

# Dr. B.R. Ambedkar: A Politician, a Social Reformer or an Economist?

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## Abstract

“The issue of the caste system in India and of so-called 'untouchables' remains a live one even today, but perhaps things would be more divisive still if it had not been for this man, Dr B R Ambedkar”. He was one of the architects of the Indian Constitution. He was a well-known politician and an eminent jurist. Ambedkar's efforts to eradicate the social evils like untouchability and caste restrictions were remarkable. The leader, throughout his life, fought for the rights of the dalits and other socially backward classes. Ambedkar was appointed as the nation's first Law Minister in the Cabinet of Jawaharlal Nehru. He was posthumously awarded the Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian honor in 1990.

**Keywords:** *Untouchables, caste system, divisive, discrimination, restrictions, Bharat Ratna, Hinduism, forward thinking.*

## Introduction

Mr Ambedkar, popularly known as Babasaheb, was a politician and jurist who fought his whole life for the rights of dalits and other persecuted classes in the Indian social system.

Dr Ambedkar was born in Madhya Pradesh on 14<sup>th</sup> April, 1891, the fourteenth child of his parents. As a member of the Hindu Mahar caste, who were regarded as untouchable by the upper classes, he himself was the victim of discrimination, and was segregated at school. This continued even after gaining scholarships, studying in the US, and finding a job as Defence Secretary to a Maharaja or king, and later as a Professor of Political Economy in Mumbai, where other staff members and students objected to him using the same water jug as them.

He also studied in England, where he was awarded a DSC at the London School of Economics. It was on his return from this trip that he decided to campaign properly against caste discrimination, organizing marches and fighting for the untouchables' right to access to water supplies and to enter Hindu temples.

He worked with Mahatma Gandhi to ensure that dalits would be treated as a normal part of the electorate in the political system, and in 1947 was asked to be the Law Minister of the newly independent country, with a central part of his job being the drawing of its new first constitution.

The text prepared by Dr Ambedkar provided constitutional guarantees and protections for a range of civil liberties, including freedom of religion, the abolition of untouchability and the outlawing of discrimination.

Dr Ambedkar had long studied Buddhism, attracted to its ethos of non-confrontation, and travelled to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) to join meetings. He wrote a book on the religion, converted, and converted numerous of his supporters. He died in Delhi in 1956, his cremation being attended by hundreds of thousands of supporters and activists. His legacy of forward-thinking social reform echoes down to India today, although his linking of the caste system to Hinduism has made him unpopular to many.

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### **His Life**

Bhimrao Ambedkar was born to Bhimabai Sakpal and Ramji on 14 April 1891 in Madhya Pradesh. He was the fourteenth child of his parents. Ambedkar's father was a Subedar in the Indian Army and posted at Mhow cantonment, MP. After the retirement of his father in 1894, the family moved to satara. Shortly after, his mother passed away. Four years later, his father remarried and the family shifted to Bombay, where he cleared his matriculation in 1908. His father Bhimabai Sakpal died in Bombay, in 1912.

Ambedkar was a victim of caste discrimination. His parents hailed from the Hindu Mahar caste, which was viewed as "untouchable" by the upper class. Due to this, Ambedkar had to face severe discriminations from every corner of the society. The discrimination and humiliation haunted Ambedkar even at the Army school, run by British government. Fearing social outcry, the teachers would segregate the students of lower class from that of Brahmins and other upper classes. The untouchable students were often asked by the teacher to sit outside the class. After shifting to Satara, he was admitted to a local school but the change of school did not change the fate of young Bhimrao. Discrimination followed wherever he went. In 1908, Ambedkar got the opportunity to study at the Elphinstone College. Besides clearing all the exams successfully Ambedkar also obtained a scholarship of twenty five rupees a month from the Gayakwad ruler of Baroda, Sahyaji Rao III. Political Science and Economics were the subjects in which he graduated from the Bombay University in 1912. Ambedkar decided to use the money for higher studies in the USA.

After coming back from the US, Ambedkar was appointed as the Defence

secretary to the King of Baroda. Even, there also he had to face the humiliation for being an 'Untouchable'. With the help of the former Bombay Governor Lord Sydenham, Ambedkar obtained the job as a professor of political economy at the Sydenham College of Commerce and Economics in Bombay. In order to continue his further studies, in 1920 he went to England at his own expenses. There he was awarded honor of D.Sc by the London University. Ambedkar also spent few months at the University of Bonn, Germany, to study economics. On 8 June, 1927, he was awarded a Doctorate by the University of Columbia.

### **Role of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar**

#### **“As A Politician”**

In 1935, Ambedkar was appointed principal of the Government Law College, a position he held for two years. Settling in Mumbai, Ambedkar oversaw the construction of a large house, and stocked his personal library with more than 50,000 books. 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 had hardened against orthodox Hindus, despite a significant increase in momentum across India for the fight against untouchability. And he began criticizing them even as he was criticized himself by large numbers of Hindu activists. Speaking at the Yeola Conversion Conference on October 13 near Nasik, Ambedkar announced his intention to convert to a different religion and exhorted his followers to leave Hinduism. He would repeat his message at numerous public meetings across India.

In 1936, Ambedkar founded the Independent Labor Party. In the 1937 elections to the Central Legislative Assembly his party won 15 seats. Ambedkar oversaw the transformation of his political party into the All

India Scheduled Castes Federation, although it performed poorly in the elections held in 1946 for the Constituent Assembly of India.

Ambedkar objected to the decision of Congress and Mahatma Gandhi to call the untouchable community as Harijans. He would say that even the members of untouchable community are same as the other members of the society. Ambedkar was appointed on the Defence Advisory Committee and the Viceroy's Executive Council as Minister for Labor. His reputation as a scholar led to his appointment as free India's first, Law Minister and chairman of the committee responsible to draft a constitution.

In 1936, 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. Attaining immense popular success, Ambedkar's work strongly criticized Hindu religious leaders and the caste system in general. He protested the Congress decision to call the untouchable community Harijans (Children of God), a name coined by Gandhi. 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*, Ambedkar intensified his attacks on Gandhi and the Congress, charging them with hypocrisy. In his work *Who Were the Shudras?*, Ambedkar attempted to explain the formation of the Shudras i.e. the lowest caste in hierarchy of Hindu caste system. He also emphasised how Shudras are separate from Untouchables. Ambedkar oversaw the transformation of his political party into the All India Scheduled Castes Federation, although 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, Ambedkar lambasted Hinduism in the *The Untouchables: A Thesis on the Origins of Untouchability*:

### **“As A Social Reformer”**

“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?”

### **Dalit Movement**

After returning to India, Bhimrao Ambedkar decided to fight against the caste discrimination that almost fragmented the nation. Ambedkar opined that there should be separate electoral system for the Untouchables and lower caste people. He also favored the concept of providing reservations for Dalits and other religious communities.

Ambedkar began to find ways to reach to the people and make them understand the drawbacks of the prevailing social evils. He launched a newspaper called "**Mooknayaka**" (leader of the silent). It was believed that, one day, after hearing his speech at a rally, Shahu IV, an influential ruler of Kolhapur dined with the leader. The incident also created a huge uproar in the socio-political arena of the country.

Ambedkar was also critical of Islam and its practices in South Asia. While justifying the Partition of India, he condemned the practice of child marriage in Muslim society, as well as the mistreatment of women. 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", as well as the oppression of women in Muslim society through the oppressive purdahsystem. He alleged that while Purdah was also practiced by Hindus, only among Muslims was it sanctioned by religion.

### **Conversion to Buddhism**

In 1950, Ambedkar traveled to Sri Lanka to attend a convention of Buddhist scholars and monks. After his return he decided to write a book on Buddhism and soon, converted himself to Buddhism. In his speeches, Ambedkar lambasted the Hindu rituals and caste division. Ambedkar founded the Bharatiya Bauddha Mahasabha In 1955. His book "The Buddha and His Dhamma" was published posthumously.

On October 14, 1956 Ambedkar organized a public ceremony to convert around five lakh of his supporters into Buddhism. Ambedkar traveled to Kathmandu to attend the Fourth World Buddhist Conference. He completed his final manuscript, "The Buddha or Karl Marx" on December 2, 1956.

### **Framer of Constitution**

Bhimrao Ambedkar was appointed as the chairman of the constitution drafting committee. He was also a noted scholar and eminent jurist. Ambedkar emphasized on the construction of a virtual bridge between the classes of the society. According to him, it would be difficult to maintain the unity of the country if the difference among the classes were not met.

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar is one such great thinker, leader and intellectual of its time in India who has not only changed the life of millions of untouchables but shaped India as a biggest democratic nation by writing its constitution. What is well known about Dr. Ambedkar is his fights against Caste system in India, But what is not known is how Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar had also Impacted the Indian economy.

### **“As an Economicst”**

Dr. Ambedkars thoughts that had great impact on Indian economy:

### **Agriculture and land reforms are as under**

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar had made in-depth study of Indian Agriculture, wrote research articles, organised Seminars and Conferences in order to solve the problems of agriculture and farmers, also led farmer's movement. His thoughts on agriculture are found in his article "**Small Holdings in Indian and their remedies**"(1917) and also in "**Status and minorities**"(1947).

He mentioned that holdings of lands by few people is an acute problem of Indian agriculture which has various disadvantages, like difficulties in cultivation and utilization and resources, increasing cost, low productivity, inadequate income and low standard of living. According to Dr. Ambedkar Productivity of agriculture is related to not only with the size of holdings of land but also with other factors such as capital, labour and other inputs. Therefore if capital, or labour etc are not available in adequate quantity and quality, then even a large size land can become unproductive. On the other hand small size land become productive if these resources are available in plenty. With this thought the '**Land Ceiling Act**' is passed after Independence.

He also mentioned about the slavery and exploitation of Labour bounded under caste system is extremely bad for economical development and fought for its abolition.

His other suggestion for solving agriculture problem are collective farming, economic holding of land or equal distribution of land, Large scale Industrialization, Provision of money, water, seeds and fertilizers by the government, cultivation of waste land by allotting waste land to landless labour, minimum wages to labours, control and regulation of private lenders of loan to farmers.

### **India's Currency Problems**

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's thoughts has a great impact on current Indian currency system. Under British rule when India Govt. was struggling with falling value of Indian Rupee, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar In 1923 wrote "**The problem of Rupee, its origin and solution.**" He focused his studies and research on the condition of Indian currency during British India. He wrote research thesis on it. In his thesis, he argued that the gold exchange standard does not have stability. The developing countries like India can not afford gold exchange standards, and besides this, it also increases the risk of inflation and price rise. He proved with statistics data and reasons how the Indian Rupee has lost its value and hence the purchasing power of Rupee is falling. He suggested that govt. deficit should be regulated and money should have a circular flow. He also suggested more attention should be given on price stability than exchange rate stability. This book eventually lead to the establishment of Reserve Bank of India.

### **Views of Taxation policy**

Dr. Ambedkar expressed his views on taxation in the manifesto of '**Swatantra Majdur Party**' in 1936. He opposed Land Revenue and its system and their taxes as the burden of these taxes are significant on the poor sections of the society. He suggested some taxes as follows:

- Tax should be imposed on payer's capacity and not on income.
- Tax should be less on poor and more on rich.
- Tax exemption should be given up-to certain limit.
- There should be equality between different sections in tax imposition.
- Tax should not lead to lowering the standard of life of the people.
- Land Revenue tax should be more flexible and should not levy on agricultural land.

He suggested that Indian tax system at that time was based on discrimination and inequality.

### **Nationalisation of Industries**

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar thought that fast development of India is impossible without Industrialization. According to him creating large scale employment produces essential goods for mass consumption. It utilizes raw materials, reduces foreign dependence and increasing security to labour, ultimately leads to the overall economical development of the country. The private sector industries can not make big industries for want of large scale investments. So, government should come forward to start large scale industries .The smaller industries should be kept in private sector. The insurance and transport companies should be nationalized. Rights to strike should be given to labourers. After the independence the industrial policy of the Indian government is in keeping with Dr. Ambedkar's expectations.

### **Strategy for economic development**

Dr. Ambedkar believed that the strategy for India's Economic development should be based on Eradication of property elimination of inequities and ending exploitation of masses. He emphasized exploitation has many dimensions In fact in the India, social or religious exploitation is no less Oppressive than economic exploitation and it should be eliminated.

### **Democratic state Socialism**

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar has presented a Democratic State Socialism to the constitution committee. The main points of it are:

- All basic industries should be owned and run by the state.
- Insurance and agriculture should be nationalized and managed by the state.
- Maintenance of Productive resources by state.
- Just Distribution of Common produce.
- Provision for compensation of land or industry acquisition in the form of bonds.

- The distribution of village and among the families in a village for collective farming.
- No discrimination as landlord, tenants and agriculture labours.
- All agriculture input like capital, seeds fertilizers etc would be provided to collective farming by the government.
- Distribution of agriculture income only after payment of land revenue tax.
- Punishment according to rules who do not follow

Dr. Ambedkar wanted this state socialism to be included in the constitution so that no legislature could change or reject it. But it could not come into existence as the constitution committee rejected it. It suggests that the conditions of labour, farmers and poor people would have different if this has not been rejected.

### **Free Enterprises Economy**

Surprising enough Dr. Ambedkar had already suggested free economy, globalization, liberalization and privatization as early as in 1923, Recently Indian government has adopted this policy. In this respect Dr. Ambedkar was a century ahead. He had stressed that the value (Price) of a rupee must be kept stable if the policy of free economy is to be successful.

### **Population Control - Family Planning**

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar said that the control of the country's economy is impossible if the population is not controlled. Hence he forcefully argued for population control and family planning in India. Later on in keeping with his views the government of India has adopted family planning as a national policy.

### **Economic Upliftment of Indian Women**

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's contribution to economic development and progress of women is significant. According to him, participation of

women in the economic development is impossible without developing their social status and equality. But due to bad economic conditions of women in India, India's economic progress is hampered. So, it is important to improve the economic condition of women and give them equal rights and freedom of occupation.

### **Concept of Human Capital**

Dr. Ambedkar argued that concept of human capital in India is useless if the poorer and down trodden untouchable dalits are not recognized by other classes as human being with equal social prestige and religious basis. It is therefore impossible to use this human capital in the economic development of India.

### **Opposition to Hindu Economy**

Dr. Ambedkar denounced the Indian economy as Hindu dominated economy. He came out with hard hitting critique of this Hindu economy. He showed logical flaws in it. Caste System is not merely the division of labour but a division of labourers also. It is not based on natural aptitudes or skills. It is a major obstacles to economic development. It reduces mobility leading to inefficient production. Untouchability is worse than slavery. It is a system of exploitation.

Hence It is evident that Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's concepts of family planning, upliftment of women and human capital and many others are important contribution to the development of the Indian economy, as the existing laws and reforms land ceiling Act, minimum wages Act, Distribution of surplus land etc are not effective it is essential to reconsider them in the context of Dr. Ambedkar's perspective. Also as current scenario of Indian economy, inflation, farmer conditions, India's large young labour force not being fully utilized for the economic development, we need to reconsider the thoughts of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and again frame our economic policies towards better economical growth of India.

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