community. For Ambedkar, political rights preceded cultural reform. To this end, he fought against Gandhi who felt that since untouchables were a part of the Hindu community, there was no need for separate electorates or reserved seats. Ambedkar insisted that the depressed classes be given a separate electorate and reservation of seats in central and provincial assemblies. In the second session of the Round Table conference, Ambedkar stressed that power should be shared by all communities in their respective proportion. To quote Ambedkar. "We are demanding equal rights which are the common possession of the entire humanity, but due to inhibitions created by the shastras we have been denied these human rights". Thus he shared views with other minorities like Muslims, Christians etc., for securing political rights for depressed classes.

COMMUNAL AWARD AND POONA PACT

Gandhi was highly critical of Ambedkar for entering into a pact with minorities. Gandhiji resented the recognition given to the untouchables as a separate political entity through the Communal Award of 1932,

giving representation of minorities and untouchables in the provincial legislatures. Separate electorate, according to Gandhi, would make it a permanent feature giving rise to serious problem of human relationship. As a protest to the communal Award Gandhiji declared his fast unto death. Leaders of Congress persuaded Ambedkar to help save the life of Gandhiji. Reservation of seats in the provincial and central assembly was agreed for 10 years. A pact was signed between the Congress party and Ambedkar representing depressed classes in September 1932, known as Poona pact. It nullified the earliest communal Award and was later on incorporated in the Government of India Act, 1935.

ASSESSMENT

A survey of the thought and actions of Ambedkar reflects the solitary purpose of his life: the emancipation of untouchables in Indian society. Taking inspiration and lessons from his own life, Ambedkar remained an untiring crusader for the cause of untouchables during a life spanning over six decades. Hence he can be designated as the social prophet of the untouchables'. Dr. Javahar Lal Nehru has rightly described Ambedkar as a 'social humanist'. After careful study of the history of human relations among Hindus in Indian society, he sincerely felt that it required serious and concerted efforts for reforms. There is no doubt that he was a patriot and would not be opposed to national integration.

=====