
UNIT 12 B.R. AMBEDKAR

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12.1 INTRODUCTION

Babasaheb Ambedkar is one of the foremost thinkers of modern India. His thought is centrally concerned with issues of freedom, human equality, democracy and socio-political emancipation. He is a unique thinker of the world who himself suffered much humiliation, poverty and social stigma, right from his childhood, 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 M.K. Gandhi. He built civic and political institutions in India and criticised ideologies and institutions that degraded and enslaved people. He undertook several major studies on the economy, social structures and institutions, law and constitutionalism, history and religion with methodological rigour and reflexivity. He was the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution and defended its key provisions with scholarly precision and sustained arguments without losing sight of the ideals it upheld while, at the same time; holding firmly to the ground. He embraced Buddhism, recasting it to respond to modern and socially emancipatory urges, with hundreds of thousands of his followers and paved the way for its resurgence in Modern India.

12.2 LIFE SKETCH

Babasaheb Ambedkar (1891-1956) was born in the untouchable Mahar Caste in Maharashtra on 14 April, 1891. He suffered all kinds of social humiliations in childhood as well as in his

subsequent life on account of the stigma of untouchability. In the class room he was not allowed to sit along with the rest of the students. He had to drink water only in his hand-cup in school, poured by members of the upper castes from above. Learning Sanskrit language was denied to him. In spite of all these hurdles, he successfully completed his graduation from Bombay University and went on to do his Masters and Ph.D. from Columbia University in U.S.A. He was influenced by the liberal and radical thought currents in America and Europe, more particularly with the thought that emerged following the French Revolution. Struggles against racial discrimination in America helped him resolve to fight against caste-based oppression in India. He came to be deeply concerned with untouchability and caste system that prevailed in India. At the same time, he probed the impact that colonialism had on the economy, politics and social life of India.

His M.A. dissertation on *Administration and Finance of the East India Company* and his Ph.D. thesis on *The Evolution of the Provincial Finance in British India* at Columbia University and his D.Sc. dissertation on *The Problem of the Rupee – its Origin and Its Solution* were brilliant contributions to the analysis of colonial economy and politics and to anti-colonial economic thought.

After he completed his Ph.D. at Columbia University, he returned to serve the administration of Baroda Maharaja who had sponsored his education in America. But even after such exceptional qualifications, he had to suffer the pangs of untouchability in Baroda administration. He left his service and was for some time Professor of Political Economy at the Sydenham College of Commerce and Economics, Bombay. He made a representation before the Southborough Committee that preceded the Montague-Chelmsford reforms of 1919 and pleaded for separate representation to the depressed classes, as the untouchable and low castes and communities were then known. He started *Mooknayak*, a fortnightly in Marathi in January, 1920 and played a leading role in the first All-India Conference of Depressed Classes held that year, presided over by Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur. He joined the London School of Economics to do his D.Sc. which he completed in 1922 and was invited to the Bar-at-Law from Grey's Inn in the same year. He started his legal practice in Bombay in 1923 and played an active role in the political mobilisation and organisation of the untouchables. He formed the *Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha* (Depressed Classes Welfare Association) in 1924. In 1927, he was nominated to the Bombay Legislative Council. He led the famous Satyagraha at Chowdar Tank in Maliad demanding rights for untouchables from common water tank, from which they were hitherto barred, eventually leading to the burning of the *Manusmṛiti*. He started the fortnightly journal *Bahishkrit Bharat* in Marathi and formed two organisations, *Samaj Samata Sangh* and *Samata Sainik Dal* in 1927 to reinforce the demand for equality of the depressed classes. In 1928, the Depressed Classes Education Society, Bombay was founded. The fortnightly journal *Samata* too was brought out in the same year. During these years, Dr. Ambedkar remained active as the professor of law. In 1928, he made his deputation before the Simon Commission, enquiring into the issue of constitutional reforms in India. He led the Satyagraha at Kalram temple, Nasik demanding temple entry to untouchables in 1930. He presided over the First All India Depressed Classes Congress, held in Nagpur in 1930.

Dr. Ambedkar's emphasis on self-help and the task of emancipation of untouchables as primarily resting on themselves, his vision of Modern India and his ideas on rights, democracy and representation increasingly put him against the Indian National Congress and M.K.

Gandhi, its undisputed leader. This opposition was poignantly visible at the Round Table Conference in 1931 where Dr Ambedkar demanded separate electorate for the depressed classes, which, M.K.Gandhi, as the sole representative of the Congress vehemently opposed. M.K. Gandhi went on a fast unto death against the communal award of 1932 that granted separate electorate to the untouchables. Dr.Ambedkar negotiated on behalf of the Depressed classes and signed the Poona Pact, agreeing for the joint electorate with reservation for depressed classes, that led to the withdrawal of the fast by M.K.Gandhi.

In 1936, Dr Ambedkar founded the Independent Labour Party which contested 17 seats in the elections of 1937 in the Bombay Province and won 15 of them. The World War II and the demand of the Muslim League for Pakistan introduced new and complex issues in the national movement. Dr Ambedkar established a different party, the Scheduled caste federation in 1942 and was appointed as a member of the Viceroy's Council in the same year for a period of five years.

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 conceptualised, formulated and defended a free and egalitarian framework for public life in India with extensive safeguards for the disadvantaged and autonomy for religious minorities and linguistic and cultural groups in India.

Ambedkar 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 mourned by millions. He left behind a complex body of thought scattered across a large number of writings and speeches, an eventful public life spanning across civic and political life and a radical agenda for economic, social and cultural reconstruction.

12.2.1 His Writings

Dr. Ambedkar wrote several books. Unlike his contemporaries, he had done a lot of original research on his texts. Apart from writing the Indian Constitution as the Chairman of its Drafting Committee and defending it in the marathon debates of the Constituent Assembly, he wrote several books that reflect systematic thinking. Apart from his doctoral dissertations on *The Problem of the Rupee* (1923) and *The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India*(1925) he wrote *Annihilation of Caste*(1936), *Thoughts on Pakistan* (1940), *What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables*(1945), *Who were the Sudras?* (1946), *The Untouchables: who were They.and Why they became Untouchables?* (1948) , *States and Minorities* (1947), *Thoughts on linguistic States* (1955) and his magnum opus *The Buddha and his Dhamma* (1957) are the most important. Apart from them he wrote numerous articles, submitted learned memoranda, delivered lectures and commented on the issues in the journals he published.

12.9 B. R. AMBEDKAR'S THOUGHT AND IDEAS

Dr. Ambedkar's thought has many dimensions. There were very few issues that he left untouched. He formulated his opinion on many crucial questions that India was confronting during his times. His versatility is reflected in his social and political thought, economic ideas, law and constitutionalism.

12.3.1 Ideological Orientation

Dr Ambedkar described himself as a 'progressive radical' and occasionally as a 'progressive conservative' depending upon the context of demarcation from liberals, Marxists and others as the case might be. He was an ardent votary of freedom. He saw it as a positive power and capacity, enabling people to make their choices without being restrained by economic processes and exploitation, social institutions and religious orthodoxies and fears and prejudices. He thought that liberalism upheld a narrow conception of freedom which tolerated huge accumulation of resources in a few hands and the deprivation and exploitation that it bred. He thought that liberalism is insensitive about social and political institutions which, while upholding formal equality, permitted massive inequalities in the economic, social and cultural arenas. He argued that liberal systems conceal deep inequalities of minorities such as the conditions of the Blacks in U.S.A. and Jews in Europe. He further argued that liberalism was often drawn to justify colonial exploitation and the extensive injustices it sustained. Liberal stress on the individual ignored community bonds and the necessity of the latter to sustain a reflective and creative self. Further liberalism ignored the repression and the alienation of the self that exploitative and dominant structures bred. He found that liberalism has an inadequate understanding of state and the measures that state has to necessarily adopt to promote and foster good life. He felt that the principle of equality before law is truly a great advance as compared to the inegalitarian orders that it attempted to supplant but it is not adequate. He advanced stronger notions such as equality of consideration, equality of respect and equality of dignity. He was sensitive to the notion of respect and the notion of community was central in his consideration.

Ambedkar identified certain crucial areas on which he was in tune with Marxism. He argued that the task of philosophy is to transform the world, as Marx suggested in his theses on Feuerbach, and he saw the central message of the Buddha as demanding the same. There is conflict between classes and class-struggle is writ large in social relations. He argued that a good society demands extensive public ownership of the means of production and equal opportunity to everyone to develop his or her self to the fullest extent. He, however, rejected the inevitability of socialism without the intervention of human agency concretely working towards it; the economic interpretation of history which does not acknowledge the crucial role that political and ideological institutions play and the conception of the withering away of the state. He decried the strategy of violence as a means to seize power and called for resolute mass action to bring about a good society. He underscored the transformative effect of struggles in transforming those launching the struggles and the social relations against which they are launched. He further argued that a desirable political order can be created only by acknowledging a moral domain which he saw eminently expressed in the Buddha's teachings.

He was very critical of the Brahmanical ideology which, he felt, has been the dominant ideological expression in India. He argued that it reconstituted itself with all its vehemence by defeating the revolution set in motion by the Buddha. It subscribed to the principle of graded inequality in organising social institutions and relations; defended the principle of birth over the principle of worth; undermined reason and upheld rituals and priest-craft. It reduced the shudra and the untouchable to perpetual drudgery and ignominy. It defended inequality and unequal distribution of resource³ and positions and sanctified such measures by appeal to doctrines such as *karma-siddhanta*. It upheld the principle of the superiority of mental labour over manual labour. It had little sympathy towards the degraded and the marginalised. It left millions of people in their degraded condition, away from civilisation, and defended their abominable conditions. It had little place for freedom and for re-evaluation of choices, It parcellised society into umpteen closed groups making them unable to close ranks, foster a spirit of community and strive towards shared endeavours. It took away from associated life its joys and sorrows, emasculated struggles and strivings and deplored sensuousness and festivity. He constructed Brahmanism as totally lacking in any moral values and considerations based on such values.

Ambedkar was a bitter critic of Gandhi and Gandhism. He attacked Gandhi's approach to the abolition of untouchability, an approach that denied its sanction in the shastras and which called upon caste Hindus to voluntarily renounce it and make reparations for the same. Ambedkar felt that rights and humanity cannot be left to the mercy and prejudices of people who have developed a vested interest in undermining them. He did not demarcate the caste system and varna system, as Gandhi did, but saw both of them as upholding the same principle of graded inequality. Even if untouchability is abolished through the Gandhian appeal to conscience, which Ambedkar did not think possible, untouchables will continue to occupy the lowest rung of society as a layer of the shudras. He saw Gandhi not merely caving in to Hindu orthodoxy but reformulating such orthodoxy afresh, Gandhi was dispensing moral platitudes to untouchables and trying to buy them with kindness while letting others to promote their interests, without hindrance. He rejected the appellation 'Harijan' that Gandhi had bestowed on untouchables and poured scorn on it.

Ambedkar rejected many central notions as propounded by Gandhi such as Swaraj, non-violence, decentralisation, Khadi, trusteeship and vegetarianism. He subscribed to a modern polity with modern economy. This-worldly concerns were central to his agenda rather than other-worldly search. He felt that an uncritical approach to Panchayat Raj will reinforce the dominant classes in the countryside handing over additional resources and legitimacy to them to exploit the social classes and groups below them.

12.3.2 Reason and Rights

Ambedkar saw the modern era as heralding a triumph of human reason from myths, customs and religious superstitions. The world and man, he argued, can be explained by human reason and endeavour. The supernatural powers need not be invoked for the purpose. In fact the supernatural powers themselves reflect weak human capacities and an underdeveloped state of human development: He therefore saw the expression of human reason manifest in science and modern technology positively. If there are problems with regard to them then the same reason is capable of offering the necessary correctives. Further, he saw knowledge as eminently practical rather than speculative and esoteric. He felt that speculative knowledge

divorced from active engagement with practice leads to priest-craft and speculation.

Ambedkar's attitude to religion remained ambivalent. While he did not subscribe to a belief in a personal God or revelation, he felt that religion, as morality, provides an enduring foundation to societies and enables collective pursuit of good life. Such a religion elevates motives, upholds altruism and concern for others, binding people in solidarity and concern. It cares and supports and strives against exploitation, injustice and wrong-doing.

He argued that freedom, equality and fraternity are essential conditions for good life and a regime of discrete rights need to be constructed on them as the foundation. He understood rights not merely within the narrow confines of liberal individualism but as individual and group-rights. He defended both types of rights in the Constituent Assembly debates. Further, he argued for both civil and political rights and social and economic rights. He did not see them in opposition but as reinforcing one another. If there is a conflict between them, they have to be negotiated through civic and political forums. He also subscribed to the rights of minorities and cultural groups to maintain their distinctive beliefs and identities while at the same time affording them proper conditions to take their rightful place in public affairs. He defended preferential treatment accorded to disadvantaged communities not only for reasons of equality but also on grounds of egalitarian social structures, and for the pursuit of a sane and good society.

12.3.3 Religion

Ambedkar dwelt extensively on major religions of the world, particularly Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Buddhism. He wrote a great deal on Hinduism and Buddhism. The mainstream trajectory of religious evolution that he traced in early India was the Vedic society getting degenerated into Aryan society; the rise of Buddhism and the social and moral transformation that it brought about and the counterrevolution marked in the development of a specific ideological and political expression which he termed Brahmanism.

He found that the Hindu scriptures do not lend themselves to a unified and coherent understanding. They reflect strong cleavages within and across sects and tendencies. There are cleavages within the Vedic literature; the Upanishadic thought, often, cannot be reconciled with the Vedic thought; the Smriti literature is, quite often, in contention with the Sruti literature; gods come to be pitted against one another and Tantra is in contention with the smriti literature. The avatars of Hinduism, such as Rama and Krishna, cannot be held up for adulation as exemplaries. He saw the Bhagavadgita as primarily putting forward a set of arguments to save Brahmanism in the wake of the rise of Buddhism and the inability of the former to defend itself by appeals to rituals and religious practices.

Ambedkar developed a new interpretation of Buddhism and saw it as socially engaged. It privileged the poor and the exploited and was concerned with the sufferings and joys of this world. It does not subscribe to the existence of God or the eternity of soul. It upholds reason, affirms the existence of this world, subscribes to a moral order and is in tune with science. He saw the great values of freedom, equality and community as central to the teachings of the Buddha.

Ambedkar had both theological and sociological criticism against Christianity and Islam. Both

of them subscribe to a transcendental domain which, apart from its affront to human reason, beget authoritative and paternalistic tendencies. In a sense they dwarf human reason, freedom of enquiry and equality of persons. Their pronouncements cannot be reconciled with scientific reason. Christian belief that Jesus is the son of God militates against reason. Both these religions, he felt, accommodated themselves to graded inequality and ranking to different degrees. Their precepts have often led their adherents to resort to force and violence. He saw the Buddha standing tall against the protagonists of both these religions.

12.3.4 Caste

Ambedkar's understanding of caste and caste system underwent certain significant changes overtime. Initially he identified the characteristics of caste as endogamy superimposed on exogamy in a shared cultural milieu. He felt that evils such as sati, child-marriage and prohibition of widow-remarriage were its inevitable outcomes. Once a caste closed its boundaries, other castes too followed suit. The Brahmins closing themselves socially first gave rise to castes. Ambedkar continued to emphasise the endogamous characteristic of caste but roped in other features such as division of labour, absence of inter-dining and the principle of birth which he had initially considered as integral to endogamy. He also found that caste name is important for the continued reproduction of caste. He argued that castes as discrete entities have to be distinguished from caste system based on the principle of graded inequality. At the pinnacle of this system are the Brahmins. We argued that ranking on the basis of graded inequality safeguards the stability of the system and ensures its continued reproduction which simple inequality would not have permitted. The dissenting members are accommodated as another grade in the hierarchy of deference and contempt that deeply mark the caste system. Ambedkar thought that caste is an essential feature of Hinduism. A few reformers may have denounced it but for the vast majority of Hindus breaking the codes of caste is a clear violation of deeply held beliefs. The principles governing varna system and caste system are one and the same. Both of them uphold graded inequality and subscribe to the doctrine of birth rather than worth.

Ambedkar argued for the annihilation of caste without which wielding community bonds, and upholding freedom and equality becomes well-nigh impossible. He suggested inter-caste marriages and inter-caste dining for the purpose although the latter, he considered, is too feeble an exercise to constitute enduring bonds. He further argued that shastras which defend 'varnasl-ratndharma' have to be abandoned as they justify and legitimise graded organisation of society. He also felt that priesthood in Hinduism should be open to all the co-religionists on the basis of certified competence rather than on birth. At the same time he thought this project is well nigh impossible to be carried out because what is to be renounced is believed to be religiously ordained.

12.3.5 Untouchability

Ambedkar distinguished the institution of untouchability from that of caste although the former too is stamped by the same principle of graded inequality as the latter. Untouchability is not merely an extreme form of caste degradation but a qualitatively different one as the system kept the untouchable outside the fold and made any social interaction with him polluting and deplorable. He argued that in spite of differences and cleavages all untouchables share common disadvantages and meted out the same treatment by caste Hindus: they are

condemned to ghettos on the outskirts of the village, are universally despised and kept away from human association.

He did not subscribe to the position that untouchability has its basis in race. He saw it as a social institution defended by the ideology of Brahmanism. While he did not extensively probe the reasons for the origin of untouchability in one instance, he proposed a very imaginative thesis that untouchables were broken men living on the outskirts of village communities who, due to their refusal to give up Buddhism and beef-eating, came to be condemned as untouchables.

Given the deep-seated beliefs and practices of untouchability prevailing in India, Ambedkar thought that no easy solution can be found for the malaise. Removal of untouchability required the transformation of the entire society wherein respect and rights towards the other person becomes a way of life rather than a mere constitutional mechanism. Given the entrenched interests and prejudices revolving around the institution of untouchability, it was something too much to expect from entrenched groups. Therefore he felt that the primary burden of emancipating themselves fell on the untouchables themselves. Such self-help required not only struggles but also education and organisation. Further a constitutional democracy with preferences at various levels can help enormously in such an endeavour.

12.3.6 Constitutional Democracy

The major area of Ambedkar's work was on constitutional democracy. He was adept in different constitutions of the world particularly those that provided an expansive notion of democracy. Rule of law as a bond uniting people and according equal participation of people in collective affairs was quite central to his imagination. He was deeply sensitive to the interface between law on one hand and customs and popular beliefs on the other. He however felt that customs may defend parochial interests and popular beliefs might be deeply caught in prejudices and may not uphold fairness. They may not be in tune with the demands of time, morality and reason. But if law upholds freedom and democracy then it could be placed at the service of common good. Given the long-drawn prejudices and denial of justice in public culture he thought that the role of the state based on law and democratic mandate is crucial. He envisaged a democracy informed by law and a law characterised by sensitivity to democracy. Law upheld reason and morality but without the authoritative injunctions of law, the former had no teeth.

Such a stress on democracy and law made Ambedkar to strongly stress the autonomy of the state. State needs to transcend the parochial interests galore in society which often tend to reduce the state as an instrument of their purpose. He argued that ascriptive majorities which are permanent, and not amenable for political dissolution and reconstitution, too can be considered as parochial interests. They can undermine rights but at the same time pretend that they are upholding constitutional democracy.

12.4 SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SUPPORTIVE POLITY

Ambedkar was the first major theoretician in India who argued that consideration for the disadvantaged should be the constitutive basis of a state if the state is committed to the

upholding of rights. He developed a complex set of criteria to determine disadvantage. Untouchability was only one of the great social disadvantages, although it was one of the most degrading and despicable one. He concentrated on socially engendered disadvantages not because he was unaware of natural and hereditary disadvantages but he felt that most disadvantages are upheld by dominant social relations which attempt to convert them as natural disadvantages foreclosing attention to them and absolving larger society from any responsibility towards them. He left behind a system of safeguards for the disadvantaged in general and the untouchables in particular. He thought that a set of positive measures are a better guarantee than merely the moral conscience of society although the latter is a prerequisite to sustain such measures in the longer run.

With regard to a scheme of safeguards he advanced three types of measures although all these three types of measures were not seen by him as appropriate to all the disadvantaged groups and equally so. Their appropriateness is something to be worked out in response to the concrete conditions of the concerned group. He demanded an autonomous political representation to the disadvantaged groups not merely to ensure their political presence but to ensure that the concerned groups undertake their pursuits of development, preservation or reproduction, as the case may be, by themselves. He envisaged definitive constitutional measures for the purpose rather than merely rely on public conscience. He argued that such representation will enable these groups to take into account the larger and the common issues into account and pitch their specific demands accordingly. He sought reservation for the disadvantaged groups in public employment to the extent they fulfill the requirement for such employment. He felt that they would be inevitably marginalised if such support was not legally extended to them. He sought extensive supportive policy measures towards these groups so as to extend to them the benefits of various developmental and welfare measures that a state undertakes.

Ambedkar saw preferential measures as resting on an inclusive conception of rights rather than merely the goodwill or benevolence of the majority. In fact goodwill itself needs to be cultivated with an awareness of such rights. In the absence of such cultivation, goodwill and benevolence often collapse into narrow pursuit of interests masquerading themselves in the language of altruism.

12.5 SUMMARY

Ambedkar has often been portrayed as a leader who upheld the partisan cause of the untouchables. He was of course partisan and he upheld the cause of the untouchables as the most disadvantaged and reviled segment of the Indian society. But such partisanship and advocacy were grounded on a body of thought and ideas built on defensible arguments which he very ably and effectively deployed. He critically engaged with the ideas and ideologies in place in the world of his times and attempted to devise his own valuations and judgements on them. He did not cave in to their popularity and preeminence. He had a place for religion in the private domain as well as in the moral life of societies but such a place was grounded in good reason. An inclusive conception of rights and an assertion of this world was central to his understanding of public life. He was an ardent votary of democracy. But democracy cannot be confined to a mode of rule but needs to become a way of life. He was a trenchant critic of the caste system and untouchability and strove hard to put an end to them. He saw

divorced from active engagement with practice leads to priest-craft and speculation.

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social justice as an essential attribute of a good polity and suggested concrete measures for the same. His ideas mark him as different from his contemporary thinkers and today we regard him, and he is much relevant to us, for being so much different from others.

12.6 EXERCISES

1. Comment on Ambedkar's critique of liberalism.
2. What were Ambedkar's significant differences with Marx?
3. Highlight the characteristics of Brahmanism as an ideology.
4. Identify four issues of conflict between Gandhi and Ambedkar.
5. Discuss the significance of reason in Ambedkar's thought.
6. Highlight the conception of rights in Ambedkar's thought.
7. Review Ambedkar's understanding of Hinduism.
8. Why does Ambedkar regard Buddhism as appropriate to the modern world?
9. What do you think of Ambedkar's critique of Christianity and Islam?
10. Highlight the characteristic features of untouchability, according to Ambedkar.
11. Why does Ambedkar think that struggle against untouchability has to be launched on several fronts?
12. Highlight the reasons for Ambedkar's defence of constitutional Democracy.
13. Why does Ambedkar think that ascriptive majorities may spell doom to constitutional democracy?
14. Adduce Ambedkar's arguments for extending preferential treatment to the disadvantaged.
15. Outline the scheme of preferential treatment suggested by Ambedkar. From your reading and experience evaluate any one of these preferential schemes.
16. Why does Ambedkar think that caste system is impermeable to demands of Equality?
17. "Hinduism and caste system are inseparable". Do you agree?