

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar



Two brothers who were studying at school went to see their father. They alighted at the Masur Railway Station, engaged a cart and continued their journey. They went some distance; then the cart driver came to know that they belonged the Mahar cast. He at once stopped the cart and raised one end of it; the poor boys tumbled down and fell on the ground. He shouted at them and scolded them as he pleased.

It was afternoon. The boys were thirsty. They begged for water but no one would give them a drop. Hours passed. Still no one gave them water. They were not allowed even to go near tanks and wells.

The younger brother's name was Bhimrao Ambedkar. A few days passed. One day Bhim felt unbearable thirst. He drank water from a well. Someone noticed it. A few people gathered and beat the boy mercilessly.

The boy had to get his hair cut. Even a barber who used to cut the hair of a buffalo would not touch the boy's hair.

On another day, the boy was going to school. It was raining heavily. He took shelter near the wall of a house. The lady of the

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

house saw this. She was very angry. She pushed him into the rain. The boy fell into the muddy water. All his books fell into the water too.

In this way, again and again, the young boy was humiliated. His mind became a volcano of bitter feelings.

Why did the people ill-treat the boy in this way?

The boy had not committed any sin. But he was born in the Mahar cast. It was the belief of many Hindu that this cast is low and those born in this cast should not be touched by people of the other castes. Like the people of the Mahar caste, people of many other castes were called 'untouchables' and have suffered injustice for hundreds of years.

There was no cast system during the Vedic age. There was no 'un-touchability'. When and how did this system creep into the Hindu society? We do not know for certain.

There is a village called Ambavade in the Ratnagiri district of Maharashtra. Bhimrao Ambedkar was the son of Ramji Sakpal of that village. He was the fourteenth child of his parents.

Ramji followed the teachings of saint Kabir. (Kabir taught that devotion to God, 'Bhakthi', alone is important) Ramji did not believe in differences of caste, creed and religion. It was his belief that all who performed 'Hari Bhajan' (prayer) belonged to God.

Ambedkar was born on 14th April 1891. His full name was Bhimrao Ambavadekar. A story is narrated about Ambedkar's birth.

Ramji Sakpal's uncle was a saint. Once he told Ramji, "You will have a son. He will become world famous, "and blessed him.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

Bhimrao Ambavadekar was born after this. His mother died when he was just five years old.

When he was still at school, he felt the sting of 'untouchability'. He could not sit with the other students of the class. He had to drink water only when others poured it for him; and even then he had to cover his mouth with one hand.

The boy could not understand why.

These insults and pain they gave him self a very deep impression on the young boy's mind. The boy felt 'untouchability' was a black mark on Hindu Dharma; he made up his mind to remove it.

Fighting was in his very blood. The Mahars had the soldier's blood in them. Father sakpal too had served in the army.

Even from his boyhood Ambedkar had a mind of steel. Once it was raining very heavily. The boy Ambedkar said, he would go to school. His friends said, "These are empty words, how can you go in this heavy rain?" In the downpour, the boy did go to school and that, too, without an umbrella!

When Bhimrao was a student at the High school, a Brahmin teacher admired Bhimrao's lively mind. His family name was Ambedkar. The teacher liked Bhimrao so much that he changed his name from Ambavadekar to Ambedkar.

When Bhimrao's father married for the second time the boy's mind underwent a change. He decided that he should be independent and the only way to achieve this was to study well.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

Why not go to Bombay, thought the boy. He needed money for the railway fare; didn't he? For three days he tried to steal his aunt's purse, and at last got it. He found just half an anna (three paise) in it!

By next morning the boy was ashamed of and disgusted with his deed. He decided to struggle and stand on his own legs whatever the difficulties.

Young Bhim was very fond of books and never tired of them. And his father even borrowed money and satisfied the boy's thirst for books.

He joined the Elphinstone High School in Bombay.

The family found a house in a locality where the poorest of the poor lived. There was just one room for the entire family. This was at once the kitchen, the bedroom and the study. There was not space enough even for two to sleep. Bhim would go to bed early. Near his head there was a grinding stone and at his feet a goat. The father would be awake till two in the night. He would then lie down. The boy would get up, light the kerosene lamp without a chimney and begin to study.

In the high school he received a wound he could never forget in his life. It was Bhim's desire to learn Sanskrit. Other Hindus of the School could learn Sanskrit. But it was ordered that he should not learn Sanskrit because he belonged to the Mahar cast! People born in other countries, people not Hindus at all were allowed to read the Vedas. No one objected. This injustice made him all the more bitter.

But Ambedkar did learn Sanskrit in later life.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

Ambedkar passed in Matriculation examination. He was then seventeen years old. The same year his marriage with Ramabai was celebrated. Their marriage took place in a shed in Byculla Market.

Ambedkar passed his Intermediate Examination from Elphinstone College. He obtained his B.A. degree in 1912.

Ambedkar's father died in 1913. Ambedkar was then working under the Maharaja of Baroda.

The first chapter of his life's struggle was over. The second chapter had begun.

The Maharaja of Baroda sent Bhimrao Ambedkar to America.

In America Ambedkar had experience of a new life. There was no 'untouchability'. In this atmosphere, he quoted in a letter he wrote to his friend a few lines from Shakespeare, a great dramatist; they mean, 'In the life of man now and again there is a swelling wave; if a man uses this opportunity, it will carry him towards his fortune.'

Ambedkar wrote very learned and theories obtained his M.A and Ph.D. degrees.

He returned to India on the 21st of August 1917.

There is one thing to note in the years of Ambedkar's education. He studied English and Persian languages in India. In America he studied Political Science, Ethics, Anthropology, Social Science and Economics. In this way he studied many subjects. He obtained his doctorate. Even at that time Ambedkar had a revolutionary mind. He had made an unshakable resolution to wipe out the injustice done to the people of the low cast; in this way he

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

wanted to bring about a revolution in the Hindu Society. But – and this is important before becoming a revolutionary he increased his knowledge. Because of this his thoughts were not mere froth. They had a solid foundation of information. This enabled him to play a very effective part in framing the Constitution of India.

Ambedkar was given a high post Baroda. He had a doctorate, he held a high office – but from the moment he set foot in India he felt the sting of ‘untouchability.’ No one came to welcome him, when he reached Baroda. Worse still, even the servants in the office would not hand over the files to him; they threw the files at him. No one in the office would give him water to drink. He could not get a house to live in. Even though he complained to the Maharaja, it was useless. Even non-Hindu did not treat him properly.

The fire of wrath against the Hindus blazed in Ambedkar’s mind. He returned to Bombay in a few days.

In 1920, Ambedkar left for London for higher studies.

The British Museum in London has a very good library. It used to open at eight in the morning, and every day Ambedkar would be there by eight. He read till five o’clock. In London he came to know a student called Asnodkar. He belonged to a rich family. He was not interested in study. Ambedkar said to him, "Your people may have made plenty of money. But think, you have born a man, what are you going to achieve? The Goddess of Learning will not come to you whenever you want. We must get her blessings when she comes."

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

In 1922 Ambedkar became a barrister and the next year he came back to India.

To proclaim and to bring to light the humiliations suffered by the 'untouchables' and to fight for equal rights, a periodical called 'Mook Nayak' was started. Ambedkar gave his support to it. He wrote in the first issue of this paper, "The Hindu Society is like a tower of many stories. It has neither a ladder nor a door to go out.... A Society which believes the God exists even in inanimate things, also says that people who are a part of that very society should not be touched!"

By this time there were signs that the Hindu Society was beginning to understand that 'untouchability' is unjust.

Sahu Maharaj of Kolhapur made arrangements for the free education of the 'untouchables' and secured jobs for many of them.

In 1924, Veer Savarkar, a great fighter for freedom, was released from the Andaman prison; he also began to fight against 'untouchability'.

Mahatma Gandhi also was taking practical steps to wipe out 'untouchability'.

Ambedkar had personal experience of the humiliation and the injustice of 'untouchability'. He did not want the pity of others for the 'untouchables'. In his view, others could not uplift the 'untouchables'. Justice cannot be granted by others. Those who suffer because of injustice should themselves secure justice.

Ambedkar felt that the 'untouchables' had lost their individuality for centuries; it was impossible to wake up such people through

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

speeches and slogans. He decided to revolt against the blind beliefs of the Hindus. The Chowdar Tank Satyagraha was a result of this decision.

The Bombay Legislature had already passed a bill. According to this, the government had decided that all could use public tanks to wells. On the basis of this decision, the Mahad Municipality in colaba district had resolved that Chowdar Tank could be used even by the 'untouchables'. But they had not given effect to it.

Ambedkar resolved to raise the flag of equality by using the water of this tank.

On the appointed day Ambedkar touched the water first. Then, many of his followers drank the water. Till then the 'untouchables' had not been allowed to go near the tank. Ambedkar proved that water created by God belonged to all.

But after a couple of hours some one spread the rumour that Ambedkar's men would enter even the Veereshwara Temple. The other Hindus attacked Ambedkar and his men. In this clash, Ambedkar was injured.

This incident opened a new chapter in the social life of India. Many sensible Hindus condemned these actions. They began to say that there is nothing wrong in the 'untouchables' taking water from wells and tanks.

Should Not Hindu, Who Seek Justice, Give Justice?

The 'untouchables' are Hindus. Therefore, the doors of temples should be open to them. If the Hindus can touch the Christians and

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

the Muslims, why should they not touch the people who are themselves Hindus and who worship the Hindu Gods? This was Ambedkar's argument. He gave a call that people who practise and support 'untouchability' should be punished.

Some people argued that the 'untouchables' were not yet fit for equality. The Hindus say that they want independence and democracy. How can a people who have temple upon all the liberties of a backward group aspire to democracy? Ambedkar argued like this and thundered that these people had no right to speak of justice and democracy.

In 1927 there was a big conference. It resolved that there should be no cast differences in the Hindu Dharma and that people of all castes should be allowed to work as priests in temples.

The Chowdar Tank dispute went to the court. The court decided that tanks are public property.

The 'untouchables' who have been subjected to humiliation for hundreds of years should find justice. For this purpose Ambedkar indicated a few clear steps. No section of the Hindus should be kept out of temples. There should be more representatives of the 'untouchables' in the legislatures. These representatives should not be nominated by the government. They should be elected by the people. The government should employ the 'untouchables' in larger numbers in the army and the police department.

Those who suffer in the Hindu Society should get justice.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

This was Ambedkar's rock-like decision. He was prepared to oppose anybody to reach his goal.

The British Government invited several Indian leaders to discuss the problems of India. The conferences were held in London; they were called the 'Round Table Conference'. Gandhiji also took part in them. At the Round Table Conference Ambedkar spoke angrily against the government. He said that the backward sections did not enjoy equality with other sections, even under the British Government; the British had just followed the ways of the other Hindus.

This was a time when Gandhiji was very popular in India. Millions of people followed his foot-steps with devotion. Ambedkar openly opposed Gandhiji's views on how justice should be secured for the 'untouchables'. He supported the views which seemed right to him.

Ambedkar secured for the Harijans (the 'untouchables') 'separate electorates' at the Second Round Table Conference in 1931. As a result, the Harijans could elect their representatives separately.

Gandhiji felt that separate electorates would only separate the Harijans from the Hindus. The very thought that the Hindu would be divided pained him much. He started a fast against separate electorates. He said he would fast unto death in necessary.

There was anxiety in the country because of Gandhiji's fast.

Many Congress leaders went to Ambedkar to save Gandhiji.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

"Muslims, Christians and Sikhs have obtained the right of separate electorates. Gandhiji did not fast to oppose them. Why should Gandhiji fast to oppose Harijans getting separate electorates?" questioned Ambedkar. "If you are unwilling to give the 'untouchables' separate electorates, what other solution is there? It is essential to save Gandhiji. But just to save him I am not prepared to give up the interests of the backward classes," he declared. He said, reserve a larger number of seats for the untouchables' than the British have given; then I will give up the claim for separate electorates."

At last there was an agreement between the leaders who had gone for a compromise and Ambedkar. It was decided that ten per cent of the seats in the legislatures should be reserved for the Harijans. Ambedkar gave up the claim for separate electorates. Gandhiji ended his fast.

This famous treaty is called the Poona Treaty was another important step in the struggle of the backward people

'Untouchability' is a branch of casteism; until casteism is wiped out 'untouchability' will not go – this was Ambedkar's firm belief. He argued that to wipe out casteism, political power was very necessary. He believed that Dharma was essential for men. But the revolted against those who, in the name of Dharma, treated some of their fellowmen like animals. Many people criticised him. Some newspapers also wrote against him. There were many occasions when his life was in danger. Also, Ambedkar knew from his own experience that even a bright man could not come up in life vacuse of

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

casteism. People give his cast importance and make him powerless. Ambedkar fought casteism. He was disgusted to find how difficult it was to secure justice and to find how many men were still narrow-minded. He even said that it would be better to give up the Hindu Dharma itself.

Muslim and Christian priest and missionaries learnt about this declaration; they tried very hard to attract Ambedkar. They met and assured him that the 'untouchables' who changed their religion would be given equal status in their society.

Today Ambedkar's name is remembered in the history of India also because of the role he played in framing the Constitution of India.

India became free from foreign rule on the 15th of August 1947.

Ambedkar became the first Minister of Law in independent India. With one voice all India welcomed his appointment. He took oath as a minister.

The country, no doubt, got freedom. It was to be decided how a country with crores of people should be ruled. How should elections take place? What are the rights of the people? How are laws to be made? How should the government work? How should courts of law function? - Such important matters had to be decided, and laws had to be made. The Constitution answers all such questions and lays down rules.

It was a very difficult task to prepare the Constitution. A study of the Constitutions of many countries, a deep knowledge of law,

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

knowledge of the history of India and of the Indian society, the patience and wisdom to weigh different opinion-all these were essential.

On 29 th August 1947, a committee was constituted to frame the Constitution of India. Ambedkar was chosen as its Chairman. Shri T. T. Krishnamachari, a member of the committee, himself has said:

"Though a committee of seven members was formed, one of them resigned. Another was nominated in his place. Another member died. No one took his place. One of the members was very busy with government work. Owing to ill health two other members were far away from Delhi. As a result, Dr. Ambedkar alone had to carry the entire burden of preparing the draft of the Constitution. The work he has done is admirable".

As the Minister for Law, Dr. Ambedkar placed the draft Constitution before the Constituent Assembly on 4th November 1948.

He gave satisfactory answers to many questions about the Constitution.

The part of the Constitution wiping out 'untouchanblity' was aproved on 29th November 1948. Ambedkar's struggle bore fruit in his own life time. A new chapter began in social life. We should remember the words of Ambedkar in answer to the debate on the Indian Constitution:

"India has lost her freedom only owing to treason of her own people. Raja Dahir of Sindh was defeated by Mohammad Bin Khasim. The only reason for this defeat was that the generals of the

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

Sindh army took bribes from Jahsim's men and did not fight for the king. It was Raja Jaichand of India who invited Mohammad Ghori to fight against Prithviraj. When Shivaji was fighting for the freedom of the Hindus, other Maratha leaders and Rajputs were fighting for the Mughals. When the Sikhs were fighting against the British, their leader did nothing.... Such things should not happen again; therefore, everyone must resolve to fight to the last drop of his blood, to defend the freedom of India"

The Constituent Assembly accepted the draft India Constitution on 26th November 1949.

Ambedkar's first wife, Ramabai, had died. He married a girl belongs to Saraswatha Brahmin – Dr. Sharda kabir; she was working in the nursing home where he was treated for sometime.

In 1951, Dr.Ambedkar resigned his office as minister.

After Resignation as a Minister

In 1952, he was defeated by a Congress candidate in the election for the Lok Sabha. The entire country was shocked by his defeat.

A few later he was elected to the Rajya Sabha. Whenever he felt that the government had not done justice to the Harijans he criticised it sharply. In 1953 the government brought a bill before the parliament. According to this bill those who practised 'untouchability' would be punished; imprisonment, imposition of fines, dismissal from employment and withdrawal of licence to follow a profession – these were the forms of punishment.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

Soon after the framing of the Constitution, Ambedkar's mind turned towards Buddha. His mind was thirsting for peace and justice. He attended the Buddhist Conference in Ceylon (Sree Lanka) in 1950.

The bitterness of his mind was ever on the increase. In spite of it, he was not willing to embrace the Christian or the Muslim faith.

Finally, Ambedkar decided to become a Buddhist.

This was a great decision in his life, a decision taken after deep thought.

Why did he choose Buddhism?

Ambedkar told his friend Dattopant Thengadi: "I am in the evening of my life. There is an onslaught of ideas on our people from different countries from the four corners of the world. In this flood our people may be confused. There are strong attempts to separate the people struggling hard, from the main life-stream of this country and to attract them towards other countries. This tendency is fast growing. Even some of my colleagues who are disgusted with 'untouchability', poverty and inequality are ready to be washed away by this flood. What about the others? They should not move away from the main stream of the nation's life; and I must show them the way. At the same time, we have to make some changes in the economic and political life. That is way I have decided to follow Buddhism."

There is a way of life which has come down as a steady stream in India for thousand of years. Buddhism is not opposed to it. The backward people must rebel against the injustice done to them; they must wipe it out. But 'untouchability' is a problem of the Hindu

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

Society. To solve this, a path which does not harm the culture and the history of Bharat must be followed. This is the basis of his resolution.

He did not believe in the theory that Aryans came from a different land and that they defeated the Dasyus' (the Dravidians) of this country. There is no foundation for this in the Vedas. The word 'Arya' appears some 33 or 34 times in the Vedas. The word has been used as an adjective meaning 'the noble' or 'the elder'. It is said in the Mahabharata that 'Dasyus' can be found in all 'varnas' (castes) and 'ashramas' (stage of life). In this way Ambedkar used to support this view.

On 14th October 1956 at a big function in Nagpur, Ambedkar, with his wife, embraced Buddhism.

Ambedkar's entire life was dedicated to one purpose – securing justice and equality to those people who are called 'untouchables'. He had said many times "God will spare me till I complete my work for the 'untouchables'. "He lived to see 'untouchability' declared a crime. The 'untouchables' had secured political equality. They should enjoy social equality also – this feeling was beginning to grow in the country.

As early as in 1951, Ambedkar's health had begun to fail. Yet he continued to work saying that he would not succumb to ill health when there was work to be done.

On 16th December 1956 he breathed his last. Thousand and thousands of people watched the funeral procession and expressed

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

their sorrow and admiration. Five hundred thousand people witnessed the last rites.

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