

Radical Liberation

Dr. Ambedkar and Democracy in India

by Mangesh Dahiwale

"My social philosophy may be said to be enshrined in three words: Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. Let no one, however, say that I have borrowed my philosophy from the French Revolution. I have not. My philosophy has roots in religion and not in political science. I have derived them from the teachings of my master, the Buddha."

—Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, 1954

The Hindu caste system is the longest surviving system of human slavery. Like other institutionalized systems of oppression such as racism and sexism, the caste system gives rise to suffering as it divides people into watertight compartments, controls access to knowledge and resources, and denies human dignity. When people from the Untouchable caste demand their rights and dignity, they are suppressed by members of higher castes, often through violence. Although the practice of untouchability was abolished by the Constitution of India, it continues to exist in various forms in rural and urban India today. The people classed as Untouchables (also known as Dalits) constitute one-sixth of India's population.

This is the story of how one man, Dr. Ambedkar, devoted his life to the liberation of India's Dalit population, and how his dharma-inspired work continues today.

The Education of Dr. Ambedkar

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was a brilliant, if controversial, figure in India. He was born in 1891 in central India into an Untouchable caste. Throughout his life, he experienced extreme caste-based discrimination from India's educational, political, and social structures.

When he was a young student, Ambedkar's upper-caste teachers did not allow him to study Sanskrit. He and other Untouchable children received little attention and were not even allowed to sit inside the classroom. Despite such treatment, Ambedkar became the first person from the Untouchable caste in western India to enter college at the University of Bombay in 1907. This achievement was celebrated by one of Ambedkar's teachers, K. A. Keluskar, who presented

him with a biography of the Buddha. According to legend, Dr. Ambedkar's inner conversion to Buddhism took place after reading this book.

Although he did not formally convert to Buddhism until 1956, he was moving in that direction from an early age. He extensively read Buddhism during his stay at Columbia University, and his important speeches bear the stamp of dharma. In a 1936 speech titled "Which Way Liberation?" he advocated the importance of legal and constitutional changes in the democratization of society. But he noted that lasting social change can occur only when minds are changed. In 1941, he wrote:

Politically India is like a sick man.... The doctor who can wash this filth will help in establishing Democracy in India. That doctor undoubtedly is the Buddha. Only the Buddha can help in creating a democratic society. Therefore it is important to remember the Buddha and take his medicine (the Dhamma) for cleansing the political and social lifeblood of the Hindus.

The Maharaja of Baroda awarded the young Ambedkar a scholarship to pursue his education at Columbia University in

New York City, where he began studies in 1913. His time in the United States gave Ambedkar a taste of freedom from caste and untouchability, and exposed him to the Black Renaissance in Harlem. Later in his life, Dr. Ambedkar asked W. E. B. DuBois to help lobby for rights of the Untouchables in the newly constituted United Nations.

Political Awakening

Upon his return to India in 1917, Ambedkar served as a military secretary in the Baroda state government, in preparation for becoming a finance minister. Though he was highly educated, no one welcomed him, and he



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was forced to leave his position and return to Bombay. He started a consultancy service for stock-brokers but this enterprise failed because higher-caste clients did not want to consult with an Untouchable.

In 1918, Ambedkar took a job at Sydenham College in Bombay, where he soon became a popular teacher. During this time, he started to build the foundation for his future movement. In 1920, he started a journal, *Mook Nayak* (The Leader of Silent), to increase awareness of the rights for Untouchables. That same year, Ambedkar went to England to complete unfinished studies despite severe economic hardship.

When he returned to India in 1923, equipped with two doctorates and a law degree, Dr. Ambedkar launched a civil rights movement for the Untouchables. In 1924, he founded Bahishkrut Hitkarani Sabha (Society for the Welfare of the Untouchables) and began to organize his people to end the caste system. In 1927, he initiated two mass movements: at Mahad for the right to drink water from public water tanks, and in Nasik at the Kalaram temple for the right to enter Hindu temples.

At the Round Table Conference in England in 1930, Dr. Ambedkar advocated for civil and political rights for the Untouchables and spoke passionately for the rights of people to elect their own representatives, irrespective of caste and class. Though Mahatma Gandhi agreed to separate electorates for Sikhs and Muslims, he opposed the rights of the Untouchables to elect their own representatives. In spite of Gandhi's resistance, the Untouchables were awarded a separate electorate by the British prime minister. Gandhi vowed to fast until death against this decision. Higher-caste Hindus pressured Dr. Ambedkar with threats of assassination and mass murder of the Untouchables, and he was forced to reach an accord in which the Untouchables had to relinquish a separate electorate and settle for reserved seats.

The relationship between Gandhi and the Untouchable people was complex. Although Gandhi, who was born into the Vaishya caste (traditionally merchants and bankers), spoke out against Untouchability, he was also a conservative Hindu who believed in the verity of the sacred scriptures and in the caste system as an ideal form of organizing society. These beliefs alienated him from the majority of Untouchables. Dr. Ambedkar, who had to live with the cruel consequences of Untouchability all his life, advocated a much more radical approach to the problem: the elimination of the caste system. In 1935, he gave a speech that ignited national debate and was later published as the book *The Annihilation of Caste*.

Sensing the rigid and patronizing attitude of the caste Hindus, Dr. Ambedkar saw that the only way

forward was to leave a religion that made one "untouchable," and find a more liberatory belief system. After studying the world's major religions as well as communism, he concluded that only Buddhism was in accordance with his most valued principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. The Buddha's emphasis on ethics, lovingkindness, altruism, rationality, and individual responsibility appealed to him. Through Buddhism, Dr. Ambedkar saw the possibility of a peaceful social revolution.

Dr. Ambedkar entered electoral politics in 1936 and founded several political parties, including the Independent Labour Party. In one of his greatest accomplishments, Dr. Ambedkar single-handedly drafted the Constitution of India in 1947. He used his knowledge of Buddhism to inform the draft, which included sangha practices such as voting by ballot, rules of debate, and the use of agendas, committees, and proposals to conduct business. The constitution provides for freedom of religion and the abolition of untouchability, and outlaws all forms of discrimination.

A few weeks before his death in 1956, Dr. Ambedkar, along with 500,000 Dalits, took refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, embracing a spiritual tradition free of prejudice and discrimination. Many more have followed since then. The number of Buddhists in India today is estimated at well over 20 million.

Carrying Forward the Work of Liberation

In recent years, the rise in religion-based nationalism in India has resulted in conflicts between Hindu nationalists and Islamic fundamentalists that have taken many lives. Sadly, Dr. Ambedkar's fear of Hindu nationalism has come true.

Dr. Ambedkar's goal was to create a truly democratic society, which he defined as one in which an individual can express all of his or her capacities. The caste system continues to be very strong in India and is a major hurdle to democratization. For Dr. Ambedkar, Buddhism was not a religion but rather a system of thoughts and practice with the potential to transform minds and therefore the world, and an effective vehicle for dismantling the caste system from the inside out.

Since Dr. Ambedkar's death in 1956, his followers have taken his movement forward. Thousands of social organizations have been formed in the name of Dr. Ambedkar, vowing to fulfill his dream. The growing political consciousness among his followers has resulted in the formation of a major national political party headed by a firebrand woman named Mayawati, herself a Dalit.

One of the organizations that works with the fol-

lowers of Dr. Ambedkar is the Jambudvipa Trust, founded by Dhammachari Lokamitra in 1998 to cultivate the relationship between individual ethical and spiritual practice and social transformation. The Manuski Project is an initiative of Jambudvipa. The word *Manuski* has connotations of humanity, compassion, and respect. The purpose of the project is to help socially deprived members of Indian society become free of the material and psychological obstacles to their full participation in a caste-free society. The Manuski Project is run by people who know from their own experience the realities of caste and untouchability. The project offers classes in Buddhist meditation and study, as well as residential retreats.

There is a conspiracy of silence over caste issues, and the Indian government has kept the issue out of the public eye. In 2006, the Manuski Project alerted a worldwide network of Buddhists and human rights agencies to raise awareness on the “Khairlanji Atrocity,” a violent massacre against a Dalit family in 2006. A dedicated website was created to keep track of the case and to inform the public, and the international media was briefed about the incident. This advocacy work snowballed into more than 800 public protests all over India and in other countries too. The government finally appointed an official from the Central Bureau of Investigation to the case, and designated a public prosecutor.

The Khairlanji Atrocity generated a lot of public consciousness internationally, and a significant number of resolutions against caste have subsequently passed. The prime minister of India made a statement acknowledging that a “hidden apartheid” exists in India. There is a direct correlation between low caste and poverty. According to the National Crime Records Bureau Report of 2005, 26,127 crimes were committed against Dalits, including 669 murders and 1,172 rapes against Dalit women. Many cases remain unregistered due to local pressures of the feudal caste people.

The challenge for human rights activists is to find methods to annihilate the caste system. Buddhism is one means, and the Manuski Project is reaching out to people across different castes through Buddhism in order to address issues of human dignity and self-respect. As the Indian diaspora migrates to other parts of the world, the caste system is becoming global. A national movement isn't enough to fight the caste system; a global response is needed to end it. ❖

Mangesh Dahiwale was educated as an electronic engineer. He works with the Jambudvipa Trust, where he is involved in publicity and communication, and serves as a contact for national and international agencies. He works closely with Dhammachari Lokamitra.