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Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Contribution to Upliftment of the Dalit: It's Relevance in Contemporary India

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Abstract:*Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was an Indian nationalist, the chief architect of the Indian constitution, social reformer and leader of the Dalits. Dalit is a modern term for untouchables whom M. K. Gandhi designated as Harijan. The upliftment of Dalits is basically the process of empowerment of social, political and economic status in the Indian society. He emerged as a crusader for the rights of the Dalit society. Dalits are the people who work as weavers, fishermen, toddy-tappers, washer man, artisans, shoe-makers and all types of unskilled works. Ambedkar was one of the greatest personalities of India who is popularly known as the Messiah for the Dalits. He came out from the Dalit society and he took initiative for political and social awareness among the Dalit society. Ambedkar raised his voice in favour of the Dalits upliftment. He devoted his whole life for the equal status for the Dalits and unity and prosperity of India. He became the voice of the voice less people in every platform for the downtrodden people. In this paper I would like to focus on the study of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar on the problem of untouchability and his movement for the upliftment of the dalits and its relevance in Contemporary India.*

Keywords: *Ambedkar, Caste, Dalits,Equal status, Politics, Reservation, Upliftment*

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Introduction

Dalit in the caste system is one of the cruelest features of the *varna* system. The Hindu social order consists of four varnas: Brahmins, Kshatriys, Vaishyas and Shudras. Ther is another social category these four varnas, i.e. outcaste or Dalits. Dalit is the name which the people at the very bottom of India's caste hierarchy have given to themselves. The term Dalit has been derived from the Sanskrit root *dal* which means broken, downtrodden, split, ground-down. It is an expression of the existing contradiction, inequality and exploitation in the Indian social hierarchy. They are also known as *Avarvas, Achhuts, Chandals, Depressed classes, Untouchables, Oppressed Hindus* and *Harijans* etc. at different point of time.[1] The Constitution of India classified Dalits as Scheduled Castes (Government of India Act 1935). They were not permitted to touch four *varna* people and they were also not permitted to enter the temples. They were confined to despicable jobs of sweepers, gutter cleaners and scavengers, watchmen and farm labors etc. The British granted special political representative to the Dalits, who had become politically mobilized under the leadership of Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956).[2] He was one of the greatest jurists, lawyers and political leaders of modern India. The untouchables were treated in distinct ways in different provinces in India.

The main issues around which most of the Dalit movements have been centred in the colonial and post-colonial periods are the conflicts on the problem of untouchability. They are predominantly anti-untouchability movements. The other issues are the same as those related to agricultural labourers. They launched movements for maintaining or increasing reservations in political offices, government jobs and welfare programmes. It can be said that Dalits are exclusively the socially and economically marginalized people in India. Now the term Dalit has become a symbol of change and revolution.[3] Dalits represent a community of about 170 million in India constituting about 17% of the total Indian population.[4] Thus 1 out of every 6 Indians is Dalit. It may be said that Dr. Ambedkar had a real visionary towards the fundamental rights of Indian Citizens and the underprivileged Dalits in India. He made several provisions in the Constitution to provide constitutional guarantees and protection for a wide range of civil liberties for individual citizens including freedom of religion, the abolition of untouchability and the outlawing all forms of discrimination.[5] Dalits are the people who usually do the works

which are usually not done by the people of Upper Castes either for themselves or for the society.

The Indian National Congress wanted to resolve the abolish untouchability in 1917; we can now begin to answer the question of who will lead the untouchables. Ambedkar said that this 'a strange event.'[6] He is known as the leader of India's untouchables and his political thought and action was also formed in relationship to his own caste (Mahar caste). He was born in Mhow (now Mahu) in Madhya Pradesh. It seemed that two major events had changed his leadership direction. These events were- the Mahad Conferences of 1927 and the battled with Gandhi over the Communal Award during the Round Table Conferences of 1930-32.[7] The Untouchables needed to lead themselves. Ambedkar opposed to the caste system, particularly of Brahmanism and he believed that caste system would have to nothing could emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of caste. He said that the Brahmins were responsible for the degradation of the Sudras.[8] In this situation, the Round Table Conferences were held in London (1930-1932) to recommend a workable solution to the Indian Constitutional problems. At the end of the Second Round Table Conference of 1932, the British Prime Minister Ramsay McDonald announced Communal Awards[9] (1932) which led the problems of different communities various stands. The Poona Pact was signed on 24th September, 1932 which increased the untouchable's representative in the legislative Assembly. This pact guaranteed the reservation seats for untouchables but it's showed the difference philosophy and tactics between Gandhi and Ambedkar. In the early stage, Gandhi believed that untouchability can be removed the changing heart of the caste Hindus. But Ambedkar seemed that the guarantee of rights, backed up by political power. The separate electorate system was acted in the Reform Act of 1935.

Until1935, B. R. Ambedkar's work took three directions, the most visibly successful was the awakening and organizing of the Untouchables through newspaper of their own and social, political, cultural and widely attended conferences that is called Depressed Classes conferences. He gave petition to the British government for political representation for Untouchables. Once Dr Ambedkar boldly declared, "I was born on Hindu, but I will not die a Hindu' and also stated that 'change your religion, reject Hinduism and convert to a religion that does not recognize caste or untouchability. Ultimately, both Ambedkar and Gandhi were right: in order to abolish untouchability ---"[10] Ambedkar protested against the limits of Gandhianism and he commented

that the nation does not exist. His main aims were attack on the system of political and social representation and economic structures disrupted.

He formed a political party named the Independent Labour Party. He established the Scheduled Castes Federation in 1942 for united Untouchables all over India and to demand for separate electorates again. During the period from 1942 to 1946, Ambedkar was harshly critical of the Congress. He was elected to the Constituent Assembly in 1946; he was also nominated for the cabinet post of Minister of Law. The Constituent Assembly was formed headed by Ambedkar, a Dalit leader in 1946. But the early stages of drafting the Constitution, he faced two major problems – Firstly, how to protect the rights of the Untouchables? Secondly, to reject the British Communal Electorate System and how to keep intact the rights of the Dalit people in the new electorate system?[11] In this context, a Sub-Committee was formed for solve the problems under the leadership of Sarder Patel and the other members were Dr B. R. Ambedkar, Pandit Jawaharwal Nehru, Dr Rajendra Prasad and K. M. Munshi. This Sub-Committee recommended for reservation for Dalit Classes.[12] All these demands became the part of independent India's government policy. It is stated that Dalits are the bottom of the Hindu caste system and laws try to protect them, they still face widespread distinction in India. Ambedkar was a prolific writer and he wrote 'Who were the Sudras?', 'The Untouchable Castes in India', 'The Buddha and His Dhamma', and 'Pakistan or the Partition of India', etc. Until 1948, Ambedkar's theory did not appear but in 1948 his theory published in book name the title '*The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables'*. In his book Ambedkar's denied a racial, ethnic or occupational basis for the origin of Untouchability. He also mentioned that Untouchables were pushed aside in the struggle for supremacy between Buddhism and Brahmanism which has so completely mould the history of India.[13]

Dr. Ambedkar popularly known as Babasaheb was born as untouchable in a poor Dalit family which had no right to be an equal in Indian society. He groused about the humiliation and discrimination of Indian culture. He always inspired untouchable castes to reject Brahmanical Social Order that kept them socially degraded, economically poor, culturally despised, politically powerless and denied them the basic human rights.[14] As the Chief Architect of free India's new constitution he abolished all forms of discrimination and inequalities based on caste, gender, race or status.[15] The social disadvantage suffered by the Dalits in India was taken note of in the Constitution of India under Dr. Ambedkar provided the Dalits with many

safeguards like – social, educational, cultural, employment, religious, economic and political safeguards. He felt that the problems of the Untouchables could not be solved by mere tinkering. They demanded a radical social solution. The Indian Constitution which has provided for complete equality before law and the equal protection of laws to all citizens, under Article 14, 15 (2), and 17, has abolished untouchability not only in theory but in practice also.

It asserted that the Indian Constitution requires the state to treat all citizens equally, without regard to birth, gender or religious aspects. Yet the Constitution provided special care and advancement of the Untouchables. For instance, we can mention two articles[16] here:

Article 14 of the Constitution declares that: "the State shall not deny to any person equality before the laws or equal protection of laws."

Article 15(2) declares: "No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex---- with regard to- access to shops, public restaurants, hotels and places of public entertainments: or the use of wells, tanks, bathing ghats, roads and places of public resorts maintained."

Article 17 declares: "Untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out Untouchability shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law."

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After Independence, the Indian Government set up various commissions and passed acts as follows—Kalelkar Commission (1953-1955), Untouchability Prohibition Act (1955) and Mandal Commission (1979-1980) etc. But ultimately, these steps failed to remove the untouchability in our society; the debate is going on among the scholars. In this connection, a question naturally comes, how far the Untouchability can be removed? Now-a-days, there is a deep crisis regarding the untouchables and they are still being insulted by upper caste people. There is no doubt that a dalit child who is born with a stamp on his forehead can never get rid of it. In the end, the Dalits are still Dalit, still broken and still suppressed. There is no doubt that Dr Ambedkar was the most famous and the militant champion of the untouchables. He stood for the social liberation, economic emancipation and political advancement of the untouchables.

Today the number of Scheduled Caste persons has gone up very high but still untouchability is in practice. The changes among Dalits have come through three methods: '1. State policy in regard to untouchable groups, 2. Reform movements at various periods of time, and 3. Process of *sanskritisation* and westernisation.'[17] Dalits are a marginal group in rural India, both in economic sense and in view of low-status members of Hindu society. The

features observed about Dalits in rural society are: most Dalits do not own land and they earn an important part of their income by working on the lands of others. Thus the big question is: will Dalits ever be integrated in the main stream of the society? In this connection we agree with Sachchidananda who remarks that the combination of factors like ameliorative efforts of the government, the growing consciousness of the Dalits and the liberal attitudes of caste Hindus will diminish the disabilities and discriminations with the passage of time.[18] Some studies made by Mrs. Epstein (1962), Andre Beteile (1966), Michael Mahar (1972), Sachchidananda (1976) and L. P. Vidyarthi (1977) etc show some changes in favour of the untouchables.

Today we find all round development of disadvantaged groups in India. After Independence, the Indian Government set up various commissions and passed acts as follows—Kalelkar Commission (1953-1955), Untouchability Prohibition Act (1955) and Mandal Commission (1979-1980) etc. Besides these several programmes of the Indian State in the form of grants, scholarships, loans, and stipends etc. are provided for Dalits. But ultimately, these steps failed to complete remove the untouchability in our society; the debate is going on among the scholars. In this connection, a question naturally comes, how far the Untouchability can be removed? Now-a-days, there is a deep crisis regarding the untouchables and they are still being insulted by upper caste people. There is no doubt that a Dalit child who is born with a stamp on his forehead can never get rid of it. It was asserted that the Dalits are still Dalit, still broken and still suppressed. Undoubtedly Dr Ambedkar was a social prophet of the untouchables. He stood for the social liberation, economic emancipation and political advancement of the untouchables. In the present time, the majority of Untouchables are remaining landless, desperately poor and illiterate. In this connection we may point out that Ambedkar devoted himself to improve the living conditions of the Untouchables. Ambedkar had a real visionary towards the upliftment of Dalits. His main aim was to uproot the evil of deep-rooted caste system, uplift the status of downtrodden society and create honour amongst so called upper castes. Untouchability has reduced, their socio-economic and political status have improved. Today at least in towns and villages both Dalits and non-Dalits enjoy the same tea stall, hotel and cinema hall but usually no body brothers about knowing the caste identity of a person. This is all due to the un-tired and intelligent efforts of Ambedkar. He was a *God Father* for the Dalits in the true sense. He was the greatest inspiration to the downtrodden people in India.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Contribution to Upliftment of the Dalit: It's Relevance in Contemporary India

Conclusion

The Constitution of India provides equal rights to all citizens, right to live with equality, honour and dignity. It is the right time to adopt the principles of Ambedkar. Now the Dalits have to come forward and to labour hard in all social, economical, educational and political fields to compete with the other members of the society. So the people of upper classes will have to change their mentality. They have to be more generous towards the Dalits regarding untouchability and the upliftment of their socio-economic, educational and political status etc. The Dalit movements have also successfully built up a good deal of pressure on the ruling classes. In this perspective Gail Omvedt pointed out that 'the post-Ambedkar Dalit Movement was ironically only that in the end-a movement of Dalits, challenging some of the deepest aspects of oppression and exploitation, but failing to show the way to transformation'[19] In conclusion, it is quite clear that untouchability cannot be removed through laws; we have to change peoples' minds and grow awareness. Dr Ambedkar's thought regarding untouchability will continue to be of great relevance in the socio-political and cultural fields in India. In conclusion, it is quite clear that the untouchability cannot be removed through laws; we have to change people's minds and grow awareness. This would be the real tribute to Dr Ambedkar's by the downtrodden people. He thought regarding untouchability will continue to be of great relevance in the socio-political and cultural fields in India.

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