

## AMBEDKAR AND HIS HANKERING FOR A MODERN INDIA

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### **Abstract**

Ambedkar was a man of modern thought, unlike many of his contemporaries. While many of them lived in a pre-renaissance state idolizing and romanticizing the traditional Indian systems like the caste and village, Ambedkar preferred India to live in a post-renaissance prismatic state. The British rule in India paved the path of modernization of India, according to Ambedkar. It opened up India with the Western World. His contributions as a theorist, lawmaker and administrator are aimed at making India a modern nation in the lines of the Western World. He argued and proposed that India should align with the West led by the US, as it will mechanize, industrialize and urbanize India. But the then policy makers of India preferred and adopted another way out. This blocked Indian progress for fifty long years. With the fall of Berlin Wall, India is moving close towards the US led Western World, as desired by Ambedkar. For Ambedkar, the US is the synonym of modernization. By employing the thought of Ambedkar, India may reach the ‘drive to maturity’ stage of growth at a higher speed.

**Keywords:** Ambedkar, Modernity, British India, the US, Industrialize, Urbanize, Digital India.

### **Introduction**

B. R. Ambedkar is a household name in India. It remembers him as the Dalit leader who led the struggle for the emancipation of the depressed classes. The Indian successive governments presented him as the chief draftsman of India Constitution. While he is rightly remembered by the masses for what he had done for them and most popularly for his role in the making of Indian Constitution, he had many other accomplishments which were overshadowed by his popular achievements. He was a Sociologist who diagnosed and advised medicine for the Caste problem, which never allows any two Indians to come together equally. He was a feminist who diagnosed the reasons for the fall of Indian woman and the one who attempted to find a way out through his Hindu Code bill. He was an Economist who diagnosed the problem of rupee and proposed the central banking system for India. He was an academic who penned thousands of pages of scholarship, which the Governments later published into 21 volumes of work. He was a social scientist trained under John Dewey, to carry forward his theory of optimism and pragmatism, instead of bulk utopia of theory. He was the one of the very few Indian who had a blue print for the future India to work upon. He insisted upon employing modern industrial methods rather than employing the manual methods. Ambedkar was the only Indian philosopher with a design to rebuild India into modern urbanized, industrialized civilization with surpluses, argues Chandrabhan Prasad. (India Today Magazine, 2022)

His hankering for a modern India had its foundations during his stay and study in the Western World. His years at Columbia and London School had a deep influence on him in his political, social, cultural outlook. He studied under Professor John Dewey, the proponent of pragmatism, which fundamentally contradicts Marxist way of thinking and addressing. Unlike many Indians of his days, Ambedkar's ideological core disagreed with Marxist theory of problem solving. He imbibed the ideas like pragmatism & fabian socialism from Dewey and developed them to suit the needs of India and its masses. He endorsed his commitment to pragmatism by overlooking the ideological imbalance. He was of the view that modernisation and the Western World are synonyms. Ambedkar may or may not be an Anglophile, but certainly he was not an Anglophobe like many other leaders of those days. He listed out and acknowledged the benefits of the British rule in India; That there can be no doubt that the advent of the British has been a great boon to the country. Without their arrival the intellectual awakening of India could not have been as great or as fast. Without the contact of European civilization, with its basic conceptions of liberty, equality and fraternity, Indian society could never have been driven to feel the sense of shame in respect of the many social customs that have been recognized as part of its social and moral code.... Without their arrival, India could never have had the advantage of a common system of governance and a common system of law... they have prepared the soil of India for the roots of Indian nationalism to go to the depth they have gone and have also laid down the foundation for a stable government. They had provided the best equipment of modern civilization such as currency, roads, canals, railways, and the post. (Moon, 1979: Vol.: 17(3), 45) However his admiration for the British took a backseat when it is compared with his admiration for the US. One who studied him can easily list him as an Americanophile. Eleanor Zelliott argues that his vision towards the US had taken cues from non-Brahmin leaders like Jotiba Phule, who was inspired by the American initiative to abolish black slavery. (Zelliott, 1992: 137) Phule whom Ambedkar termed as one of his three masters, the other being the Buddha and Kabir, along with his activist wife Savitribai were anti-Caste reformers who laid path for the progression of women and depressed classes against the tyranny of Brahminical patriarchy. Jotiba Phule, an Anglophile and an Americanophile even dedicated his book 'Slavery-in the civilized British Government under the cloak of Brahmanism' 'to the good people of the US as a token of admiration for their sublime disinterested and self-sacrificing devotion in the cause of Negro slavery; and with an earnest desire, that my countrymen may take their noble example as their guide in the emancipation of their Shudra brethren from the trammels of Brahmin thralldom.' (Phule, 1991: 03) Ambedkar's years at the Columbia University as he said, had awakened his potential. The two qualities that shaped him; Optimism and Pragmatism which he learned from Dewey are the driving forces of the American advancement. The US administrators and its people pragmatically took only some portions of the European political and administrative theory and worked them to suit their conditions. Dewey's philosophy preached equality, no barriers to upward mobility and the use of machinery to produce leisure. He was influenced by the US in such a way that one of his professors at the London School doubted that he was a Scotch-American. Writing a recommendation letter for Ambedkar back in 1918 for a teaching post in Sydenham College, Bombay; Prof. Cannon wrote, 'I don't know anything about

Ambedkar except that he came to do a thesis and attacked it and me in a way which showed he had quite extraordinary practical ability...I rather wonder if he is a pure Indian; his character is rather Scotch-American. (Columbia University Website) Ambedkar's enthusiasm for the Western system was driven by his hankering for modern India. He spent his life in trying to destroy the traditional systems like the caste and village. He is for building new institutions, in their place which suits the needs of the modern world. As Chandrabhan Prasad puts it, Ambedkar was the only 21<sup>st</sup> century India philosopher in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (India Today Magazine, 2022)

### **Ambedkar as a Lawmaker**

Ambedkar, as a law maker tried hard all his life to make India a modern nation in the lines of the Western World, through the legislations he drafted. Ambedkar was one of the first Indians to discover that its huge population would hurt it and make it tremble as a nation. He was of the opinion that this huge mass would serve as a blockade for Indian modernization. He introduced a bill on birth control in Bombay Legislative Assembly in 1939, which was met with heavy criticism from the conservatives for its explicit note on sexuality and contraception. (Rathore, 2010: 24) Defending his bill, he argued that although it may be admitted that self-rule may effect some betterment of the lot of our masses, no lasting and appreciable improvement in the economic condition of our people can be hoped for unless the growth of our population is deliberately checked. Unless precaution is taken, to regulate population growth by means of birth-control, along with efforts to improve the economic condition of the people, there cannot be a substantial and permanent rise in the standard of life of the masses, (Moon, 1979: Vol.- 02, 274) declared Ambedkar making him the first Indian to see population as a barrier for country's progress. By the standards of the early twentieth century of India, it was a revolution to speak about contraception. People like Gandhi had already made their views clear on that. When American birth control activist Margaret Sanger visited him in 1935 for his support in her campaign for making contraception universal, Gandhi told her that women should resist their husbands and sex should be only for procreation. (BBC News, 2008) The bill was defeated as it received no support from other parties. His political party the Scheduled Caste Federation in its manifesto during the first general elections of 1951, stated that it would take more drastic methods of controlling population, making it the only political party to do so. (The Times of India, 1951) In one way, what Indian Governments attempted to do in 1970's and 1980's to control the population was proposed by Ambedkar in 1930s.

He was of the firm opinion that without improving the societal position of India women, no modernity can be achieved in the Indian society. After the adoption of Indian Constitution, Ambedkar as the Law Minister had concentrated on works like the Representations of the Peoples Act, 1951 among others. He piloted and spearheaded the introduction of the Hindu code bill, aimed in reforming the position of women in the Hindu society that gives them the Rights of property ownership and inheritance. The bill outlawed polygamy and contained provisions for inter-caste marriage and divorce. Ambedkar addressed the position of women in India, way back in his first academic paper in 1916. He tried hard to win the bill by arguing that the Hindu code was the

greatest social reform measure ever undertaken by the legislature in this county.... To leave inequality between class and class, between sex and sex which is the soul of Hindu society, untouched and to go on passing legislations relating to economic problems is to make a farce of our constitution and to build a palace on a dung heap. (Moon, 1979: Vol.- 14(2), 1326) However all the diverse factions both inside and outside the Congress Party were united to defeat the bill. The BJS organised nationwide protests against the bill, with some women participating. The RSS termed the bill as an atom bomb on the Hindu society. (The Indian Express, 2015) When Nehru himself withdrew support for the bill due to political expediency, Ambedkar resigned from the cabinet in October 1951. In his resignation letter, he listed out it as one of the reasons for his resignation. (Moon, 1979: Vol.- 14(2), 1321)

### **Ambedkar as an Administrator**

His administrative effectiveness could be witnessed from his tenure as the Labour member in the Viceroy Executive Council from 1942 to 1946. As the Labour member, he supervised the Public Works Department and engaged himself in planning and constructing many irrigation projects for India like Damodar River Valley Project, Hirakud Project, Bhakra Nangal Dam, Sone River Valley Project and others. (Centre Water Commission, 1993: 09) The Damodar Valley project was designed and executed in the lines of the Tennessee Valley project in the US with the help of the US technical assistance. Breaking the tradition of employing British engineers to look after the construction of these irrigation projects, he employed the American engineers. He was of the view that the West, particularly the US was an important ally to have on one's side, due to the reason of its control over modern technology in addition to its control over global economy. Speaking at a Labour Conference in Calcutta, he said that a team of four engineers from the US was invited to advice on the design and construction of the two dams in India. (Moon, 1979: Vol.- 10, 289) The man who was denied water to drink at school, who had led the Mahad satyagraha had to work on the water distribution across India. In some respect Ambedkar was the father of the democratization of water. (Rathore, 2010: 25) Another accomplishment during his tenure was the reduction of working hours from twelve to eight. (India Today Magazine, 2017) Now in this 21<sup>st</sup> century this eight-hour work has become the order of the day. While his contemporary leaders were busy in fighting the British imperialism, demanding them the inevitable independence, they never demanded the British Indian Government to build industries and irrigation projects which will help India after its independence, Ambedkar included himself in planning and executing projects for future India. Ambedkar was not blinded by the rhetoric of anti-imperialism and did not hesitate to call spade a spade, says Anand Teltumbde. (Ashok, 2018: 12) The irrigation projects he spearheaded laid foundations for meeting the demand of food grains in the regions like erstwhile Punjab, Bihar, Bengal and Odisha.

After the Independence, the Indian under Nehru distanced itself from the western sphere terming them as the imperialistic powers. The Indian fears are not just for the British, but also for the newly emerged power the US. The Indian fears of the US date back to the 'Uncle Sam's Empire' in 1944 by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay. This non-alignment with the US had alienated India from the much

needed technical support for its infrastructure development projects. He wished for the close cooperation of India with the free nations led by the US. He was critical of non-alignment policy as it downplayed important American contacts, that would have strategically assisted development projects which are critical for an independent India, says Eleanor Zelliott. (Zelliott, 1992: 84)

### **Ambedkar as a Theorist**

Ambedkar as a political sociologist stated that the Indian village is bulwark against modernity. Indian village is a sink of localism, a den of ignorance and narrow-mindedness, remarked Ambedkar. (The Caravan Magazine, 2015) He proposed Indian urbanization in the lines of modern Europe. This opinion of his on the Indian village was an equally opposite argument against the much published and romanticized Indian village. Urbanization along with rapid industrialization is the only way out for modern India.

As a trained economist, he appeared before the Royal Commission on Indian Currency and Finance in 1926 and gave them evidence. Ten years later the Government created a central banking system much on the lines he proposed. The RBI was created on the basis of guidelines he presented to the Royal Commission and under the influence of his definitive book ‘The problem of the Rupee: Its Problems and its Solution.’ (Rathore, 2010: 24) May the Indian Rupee, which is now turning digital create equality as desired by Ambedkar.

### **Conclusion**

For Ambedkar, the Western World is a synonym of modernization. The Americanophile Ambedkar was the century old predecessor of the present day Indians who are attempting to chase the American dream. While Ambedkar tried to convince the Indian administration under Nehru to work in close cooperation with the US, many Indian leftists and socialists accused him as an American agent. He was of the opinion that the US was the ambassador of modernity, with which India should align. He was the one of the first Indian who insisted that India should mechanize its agricultural methods. As a person of the twentieth century, he laid emphasis on the secondary sector. If he was a person of the twenty first century like us, he may have suggested India to focus on the tertiary sector, the service sector. He may have actively participated in the making India, a digital India as it may reduce the caste and class differences.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the triumph of the American model, India started adjusting with the US led Western World since 1990s, which it should have done from the 1940s, as proposed by Ambedkar. If the then Indian policy maker had paid an interest in Ambedkar’s proposition, India would have reached the stage of ‘drive to maturity’, if not the ‘high mass consumption’ by the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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