CHAPTER III

PREDECESSORS OF GANDHI AND AMBEDKAR:
Their Concept of Social Justice
Before Gandhi and Ambedkar various revolutionary socio-religious movements as well as leaders from both upper caste and Dalits had challenged the discriminatory social structure of India. The Buddhist tradition has been the primary onslaught on the caste system. This was followed by the Bhakti Movement representing the aspirations of the masses against the Brahminical religion. The religious movement led by Kabir and Guru Nanak all marked the working peoples’ urge for basic human rights.

The British period witnessed several socio-religious movements like the ‘Arya Samaj’ as well as anti caste movements led by Mahatma Phule, Narayan Guru, Periayar etc. While the movements led by the upper caste representatives like Raja Rammohan Roy, Dayand Saraswati and Vivekananda ended up as pure reform movements without deep impact, the other movements led by the Dalit leaders were revolutionary with far reaching consequences.

Thus both Gandhi and Ambedkar were influenced by their thoughts and ideals. Ambedkar was specially influenced by three great man, namely Lord Buddha, Mahatma Kabir and Mahatma Jyotiba Phule. He himself said unequivocally that, “I owe to three preceptors. Everybody owes to his preceptor, I too. Their teaching has however helped me in building my personality”1

Presently, it is proposed to see as to who were they and which principles of them and to what extent they influenced the thoughts of Babasaheb Ambedkar.

**Lord Buddha:**

Lord Buddha the founder of Buddhism was a prince of Kapilvastu in the North-east corner of India. He renounced the kingdom and vowed to find out the real remedy on the conflict of any kind. He attained enlightenment in four stages. They were (i) reason and investigation (ii) concentration (iii) equanimity and mindfulness and (iv) purity.

He gave his first sermon to five parivrayakas at Sarnath. Subsequently, he continued teaching Dhamma to the men and women throughout his life. He breathed his last in 483 B.C.

Dhamma means purity of body, purity of speech and purity of mind. Dhamma means living in Nibbana or practising self control over passions so as to enable one to walk on the path of righteousness.

Buddha had no faith in inequality based on caste, creed or sex. He believes that worth and not birth is the measure of man. He gives liberty to each and every one for their fullest development. When there is equality and liberty there will be fraternity.

Babasaheb accepted Buddhism because it stood the test of true religion. His thoughts on the test of a true religion are as follows - “(1) The Society must have either the sanction of law or the sanction of
morality to hold it together. Without either, the society is sure to go to pieces, (2) Religion, if it is to function, must be in accord with reason, which is another name for science, (3) It is not enough for religion to consist of a moral code, but its moral code must recognize the fundamental tenets of liberty, equality and fraternity, (4) Religion must not sanctify or ennoble poverty.”

Buddhism, however, fulfilled all the requirements of a true religion.

The Buddha was a symbol of protest against the old Brahminical social order. He desired to establish a new social order based on liberty, equality and fraternity.

The Bhuddha stood for equality. He was against all the artificial social barriers between man and man. He said very categorically that “No one is an outcaste by birth – and no one is a Brahmin by birth”. The Buddha propounded the principle of fraternity transcending all social, regional and linguistic barriers. He taught Karuna and Maitri with all the human beings.

Babasaheb Ambedkar also said very categorically that “my ideal would be a society based on liberty, equality and fraternity”. He said in very explicit terms that he had derived these principles of social

3. B.R. Ambedkar: Annihilation of Caste p-57 Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol:1, Govt. of Maharashtra
structure from the philosophy of Buddha only. The Buddha believed in democracy. The constitution of Bhikshu Sangh was democratic. Ambedkar also proposed to have a democratic society, wherein everybody would get equal share of all the benefits.

Buddha was an apostle of love and compassion. The compassionate Buddha stood for sex equality. He said to Ananda that, “I hold that women are as much capable as men in the matter of reaching Nibbana. I am not an upholder of the doctrine of sex inequality.” The Hindu Code Bill proposed by Ambedkar is the testimony of the fact that he was an active supporter of gender equality.

The Buddha was a great rationalist. He had no faith in God, soul, scriptures, superstitions etc. Like Buddha, Babasaheb Ambedkar was an atheist and rational. He thought that man is the creator of his own fate. Hence, he had no faith in any scriptures.

Thus Lord Buddha (B.C 563-B.C 483) had successfully protested against the old and traditional social order and tried to restructure it on the basis of new human values named Buddhism.

2. Mahatma Kabir:

Mahatma Kabir was second preceptor of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. In the words of Babasaheb Ambedkar, “My second preceptor is Kabir. My father belonged to Kabir Panth. Therefore, I am greatly influenced

4. Keer Dhananjay: Dr Ambedkar, Life and Mission, p-459
5. B.R. Ambedkar: Buddha and His Dhamma, p-136
by the personality and philosophy of Kabir.”6

Mahatma Kabir was a great saint and social philosopher of India. However detailed information about him is not available. It is generally said that he was born in Sawant 1455 (A.D 1398) at Kashi (Banaras) and died in Sawant 1551 (A.D 1494) at Maghar in U.P. It is believed that Saint Kabir was a disciple of Ramanand. He was equally influenced by Sufi Saints. Nevertheless he had no faith in either Hindu or Islam religion. He stood for absolute unity with the God, who was ‘Nirgun’ and truth. He was a staunch supporter of Hindu-Muslim unity. His thoughts are named as “Kabir Panth”.

Babasaheb accepted it because it stood the test of reasoning. Kabir Panth had emerged as a protest against Brahmanism and fundamentalism. It proposed to establish spiritual and social equality, liberty of thought and expression and human brotherhood. In the words of Babasaheb Ambedkar, “Kabir could realize the real secret of the philosophy of Buddha.”7

Kabir’s philosophy of social equality impressed Ambedkar very much. Kabir had categorically said that every man is born out of ‘Panch Tatva’ or five elements – Brahmin, Kshatriya and Shudra are born in the same way. Kabir outrightly rejected the Vedas as Vedas give rise to divisions among the human beings. Dr Babasaheb also believed in social equality.

7. Ibid, p-100
Kabir propounded perfect communal harmony between the Hindus and the Muslims. In those days Islam was attracting the Hindu lower classes towards it. Both the religion were claiming superiority over each other. Having seen this critical situation Kabir tried to unite both the communities. His objective was to establish fraternity among all human beings. Like Kabir, Babasaheb is also a rationalist and a humanist.

Thus he derived from Kabir the concept of social equality, liberty of thought and humanism as the principles of his life.

3. Mahatma Phule:

Jyotiba Phule was the true preceptor of all the non-Brahmins. He taught the lessons of human values to the weaker sections. Mahatma Phule was really a great social revolutionary thinker and a great crusader against all the social evils. He was born on 20th Feb., 1827 at Pune. Mahatama Phule died on 28th Nov., 1890.

Mahatma Phule made the so called lower classes “conscious” of their slavery and preached the “gospel” of social democracy, which would be based on liberty, equality and fraternity. He worked throughout his life for the cause of the toiling masses and the untouchables with a missionary zeal. He was sincere, intellectual and moved by the dynamics of social purpose. Therefore, a highly educated man like Babasaheb Ambedkar followed the footprints of Mahatma Phule.

Mahatma Phule believed in social equality. All the human beings, irrespective of their sex, caste, religion and region are equal. They ought
to observe fraternity amongst them. He said that the Vedas, which created differences among the human beings are false. They were created by the priests or the Brahmins for protecting their self-interest, as such they should out-rightly be rejected.

Dr Ambedkar also discarded Vedas and asked his followers to dynamite the Vedas. He burnt Manusmriti, which provides punishment to the Shudras and the ati-Shudras claiming social equality.

Mahatma Phule felt that the Shudras and the untouchables had to suffer only due to their "ignorance" or "Avidya" Therefore he started in Poona the first ever School in India for the untouchables in the year 1848. He started many other schools for the children of the Shudras and other untouchables.

Ambedkar also asked the untouchables that they should "educate" first, which would inspire them to "agitate" against all irreligion, superstition and exploitation.

Both Mahatma Phule and Dr Ambedkar pointed out that the British Government could have brought about greater social reforms, but for their appeasement policy towards the Brahmins, they continued to be indifferent to the problems of the untouchables.

Mahatma Phule was a rationalist. He had absolutely no faith in Veda, Varna, Caste, Soul, rebirth, hell or heaven etc. etc.

8. B.R. Ambedkar : Annihilation of Caste. Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar : Writings and Speeches, Govt. of Maharashtra, p-75
Both, Mahatma Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar were against Brahminism. However, they had no hatred whatsoever towards the Brahmins. When Tilak and Agarkar were released from Dongari Jail in 1881, Mahatma Phule received them happily and led them into Poona city in procession. Babasaheb Ambedkar also had no personal enmity with the Brahmins.

Thus, Babasaheb Ambedkar was a true follower of Mahatma Phule. Their purpose is one, their spirit is one, and their missionary zeal is one.

Socio-Religious Reform Movements of the 19th Century:

The impact of British rule on Indian Society and culture was widely different from what India had known before. The new scientific outlook, the doctrine of rationalism and humanism particularly impressed the English educated class. The Indian leaders stimulated by the new knowledge, sought to reform Hinduism from within and sought to purge it of superstitious beliefs and practices. Indian intellectuals closely scrutinized the country’s past and found that many beliefs and practices were no longer of any use and needed to be discarded. The result was the birth of many socio-religious reform movements touching almost every segment of Indian society. Notables among them are, the Brahmo Samaj founded by Raja Rammohan Roy, The Arya Samaj of Swami Dayanand, and the Ramakrishna Movement of Swami Vivekananda.

The Brahmo Samaj:

The Brahmo Samaj was the earliest reform movement of the modern type which was greatly influenced by modern western ideas. Raja Rammohan Roy was the founder of Brahmo Samaj. Although Rammohan Roy was a man of versatile genius, the governing passion of his life was religious reform. He re-interpreted Hindu doctrines and found ample spiritual basis for his humanitarianism in Upanishads. He started campaign for the abolition of Sati, condemned polygamy, denounced casteism, advocated the right of Hindu widows to remarry.

Rammohan Roy accepted the concept of one God as propounded by Upanishads. In August 1828, Roy founded the Brahmo Sabha which was later renamed Brahmo Samaj.

For him God was shapeless, invisible, omni-present and omnipotent. There was no place for priesthood in the Samaj nor sacrifices of any kind were allowed. The worship was performed through prayers and meditation and readings from Upanishads.

It should be clearly understood that Rammohan Roy never intended to establish a new religion. He only wanted to purge Hinduism of the evil practices that had crept into it.

The main significance of Brahmo Samaj lay not in what retained of traditional Hinduism but what it discarded of the old beliefs of Hinduism. For e.g. (i) it denied that any scripture could enjoy the status
of ultimate authority transcending human reason and conscience. (ii) it denounced idol-worship, (iii) it criticized caste system etc.

   In matters of social reform, Brahmo Samaj has influenced Hindu Society. It worked for a respectable status for woman in society – condemned sati, worked for abolition of purdha system, discouraged child marriage and polygamy, crusaded for widow remarriage, provision of educational facilities etc. It also attacked casteism and untouchability though in these matters it attained limited success.

The Arya Samaj:

   The Arya Samaj movement was an outcome of reaction to Western influences. The founder, Swami Dayanand rejected Western ideas and sought to revive the ancient religion of the Aryans.

   Mulshankar (1824-83) popularly known as Dayanand was born in a Brahmin family living in the old Morvi State in Gujrat. Mulshankar acquired good insight into Vedic literature, logic, philosophy, ethics etc. In 1875 he formally organized the first Arya Samaj unit at Bombay.

   Dayanand’s ideal was to unite India religiously, socially and nationally – Aryan religion to be the common religion of all, a classless and casteless society, and an India free from foreign rule. His motto was ‘Go back to the Vedas’. He disregarded the authority of the later Hindu scriptures like the Puranas etc.

   Dayanand accepted the doctrine of karma, but rejected the theory of niyati (destiny). He said that world is a battlefield where every
individual has to work out his salvation by right deeds.

Dayanand challenged the dominant position of the Brahmin priestly class in the spiritual and social life of the Hindus. The Swami asserted every Hindu’s right to read and interpret the Vedas. He strongly condemned the caste system based on birth, though he subscribed to the Vedic notion of the four-varna system in which a person was not born in any Varna (Caste), but was identified as a Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya or Shudra according to occupation he followed. The Swami was also a strong advocate of equal status between man and woman; he pleaded for widow remarriage and condemned child marriage.

His slogan of ‘Back to the Vedas’ was a call for revival of Vedic learning and Vedic purity of religion and not revival of Vedic times. He accepted modernity in the true sense.

The most phenomenal achievement of the Arya Samaj has been in the field of social reform and spread of education. The Samaj based its social programme entirely on the authority of the Vedas, of course, conditioned by rationalism and utilitarianism. The Arya Samaj’s social ideals comprise, among others, the Father-hood of God and the brotherhood of man, the equality of sexes, absolute justice and fair play between man and man and nation and nation, and love and charity towards all.

The Ramakrishna Mission:

The teachings of Ramakrishna Mission are based on ancient and
traditional concepts amidst increasing Westernization and modernization. The Ramakrishna Mission was conceived and founded by Swami Vivekananda in 1897, eleven years after the death of Ramakrishna.

Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1834-86) was a priest at the Kali temple in Dakshineswar near Calcutta. His thinking was rooted deeply in Indian thought and culture, although he recognized the Truth in all religions. He stood for selfless devotion to God. This spirituality and compassion for suffering humanity inspired those who listened to him.

It was left to Swami Vivekananda (Narendranath Dutta, 1862-1902) to give an interpretation to the teachings of Ramakrishna and render them in an easily understandable language to the modern man.

Vivekananda emerged as the preacher of neo-Hinduism. He attended the Parliament of Religions held at Chicago in 1893 and made a great impression by his learned interpretations. He envisaged a new culture for the whole world where the materialism of the West and the spiritualism of the East would be blended into a new harmony to produce happiness for mankind.

The Swami decried untouchability and the caste system. He strongly condemned the touch-me-not attitude of Hindus in religious matters. He regretted that Hinduism had been confined to the kitchen. He also believed that it was an insult to God and humanity to teach religion to a starving man. Once he said, “Him I call a Mahatma whose heart bleeds for the poor, otherwise he is a Duratma. So long as millions
live in hunger and ignorance I hold every man a traitor who while educated at their expense, pays not the least heed to man”. Thus Vivekananda feels that the best way to worship God is through service of humanity. In this way he gave a new social purpose to Hinduism.

Vivekananda through his speeches and writings infused into the new generation a sense of pride in India’s past, a new faith in India’s culture and a rare sense of self-confidence in India’s future.

The Lower Caste Movements in Modern India:

The Changing Scenario –

A number of circumstances in the 19th and 20th centuries created class consciousness among the lower castes who took upon themselves to struggle for caste equality. Their efforts resulted in the organization of various lower castes movements in South India and Western India. The British policy of Divide and Rule, the growth of Western system of education, the introduction of Common Indian Penal Code (1861) and Code of Criminal Procedure (1872), the growth of national consciousness and the popularity of the modern political thought based on equality and social egalitarianism created a social and political climate in which the caste system could not be defended.

The Justice Party and Naicker:

In 1917 Shri P. Theagaraya and Dr T.M. Nair organized the first Non-Brahminical organization called South Indian Liberal Federation,
which later came to be known as the Justice Party. In 1937, Ramaswamy Naicker (1879-1973) was elected as the President of the Justice Party. Naicker was a crusader for social equality and fought against the evil of untouchability. He condemned Hinduism as an instrument of Brahminical control, the laws of Manu as inhuman and Puranas as fairy tales. He said, “There are certain things which cannot be mended but only ended. Brahminical Hinduism is one such”.

His followers called him a Thanthai (father) and Periyar (Great Soul).

**Narayan Guru and the SNDP**:

In the State of Kerela, another leader of the Ezhava Caste (the untouchable caste), Shri Narayan Guru (1854-1928) established the SNDP (Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam) in Kerela and at many places outside Kerela. Narayan and his associates launched a two-point programme for the uplift of the Ezhavas. Firstly, to give up the practice of untouchability with respect to caste below their castes. As a second step, Narayan Guru built a number of temples which were declared open to all castes.

He also simplified rituals regarding marriage, worships and funerals. Narayan Guru achieved notable success in transforming the untouchable groups into a backward class. He openly criticized Gandhi and the Congress for their lip-sympathy towards the lower castes. He criticized Gandhiji for his faith in Chaturvarna, which is the root of caste system and untouchability. He pointed out that the difference in castes is only
superficial and emphasized that the juice of all leaves of a particular tree would be the same in content. He gave a new slogan, “One religion, one caste and one God for mankind”.

Thus the leading lights from both the upper caste (mainly the upper caste reformers belong to Brahmin Community) and lower caste themselves organized number of reform movements in India. But unfortunately the movements carried on by the upper caste reformers achieved little success in removing the untouchability and caste system from the society. But some of the eminent leaders belonging to lower caste organized their anti-caste movement with revolutionary zeal as they are the worst sufferers of this hated system. Thus they inspired both Gandhiji and Babasaheb in their struggle for establishing ‘social justice’ in India.