

Role of Dr. B.R Ambedkar in the Eradication of Untouchability

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Abstract

Untouchability was one of the most inhuman social evils in Indian society, rooted deeply in the caste system. Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar dedicated his entire life to the struggle against untouchability and caste discrimination. As a social reformer, thinker, jurist, and the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, Ambedkar played a decisive role in securing social justice, equality, and dignity for the oppressed classes, especially the Scheduled Castes. This research paper examines Ambedkar's contribution through social movements, writings, political efforts, and constitutional safeguards to eradicate untouchability in India.

Keywords:

Untouchability, Constitution, Dalit, Discrimination, Indian Constitution, Equality, Social Justice

Introduction

Untouchability represents an extreme manifestation of caste hierarchy, in which certain communities were historically excluded from social, economic, and religious life. Denied access to education, public spaces, temples, and basic human dignity, Dalits were systematically oppressed for centuries. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), born into an untouchable Mahar caste, transformed personal suffering into a collective struggle for social emancipation. Unlike earlier reformers who focused primarily on moral persuasion, Ambedkar emphasized structural change through law, political power, and rational critique. His approach marked a decisive shift in the anti-untouchability movement in India.(1)

Understanding Untouchability: Ambedkar's Perspective

Ambedkar rejected the view that untouchability was merely a social evil or a distortion of Hinduism. He argued that untouchability was an intrinsic product of the caste system, sustained by religious texts, customs, and social practices. According to Ambedkar, caste was not a division of labour but a division of labourers, which destroyed social unity and individual dignity. He maintained that without annihilating caste, the eradication of untouchability would remain impossible.)2)

Early Life and awareness of Untouchability:

Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar was born on April 14, 1891 in Mhow (presently in Madhya Pradesh). He was the fourteenth child of Ramji and Bhimabai Sakpal Ambaedkar. B.R Ambedkar belonged to “untouchable” Mahar Caste. Bhimrao Ambedkar experienced caste discrimination right from the childhood. His father and grandfather served in British Army. After his retirement, Bhimrao’s father settled in Satara Maharashtra. Bhimrao was enrolled in the local school. Here, he had to sit on the floor in one corner in the classroom and teachers would not touch his notebooks. In spite of this hardships, Bhimrao continued his studies and passed his Matriculation examination from Bombay University in 1908. His higher education continued in Elphinstone College. Political Science and Economics were the subjects in which he graduated from the Bombay University in 1912. Just a year after his graduation, Bhimrao Ambedkar lost his father. He acquired a job in Baroda and it was the Maharaja of Baroda appointed Dr. Ambedkar as his political secretary. But no one would take orders from him because he was a Mahar. These bitter experiences made him realize that untouchability was not just a social problem but a systematic denial of human dignity. (3)

Social Movements Against Untouchability:

1. Mahad Satyagraha (1927):

Mahad Satyagraha was one of the earliest and most significant mass movements led by Dr. B.R Ambedkar against untouchability in colonial India. It was launched to assert the civil and human rights of Dalits, particularly their right to access public resources. In 1923, the Bombay Legislative Council passed a resolution allowing Dalits to use public water tanks. However, this law was not implemented in practice due to caste prejudices. The Chavdar Tank, a public water source in Mahad, remained inaccessible to Dalits despite being legally open to all. Ambedkar viewed this denial as a violation of citizenship rights and decided to challenge it through organized protest. (4)

2. Temple Entry and Religious Protest:

Dr. B.R Ambedkar played a crucial role in transforming temple entry movements into powerful acts of religious protest against the caste system in India. For centuries, Dalits were denied entry into Hindu temples on the grounds of untouchability, which Ambedkar considered not merely a social injustice but a religious sanction for inequality. Ambedkar supported temple entry movements as a means to challenge the moral authority of caste-based Hinduism. (5)

3. Burning of Manusmriti:

Ambedkar strongly criticized Hindu scriptures such as the Manusmriti for legitimizing caste hierarchy and untouchability. He believed that religious texts were used to justify social inequality and maintain Brahminical dominance.

The burning of Manusmriti by Dr. B.R Ambedkar on 25 December 1927 at Mahad was a landmark act of social protest against the religious legitimization of caste hierarchy and untouchability in India. By publicly rejecting the Manusmriti, a text that prescribed unequal social status and denied basic human rights to lower castes, Ambedkar challenged the moral authority of scriptures used to justify discrimination. (6)

4. Demand for separate Electorates: Separate electorates meant that Dalits would vote only for Dalit candidates and only Dalit representatives would be elected by Dalit voters. Dr. B.R Ambedkar demanded separate electorates for the Depressed Classes (Dalits) as a political safeguard against caste domination in colonial India. He believed that mere social reforms were insufficient unless Dalits had independent political representation. Ambedkar believed that due to untouchability and social exclusion, Dalits lacked the power to influence elections in joint electorates.

The British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald accepted Ambedkar's demand through the Communal Award of 1932, granting separate electorates to the Depressed Classes (7).

Constitutional Abolition of Untouchability:

As the chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution, Ambedkar ensured strong measures against untouchability.

Constitutional Provisions:

Article 14: Article 14 of the Indian Constitution guarantees equality before law and equal protection of laws to all persons within the territory of India. Dr. Ambedkar emphasized that equality must be practical, not merely legal. (8)

Article 15: Ambedkar supported Article 15 to ensure real equality, not merely legal equality. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth and permits special provisions for disadvantaged groups.

Article 16: As Chairman of the Drafting Committee, Ambedkar defended Article 16 in the Constituent Assembly. He clarified that reservation is not a privilege, but a means to achieve equality of opportunity. He stressed that public services should reflect the social diversity of the nation. (9)

Article 16 allows reservation for backward classes in public services. He believed public employment was key to Dalit empowerment. It complements Article 14 and 15 in ensuring equality.

Article 17: As chairman of the Drafting Committee, Ambedkar ensured Article 17 was included as a Fundamental Right. Article 17 abolishes untouchability in all its forms. Article 17 makes the practice of untouchability a punishable offence. Article 17 gave constitutional backing to Dalit emancipation. (10)

Conversion to Buddhism:

In 1950, Ambedkar traveled to Sri Lanka to attend a convention of Buddhist scholars and monks. After his return he decided to write a book on Buddhism and soon, converted himself to Buddhism. In his speeches, Ambedkar lambasted the Hindu rituals and caste division. Ambedkar founded the Bharatiya Bauddha Mahasabha In 1955. His book "The Buddha and His Dhamma" was published posthumously. On October 14, 1956 Ambedkar organized a public ceremony to convert around five lakh of his supporters into Buddhism. Ambedkar traveled to Kathmandu to attend the Fourth World Buddhist Conference. He completed his final manuscript, "The Buddha or Karl Marx" on December 2, 1956.

Impact and Legacy

Dr. Ambedkar's role in eradicating untouchability was revolutionary. He transformed the struggle of Dalits from social protest to constitutional rights. His ideas continue to inspire movements for social justice, equality, and human rights. Though untouchability has been legally abolished, Ambedkar's vision reminds us that true equality requires social awareness and moral transformation.

Conclusion

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's role in eradicating untouchability was comprehensive and transformative. He challenged its religious, social, political, and legal foundations through a multidimensional struggle. By converting social protest into constitutional rights, Ambedkar reshaped Indian democracy itself. His legacy reminds us that the abolition of untouchability is not only a legal mandate but a continuous social responsibility.

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