

## **B.R. AMBEDKAR**

### **Life Sketch of B.R. Ambedkar**

Ambedkar born on 14th April 1891 was the most towering figure among the Dalit leaders. In 1917 he joined the Baroda State Service after returning from his studies in the USA and the United Kingdom, as part of the terms of his scholarship agreement. He worked in the city of Baroda, the place of the ruling family of Gaikwad, which financed his studies abroad. He worked as secretary in the defense office of the Maharaja of Baroda State. Ambedkar worked for the protection of dalit rights and upliftment of the status of the Dalits. In 1924, he started legal practice in Bombay and founded the *Bahishkrit Hitkarni Sabha* (Depressed Class Institute) to uplift the Dalits. Henceforth, he started his movement and took the cause of the Dalits. He roused the dalit consciousness to fight for the eradication of dalit discrimination; to claim equality of treatment, status and opportunity; to equally enjoy all rights including civil, political, social and economic and respect for the dignity of persons. He was considered a crusader for the human rights of the Dalits in India.

Ambedkar was a great supporter of women's liberation. He blamed the verna system, which has not only subjugated Dalits but also women. He questioned *Manu Smriti* (Laws of Manu), the law book (Dharam-Shastra) of Brahminic Hinduism and attributed to Manu, the legendary first man and lawgiver. *Manu Smriti* prescribed the Dharma of each Hindu, stating the obligations attached to his or her social class and stage of life. It was hostile to the interest of lower caste people and women. It prohibited re-marriage of widows. He felt that *Manu Smriti* was solely responsible for the downfall of Hindu women. He encouraged the Dalits to embrace Buddhism to liberate their own selves from Hindu subjugation. Hence he fought for the right to choose ones' faith.

He adopted various means to safeguard dalit rights. Ambedkar launched a movement against dalit discrimination by creating public opinion through his writings in several periodicals such as *Mook Nayak*, *Vahishkrit Bharat*, and *Equality Janta*, which he started for the protection of dalit rights. He also launched numerous movements. One of the memorable struggles of the Dalits was the Vaikom Satyagraha in Travancore in Maharashtra, which asserted the right of the Dalits to worship in Hindu temples without hindrance. Ambedkar also fought for the rights of workers and peasants. In the late 1920s and especially in the 1930s when he had formed his Independent Labour Party, he took up the cause of tenants (from both the dalit Mahars and the caste Hindu

Kunbis) in the Konkan region of Maharashtra. he demand for safeguards and protection of Scheduled Castes (earlier called Depressed Class) has a long history dating to Montague-Chelmsford Reform of 1919 during the British Raj period. Ambedkar had been closely involved in the struggle to give Scheduled Caste people solid statutory safeguard. He was a delegate at the Round Table Conference in London, where he asked for separate electorate for the Dalits. It is not a surprise that subsequently Ambedkar saw to it that the welfare of the Scheduled Caste people were guaranteed in the 1949 Constitution of India in the form of reservation in legislative, employment and educational fields. Ambedkar was a great champion of the dalit cause because he succeeded in turning the depressed class movement into a revolutionary movement throughout India.

### **Writings of B.R. Ambedkar**

Ambedkar has made several major contributions in social sciences. His scholarly writings include:

- i. The untouchables, Who are they?
- ii. Who are the Shudras?
- iii. States and Minorities
- iv. Emancipation of the Untouchables
- v. Annihilation of Caste

### **Understanding Dalit**

In general terms Dalit refers to the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and the Other Backward Classes (OBC). But in political sense, term Dalit refers to the Scheduled Castes. This term was first used by the British in Government of India Act, 1935. They were generally considered as untouchables. So Mahatma Gandhi had replaced the term with 'Harijans' which means the man of God. According to Hindu Code of Conduct untouchables belongs to the lowest rank of hierarchy with different names like shudras, chandals, antyajas etc. Ambedkar's movement had led to the development of the term 'Dalit' which indicates a political and social; awareness. Ambedkar had adopted a different approach and philosophy for the emancipation of Scheduled Castes. Ambedkar wanted the liberation of dalits through creating an egalitarian society. But it was not possible in Hindu social structure, which was

quite hierarchical in nature and placed the dalits at the bottom. So he asserted that the dalits should come forward and have to fight for themselves, for which Ambedkar provided them with the mantra of- educate, organize and agitate.

### **Subaltern approach of Ambedkar**

The involvement of Ambedkar in the field of politics, created the new dimensions for social reforms. According to him unless and until the downtrodden do not fight for their rights and for themselves then no one could bring them out of their problems. Self-awakening, is the best way to remove the evils in society. Ambedkar in his subaltern approach used to preach that liberty can not be received as a gift rather it has to be fought for. Self-elevation is not achieved by the blessings of others but only by one's own struggle and deed. Ambedkar provided the mission and vision to the people who were lacking the courage within themselves.

According to Ambedkar in Hindu religion the Vedas, smritis and shastras were used as a tool to inflict severe punishment against the dalits or untouchables. So he viewed that these Vedas, smritis and shatras are just a system of rule, which deprived the untouchables from their basic needs and creates the discrimination in the society. So there is nothing wrong in destroying this religion and it is not even irreligious.

Another major aspect of Ambedkar's subaltern approach is the formulation of Indian nationalism. It included the national perception and aspirations of the downtrodden. Ambedkar's alternative form of nationalism, in opposition to the dominant discourse of Hindu nationalism as represented by Raja Rammohan Roy, B.G. Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawahar Lal Nehru and Shyama Prasad Mukherjee on the one hand and Communist- secular- socialist nationalism represented by M. N. Ror, R. P. Duta, T. Nagi Reddy and E. M.S. Namboodri on the other, are not only distinct but are also original. Whereas the Hindu nationalism on strengthening the Brahminical supremacy in the post-colonial India, the communist-secular nationalism, inspite of its endeavour to abolish class was myopic to the Dalit's tribulation as its ideologies also belonged to the upper castes like that of Hindu nationalism. Therefore, Ambedkar's 'Dalit-Bahujan- Samaj' formed an anti-hindu and anti-brahminical discourse of Indian nationalism. The main aim of this nationalism was to form a casteless and classless society where there will be no discrimination on the basis of birth and occupation.

## **Role in politics**

B.R. Ambedkar was a representative figure of Indian Politics in the Gandhian era. Gandhi was the unchallenged leader of Indian National Congress; Jinnah represented the separatist Muslim forces and Ambedkar was the main spokesman of Depressed Classes in India. Both Gandhi and Ambedkar were the champions of the Depressed Classes. Ambedkar had been born in an untouchable family and had suffered from humiliation on that account. By his exertions and perseverance he proved himself the unchallenged leader of the Depressed Classes in India as well as a statesman of national stature. Decades have passed since independence and Ambedkar's death. At the distance of time it is perhaps worthwhile to evaluate his role and personality in proper historical perspective. For most of his life Ambedkar worked outside the mainstream of national politics. He worked for the Depressed Classes' uplift within the political and constitutional framework of the imperialist era. He sincerely felt that being socially treated as an untouchable, he could not get a status of equality and dignity within the Congress politics which was dominated by Caste Hindu politicians. Mahatma Gandhi realized Ambedkar's mental state and said: "He is pronounced as belonging to the Depressed Classes and as being untouchable. Intellectually he is superior to thousands of intelligent and educated caste Hindus. His personal cleanliness was as high as that of any of us. Today he is an eminent lecturer in law. Tomorrow you may find him a Judge of the High Court. In other words there is no position in the Government of this country to which he may not aspire or rise and to which an orthodox Brahmin can rise." Ambedkar pointed out that though the Caste Hindu Congressmen adopted a radical stand in politics, in social matters they were traditionalists and upheld social inequality. Gandhi also felt that many Congressmen supported his anti-untouchability programme only out of political consideration and that they had no hearty support for this programme. Even though Ambedkar kept aloof from the political programme and activities of the National Congress, yet he cannot be branded as protégé of the British imperialism. He fearlessly criticized the failings of the British Government. He pointed out that the British Government supported the cause of Depressed Classes only out of ulterior political motives and gave undue weightage to the Hindu conservatives. Ambedkar professed and proclaimed that the uplift of the Depressed Classes was the be all and end-all of his life. He did not show any eagerness to earn the reputation of a nationalist leader. This is why he fearlessly and frankly

expressed his views for the cause of Depressed Classes and quarrelled with Congress and even Mahatma Gandhi. In September 1932, when Mahatma Gandhi announced his decision to fast unto death, protesting against the provision of separate electorates for the Depressed Classes in the British Prime Minister's Communal Award, and when practically the whole nation backed Gandhi's stand, Ambedkar criticized Gandhi and called his fast " a political stunt". Gandhi took Ambedkar's views seriously and finally agreed to reservation of seats for the Depressed Classes in joint electorates, which was embodied in the Poona Pact. Ambedkar was a social revolutionary. He endeavoured to rouse self-consciousness and self respect among the Depressed Classes. He advised them to be lionine heroes instead of remaining as innocent as goats. He aimed at eradicating social distinctions, based on caste and Varna, and establishing a social order, based on liberty, equality and fraternity. At the fag-end of his life he with his followers embraced Buddhism, as he considered Buddhism, to be a humanitarian religion, based on liberty, equality and fraternity. As Ambedkar worked outside the mainstream of Congress politics and also criticized the Congress, he was suspected by many to be a separatist and pro-British. But all along he remained a patriot. He used to say that patriotism was not the monopoly of Congress and that one could be patriotic without becoming a Congressman. He considered the uplift of the backward sections of the society to be more important than mere political emancipation of the country. Political freedom was meaningless without the elevation of the backward sections of the society. Mahatma Gandhi also held similar views as he thought of the concept of Swaraj in terms of the meanest of the countrymen. Swaraj without extinction of caste had no meaning for Ambedkar. Even though Ambedkar had quarreled with Congress and Gandhi on certain basic issues, on the eve of independence he accepted the invitation of the Congress to join the Union Government and played his role in the building of the nation. As the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution he played the major role in hammering a new constitution. He took all care to enshrine the progressive ideas and ideals of the National Congress in the Constitution. Generally Ambedkar is known as the father of Indian Constitution. Dr. K.V.Rao has described him as the mother of the Constitution as he gave constitutional shape to the ideas of Congress rather than his own. He held the portfolio of Law in Jawaharlal Nehru's first Cabinet. Because of his differences with the Congress and Prime Minister Nehru, he resigned from the Union Government. Ambedkar is generally regarded as the great protagonist of reservation of seats

in legislature and posts in Government. But towards the end of his life, when he embraced Buddhism with his followers, he advised the Scheduled Castes to stand on their own legs instead of depending on crutches. Ambedkar is a rare personality in the national life of India. He was an economist, a jurist, a social revolutionary, a constitution-maker, an able parliamentarian, an administrator, and above all a constructive statesman of extraordinary calibre. He had entered public life as a well equipped soldier with Ph.D from the Columbia University, D.Sc from London School of Economics and Bar-at-Law from Gray's Inn. Born as a "social leper" (as the untouchables were being treated in those days) Ambedkar could rise to the stature of a towering personality in the national politics through perseverance as well as a profound sense of self-respect and human justice.

### **Critical Appraisal**

Ambedkar had talked about the exploitation of the untouchables or the dalits but this exploitation is not always the social dimension. There are also the other sources of exploitation like economic exploitation, cultural exploitation also which results in the marginalization of the dalits. While he acknowledged the possibility of diverse religious and moral standpoints that were reasonable he did not see them as equally predisposed towards freedom, equality and fraternity. Reservation for the SCs as a tool to bring equality can never be the only solution for the empowerment of the dalits.