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Babasaheb Ambedkar: A Dalit leader or a national leader: A critical analysis

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Abstract
Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, popularly known as Babasaheb, dedicated his entire life to the upliftment and empowerment of Dalits and worked relentlessly for the rights of the depressed class in society. He tried various strategies during his four-decade-long public career to eradicate the prevalent caste system and, more especially, to emancipate the Dalits from this oppressive social system. However, considering Ambedkar just as a Leader of the depressed class, we ignore his multi-faceted personality and reduce the significance of his outstanding contributions to Indian society, in terms of eliminating discrimination, achieving social justice, and establishing equality, freedom, and true democracy. Hence, this paper puts forward a proposition to regard Babasaheb as a National leader, a nationalist hero.

Keywords: Babasaheb, Ambedkar, Dalit leader, Indian national leader

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Introduction
Born in 1891, Babasaheb Ambedkar belonged to a community that was considered to be an untouchable or impure caste by higher-caste Hindus. From an early age, he experienced racial discrimination and a lot of humiliation due to his low-caste Dalit community. Being a Dalit, he was segregated at school; although he managed to pass his matriculation examinations from Elphinstone High School. Later, in 1912, he obtained a Bachelor's degree in economics and political science from the University of Bombay and went on to get a Master's degree from Columbia University of USA, before applying for the training as a lawyer in London.

However, due to the end of his scholarship, Ambedkar was forced to return back to India. While in India, he got appointed as the Defense secretary to the King of Baroda. Even at Baroda, he had to face humiliation and social discrimination for being an "Untouchable". He decided to continue further studies at his own expense and he went to England in 1920. He was awarded the honor of D.Sc. by the London University. On 8 June 1927, he was awarded a Doctorate by the University of Columbia. All through this period, he studied economics, records, and politics, and wrote on a variety of topics, inclusive of the records of caste in India. After returning back to India, Ambedkar observed that caste discrimination and untouchability was almost fragmenting the country. Hence, he decided to struggle against these social evils. He established Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha to strengthen socio-political awareness for the untouchables and raise public awareness of their distress, thereby strengthening the social reforms movement. Ambedkar supported the concept of providing reservations for Dalits and other religious communities. He also launched a newspaper called "Mook Nayak" (literally meaning, the silent leader) after reaching out to people and making them aware of the evils of the prevailing social evils.

Furthermore, he used the opportunity provided by the British government to fight for political rights, even when the Indian National Congress chose to boycott discussions on constitutional reforms, such as during the Simon Commission. In 1932, due to his growing popularity as a fighter for the rights of the untouchables, he was invited to London to participate in the second round table conference. After discussion, a reservation system was granted to the untouchable community in the regional legislative assembly and the Central State council. His article, Annihilation of Caste is not only strong criticism of the ancient caste system but also a strong criticism of the independence movement led by Gandhi and Nehru, both of them being high-caste Hindu.

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As a political leader, he began his career in 1936 by establishing his own party, the Independent Labor Party. His party participated in the election of the Central Legislative Assembly in 1937 and won fourteen seats. Later, he transformed his Independent Labor Party into the All India Scheduled Castes Federation. However, his party failed to achieve the desired result in the elections held for the Constituent Assembly of India in 1946. He also participated in the Lok Sabha election twice but lost the election. Later, he was appointed Minister of Labor on the Defense Advisory Committee and the Governor's Executive Committee. On August 29, 1947, his academic reputation led him to be appointed as the first independent Indian Minister of Law and the chairman of the committee responsible for establishing a constitution for Independent India.

Ambedkar took every care to establish the Indian Constitution in a manner so as to provide equal rights, justice, religious freedom, and to eliminate the gap between all social strata across the country. He made provisions in the Constitution to provide reservations for people of the reserved class in education and work. Because of his contribution to the formation of the Indian Constitution, he is also known as the "Father of the Indian Constitution". In addition, he also played a significant role in the establishment of the "Finance Commission of India", which helped India develop its society and economy.

As the main framer of the Indian Constitution, he set out to establish safeguards for affirmative action in order to build a fairer society that can provide social justice to millions of oppressed people. In this process, thus, Ambedkar not only took the lead as a heroic supporter of the Republic of India but also became the curator of modern India's conscience (Jadhav, 2014) [4]. Just before two years of his death in 1956, he got converted to Buddhism. Because of his great contributions to Indian society, he was posthumously awarded, "Bharat Ratna" in 1990, by the Indian government.

Research Objective and Approach

Having gained an understanding of Ambedkar's early life, his vision, his mass movements, and his role in political and public life, will it be justifiable to regard Ambedkar just as a Dalit leader or a spokesperson of Dalits? Considering the significance of his immense contribution to the nation, will it not be correct to regard him as a national leader and a nationalist? Keeping these research questions in mind, the present study is an attempt to understand the position of Dr. Ambedkar as a Dalit Leader and as a National Leader. The main objective of the present study is to critically analyze and evaluate the two protagonist roles of Dr. Ambedkar in the socio-political context. The present research study titled, "*Babasaheb Ambedkar: A Dalit Leader or a National Leader – A Critical Analysis*" adopts a historical approach. It is entirely based on secondary sources, i.e. books, published journals, and research papers, which are referenced at the end of this research paper.

Babasaheb Ambedkar as a Dalit Leader

Born a Dalit, Ambedkar suffered discrimination throughout his life. His childhood was shaped by the injustices of British India when the caste system was the norm in India. He was disgusted with the way the Dalits were treated in society. The everyday discrimination turned him into a revolutionary. He devoted his entire life to invigorating and empowering Dalits and working relentlessly for the rights of the oppressed sections of society. He opposed social discrimination and the theory of caste superiority.

Ambedkar became the leader of the depressed class and even represented them separately in the round table conference in the 1930s. It was after he signed the Ponna Pact with Gandhi ji that this ensured that the depressed class had more seats and eventually became one of the most important components of the Indian political system. In 1936, he wrote an influential article *Annihilation of Caste*, fiercely opposing the ancient social stratification system. Beginning in 1947, when he finalized the overall principles of democracy, equality, and religious freedom in the Indian Constitution, he also inserted the prohibition on caste-based discrimination and the law prohibiting untouchable practices. Ambedkar believed that even if India gains independence, Dalits will still have to struggle for their rights unless the caste is lawfully abandoned.

The types of inequality suffered by caste societies are dissimilar because their logic divides the dominating groups and thus prevents them from overthrowing their oppressors. In Indian society featuring "class inequality", the Bahujan Samaj was sub-divided into lower castes (Shudras and Dalits), and these lower castes themselves were further sub-divided into many sub-castes. Therefore, Ambedkar wanted to unite the Dalits and give them a separate identity, providing them with an alternative way to get rid of the Sanskritization. To achieve this goal, he attempted to implement six different strategies during his four-decade-long public career.

1. Identity Building: Ambedkar made an attempt to give the lower castes the glorious history of "the sons of the soil", in order to help them acquire an alternate identity, that was not caste-based, in order to regain self-esteem and overcome differences. In "The Untouchables, who were they and why they became Untouchables?" (1948) [1], Ambedkar refutes Western authors explaining caste hierarchy by resorting to racial factors (Babasaheb's Writings and Speeches, Vol. 7, pp.293).

2. Electoral Politics: In his testimony, during the Montagu and Chelmsford reforms, he explained that the real line of division among Hindus was not between "Brahmins" and "non-Brahmins," but between "touchables" and "untouchables". Therefore, "he rejected an electoral system based on territorial electoral constituencies, because the untouchables would remain in a minority and therefore deprived of their representation" (Keer, 1971) [6]. As a solution to this issue, he suggested, "either to reserve seats for those minorities that cannot, otherwise, secure personal representation or grant communal electorates" (Babasaheb's Writings and Speeches, Vol. 7, pp.252). Both the options seem to be equally effective and valid to him (Keer, 1971; Zelliot, 2004) [6].

3. Reserved Seats: In 1928, before the Simon Commission, Ambedkar advocated granting universal voting rights and seat quotas to untouchables rather than individual voting rights (Jaffrelot, 2009) [5]. He explained that if Dalits do not get universal voting rights, then he will campaign for separate electorates (Jaffrelot, 2009) [5]. This position shows that he has nationalist concerns, which prevented him from

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severing his connection with the social and political mainstream.

4. Political Party: Ambedkar continued to pursue an election-based strategy by creating a political party in 1936, called the Independent Labor Party. As the president of the party, not intending to be limited to untouchables, Ambedkar tried to establish himself as the leader of the "working masses" as a strategy to realize the necessity of expanding the social foundation. Later, Ambedkar resigned from the position of Dalit leader in 1942 and established the All India Scheduled Caste Federation, aiming to expand his caste base and work hard to defend the interests of untouchables.

5. Working with the Rulers: As a part of his strategy, he strived to influence the government in his personal capacity, whether it was the British government or the Congress, in order to better serve the cause of the untouchables. Under British rule, Ambedkar shared egalitarian values with the British and hoped for protection against the "caste Hindus". As a Law Minister of the Nehru Government and an architect of the Indian Constitution, he opened the way for legal rights to enact laws related to the advancement of Dalits, which may change their lives, in a positive way.

6. Religious Conversion: "The idea of converting to another religion in order to escape from the caste system logically ensued from Ambedkar's analysis of Hinduism, whose originality and strength laid in its demonstration that in this civilization social hierarchy was consubstantial to religion. To leave it was thus the only means to attain equality" (Jaffrelot, 2009) [5]. Ambedkar, during the Yeola Conference, in 1935, announced his decision to leave Hinduism: "Unfortunately for me, I was born a Hindu Untouchable. It was beyond my power to prevent that, but, I declare that it is within my power to refuse to live under ignoble and humiliating conditions. I solemnly assure you that I will not die a Hindu" (Das, 1969, p.108) [2].
Thus, during his entire public life, Ambedkar tried various strategies to eradicate castes, especially to liberate Dalits from this oppressive social system. In the political domain, "he promoted a separate electorate, political party building, and public policies like reservations – and did not hesitate to collaborate with the ruling authority of the time – be it the British or the Congress for having things done" (Gore, 1993) [3]. In the social domain, "he militated in favor of reforms at the grass-root level – education being his first goal – and reforms by the state – as evident from the Hindu code bill" (Gore, 1993) [3].
As Vundru (2012) [9] observes: "Ambedkar gave millions of untouchables an identity of their own. He is now regarded as a great Indian, a person relevant for all times to come. He dedicated his life to the uplifting of Dalits. He made a path for legal rights to enact the laws in connection with the progress of Dalits which could positively change their lives. He always led by example". Thus, he can truly be regarded as a Leader of the depressed class (Dalits).

Babasaheb Ambedkar as a National Leader

Ambedkar is well-renowned and acknowledged not only for his remarkable contributions and eminent role as a champion of the depressed class (Dalits), but also as a social thinker, as a politician, as an economist, as an educationist, as a philosopher, as the constitution maker, as a supporter of women empowerment, and a nation-builder. Undoubtedly, Ambedkar has made a great contribution to the upliftment and empowerment of the untouchables; still, he can be regarded as a magnificent personality who contributed immensely to direct "independent India" in becoming "modern India". Ambedkar may be regarded as the designer of modern India and a national leader, based on his outstanding contributions which were closely related to Indian society, in terms of eliminating discrimination, achieving social justice, and establishing equality, freedom, and true democracy.

1. Nation builder: Ambedkar, after a realistic analysis of the problem of linguism and its implications, firmly opined that "one state, one language" is a universal feature and any departure from this rule may pose the problem of disintegration and degeneration to the state. He suggested that Hindi should be the single official language of the whole nation. He suggested that for a region with a larger language community, a sub-divided smaller state would be a better option than a single larger state because a single dominant country will not challenge the center. In addition, he demanded a strong Central Government to keep India united. Undoubtedly the states are sovereign in normal times but whenever a situation arises which poses a danger to the security of the state, the Center becomes all-powerful and assumes control over all affairs of the nation.

2. Educationist: Ambedkar was a great thinker. He believed that education is a powerful tool to improve the overall status of the marginalized section. He believed that education is the right weapon to reduce social slavery. Education does provide a moral weapon for any social movement. For a society with a higher level of education, there are greater chances of equality and progress. Hence, under the People's Education Association founded in 1945, he established a series of academic institutions and hostels. He considered that education will enlighten and empower Dalits to achieve human and political rights, social status, and economic improvement.

3. Economist: The establishment of the Finance Commission of India was inspired by his Ph.D. thesis, and his knowledge in Economics was very helpful in formulating the guidelines for the Reserve Bank of India Act, 1934. He was among one of the founders of the employment exchange in India. He also played a significant role in the establishment of the Central Water Irrigation System, Navigation Commission, National Power Grid System, Hirakud Project, Sone River Project, and Damodar Valley Project.

4. Political Leader: Ambedkar firmly believed that the political system has the responsibility to use legislative power to reform the existing social system to produce results. Political institutions can survive only when they actively promote social reforms. He emphasized the importance of not only establishing political democracy but also socio-economic democracy.

5. Architect of Constitution: As the main framer of the Indian constitution, Ambedkar preferred the British parliamentary setup to the American presidential setup. He

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strongly supported the federal system. He established a fairer social safeguard for millions of oppressed and depressed classes. His political qualities, talent, and vision are evident in every article of the Indian Constitution.

6. Promoter of Women Empowerment: As the Minister of Law, Ambedkar framed the Hindu Code Bill, which is regarded as one of the most powerful legislation introduced in Indian history. Not only did it attempt to delineate who would be considered Hindu, but it also attempted to abolish the caste system in marriages. It not only made an attempt to establish equality between men and women in all legal matters, but also ensured women's property rights, adoption rights, and divorce rights, stipulated equal inheritance rights for men and women, and ended various marriage systems prevailing in India. The Hindu Code Bill failed to pass in the Parliament and was later enacted in parts as 4 separate bills, namely – The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955; The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956; The Hindu Succession Act, 1956; and The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, 1956.

Ambedkar revealed to society and worked towards eradicating the root causes of what is preventing India from becoming a great nation again. Ambedkar made "outstanding contribution as an economist, sociologist, anthropologist, educationist, journalist, as an authority on comparative religion, as a policymaker and administrator and as a parliamentarian, besides being a jurist who became the principal architect of the Indian constitution" (Jadhav, 2014) [4]. All these aspects of Ambedkar's personality have a strong humanistic foundation. Ambedkar is actually a national designer and national leader, not just a spokesperson of Dalits or a hero of the backward classes.

Critical Analysis of the proposition

Ambedkar was steadfast in his beliefs and had strong opinions on most issues. His arguments were rooted in logic and his passion for justice inspired a generation of political leaders. He was a man who believed in logic and rationality. He opposed social discrimination and the theory of caste superiority. His ideology of nationalism was not limited to the transfer of political power from British rule to the Indians, but it demanded socio-cultural and economic freedom. "It was focused on a much broader notion of sustainable national re-construction that is, building a democratic Republic through the creation of social equality and cultural integration in the age-old caste-ridden, inherently unjust, and discriminating society" (Jadhav, 2014) [4].

The proposition regarding the role of Ambedkar as a nationalist or portraying him as a national leader is undoubtedly without any disagreement. However, there exists a subtle fear which cannot be ignored in this regard. In the process of portraying Ambedkar as a national hero or political philosopher, discussions often deviate from the core socio-political goals he was engaged in throughout his public and political life. Ambedkar worked hard to free the Dalits from the shackles of the untouchables and fight against the oppressive Brahmin caste system, which shaped his political or intellectual face.

Critics like Arun Shourie seem to believe that only Hindus can legally advocate the tradition of freedom struggle and that Dalits are the silent object of Indian nationalist discourse. In addition, the Dalits in India have connected themselves to Ambedkar more closely than ever before. This broader claim of Ambedkar as a cultural symbol will become the consolidation of Dalits after independence. An important gathering factor in the politics of power in the Dalit-Bahujan, especially against Hindu forces, represents the connection between Brahmin-Baniya with the global capital. However, Shourie's book, "*Worshipping False Gods: Ambedkar and the Facts which have been erased*" (1997) [8] unfortunately did not cover all aspects of Ambedkar's political thoughts in its comments.

Ambedkar played a "key role in diagnosing the ills of caste-based society, and he worked his entire life to free Dalits from social discrimination, economic alienation, and political exclusion. He was a great supporter of modernity and hopes that the upcoming industrial development, democratic system, and republican values will form a superstructure to ensure the liberation of untouchables" (Jadhav, 2014) [4]. Since independence, the country has witnessed positive changes due to progressive laws, affirmative action policies, and religious and social reforms proposed by Ambedkar. Urbanization and education brought former untouchables closer to citizenship.

In fact, Ambedkar is not only a Dalit leader, or just an emotional voice in social justice politics. He must have transcended these classifications. He has shown commendable leadership on pressing working-class issues, and his critical participation in Marxist socialist thinking is essential. As the Minister of Labor of the Council of Governors, he provided many benefits to the working class with the requirements of eight-hour working days, equal wages, and maternity leave.

In addition, his contribution is highly valued in the struggle to strengthen the emancipation and empowerment of Indian women. Not to mention, Ambedkar, as a constitutionalist, has shown great charm and political foresight to establish India as a modern democratic republic. As an organic intellectual, his thoughts are essential for understanding key political concepts such as citizenship, freedom, equality, and justice. More than paying attention to nation-building, constitutional government, and even normative philosophical issues, Ambedkar is also firmly committed to correcting the cruel reality of caste-based society and hopes to fundamentally transform it into a better human world. He represents all political, social, and cultural activities that promote human progress and happiness. He is the soul of the Indian Constitution. He fought to improve the oppressed position of marginalized section in society. And in this struggle, "he stood rare crusading spirit, carving out in this process plays a significant role for himself among the leading architects of modern India" (Sahadevudu *et al*., 2015) [7]. Thus, ignoring the fundamental issues of caste and untouchables and praising Ambedkar as an abstract national hero seems to be detrimental to Ambedkar and his intellectual works and immense contributions to the nation.

Conclusion

Having gained an insight into Ambedkar's erudition, his mass movements, his role in the government and outside, one can conclude that "Babasaheb Ambedkar was a great social reformer, a valiant champion of human rights and an emancipator of the downtrodden masses of India, who dedicated all his life to awaken the social conscience of modern India" (Jadhav, 2014) [4]. His contribution to uplift and empower the downtrodden made him a cult figure

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among the depressed classes. Apart from this, he can undoubtedly be regarded as a magnificent personality who contributed immensely to direct "independent India" in becoming "modern India". Thus, Ambedkar may be regarded as the designer of modern India and a national leader, based on his outstanding contributions which were closely related to Indian society, in terms of eliminating discrimination, achieving social justice, and establishing equality, freedom, and true democracy.

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