

Defender of Human Rights B. R. Ambedkar

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Introduction

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was born as the fourteenth child of Mahar parents, Ramji and Bhimabai, on 14 April 1891 at Mhow, in present-day State of Madhya Pradesh. The Mahars are considered low- caste and treated as untouchables Dalits by higher-caste Hindus. They are mainly found in the State of Maharashtra. The father and grand father of Ambedkar served in the army and were of well-to-do family. But the stigma of being members of Mahar community caused their social oppression in a caste-ridden society. B.R.Ambedkar had a bitter taste of discriminatory treatment due his caste at an early age. He and his brother had to carry gunny bags to sit on inside the classroom because they were not allowed to sit on classroom chairs. They were denied drinking water facilities, and excluded from games and mixing with other children. Even teachers would not check their notebooks for fear of pollution. Thus sowed the seeds of discontentment about the Hindu social system in the life of B.R.Ambedkar.

School, College Life

He did his early education in Satara in Maharashtra State and then moved on to Bombay. In 1912, he passed his B. A. Examination with distinction from the prestigious Elphinstone College with the scholarship and encouragement from the Maharaja of Baroda State. In 1913, with a condition that he would serve the Baroda State for ten years, he was chosen by Maharaja of Baroda State for higher studies at Columbia University in the USA. This was followed with a trans-Atlantic shift to the United Kingdom where he studied at the University of London. While studying abroad, he mixed with students of various nationalities and races, which was an eye-opener for him.¹

Hindu Code Bill

He Joined the Union Cabinet of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru during the 1946-1951 period. He resigned on 27 September 1951 to protest the deferment of the discussion in the parliament of the Hindu Code Bill supposedly due to the coming 1952 elections. B.R.Ambedkar saw the Bill as a very important reform of Hindu law, with reform proposals on marriage, divorce, and monogamy. Despite failing health, he plodded on with his advocacy for the cause of the Dalits. He came to Nagpur in October 1956 for his conversion to Buddhism and a couple of months thereafter on 8 December 1956 breathed his last.²

B.R.Ambedkar Movement for Human Rights

During the last decade of the 19th century, many Indian leaders born among the lower castes like Narayan Guru (1854-1928), Jotiba Phule (1827-1890), and Ramaswamy Naicker 1879-1973) launched massive struggles for the dignity of Dalits throughout India. B.R.Ambedkar was the most towering figure among these Dalit leaders.³ 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. However, despite his foreign education, he had to endure insults while at work due to his low caste origin. He was a victim of the cruel dalit discrimination. He suffered the ignominy of having document files hurled by peons at his face

He suffered the humiliating experience of not being served drinking water during official functions. At the officer's club, he had to sit in a corner and keep his distance from the other members belonging to higher castes. He also had difficulties in finding a rented house, as he was not allotted government bungalow. He stayed in an inn owned by Parsis. One morning, as he was getting ready to go to work, a dozen Parsis, allwielding sticks, rushed up to his room screaming that he had polluted the inn and insisted on his immediate departure. He begged them to let him stay for a week longer since he hoped to get his government bungalow by then. But they were obdurate. If they found him at the inn that evening, they said God help him. After spending much of the

¹ Shyam Lal and K. S. Saxena,(ed), *Ambedkar and Nation Building*, Rawat Publication,Delhi,1998,p, 254.

² Yogendra Makwana(ed), *Ambedkar-A crusader, Ambedkar and Social Justice*,New Delhi, Publication Division, Government of India,1992,p, 68.

³ M. S. Gore, *The Social Context of an Ideology* , Sage Publication,Delhi, 1993, p,92.

day in a public garden, B.R.Ambedkar, in utter frustration and disgust, left for Bombay by the 9 pm train.⁴

Human Rights Dalits

These scorching incidents goaded B.R.Ambedkar to work 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 – 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. The Hindu religious belief that “All human beings are not born equal” creates caste-based discrimination against the Dalits that leads to various forms of violence against them including public humiliation, torture, rape, beating and killing. Reacting to the values of Hinduism, Rabindranath Gore wrote, “We do not value Hinduism, we value human dignity, We want Equal Rights in the society. We will achieve them as far as possible while remaining within the Hindu fold or if necessary by kicking away this worthless Hindu identity.”⁵

Manu Smriti

B.R.Ambedkar was a great supporter of women's liberation. He blamed the varna system, which has not only subjugated Dalits but also women. He questioned *Manu Smriti* (Laws of Manu), the law book (Dharm-Shastra) of Brahminic Hinduism and attributed to Manu, the legendary first man and lawgiver.⁶ *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 one's faith. After embracing Buddhism, B.R.Ambedkar said, “Unfortunately for me I was born a Hindu Untouchable, I solemnly assure you I will not die as a Hindu.” He practiced what he advocated and became a Buddhist in 1956. He also wrote about the French revolution ideas of fraternity, liberty and equality. He thought that the French and Russian revolutions failed to realize all three ideas. He believed that they could not all be realized except through the way of the Buddha.⁷

Means and Ends for Struggle

He adopted various means to safeguard dalit rights. B.R.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. Another very significant movement was Mahad to assert the rights of Dalits to take water from public watering places. B.R.Ambedkar organized the Dalit rally to assert their legal right to take water from the Chowdar tank. The Chowdar tank of Mahad was made a public tank in 1869. In 1923, the Bombay Legislative Council passed a resolution to the effect that the Dalits be allowed to use all public watering places. The Mahad Municipality passed a resolution on 5 January 1927 to the effect that the Municipality had no objection to allowing the Dalits to use the tank. But the higher castes were hesitant in allowing the Dalits to use the tank. Soon after this resolution was passed a conference of the Dalits of the Colaba district was held for two days. Ambedkar also convened a conference on 18-20 March 1927 on this issue. On 20 March 1927, the conference exhorted the Dalits to go to the Chowdar Tank and exercise their right to take water from it. The Hindus who had exhorted them to be bold instantly realized that this was a bombshell and immediately ran away. But the electrified Dalits led by Ambedkar marched in a procession through the main streets and for the first time drank the water from Chowdar tank.⁸

Independent Labour Party

Another temple entry movement took place at the Kalaram temple at Nasik in Maharashtra State. On 13 October 1935, at a conference convened on the issue, B.R. Ambedkar recounted the experience of the depressed classes

⁴ Ibid., pp.93-97.

⁵ Vasant Moon, (ed), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, volume- 3, Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1987, p, 462.

⁶ Shyam Lal and K. S. Saxena, op.cit., p,255.

⁷ Vasant Moon, (ed), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, volume- 6, Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1987, p, 365.

⁸ Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, Vol-5 Bombay, Government of Maharashtra, 1990, p,248-252.

and the immense sacrifices made by them to secure minimum human rights under the aegis of Hinduism. B.R.Ambedkar 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. With the support of radicals then in the Congress Socialist Party, the Independent Labour Party organized a huge march of 20,000 peasants to Mumbai in 1938, the largest pre-independence peasant mobilization in the region. In the same year, B.R.Ambedkar Joined with the Communists to organize a strike of Mumbai textile workers in protest against a bill about to be introduced by the British Government to curbe labor strikes. B.R. Ambedkar took the lead in condemning the bill in the assembly and argued that the right to strike was simply another name for the right to freedom of assembly.⁹

British Raj and Protection for Dalits

The 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. B.R.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. B.R.Ambedkar was a great champion of the dalit cause because he succeeded in turning the depressed class movement into a revolutionary movement throughout India. Today India has witnessed the oppressed classes walking on the streets of cities and villages with confidence and poise, of course many despicable acts of discrimination and violence against the dalits still occur. Yet the juggernaut of equality is rolling on remorselessly and forcefully.¹⁰

Conclusion

B.R.Ambedkar is India's foremost human rights activist during the 21th century. He is an emancipator, scholar, extraordinary social reformer and a true champion of human rights. It can be said that he is one of the highly regarded Indians whose emancipation and empowering role for oppressed groups that cut against the gender divide has inspired subaltern groups all over the world. All should try to take inspiration from Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's life and work for the creation of a just and gender-neutral world. In establishing an egalitarian society in India which is based on liberty , equality and fraternity and Social Justice, Human Rights B.R.Ambedkar, the great Indian Constitution maker, struggled to find out avenues and means.

Endnotes

⁹ A.K.Majunder and Bhanwar Singh,(ed), *Ambedkar and Social Justice*,New Delhi: Radha Publications, 1997, p, 159-165.

¹⁰ Dhananjay Keer, *Ambedkar Life and Mission*,Popula Publication,Bombay 1962,p,73.

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