

A STUDY ABOUT THE BIOGRAPHY OF DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR

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ABSTRACT

Dr. B.R Ambedkar, the most vibrant thinker – activist of modern India, attracts the suffering masses of the world because of his pragmatic and far –sighted vision. His thoughts are gaining momentum even in the present social and political scenario. He is the source of inspiration to the downtrodden millions in the land because he was a model by himself whose words and deeds stood united till the end of his life. As a social reformer, political leader and a spiritual guide, he played a unique role in shaping the mind and the political outlook of his community, and the transformation of society in modern India. He discarded the infallibility of the Vedas and the age old scriptures as they failed to prove themselves rational. He believed in the power of reason. “The country’s leading politicians were its leading political thinkers. This is especially true of the trinity of Mohandas K. Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and B.R. Ambedkar. The first was the father of Indian nationalism who, between the 1920s and 1940s, forged a popular, countrywide movement against British colonial rule. The second was the architect of the modern Indian nation- state, serving as the prime minister from the nation’s birth in August 1947 until his death in May 1964. The third was the great leader of country’s oppressed castes, who also oversaw, as the country’s first law minister, the drafting of the Indian Constitution, which came into effect on 26 January 1950. But even as they fought and struggled, led and governed, Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar wrote at great length about the world they saw and shaped.”

Key Words: Bhimrao Ambedkar, Discrimination, writer, Fight

INTRODUCTION

Bhimrao Ambedkar was born to Bhimabai and Ramji on 14 April 1891 in Mhow Army Cantonment, Central Provinces (Madhya Pradesh). Ambedkar's father was a Subedar in the Indian Army and after his retirement in 1894, the family moved to Satara, also in Central Provinces. Shortly after this, Bhimrao's mother passed away. Four years later, his father remarried and the family shifted to Bombay. In 1906, 15 year old Bhimrao married Ramabai, a 9 year old girl. His father Ramji Sakpal died in Bombay, in 1912.

Ambedkar faced the stigmas of caste discrimination from his childhood itself. Hailing from the Hindu Mahar caste, his family was viewed as "untouchable" by the upper classes. The discrimination and humiliation haunted Ambedkar at the Army school. Fearing social outcry, the teachers would segregate the students of lower class from that of Brahmins and other upper classes. The untouchable students were often asked by the teacher to sit outside the class. After shifting to Satara, he was enrolled at a local school but the change of school did not change the fate of young Bhimrao. Discrimination followed wherever he went. After coming back from the US, Ambedkar was appointed as the Defence Secretary to the King of Baroda but there also he had to face the humiliation for being an 'Untouchable'.

In 1908, he cleared his matriculation from Elphinstone High School. In 1908, Ambedkar got the opportunity to study at the Elphinstone College and obtained his graduate degree in Economics and Political Science in the year 1912 from Bombay University. Besides clearing all the exams successfully Ambedkar also obtained a scholarship of twenty five rupees a month from the Gaekwad ruler of Baroda, Sahyaji Rao III. Ambedkar decided to use the money for higher studies in the USA. He enrolled in the Columbia University in New York City to study Economics. He completed his Master's degree in June 1915 after successfully completing his thesis titled 'Ancient Indian Commerce'.

He enrolled in the London School of Economics in 1916 and started working on his doctoral thesis titled "The Problem of the Rupee: Its Origin and its Solution". With the help of the former

Bombay Governor Lord Sydenham, Ambedkar became a professor of political economy at the Sydenham College of Commerce and Economics in Bombay. In order to continue his further studies, he went to England in 1920 at his own expense. There he was received the D.Sc by the London University. Ambedkar also spent a few months at the University of Bonn, Germany, to study economics. He received his PhD degree in Economics in 1927. On 8 June, 1927, he was awarded a Doctorate by the University of Columbia.

Bhimrao Ambedkar decided returned to India and to fight against the caste discrimination that plagued him throughout his life. In his testimony before the Southborough Committee in preparation of the Government of India Act in 1919, Ambedkar opined that there should be separate electoral system for the Untouchables and other marginalized communities. He contemplated he idea of reservations for Dalits and other religious outcasts.

He began to find ways to reach to the people and make them understand the drawbacks of the prevailing social evils. He launched a newspaper called “Mooknayaka” (leader of the silent) in 1920 with the assistance of Shahaji II, the Maharaja of Kolkapur. It is said that after hearing his speech at a rally, Shahu IV, an influential ruler of Kolhapur, dined with the leader. The incident also created a huge uproar in the socio-political arena of the country.

He started his legal career after passing the Bar course in Gray’s Inn. He applied his litigious skills in advocating cases of caste discrimination. His resounding victory in defending several non-Brahmin leaders accusing the Brahmins of ruining India, established the bases of his future battles.

Ambedkar launched full-fledged movements for Dalit rights by 1927. He demanded public drinking water sources open to all and right for all castes to enter temples. He openly condemned Hindu Scriptures advocating discrimination and arranged symbolic demonstrations to enter the Kalaram Temple in Nashik.

The Poona Pact was signed in 1932 between Dr. Ambedkar and Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya, representative of the Hindu Brahmins relinquishing reservation of seats for the untouchable

classes in the Provisional legislatures, within the general electorate. These classes were later designated as Scheduled Classes and Scheduled Tribes.

Ambedkar founded the Independent Labor Party in 1936. In the 1937 elections to the Central Legislative Assembly, his party won 15 seats. Ambedkar oversaw the transformation of his political party into the All India Scheduled Castes Federation, although it performed poorly in the elections held in 1946 for the Constituent Assembly of India.

Ambedkar objected to the decision of the Congress and Mahatma Gandhi to call the untouchable community as Harijans. He would say that even the members of untouchable community are same as the other members of the society. Ambedkar was appointed on the Defence Advisory Committee and the Viceroy's Executive Council as Minister for Labor.

His reputation as a scholar led to his appointment as free India's first Law Minister and Chairman of the Committee responsible to draft a constitution for independent India.

Dr. Ambedkar was appointed as the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution on August 30, 1947. Ambedkar emphasized on the construction of a virtual bridge between all classes of the society. According to him, it would be difficult to maintain the unity of the country if the difference among the classes were not met. He was successful in receiving support of the Assembly to introduce reservation for members of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in education, government jobs and civil services.

Ambedkar travelled to Sri Lanka in 1950, to attend a convention of Buddhist scholars and monks. After his return he decided to write a book on Buddhism and soon, converted to Buddhism. In his speeches, Ambedkar lambasted the Hindu rituals and caste divisions. Ambedkar founded the Bharatiya Bauddha Mahasabha in 1955. His book, "The Buddha and His Dhamma" was published posthumously.

On October 14, 1956 Ambedkar organized a public ceremony to convert around five lakh of his supporters to Buddhism. Ambedkar traveled to Kathmandu to attend the Fourth World Buddhist

Conference. He completed his final manuscript, "The Buddha or Karl Marx" on December 2, 1956.

Ambedkar was suffering from serious health problems including diabetes and weak eyesight since 1954. On 6 December, 1956 he died at his home in Delhi. A Buddhist-style cremation was organized for him. The ceremony was attended by hundreds of thousands of supporters, activists and admirers.

WRITINGS OF AMBEDKAR

Dr. Babsaheb Ambedkar was a scholar of eminence and a voracious reader. He had a knack for research and writing. He owned the biggest personal library in Asia. He was well versed in seven languages. His writings were the manifesto of social emancipation of the oppressed classes. It addressed all the burning issues the country faced and he was keen in providing solutions to all the issues based on his reason and deep knowledge on the subject. His forward looking and thought provoking writings and speeches makes him immemorial.

The famous writer T.K.Tope says: ‘Dr. Ambedkar’s erudition and learning were no doubt great...the generations to come may not remember the political achievements of Dr.Ambedkar, but they will remember his lofty achievements in the field of scholarship and learning. Ambedkarthe political leader, Ambedkar the social revolutionary, Ambedkar the modern exponent of Buddhism, may be forgotten, but Ambedkar the scholar, will be immortal.’¹

Edward Thompson writes:

‘If anything by Dr. Ambedkar comes to your way, read it, and you will understand why he often makes orthodox Hindus, hopping mad. He is one of the dozen most astonishing men in India’²

The American friend of Ambedkar, Vincent Shean, writes: ‘He may not have been the greatest Sanskrit scholar but could plaster a text with dozens of references to early Hindu authorities’³

His quest for reading forced him to join many libraries in the western world. He joined the London University General Library, Goldsmiths' Library of Economics Literature, the British Museum Library and the India Office Library. On 15 June 1952, Columbia University conferred the degree of LL.D on him in recognition of the work done by him in connection with the drafting of the Constitution of India. In 1953, Osmania University conferred LL.D degree. He was the Professor of Economics in Sydenham College, Bombay and the Principal of the Government Law College, Bombay. His writings cover diverse subjects of human interests. During the period from 1916 to 1956, he wrote over 20 books, pamphlets and articles.

MAJOR WORKS

Ambedkar left behind reams of scholarly work. His writings were mainly in English and were the product of deep study and contemplation. Babasaheb's literature is even more relevant today than it was when it was written. His literature is the subject matter of research not only in India but also abroad. Brief notes about some of the books are given below.

1. Annihilation of Caste

It was the presidential address prepared for the 1936 annual conference of the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal of Lahore. After reading the speech prepared by Dr.Ambedkar, the organizing committee requested him to amend the speech as it would be unbearable to the participants in the conference. Ambedkar was not willing to change a single pint in his speech and as a result of it the committee cancelled the meeting. He published the speech in 1936 itself. It was a thought provoking material as in the case of other writings of Ambedkar. He examined the caste system from two angles in this book. He draws attention to the drawbacks of the caste system and to the solutions for it. This is the peculiarity of Ambedkarian thoughts. He analyses the issue and reaches a solution for each issue. According to him the caste system hasn't improved the race. A system which is not beneficial to the people who observe it is not acceptable. Instead of improving the community, the caste system disorganized and demoralized the community. It hasn't shown any sympathy to the deserving. The downtrodden people including the untouchables remained so for a long period of time. The system has no appreciation for the

meritorious if they belong to the untouchables. Ambedkar himself faced this unethical approach of the system throughout his life. He considered it as a serious issue towards the unification and integration of India.

2. Who were the Shudras?

The book published in 1946 attacks the theory of Chaturvarnya. It is based on graded inequality. It imposes restrictions on Shudras and makes the fifth Varna untouchables. They had not been Shudras from the very beginning. It shows that the system was intentionally imposed by the upper class.

According to Ambedkar there were only three Varnas, namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas and vaishyas. The Shudras were part of the Kshatriya Varna. The continuous feud between the Shudra kings and the Brahmins resulted in the denial of Upanayana by the Brahmins to the Shudras. It resulted in the social degradation of the Shudras and they fell below the Vaishyas.

3. The Untouchables

The book published in 1948 describes the shameful disgrace that the downtrodden communities face in India. They were considered as a community beyond human intercourse. Even their touch was considered as an evil to cause pollution. The scholarship was confined to Brahmins and they never produce a Voltaire because of their vested interest. They were interested only in maintaining the Brahmanic supremacy. Ambedkar traces the origin of untouchability in the hatred of Brahmins towards the Buddhists and he argues that it originated around 400 AD.

4. Castes in India

Ambedkar wrote this research paper while he was in Columbia University, USA, in April 1916. It was published as a book in 1917. The book throws light on the origin, structure and development of castes in India. Ambedkar considers caste as a closed group that is self-contained. According to him; there are four aspects of the problem of caste in India:

- i) Despite being an admixture of different elements, the Hindus have a strong cultural unity.
 - ii) Castes are a part of this gargantuan cultural identity.
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iii) Originally, there was only one caste.

iv) Different castes came into being through ostracism or copying

5. The Problem of the Rupee

Dr Ambedkar wrote this thesis for his D.Sc degree from the University of London in October 1922. It was published in the form of a book in December 1923. This is an analysis of how the British, by linking the value of the Indian Rupee with the British Pound, had made maximum profit while pushing the Indians into deep economic morass. That had led to Indian money flowing into the coffers of the British Empire and being used in the interest of the British people.

6. The Evolution of the Provincial Finance in British India

This was Ambedkar's Ph.D thesis, which he had submitted in Columbia University in 1916. The book, published in 1924, is dedicated to the ruler of Baroda Shrimant Sayajirao Gaikwad, who had sent him to the US for higher education. This book brutally exposes the British bureaucracy in India.

7. Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah

In January 1943, Dr Ambedkar delivered a lecture to mark the birthday of M.G. Ranade in Pune. This lecture came out as a book later. It makes a comparative study of the personalities of Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah and says that hero worship, in the long run, harms the nation and society.

8. Thoughts on Pakistan

This is Ambedkar's much talked-about book. It appeared in 1945, when the country was in turmoil over the impending Partition. The book offers a solution to the problem and played a key role in resolving it. Dr Ambedkar wrote, "The book, by its name, might appear to deal only with the X.Y.Z. of Pakistan. It does more than that. It is an analytical presentation of Indian history and Indian politics in their communal aspects. As such, it is intended to explain the A.B.C. of

Pakistan also. The material relating to Indian history and Indian politics contained in this book is so large and so varied that it might well be called Indian Political What is What”⁷

9. What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables

This book, also published in 1945, scrutinizes the work that the Congress and Gandhi have done for the Untouchables and pulls them up for not being on the right track. The book argues that the Congress used the issue of emancipation of the Shudras as a tool for furthering its political interests. It says the Congress’ programme for emancipation of the Shudras is more about publicity and less about sincere efforts. The book urges Dalits to be wary of Gandhi and Gandhism. According to Dr Ambedkar, if there is any “ism” in the world that has used religion as an opiate to subdue the masses and has fed them wrong concepts and hollow promises, it is Gandhism. Gandhism cheats the Untouchables.

10. States and Minorities

This book was published in March 1946. Here, Dr. Ambedkar presents an outline of a socialist society and forcefully argues that socialism should be ushered in in India through Constitutional provisions so that the legislature and the executive will not be able to tinker with it. He says that parliamentary democracy is a just system of governance and state socialism should be introduced in India through parliamentary democracy.

11. Thoughts on Linguistic States

This important book came out in 1955. While describing the linguistic divisions of the country, Dr Ambedkar accepted the universal principle of one state, one language and emphasized on making Hindi the official language of the country. He said that a common language could bind a national together and make exchange of ideas easier.

12. The Buddha and his Dhamma

This book, published posthumously, in 1957, has a special place in his works. It can easily be described as a Buddhist scripture, as it makes a detailed analysis of Buddhism. According to Dr D.R. Jatav, a scholar of Ambedkar’s works, the book “raises some very pertinent and original questions and provides scholarly and intelligent answers to them. Ambedkar dismisses the

division of Buddhism into Hinayana and Mahayana sects. He says that the Lord Buddha's religion is one, though there may be different philosophical interpretations of its teaching. He argues that there cannot be two Buddhisms." Dr Ambedkar launched several newspapers and magazines to make the Dalit community aware. He edited most of them. These publications played an important role in taking his movement for the emancipation of the Dalits forward. In that sense, Dr Ambedkar laid the foundations of Dalit journalism. He was the first and the foremost editor and publisher of Dalit journals. The publications that he edited can be the ideal of any journalist. Given below is a brief description these newspapers and magazines.

13. Mook Nayak

This Marathi fortnightly was launched on 31 January 1920. Though Dr Ambedkar was not the editor of the publication, he was the moving spirit behind it. The editor was Panduram Nandram Bhatkar, a Mahar by caste. *Mook Nayak* was the voice of the voiceless – the Dalits. It voiced their pains, served to create a new consciousness among them and urged them to agitate to better their lot. Due to financial constraints, the publication did not last long but it did succeed in its objective of creating a wave of consciousness among the Dalits.

14. Bahishkrit Bharat

After *Mook Nayak* ceased publication, Dr Ambedkar launched another Marathi fortnightly, *Bahishkrit Bharat*, on 3 April 1937. Published from Bombay and edited by Ambedkar himself, the newspaper brought to the fore the problems and complaints of the Untouchables. Ambedkar also used it to answer his critics. In one of the editorials of the newspaper, Ambedkar wrote, "Had Tilak been born an Untouchable, he would not have come up with the slogan of "Swarajya is my birthright". Instead, he would have said "Elimination of untouchability is my birthright". This newspaper also played a seminal role in awakening the Dalits.

15. Samta

This newspaper, which began publication on 29 June 1928, was the organ of the Samta Sangh, an organization floated by Dr Ambedkar for bringing about social reform. Dr Ambedkar had appointed Devrao Vishnu Nayeek as its editor.

16. Janata

After *Samta* shut down, Dr Ambedkar launched *Janata*. Its maiden issue came out on 24 November 1930. It continued publication for 26 years till February 1956. Ambedkar highlighted the problems of the Dalits through it.

17. Prabuddha Bharat

After Dr Ambedkar embraced Buddhism on 14 October 1956, he renamed *Janata* as *Prabuddha Bharat*. Its front page declared itself as the organ of Akhil Bharatiya Dalit Federation. All the newspapers brought out by Ambedkar were published in Marathi, as it was the language of the masses. Babasaheb's area of work was Maharashtra and Marathi was the commonly spoken language in the region. As we all know, Babasaheb has an unimpeachable command of the English language but he still brought out his newspapers in Marathi, as the Dalits of Maharashtra were not educated and could not have been expected to read and understand English.

In view of the importance of Ambedkar's writings and the popular demand for them, the education department of the Maharashtra government drew up a programme to publish a collection of all his writings and speeches. 22 volumes of *Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches* have been published. These volumes, first published in English, are immensely valuable and have been reasonably priced. The first volume of the series was published on 14 April 1979, the birth anniversary of Ambedkar. Due to the popular demand for *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, the Ambedkar Pratishthan, under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India, decided to have the volumes translated into Hindi. So far, 21 volumes titled *Babasaheb Dr Ambedkar: Sampurna Vangmay* have been published. Such has been the demand that the series has run to many editions. It has played an important role in spreading the thoughts of Dr Ambedkar in the Hindi belt. Writings and speeches of Ambedkar still incite the hearts of millions around the globe.

FIGHT AGAINST UNTOUCHABILITY

Dr. B.R Ambedkar breathed in the Indian untouchables a spirit to fight for the reassertion of their human rights. There was indigenously created caste – based segregation on the basis of religion. It created discrimination and oppression that existed for millennia. This separation on the basis of human selfishness and human greed to adore and enjoy the privileges over others created graded inequality in the society and humiliated the majority on the basis of caste.

Untouchability in India meant pollution by touch or vision. From this disgrace, discrimination and severe social handicap that Dr. Ambedkar suffered right from his early life for being born to a so called untouchable family, he came determined to liberate the depressed and the marginalized classes from this inhuman social system and unending saga of misery till the last breath of his life. Ambedkar wanted to annihilate the castes in order to provide equality of social status for his community. Though he succeeded in it to some extent, the remnant of the age old evils exist now also. So the fight is to be continued.

Gandhiji and others were taking a religious and political approach to the problem and tried to bring about a change of heart by appeal and persuasion among the so called upper caste members. Ambedkar wanted specific legal protection and safeguards to make members belonging to the untouchable community to get education, change the hereditary occupations and raise their standard of living.

Overcoming numerous social and financial obstacles, Ambedkar became one of the first men from untouchable community to obtain a college education in India. Eventually earning law degree and doctorates for his study and research in law, economics and political science from Columbia University and the London School of Economics, Ambedkar gained a reputation as a scholar and practiced law for a few years. He started campaigning by publishing journals, advocating political rights and social freedom for India's untouchables. Ambedkar had been invited to testify before the Southborough Committee, which was preparing the Government of India Act 1919. He was appointed to the Bombay Presidency Committee to work with the all-

European Simon Commission in 1925. He was elected as a member of the Constituent Assembly of India in 1946.

Ambedkar led the struggle to get rid of this yoke by the deprived masses. They found their Messiah in him. He was the source of energy for the millions who stood under the yoke of untouchability for ages. His fight to annihilate caste fortifications can be considered as equal or better than the contributions of Martin Luther King for the blacks in America. Ambedkar suffered the dark realities of untouchability. Born as an untouchable, he suffered indignities and humiliations. But his struggle was to uplift the entire community from the unethical slavery and atrocities of the caste system. In this march for the emancipation of a people, he endured abandonment, betrayal and social invisibility as in the case of most of the leaders who fought for the liberation and rights of their communities. Even his nationalistic thought was suspected by some. He fought against the institutionalization of the caste – based isolation and discrimination prevalent in the Hindu mind for ages. The prime aim of his life was the abolition of caste discrimination from the fabric of India. His epoch – making battle to seek justice for the millions of downtrodden people in India changed the basic structure of Indian life.

Ambedkar makes a detailed and authentic study about the origin of caste in India. Different stocks of people came to India with various cultures. Each of them entered to a new area with a fight with the people existed there. It was there in history in the case of almost all new settlements. There may be instances of peaceful entry. Though they enter with resistance, they will become peaceful neighbours later. The constant contact and the mutual intercourse of different groups and cultures results in the formation of a common culture. The unity of culture is the base of homogeneity as all people are ethnically heterogeneous. According to Ambedkar:

CONCLUSION

‘It may be granted that there has not been a thorough amalgamation of the various stocks that make up the peoples of India, and to travellers from within the boundaries of India, the East presents a marked contrast in physique and even in colours to the West, as does the South to the North. But amalgamation can never be the sole criteria of homogeneity as predicated of any

people. Ethnically all people are heterogeneous. It is the unity of culture that is the basis of homogeneity. Taking this for granted, I venture to say that there is no country that can rival the Indian peninsula with respect to the unity of its culture. It has not only a geographic unity, but it has over and above all a deeper and a much more fundamental unity—the indubitable cultural unity that covers the land from end to end. But it is because of this homogeneity that caste becomes a problem so difficult to be explained. If the Hindu Society were a mere federation of mutually exclusive unity, the matter would be simple enough. But caste is a parcelling of an already homogenous unity, and the explanation of the genesis of caste is the explanation of this process of parcelling.’¹

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