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## DR. AMBEDKAR, MAHATMA GANDHI AND DALIT MOVEMENT

N.S. Gehlot

Dr.B.R. Ambedkar, the leader of the depressed classes of his time (1891-1956) should be viewed as a social scientist, reformist, thinker, writer, statesman and a constitutional authority. He is known as the messiah of the social revolution against all kinds of oppressive and discriminative practices prevailing in our social structure. He was vehemently opposed to the caste system and the practice of untouchability as propounded by the Hindu religion. To do away with these social evils Dr. Ambedkar evolved a theory of safeguards and protections for the backward classes and weaker sections of society for the cause of social justice and equality, which he evolved on the basis of his experience of discrimination and inequalities during his childhood. He, therefore, developed a concept of social justice and security of its own kind along with political equality and sought its due place in the constitutional law of India. For his relentless struggle Dr. Ambedkar was dubbed as the 'Modern Manu' or social reformer who, throughout his life, wrote extensively on the political and social problems facing Indian society. He was concerned with problems, namely, caste system, untouchability, backwardness and exploitation. On his part he suggested numerous solutions to transform the Indian society on the basis of democratic values, secular credentials and social equality. In that sense, Babasaheb was a man of thought and action, as his political and social philosophy revolves around humanism, equality, liberal democracy, secularism and social cohesion.<sup>1</sup> During his life-period, he struggled for the cause of social justice and organized the scheduled castes to seek their due place in the new democratic order.

From his childhood, Ambedkar was opposed to the Hindu Code based on caste-system, which has segregated individuals into compartments and units on the basis of birth and parental vocation or occupation. According to him the caste system is unique in the world; it contributed to economic imperialism, political tyranny and social fascism of the Brahmins in Indian society. For him, the caste system of the Hindu

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society, based on ascription and social dominance, is like a steel-frame of Hinduism. He felt that the caste concept in India was more ancient than the Vedas and no such comparable institution can be found elsewhere, encompassing features like complexity, exploitation, discrimination and rigidity of caste-system as prevailing in India. Dr. Ambedkar viewed the institution of caste as inhuman, undemocratic and authoritarian and so he regarded it contrary to the very concept of social justice and economic equality. His firm belief was that the caste system would retard the social unity and generate caste conflicts and wars in society, cutting at the roots of democracy. He, therefore, preferred to follow the political approach in dealing with the problems of untouchables and identified their interests, by propounding a theory of safeguards and reservations as a solution.

To achieve this purpose, he considered the awakening of the inner consciousness of the depressed classes as of foremost importance. He wanted that the Dalits should gain self-pride, self-improvement and self-confidence so as to have an equal share in the society. For this mission, the first Mahar Conference of Untouchables and Non-Brahmins was convened in 1927 in a town of South of Bombay and the issues relating to psychological dimensions of untouchability, creating self-pride, ways and means of redressing their grievances via legal means in a parliamentary democracy etc. were discussed therein. While seeking solution to the problems on hand Dr. Ambedkar gathered the impression that only untouchables could lead untouchables; and he never sought the support of any caste Hindu-led groups for his mission, namely, social justice and equality. It is pertinent to mention that when he launched his Satyagraha to establish equality among the Hindus by asking the people to allow the Harijans to enter the temples, he was not supported by either Gandhiji or Hindu leaders or the Indian National Congress. Nevertheless, he was committed to reforming Hinduism itself with the help of legal and constitutional means. After Independence, while quitting the Nehru Cabinet in 1951, he realized that the conversion of the Harijans into Buddhism was the only alternative to escape from the dominance of Hinduism (i.e. Brahmanism) and from the curse of untouchability, so as to enjoy an equal status and to live with pride and self-respect on par with others in the Hindu community. Dr. Ambedkar founded the Buddhist Society of India, in 1954, for this purpose and since then, it has revived its proselytism in earnestness.

It is true that Gandhiji himself denounced the practice of untouchability operating in the Hindu society and launched the anti-untouchability campaign for awakening the consciousness of the Hindus to the wrongs inflicted on the Harijan community. He also aroused the Harijans to their rights and status. But Dr. Ambedkar was not satisfied with the political approach of Gandhiji and his bona-fides. Consequently, Dr. Ambedkar

emerged as a prominent leader of the Harijan community at the time of the Poona Pact in Sept. 1932. He vehemently criticised the way of handling the problems of the Harijans by Gandhiji, thus expressing a lack of faith in the path of Truth and Ahimsa as a means in bringing a change of heart of the Hindus. In fact, Gandhiji viewed untouchability as a political problem and not as a social problem. But Dr. Ambedkar was afraid that the Gandhian approach in dealing the problem of untouchability was likely to make caste Hindus more powerful and untouchables weaker. Dr. Ambedkar's vociferous criticism in this regard resulted into some sort of a personality clash between the two leaders of great stature.

Against this backdrop, it is worthwhile to mention the acrimony between Gandhiji and Dr. Ambedkar over the upliftment of untouchables, dating back to the Second Round Table Conference in London in 1931, in which Gandhi vehemently opposed Ambedkar's demand for separate electorates for the Dalits. The intense feelings of the Dalits against Gandhi was manifested by black flag demonstrations against him on his return to Bombay. Dr. Ambedkar himself did not mince words when it came to criticising Gandhi. He said: "I insist that if I dislike Gandhi, it is because I love India more .. The worship of Gandhi and service to India are two very different things and may even be contradictory of each other". In another scathing comment he said: "I hate all the mahatmas and firmly believe that they should be done away with. I am of the opinion that their existence is a curse to the nation in which they are born. They try to perpetuate blind faith in place of intelligence and reason".

In 1932, the Communal Award of the British government granted separate electorates for the depressed classes. M.K. Gandhi took up a fast unto death in his prison cell in Poona, protesting that separate electorates were a device which would separate the untouchables from Hindu society for ever. As Gandhi weakened, Dr. Ambedkar capitulated, but only when some Hindu leaders pledged their help in the removal of untouchability, and agreed that the untouchables would have seats in all elected bodies. Dr. Ambedkar, however, never reconciled himself to this outcome. According to him, it forced the Dalits to agree to live at the mercy of the Hindus. Subsequent events showed that Gandhi was wrong when he claimed in August 1934 that 'untouchability was on its last legs'. On the contrary, the impact of the evil still persists, even forty six years after Independence. According to the Commissioner of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, there are many areas where these weaker sections are denied even common access to drinking water. There has been a sharp increase in the atrocities on them, and their socio-economic conditions are fast deteriorating, despite the Dalit movement.

The Dalit movement has never benefited from mere electoral participation. It would be useful to consider the record of Dr. Ambedkar's first political party, the Independence Labour Party, which was born in great optimism to fight the elections of 1937, the first in which the Scheduled Castes had designated seats. It won 11 of the 15 seats reserved for the SCs in the Bombay Province. The Congress won the rest. But Ambedkar's electoral success was of absolutely no use in passing legislation as long as his Party was a small and lonely minority in a legislature dominated by the majority party. The Party was second only to the Muslim League as an opposition party to the Congress in Bombay, and it functioned with vigour, but had little effect. Not even the protest against the use of Gandhi's term 'Harijan' for untouchables was heard. Even Dr. Ambedkar too realised after his defeat in the 1952 general elections that the problems of Dalits could not be solved by a caste-based party. Hence, he wanted to convert the Scheduled Caste Federation, the organization in existence at that time, into a broad-based party. This did not happen during his life time. After his death, his followers simply renamed SCF the Republican Party, but failed to achieve the unity of all the oppressed classes as desired by him.

An objective study of the role played by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in a proper historical perspective reveals that it suffers from two factors, namely (i) the mindless deification of the man by his followers and (ii) the reluctance of the country's intellectual elite to shed its deep prejudice against Dr. Ambedkar. His deification only exposes the bankruptcy of the Dalit leaders today, for Ambedkar was a man of action and resented being idolised. He believed that a society which idolised and raised a man to the level of God, had set on the path of destruction. For this, the mainstream political leaders are equally to be blamed. They have silently conspired, with their eyes on the vote bank, to allow, abet and encourage the idolisation of the great man to a disgusting level. Likewise, the second obstacle is more formidable. The prejudice of the Indian intellectuals against Dr. Ambedkar is based on three factors: his role in the national movement, his confrontation with Mahatma Gandhi and the lingering influence of Manu, the codifier of the Hindu Law, on the psyche of the Indian thinkers. Our intellectuals and thinkers, although not casteist in outlook, have been prejudiced by the caste system operating within the country. B.R. Ambedkar was perhaps afraid that Manu's influence would continue for a long time. Manu, who had ordained that the status of an untouchable, no matter how old or venerated, will always be lower than the lowliest of caste Hindu. And this fear coloured Dr. Ambedkar's perspectives throughout his life. Not without reason though, since the caste system has taken such deep roots in the Hindu

subconscious, that even today, 46 years after Independence, a Dalit celebrity is tolerated, encouraged or patronised, but rarely accepted with warmth or given equal status. Dr. Ambedkar's first priority was social reform. To him annihilation of the caste system and ensuring the basic human and political rights to the untouchables was a task of paramount importance. He said that the level of society cannot be raised unless those at the bottom are given their due. All his early struggles, to secure for the lower castes a right to enter temples, to draw water from common wells, and later his fight for the Hindu Code Bill, were directed towards this objective. Dr. Ambedkar's strategies and tactics ought to be viewed against this background. If he openly regarded the British as the "deliverers" of the untouchables, it was essentially a tactic. He cared little if the Hindu orthodoxy was alienated because he was certain that the caste system left no scope for the high castes to help the untouchables.

Dr. Ambedkar's cooperation with the Simon Commission and the first Round Table Conference, both boycotted by the Congress Party, earned him the wrath of the Congressmen. From then on, he was abused as a stooge of the British. His championing of the idea of separate electorates for the untouchables evoked violent resentment among nationalists, Congressmen and orthodox Hindu groups. The echoes of the villification campaign against Dr. Ambedkar have still not died. Likewise, Mahatma Gandhi's famous fast unto death to oppose separate electorates for the untouchables caused extreme bitterness on both sides. The Mahatma himself, Congressmen and the Hindus at large, thought that Dr. Ambedkar was seeking to divide the country. They cried that Ambedkar was holding the whole of Hindu society and the Mahatma to ransom. In the eyes of the depressed, however, Gandhiji's fast was a diabolical ploy to crush the aspirations of the untouchables and at the same time to win the confidence of the Hindu orthodoxy. "Why does not the Mahatma go on a fast unto death to wipe out untouchability?" Dr. Ambedkar asked, only to capitulate in the face of pressure from the entire nation. But upto the end of his life, he did not forgive Mahatma Gandhi for coercing him into signing the Poona Pact. The bitterness of that confrontation lingers even today. Dr. Ambedkar's followers and critics alike thrust on him a kind of greatness he never wanted, the former out of naive adulation and the latter with a deliberate design. Ambedkar's predicament was peculiar in the world's social history because of the unique viciousness of the caste system. For him fighting for the dignity of the lower castes was the most human endeavour, a supreme contribution in enhancing the consciousness of the universal mind. And he did it with zeal, caring little for the

wrath of the "tyrannical majority". Dr. Ambedkar's achievement in ushering in a silent social revolution in the country needs to be evaluated, because the way caste wars and social tensions prevail today in the aftermath of the politics of Mandalization and the Ayodhya controversy. It appears that we have deviated from the path shown by Gandhiji and Dr. Ambedkar and our leaders have lost moral courage to lead the mission of both Gandhiji and Dr. Ambedkar in solving the problems of the downtrodden in a true spirit. The brand of social justice as propounded by our political parties -- be they ruling ones or the opposition -- and the manner of its implementation would convince us as to how our parties have largely been interested in compromise politics, to boost vote banks of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes or Other Backward Classes through the politics of Mandalization or other placards of social justice.

### Notes

1. For a comprehensive account of his thoughts see Jatava, D.R., *The Political Philosophy of B.R. Ambedkar*, Phoenix Publishing House, Agra, 1965; Rajasekhariah, A.M., *B.R. Ambedkar: The Politics of Emancipation*, Sindhu Publication, Bombay, 1971 and *B.R. Ambedkar : The Quest for Social Justice* Uppal, Delhi, 1989; Bharill, C., *Social and Political Ideas of B.R. Ambedkar*, Aalekha Publishers, Jaipur, 1977; and Kavlekar, K.K. and A.S. Chausalkar, *Political Ideas and Leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar*, Vishwanit Publications, Poona, 1989.