

The relevance of Ambedkar

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An assessment of the legacy of the oppressed intellectual and social rebel Babasaheb Ambedkar in the 125th year of his birth, especially in the context of the Hindu Right's efforts to appropriate him. By N. RAM

AS democratic India prepares to celebrate the 125th year of his birth, Babasaheb Ambedkar stands taller than he ever did before—his role in the struggle for a modern, democratic, and socially just India greatly enhanced at the expense of various other outstanding national figures who were contemporaries and opponents during the great battles of the freedom movement era. This is essentially because the deep-seated and central problems spotlighted by his life, struggles, studies, and experimentation in ideas remain alive and kicking while the searching and often profound questions he raised about Indian society remain basically unanswered.

Ambedkar was born Bhimrao on April 14, 1891, at Mhow in central India in an austere and religious Mahar family with a military service background and unusual respect for education. In school (Satara and Bombay), college (Bombay), service under the Maharaja of Baroda (briefly in 1913 and again between July and November 1917), and study abroad (Columbia University, the London School of Economics, Gray's Inn, the University of Bonn), the young man displayed a scholarly orientation, a commitment to the life of the mind, and well-honed intellectual gifts that few other contemporary political leaders of the era could match.

Bhimrao benefited from opportunities that had just opened up, which none in his family or, for that matter, in the recorded history of his people had access to. Yet every one of his academic, intellectual, and professional achievements was hard-earned, in social battle, against entrenched oppression, discrimination, and anti-human caste prejudice. By the time he was finished with his formal studies in the early 1920s, Ambedkar had acquired qualifications that surpassed the M.A., Ph.D., M.Sc. (Econ), D.Sc. (Econ), and Barrister-at-law he had added, by right, to his name and title. By the time he was 30, he had been through a real-life education that most people, including the most renowned scholars, do not acquire in a lifetime.

There may be various opinions on the formidable range of issues and controversies in which Ambedkar figured as a protagonist during four decades of his public life—which can be said to have begun with the brilliant paper he did on “The Castes in India, Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development” for Alexander Goldenweiser’s anthropology seminar in New York in May 1916.

Ambedkar was a transparently honest, challenging, and eclectic liberal thinker. He was attracted to utilitarianism, and eventually to Buddhism, in philosophy. He found inspiration in the ideals of the French Revolution and also in the socially forward-looking and humanistic elements and values in Indian culture and civilisation over the millennia. He delved into the Marxist classics, going so far as to claim, during the historic anti-khot mobilisation of peasants in Bombay in early 1938, that “I have definitely read studiously more books on the Communist philosophy than all Communist leaders here”. However, he was not persuaded either by the revolutionary theory of Marxism-Leninism or by the practice of socialism in his time.

He was sharply and emphatically opposed to Gandhism and to the Congress' ideology, although on certain social issues he held views in common with Jawaharlal Nehru—who, as Prime Minister, badly let down his Minister of Law on the Hindu Code Bill in the early 1950s.

Courageous experimenter

From his early days, Ambedkar stood out as a restless and courageous experimenter who did not always get it right when it came to balancing values and practical considerations that seemed to be in conflict. He had fallen in love with great ideas as a socially oppressed and humiliated schoolboy who refused to be treated with condescension by anyone, including Baroda's royalty. Throughout his life, which ended a couple of months after he publicly embraced Buddhism along with his followers, he was interested in the big picture. The boy who was barred, by the curse of untouchability, from playing cricket with his schoolmates in Satara never took his eye off the ball. He concentrated in his public life on attainable, practical goals. And he never became too big to go into specifics, details, doubts, books, and the problems of ordinary people, especially the lowliest of the low in Indian society.

During Ambedkar's lifetime, his many opponents and critics, especially Congressmen, alleged from time to time that he had missed the main strategic task of the era. Such criticism gained wide currency, especially in the press which tended to patronise him as a sort of sub-national leader, a sectional leader of the Scheduled Castes rather than the towering and challenging national figure he was in an objective sense. Unfortunately, some of the heroes of the freedom struggle, social reactionaries themselves, completely missed the point about how Ambedkar's studious, tough-minded, powerful social questioning and battles fitted in the overall picture. Some of them even questioned his patriotism and called him names, but who remembers them today? Looking at this inspiring but contradictory freedom movement experience in the early 21st century light, we can begin to appreciate why Ambedkar was unerringly on target on social questions and his critics and opponents dead wrong.

Big social questions raised by Ambedkar

It can be argued that one of the defining weaknesses of India's freedom movement was its underestimation, if not neglect, of the big social questions raised by Ambedkar and its compromising stance on these questions, notably on sanatana dharma.

The time has come to recognise that Ambedkar represented the profound side of the social struggle that was not adequately represented in the Congress-led nationalist movement. Standing to the right of centre in his political outlook, he tended towards radicalism and uncompromising struggle in the social arena in which he spearheaded many a battle. His lifelong concern with the inequities and oppression embedded in religion, conventional morality, and the values of so-called mainstream society led him to forge his own conception of socio-economic justice in an idealistic sense. He turned his back on class analysis, which might have given him new insights, but he seemed intuitively to grasp the link between caste and class in India. What is impressive is that this doughty fighter for social justice who considered himself a political liberal and was sought to be marginalised by his opponents during key moments of the freedom struggle commands a powerful following today as democratic India grapples with the troubling questions he never tired of raising in politics and public life.

Ideologically, Ambedkar may have stood to the right of centre, but at times he moved sharply the other way, to the radical side. This happened especially when his ideas, campaigns, and political organisational work were backed by powerful mass movements, for example during the 1938 workers' struggle in Bombay against the anti-strike Bill. He was the builder of the Independent Labour Party, which did not take off at the all-India level but yielded some useful political, ideological, and organisational lessons to the opposition around the country.

Notwithstanding his chairmanship of the Constitution Draft Committee in the Constituent Assembly and his stint in the Union Ministry under Prime Minister Nehru, Ambedkar can be considered the founder of non-Congressism and anti-Congressism in Indian politics. Even while championing social egalitarianism and popular liberties and criticising the sway of big business and landlordism, and campaigning for social and economic democracy, he remained a conscious ideological and political adversary of Marxism-Leninism and Communism.

He had a number of interesting things to say about complicated and difficult national problems—Kashmir, language, nationhood, citizenship, ethnicity, and so on. His analysis lit up the field for a proper democratic understanding of cooperative federalism and Centre-State relations in India. On international questions and foreign policy, his approach was that of a conservative dissenting from non-alignment and from the Nehruvian, not to mention the Left's, world view.

The social and class basis of the following he commanded; the radical nature of his social questioning; his passion for social justice; his openness to modern, scientific, and rational ideas; his unyielding secularism and forward-looking views on a number of questions, especially on the condition and future of women, and on what it took to make a civil society; his great intellectual gifts, tireless curiosity, and wide-ranging interests; his ability to concentrate on attainable, practical goals; and his constructive sense of realism—these marked him out as a unique kind of leader.

The current national situation is framed by the political and social ascendancy of the Hindu Right and the ideological and political offensive by majority communalism and social reaction. Hindutva is even attempting, against the grain of history, to appropriate Ambedkar's legacy. In this situation, his uncompromising analysis of the caste system, of chaturvarnya and sanatana dharma, of notions of pollution, of unalterable or rigid social hierarchy, and of the implications of the hegemony of the shastras must be read, re-read, and made part of a national debate. His major theoretical exposition of such questions is contained in a 1936 presidential address which stirred up a hornet's nest, the radical Annihilation of Caste to which the writer Arundhati Roy, in a long introductory essay, has provided fresh meaning and context. This intellectual contribution to the building of a new India must be ranked on a par with Babasaheb's signal and justly celebrated contribution to the making of a Republican Constitution.

Social endosmosis

In this work, Ambedkar emphasised the anti-social, anti-progress character of an unjust social order as well as its vital connection, through networks of force and ideology, with political power. The caste system, in his analysis, militated against fraternity, “sanghatan and cooperation for a good cause”, public charity and broad-based virtue and morality. When critics challenged him to specify his “ideal society” in lieu of a caste-based order, he replied: “My ideal would be a society based on liberty, equality, and fraternity.” He specified that his ideal society would be mobile; there would be “social endosmosis”. There would be fraternity, which was only another name for democracy, and democracy was primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoining communicated experience and breeding an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellow human beings.

“Chaturvarnya must fail for the very reason for which Plato’s Republic must fail,” warned the oppressed intellectual as social rebel. He pointed out that “the lower classes of Hindus” were “completely disabled for direct action on account of a wretched system”. He asserted: “There cannot be a more degrading system of social organisation.... It is the system which deadens, paralyses, and cripples the people from helpful activity.” He attempted to follow through the implications of this system in the political sphere. To Ambedkar, the real remedy was “to destroy the belief in the sanctity of the shastras” and their caste-borne tyranny.

It was no wonder that Gandhi, a notable compromiser in such matters, declared more than half a century ago: “Dr Ambedkar is a challenge to Hinduism.” He remains so today, which is why the votaries of Hindutva and the forces that form part of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) constellation cannot afford to ignore him.

One battle in which social orthodoxy and opportunist politics allied to defeat social progress was the instructive fight over the Hindu Code Bill in the late 1940s and the early 1950s. One of the leading authors of the Constitution led the effort to institute a reasonably forward-looking and egalitarian Hindu Code law but it was sabotaged by orthodox elements. The Congress party, despite Nehru’s claim to rationality and progressivism, refused to support the Bill. The abandonment of this forward-looking legislative measure meant the betrayal of Ambedkar’s vision on such critical issues.

His solid contribution to constitutional and institution-building aside, he had a great deal to say about democracy as a real way of life and about citizens’ rights, about authoritarianism, and also about a healthy democratic political system. He detested hereditary, dynastic rule and a one-party system. “To have popular government run by a single party is to let democracy become a mere form for despotism to play its parts from behind it,” is a typical Ambedkar formulation. He warned: “Despotism does not cease to be despotism because it is elective. The real guarantee against despotism is to confront it with the possibility of its dethronement, of its being laid low, of its being superseded by a rival party.” Ambedkar clearly had little use for political stability premised on a single-party rule, or on a social philosophy of “letting sleeping dogs lie”.

Two of his political admonitions are of particular contemporary relevance. Do not lay liberties at the feet of a great man; in politics, bhakti or hero-worship is a sure road to degradation. Make political democracy a social democracy; resolve the contradictions, else they will undermine democracy itself.