
Ambedkar's Role in Empowering India's Depressed Classes

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Abstract

Dr B R Ambedkar was born an untouchable in the depressed class of Indian society. The depressed classes represent the lowest of the low in a community facing several disabilities and hardships associated with their miserable existence. Having known the sorrows and sufferings of the depressed classes, Ambedkar developed an intense yearning to improve their status in the political, social and economic spheres. He launched a lifelong crusade to liberate them from their old enslavement. He dedicated his life to the cause of eliminating untouchability and securing social dignity for the depressed classes. His human social policy was described in the Constitution of India as safeguards, and their implementation facilitated the human development of depressed classes. The paper analyses Ambedkar's vision of uplifting depressed classes through education, public service reservation, and adequate political representation.

Keywords: Depressed Class, Social Dignity, Safeguards, Uplifting, Vision

Introduction

Ambedkar declared, "It is my solemn vow to die in the service and cause of those downtrodden people among whom I was born, I was brought up, and I am living." Ambedkar was a visionary leader who dedicated his life to serving the downtrodden and oppressed sections. His solemn vow to die in the service and cause of these people reflects his unwavering commitment to social justice. Ambedkar's contribution to empowering the oppressed classes is evident in his various initiatives, including founding the Marathi paper, MookNayak, in January 1920. MookNayak served as a powerful platform to highlight the issues the downtrodden faced and encourage them to rise and fight for their rights. Ambedkar emphasised the necessity of awakening the oppressed masses from their age-old lethargy and inspiring them to take charge of their lives. He believed that education and economic empowerment were the keys to liberation, and he founded the Bahiskrit Hitakarini Sabha Society in July 1924 to promote these goals.

The society's main objective was to spread education and improve the economic conditions of the depressed classes. Ambedkar consistently tried to achieve social equality by launching Satyagraha with the help of the oppressed classes under the society's banner. Satyagraha, or nonviolent resistance, was a powerful tool Ambedkar used to challenge the oppressive caste system and fight for the rights of marginalised communities. Ambedkar's heroic efforts to achieve social justice and equality have left an indelible mark on Indian society. He was a visionary leader who inspired generations to fight for their rights and demand social justice.

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Depressed Classes Upliftment in British India

Ambedkar's contributions to the uplift of the Depressed Classes in British India were multifaceted and far-reaching. He was not only a social reformer but also a legal expert, economist, and politician who dedicated his life to advocating for the rights of the Dalits.

One of his significant contributions was his demand for adequate representation of the Depressed Classes in the legislature. He proposed a wholly elected legislature with reserved seats based on the population ratio for the Depressed Classes. This ensured they had a voice in the democratic process and could participate in decision-making.

Ambedkar also recognised the need for immediate reform in the education system. He recommended setting up new schools, hostels, and scholarships for Depressed Class students for higher education in India and abroad. He played a prominent role in recommending scholarships and student hostels for the economic uplift of the Depressed Classes. The committee he was a part of urged the government to recruit the Depressed Classes in the police force and remove the bar on their recruitment in the army.

At the Round Table Conferences in London from 1930 to 1932, Ambedkar demanded fundamental rights for the Depressed Classes, including the right to declare untouchability illegal for all public purposes, safeguards to ensure adequate legislative representation and recruitment for the Depressed Classes in the public service. He submitted a Supplementary Memorandum on the claims of the Depressed Classes for Special Representation, defining the details of the special safeguards.

In 1932, the Communal Award was announced, creating separate electorates for the Depressed Classes. This culminated in a long and bitter struggle to represent the untouchables on their terms adequately. However, Gandhi opposed the award, leading to a fast unto death. Ultimately, Ambedkar agreed to amend the Communal Award in a manner agreeable to Gandhi. They signed the Poona Pact, which provided for reserved seats for the Depressed Classes in the legislature.

Ambedkar also submitted a confidential memorandum to the Viceroy and Governor General of India in 1942, advocating for adequate representation of the Depressed Classes in the legislative, executive, public services, education, and contracts. As a result of his efforts, the government of India reserved public services for the Depressed Classes for the first time in India. He also persuaded the government to give scholarships to deserving students for higher studies abroad.

In conclusion, Ambedkar's tireless efforts as a social reformer and member of the Constituent Assembly of India significantly impacted Indian society. He fought for the constitutional rights of the Depressed Classes, including their representation in the legislature, access to education, and equal opportunity in the public services. He remains an inspiration for generations as a champion of the oppressed and marginalised communities.

Constitutional Safeguards of SC and ST

Ambedkar's efforts bore fruit when India gained independence from British rule in 1947. As India's first Law Minister, he played a vital role in drafting the Indian Constitution, which included several provisions for uplifting the Depressed Classes. For instance, the Constitution abolished untouchability and provided for reserving seats in educational institutions and government jobs.

Ambedkar played a crucial role in drafting the Constitution of India as the Chairperson of the Drafting Committee and a member of the Advisory Committee on Minorities and Fundamental Rights. As a champion for the rights of the untouchables, he ensured that the interests of the Scheduled Castes were taken into account during the drafting process. He said, "I came into the Constituent Assembly with no greater aspiration than to safeguard the interests of the Scheduled Castes." Ambedkar's dedication to

securing constitutional safeguards for marginalised communities, including Scheduled Castes, was evident in his work on the Constitution, which included provisions to prevent discrimination and promote social justice for all citizens

⇒ ***The Fundamental Rights:*** The Indian Constitution, with its extensive Fundamental Rights, is a testament to the vision of Ambedkar and the other founding fathers of India. The Constitution guarantees equality and social justice to all citizens, with particular attention given to the disadvantaged and marginalised sections of society. This emphasis on protecting human rights and promoting social equality has made the Indian Constitution one of the most progressive in the world.

Ambedkar, who himself faced discrimination as a member of the Dalit community, understood the need for a robust bill of rights to protect all citizens' rights. He recognised that social justice could only be achieved if enshrined in the Constitution. With this understanding, he was instrumental in ensuring that the Constitution guaranteed fundamental rights to all citizens, regardless of their caste, religion, gender, or place of birth.

The Indian Constitution's Fundamental Rights cover a broad range of areas, including the right to equality, freedom of speech and expression, the right to life and personal liberty, and the right to education. These rights are enforced through the courts, ensuring that they are not just empty promises but are tangible protections for citizens.

Article 14 of the Constitution, which guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the law, is one of the most critical provisions in the Fundamental Rights. It ensures that all citizens are treated equally under the law, without discrimination. The courts have used this provision to strike down laws that discriminate against marginalised communities.

Article 15 prohibits discrimination based on religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. This provision ensures that all citizens have equal opportunities and are not discriminated against based on their identity. It has been used to challenge discriminatory practices such as the caste system and gender discrimination.

Article 16 guarantees equality of opportunity in matters of public employment. It ensures that all citizens have equal access to government jobs and are not discriminated against based on their identity.

Article 17 abolishes untouchability, a prevalent social practice in India before independence. This provision has been instrumental in eliminating this inhumane practice and ensuring that all citizens are treated with dignity and respect.

Article 18 abolishes titles, ensuring no citizen is given a title or honorific that creates distinctions in society. This provision has been instrumental in promoting social equality and preventing discrimination based on titles.

Article 23 prohibits traffic in human beings and forced labour, ensuring that all citizens are protected from exploitation and forced labour.

These provisions have been essential in promoting social justice and creating an egalitarian society in India. However, the journey towards social justice is far from over. The Constitution guarantees these rights, but it is up to the government and the citizens to uphold them.

The Fundamental Rights enshrined in the Indian Constitution is a testament to the vision of Ambedkar and the other founding fathers of India. They recognised the importance of protecting human rights and promoting social justice and created a Constitution reflecting these values. The Constitution guarantees equal rights to all citizens, regardless of their identity, and it is up to all of us to ensure that these rights are upheld. We must continue to work towards creating a society where everyone is treated with dignity and respect, and no one is left behind.

⇒ **The Directive Principles of State Policy:** The Indian Constitution is a unique document that enshrines the Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State Policy. While the former guarantees individual rights and liberties against State actions, the latter focuses on economic and social goals. The Constitution's framers aimed to incorporate principles that would bring about a social and economic revolution, believing India's survival depended on its success.

Ambedkar, who played a crucial role in drafting the Constitution, defended the Directive Principles, stating that they were not mere rhetorical statements but instruments of instruction that would guide governmental activity. He believed whoever held power would have to respect these principles, and the judiciary could not compel the State to perform a 'duty' under them. However, Ambedkar argued that the State should be free to decide how and when to fulfil these principles.

The Directive Principles aim to create a welfare State that prioritises the needs of the most vulnerable sections of society. The State should promote the welfare of the people by securing and protecting a social order that is instructive, social, economic, and political. These principles should guide all national institutions.

The non-justiciability clause in Article 37 of the Constitution has sparked debate. While the judiciary cannot compel the State to perform a 'duty' under the Directive Principles, they remain a vital part of the Constitution. They serve as a guiding force for the government to pursue economic and social development that benefits all citizens.

The Directive Principles are crucial for creating a just social order that prioritises the needs of all citizens and aims to eliminate economic exploitation. The emphasis on creating a society where everyone has equal opportunities and rights indicates that the Constitution's framers wanted to create an equitable society.

The Directive Principles of State Policy in the Indian Constitution emphasise economic and social goals that can bring about a social and economic revolution in the country. The non-justiciability clause does not diminish their importance, and it should guide the government's policies and actions to ensure that all citizens have equal access to necessities. These principles remain an essential part of the Constitution and serve as a reminder of the government's obligation to create a just society.

⇒ **Special Provisions:** The Indian Constitution includes Part XVI, which contains special provisions for certain classes of people, specifically the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). These provisions, which Ambedkar championed during the drafting of the Constitution, include reserved seats in the House of the People and Legislative Assemblies of the States, the appointment of a Special Officer to investigate matters related to safeguards for these groups, and the creation of a commission to report on the administration of scheduled areas and the welfare of Scheduled Tribes.

Despite objections from some members of the Constituent Assembly, Ambedkar and others believed that these particular provisions were necessary to address the historical marginalisation and exclusion of SC and ST communities from the political process and government services. Ambedkar's social policy aimed to empower these communities by giving them political power and representation to improve their socioeconomic, educational, and cultural conditions.

The reservation of seats for SC and ST groups has been in place since the Constitution's commencement, as stated in Article 334, and is fixed for ten years. Ambedkar's vision for social justice for these marginalised communities continues to shape public policy in India. It is seen as a forerunner of the contemporary human development approach, which emphasises government intervention and regulation to promote the development of marginalised communities. Today, SC and ST communities

participate in democratic elections with a sense of identity and solidarity, evidence of the effectiveness of these special provisions in the Constitution.

Conclusion

Dr B R Ambedkar played a pivotal role in the drafting of the Indian Constitution and the development of the depressed classes in India. The Constitution enshrines his vision and ideas for a just and equitable society, which has become the cornerstone of India's democracy. Through his tireless efforts, Ambedkar ensured that the interests of the marginalised sections of society, particularly the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, were safeguarded by the Constitution. The provisions for affirmative action, reservations in educational institutions and government jobs, and the creation of special officers and commissions were some measures taken to uplift the oppressed and underprivileged communities in India.

Ambedkar's social policy is a forerunner of the contemporary human development school of thought in public policy. His approach emphasised the need for Government intervention and regulation in developing education, health, nutrition, and protection of the environment for the benefit of the poor masses and weaker sections. Today, his legacy lives on, as millions of people from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are participating in the democratic process, holding public office, and making significant contributions to the country's development.

In conclusion, Dr B R Ambedkar's contribution to developing the depressed classes in India and his role in drafting the Constitution cannot be overstated. He was a visionary leader who dedicated his life to the cause of social justice and the upliftment of the marginalised sections of society. His legacy will continue to inspire generations of Indians to strive for a more equitable and just society where every individual can realise their full potential.

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