

Dr. B R Ambedkar – The relevance of a conscientious dissenter in nation building and sustaining today's democracy

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In May 2011, the bachelor myself, after moving to the Mumbai head-quarters of my employer, the Indian financial capital had always been my preferred work location, started the arduous hunt for an apartment that I could afford to rent. I made daily calls to multiple real-estate brokers, making them aware of my price range and proclivity to live in a gated housing complex having fitness amenities. I figured that after clocking ten to twelve hours daily in the office, I would not like to travel far to hit the gym or swimming pool, and there were quite a few large modern residential developments near my work place that I could afford. However, the brokers ended up showing me apartments in standalone houses, well within my budget as they had no additional amenities, in predominantly Muslim neighbourhoods. The whole process was not only annoying, because I was not getting what I was willing to pay for - live in a relatively modern housing complex by my standards, but surprisingly the brokers were compromising on their annual commissions, which were proportional to the rent amount. Finally, when I confronted one of these brokers, I was told that my predicament had to do with my last name, 'Khan'. Most of the apartments in these modern housing societies were owned by Hindu families and they would not be overtly keen on renting it out to a Muslim. I was completely taken aback. Ironically, I was supposedly an upper-caste Hindu, despite my Islamic sounding last name, 'Khan', which technically was a title that was bestowed to my forefathers few hundred years back, when they were living in Eastern Bengal (now part of Bangladesh) and helped the defeated Mughal prince, Shah Shuja, escape to Myanmar (erstwhile Burma) from the armies of his brother Aurangzeb, the soon-to-be Mughal emperor. I was always proud of the historical relevance of this innocuous regalia attached to my family, never realising that one day some countrymen would hold this against me, despite having done my best to become a bona fide member of the educated, English-speaking and tax-paying Indian elite. I ended up moving in with a friend of mine, who was doing very well professionally and was kind enough to share his spacious two-bedroom apartment in a housing society, that fit my definition of modernity.

I had read multiple accounts of discriminatory practices that exist in our modern society. Such malaise has its roots in the stark inequality that permeates our sui generis pluralistic Indian society, but this time when I was exposed it, albeit in a much smaller and relatively harmless way, I was least prepared for it. It is well-known that the racial, cultural, economic, religious and caste divisions in our polyglot nation, containing one-sixth of humankind, still run deep. Time and again, social, economic and political turmoil have accentuated these fissures, but the Indian experiment, that started with bare minimum resources in 1947, is still evolving. Certainly, the Indian heterogeneity has come a long way in overcoming the maladies of untouchability and communal conflicts, which enjoyed centuries of head-start in entrenching themselves into the Indian way of life. That is why, taking a leaf out of historian Ramchandra Guha's works, the country must owe a great deal of gratitude to the vision, effort and sacrifice of the 'Makers of Modern India', who helped steer the fledgling machinery of Indian

democracy on a coherent and just path. Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, fondly called Babasaheb, was one such visionary and towering personality of modern India. Drawing inspiration from Buddha, Kabir and Phule, he was a true champion of socio-economic justice. A 'darling of the dispossessed', always memorialised in a suit to celebrate his successful storming of the then elite corridors of knowledge and power, inspiring generations of unprivileged Indians.

Throughout his early life, Ambedkar was haunted by the unyielding stigma of caste discrimination. Hailing from the Hindu 'Mahar' caste, he was viewed as an 'untouchable' by the then upper caste people. In school, teachers would segregate students of lower-class from the students of upper-class, often the lower-class students being made to sit outside the classrooms in the sweltering heat. It was a sheer testament to his scholastic capabilities and tenacity, that he overcame all the adversities and graduated in Economics and Political Science from the Bombay University in 1912. In recognition of his merit, he was awarded scholarships to pursue higher studies in Economics at the University of Columbia, New York. He furthered his studies, receiving DSc degree from the London University and completing his Doctorate from the University of Columbia in 1927. On his return to India, he started campaigning for social reform to fight for the rights of the marginalised Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) from the grassroots level. He launched the newspaper 'Mooknayaka' (leader of the silent) in 1920 and founded the Independent Labour Party in 1936.

Ambedkar's leadership was established through radical movements against untouchability and in emancipation of peasants and workers in Maharashtra in the 1920s and 1930s. The most prominent among them were:

- i. The Chowdar Lake 'satyagraha' (non-violent civil resistance movement) at Mahad in Raigad district, in March 1927, where lower-caste people asserted their right to draw water from the public tank.
- ii. The public burning of the controversial 2,000 years old, orthodox Hindu scripture 'Manusmriti' (the laws of ancient philosopher Manu) that glorified the rigid caste and gender discrimination, again at Mahad in December 1927.
- iii. The 'Dalit' (people belonging to SC/ST communities) temple entry 'satyagraha' (non-violent civil resistance movement) at the Kalaram temple at Nashik, which began in March 1930 and continued for five years
- iv. The huge peasant demonstration in Mumbai in early 1938 against the exploitative 'Khoti' system of landlordism (which forced landless labourers to look for jobs as unskilled workers) and for the passage of the Bill for abolition of this Khoti system, moved by him in the Bombay legislative assembly in September 1937.
- v. The massive Indian Workers' Great One-Day Strike, in Mumbai on November 7, 1938, against the Bombay Trades Dispute Bill (which restricted the freedom of trade union movement) introduced by the Bombay Congress Government.

It is important to note that although Ambedkar became a popular leader for the downtrodden, his Labour party could not garner necessary capital to achieve success and popularity in equal measure as the Indian National Congress (the Congress). However, his reputation as a scholar was recognised by his political adversaries in the Congress, especially Mahatma Gandhi and

Jawaharlal Nehru, which led to his appointment as independent India's first Law Minister and Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution. Ambedkar was the principal architect of India's liberal and democratic Constitution, despite having spent only two to three years of his entire life for the necessary preparatory work. Today, Ambedkar is chiefly remembered as the unrelenting critic and opponent of the caste system. Over centuries of the subcontinent's history, the resistance to caste-based discrimination had taken many forms. Within Hinduism, one should acknowledge the revolutionary roles played by the 'Bhakti' (theistic devotional trend) social reformation during 15-17th century and the 19th century non-Brahmin reform movement, 'Satya Shodhak Samaj', led by the social activist Jyotirao Phule. Other religions of Indian origin, which challenged the rigidity of caste system were Buddhism and Sikhism. When Islam and Christianity arrived in India, they also made important contributions to the weakening of caste. Mahatma Gandhi's lifelong struggle against untouchability and abolition of caste hierarchy throughout the 20th century had been well documented and credited as the maximum contribution coming from a single upper-caste Hindu. However, the most meaningful impact to weakening the racially stratified system of caste came from Ambedkar. His writings and speeches on a wide range of issues, but especially on caste, untouchability and socio-economic-religious aspects, were both phenomenal and penetrating. Ambedkar's renowned last address to the Constituent Assembly on November 25, 1949, laid bare his vision for India. "We must make our political democracy a social democracy as well. Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it, social democracy. What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognises liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life. These principles of liberty, equality and fraternity are not to be treated as separate items in a trinity. They form a union or trinity in the sense that to divorce one from the other is to defeat the very purpose of democracy."

Given his deep antipathy to communalism and the 'Hindutva' political ideology, Ambedkar was a sworn opponent of the Hindu orthodoxy. Interestingly, Ambedkar was also a vocal critic of the Congress, because he felt that the urgent need for a radical social transformation to achieve the political and social democracy necessary for the desirable economic emancipation of the oppressed, was not fully appreciated by the Congress stalwarts, most notably Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. Ambedkar's objections kept pushing Gandhi and Nehru to do more to challenge the Hindu Mahasabha organisation in dismantling the primitive caste-based order. It was in response to Ambedkar's incessant criticisms that Gandhi was provoked into suspending the ongoing Civil Disobedience movement against the British and embark on a countrywide tour in 1933, to campaign against untouchability, an act as important as the Salt March in 1930. Even when it came to economic reforms, there was constant consternation between Ambedkar and the Congress. Gandhi believed that change needed to be village-oriented while the economist in Ambedkar felt that urbanisation and industrialisation should be the way forward. Gandhi was sceptical of giving too much power to the State and believed that change would come from within society, while the constitutionalist in Ambedkar believed in the power of the State, given his apprehensions about the society alone upholding the virtues of a liberal and just democracy. In hindsight, we find that Ambedkar was right on many of these accounts.

Although, Gandhi and Ambedkar were deeply critical of one another because of their different ideological perspectives, both learnt a great deal from one another. Even, Nehru, whose personal burden of being Gandhi's protégé prevented him from being an openly harsh critic of few Gandhian policies not keeping with the realities of modern times, evolved his thinking and approach on multiple social and economic issues after understanding the merit in the forward-looking ideologies of Ambedkar. Ambedkar's experience of the indignity and humiliation allowed him a more intuitive understanding of the questions of caste. Gandhi's initial attitude on the other hand was more academic. Gandhi believed that Hindus needed to reform themselves from within and make reparations for the sins they inflicted on the marginalised communities, within the framework of a joint electorate. When Gandhi gave the name 'Harijan' (children of God) to the 'untouchables', Ambedkar vehemently opposed it and rejected the term. He argued that, "It is better that a wrong should be called by its known name. It is better for the patient to know what he is suffering from. It is better for the wrongdoer that the wrong is there, still to be redressed. Any concealment will give a false sense of both as to existing facts. The new name in so far as it is a concealment is a fraud upon the untouchables and a false absolution to the Hindus." It was primarily because of Ambedkar's pressure, that Gandhi's approach gradually grew more radical on purging Hinduism of caste, although Gandhi had other influences.

Historian Ramchandra Guha, in his works has very aptly drawn parallels between the Gandhi-Ambedkar relationship and the relationship between U.S. President Lyndon B Johnson and Martin Luther King Jr., both proselytisers of advancing universal civil rights, the former tackling the racial discrimination problem from the top while the latter organising grassroots reformation ground up. As independent India's first Union Law Minister, Ambedkar waged a major battle on the floor of the Assembly against the powerful Hindu orthodoxy on the issue of the legislation of the Hindu Code Bill (reform of the Hindu personal-laws), which granted more civil rights to the women and weaker communities. When the Bill was stalled, Ambedkar grew disillusioned with the patriarchal character of few powerful Congress leaders and concluded that there was no redemption in Hinduism, finally resigning from the Congress led Union Cabinet in 1951. It was Jawaharlal Nehru's brinkmanship that finally helped the Congress to successfully pass a somewhat diluted version of Ambedkar's original Hindu Code Bill in 1955-56, amidst significant opposition. It is the author's view that if Ambedkar had his way, then despite the repercussions of the recent partition, he would have wanted the Congress to be radical and steadfast in their resolve to enact a uniform civil code across the Indian Republic that would have replaced personal laws based on the scriptures and customs of various religious communities in India, with a common set of rules governing every citizen, thus, simplifying the legal system in a complex society. After seventy-one years of India's independence, the contentious uniform civil code is still being debated by today's political and judicial class.

Ambedkar had fought a lifelong struggle for the emancipation of the 'Dalits' and the weak by risking his political and personal ambitions. His role as a conscientious objector and vociferous dissenter, helped shape the nascent Indian democracy by emphasising the need to challenge the status quo and adopt sincere bipartisanship in the social and political spheres, respectively. In today's world of strongman politics, few would argue that the right to dissent

is globally fraught. A recent New York Times op-ed, anonymously authored by a senior White House official, underscores the significant role that dissenters can play in challenging authoritarian regimes. Although, the anonymous op-ed was a very innovative way to leverage dissent, one should not forget that individual dissenters assume far greater risks than mass protesters. They carry with them risks of harassment, imprisonment, physical harm, loss of career or even loss of an entire way of life. India is at crossroads, embracing a new economic and political order. However, the growing attacks on political dissenters and the marginalised section throw up important questions about the pitfalls of the world's largest democracy and what India need to be doing to preserve the hard-fought legacies of Ambedkar and the rest, who sacrificed their lives fighting for India's political, social and economic freedom. Dissent in India is understandably channelled through collective protests. Individual dissenters, akin to Ambedkar, ready to put their career on the line, are incredibly hard to come by. The fear of retribution on the part of the State machinery plays a big role in stifling their courage and voices. Gone are the days when the political leadership comprising Nehru, Patel, Azad and Rajagopalachari, had the wisdom of absorbing criticisms and sincerely engaging opponents like Ambedkar in debates and arguments on policies and actions. Incidents like Gauri Lankesh, Sudha Bharadwaj or the young woman arrested on board a Tuticorin flight, brings to the fore the plight of individual dissenters in our democracy, a democracy that was chiselled by the sharp tools of dissension and criticism from Ambedkar.

In conclusion, I would stress that unlike the visionary social, legal and economic reformer that Ambedkar was, present day dissenters need not always be knights in shining armour. It is not necessary that one ends up agreeing with the beliefs, views and politics of the groups or individuals, protesting and challenging today's status quo in multiple fields. However, in the backdrop of an alarming increase in instances of suppression and distortion, having people within the system articulate criticisms - no matter how flawed or restrictive - should be encouraged for an aspiring egalitarian society. More importantly, upholding the right to dissent, be it individually or collectively, would instil the public confidence in a just democracy, something Ambedkar fought passionately to achieve. Journey to wisdom requires making oneself worthy of other people's truths by embracing diversity of ideas and opinions. Instead of appropriating leaders of the past to fit the colours of politics, the leaders of modern India should take inspiration from the code of values that guided giants like Gandhi, Nehru, Ambedkar, Patel, Azad and Rajagopalachari; so that the nation can see the birth of hundred more Ambedkars, capable of leading millions more out of misery. Otherwise, in a world of rising inequality, we risk the bottled-up despair and desperation of the oppressed, conflagrating into polarising anarchy.

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