

Dr. B. R. AMBEDKAR

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, affectionately known as Babasaheb, was one of the most illustrious sons of India. He appeared on the Indian socio-political scene in early 1920s and remained in the forefront of all social, economic, political and religious efforts for upliftment of the lowest stratum of the Indian society known as untouchables. Babasaheb was a great scholar who made outstanding contributions as an economist, sociologist, legal luminary, educationalist, journalist, Parliamentarian and above all, as a social reformer and champion of human rights. Babasaheb organised, united and inspired the untouchables in India to effectively use political means towards their goal of social equality.

Born in 1891 to an untouchable school teacher in the British Army, he was highly educated – Ph.D. from Columbia University (1917), D.Sc. from London School of Economics and Bar-At-Law from Gray's Inn in London (1923). These achievements spectacular by in standard were truly incredible for an untouchable.

Dr. Ambedkar was an economist by his basic training. His career was characterised by two distinct phases : the first one up to 1921 as a professional economist contributing scholarly books and the second one as a political leader thereafter until his demise in 1956, during which he made pathbreaking contributions as a champion of human rights for the untouchables.

Dr. Ambedkar wrote three scholarly books on economics:

- (i) Administration and Finance of the East India Company,
- (ii) The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India, and
- (iii) The Problem of the Rupee: Its Origin and Its Solution

The first two represent his contribution to the field of public finance: the first one evaluating finances of the East India Company during the period, 1792 through 1858 and the second one analysing the evolution of the Centre-State financial relations in British India during the period, 1833 through 1921. The third book, his *magnum opus* in economics, represents a seminal contribution to the field of monetary economics. In this book Dr. Ambedkar examined the evolution of the Indian currency as a medium of exchange covering the period, 1800 to 1893 and discussed the problem of the choice of an appropriate currency system for India in the early 1920s. On his return to

India, Dr. Ambedkar did not write any book on economics *per se*, though several of his other contributions during that period carry a distinctive imprint of the economist in him.

As a member of the Bombay Legislative Assembly (since 1926), Ambedkar gave effective expression to the grievances of the rural poor through his mass movements. His successful struggle against the prevailing land tenure system called *Khoti* liberated a vast majority of the rural poor from an extreme form of economic exploitation. His successful agitation against *Mahar Vatan* emancipated a large section of the rural poor from virtual serfdom. He presented a bill in the State Assembly aimed at preventing the malpractices of money-lenders hurting the poor. On the industrial front, Dr. Ambedkar founded in 1936, the Independent Labour Party. While the prevailing trade unions fought for the rights of workers, they were indifferent to the rights of untouchable workers as human beings. The new political party took up their cause. Subsequently, as the Labour Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council from 1942 to 1946, Dr. Ambedkar was instrumental in bringing about several labour reforms including establishment of employment exchanges, generally laying the foundations of industrial relations in Independent India. His ministry also included irrigation, power and other public works. He played an important role in shaping the irrigation policy, especially the Damodar Valley Project.

A distinctive feature of Dr. Ambedkar's scholarly contribution is his perceptive analysis of economic dimension of social maladies, such as, the caste system and untouchability. While Mahatma Gandhi had defended the caste system on the basis of division of labour, Ambedkar came out with a hard-hitting critique in his book '*Annihilation of Castes*' (1936), pointing out that what was implicit in the caste system was *not* merely division of labour but *also* a division of labours. Dr. Ambedkar's attack on the caste system was not merely aimed at challenging the hegemony of the upper castes but had broader connotation of economic growth and development. He argued that the caste system had reduced the mobility of labour and capital which in turn, impeded economic growth and development in India.

In his memorandum submitted to the British Government titled 'States and Minorities' in 1947, Dr. Ambedkar laid down a strategy for India's economic development. The strategy placed "an obligation on the State to plan the economic life of the people on lines which would lead to highest point of productivity without closing every avenue to private enterprise and also provide for the equitable distribution of wealth".

After Independence, Dr. Ambedkar became the first Law Minister of India. Even while drafting the Indian Constitution (as the Chairman, Drafting Committee) in 1948-49, the economist in Dr. Ambedkar was very much alive. He strongly recommended democracy as the 'governing principle of human relationship' but emphasized that principles of equality, liberty and fraternity which are the cornerstones of democracy should not be interpreted narrowly in terms of the political rights alone. He emphasised the social and economic dimensions of democracy and warned that political democracy cannot succeed when there is no social and economic democracy. He gave an expression to the objective of economic democracy by incorporating the Directive Principles of State Policy in the Indian Constitution.

As the Law Minister, Dr. Ambedkar fought vigorously for the passage of the Hindu Code Bill – most significant reform for women's rights in respect of marriage and inheritance. He resigned in September 1951 when the Bill did not pass in the Parliament.

There is a unified theme running through Ambedkar's multifaceted and diverse contributions. The economic philosophy underlying is best captured in his own phrase: *Bahujan Hitaya Bahujan Sukhay* (i.e., Greatest Good to the largest number of people). Ambedkar philosophy is *couched* in social, religious and moral considerations. The focal point of philosophy is the oppressed and the depressed. The philosophy aims at giving life to those who are disowned, at elevating those who are suppressed, and ennobling those who are downtrodden and granting liberty, equality and justice to all irrespective of their castes. Before his death in 1956, Dr. Ambedkar led nearly three quarter of a million untouchables to Buddhism.