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The Architect of Social Justice: Ambedkar's Enduring Relevance in the Dalit Struggle

Sanskrati Sharma
Ph.D. Scholar, University of Lucknow, Lucknow

Abstract:

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar remains a seminal figure in India's socio-political history, celebrated for his relentless advocacy for the rights and dignity of Dalits. His unique positionality as a member of the Dalit community enabled him to deeply comprehend and confront the entrenched caste-based inequities in Indian society. Ambedkar's leadership extended across social movements, institutional development, and constitutional reform. Through pivotal actions such as founding the Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha, leading the Mahad Satyagraha, and playing a foundational role in India's Constitution, he catalyzed a transformation in Dalit consciousness and agency. This paper revisits Ambedkar's contributions to the Dalit movement from a historical lens, analyzing the significance of his interventions and their enduring relevance in the contemporary struggle for social justice.

Keywords: Dalit, Discrimination, Caste System, Social Justice, Ambedkar, Inequality

Introduction:

The Varna system represents an ancient framework of social classification referenced in Hindu texts, notably the Vedas, and was further developed in later writings such as Manusmriti. This system categorizes society into four main groups, or varnas, which are determined by occupational roles and responsibilities. These groups include Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Today, the Dalits are part of the Sudra Varna. Dalits are referred to by various names across different regions of India, including Holaya, Panchama, Chandala, Samagara, Chamar, Adikarnataka, and Adidravida, among others. The term "Dalit" originates from the Sanskrit word "Dal," which translates to "ground," "suppressed," "crushed," or "broken into pieces." This term was first employed by Jyotiba Phule, the founder of the Satya Shodhak Samaj, a non-Brahmin movement in Maharashtra, to denote outcastes and untouchables who were marginalized by the caste system prevalent in nineteenth-century Indian society. Contemporary Dalits embrace the term "Dalit," viewing it as a symbol of resilience and identity forged through struggle. Historically, the term was considered derogatory, and British colonial authorities designated this group as the "depressed class" in 1919. Mahatma Gandhi affectionately referred to them as Harijan, while the British administration classified them as Scheduled Castes in 1935. The term "Dalit" gained renewed prominence through the Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra during the 1970s (Kumar, 2016). The Dalit movement emerged as a response to the long-standing exploitation and oppression of Dalits by the upper castes in India. Historically, Dalits have faced severe discrimination and social isolation due to the hegemony of Brahmin culture, which has perpetuated a hierarchical caste system for centuries. The movement gained momentum in the context of a changing political landscape in India. The postmodern administrative framework, rational judicial system, and liberal

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education system began to emphasize ideals of liberty, equality, and social justice, which resonated with the aspirations of the Dalit community. The Dalit movement is characterized as a social revolution aimed at transforming the age-old hierarchical structure of Indian society. It seeks to assert the rights and privileges of Dalits and challenge their socio-cultural exclusion and economic deprivation they have faced for centuries. The movement used literature and the formation of organizations such as the Dalit Panthers to mobilize and protest against injustices. This grassroots activism played a crucial role in raising awareness and fostering Dalits' sense of identity. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) significantly contributed to the political mobilization of Dalits, enabling them to participate in the democratic electoral process. This participation has been pivotal in creating a separate identity for Dalits and advocating for reservations in political offices and government jobs. The Dalit movement has fundamentally challenged the traditional caste hierarchy in Indian society. It has encouraged democratic ideals and has been instrumental in bringing Dalits into mainstream politics, allowing them to hold important administrative positions. The movement has also raised critical issues related to identity, reservations, and the fight against untouchability and discrimination. It has become a powerful social movement advocating for socio-economic and political transformation for Dalits. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was a pivotal figure in the Dalit movement, advocating for the rights and dignity of Dalits in India. He initiated several publications, including the Marathi fortnightly "Bahishkrit Bharat" in 1927 and the weekly "Janta" in 1930, to raise awareness about the plight of Dalits and promote social equality between untouchables and caste Hindus. Ambedkar founded the "Samaj Samta Sangh" in 1927, which aimed to advocate for social equality. He actively supported inter-caste marriages and dinners, challenging the rigid caste norms that perpetuated discrimination against Dalits. One of his significant contributions was leading a Satyagraha in December 1927 to assert the civic rights of untouchables to draw water from a public tank in Mahad. This act of defiance against caste-based restrictions highlighted the struggle for basic human rights. Ambedkar's legal efforts culminated in a victory at the Bombay High Court in 1937, affirming the rights of Dalits to access public resources. Ambedkar also recognized the dual oppression faced by Dalit women, who suffered from both caste and gender discrimination. He advocated for their rights and emphasized the need for gender equality within the Dalit community, highlighting the intersectionality of caste and gender issues. Ambedkar's vision for the Dalit movement was rooted in democratic ideals of liberty, equality, and social justice. He believed that the socio-cultural exclusion and economic deprivation faced by Dalits necessitated a revolutionary change in society, which he sought to achieve through organized movements and political engagement. Ambedkar's efforts laid the groundwork for the modern Dalit movement, inspiring future generations to continue the fight for social justice and equality. His teachings and activism have had a lasting impact on the socio political landscape of India, making him a revered figure in the struggle for Dalit rights. This study is fundamentally an exploratory investigation that relies on secondary data for systematisation, analysis, and drawing conclusions. Secondary data from journal articles, books, and e-resources have been employed. The primary goals of this research are two in number. The initial task is to examine Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's role in contributing to Dalit liberation. The second aim of this investigation is to examine his tactics and assess their influence on Indian culture. This study has four sections. The first one is The Historical Context of Dalit Movements. In which the trajectory of the Dalit movement is assessed from the 18th

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century to independence and also post independence. The second section is Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Contribution to Dalit Movements. In this section, Dalit consciousness and the historical decisions taken by Dr. Ambedkar have been discussed. In the third section, his impact and legacy have been discussed through the lens of acts, regulations, and laws he has made. The final section discusses the conclusion of his tremendous work for the Dalit upliftment.

The Historical Context of Dalit Movements:

The history of the Dalit movement in India is long and complicated, going back centuries. It is a movement that seeks social and political equality for Dalits, historically classified as "untouchables" within the Hindu caste system. The movement has evolved with different phases and leaders but has retained its core demands: eradication of caste discrimination, social justice, and political empowerment. Socio-political Landscape Before Ambedkar in dalit movement was focused on social reforms and religious conversions before the rise of B.R. Ambedkar. Jyotirao Phule, the father of the Dalit movement, was a 19th-century social reformer. He founded the Satyashodhak Samaj (Society of Truth-Seekers) in 1873 with the intention of challenging the dominance of the Brahmin caste and bringing about social equality (Kumari, 2019). Phule's work laid the foundation for the Dalit movement, but it was Ambedkar who transformed it into a

powerful political force. In the Emergence of Dalit Consciousness, Ambedkar was a Dalit himself, and he became the most prominent leader of the Dalit movement in the 20th century. He was a brilliant scholar and a skilled politician who fought for the rights of Dalits with unwavering determination. Ambedkar's vision for the Dalit movement was based on four pillars: education, organization, agitation, and political power. He believed that education was necessary for Dalits to overcome social and economic discrimination. He also emphasized the importance of organizing Dalits into a unified political force to demand their rights. Ambedkar's leadership led to the rise of Dalit consciousness and a new wave of Dalit movements. These movements, which included a wide range of issues such as caste discrimination, land reforms, and political representation, challenged the traditional Hindu social order and sought a more egalitarian society. Historical Key Events and decisions by Dr. Ambedkar taking care of Dalit upliftment perspective.

- The Poona Pact (1932): This agreement between Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi ensured reserved seats for Dalits in the legislatures.
- The Scheduled Castes Federation (SCF): Founded by Ambedkar in 1942, the SCF is a political party that represents the interests of Dalits.
- The Republican Party of India (RPI): After Ambedkar's death, the RPI was formed and is a major political party continuing to advocate for Dalit rights.
- The Dalit Panthers: Radical political organization, emerged in the 1970s and advocated for Dalit liberation and social justice.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Ideology and Vision were very clear for social justice. He was a towering figure in Indian history. He was committed to social justice and equality, which was reflected

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in his unwavering determination to change the course of history. His ideology and vision were shaped by the complex interplay of philosophical foundations, personal experiences, and intellectual influences. The philosophy of Ambedkar is based on a profound understanding of Indian society and its historical injustices. He was strictly opposed to the caste system that he saw as the principal root of social inequality and social discrimination. His strict critique of the caste system included not only its social, economic, but also the political implications it had carried for centuries. He suggested that the caste system developed such a stratified social society where lower castes could not reach education or acquire employment opportunities or a right to rule the governance. The caste system had been an issue for multilateral criticisms. Ambedkar claimed it as an evil institution that fostered inequality and injustice in the society. He criticized that the system was morally objectionable in addition to posing a big hindrance in the march of Indian society and economy. "The caste system is not merely a division of labour, it is a division of labourers." Ambedkar was influenced heavily by Western education and liberalism in his view of life. He did his M.A. at Columbia University and completed his MSc at the London School of Economics. Through these academic interactions with some of the most celebrated philosophers and economists such as John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx, and Max Weber, he formed his worldview critically about social and economic issues and made his individual thoughts on the concepts of social justice and equality. Ambedkar envisioned social equality based on liberty, equality, and fraternity. He believed all should be treated as equal individuals and have equal opportunity in the political, economic, and social life of the nation, irrespective of their caste, creed, or gender. He stood for a society where social status and opportunities would not depend on birth but rather on merit. He believed that education, law, and political representation were necessary tools for achieving social equality. He emphasized the importance of education in empowering the marginalized sections of society and breaking the cycle of poverty and discrimination. He also advocated for the use of law to dismantle discriminatory social practices and to ensure equal rights for all citizens. He realized the need for political representation for the oppressed communities and struggled for their inclusion in the political process.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Contributions to the Dalit Movement:

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's leadership was instrumental in shaping the ideological and organizational core of the Dalit movement in India. His interventions were not merely reactive but strategic, aiming at dismantling caste-based hierarchies through legislative, educational, and social reform. Ambedkar understood that the caste system was not only a social evil but a systemic mechanism of control that required institutional redress and revolutionary consciousness (Hanumanthappa, 2021).

One of his early and notable actions was the Mahad Satyagraha (1927), in which he led Dalits to assert their right to drink water from public tanks—an act that symbolized the rejection of untouchability and caste-based exclusion. This was followed by the Kalaram Temple Entry Satyagraha (1930) in Nashik, where Ambedkar again emphasized the fundamental right of Dalits to access public religious spaces (Thippeswamy, 2016).

Ambedkar's intellectual activism was equally forceful. Through periodicals like Bahishkrit Bharat and Janata, he raised awareness and disseminated critical views on caste and society. In

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1936 , he published Annihilation of Caste, a scathing critique of Hindu orthodoxy that called for the total dismantling of the caste system. He famously declared that he was "born a Hindu, but will not die a Hindu," signaling his eventual conversion to Buddhism in 1956 along with half a million followers—an act of both personal liberation and collective protest (Jaffrelot, 2005).

Politically, Ambedkar founded the Independent Labour Party (1936) and later the Scheduled Castes Federation (1942) to provide a political platform for Dalits. He participated in the Round Table Conferences in London, arguing for separate electorates for Dalits—a stance he eventually modified in the Poona Pact. As Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution, Ambedkar institutionalized affirmative action, embedding provisions for the Scheduled Castes in education, employment, and politics (Kumar, 2016).

His multi-dimensional contributions created a robust foundation for the Dalit movement, which combined grassroots mobilization, legal activism, and political advocacy.

Ambedkar's Ideology and Vision:

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's ideology was deeply rooted in the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, which he considered essential for a just society. His intellectual framework was shaped by a diverse array of influences, including liberal Western thinkers like John Stuart Mill, the egalitarian ideals of Buddhism, and his lived experiences of caste discrimination (Dhankhar, 2022). Unlike many of his contemporaries who sought reform within Hinduism, Ambedkar rejected the caste system as inherently unjust and irredeemable.

Central to his ideology was a rigorous critique of the Varna system and its legitimization through Hindu scriptures such as the Manusmriti. Ambedkar argued that the caste system was not merely a division of labor, but a division of laborers—an oppressive structure that denied dignity and mobility to the lower castes. In his words, "Caste is not just a division of labor. It is a division of laborers" (Ambedkar, 1936/2002).

Ambedkar believed that education was the ultimate tool of empowerment. He consistently urged Dalits to "educate, agitate, and organize," viewing education as a means to consciousness and emancipation. He founded the People's Education Society and supported numerous initiatives aimed at increasing Dalit access to schools and universities (Hanumanthappa, 2018).

Legally, Ambedkar envisioned the Indian Constitution as a transformative instrument. He included provisions to prohibit untouchability (Article 17) and introduced affirmative action policies (Articles 15(4), 16(4)) to uplift historically oppressed communities. He also recognized the intersectionality of caste and gender, advocating for the rights of Dalit women who faced dual marginalization.

In advocating for the conversion to Buddhism, Ambedkar offered a spiritual and ethical alternative to Hinduism's caste hierarchy. For him, Buddhism was a religion of reason, compassion, and social equality. This conversion was not only a religious act but a political and psychological assertion of identity and dignity (Jaffrelot, 2005).

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Ambedkar's vision was not merely of Dalit emancipation but of a democratic and inclusive India. His commitment to justice extended beyond caste and aimed to redefine citizenship in ethical and egalitarian terms.

Impact and Legacy:

The legacy of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar is monumental in the context of Indian democracy, social reform, and Dalit empowerment. His contributions transcended his lifetime, establishing a framework for the ongoing struggles against caste-based injustice and systemic exclusion. The empowerment of Dalits—socially, politically, and economically—stands as one of the most significant outcomes of his life's work (Lajwantsingh, 2016).

Social Reform and Legal Protection:

Ambedkar's tireless efforts were instrumental in the abolition of untouchability through the Untouchability (Offences) Act, 1955, and the later Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, which provided legal safeguards against caste-based violence and discrimination. These laws represent a tangible legacy of his insistence on legal justice as a path to equality (Hanumanthappa, 2021).

Education and Economic Upliftment:

Recognizing the link between education and emancipation, Ambedkar established institutions like the Depressed Classes Education Society (1924) and advocated for scholarships and hostels for Dalit students. He believed that without access to education and economic resources, social reform would remain symbolic and superficial (Dhankhar, 2022).

Political Representation and Constitutional Inclusion:

Perhaps Ambedkar's most enduring contribution was his role as chief architect of the Indian

Constitution, where he embedded the principle of affirmative action. Through Articles 15(4),

16(4), and 46, he ensured reservations in education, employment, and legislative bodies for Scheduled Castes and Tribes measures aimed at redressing historical wrongs through structural inclusion (Kumar, 2016).

Despite criticism and political debates over the reservation system, it remains a critical tool for enabling Dalit access to public institutions, allowing the rise of leaders such as Kanshi Ram and Mayawati, and fostering parties like the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP).

Modern Relevance and Global Recognition:

Ambedkar's thoughts continue to influence global discourses on social justice and human rights. His writings are studied across the world in departments of law, sociology, and political science. In India, Ambedkar Jayanti is celebrated nationally, and his statues stand in public spaces as symbols of resistance and hope.

Today's Dalit movements, including grassroots activism and digital advocacy, draw heavily from Ambedkar's ideas. Whether in the form of hashtag activism, student movements, or international academic conferences, his influence remains foundational.

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Conclusion:

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's transformative role in the Dalit movement remains unmatched in modern Indian history. By situating caste oppression within broader political, legal, and social frameworks, Ambedkar redefined the struggle of Dalits from passive victimhood to active resistance. His interventions ranging from the Mahad Satyagraha and Round Table Conferences to his leadership in drafting the Indian Constitution collectively laid the foundation for a new, rights-based vision of democracy and citizenship in India.

Ambedkar's emphasis on education, legal reform, and political representation empowered the Dalit community to assert their rights and challenge millennia-old hierarchies. His efforts resulted in structural reforms, including the outlawing of untouchability, affirmative action policies, and increased visibility and leadership roles for Dalits in politics and governance. Moreover, his advocacy for Dalit women emphasized an intersectional approach long before it became part of mainstream academic discourse.

Despite progress, caste-based inequality continues in both overt and subtle forms. Incidents of caste violence, educational exclusion, and employment discrimination persist, reminding us that Ambedkar's dream of a truly egalitarian society remains a work in progress. Nonetheless, his vision and legacy continue to inspire new generations of activists, scholars, and leaders who carry forward the banner of social justice, dignity, and constitutional morality. Ambedkar was not merely a reformer of his time; he was a revolutionary thinker whose relevance spans across generations and borders. His life and work remain vital not only to Dalit assertion but also to the larger democratic project of creating a just and humane society.

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