DISCURSIVE WRITING IN INDIAN ENGLISH
A STUDY OF DR. B. R. AMBEDKAR
Indian writing in English has by now been recognised as a distinct literature, and works studying its various aspects have been coming out at a steady pace. Little effort, however, seems to have been made in the study of its non-fictional prose, while a great deal of attention is paid to its poetry, fiction and drama. Indeed, discursive writing by eminent men in different fields of life in India has contributed much to Indian writing in English. Ever since the English language established its roots in the soil of India, discursive writing has been continuously produced by eminent Indians. This form of literature, 'literature of thought', began with the Indian Renaissance — socio-religious and cultural — with the advent of the 'Father of Indian Renaissance' Raja Rammohan Roy. Such writings are naturally exclusively in prose. They may not be spontaneous and always imaginative but they are an 'overflow of powerful feelings', products of 'brain and heart', and the 'life blood of master spirits'. These writings on topics social, religious, spiritual, political and economic are a result of serious thought on matters concerning contemporary society. They are an outcome of the writers' reaction to life around them; thus they form 'literature of knowledge', 'literature of thought'.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar has written exclusively in English on several aspects of life in India. His writings on various topics
are a substantial contribution to the body of discursive writing in Indian English literature. The aim of the present study is -

a) to make a brief, comprehensive survey of discursive writing by eminent men in India since the renaissance to the post-independence period,

b) to study Dr. Ambedkar as a discursive writer in Indian English against this background, and

c) to assess him as a writer vis-a-vis his major contemporary writer - statesmen like Gandhi and Nehru.

Indian writing in English, in its various forms, in itself forms a distinct body of literature. However, English poetry by Indians shares a major portion of this literature. It has been poetry of imitation, assimilation and experimentation as Dr. Raghukul Tilak puts it; whereas poets of 1859 - 1900 leaned heavily on the Romantics and Victorians of the English poetry, those of 1900 - 1947 were nationalists self-expression being important to them, while they also projected nature and man in their poetry. The third category of poets (experimentalists) are the post-independence poets among whom Nissim Ezekiel, P. Lal, Kamala Das and A.K. Ramanujan are prominent. Indian English poetry is rich with the contributions made by several outstanding writers; the poetry of Nature is mainly contributed by Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu, Rabindranath Tagore,

Sri Aurobindo and M.S. Iswaran, whereas the poetry of love and poetry of Man\(^2\) has mainly been the contribution of Manmohan Ghose, P. Lal, M.M. Dutt, Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, Sarojini Naidu, Anand Acharya, Debkumar Das, Ram Sharma, P. Sheshadri and P.K. Saha. Indo-Anglian poetry is particularly rich in the poetry of metaphysical reflection; Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda, Sarojini Naidu, H. Chattopadhyaya, J. Krishnamurthy, Sri. Aurobindo are the main contributors. Apart from these Indian poets in English, there remain a host of others who are known for their mystical poetry, poetry of devotion and spiritual illumination, and poetry on Beauty and the fine arts.

Literature, in any form for that matter, "is a vital record of what men have seen in life, what they have experienced of it, what they have thought and felt.... It is thus fundamentally an expression of life through the medium of language"\(^3\) as W.H. Hudson puts it. In India, literature in English has been produced and enriched since more than a couple of centuries now. The beginning of Indian literature in English, inextricably intertwined with the introduction and spread of English language and Western education in India, gathered momentum in the second half of the 19th century.


The period saw the rise of Raja Rammohan Roy, the first of the Indian masters of English prose. His tract on 'Sati' was published in 1818. In his famous letter to Lord Amherst in 1832, he had pleaded, in masterly English, for English education in India. Thus the commencement of the Anglicising period in India, with the 'Minute' of Macaulay and the resolution of Lord William Bentinck in 1835, culminated in the Renaissance of Indian English Literature beginning with Rammohan Roy. The first Indian writers of English prose and verse were the Cavally brothers, Derozio who is compared with Keats for his passionate temperament combined with his unbounded sympathy with nature, Kashiprasad Ghose, Hasan Ali, P. Rajagopaul, Mohan Lal and Michael Madhusudan Dutt. K.R. Srinivas/Iyengar notes that even before Rammohan Roy's tract on 'Sati' appearing in 1818 came Venkata Boriah's 'Dissertation on the Jains' in 1801 in The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society. He was one of the Cavally brothers, the other two being Venkata Ramaswamy and Venkata Lakmaiah - who were the earliest of our prose writers in English. From Rammohan Roy flowed as from a fountainhead diverse streams of renascent activity - religious awakening, social reform, political consciousness, each of which was carried forward by its own dedicated spirit.

5. Ibid., p. 520.
and wrote in English. The social reform activity which began with Rammohan Roy was carried on by the 'Brahmo-Samaj'—by Dwarakanath Tagore and Maharshi Devendranath Tagore. The latter worked with Keshub Chander Sen who felt that a close understanding between India and England was possible. A good speaker and writer in English, he worked with another scholar, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, who after Rammohan Roy, became a determined social reformer. The task of religious regeneration was carried on by Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of 'Arya Samaj'. As most of the men who passed out from intellectual centres like the colleges in Bombay and Poona were idealistic in their outlook, the leaders of religious movements among them—like Kashinath Trimbak Telang and Mahadev Govind Ranade—were well read in English. Several others who were religious reformists with Western outlook were scholars like Sir Narayan Chandavarkar, Dadabhai Naoroji, Pherozeshah Mehta, C. Rangacharlu, Sir T. Muttuswamy Ayyer and Sir V. Bhashyam Aengar. A 'living embodiment of human unity through God-realization' was Ramakrishna Paramahansa and though he was totally ignorant of English, yet around him crowded the intellectual aristocracy of the time. His chosen disciple Swamy Vivekananda carried on the Master's task, and his speeches and writings in English are widely known. The first editor of *Prabuddha Bharat*, B.R. Rajam Ayyer, was also a scholar in English. Therefore, as K.R.S. Iyengar refers to it, 'The Age of Innocence' was followed, after the Mutiny, by 'The Age

6. Ibid., p. 52.
of Experience'. All the eminent personalities in the fields of social
reform and religious regeneration were beneficiaries of English
education. Powerful figures like Michael Madhusudan Dutt and
Surendranath Banerjee were forceful speakers and writers in English.
The prose writings of Behramji Malbari bear a tolerant outlook
towards different religions, and those of Swamy Vivekananda
constitute part of India's cultural history.

The movements of social reform and religious regeneration
led by several of these stalwarts went hand in hand with political
consciousness later on. There was the impact of European liberalism
on them which led them to think seriously over the social evils
of the time. Their writings in English prose form a genre in itself-
'Non-fictional prose' or 'Discursive writing'. Cultural renaissance
in India ran parallel to nationalism; reform movements like the
Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Samaj and the Ramakrishna Mission closely
Identified themselves with national awakening. The socio-religious
reform movements and nationalism also initiated a socio-economic
revolution. These formed the undercurrent of the writings in English
prose and thus an era began. After the Congress came into
existence, all the conferences began with addresses and resolutions
in English, as K.R.S. Iyengar notes, and until almost the coming
of Gandhiji on the scene, almost 30 years later, the proceedings
of these conferences - Social Conferences, Conferences of the Hindu
Mahasabha and the Muslim League, Youth Conferences, Women's

7. ibid., p. 526.
Conferences, etc., were entirely in English. Leaders like Dadabhai Naoroji and Badruddin Tyabji, speaking in English at various places all over India, while admitting the benefits of the British rule, insisted on a united India for common benefits. Keshub Chunder Sen wanted India to shake off her lethargy. Swamy Vivekananda presented to the West the spiritual philosophy behind the Hindu religion. Political consciousness became widespread; the feeling of intolerance to alien rule culminated in the predominance of a political movement, the struggle for freedom. The concept of equality - social, economic and political - inspired the Indian as never before.

Thus when the nationalistic feelings were running high, there came on the scene political leaders like Gandhi and Nehru. Both were educated in England. The prose writings of Nehru in English are studied as pieces of literature whereas those of Gandhiji place him high among the Indian writers of non-fictional prose. Yet another eminent personality, a contemporary of these two statesmen, also educated abroad, and an eminent scholar, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar deserves to be placed in this genre, but has surprisingly and rather unfortunately been practically ignored by critics and literary historians.

Much has been written on Dr. Ambedkar as a political philosopher and a social reformer. Himself a great intellectual and

perhaps the only scholar-statesman among his contemporaries with a host of degrees from noted universities abroad, Dr. Ambedkar studied the contemporary society in its varied aspects and made great efforts in his various capacities to lessen the miseries of the oppressed and find solutions to the country's socio-religio-political problems. His thoughts found expression in his eloquent speeches and forceful writings in English on topics social, political, religious and economic. It is surprising therefore that such an eminent writer who has authored a dozen books has found little place among the non-fictional writers of English prose in India.

W.N. Kuber has given a detailed account of the social and political thought of Dr. Ambedkar in his *Ambedkar: A Critical Study* whereas we get glimpses of Ambedkar's multifaceted personality in *B.R. Ambedkar and Human Rights* which contains selected writings on Ambedkar by eminent men like Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, V.V. Giri, Vincent Shean, A.M. Rajashekharaiah, Chandra Bharill and Ahluwalia. The impact of humanitarian principles of western liberal thinkers can be perceived in Dr. Dinkar Khabde's thesis entitled *Dr. Ambedkar and Western Thinkers* whereas the gigantic efforts of Ambedkar made in the direction of socio-economic and political emancipation of the down-trodden and his achievement embodied in the Constitution-making are brought home in A.M. Rajashekharaiah's scholarly thesis, *B.R. Ambedkar: The Politics of Emancipation*. Several other writers like D.C. Ahir, D.R. Jatava, Khairmode I.B., G.S. Lokhande, Jennett Bobbin and
Dhananjay Keer (the masterly biographer of Ambedkar) have written on Ambedkar. But little effort has been made in bringing out the literary aspect of the great personality, except for the fact that mere mention has been made, by literary historians like K.R.S. Iyengar and M.K. Naik, of the political prose of Ambedkar.

Dr. Ambedkar, a recipient of a handful of degrees both in India and abroad, naturally wrote in English. A low-born, he had to experience stings of ill-treatment from his boyhood days. Although he returned from abroad with degrees from Columbia University, the University of London, Gray's Inn, and studied at Bonn University for sometime, on his return to homeland he was still treated as a social leper. When he was serving as a Military Secretary under the Maharaja of Baroda he was refused accommodation - even Parsis drove him out of a hotel because he was an 'untouchable'; even peons flung files at him and rolled the carpet lest his touch pollute them; he could not drink water from the same pot from which his colleagues did when he was a part-time Professor of Political Economy in Sydenham College, Bombay. Such recurring incidents ever reminded him of his low-birth which urged him to study the religion into which he was born to find out the root-cause of 'untouchability'. The person who was prohibited to learn Sanskrit now learnt it on his own and his books like Untouchables: Who Were They and Where Were the Shudras?

are replete with quotations from the Hindu scriptures. An enlightened man, Dr. Ambedkar awakened the consciousness of his dumb brethren through his speeches and writings in English; and through his Marathi Weekly and Fortnightly - Mooknayak and Bahishkrit Bharat, he aroused them to their pitiable plight and rebelled against tyranny practised in the name of religion. Dr. G.S. Lokhande aptly calls him "the Harbinger of a cultural renaissance in India", "an erudite scholar and thinker of international repute" and ".... one of the finest flowers of the 20th century renaissance, a valiant fighter for human freedom and dignity."\(^\text{11}\)

To Dr. Ambedkar, the attainment of equality, social and economic, was more important than mere political freedom from an alien rule. So he had to confront other eminent leaders of the time, but he did share with them the sense of nationalism. In fact Dr. Radhakrishnan paid him a rich tribute when he wrote "Dr. Ambedkar was a patriot in the fullest sense of the term.... for he it was who said 'So long as we have these differences of Hindu, Muslim and others, or Sindhi, Madrasi, etc., we can never develop our nationality'.\(^\text{12}\) Though Ambedkar did not actively take part


\(^{12}\) Ibid., p. 1.
in the freedom struggle, he made public opinion possible at a crucial time writing on Pakistan or Partition of India. The book was acclaimed by both Gandhiji and Jinnah. Dr. Ambedkar has been hailed as the Dr. Johnson of India by critics and observers overseas. Dr. Radhakrishnan further writes, "He was a great writer of books. He studied a good deal of literature of so many countries. The educational institutions which have been established at Bombay, Aurangabad etc., are a testimony to his great love of learning." Even Mahatma Gandhi with whom Ambedkar had acute political differences, once wrote about him as 'a man who carved out for himself a unique position in society. Whatever label he wears in future, Dr. Ambedkar is not the man to allow himself to be forgotten."

Dr. Ambedkar stands out as a distinctive discursive writer in Indian English in his own right. In his Who Were the Shudras? he puts forth innovative theories regarding the social divisions in India and examines the 'Infallible' Vedas and their themes. In yet another book entitled Untouchables: Who Were They? he analyses the origin and nature of untouchability. His first writing on the topic was entitled 'Castes in India' (1917), a paper read by him at the Anthropology Seminar in Columbia University. In his preface to his Pakistan or Partition of India (1946) he wrote that it was "an analytical presentation of Indian history & Indian politics in..."
their communal aspects". He further wrote: "The book is more than a mere treatise on Pakistan. The material relating to Indian history and Indian politics contained in this book is so large that it might well be called 'Indian Political What is What'." The significance of his contribution to the subject, as he himself was aware, is stated in his preface: "... I am glad that the book has been of service to Indians who were faced with this knotty problem of Pakistan. The fact that Mr. Gandhi and Mr. Jinnah in their recent talks cited the book as an authority on the subject which might be consulted with advantage bespeaks the worth of the book." With regard to the book, The Times of India as several other journals did, expressing reactions to it, commented, "Pakistan is the label under which the learned doctor discusses the entire problem of India in all its peculiarities and perplexities.... Nobody can deny the candour and competence with which he has discussed this difficult and intriguing topic."

Dr. Ambedkar's writings on the Hindu religion brought out in Vol.4 prove him a versatile genius. These writings contain his philosophical and historical analysis of the Hindu religion. His analysis is intended not as an intellectual exercise but as a definite approach to strengthening the Hindu society on the basis of the human values of equality, liberty and fraternity. The analysis ultimately points towards uplifting the down-trodden and absorbing the masses in the national mainstream. 15 His views on Buddhism,

15. BAWs, Vol.4, Preface.
* As given on the jacket of BAWs Vol.8
the religion which he chose to embrace later on, are expressed in his *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. Though a treatise, it is written in a very distinct style. The history of constitutional reform in our country can be found in Vol. II of Ambedkar's *Writings and Speeches*. His significant work in the Bombay Legislature, with the Simon Commission, and at the Round Table Conferences comprises his speeches and writings in the field of politics.

During his massive struggle to uplift the down-trodden, Dr. Ambedkar had to confront Gandhiji who also was doing meaningful work in this regard; the two great minds were bound to differ because their approaches were different though their aim was the same. Gandhiji spoke through his *Harijan* while Dr. Ambedkar's thoughts were voiced in his *Mooknayak* and *Bahishkrit Bharat*. Blaming the British for the socio-economic-educational backwardness of the Depressed Classes, Ambedkar lashed out at the Congress for the same in his *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*. He did not join the Congress for he held the strong conviction that freedom was meaningless without socio-economic equality among his countrymen. Besides writing essays and reviews occasionally, Dr. Ambedkar authored books not only on economics—*Administration and Finance of the East India Company*, *The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India*, *The Problem of the Rupee and History of Indian Currency and Banking*—but also in the field of Political Science and other fields such as *States and Minorities, Maharashtra*. 
as a Linguistic Province, Thoughts on Linguistic States and The Rise and Fall of Hindu Woman. His other writings and speeches can be listed as Castes in India: Their Genesis, Mechanism and Development, Annihilation of Caste - With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi, Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah, Federation Versus Freedom, On Parliamentary Democracy, 'Small Holdings in India and Their Remedies', 'Communal Deadlock and a Way to Solve It', 'Labour and Parliamentary Democracy', and 'Buddhism and Communism.'

Dr. Ambedkar's writings range over vast and varied subjects, and for the purpose of the present study, not all of them need be discussed in depth. The study is confined to those of his writings which are eminently readable and have literary qualities in them. Again, Gandhiji, like Ambedkar, is a writer's writer though what he wrote in English is very little compared to what the latter has done. Yet Gandhiji is admitted as a man of letters, as is Nehru. The two being contemporaries of Ambedkar, it would be fair to compare Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar, as discursive writers.

Dr. K.R. Srinivas Iyengar writes: "... We cannot list Rammohan Roy and Ranade, Vivekananda and Aurobindo, Tilak and Gokhale, Tagore and Gandhi in the calendar of our prophets and poets and yet cultivate a blind antipathy towards the language (which they used as a forceful means of communication of their meaning and message to India and the world). Similarly,

Dr. Ambedkar's writings cannot be overlooked too, as he also used English language as the forceful means of communicating his thoughts on various aspects of life in India. His writings are exclusively in English; he stands out as one of our eminent writers of prose in English. Hence what he said and wrote ought to be cherished as part of Indian literature in English.

Ambedkar's writings do not render reality only but they aspire to the status of literature because -

- the sincerity of the writer is discerned through them,
- the degree of sensitiveness and individual talent are at the apex, and the utter intensity in some of his writings on the social aspect of Hindu Society leads others to the renewal of consciousness and heightening of it, and
- in these writings there is every possibility of transformation of certain words and ideas into prophecies.

By cultivating his incipient powers of expression Dr. Ambedkar became the fiery voice of the depressed. Through his writings and also his own torments, urges and exaltations he voices the feelings and experiences, the pains, frustrations and aspirations of the oppressed.

A spokesman of millions of downtrodden 'untouchables', Ambedkar wrote on varied themes. In order to place him among the discursive writers who conveyed their views and thoughts on
matters social, cultural, political, economic, religious, philosophical and historical, a brief survey is made of such writers in the next chapter.