

Dr.B.R. Ambedkar: A Socio-Political Missionary

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Abstract

This paper is aimed at highlighting the ideas and ideals of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the champion of downtrodden masses and the marginalized communities in India. Given his multi-dimensional contribution towards ameliorating the living conditions of millions of such communities, Dr. Ambedkar deserves the greatest appreciation and admiration. While his constitutional contribution is living memory to generations of Indians, past and present, his socio-political vision is hardly exposed, leave alone realized, in any serious manner. His social revolutionary role in particular is least covered in the academic discourses in the country. Thus, this paper makes a humble attempt in this direction to remember his multiple activities at a glance and thereby to give him the place he deserves in the political history of Independent India. Obviously, leading contribution of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in making of the Indian Constitution has been elucidated in this paper. As part of it an attempt is made to highlight the main focus of Dr. Ambedkar's vision on socio-economic issues whose significance is felt even at present times. Having measured Dr. Ambedkar's idea of democracy one can feel that he had unshakeable faith in democracy and its practice. In his conception of egalitarian society, democracy has had an amazing role which he defined as 'one person, one vote'; and 'one vote, one value'. Further, democracy means empowerment of any person for participating in the process of decision-making relating to him or her. Thus, his memorable contribution in letter and spirit will always guide the nation on its path of justice, liberty and equality. This paper is a humble attempt to pay a tribute to a great humanist of this century on his 125th Birth Anniversary this year.

Key words: Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Socio-political missionary, Constitutional contribution, Reservation process.

Prior to Independent India, the country was manifested with the crisis-ridden social order of numerous castes and communities. There was hardly any social cohesion in its people for centuries on end.

Obviously, that was both the cause and consequence of alien rule in the country. Thus, none of the regimes, native or alien, had ever affected the social fabric of its people in any significant way¹. The

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mainstream Indian society and its upper castes had alienated the marginalised from possessing or acquiring normal citizenship. In the façade of traditional social structure, the unequal Hindu religious institutions were imposed on all communities. Apparently, there were four major castes that caused disunity, both vertically and horizontally in the Indian society². Indian 'lowest castes' like Dalits (16%) and Adivasis (8%) were socially discriminated and became marginalised from the mainstream. Due to the hierarchical caste system³, these communities had been denied equal opportunities in dimensions of social life. And, these were deprived of any basic rights, let alone human rights, for centuries on end.

According to Marc Galanter⁴, 'unlike the whites of the US who fought both the civil war and led civil liberties movement to help African Americans gain equality or established associations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People', their Indian counterparts (manuwadis)⁵ remained indifferent towards the lowest castes. Additionally, the fifth caste (untouchable) was introduced to create havoc in the Indian society once for all. Despite many a social reform movement, casteist discrimination was preached, practiced and propagated in the country. Of all social evils that had undermined Indian social life most was the 'manuwadi practice of untouchability' towards its fellow-Indians, the 'Dalits', formally known as the Scheduled Castes (SCs). Besides women under patriarchy, there

were also some aboriginal communities, the 'Adivasis', or else known as the Scheduled Tribes (STs) who inhabited the Northeast and other remote regions of India, who had faced the similar wrath of 'mainstream Indians' for over centuries on end.

Additionally, the country was also divided along religious lines, as there were several Muslims, Christians, Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs who constituted the religious minorities of plural India. Despite these diverse communities, there remained a common feeling of cultural oneness among all the Indians during the course of freedom struggle. However, these latent differences appeared on the political horizon once freedom was conceded to India. In other words, there were several challenges that the Indian Nation and its people were confronted with on the eve of its Independence. Understandably, the new government had to address such socio-political problems so as to ensure proper governance in the largest democracy like India.

While the Indian state recognised all its citizens as one and the same, its various governmental agencies did not implement the Constitutional provisions for several decades. It was only after a couple of decades after independence (1947) that these marginalised communities were encouraged to practise certain Constitutional rights in the realm of political and economic development. Yet, their legal enforcement was marked by political setbacks and bureaucratic

sabotages. Defective application of reservation policy in public sector is a case in point. For, state bureaucracy smacked of upper caste mind-set (manuwadi) that got stimulus from the overall societal attitude towards the lowest castes. Although the casteist regimes were averse to enforce the reservation policies in the initial decades of independence, emerging economic crisis had diluted such policies thereafter. Incidentally, such a belligerent attitude evoked silent protests in 1960s and 70s in the country. Several social movements were launched under the leadership of middle caste sections of the marginalised. In consequence, the state and its status quoist parties having realised the political necessity to respond to electoral calculus have tried to negotiate the execution of certain schemes like reservations.

Besides the problems of social and cultural discrimination, the marginalised communities have had several other concerns and complications in the field of education, employment and economy that were expected to be addressed through the scheme of reservations. Although these policy initiatives were supportive to very few families economically, their socio-cultural dimension could not be reformed in any way. For, the policy implementation had been sabotaged at ground levels. While the casteist-societal attitudes are attributed for the failure of implementing the policy, lack of awareness among the marginalised cannot be overlooked in this context. Thus, responses of the state and

governments at these levels have been conspicuously apathetic.

While there was one common political leader, M.K. Gandhi, regarded as the Father of Indian nation, who emerged as the guiding force of the mainstream Indian society, his political devotee, Jawaharlal Nehru became the national leader of the Independent India. Both the political leaders since predisposed by similar overseas education and British liberal views and Western ideas like democracy and secularism, the country was expected to follow the alien model of governance. Gandhi was more conservative and traditionalist, whereas Nehru was willing to adopt a different and progressive approach in his work style. Thus, the new government had to follow both these leaders and their conflicting approaches if the country was to move ahead.

Rise of a Socio-Political Visionary

Meanwhile, at an alternative level, there was another-foreign educated scholarly Indian, described as the messiah of the downtrodden, Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, emerged as the top leader of the so-called untouchable communities, the Dalits in India. Unlike the Congress political leaders and their primacy, Baba Saheb Dr. Ambedkar was disturbed more about the social cleavage that plagued India, due to prevalent caste system in the society⁶. Thus, he made it a foremost issue in his consistent struggle against social discrimination and inequality. He

launched many a struggle against the social evils and casteist atrocities of his times. Having honored Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, as his philosophical mentor, Dr. Ambedkar worked against the casteist practices in the country. He was a social reformer of unparalleled quality. He founded several institutions of educational and social nature in Maharashtra and outside so as to educate the masses.

Despite being faced with several uncharacteristic affairs at home and abroad, Dr. Ambedkar always stood firmly for his principles. He took up the problems of one-fourth of Indians, the depressed castes, to the International level (Round Table Conferences at London) on couple of occasions. Ultimately, he proved effective in achieving some concessions to his fellow communities, notwithstanding the stiff opposition from the Gandhian leadership. More than anything else, Dr. Ambedkar was successful in making the social issue on the top of political agenda of the emerging leadership of Indian government. At a time when the whole country was sycophantic of the efforts of Gandhians and Nehruites of the Indian National Congress for the attainment of freedom and forming a fresh government, Dr. Ambedkar was taking on them, on the issues of casteism and social inequality. Thus, he had to face the odd times, like swimming across the currents all the way throughout the country!

Dr. Ambedkar was born April 14, 1891 in a so-called untouchable

community (Mahar) and thus experienced the cruel form of casteism throughout his youth. Yet, he emerged on the heights of academic achievements in the world. Despite facing social discrimination at different levels, he studied law, philosophy and economics in the most reputed institutions at home and abroad. Having acquired a doctorate degree for his work in economics from an American University, he authored several theses and books thereafter. For instance, his writing on the 'annihilation of caste' became the most powerful writing of his times⁷. He practiced law in Mumbai courts, not as a professional lawyer but as a humanist, representing the concerns of the marginalized communities.

As part of his academic-administrative engagements, besides being the Principal, he was also working as a faculty in the law college. Dr. Ambedkar contributed several articles on the socio-economic plight of his fellow countrymen. He presented research papers in several national and international conferences. He delivered lectures in meetings in India and abroad. He was a multi-dimensional personality, having humanism foremost in his works ala Karl Marx of Germany. Having possessed rich intellectual qualities, Dr. Ambedkar wrote extensively on subjects ranging from society, religion, politics, philosophy, law and economics. Thus, framing of the Constitution for the largest democracy was assigned to Dr. Ambedkar.

Constitution-making

On the eve of India's independence, the Nehru-led government invited Dr. Ambedkar to serve as the nation's first law minister, which he accepted for four years. In November 1946, he was elected to the Constituent Assembly from Bengal and in August 1947, was appointed by the Assembly to the drafting committee. Subsequently, Dr. Ambedkar was appointed as the Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee that was constituted by the Constituent Assembly to draft the Constitution for Independent India. Although there were several eminent freedom fighters, political leaders, intellectuals and educationists belonging to different parts of India, Dr. Ambedkar alone was selected and requested to lead the team of Constitutional makers. Appointed as the head of that committee on August 29, he worked for more than two and half years within the drafting committee and outside quite effectively. Thanks to his extraordinary knowledge and skills, Dr. Ambedkar ensured passage of the Constitution⁸ in the Constituent Assembly.

Besides Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a galaxy of great leaders and legal scholars in the Constituent Assembly such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Rajendra Prasad, Sardar Patel, Alladi Krishnaswamy Ayyar, B.N.Rau among others were associated with the drafting of the Constitution. Although it was the result of the collective efforts of those

many that were charged by the Constituent Assembly to write Indian Constitution, Dr. Ambedkar alone worked on it consistently. As Chairman of the Drafting Committee, Dr. Ambedkar won great praise from his colleagues and contemporary observers for his laborious work. Thanks to Dr. Ambedkar as Chairman of the Drafting Committee and the chief architect of our Constitution, the Indian government has always charted the path of democracy.

As part of his Constitutional mission, Dr. Ambedkar had to study several Constitutions both of his times and of the past, of other nations. He had to spend several sleepless nights during the course of the drafting assignment. He used to stay up whole nights while 'his community was in deep slumber' during the period. Apparently, he was influenced by the British, American, Canadian and Irish Constitutions in certain areas. In this Herculean task of Constitutional work, Dr. Ambedkar's thorough knowledge of the Buddhist scriptures was to come to his timely help. For instance, the Sangha practice from the Buddhist literature was incorporated in terms of voting by ballot, rules of debate and precedence and the use of agendas, committees and proposals to conduct administrative business. Moreover, he tried to incorporate appropriate provisions that were suitable to the Indian context in his draft. Although Dr. Ambedkar used the Western models to give the Constitution a form, its spirit was totally Indian!

Further, the draft prepared by Dr. Ambedkar provided several Constitutional guarantees and protections for individuals, including freedom of religion, the abolition of untouchability and the outlawing of all forms of social discrimination. Most importantly, Dr. Ambedkar argued for extensive economic and social rights for women, and also won the Assembly's support for introducing a system of positive discrimination that later on became the basis for reservations in education and employment for members of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes under various provisions of the Constitution.

Besides, the manner in which he singlehandedly responded to several questions being raised in the Constituent Assembly was worth noting. His resounding arguments on many controversial issues won him big applause during the course of debates in the Assembly. Further, there were elaborate explanations that were given to enhance the social relationships and this is why many famous scholars have regarded the features of Indian Constitution as the motivating factors behind the ever "changing and rebuilding society" of India and thus Dr. Ambedkar is rightly acknowledged for such a great achievement⁹.

Constitutional Safeguards: In the Constitutional grounding, he provided an inspiring Preamble to the Constitution, ensuring justice, social, economic and political, liberty, equality and fraternity to

one and all. Dr. Ambedkar was always a champion of fundamental rights, and as Part III of the Indian Constitution states, the fundamental rights are guaranteed to all citizens. According to Dr. Ambedkar, the most significant feature of the fundamental rights is that these rights were made justifiable. In view of coexistence of numerous religions in the country, and considering the case of religious freedom, he included it as a right, as part of fundamental rights itself. In a way, that has enabled India to remain a secular state. Lastly, the Constitutional right to move to the Supreme Court for enforcement of fundamental rights under Article 32 per se became the chief custodian of all other fundamental rights.

Aware of the plural character of Indian society, Dr. Ambedkar strongly advocated for the federal structure of the Union and States based on the principles of a strong Centre and independent States. Dr. Ambedkar also did great service to the nation by proposing the institution of an integrated judicial system and common All India Services with a view to strengthen the national unity and integrity. The significant contribution of Dr. Ambedkar is reflected in the protective discrimination scheme envisaged under some provisions of Part III (Fundamental Rights) and Part IV (Directive Principles of State Policy) dealing with the Constitutional mandate to ameliorate the condition of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and the other backward classes. Provisions like Article 17

prohibiting untouchability, Article 30 dealing with the protection of religious and linguistic minorities are some of the notable examples.

Moreover, Dr. Ambedkar was a strong advocate of the parliamentary form of government right from the inception of the Government of India Act of 1935. He firmly believed that the parliamentary system of government alone can usher in an egalitarian society through the application of principles of social democracy. Dr. Ambedkar's social democracy comprised of politicians and political parties with high standards of political morality, honesty and integrity, committed to the cause of the downtrodden and depressed castes. Even the Preamble of Indian Constitution echoes the principles of parliamentary democracy and other ideals. Further, he created the 'Schedules' so that those included in the Schedules are protected without any changes. The Constitution is indeed very lengthy and bulky, as its provisions are explained in a detailed manner.

Social Empowerment

Incidentally, Dr. Ambedkar, who fought for civil rights and struggled for abolishing caste and untouchability, made the new India a possible dream. Besides, Dr. Ambedkar was not only the father of Indian Constitution but also the liberator of all oppressed sections and communities. No other icon but Dr. Ambedkar can truly represent that socio-

cultural heritage in the modern period. Dr. Ambedkar always stood for equality, justice, liberty and fraternity and fought hard to integrate all Indians across the nation. As a social reformer, Dr. Ambedkar developed a progressive outlook that elevated his religious temperament to its peak. The humanist in him was always alive not only in words but also in deeds.

In fact, the most imperative contribution of Dr. Ambedkar was his battle for equal rights for women, socially and otherwise, at a time when patriarchy was discernible in its ugliest form in the country. Like the other marginalized communities, women were also suffering under chauvinistic discrimination silently for centuries. Unlike the American women and those in some western countries like England, France and others, who had to fight for their voting rights for decades before they were allowed to vote, Dr. Ambedkar facilitated Indian women to enfranchise since the adoption of the Constitution itself!

Yet, his solemn efforts towards women empowerment were unsuccessful when he tried to get the Hindu Code Bill¹⁰ in the Constituent Assembly passed. Thus, he had to resign from Nehru's Cabinet in October 1951. To quote from his statement made in the Parliament, 'for long time I have been thinking of resigning my seat from the Cabinet. The only thing that held me back from giving effect to my intention was the hope that it would be possible to give effect to the

Hindu Code Bill before the life of the present parliament comes to an end. I have agreed to break up the bill and restricted it to marriage and divorce in the fond hope that at least this much of our labor may bear fruit. But even that part of the bill has been killed. I see no purpose in my continuing to be a member of your Cabinet'. Further, he wrote at length on the 'rise and fall of Hindu women', in an article.

Dr. Ambedkar argued for extensive economic and social rights for not only women, but also for backward classes and religious minorities. Meanwhile, Dr. Ambedkar kept some of the clauses of the Constitutional provisions (Article 340) very flexible and convenient so that certain amendments (OBC Reservations) could be made as and when the situation demanded. Thus there were numerous amendments made to the Constitution so as to offer reservation benefits to these OBC communities in the country. This perhaps was not due to any inadequacies inherent in the Constitution, but only to incorporate the changing times and situations in it, as and when there would be need.

Dr. Ambedkar also staunchly stood for empowerment of Dalits, Adivasis, Backward communities, religious minorities and women in India. He made it his life's mission to uplift the untouchables and other downtrodden masses from their unequal position of inferiority to that of equal position of parity in socio-economic status with so-

called upper-caste Hindus. For achieving this goal the reservation policy or the scheme of protective discrimination was advocated and implemented for ten years at least to ameliorate the conditions of various depressed and down-trodden sections of Hindu society. However, the scheme was not implemented sincerely by those who were at the helm of affairs at the center or in states. Hence, the scheme was extended time and again so as to make it a political issue¹¹.

As usual, the governments were interested more in politicizing the issue rather than implementing the scheme effectively. Or else, why do we have those members (s-elected) in the legislative and executive bodies of the government at all levels who are either unaware of what Dr. Ambedkar wrote in the Constitution or unwilling to implement the same in letter and spirit. Today's tragedy is that our own rulers hardly show any sincere interest for effective implementation of the basic Constitutional provisions. The Constitution of India provided to all its subjects right to live with honor and dignity. Yet the caste system is still playing disastrous role in the life of marginalized sections of the society.

Owing to his significant role in framing of the Indian Constitution, Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar was popularly known and revered all over India as the father of the Indian Constitution. His efforts to eradicate social evils were remarkable and his birthday is celebrated every year on April 14, not just as an official affair, but

also as a national festival. Having failed to realize his Constitutional dream of social equality in India, he died on December 6, 1956. The fact that he was posthumously awarded the prestigious Bharat Ratna as late as in 1990 exposes the hollow claims of our manuwadi political regimes, over the years. Thus, the less said the better about fulfilling his constitutional safeguards that still remains a dream.

Reservation Process

Due to Dr.B.R.Ambedkar, political regimes at the Centre (Union) and in States (provincial units) had to implement some inclusive policies and thereby made certain efforts at assimilation of diverse groups into the mainstream society, but in vain. For, the political regimes were disinclined to challenge the entrenched social hierarchies. Instead, these status quoist regimes continued to travel by water in the mainstream society. As a consequence, the marginalized communities like the dalits, adivasis, backward classes and religious minorities that faced the wrath of social discrimination and developmental neglect for long, are still at the receiving end.

Thanks to Dr.B R Ambedkar¹², the reservation facilities in public sector had offered certain economic means of livelihood to more than 1.5 million Dalits, for instance. Besides, over 50,000 Dalits entered the field of government authority within a couple of decades. Obviously, these physical and economic benefits have

instilled some confidence in Dalit communities. The private sector that attracted around 90% of the job market was left free from state control. As part of Constitutional obligation, the reservation strategy was restricted only to the public sector that offers around 10% jobs¹³. Besides, it is only in the case of lowest category of jobs that the bahunjansamaj was given its due share, particularly in the manual jobs. In fact, both sectors, public and private are essential in securing the proportional opportunities for dalits and adivasis. Despite many hurdles, reservation facilities has benefitted a section of dalits and adivasis economically.

At a time when the number of educated among these underprivileged classes/castes was increasing in geometrical progression, their share of jobs in the public sector was dwindling. This was more so in the last two decades, all in the name of globalisation. According to a Report of Working Group¹⁴ on Empowering of SCs, 1,13,450 dalits lost jobs due to the LPG policies in 1992-97, in the Central Government (national domain) alone. The process of their employment retrenchment was on the rise thereafter. Then, one can imagine the fate of those dalit employees working in the State governments' Public sector units during the period. The less said the better about their recruitment in private sectors!

Incidentally, vast majority of private institutions were hardly providing jobs to the candidates of the marginalised

communities. Obviously, the private sector that employs around 90% of work force in the country was under no obligation to fulfil the Constitutional requirements. Meanwhile, several studies¹⁵ on Labour Market reveal that insignificant percentage of these communities was employed, while excluding large majority of them by way of discrimination. Thus, there is a serious need of implementing private reservations in the country, and the sooner the better!

Conclusions

To conclude it, Dr. Ambedkar played a seminal role in the framing of the Indian Constitution. He used all his experience and knowledge in drafting the Constitution. In his capacity as the Chairman of the Drafting Committee, he hammered out a comprehensive workable Constitution into which he incorporated his valuable views. He gave free India its legal framework, and the people, the basis of their freedom. To this end, his contribution was significant, substantial, and spectacular. Dr. Ambedkar's contribution to the evolution of free India lies in his striving for ensuring justice—social, economic and political—for one and all.

Notes

¹Naval, TR (2000). *Law of Prevention of Atrocities on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes*.

² Reddy KV.(2015). *Bahujan Politics in India: Beyond Reservations*. New Delhi: Trans-knowledge Book Co.

³ As part of Hindu religious practice of four-fold social hierarchy, caste played a divisive role in the Indian society for over thousands of years. Based on the birth of an individual, a Hindu can be excluded socially and otherwise.

Yet, the political regimes that effected the Constitutional provisions were status quoist and thus just rights are inaccessible to the marginalized communities so far. So the need of the hour is to implement the Constitution in its true spirit, which is humanitarian beyond doubt. It will enable the Indian society to overcome all social and economic evils that the Nation is faced with. The Indian Constitution was designed in such a way that all its citizens are equal before it as “one man one vote and one vote one value”, was advocated by Dr. Ambedkar. However, this sort of equality has been achieved in the political sense to an extent, but not beyond.

Socially and economically, all Indians are hardly alike. Besides the casteist social hierarchy that created havoc in the Indian society, the process of globalisation had undermined the Indian state and its policy initiatives and responses to reservations in recent decades. Unless the constitutional vision of Dr. Ambedkar is realized, there cannot be social harmony that he had always struggled and lived for.

- ⁴Galanter, Marc. (1998). 'The Abolition of Disabilities: Untouchability and the Law', in J. Michael Mahar (ed), *The Untouchables in Contemporary India*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications.
- ⁵Manuwadi mindset refers to that casteist mental makeup which seeks to justify and promote the 'varnashramadhrama', whereby the prevalent unequal social hierarchy is continued unabated in various forms of Indian social life. As a result of such social cleavage, the upper castes that practice casteist discrimination (manuwadisamaj) dominate over the vast mass of lower castes (bahujansamaj), which ultimately become the victims of manuwadi rule in the country.
- ⁶ Reddy, K.V., op.cit. p.109.
- ⁷Ambedkar, B.R. (1989). *Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol.I*. Bombay: Government of Maharashtra.
- ⁸ While it was adopted on November 26, 1949, the same was implemented with effect from January 26, 1950.
- ⁹ Constituent Assembly Debates, (1989). Vol.I, Government of India, New Delhi: Lok Sabha Secretariat.
- ¹⁰ The aim of the bill was to codify the rules of Hindu law scattered in numerous decisions of the High Court and of the Privy council, which form a bewildering mostly to the common man and give right to constant litigation.
- ¹¹Sastry, V.R. and G. Ram Reddy (ed) (2014). *Empowerment: State, Governance and Beyond*. New Delhi: Research India Press.
- ¹² The father of Indian Constitution, as part of drafting chairperson of the Constitutional scheme of reservations in education and employment, he had played an incredible role for Dalits and Adivasis in the initial decades of independence.
- ¹³ Even these reservations were never implemented beyond 10% in the middle category of posts.
- ¹⁴ 10th Five year Plan, Planning Commission of India, New Delhi
- ¹⁵ Sukhdev Thorat and others (ed), (2005). *Reservation and Private Sector*. New Delhi: Rawat Publication.