CHAPTER – II
CHAPTER-II
Dr. B.R. Ambedkar: Biographical Background

2.1 Introduction

In the early 18th Century the scenario in India was such that there was a gradual decline of Muslim power and rise of British supremacy. Early 19th Century was a period of transaction. India had suffered loss due to the two World Wars and had submitted to the power of the British rule. Thus she was going through “a state of agony resentment and frustration”. (Kanagali 1995) Added to it was the continued misery caused by social evils that were inherent in the Indian Society. However, on the one hand there was social reformation taken up by reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and organizations like Arya Samaj and Brahma Samaja, and on the other hand the movement of Nationalism was heading for political freedom.

But economic condition was deteriorating and the social scene, as observed by Dr. Rajashekaraiyah, “The Indian Society at the time of the British rule was a plural society. It was medieval, feudalistic, and caste ridden, without a strong, unified political and economic base ......in......case (of British)” (Rajashekaraiyah 1978) conquest and consolidation went hand in hand. As a result, the Indian society was not different from what it was before the advent (of the British) such condition naturally required revival in all spheres. Among a host of eminent men working toward this ‘renaissance’ Dr. Ambedkar, “one of the finest flowers of the 20th Century ‘renaissance’, a valiant fighter for human freedom and dignity” (Lokhande 1981) emerged. He struggled for attainment of equality and justice.
He is always esteemed as a noted scholar, erudite professor, the Architect of Indian constitution, a socio-religious reformer, a versatile writer, an eminent parliamentarian, an eloquent orator, the first Law Minister of Independent India, etc., who had a vision of India as a perfect society based on social democracy; for, “social democracy means a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity as the principle of life. We must acknowledge the fact that there is a complete absence of two things in Indian society..... on the social plane we have in India a society in which there are some who have immense wealth as against many who live in abject poverty.” (Kanagali 1995) Hence his relentless struggle has always been to eradicate inequality in social and economics life in India and bring about social, political and economic justice.

Though, ‘one of the six best brains in India’, as a British journalist observed, this scholar had to suffer injustice due to ‘untouchability’;-- "Dr. Ambedkar, ...... in the eyes of ...... several million Hindus, is an untouchable. A person to bring pollution if his May fair dinner-jacket should happen to brush against their dhotis. A creature from whose touch the extreme orthodox must fly as though he were a leper,.......compel them to precipitate themselves into the nearest bath-tub, to soap and pray... so that the filth of Dr. Ambedkar___(MA London) the shame of Dr.Ambedkar__(high honors at Columbia University)__ the plague and scourge of Dr. Ambedkar (Special distinction at Heidelberg)__ should be washed for ever from their immaculate and immortal souls.” (Nicholas 1944).

Such was a great man but he himself was a victim of social inequality in India. He had to suffer inequality and injustice because he was an untouchable.
2.2 Social Background

'Untouchability' is a concept and practice uniquely found only in India. It is an offshoot of a system found in Indian society viz. 'Caste system'. To the surprise and shock of foreigners Dr. Ambedkar had presented a paper entitled 'Caste in India – Its Origin, Genesis and Development' at an Anthropological seminar of Goldenweizer in Columbia University in 1915. And he was an 'Untouchable' himself being born in the lowest strata of the hierarchical social order of caste system in India. The justification of the graded caste system as 'division of labour' is hard hit by Dr. Ambedkar, who condemns it as a 'division of labourers', a 'social stratification', which is 'positively pernicious'. (Moon 1989) Caste, as Dr. Ambedkar analyses it, has no scientific basis. Untouchability, an offshoot of caste, too is hereditary. The nature of untouchability is brought out in his lucid words. "Foreigners of course know of the existence of untouchability. But not being next door to it, so to say, they are unable to realize how oppressive it is in its actuality. It is difficult for them to understand how it is possible for a few untouchables to live on the edge of a village consisting of a large number of Hindus, go through the village daily to free it from the most disagreeable of its filth and to carry the errands of all and the sundry, collect food at the doors of the Hindus, buy spices and oil at the shops of the Hindu Bania from a distance, regard the village in every way as their home, and yet never touch nor be touched by any one belonging to the village" (Moon 1993:661)... The fundamental feature of untouchability is the living habitat of the untouchables; 'the ghettos' of their separate quarters outside the village, these outcastes always lived in the unhygienic outskirts of villages. Temples and public service were barred to them. Excluded totally from educational and cultural opportunities, they were socially degraded, and economically impoverished. Such 'untouchability' has been being practiced in India since many centuries.
2.3 Early Life, Family and Education

Dr. Ambedkar was born in an untouchable 'Mahar' community on 14\textsuperscript{th} April 1891 to Ramji Sakpal and Bhimabai. His family originally hailed from Konkan region of Maharashtra; the family belonged to Ambavade Village in Khed Taluk of Ratnagiri district. Among all untouchables the Mahar group was the strongest-dynamic, more advanced and martial. Dr. Ambedkar's family had a military background. Malhoji Sakpal, Dr. Ambedkar's grandfather was an ex-serviceman. He had two children-son Ramji and daughter Mira. The family was devotees of Saint Kabir who had condemned untouchability. Ramji too served in the Indian army and was married to Bhimabai of Murhad village in Thana district. She too hailed from a family with military background and which was devoted to Mahatma Kabir; her father and six uncles was Subhedar Major in the army. Ramji, a very pious man, a teetotaler, retired after serving in a military school as a headmaster for 14 years in the rank of Subhedar major; he had social concern. An admirer of the social reformer of his days Mahatma Jyotibai Phule, he worked for the welfare of the untouchables. eg. In 1882 when the British Government barred them joining the army, he wrote petition in protest and sent it to the Govt. He left behind him a legacy of piety, concern for the lowly, unique mental energy and dedication for the task at hand all later imbibed by his son Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar!

In his 'Reminiscence's" (Moon 1993) Dr. Ambdkar himself recalls that his family came originally from Dapoli Taluk of the Ratnagiri District of Bombay presidency, and from the very commencement of the rule of East India Company his forefathers had left their hereditary occupation for service in the army of the company; On his retirement from the army,
Ramji had sought a civilian job as a cashier at a place called Goregaon in Khatar Taluk in Satar District, where the Government of Bombay had started the work of excavating a tank for giving employment to famine stricken people who were dying by thousands. There, Ramji could not once go to the railway station to receive his sons to take them to Goregaon, which was ten miles away from the railway station. When the children detrained at Masur railway station in the evening and the stationmaster, taking them for Brahmin children from their dress and talk was extremely touched to learn that the children were stranded in a strange place. But his face underwent a sudden change on hearing that they were untouchables; overcome by repulse he went away without uttering a word. However, after half an hour he come to their rescue by negotiating with the cart-men who were unwilling to drive the children on their bullock-cart lest their touch pollute him and his cart; they were to drive the cart while the cart-man walked and pay him double the fare. However, they were taken to the toll collector's hut almost at midnight for halt; though hungry and thirsty, they were denied food and water. In Dr. Ambedkar's own words “This incident has a very important place in my life. I was a boy of nine when it happened. But it has left an indelible impression on my mind. Before this incident occurred I knew that I was untouchable and that untouchables were subjected to certain indignities and discriminations. For instance I knew that in the school I could not sit in the midst of my class students according to my rank and that I was to sit in a corner by myself ...to have a separate piece of gunny cloth for me to squat on in the class room... That while other children... when thirsty... could... open the water tap... and quench their thirst . . . . In my case . . . . no peon, no water . . . . The work of shaving and hair cutting was done by my sister, because we were untouchables. All this I knew. But this incident gave me a shock ... and made me think about untouchability. ... Which... was with me a matter of course as it is with many touchable as well as untouchables” (Moon 1993:670)
After Ramji's termination from the civilian job, the family shifted to Bombay in 1904; their home there was a one-room tenement in a chawl in parel. Bhimrao joined first a Maratha High School, and soon transferred to the Government-run Elphinston High School. He was presented with a copy of a biography of Buddha by the author K.A. Keluskar on the occasion of his felicitation for the remarkable success in matriculation in 1907. With the help of the scholarship of 25 rupees per month by the reform minded-ruler of Baroda, Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad Bhimrao continued his college education at Elphinstone college. Professor Muller helped him with books and clothes. But the social humiliation did not stop; he was refused tea and water in the hostel. Bhimrao passed his B.A. in 1913 with English and Persian as his subjects. In the same year on 2nd February he lost his father Ramji to whom he was profoundly attached. He was serving in Baroda state as a lieutenant much against his father's wish but after Ramji's demise he had no mind to return to the service where he had experienced stings of ill treatment as an untouchable. The benevolent Maharaja of Baroda provided another opportunity to this brilliant student.

2.4 Scholar Ambedkar

Bhimrao, among others, was selected to be sent to USA and Dhananjay Keer rightly observes that—except perhaps Jay Prakash Narayan who studied in South America in early thirties, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was, “among the first rate Indian political leaders (he was) the first to receive instruction in the land of Lincoln and Booker T Washington” (Keer 1990:27) Ambedkar made the best use of life's opportunity. During his life of revelation of equal status with others, he proved his worth, with no influence or affluence, but by sheer, diligence
and concentration. In India he had obtained B.A. with English and Persian languages; now he took up Political Science, Moral Philosophy, Anthropology, Sociology and Economics as the subjects for his higher study. Breathing for the first time in his life an air of total freedom from the evil of caste and untouchability the industrious and painstaking Ambedkar obtained his M.A. degree from Columbia University in 1915, for his study on 'Ancient Indian Commerce' and later on he shifted to a new topic 'Administration and Finance of East India Company' Thereafter, he also read a paper on 'Castes in India, Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development' before the Anthropology seminar of Dr. Golden Weiser in May 1916. Ambedkar was also working on another thesis on National Dividend of India—A Historic and Analytical Study. It was accepted by the Columbia University in June 1916 for which he was officially awarded Ph.D. degree, eight years later when the required number of published copies of the thesis were submitted by him. The work was published an extension of this thesis under the title The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India—A Study in the Provincial Decentralization of Imperial Finance was dedicated to the Maharaja of Baroda Shri Sayajirao Gaekwad as a token of 'my gratitude to his help in the matters of his education'. (Moon 1989:52) The work was duly appreciated by his teacher, the renounced S.A.Seligman in his foreword to the book. Dhanajay Keer in his biography Dr. Ambedkar—Man and Mission aptly observes, "His success in the academic world was so brilliant that he was heartily felicitated at a special dinner given in his honour by the students and professors belonging to the faculty of Arts; young Americans whose forefathers had struggled for the abolition of slavery of the Negroes were celebrating the success of a young man who had the will and mission of Lincoln and the labour of Booker T. Washington" (Keer 1990:29).
On his request to his London acquaintance Lord Sydenham, former Governor of Bombay to consider him for the post of professorship, the foreign educated Ambedkar was selected as a professor of political economy in Sydenham College, Bombay in November 1918. Though the "Young Professor with fine dress, his profound studies, his serious gloomy eyes became well known in the circle of students of economics and as a result students from other colleges also attended his classes with special permission", yet this eminent professor of "deep study exhaustive exposition and thoughtful style" suffered the treatment of untouchability in the college for some Gujarathi Professors objected to his drinking water from the pot reserved for the professorial staff. (Keer 1990:39) However, professorship for Ambedkar was only a means and not an end in itself. He had accepted the post temporarily to earn money, which would enable him to go to England to study Law and Economics.

On March 21, 1920 a Conference of the untouchables presided over by Ambedkar was held in the State of Kolhapur and was attended by the Maharaja of Kolhapur himself. That was the first occasion, which gave rise to Ambedkar as a leader and was prophesied by the Maharaj as the future saviour of untouchables who would break their shackles.

Ambedkar's pious, simple wife Ramadevi had been living sparingly, and had saved some money. With that money and a loan from his friend Naval Bhathena and help from the Maharaja of Kolhapur, Ambedkar again left for London in July 1920 to complete his studies. From September 1920 he studied Economics at London School of economics and Political Science and kept terms for Bar at Gray's Inn. His method seemed to be industry and frugality. Ambedkar's tremendous research work bore fruit in 1921; he was awarded Master of Science degree for his thesis 'Provincial Decentralisation of Imperial Finance in British India'.
In 1922 he submitted another thesis; “The problem of the Rupee: Its origin and its solution” and went to Germany to study at Bonn University but was called back to London by his teacher Professor Edwin Cannan as the terse exposition in his thesis had given offence to the British examiners who had asked him to rewrite his thesis without changing his conclusions. By this time he had run out of money for whatever little he had, he had spent all that on books. In 1923 he had to return to Bombay and re-submit the thesis, which, a testimony to his laborious industry and iron will, was accepted and he was awarded Doctor of Science degree. The thesis was published in 1923 with a Foreword by Professor Edwin Cannan (P.S. King and Sons, Westminster) and again was reprinted in 1947 under the different title History of Indian Currency and Banking with plan of bringing out an updated edition of the History of Indian currency and banking in two volumes; Vol-1 consists the Problem of Rupee and the Vol-2 History of Indian currency and Banking from 1923 onwards. The present book is merely a reprint of the Problem of Rupee, but unfortunately the second volume never came through although Dr. Ambedkar had determined to bring it out. “Ambedkar was now a barrister reinforced by a London Doctorate in Science, an American Doctorate in Philosophy and studies at Bonn University. He was thus well equipped as a lawyer and an authority to challenge the scholars of economics and sociology in India, and to storm the Indian citadels.” (Keer 1990:50)

2.5 Educationist-Reformer

He started his career as a lawyer in Bombay High Court in 1923. As a lawyer he was not dogged by the practice of untouchability. However, he refused the offers of professorship in Elphinstone college and Minister-ship in Kolhapur State, so that the constraints of these posts did not stop his public life and completion of his mission in life.
He always regarded education as an important instrument for the socio-economic improvement of the depressed classes. With this aim Dr. Ambedkar launched in 1924 *The Bahiskrit Hitkaran Sabha*. Since time immemorial, about more than twenty-five centuries, the social structure of the Indian Society was such that one-fifth of the population had been living a subhuman life; if some were untouchable, some were unapproachable and some even un-seeable! They were forced to live in the dirty, dingy, unhygienic outskirts of villages and towns; they were denied the use of public wells, were prohibited entry into temples; their children were denied education for admission to schools attended by caste Hindu children was refused; barbers, washer men and people of other hereditary occupation living within the village or town refused to serve them; for these illiterate, ill-treated people all public services in modern times, like the police and military were closed. Hence they were forced to take up degraded occupations such as street-sweeping, scavenging, shoe-making, skinning carcasses, tanning hides and skins; some worked as bonded agricultural laborers and some worked in bamboo and canes. This deprived, depressed humanity lived a miserable life with totally no social or religious or civic right.

Ambedkar, through establishment of institutions like 'Bahiskrit Hitkaran Sabha' and 'People education Society' took up the Herculean task of improvement of the life of the 'sunken humanity'. He awakened them to their own slavery and aroused them to self-respect and self-help in his first social appearance as their Messiah at the historical conference at Mahad on 19th & 20th March 1927. S.K.Bole, a reformist had moved a Resolution in Bombay Legislative Council which was adopted and passed and as a result of it in 1926 the Mahad Municipality had thrown open the Chowdar Tank to the untouchables but it had remained as a mere gesture. Presiding over the conference Dr. Ambedkar said that it was to inaugurate an era of equality in this land “that the Conference was called,” and that Removal of untouchability and inter-caste dinners alone
will not put an end to our ills. All departments of services such as courts, military, police and commerce should be thrown open to us" and concluded that “Hindu society should be reorganized on two main principles equality and absence of caste-ism”. (Keer 1990:39)

2.6 Leader-Liberator

Dr. Ambedkar’s struggle against social discrimination continued in the political arena also. In 1928, on behalf of the Bahishkrit Hitakarani Sabha he gave Evidence before the Simon Commission and submitted a memorandum demanding adequate representation for depressed classes. The all-white commission had been boycotted by the National Congress and even students boycotted Ambedkar’s classes for at that time he was professor of Law in Govt. Law College, Bombay; he had temporarily accepted that post to make both ends meet. Based on the recommendations of the Simon Commission a Round Table conference was convened in London in November 1930. A second Round Table Conference was convened in 1931. This conference ended without arriving at any decision since the question of claims of representation of untouchables between Ambedkar and Gandhi remained unresolved. The subsequent. The proclamation of communal Award was resisted by Gandhiji. He was a member of the third Round Table Conference held in London in 1932-33.

Dr. Ambedkar formed the Independent Labour Party in August 1936 in order to prepare for the ensuing elections to provincial legislatures on all India basis, and to guard the interests of the Depressed Classes. The party drew up a comprehensive programme to answer all the immediate needs and grievances of the landless, poor tenants, agriculturists and labourers. The party secured 15 out of 17 contested seats and Dr. Ambedkar joined the opposition in the Bombay
legislature. In 1937 he introduced Khoti and Abolition of Mahar watan bill. From 1942 to 1946 he worked effectively as a labour member in the executive council of the governor-general of India.

2.7 Constitutionalist – Writer

Dr. Ambedkar visited England in 1946 to plead for constitutional safeguards for untouchables in the independent India. In November 1945 he was elected to the constituent assembly from Bengal and in 1947 he was appointed by the constituent assembly on the drafting committee, which elected him as its chairman. With his extraordinary talents as a constitutional lawyer, a skilled parliamentarian and an orator, he piloted the constitution most successfully and brilliantly; thus he proved what Dr. Rajendra Prasad later said of him: “sitting in the chair and watching the proceedings from day to day, I have realized as nobody could have, with what zeal and devotion.... Especially Dr. Ambedkar, in spite of his indifferent health.... Worked. We would never make a decision, which was or could be ever so right as when we put him on the drafting committee and made him its chairman. He has not only justified his selection but has added luster to the work he has done” (Kanagali 1995:137) Although he was chosen a minister for Law in independent India’s first cabinet he resigned it in 1951 dissenting with the cabinet on vital issues such as Kashmir issue, foreign policy and Hindu code Bill.

Despite his busy schedules Dr. Ambedkar never stopped writing on what he felt was right, and only after a serious study of the problem he was dealing with such as Annihilation of caste (1936) Federation V/s Freedom (1939), Pakistan or Partition of India (1943), Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah (1943), Who Were Shudras (1946), States and minorities (1947),
Untouchables (1948), The Buddha and his Dhamma (1957), besides his theses on economic issues and several essays, articles, statements, evidence and reviews.

Thirty-five years after his Ph.D Dr. Ambedkar was conferred the LLD (Honoris Causa) by Columbia University on 5 June 1952. On that occasion he was hailed as “one of India’s leading citizens, a great social reformer, and a valiant upholders of human rights” and the citation said, “The degree is being conferred in recognition of the work done by him in connection with the drafting of India’s constitution.” (Kuber 1979:24-25) Osmania University in India conferred upon him an honorary degree of Doctor of Literature.

From 1949 onwards his leaning towards Buddhism became stronger. He attended and addressed several Buddhist Conferences including the World Buddhist Conference, in 1956 and embraced Buddhism along with lakhs of his followers before a couple of months of his demise on 6th December 1956.

Against this historical background of India’s social-economic and political life the study of the life and works of the Dr. Ambedkar is important. His multifaceted personality, his contributions in different fields made in different capacities are apparent. But his work in the economic field is also important. In fact, it gains greater significance since the spade work he did in providing a base for future economic activities is in the form of treatises written between 1923 – 25. A study of the first two in the series is taken up in the next chapter.
References:


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