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# AMBEDKAR'S STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE OF INDIA

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**Abstract**

The history of India's struggle for freedom is not singular but plural. People from different social backgrounds led struggles with different strategies to fight against British rule for India's independence. Ambedkar adopted a socio-political strategy to negotiate with British hegemony. Taking the position of the opponent, he employed intellectual tools to question the moral right of the colonial powers from the days of a student in London to the day of gaining freedom to India. His struggle for India's independence started in 1919 and even after getting independence to India, he didn't rest but worked to use his deep legal knowledge, political experience and international exposure to create the world's most acclaimed Constitution for India that guaranteed social justice and social equality to all citizens of a free nation.

**Keywords:** Ambedkar, Dalit, Gandhi, Independence, India.

## Introduction

It was not one struggle, but there were many struggles for the independence of India from British rule. It was not one national movement but there were many national movements for freedom. The history of India's struggle for independence consisted of the history of many struggles different from each other ideologically and methodologically. Many employed different strategies in their struggles that ultimately led to gain freedom from British rule. Certainly, Congress was the dominant partner of the freedom struggle but it was not the only player that contributed to getting freedom from the British. It is unhistorical and far from the facts to attribute all credit to only Congress. There were many players and Ambedkar were one among them who employed strategy and methodology different from Congress. Some went far left, some went far right. Congress adopted a centrist model of taking something from the left and something from the right. Ambedkar too was a centrist with a difference. His centrist approach to lead India's struggle for independence was drawn from neither the right nor the left but from his practical experience in a given situation. His motto was socio-political power to the Indian masses. The whole direction of Ambedkar's led India's struggle for independence went with the one single purpose that was to bring socio-economic empowerment of depressed classes through political power.

## Social Reform versus Political Reform

Why did Ambedkar's strategy of the struggle for independence employ the methodology of privileging social reform over political reform? The birth of the Indian National Congress in 1885 was accompanied by the birth of the Indian National Social Conference in 1887 with the view that political freedom could be gained and sustained through social reform. Social reform creates common interest mutually benefitting all sections which could create social unity and by translating that social unity into a political force that would get freedom for all and also the foundations of socially reformed society could ensure the fruits of political freedom to percolate down to all layers of the society. Both Congress and Social conference worked together with the objective of uniting all sections of the society by representing their voices socially and politically to fight for rights and freedom from British rulers in India.

After a decade of carrying the agenda of socio-political reform, Congress dropped the idea of social reform. Conservatives prevailed over liberals and argued that social reform no need to precede political reform. Hence, Congress guided by leaders like W.C. Bonnerji and B.G. Tilak by 1892 became a party only for political reform and not for social reform. Since then Congress demanded political reforms from the government of British India but totally silent on social reform in the society. History testifies the fact that social reform has bearing on political reform. And Congress made the biggest mistake of neglecting social reform thus paving way for conservatives to take over power from the British to establish its rule over the masses. Anticipating the rule of Conservative forces over masses once the British leave India, Ambedkar participated in India's struggle for independence with the aim to empower socially and politically the depressed classes who constitute the vast majority of Indian society. He found both British and Congress as two enemies- one was external and another was internal. From the British, he wanted not just political power but socio-political power but Congress wanted only political power which might be concentrated in the hands of conservative forces of Congress and the depressed classes would be deprived of socio-economic development.

## Strategy: Middle Path; Ideology: Social Democracy

Some people bring changes in the system by opposing it from outside or by being within it. But both are extremes. There is a danger of the system destroying the non-state actors once they adopt violent methods and at the same total dependence on the system







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creates selfish leadership. Both methods may not bring the desired results for the emancipation of depressed classes. Ambedkar adopted a middle path and put one step within the system and another outside it. Therefore, he never aspired for a government job, though he was highly educated from well-acclaimed foreign universities and also, he was leading a financially highly constrained life. If Ambedkar had to oppose the system from totally outside, it meant that he had to close all means of negation with power players. If he had to bring change in the system by being wholly within it, the dependency on the system makes him voiceless. Hence, he adopted the middle path that when he worked from outside the system, he opened the space for negotiations and when he worked within the system, he always carried resignation letter in his pocket whatever the post he held under the government only to make himself not depend on the post but work for protecting the democratic rights of people. Ambedkar was the only leader that broadly fit into the Gramscian theoretical perspective of a war of position where state power is negotiated through popular struggles on social, political and also on moral grounds. On moral ground, Congress failed when Ambedkar questioned it that if one country couldn't fit to rule another country, how could one class fit to rule another class or one race could fit to rule another race.[1]

Ambedkar believed that social problems have a bearing over political power. The principle of natural justice means accommodating socially different groups in political power. Hence, Ambedkar wanted the share of political power proportionate to the population of different social groups. Real democracy in other words is social democracy that is addressing the social concerns of depressed classes and finding political solutions to those concerns. Ambedkar led India's struggle for independence with the sole objective of protecting the socio-political rights of the depressed classes because without their empowerment India can't be empowered India. Since Congress didn't sincerely work for protecting the interests of depressed classes, Ambedkar felt that a separate struggle for independence with a methodology and strategy different from Congress need to be built. The philosophy of pragmatism is the philosophy of Ambedkar. Political democracy is all about acquiring power but social democracy is all about empowering society. Ambedkar wanted to do politics not for political power but the social empowerment of the society. Thus, born Ambedkar's led India's struggle for independence with the middle path as strategy and democracy as an ideology. Ambedkar struggle for India's independence has both a social and political message.

**Evidence before Franchise Committee (1919)**

Ambedkar reported to the Southborough Commission known as the Franchise Committee on the exclusion of Dalits. When Ambedkar entered the political arena of freedom struggle, there were already well-established players – Congress, Muslim League, Communists and Orthodox. Strangely, no one took up issues concern to Dalits. Ambedkar played a crucial role in shaping the direction of contemporary Indian history by espousing the cause of Dalits in the freedom struggle. He wanted freedom for India but with freedom for Dalits from caste-oppression. Freedom for Casteists meant freedom to perpetuate caste oppression. His struggle for freedom involves the struggle for gaining civil rights for Dalit Indians. India's struggle for independence includes the struggle for freedom from caste hegemony. For Ambedkar, Swaraj (self-rule) includes the rule of Dalits. He made representation on behalf of Dalit Indians before the Southborough Committee on Franchise on 27 January 1919 that was the first time any leader voiced for Dalit rights before the British rulers. In his evidence, Ambedkar argued for a separate electorate for Dalit Indians. His political freedom has social content. For him, freedom from British rule means a free Indian nation where every Indian citizen has equal opportunity to develop.

**Mooknayak (1920)**

Ambedkar started Mooknayak (leader of the dumb), a fortnightly in Marathi on 31 January 1920 to voice Dalit protests against the injustice meted out to them and to suggest the means to find solutions to better their conditions. In the very 1st issue of Mooknayak, Ambedkar explains caste-ridden society as a pyramid with the different caste on each floor without any ladder to climb and as a result, a person born on one floor remains there till death.

**Shahu and Ambedkar**

Ambedkar questioned the British rule in India as he upheld the principle of self-rule but at the same time, he didn't wait till the British leave India to gain Dalit rights, instead, he negotiated with the power for safeguards, concessions, opportunities and rights. Dalits are a socially excluded and numerically minority community. The major social group in India is the Shudra community that consists of Backward castes. Ambedkar desired an alliance between Dalits and Shudra as both were socially deprived and economically depressed classes. Ambedkar represented Dalits and Shahu, the prince of Kolhapur state represented Shudra. They formed an alliance of Depressed Classes which was an alliance of Dalit and Shudra for the first time in the history of India. On 20 March 1920 in a Conference presided by Ambedkar held at Managaon in the then Kolhapur state, Sahu, who was popularly called Chatrapati Shahu Maharaj said, "Depressed Class delegates from my realm, I heartily congratulate you upon your having found your true leader from amongst yourselves. I am confident Dr Ambedkar will not rest till he achieves your upliftment. And he will not rest there: a time will come when he will lead the entire nation. I feel certain about it." [2]

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The first All India Conference of Depressed Classes held from 30 May to 1 June 1920 at Nagpur, presided over by Shahu and while delivering the keynote address Ambedkar argued for self-help and self-reliance. In this Conference, a resolution was passed for the nomination of Dalits to the Legislative Council by the Government or by the institutions of Dalits.

**Academic Protest from London**

No leader in India dared to criticize the British government when studying in Britain. Ambedkar as a student of London School of Economics in April 1921 daringly criticized British rule in India in his paper on 'Responsibilities of a Responsible Government in India' read before the students' union which was criticized by his teacher Prof. Harold J. Laski as he felt that the content of the paper was revolutionary in nature. Ambedkar was also very critical of the economic policy of the British government in India. In his thesis on 'Provincial Decentralisation of Imperial Finance in British India' meant for an M.Sc. (Economics) Degree from the London School of Economics, University of London, Ambedkar argued against the wrong financial policies of the British government in India, putting his academic career at stakes. Ambedkar obtained an M.Sc. degree in June 1921. Ambedkar continued his criticism on the wrong financial policies of the British government detrimental to the economic development of India in his thesis on 'The Problem of the Rupee- Its Origin and its Solution' meant for a D.Sc., degree from the University of London. Later it was published under the title, 'History of Indian Currency and Banking.

**Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha**

Ambedkar formed a welfare association for Depressed Classes known as Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha in Mumbai (then Bombay) on 20 July 1924. Its motto was made in three words 'Educate, Agitate, Organise'. It was aimed to work for the educational and economic advancement of the Depressed Classes by representing their grievances before the British government. Its aims were: 1. To promote the spread of education among the Dalits by opening Hostels; 2. To promote the spread of culture among the Dalits by opening libraries, social centres and classes of study circles; and 3. To advance and improve the economic condition of the Dalits by starting Industrial and agricultural schools. Ambedkar also founded Bahishkrit Bharat Prakashak Sanstha a publication institute in Mumbai for the Depressed Classes on 4 December 1924.

**Fight from within the system**

Ambedkar was nominated to Bombay Legislative Council for five years on 18 February 1927 which was renewed in 1932 for a further five years. 19 March 1928, Ambedkar introduced the bill to amend the Bombay Hereditary Offices Act, 1874. Ambedkar also became the Labour Member in Viceroys Executive Council on 27 July 1942 and worked till July 1946.

**Mahad Satyagraha**

Addressing the three thousand Dalits of Depressed Classes Conference, mostly First World War veterans, on 20 March 1927 at Chavadar Tank in Mahad, Ambedkar started satyagraha to assert the right of Dalits for drinking water from public tanks. In the address, he said, "We are not going to Chavdar tank to merely drink its water. We are going to the tank to assert that we too are human beings like others. It must be clear that this meeting has been called to set up the norm of equality.' The orthodox mob attacked the Dalit delegates when they were returning from the tank after drinking the water. About seventy Dalits including women were wounded and twenty Dalits were seriously injured. Within nine months Ambedkar organized satyagraha which was attended by more than ten thousand Dalit volunteers of the Depressed Classes Conference and burnt Manusmriti on 25 December 1927.

**Struggle with Simon Commission**

Ambedkar started the fortnightly journal, Bahiskrit Bharat, in Marathi on 3 April 1927 which was published till 15 November 1929. He formed Samaj Samata Sangh on 4 September 1927 and also formed Samata Sainik Dal in December 1927.

Seven members Simon Commission visited India in 1927 to study for providing more constitutional reforms to politically empower Indians based on promises made at the time of the Montague-Chelmsford reforms of 1919. The Congress boycotted it on arrival but Ambedkar made a statement before the Simon Commission on 29 March 1928. On behalf of Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha on 23 October 1928, Ambedkar gave evidence before the Simon Commission for improving the educational facilities of Dalits.

Ambedkar founded the Depressed Classes Education Society in Bombay on 14 June 1928. He started Samata, the Marathi fortnightly on 29 June 1928 which was closed in 1929. With Ambedkar's support his followers P.N. Rajbhoj and B.D. Gaikwad began Satyagraha for entry to Kalaram Temple at Nasik on 2 March 1930 that continued five years but irregularly. Ambedkar started Marathi fortnightly, Janata on 24 April 1930. He became president of the First All India Depressed Classes Congress held in Nagpur from 8 to 9 August 1930. By then the Simon Commission Report was published. In the meeting, Ambedkar denounced recommendations of the Simon Commission Report as he felt they were against the interests of the Depressed Classes and demanded political independence for India. Congress-led the struggle against the British by boycotting Simon Commission but Ambedkar led the struggle against the British by engaging with the Simon Commission.

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**Round Table Conferences**

As a Dalit representative, Ambedkar attended all the three Round Table Conferences held in London. The first RTC was held from 12 November 1930 to 19 January 1931; the second RTC was from 7 September to 1 December 1931 and the third one was from 17 November to 24 December 1932. Congress boycotted the first RTC. Ambedkar believed in politics of engaging with opponent and Congress believed in boycotting the opponent. As Congress saw the failure of its boycotting strategy, it sent Gandhi to attend the second RTC only to oppose separate electorates for Dalits. Very interestingly Gandhi agreed on separate electorates to Forward Castes, Muslims, Sikhs, Europeans, Indian Christians, and Anglo-Indians but not to Dalits granted by the same Communal Award announced by Ramsay MacDonald on 16 august 1932. Finally, Poona Pact was made on 24 September 1932 between Ambedkar and Congress leaders led by Gandhi resulting in providing joint electorates and the increase in the number of reserved seats which was later incorporated in the Government of India Act 1935.

**Widening the struggle**

Ambedkar's strategy of engaging with the opponent continued and used every opportunity to lead the freedom struggle with the focus on gaining rights to Dalits. On 1 May 1932, he sent a note to the Indian Franchise Committee demanding to identify Dalits as a separate element of the society as they were different from other Depressed Classes like Backward Classes. On 15 August 1936 Ambedkar formed Independent Labour Party intending to broaden Dalit politics by including workers, labourers and peasants in his struggle against the British government. He led a protest on 7 November 1938 against Industrial Dispute Bill. He also engaged with the British intellectually by putting new ideas in the Indian polity by writing on Federation vs Freedom in 1939. He argued for the creation of Pakistan in his work titled Thoughts on Pakistan in 1940. Since he found not only the division labour and also division of labourers on caste lines and not much support from non-Dalit labourers for ILP, Ambedkar in a meeting held from 18-20 July 1942 formed the 'Scheduled Caste Federation' which he called in Marathi 'Dalit Federation'.

**Independence to India**

Ambedkar was a very significant player in the history of India's struggles for independence. He played a significant role in the crucial period of Indian history and gave a new direction to the newly independent India. He was elected to the Constituent Assembly from Bombay on 23 July 1947 and became the first Law Minister of Independent India on 3 August 1947. He was appointed as Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution on 19 August 1947. Ambedkar's written Constitution of India was accepted on 26 November 1950 which is known as the 'Constitution Day' and came into effect on 26 January 1951 the day is celebrated as Republic Day. The most significant characteristic of the Constitution of India is the right to social equality and justice for all citizens. Ambedkar became ordinary to extraordinary because of his commitment to the nation's unity and integrity. He never looked at British or Gandhi's Congress as enemies but opponents. He adopted a very unique strategy to fight against the British or to differ with Gandhi and Congress. His strategy that is 'No boycott but engagement with an opponent' created a very significant space for Ambedkar in the pages of the history of India's struggle for independence.

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