

Dr. B.R AMBEDKAR AND UPLIFTMENT OF UNDERPRIVILEGED CLASSES

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Abstract

Ambedkar was the first among the galaxy of social reforms in India, who made a legal and political approach to the social problems in India and had given many contributions to Indian people and Indian society. Ambedkar told the Depressed Classes that they should stop observing caste and untouchability among themselves. Untouchability is the practice of discriminating various individuals and groups based on their caste and the jobs done by them. Ambedkar focused the world attention on the civic, social and political rights and liberties of the depressed classes, made untouchability a burning topic of the days, raised it to an international importance, and gave it global publicity.

Key Words: Upliftment, Underprivileged Classes, Depressed Classes, Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, Other Backward Classes, etc

INTRODUCTION

Ambedkar was the first among the galaxy of social reforms in India, who made a legal and political approach to the social problems in India and had given many contributions to Indian people and Indian society. The life of Ambedkar is a saga of great struggle of man who in spite of being born in a family of untouchables, rose to great heights and occupied prominent positions, entirely by dint of his own merit and hard work. His achievements in other fields, especially his quite well known among a number of social reformers Ambedkar was the first to fight for the political and legal rights of untouchables. Dr. Ambedkar's main contribution is the struggle he started for the equal rights of untouchables. He was a man of sterling qualities and was wedded to the cause of the poor and weaker sections of society.

Ambedkar rose to eminence as a social reformer and a leader of the Depressed Classes of India. As such, he worked hard for their upliftment from the downtrodden position they were living in, as a result of social, economic, religious and political disabilities, sanctioned by religion and imposed by custom. The Indian society, according to him was a most undemocratic society, where the people were compartmentalized into classes and castes, not according to aptitude, ability or profession but because of birth, and this position to continue indefinitely, the son confirming himself to the hereditary calling of his father.

The main aim and mission of Ambedkar's life was to try to lead the Depressed Classes towards a higher social, political and economic status and to free them from the stigma of untouchability that lay upon their foreheads. In other words, he desired to secure for the Depressed Classes, complete equality, and equality at par with the Hindus. Ambedkar realized that for this extremely difficult aim, he would have to plan an all-round attack on the system of Caste and Untouchability. The first step in this direction would be for him to explain in a convincing manner the defects, shortcomings, and evil impacts of the caste-system and how they hindered the removal of Untouchability, apart from leading to dismal, negative, disunited and separatist trends in the Hindu Society. He wrote a number of books for this purpose. But the greatest contribution of Ambedkar lies in the fact that as a leader of the Depressed Classes, he was able to awaken them to an awareness of their lowly existence and the life of degradation and ignominy that they were leading.

He made them conscious of their weakness and told them how these rendered them powerless. In short he enthused in them a new spirit of restlessness, a questioning attitude and a determination to have justice done. It is on this account that he is known as a regenerator of their spirit and the inaugurator of the self-Respect Movement among the Untouchables. He made them conscious of their united strength and their power to vote. He organized them and led them to agitate in a peaceful manner for the vindication of their rights. "Education, Organization and Agitation" were the key-words of his 'Self-Respect Movement'.

He had aroused and awakened them against social injustice and installed in them the spirit of self-reform, self-emancipation, self-reliance, self-respect and self-confidence. He tried to free their minds of the inferiority complex that these people had because of their belief that they belonged to the lowest strata of the Hindu society, and which was inculcated in their minds by custom and usage, sanctioned by religion. But this was only the spadework for future reforms. Immediately he laid great emphasis on education-schooling for the Depressed Classes children and all possible facilities like hostels, libraries, books and stationery. Ambedkar himself was instrumental in getting a number of such institutions opened.

Finally, Ambedkar told the Depressed Classes that they should stop observing caste and untouchability among themselves. “Charity must begin at Home”. He encouraged them to participate in inter-caste dinners and contract marriages amongst the various untouchable castes’ ranks, he believed. If they could not do this, they would not be just on their part to ask the Hindus to do away with the institutions of caste and untouchability. Ambedkar himself never missed any opportunity to attend such inter-Caste feasts and marriages. And finally, he organized them for joint action, on peaceful and constitutional lines. He trained them for Satyagraha. He made them conscious of the power accruing from their right of franchise. In short, he brought about a great change in the life, outlook and general behaviour of the “Untouchables”.

This was so far as his programme of the uplift of the Depressed Classes was concerned. There was still much more to be done. He had to arouse the conscience of the Hindus, explaining to them the injustice and inhumanity involved in the practice of untouchability and pointing out to them how ugly the face of Indian Society looked with this stigma of untouchability upon its forehead. While Ambedkar carried on his work in the direction of arousing the Depressed Classes to the injustice involved in the caste system and untouchability, he also carried on the work of organizing them for agitation against these social wrongs.

He worked equally hard right from the beginning of his career to stress upon social legislation for the Depressed Classes. He believed that while efforts for social reform must continue steps should be taken to bring about a change in the attitude of society and departure from the existing norms of behaviour. Intrinsicly this is a slow process but a very essential one. Until this change comes social legislation was necessary to protect the weaker section from social persecution. The two were supplementary to each other. This, one has to agree, was a very sound approach to the Depressed Classes problems.

His love for the Depressed Classes was unbounded. He was very sad in the later years of his life it is stated, because there would be not proper leader for “these poor ignorant people” after he would die, and also because the fruit of his labour had reached the educated persons more than the uneducated. Ambedkar stated; “I have not been able to fulfil my mission. I wanted to do more for the Scheduled Castes People, and to see them as a governing class in my life. Whatever I have been able to do, is being enjoyed by the educated people. I now wanted to divert my attention to the uneducated masses, but life seems short. The second worry to my mind is that I wanted that somebody from the Scheduled Castes should come forward and take the responsibilities from me. There, however, seems to shoulder such a heavy responsibility”.

Whatever may Ambedkar’s own estimate of the work done by him be, his contribution in attempting to elevate the mental, moral, physical, religious, intellectual and political standards of the Depressed Classes cannot be underestimated. But that was not at all. He had wanted to expose and explain the defects like the caste system and untouchability that had crept into the Hindu society through the ages; and how they were weakening its structure and demoralizing the Hindu Society in general. As early as 1916 he had studied the problem of caste and written his paper on its origin, growth and spread. In 1936 again he made a complete exposition of caste in his lecture “Annihilation of Caste”. The purpose of both these writings was largely fulfilled, it must be realized. It led to an introspection attitude among the progressive Hindus, and also among the social reformers

Untouchability is the practice of discriminating various individuals and groups based on their caste and the jobs done by them. Untouchability is practiced for a very long time. It works on the Indian caste system hierarchy. The untouchables usually bear inhuman treatment because they belong to the lower caste. They have been going through various kinds of discrimination in almost all places. The term Dalit for the untouchables is derived from the Sanskrit which means broken or downtrodden. Some people believe that the system of untouchability only prevails in India but it is also prevalent in other countries such as Japan, Tibet, and Korea. The castes have been derived from Vedic texts which divide people into four major groups; Brahmans-Priests and elite people, Kshatriyas-Warriors, Vaishyas-Small Businessmen and Merchants, Shudras-Sanitary workers. Thus, these differences in the people of ancient India were mostly based on caste and profession of the people.

After fighting for years against exercising dominance over the oppressed class, the practice of untouchability still has its marks in many societies around us. Even educated people follow these practices. Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi were among the prominent leaders who fought very hard for the abolition of the practice of untouchability. Thus, the hard work of such people gave a rightful chance to the Dalits to prove themselves and enhance the chance of equality, harmony, and brotherhood in the society. After several movements and struggles to abolish the practice of untouchability, laws were made in the constitution to accommodate the interests of the oppressed classes. Article 17 of the Indian Constitution abolished untouchability and declared it as a punishable act.

According to this, no one can restrict the Dalits or Harijans from entering temples, streets, buses, etc. They are free to use all public services with respect and dignity. Also, no one can refuse from selling anything to the Dalit people. The government also gives reservation to these castes. Reservation means that a certain percentage of places in government colleges and jobs are reserved for the people from lower classes. It, therefore, ensures that their oppression in the past does not affect the progress of their present and their future. The reservation also aims at providing them a fair chance of education which is beneficial for them along with their families and generations to come.

CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS FOR THE UPLIFTMENT OF THE DEPRESSED CLASSES

As the Chairman of the Drafting Committee, Ambedkar was closely associated with drafting of the Constitution for free India. As the unquestioned spokesman of the untouchables, Ambedkar kept in mind the interests of Scheduled Castes while drafting the Constitution. As a matter of fact, Ambedkar was a party to general consensus in the Constituent Assembly that the term 'Backward Classes' would cover three principle components:

- ❖ Scheduled Castes
- ❖ Scheduled Tribes
- ❖ Other Backward Classes.

And Ambedkar addressed himself to the task of securing social justice for all backward classes in the country under the mandate of a new Constitution.

Fundamental Rights

Ambedkar was convinced of the need for a Bill of Rights in the Indian Constitution. He was continuously pleading for an elaborative system of fundamental rights for the minorities in particular and all the citizens in general. His fight for social justice was the main plank in his struggle as the leader of the minorities. He was also convinced that social justice could not be secured unless it was enshrined in the Constitution itself. One of the first tasks to which the Constituent Assembly addressed itself was the formulation of a Bill of Rights with a pride of place accorded to social justice and non-discrimination.

A comprehensive charter of rights was soon evolved through various stages in the Assembly and Committees. In the Indian Constitution, provisions aimed at preventing discrimination and promoting social justice are known as 'Fundamental Rights'. Fundamental Rights in the Indian Constitution are more elaborate and comprehensive than the Bill of Rights in any other Constitution, because, India being a heterogeneous society, has diversity of religions and culture and social conditions. They are intended to provide not only security and quality of citizenship but also certain standards of conduct, citizenship, justice and fair play.

The Fundamental Rights enshrined in the Indian Constitution are:

- ❖ Guaranteeing equality before the law and equal protection of law (Article 14)
- ❖ Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth (Article 15)
- ❖ Equality of opportunity in matters of public employment (Article 16)
- ❖ Abolition of untouchability (Article 17)
- ❖ Prohibition of traffic in human beings and forced labour (Article 23)

Ambedkar's efforts to abolish social inequality, social stigma and social disabilities in our society culminated in these provisions. In nutshell it may be said that Ambedkar and the founding fathers of our Constitution emphasized that the objective of the Constitution was to establish an egalitarian society where rights were guaranteed to not a few but to all. They firmly believed that right to equality of opportunity has no meaning unless the vast disparities in society are reduced. Political liberties and individual freedoms are of little value when the fear of starvation compels the vast majority of the people to the will of a few.

Right to private property has no meaning for those who have no roof over their heads. Right to leisure or freedom to choose one's profession conveys nothing to an unemployed person. The Indian constitutional format is remarkable in respect of human rights, as a significant and unique attempt at conflict resolution. It seeks to achieve a balance between political and civil rights on the one hand and social and economic rights on the other or between the individual rights and demands of social justice. The whole scheme is based on a philosophy postulating a dialogue between individualism and state control.

Directive Principles of State Policy

While the Fundamental Rights guarantee the rights and liberties of the individual against arbitrary state action, the Directive Principles seek to emphasize economic and social goals. It was the intention of the founding fathers of Indian Constitution to incorporate into the Constitution concepts and principles that should determine governmental activity, which would bring about a social and economic change in the country. Ambedkar defended the Directives Principles of State Policy in the following words:

Whoever captures power will not be free to do what he likes with it. In the exercise of it, he will have to respect these instruments of instructions which are called Directive Principles. He cannot ignore them. He may not have to answer for their breach in a court of law, but he will certainly have to answer for them before the electorate at election time. What great value these directive principles possess will be realized well when the forces of right contrive to capture power. The Directive Principles strive to create a welfare state and a just social order without any economic exploitation. Article 38 contains the essence of these principles:

The State shall strive to promote the welfare of the people by securing and protecting as effectively as it may a social order in which justice, social, economic and political shall inform all the institutions of national life.

Special Provisions

The provisions of Part XVI of the Indian Constitution may be described as special provisions relating to certain classes - the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, the Anglo- Indians and the socially and educationally Backward Classes.

- ❖ Article 330 provides that seats shall be reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the House of the People.
- ❖ Article 331 provides for representation of the Anglo-Indian community by nomination by the President, in case that community is not adequately represented in the House of the People.
- ❖ Article 332 provides that seats shall be reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the Legislative Assemblies of the States.
- ❖ Article 333 provides for representation of the Anglo-Indian community by nomination by the Governor, in case that community is not adequately represented in the States' Lower Houses.
- ❖ According to Article 334, the period of such reservations is fixed as ten years from the commencement of the Constitution.
- ❖ Article 335 stipulates that the "claim of the members of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes shall be taken into consideration, consistence with the maintenance of efficiency of administration, in the making of appointments to services and posts in connection with the affairs of the Union or of a State".
- ❖ Article 336 deals with special provisions for appointments in certain services for the Anglo-Indian community.
- ❖ Article 337 deals with educational grants for the Anglo-Indian community.
- ❖ Article 338 provides for a Special Officer for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes to be appointed by the President, whose duty is to investigate all matters relating to the safeguards for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and to report to the President. For the purpose of Article 338, reference to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are to be construed as including references to such other backward classes as may be specified by the President on receipt of a report from a commission which may be appointed under Article 340 (1).
- ❖ Article 339 provides for the appointment of a commission to report in regard to the administration of the scheduled areas and the welfare of the Scheduled Tribes.
- ❖ Article 340 (1) provides for the appointment, by the President, of a commission to investigate the conditions of socially and educationally backward classes within the territory of India and the difficulties under which they labour and to make recommendations as to the steps that

should be taken by the Union or any State to remove such difficulties and improve their conditions etc.

Ambedkar focused the world attention on the civic, social and political rights and liberties of the depressed classes, made untouchability a burning topic of the days, raised it to an international importance, and gave it global publicity. His ceaseless hard struggle and his merciless hammering forced an opening for untouchables, and inaugurated an era of light and liberty. He awakened in them a sense of human dignity, of feeling of self-respect and a burning hatred for untouchability that was worse than slavery. This was major contributions to the untouchables.

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