

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar Eaely Life A Study

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Early life

The Young B.R. Ambedkar

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was born in the British-founded town and military cantonment of Mhow in the Central Provinces (now in Madhya Pradesh). He was the 14th and last child of Ramji Maloji Sakpal and Bhimabai Murbadkar. His family was of Marathi background from the town of Ambavade in the Ratnagiri district of modern-day Maharashtra. They belonged to the Hindu Mahar caste, who were treated as untouchables and subjected to intense socio-economic discrimination. B.R. Ambedkar's ancestors had long been in the employment of the army of the British East India Company, and his father served in the Indian Army at the Mhow cantonment, rising to the rank of *Subedar*. He had received a degree of formal education in Marathi and English, and encouraged his children to pursue education.

Belonging to the Kabir Panth, Ramji Sakpal encouraged his children to read the Hindu classics, especially the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. He used his position in the army to lobby for his children to study at the government school, as they faced resistance owing to their caste. Although able to attend school, Ambedkar and other untouchable children were segregated and given no attention or assistance from the teachers. They were not allowed to sit inside the class. Even if they needed to drink water somebody from a higher caste would have to pour that water from a height as they were not allowed to touch either the water or the vessel that contained it. Ramji Sakpal retired in 1894, and the family moved to Satara two years later. Shortly after their move, Ambedkar's mother died. The children were cared for by their paternal aunt, and lived in difficult circumstances. Only three sons—Balaram, Anandrao, and Bhimrao—and two daughters—Manjula and Tulasa—of the Ambedkars would go on to survive them. Of his brothers and sisters, only Ambedkar succeeded in passing his examinations and graduating to a higher level school. He later changed his name from "Sakpal" to "Ambedkar" with the encouragement of a Brahmin teacher.

Ramji Sakpal remarried in 1898, and the family moved to Mumbai (then Bombay), where Ambedkar became the first untouchable student at the Government High School near Elphinstone Road. In 1907, he passed his matriculation examination and entered the University of Bombay, becoming one of the first persons of untouchable origin to enter college in India. This success provoked celebrations in his community, and after a public ceremony he was given a biography of the Buddha by his teacher Krishnaji Arjun Keluskar also known as Dada Keluskar, a Maratha caste scholar. Ambedkar's marriage had been arranged the previous year as per Hindu custom, to Ramabai, a nine-year old girl from Dapoli.^[3] In 1908, he entered Elphinstone College and obtained a scholarship of twenty-five rupees a month from the Gayakwad ruler of Baroda, Sahyaji Rao III, for higher studies in the United States. By 1912, he obtained his degree in economics and political science, and prepared to take up employment with the Baroda state government. His wife gave birth to his first son, Yashwant, in the same year. B.R. Ambedkar had just moved his young family and started work, when his ailing father died on February 2, 1913.

Pursuit of education

B. R. Ambedkar, barrister

A few months later, Ambedkar was selected by the Gayakwad ruler to travel to the United States where he enrolled at Columbia University, with a scholarship of \$11.50 per month. Arriving in New York City, Ambedkar was admitted to the graduate studies program at the political science department. At Columbia, Ambedkar studied under John Dewey, who inspired many of his ideas about equality and social justice.

In 1916, he was awarded a Ph.D. for his thesis, which he eventually published in book form as *The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India*. His first published work, however, was a paper titled *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*. Winning his degree and doctorate, he traveled to London and enrolled at Gray's Inn and the London School of Economics, studying law and preparing a doctoral thesis in economics. The expiration of his scholarship the following year forced him to temporarily abandon his studies and return to India amidst World War I.

Returning to work as a military secretary for Baroda state, Ambedkar was distressed by the sudden reappearance of discrimination in his life, and left his job to work as a private tutor and accountant, even starting his own consultancy business that eventually failed. With the help of an English acquaintance, the former Bombay Governor Lord Sydenham, he won a post as professor of political economy at the Sydenham College of Commerce and Economics in Mumbai. He was able to return to England in 1920 with the support of the

Maharaja of Kolhapur, a Parsi friend and his own savings. By 1923 he completed a thesis on *The Problem of the Rupee*. He was awarded a D.Sc. by the University of London, and finishing his law studies, he was simultaneously admitted to the British Bar as a barrister. On his way back to India, Ambedkar spent three months in Germany, where he conducted further studies in economics at the University of Bonn. He was formally awarded a Ph.D. by Columbia University on June 8, 1927.

Fight against untouchability

As a leading Dalit scholar, B.R. Ambedkar had been invited to testify before the Southborough Committee, which was preparing the Government of India Act of 1919. At this hearing, Ambedkar argued for creating separate electorates and reservations for Dalits and other religious communities. In 1920, he began the publication of the weekly *Mooknayak (Leader of the Silent)* in Bombay. B.R. Ambedkar used this journal to criticize orthodox Hindu politicians and a perceived reluctance of the Indian political community to fight caste discrimination. His speech at a Depressed Classes Conference in Kolhapur in March 1920, impressed the local state ruler Shahu IV, who shocked orthodox society by dining with Ambedkar and his untouchable colleagues. Ambedkar exhorted the Mahar community, which had eighteen sub-castes, to hold a joint communal dinner in which they all participated.

“Upon his return from studies in Europe in 1924, B.R. Ambedkar established a successful legal practice, and also organized the Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha (*Group for the Wellbeing of the Excluded*). Its motto was *Educate, Agitate, Organize.*”

In 1926, he became a nominated member of the Bombay Legislative Council. By 1927, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar decided to launch active movements against untouchability. He led the satyagraha at Mahad to exercise the right of untouchables to draw water from the Chavdar Tank. He ceremonially took a drink of water from the tank, after which local caste Hindus rioted, and Brahmins took elaborate measure for the ritual purification of the tank.

On January 1, 1927, B.R. Ambedkar organized a ceremony at the Koregaon Victory Memorial near Pune, which commemorates the defeat of the Peshwa's forces and the inauguration of British rule. The names of Mahar soldiers who fought with the British are inscribed on a marble tablet. Later that year in a Depressed Classes Conference on December 24, he condemned the ancient Hindu classical text, the *Manusmriti (Laws of Manu)*, for justifying the system of caste discrimination and untouchability. Ambedkar and his supporters caused a public scandal by burning copies of the texts. He was appointed to the Bombay Presidency Committee to work with the all-European Simon Commission in 1928. This commission had sparked great protests across India, and while its report was ignored by most Indians, Ambedkar himself wrote a separate set of recommendations for future constitutional reforms. In 1929, he ended his second journal, *Bahiskrit Bharat (Excluded India)*, and rechristened it *Janata (The People)*.

Critic of Gandhi and the government

B.R. Ambedkar grew increasingly critical of mainstream Indian political parties for their failure to address the inequities of the caste system. He criticized the Indian National Congress and its leader Mohandas K. Gandhi, whom he accused of reducing the untouchable community to objects of pity. B.R. Ambedkar was also dissatisfied with the failures of British rule, and advocated a political identity for untouchables separate from both the Congress and the British. At a Depressed Classes Conference on August 8, 1930, B.R. Ambedkar outlined his political vision, insisting that the safety of the Depressed Classes hinged on their being independent of the Government and the Congress both:

We must shape our course ourselves and by ourselves, Political power cannot be a panacea for the ills of the Depressed Classes. Their salvation lies in their social elevation. They must cleanse their evil habits. They must improve their bad ways of living.... They must be educated, There is a great necessity to disturb their pathetic contentment and to instill into them that divine discontent which is the spring of all elevation.

In this speech, B.R. Ambedkar criticized the Salt Satyagraha launched by Gandhi and the Congress. B.R. Ambedkar's criticisms and political work had made him very unpopular with orthodox Hindus, because Gandhi had been one of the first Indian leaders to call for the abolition of untouchability and discrimination. B.R. Ambedkar felt their efforts were too superficial and he increasingly found prominence and popular support amongst the untouchable community. He was invited to attend the Second Round Table Conference in London in 1931. Here he sparred verbally with Gandhi on the question of awarding separate electorates to untouchables. A fierce opponent of separate electorates on religious and sectarian lines, Gandhi feared that separate electorates for untouchables would divide Hindu society for future generations.

In August 1932, the British Government's passed the Communal Award which granted separate electorates to minority communities, including Muslims, Sikhs, and the Dalit. To oppose this decision Gandhi then began a *fast-unto-death* while imprisoned in the Yeravada Central Jail of Pune in 1932. Exhorting orthodox Hindu society to eliminate discrimination and untouchability, Gandhi asked for the political and social unity of

Hindus. Gandhi's fast provoked great public support across India, and orthodox Hindu leaders, Congress politicians and activists such as Madan Mohan Malaviya and Pawlankar Baloo organized joint meetings with B.R.Ambedkar and his supporters at Yeravada. Fearing a communal reprisal and killings of untouchables in the event of Gandhi's death, B.R.Ambedkar agreed to drop the demand for separate electorates, and settled for a reservation of a specific number of seats. The agreement was known as the Poona Pact. B.R.Ambedkar was later to criticize Gandhi's fast as a gimmick to deny political rights to the untouchables.

Critic of religion

B.R.Ambedkar delivering a speech to a rally at Yeola, Nasik on 13th October 1935. In 1935, Ambedkar was appointed principal of the Government Law College, a position he held for two years. Settling in Bombay, Ambedkar oversaw the construction of a large house, and stocked his personal library with more than 50,000 books.^[6] His wife Ramabai died after a long illness in the same year. It had been her long-standing wish to go on a pilgrimage to Pandharpur, but Ambedkar had refused to let her go, telling her that he would create a new Pandharpur for her instead of Hinduism's Pandharpur which treated them as untouchables. His own views and attitudes towards orthodox Hindus hardened even though momentum for the fight against untouchability was increasing. Later that year, speaking at the Yeola Conversion Conference, B.R.Ambedkar announced his intention to convert to a different religion and exhorted his followers to leave Hinduism. He vowed, *I solemnly assure you that I will not die a Hindu.*^[6] He would repeat his message at numerous public meetings across India.

In 1936, B.R.Ambedkar founded the Independent Labour Party, which won 15 seats in the 1937 elections to the Central Legislative Assembly. He published his book *The Annihilation of Caste* in the same year, based on the thesis he had written in New York. B.R.Ambedkar's book, strongly criticizing Hindu religious leaders and the caste system in general, won great support. He protested the Congress decision to call the untouchable community *Harijans (Children of God)*, a name coined by Gandhi.^[6] Ambedkar served on the Defence Advisory Committee and the Viceroy's Executive Council as minister for labour. Between 1941 and 1945, he published a large number of highly controversial books and pamphlets, including *Thoughts on Pakistan*, in which he criticized the Muslim League's demand for a separate Muslim state of Pakistan. With *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, B.R.Ambedkar intensified his criticisms of Gandhi and the Congress, charging them with hypocrisy.^[7] In his work, *Who Were the Shudras?* Ambedkar attempted to explain the formation of the Shudras, the lowest caste in the Hindu hierarchy. He also emphasized how Shudras are separate from Untouchables. Ambedkar oversaw the transformation of his political party into the All India Scheduled Castes Federation, but it performed poorly in the elections held in 1946 for the Constituent Assembly of India. In writing a sequel to *Who Were the Shudras?* in 1948, B.R.Ambedkar again lambasted Hinduism in the *The Untouchables: A Thesis on the Origins of Untouchability: The Hindu Civilisation...* is a diabolical contrivance to suppress and enslave humanity. Its proper name would be infamy. What else can be said of a civilisation which has produced a mass of people ... who are treated as an entity beyond human intercourse and whose mere touch is enough to cause pollution? B.R.Ambedkar was also critical of Islam and its practices in South Asia. While justifying the Partition of India, he condemned child-marriage, the mistreatment of women, caste practices, and slavery in Muslim communities. He said,

No words can adequately express the great and many evils of polygamy and concubinage, and especially as a source of misery to a Muslim woman. Take the caste system. Everybody infers that Islam must be free from slavery and caste. While slavery existed, much of its support was derived from Islam and Islamic countries. While the prescriptions by the Prophet regarding the just and humane treatment of slaves contained in the Koran are praiseworthy, there is nothing whatever in Islam that lends support to the abolition of this curse. But if slavery has gone, caste among Musalmans (Muslims) has remained.

He wrote that Muslim Society is "even more full of social evils than Hindu Society is" and criticized Muslims for sugarcoating their sectarian caste system with euphemisms like "brotherhood." He also criticized the discrimination against the Arzal classes among Muslims who were regarded as "degraded." He criticized their fanaticism on the grounds that their literalist interpretations of Islamic doctrine made their society very rigid and impermeable to change. He further wrote that Indian Muslims have failed to reform their society unlike Muslims in other countries like Turkey. In a "communal malaise," both groups (Hindus and Muslims) ignore the urgent claims of social justice.

While he was extremely critical of Muhammad Ali Jinnah and the communally divisive strategies of the Muslim League, he argued that Hindus and Muslims should segregate and the State of Pakistan be formed, as ethnic nationalism within the same country would only lead to more violence. He cited precedents in historical events such as the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and Czechoslovakia to bolster his views regarding the Hindu-Muslim communal divide. However, he questioned whether the need for Pakistan was sufficient and suggested that it might be possible to resolve Hindu-Muslim differences in a less drastic way. He wrote that Pakistan must "justify its existence" accordingly. Since other countries such as Canada have also had communal issues with the French and English and have lived together, it might not be impossible for Hindus and Muslims

to live together. He also warned that the actual implementation of a two-state solution would be extremely problematic with massive population transfers and border disputes. This claim would prove to be almost prophetic when the violent Partition of India took place after Independence.

Architect of India's constitution

The chairman of the constitution drafting committee B.R. Ambedkar Despite his increasing unpopularity, controversial views, and intense criticism of Gandhi and the Congress, B.R. Ambedkar was by reputation an exemplary jurist and scholar. Upon India's independence on August 15, 1947, the new Congress-led government invited B.R. Ambedkar to serve as the nation's first law minister, which he accepted. On August 29, B.R. Ambedkar was appointed chairman of the *Constitution Drafting Committee*, charged by the Assembly to write free India's new Constitution. B.R. Ambedkar won great praise from his colleagues and contemporary observers for his drafting work.

B.R. Ambedkar's study of sangha practice among early Buddhists and his extensive reading in Buddhist scriptures played a significant role in this work. Sangha practice incorporated voting by ballot, rules of debate and precedence and the use of agendas, committees and proposals to conduct business. Sangha practice itself was modeled on the oligarchic system of governance followed by the tribal republics of ancient India like the Shakyas and the Lichchavis. As a result, even though Ambedkar used Western models to give his Constitution shape, its spirit was Indian with tribal influences.

The text prepared by B.R. Ambedkar provided constitutional guarantees and protections for a wide range of civil liberties for individual citizens, including freedom of religion, the abolition of untouchability and the outlawing of all forms of discrimination.^[7] B.R. Ambedkar argued for extensive economic and social rights for women, and also won the Assembly's support for introducing a system of reservation of jobs in the civil services, schools and colleges for members of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, a system similar to affirmative action. India's lawmakers hoped to eradicate the socio-economic inequalities and lack of opportunities for India's depressed classes through this measure, which had been originally envisioned as temporary and on an as needed basis. The Constitution was adopted on November 26, 1949 by the Constituent Assembly. Speaking after the completion of his work, B.R. Ambedkar said:

I feel that the Constitution is workable; it is flexible and it is strong enough to hold the country together both in peace time and in war time. Indeed, if I may say so, if things go wrong under the new Constitution the reason will not be that we had a bad Constitution. What we will have to say is that Man was vile.

B.R. Ambedkar resigned from the cabinet in 1951 following the stalling in parliament of his draft of the *Hindu Code Bill*, which sought to expound gender equality in the laws of inheritance, marriage and the economy. Although supported by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, the cabinet and many other Congress leaders, it received criticism from a large number of members of parliament. Ambedkar independently contested an election in 1952 to the lower house of parliament, the Lok Sabha, but was defeated. He was appointed to the upper house of parliament, the Rajya Sabha in March 1952 and would remain a member until his death.

Conversion to Buddhism

In the 1950 B.R. Ambedkar turned his attention to Buddhism and traveled to Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) to attend a convention of Buddhist scholars and monks. While dedicating a new Buddhist vihara near Pune, B.R. Ambedkar announced that he was writing a book on Buddhism, and that as soon as it was finished, he planned to make a formal conversion to Buddhism. B.R. Ambedkar twice visited Burma in 1954; the second time in order to attend the third conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Rangoon. In 1955, he founded the Bharatiya Bauddha Mahasabha, or the Buddhist Society of India. He would complete his manuscript and final work *The Buddha and his Dhamma* in 1956, although it would be published posthumously.

B.R. Ambedkar organized a formal public ceremony for himself and his supporters in Nagpur on October 14, 1956. Accepting the Three Refuges and Five Precepts from a Buddhist monk in the traditional manner, Ambedkar completed his own conversion. He then proceeded to convert an estimated 380,000 of his supporters who were gathered around him. Taking the 22 Vows, B.R. Ambedkar and his supporters explicitly condemned and rejected Hinduism and Hindu philosophy. He then traveled to Kathmandu in Nepal to attend the *Fourth World Buddhist Conference*.

Death

Since 1948, Ambedkar had been suffering from diabetes. He was bed-ridden from June to October in 1954, owing to clinical depression and failing eyesight.^[8] He had been increasingly embittered by political issues, which took a toll on his health. His health worsened as he continued to try to keep a full schedule through 1955. Shortly after completing his final manuscript *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Ambedkar died on December 6, 1956 at his home in Delhi. A Buddhist-style cremation was organized for him at Chowpatty beach on December 7, attended by hundreds of thousands of supporters, activists and admirers.

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