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Legacy of Dr. Ambedkar and Its Relevance for 21st Century India

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Abstract

One of the largest democratic countries in the world, India became independent on August 15th, 1947. When the reconstruction of independent India began, many great leaders of that time, like Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Dr. Ambedkar, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, etc., worked together, keeping their ideological differences away. After 3 years of independence, the constitution of India was created, a constitution that lives up to the aspirations of the people by respecting the diversity of the whole of India. Due to the visionary thinking of the makers of independent India, today, it has made its place among the powerful countries of the world, but it is not that at present there is no problem in front of the country. Socio-economic disparity, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, etc. are still the major challenges before the development today. In recent years, the privatisation of the economy, the changing definitions of nationalism, the division of society on the basis of religion and identity politics have given rise to new types of challenges. The biggest misconception about Dr. Ambedkar is that he is still seen by a large section of society as a leader of the Dalit community, while the legacy of Dr. Ambedkar is beyond this characterization and holds central place in the periphery of real humanity. This paper explores and gives an insight into Dr. Ambedkar's contribution to Indian society and try to understand the relevance of Dr. Ambedkar's legacy in the context of the major issues and challenges of 21st century India.

Introduction

Dr. Ambedkar's life journey from being born in a community that has historically been placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy and to making his mark as a great emancipator of millions of marginalised people, architect of the Indian constitution, philosopher, economist, social reformer, jurist, astute politician, and lastly, father of modern India, is one of the inspiring episodes of Indian history which will continue to benefit the people of this country and the world community for centuries. In 2006, Columbia University published a list of the best scholars in the world, in which the first name was Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, and it is no surprise that the person who was deemed as the leader of the most downtrodden community in India was ranked first in the list of the world's leading scholars by an excellent international institution.¹ Dr. Ambedkar was tasked with writing the constitution for independent India; it was a constitution that left no one out, and it was the result of Ambedkar's knowledge and extensive experience that the world's most comprehensive and laudatory constitution was written in the spirit of establishing an inclusive and democratic India.²

Legacy of Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar

Dr. Ambedkar's legacy is multi-faceted. Its sphere of influence extends beyond the upliftment of the community in the lower rungs of society to a wide range of societal issues, including the economy, politics, religion, culture, human rights, social justice, law, education, and gender, which is relevant even today. Ambedkar's life had spanned the first part of the twentieth century and all the decisive phase of India's freedom struggle. However, he had fought for a correlated but different freedom struggle, one for the liberation of the most oppressed sections of Indian society. This was a liberation movement wider and deeper than that of fighting colonialism, focusing on the kind of new nation that was to be built. This struggle did not emerge in a vacuum; it was the zenith of protracted and widespread movements of those classified as 'Shudras' and 'Untouchables' in the traditional hierarchy.³ Dr. Ambedkar was a pioneer of human rights his foundations of human rights can be observed easily in the writings and works of Dr. Ambedkar. The same reflections can be seen from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was signed on 10th December 1948 across majority of the nations, including the so-called imperial powers and newly independent states. Everyone agreed to certain principals for the 20th century. As the architect of fundamental rights, having faced

discrimination on the basis of birth and understanding rationally that the Varna system of caste is not merely the issue of untouchability but much beyond that, Ambedkar clearly suggested that if Hindu society has to improve, it must be formed on the basis of equality, fraternity and liberty.⁴

Ambedkar was a great votary of women's emancipation. He believed that the Varna System not only subjugated untouchables but also women. He also attempts to ensure the safety and security of women at work. In November 1932, Ambedkar wrote to AV Thakkar, known as Thakkar Bappa, General Secretary of the Anti-Untouchability League. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, which ended segregation in public places and banned employment discrimination on the basis of race, colour, religion, sex, or national origin, is considered one of the crowning legislative achievements of the civil rights movement.⁵ He came up with the idea of equality of opportunity in political theory, the idea that people ought to be able to compete on equal terms or on a "level playing field" for advantaged office positions. Much of the misery and poverty of the depressed classes is due to the absence of opportunity due to the absence of equality of opportunity, which in its turn is due to untouchability. In the social context, we have in India a society based on the principal of graded inequality, which means elevation for some and degradation for others. In an economic context, we have a society in which there are some who have immense wealth and many who live in severe poverty. It is also called a difference in the means of production. In a political context, we have equality through one man, one vote, and one vote, one value. Ambedkar organised numerous campaigns to bring equality in socio-economic and political contexts to the public.⁶ In 1919, in his testimony before the South Borough Committee in preparation of the Government of India Act, Ambedkar's opinion was that there should be a separate electoral system for the untouchables and other marginalised communities. In 1920, Ambedkar launched a newspaper called "muknayak" (leader of the silent) with the assistance of Shahaji II, the Maharaja of Kolhapur.⁷

Dr. Ambedkar's was one of the influential educationists of his time; his philosophy of education can be understood through his writings, speeches, party manifestos, and correspondence. He gave prime importance to education in his life. He wanted to reconstruct the structure of Indian society. His approach towards education, therefore, was more constructive and structural.⁸ He considered education the basis of social,

economic, and political revolution. For Dr. Ambedkar, education alone creates a sense of new thinking and awakening among the hitherto oppressed people in India. He wanted it for all and not restricted only to a few classes of society. As a humanist, Dr. Ambedkar was in favour of imparting education for the development of human personality. ⁹ In the view of Dr. Ambedkar, education must focus on serving human interests and achieving social amelioration. It ought to aim at human development, for which remoulding the mind must be the major concern of education. It is only through education that one can enlighten oneself and organise social forces against tyrannical and oppressive elements of traditional societies in India. Dr. Ambedkar's educational philosophy is seen in the three principles¹⁰ that he inherited from his master, Gautam Buddha. They are Pradnya (Knowledge or Wisdom), Sheel (Character), and Karuna (Compassion). He placed a high value on these three principles and attempted to instil them in the masses. He says, "Knowledge is the foundation of a man's life." He wanted to imbibe 'Samyak Dyan' (right knowledge) as it was propagated by Gautam Buddha in his eight-fold path amongst the downtrodden. He changed the entire mindset of the lower strata of society towards education. His philosophy of education was emancipatory in nature. Lower caste people were systematically made slaves of the upper castes in the name of the caste system, and they established religious hegemony over them. Ambedkar rejected the Hindu Social Philosophy propounded in Hindu religious scriptures, which has made the caste system and the system of graded inequality the law of Hindu social life.

Dr. Ambedkar was a great economist too. The Reserve Bank of India was conceptualized from the Hilton Young Commission's recommendation, which considered Ambedkar's guidelines laid out in *'The Problem of the Rupee: Its Origin and Its Solution'*. In an essay of Dr. Ambedkar entitled –*"Small Holdings in India and their Remedies"* first published in 1918 in Journal of the Indian Economic Society Vol. I, he presented a detail account on India's agrarian problems basically small landholdings and how even in this situation raising agricultural productivity agricultural can may be made profitable affairs. The problem facing Indian agriculture was not only that the holdings were small but that they were also scattered. For example the average size of holding varied from 25.9 acres in Bombay presidency to one acre or two in Pimpala, Saudgar near Poona. Again as mentioned above these small holdings were fragmented. For example in Ratnagiri District a holding of 20 gunthas was fragmented into 3 plots in Thane District a holding of one acre and nine

gunthas consisted of six plots while in Surat District a holding if an acre consisted of as many as 14 plots.”¹¹ “..diminutive size of holdings is said to be greatly harmful to Indian Agriculture.” Dr Ambedkar further adds, “The evils of small holdings no doubt, are many. But it would have been no slight mitigation of them if the small holdings were compact holdings. Unfortunately they are not”.¹² In the view of Dr. Ambedkar the small size and fragmentation of holding resulted in inefficient use of resources which by raising the cost of production, ultimately culminated in low agricultural productivity. Thus on the one hand overwhelmingly large population depended on agriculture that being a major national industry; and on the others its productivity was low. Now since the small and scattered holdings were said to be a cause of low productivity, enlargement and consolidation of holdings was considered a natural solution. Dr. Ambedkar did not agree with the view that the law of inheritance was the chief cause of subdivision of land. He attributed it mainly to an enormous pressure of population on land. He held that ‘when farming was the only occupation to get a small piece of land was better than to have none.¹³ Dr. Ambedkar thus went to the root of the problem. He argued; the grievance (of small holdings) lies in the circumstances which put a premium on these small pieces of land. The premium is no doubt due to the large population depending solely on agriculture to eke out its living. It is not therefore the law of inheritance that is the evil it is the high pressure (of population) on land which brings it into operation. People cultivate the small piece not because their standard of living is low but because it is the only profitable thing for them to do at present. If they had something more profitable to do they would never prefer the small piece.¹⁴

Relevance for 21st Century India

It will be important to analyse how Dr. Ambedkar is relevant in 21st century India, adding it to the present perspective of each of his important contributions. As such, he presented his views in the context of human rights and social justice in British India and independent India and said that the nature of society should be free from discrimination and should be established on the principal of equity and equality. Today, India ranks among the world's leading countries in terms of human rights abuses. Even today, the weaker section of society is the victim of many types of exploitation and oppression. Today we are seeing gender discrimination as a serious problem in the country. Dr. Ambedkar has already given his views in this regard. He has clearly accepted that there

should be no distinction of any kind between men and women. The thoughts given by Dr. Ambedkar in the context of women's empowerment are important today because today's society has started to understand that no society can ever prosper by ignoring women. In the context of education, Dr. Ambedkar said that it is the 'milk of a lioness whoever drinks it will roar'. His education philosophy is so progressive that empty ideals have no place in it. In today's democratic society, only Dr. Ambedkar's democratic education is needed, which can establish an egalitarian society by educating such people. Dr. Ambedkar knew that agriculture was like the backbone of the Indian economy. In the context of land holding, his views are still important from the Indian perspective. Dr. Ambedkar advocated independent journalism. He himself used to bring out the magazine. The way in which the character of journalism has declined, the writings and independent thoughts of Dr. Ambedkar is like a mirror. Indian society will always be indebted to the work that Dr. Ambedkar has done while being the Law Minister in independent India and as the father of the Constitution. Employment law, child marriage, the Hindu code bill, and provisions made in the constitution for inclusive India have become the most important basis for protecting the rights of the people today. India is a pluralistic country and pluralism is its beauty, but the way it has been challenged by religious fundamentalists in the present scenario, Dr. Ambedkar's thoughts on nationalism and India's pluralistic values are like a source of a light in the deep darkness of hate politics, identity conflicts and radical nationalism.

Conclusion

Dr Ambedkar was a genius person. His legacy does not require proof because his theoretical and practical contributions to our society are inspiring and will continue to be a source of insight for millions of people worldwide. It is a matter of fact that India is the fastest growing nation in the world. But at the same time, the continuous attack on the fundamental values of this country by dividing forces is a major threat to social harmony and national prosperity. The problems of corruption, nepotism, suprematism and authoritarianism, rampant poverty, unemployment, and socio-economic inequalities are some big hurdles in the path of the formation of an inclusive and sustainable society in India. In such a situation, Dr. Ambedkar's thoughts on social, economic, and political aspects of human life are very relevant, not only to understand the root cause of these problems but also to find resolutions.

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