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Dr. B. R. Ambedkar *A Biographical Sketch*

*** Who's Who in Viceroy's Council**

Thirty years ago, a Mahar youth viewed the golden vista of opportunity opened up by education and decided that his life's work should be a crusade against the social system which declared him and his kinsmen untouchables whose very shadows polluted high caste Hindus in their vicinity. Today, Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar holds the portfolio of Labour in the Viceroy's Executive Council, but he still feels that his first duty is to the millions in India who belong to the so-called Depressed Classes and that no considerations of personal well-being or ambition should come in the way of his leading them to emancipation.

Those who know of his attacks on the Hindu social system and of his differences with caste Hindu leaders will certainly feel that he is a much embittered man. But to one who has heard him tell of his career and antecedents, the wonder is that he is not even more bitter and that he has managed to crowd into a life devoted so largely to his crusade against untouchability so many interests, and to study a great variety of subjects with so much distinction.

One naturally asks: How did this untouchable manage to acquire any sort of education? The answer is simple. His community—the Mahars—are cultivators, village servants and soldiers. They once supplied the Bombay Army of the East India Company with its manpower, just as the Dusads of Bihar and the Pariahs of Madras manned the armies of the Company in those Provinces. Then sepoys were given education in the Army, and Subedar Ramji Maloji Ambedkar, Dr. Ambedkar's father, had once been a teacher in an Army school.

* Indian Information, March 1, 1943, pp. 194-95. *This article was published under the caption 'Personalities'. Name of the author is not printed on the article.*—Ed.

Early Education

Had the recruitment of Mahars to the Army not been stopped in 1892, it is possible that the Subedar's son would have followed the profession of arms as well, but things were to be otherwise. Realising the value of education, the Subedar did his best to educate his sons. This called for great effort. Schools refused to admit the children of a Mahar, and from his native district of Ratnagiri he went to Satara and later to Bombay, where he finally settled. At one stage he had to decide which of his two sons he could afford to keep at school, and he chose the youngest boy, now the leader of the Depressed Classes.

That youth learnt early what it was to be an untouchable. He was born in 1893* at Mhow in the comparatively democratic atmosphere of a military station, but as a child went to the Bombay Presidency. He remembers going to school in Satara carrying a piece of gunny cloth to squat on in a corner of the classroom. The school servant would not touch the cloth, which young Ambedkar carried to and fro every day. He could not touch the school tap and could only quench his thirst if the school peon was there to open it for him. At home his sisters did the family washing as no *dhobi* would wash their clothes, and also cut their brothers' hair.

One incident stands out very clearly in his memory. Once he, his elder brother and his little nephew set out to meet their father at some town off the railway line. No cartman would carry them on the last stage of their trip and they had eventually to pay double the fare to drive a cart themselves. The appetising meal prepared for the way was completely spoilt as they had no water to drink and nobody would give them any.

Help From Baroda Ruler

In due course B. R. Ambedkar finished school and joined the Elphinstone College at Bombay. Half way through his university course, his father ran out of funds and a friend took the young undergraduate to the Gaekwar of Baroda who gave him a scholarship which enabled him to secure his degree.

After graduating, B. R. Ambedkar went to thank the Gaekwar, and to his surprise was asked if he would go overseas for further studies.

* According to the biographers of Dr. Ambedkar, his date of birth is 14th April 1891 as per school register at Satara where he had had his primary education.—Ed.

He jumped at the offer and it was arranged that he should go to the Columbia University of New York. During the months of waiting before sailing for America, the Gaekwar advised Ambedkar to try the profession of his fore-fathers and made him a Lieutenant in the Baroda State Forces.

At the Columbia University, he studied Economics, Sociology and Political and Moral Philosophy, securing his Master's degree and a Doctorate in Philosophy. In 1917 he went to London and carried on research in the India Office Library and at the London School of Economics, besides joining Gray's Inn.

Returning to India, he offered his services to the man who had helped him and was appointed a probationer in the office of the Accountant-General of Baroda.

Experiences In Baroda

Dr. Ambedkar had been several years abroad and made many friends, Indians, Europeans and Americans, who had not treated him as an untouchable. The feeling that he was one of the downtrodden had thus been erased from his mind. Now it all returned painfully as he went to Baroda to start work. Where was he, a Mahar, to stay? He persuaded a Parsi innkeeper to board and lodge him. Luckily there were no other lodgers, but after ten days a number of Parsis armed with lathis called on him, asked what he meant by defiling a hostel reserved for their community and told him to quit by that very evening.

He appealed to two friends, one a Hindu and the other a Christian, for shelter. The first said, "If you come to my home my servants will go." The second friend wanted to consult his wife, and Dr. Ambedkar, knowing that husband and wife came of orthodox Brahmin stock and that the latter still suffered from inhibitions regarding caste, decided to return to Bombay.

There he became Professor of Political Economy in the Sydenham College of Commerce. But he longed to complete his studies in England. He supplemented his salary by private tuitions, saved every pie he could and after a year or two rejoined the London School of Economics. He obtained the coveted D.Sc. at London for a thesis on "The Problem of the Rupee" and was called to the Bar. His desire to study at a German University took him to Bonn, but the fall in the exchange led him to return to India without a degree.

He had now decided to practise Law rather than serve under Government or in a University, as he would then be completely free to work for the untouchables.

Close Association With Depressed Classes

His early fears that the prejudices of the caste Hindu solicitors and pleaders on whom he would depend for briefs, would bar his progress were not justified and he built up a good civil appellate practice in Bombay. The Universities of Bombay and Nagpur and the Bombay High Court offered him examinerships in law and he was for a time Professor and Principal of the Government Law College in Bombay. Tempting offers of judicial appointments, with the prospect of a life far removed from political turmoil, he has turned down.

For ten years the untouchable Barrister and Professor lived in one of the Bombay Development Department's *chawls* at Parel. These chawls are big five-storeyed buildings, each containing about 100 one-room tenements. They possess no modern conveniences, each floor having a single lavatory and a single tap for bathing, washing and cleaning cooking utensils. Most of the tenants are millhands earning on an average Rs. 25 per mensem.

Living under these conditions, Dr. Ambedkar acquired a firsthand knowledge of life among the workers of Bombay. It is his boast that hundreds of millhands know him personally and have sought his advice and assistance. He has thus gained the confidence of many workers and established his leadership of the Depressed Classes in his campaign against untouchability.

Campaign Against Untouchability

That campaign has been marked by two outstanding events. The first was the Chowdar Tank Satyagraha in Mahad (Kolaba District) when he organised mass demonstrations by members of the Depressed Classes to assert their right to take water from a certain tank. Heads were broken when the untouchables drew water and Dr. Ambedkar was compelled to accept the protection of the police, but the untouchables gained their point. More important still, a great feeling of *esprit de corps* was awakened among them and a sense of their dignity as human beings, which was to carry them further along the road to emancipation.

Encouraged by their success, the untouchables decided to fight for the right to enter the most sacred temple in the sacred city of Nasik.

For over five years they offered satyagraha at the Kalaram Temple. They obstructed pilgrims at the great annual fair to such an extent that the fair could not be held, and they bathed at a *ghat* which, till then, had been closed to them, thereby "polluting" the waters of the sacred Godavari. Many, including a large number of women, went to jail, and although the untouchables were not given the right to enter the Temple, by the time the satyagraha was called off, they had shown that they could unite and had given the caste Hindus a bit of a jolt in no way tempered by their threat to sever their connection with Hinduism once and for all.

Political Activities

As the leader of the untouchables, Dr. Ambedkar has been prominent in politics. He was nominated to the Bombay Legislative Council in 1926, and eleven years later, elected to the Bombay Legislative Assembly as the representative of the Scheduled Castes from the city of Bombay. He fought for his people at the three Round Table Conferences in London and on the Joint Parliamentary Committee which drafted the Bill on which the Government of India Act of 1935 is based.

The most notable incident in his political career was his conflict with Mr. Gandhi over safeguards under the new Constitution. Dr. Ambedkar claimed certain political safeguards for the Scheduled Castes. As a protest against the provision which the British Government were about to make for safeguards, Mr. Gandhi started a fast to death. The result of the struggle was that Dr. Ambedkar and Mr. Gandhi agreed, under what is known as the Poona Pact, to joint electorates with reservation of seats for untouchables in elections to the Lower Houses of the Provincial Legislatures under the new Constitution.

At the first elections under the new Act, Dr. Ambedkar organised his followers in his own Province of Bombay and, to a lesser extent, in the Central Provinces. In Bombay, his Independent Labour Party secured 11 of the 15 seats reserved for the "Scheduled Castes." In the Ratnagiri District, caste Hindu candidates put up by his Party actually captured two seats *not* reserved for the Depressed Classes. In the Central Provinces, most of the successful Depressed Class candidates were non-Congressmen and followers of Dr. Ambedkar.

Stigma Of Untouchability

Even as a figure of national importance, Dr. Ambedkar does not escape the stigma of untouchability. In 1929, while serving on a committee investigating certain grievances of the untouchables, he visited Khandesh District, and at a place called Chalisgaon was welcomed by the local Mahars. After a long delay at the station he was put into a *tonga* and driven in the direction of the Maharwada, the Mahar quarters. The driver of the *tonga* was lamentably inexpert and at a culvert the horse bolted and Dr. Ambedkar was thrown on to the stone pavement and seriously injured. He then learnt that the untouchables had great difficulty in getting a *tonga* and that, as no *tonga* driver would drive him, one of the Mahars took the reins, not thinking of the risk to his leader.

As recently as 1934 Dr. Ambedkar and some of his fellow workers visited Daulatabad Fort in the Nizam's Dominions while on a sightseeing tour. They reached the Fort covered with dust and unthinkingly took water from a tank to wash. While they were getting permission to go round, an old Mohammedan ran up and raised an outcry, shouting, "The Dheds (untouchables) have polluted the tank." The situation became serious and, exasperated by the attitude of the Mohammedans. Dr. Ambedkar asked : "Is that what your religion teaches ? Would you prevent an untouchable from taking water from this tank if he became a Mohammedan ?" That silenced the crowd, but the untouchables were only allowed to go round the Fort with an armed soldier who saw that they did not "pollute" water anywhere else.

His life's experiences have shown Dr. Ambedkar that, while caste and untouchability are of Hindu creation, India's Mohammedans, Parsis and Christians are not wholly free from Hindu inhibitions on the subject. During his long struggle he has found valuable companionship in a world which denies none of its treasures to the outcast among men—the Commonwealth of Letters.

Literary Activities

No one who has seen Dr. Ambedkar at home can fail to be struck by the number and variety of the volumes which fill his bookshelves and lie on the tables around him. Books of every kind, but more especially works on constitutional law, politics, economics and sociology, appeal to him.

His own writings include "The Problem of the Rupee", "Provincial Finance in British India", "Annihilation of Caste", "Federation *versus* Freedom" and "Thoughts on Pakistan."

He has conducted Marathi newspapers to awaken the untouchables politically. In 1919* he started the "Muka Nayak" ("Leader of the Dumb"), but this died a natural death soon after he left to resume his studies in Europe. In 1923@ he started the "Bahiskrata Bharat" ("Excluded India"), a title which was changed to "Janata" ("The People") some years ago as he felt that its appeal should not be solely to the communities composing "Excluded India."

Attitude To Religion

A word should be said about Dr. Ambedkar's attitude to religion. He feels that the Hindu social system, with its four castes and a great mass of outcasts, has been a source of weakness to India as a whole and he does not wish to remain within its fold.

Some years ago the *Jat Pat Todak Mandal*, a reformist Hindu organisation, invited him to preside over their annual conference. Later the conference was cancelled as his draft presidential address, in which he stated that it would be his last speech as a Hindu, was not acceptable to the *Mandal*. He published that undelivered speech as a booklet "Annihilation of Caste." Its title shows his attitude to caste.

But, while he is determined not to remain a Hindu and has studied the teachings of several other religions, including Buddhism, Sikhism and Christianity, Dr. Ambedkar will not yet announce his entry into another faith. The untouchables, he feels, still need him. His conversion now would have far-reaching repercussions. His faith and the faith of every follower of his is a matter which each man should settle for himself; and he does not wish to influence his followers in this matter. When he has handed over the leadership of the untouchables to others and retired from public life, he will tell the world of his decision. For the present his crusade must go on.

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* Should be 1920.—Ed.

@ Should be 1927.—Ed.