

## B R Ambedkar, W E B DuBois and the Process of Liberation

*B R Ambedkar's American 'experience' helped him hone his commitment to a pragmatic, flexible democratic system. For most authors, Ambedkar was not influenced by the Black American struggle, though his stay in America coincided with an efflorescence of Black protest literature. Instead he used his knowledge of American culture to analyse his own country's social situation. This essay analyses the writings of Ambedkar and W E B DuBois as both sought a way out to liberate their long oppressed peoples.*

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In one of the essays, 'The American Experience of B R Ambedkar' included in her book, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, Eleanor Zelliot writes: "A direct comparison between the Negroes of America and Untouchables of India does not appear in Ambedkar's writings." She may be right, in a way, but Ambedkar does make comparison between slaves and untouchables, cites parallel cases and also shows how Hindus lack social and public conscience as against the white Americans.<sup>1</sup> The reason why Zelliot finds no direct comparison between the two oppressed groups is that Ambedkar found no racial basis for untouchability. From this she deduces that Ambedkar was not influenced by the struggle of Negroes (they prefer to call themselves African Americans or Blacks) in America but used his "knowledge of American culture to analyse his own country's social situation". Thus, according to her, the American experience of Ambedkar "seems to be chiefly in developing his commitment to a pragmatic, flexible democratic system". Zelliot seems to limit Ambedkar's interest in America to the effort made by white American to create an egalitarian democracy.<sup>2</sup> For her Ambedkar's experience of Black Americans counts for nothing.

Apart from the trappings of American democracy to which Ambedkar was exposed, there was another reality, the

Black American reality, that was struggling to assert itself. I believe that the Black American component of his American experience has been glossed over or has not been sufficiently researched. Since Black struggle is integral to American experience, it is difficult to keep this part out of Ambedkar's experience of America.

The period of Ambedkar's stay at Columbia University (1913-16) coincided with the most crucial period in Black American history. It was the period of Harlem Renaissance when Black American writers and thinkers were trying to separate those aspects of their existence that made them different from the whites. In fact, they were struggling to free themselves from the white imagination which had defined their existence for them. Their struggle did not end with the Civil War and the Fourteenth Amendment of the constitution of the US. It continued long after the period of Reconstruction both in the south and the north. Malcolm X, in the first chapter of his autobiography titled 'Nightmare' mentions the warnings and threats given by the Ku Klux Klan raiders to his family that they better leave the town. Malcolm's father was a dedicated organiser for Marcus Aurelius Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association. The incident took place before Malcolm X's birth.<sup>3</sup> The struggle intensified in the 1950s and the 1960s moving from civil rights (non-violent struggle of Martin Luther King Jr) to human rights

(violent struggle represented by Malcolm X). Black power movement bordering on separatism and Black Muslim movement were other manifestations of that struggle. As late as 1992 Arthur Schlesinger Jr wrote that "racism has been a great national tragedy".<sup>4</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that in India a large number of dalit writers, particularly in Maharashtra, compared their struggle with that of Blacks in America. The Dalit Panther Movement was modelled on Black Panther Movement. V S Naipaul writes in *India: A Million Mutinies Now* that Namdeo Dhasal's career was like the career of a number of Black Power people in the US.<sup>5</sup> Sharad Kumar Limbale, one of the prominent dalit writers, has written his PhD dissertation on Negroes and dalits.

Even if it is conceded that the untouchables in India were of the same racial stock as the caste Hindus, although it has not been conclusively established as yet, it does not follow that the comparison between the two cannot be made. James Baldwin, while emphasising the uniqueness of Black experience in America, finds similarities between the Blacks and the oppressed groups in other countries. In a piece on James Baldwin, Stephen Spender writes: "If the Negro problem is resolvable, the only useful way of discussing it is to consider American Negroes in a situation comparable to that of workers and Negroes elsewhere (like dalits in India). To write as though Negroes do not exist anywhere except in America is to induce despair, to suggest that in America, white and black, cannot become integrated to the (rather limited) extent to which they have been, for example, in Brazil. It is in fact playing in the hands of black Muslims whose position is that America – world even – has to choose between having but black or nothing but white people by which it is meant that it would be undemocratic to have nothing but the black majority."<sup>6</sup> The comparison between the oppressed groups is natural despite different historical situations because the process of liberation is almost similar. Although the direct comparison between the Blacks and untouchables is rather limited in Ambedkar's writings, the influence of America, including Black America, goes deeper than direct comparisons can show. I find marked similarities between W E B DuBois and B R Ambedkar in the process of liberation

of their people. It is here that the comparison is valid and ought to be considered.

## Slaves and Untouchables

In an essay, 'Slaves and Untouchables', Ambedkar compares the two inhuman systems pointing out the level of segregation and the degree of psychological damage caused by them. "Slavery was never obligatory. But untouchability is obligatory. The law of slavery permitted emancipation. Once a slave always a slave was not the fate of the slave. In untouchability there is no escape. Once an untouchable always an untouchable. The other difference is that untouchability is an indirect form of slavery. A deprivation of a man's freedom by an open and direct way is a preferable form of enslavement. It makes the slave conscious of his enslavement and to become conscious of slavery is the first and most important step in the battle for freedom. But if a man is deprived of his liberty indirectly he has no consciousness of his enslavement. Untouchability is an indirect form of slavery."<sup>7</sup>

Columbia University, where Ambedkar was working for his degree, was close to Harlem, and it seems unlikely that he had no knowledge of the stirrings going on there. Besides, there were two prominent Black leaders whose approaches to Black problems were diametrically opposed. They were Booker T Washington and W E B DuBois who disagreed not only over the nature of education Blacks should receive but also the direction their struggle should take. Washington wanted his people not to aspire to be like white but be satisfied with things they could do. In other words, he was for the status quo. It was reflected in his famous slogan 'cast your bucket where you are' (*Up from Slavery*). Dhananjay Keer in his biography, *Dr Ambedkar: Life and Mission*<sup>8</sup> and W N Kuber in *BR Ambedkar* mention Booker T Washington and the good work he had done at Tuskegee Institute.<sup>9</sup> AN Rajsekhariah in his book, *BR Ambedkar: The Politics of Emancipation*, mentions, not only Booker T Washington but also W E B DuBois. This is what Rajsekhariah writes about Washington: "One of the most remarkable men America has produced, a man born in slavery but lifted by his own vision and perseverance to a position of leadership and power. The son of a slave woman, Booker T Washington struggled to acquire an education for himself, then dedicated his life to educating others. His is the story of almost unbelievable devotion and selflessness, an inspiration to people all over the world as long as men

recognise the value of courage and human dignity". Rajsekhariah adds: "How could Ambedkar escape the influence of such a silent revolution that was brought about by Booker T Washington, about whom he had learnt so much while in America."<sup>10</sup> Rajsekhariah does not mention DuBois in such glowing terms although he was doing much more revolutionary work than Washington. DuBois wanted his people to educate themselves in the best manner possible – not just for mechanical work which was the object of Tuskegee institute – and work for change so that they could not only compete with the white on equal footing but also help raise their unfortunate brethren. Towards the end of his book Rajsekhariah mentions DuBois to whom Ambedkar had sent a letter exploring the possibility of taking the question of the untouchables to the newly born United Nations Organisation. The letter was sent to the University of Atlanta, Georgia, US where DuBois was working as a professor. The letter was despatched on July 2, 1946.<sup>11</sup> Ambedkar probably had no time to pursue the matter as soon after the British government announced that it would hand over power to Indian leaders by June 1948. I do not think it was a sudden revelation to Ambedkar that DuBois was a prominent Black leader and could help him in his crusade against untouchability. It appears to reason that he must have known DuBois or read his books during his stay in the US. DuBois published his important book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in 1903 and it became an instant success. Its readers were impressed by the fresh approach to the Black problem. Saunders Redding wrote that the book "may be seen as fixing that moment in history when the American Negro began to reject the idea of the world's belonging to white people only, and to think of himself as a potential force in the organisation of society".<sup>12</sup> Ambedkar was a bibliophile and, according to Dhananjaya Keer, he bought about 2,000 old books in New York itself. It is unlikely that Ambedkar wouldn't have seen the book or even bought it. It is said that the steamer in which Ambedkar had sent his pile of books was destroyed by a submarine. Some of the precious books were lost this way. He had also sent some books with his friends returning from America but not all books finally reached him. I am sure some future scholar who will have access to the pile of papers still lying unpublished, will come across the name of DuBois and other Black American writers.

In polite conversation quite often we advance the argument that since law has

taken care of casteism and racism, it is pointless to talk about it. But a single incident in Los Angeles or in a remote village in Rajasthan or Bihar exposes the falsity of this argument. Similarly, it is facile to argue that racism and casteism were invented to deal with a particular historical situation and it was necessary at that particular point of time. Ambedkar argues that a division of labour eventually became a division of labourers and became the basis of graded inequality. A system thus invented doesn't suddenly disappear with a change in historical situation. It acquires association and mythical, even rational, justification. The power of the privileged whether in India or the US rests upon lies which are propagated in such a manner that they get internalised. Even after the lie on which the entire structure of racism and casteism is based is exposed, it continues to exist in the minds of people.

Dalits in India took a long time, as compared to Blacks in America, in reaching the level of awareness of their predicament. And even when they did reach that level, their awareness was still enmeshed in the complex hierarchy of caste within their own group. In Laxman Mane's *Outsider* the protagonist fights against the stranglehold of caste throughout his life but ends up by accepting the same debasing and limiting system against which he had earlier revolted. It is another thing that he did this to please his father. One is tempted to ask whether it is the expression of related intolerance or a kind of assimilation into the larger world of caste. A character in Lorraine Hansberry's play *Les Blancs* has this to say about racism, and it could be applied to casteism as well. "Race-racism is a device. No more, no less. It explains nothing... I am simply saying that a device is a device but it also has consequences; once invented it takes on a life, a reality of its own. So in one century, men invoke the device of religion to cloak their conquests. In another race (or caste). Now in both cases you and I may recognise the fraudulence of the device, but the fact remains that a man who has a sword run through him because he refuses to become a Muslim or Christian – or who is shot in Zatembe or Mississippi (or refuses to follow the caste code in a remote village in India) because he is Black (or dalit) is suffering the bitter reality of the device. And it is pointless to say that it doesn't exist."<sup>13</sup>

The process of liberation of dalits and Black Americans from invisibility to visibility, from a non-human to a human existence, has not been simple and linear. It is characterised by growth and difficulty.

In fact it has been painful and prolonged. It has been painful because at each stage of their struggle they are reminded of their lurid past; it has been prolonged because they have to fight against an invisible wall of segregation, supported by racially or religiously sanctioned entrenched attitudes. The attitudes that racism and casteism have put in them cannot be jettisoned out of the system at will. Besides, the ruling ideology in its innumerable manifestations does not concede the human space to them. The history of Black Americans since 1866 when slavery was legally abolished and of dalits since 1948, when through an Act of Parliament untouchability was abolished, shows how difficult the path for equality has been. The psychological distance in both cases is not allowed to be bridged and ever new ways are devised to maintain the status quo. The fight is now against an unknown terror as against a known terror.

It takes a long time before the oppressed group throws up a thinker who gives direction to their struggle. In America such a thinker emerged in the person of W E B DuBois; in India, in the person of B R Ambedkar. The task of such a thinker is momentous since he derives his strength from his people. He has to analyse the entire gamut of their experience, the forces that were responsible for their predicament, the strategies to deal with those forces and then to project an ideal order in which the one-time victims can realise their full potential as human beings.

The first task of a thinker is to give his people 'group consciousness' that is to tell them that it is not an individual problem but a group problem. Since they have had a common history, have shared a common memory and have suffered a common disaster, they must fight it collectively. The battle for liberation begins when group consciousness gets crystallised. DuBois wrote in his autobiography, *Dusk of Dawn*, that his life derives its significance from the community and not otherwise. Ambedkar wrote letters for *Mook Nayak* in which he emphasised the need for unity among all the innumerable untouchable castes. He once said that he would survive as long as it was necessary for the welfare of the depressed classes. "If I fail to do away with the thralldom and inhuman injustice under which the class, into which I was born, has been groaning, I will put an end to my life with a bullet."<sup>14</sup> He was impatient to get his people dignity and human status. He kept on goading his people to come out of the ghetto of their existence and unitedly fight against the monster of caste discrimination and those

who denied them a decent existence. In order that they did not relapse into the same pattern of passive acceptance of their existence, he organised satyagraha, first against the denial of access to Chawadar Tank, then against entry to the Kalaram temple and finally the burning of *Manusmriti* which was for him a symbol of inequality.

### Examining the Past

A precondition for forging group consciousness was to systematically examine the past. Both DuBois and Ambedkar were intellectually equipped to do so. DuBois had done his research on the Suppression of the European Slave Trade; Ambedkar began his intellectual journey by writing a paper on *Castes in India: Their Mechanism and Development* for the anthropological seminar at the Columbia University. DuBois took this inquiry further in *The Souls of Black Folk*; Ambedkar examined the concept of caste in his well-researched paper, 'Annihilation of Caste', which he wrote as a presidential address for the Jat Pat Todak Mandal, Lahore.

In *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* DuBois tries to capture the mechanism of racism through an elaborate imagery.

It is difficult to let others see the full psychological meaning of caste segregation. It is as though one, looking out from a dark cave in a side of an impending mountain, sees the world passing and speaks to it courteously and persuasively, showing them how these entombed souls are hindered in their natural movement, expression and development; and how their loosening from prison would be a matter not simply of courtesy, sympathy and help to them, but aid to all the world. One talks on evenly and logically in this way, but notices that the passing throng does not even turn its head, or if it does, glances curiously and walks on. It gradually penetrates the minds of the prisoners that the people passing do not hear, that some thick sheet invisible but horribly tangible plate glass is between them and the world. They get excited; they talk louder; they gesticulate. Some of the passing worlds stop in curiosity; these gesticulations seem so pointless; they laugh and pass on. They still either do not hear at all, or hear but dimly and even what they hear, they do not understand. Then the people within may become hysterical. They may scream and hurl themselves against the barriers, hardly realising on their bewilderment that they are screaming in a vacuum unheard and that their antics may actually seem funny to those outside looking in. They may even, here and there, break through in blood and disfigurement, and find themselves faced by a horrified, implacable and

quite overwhelming mob of people frightened for their own very existence."<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, in the second issue of his paper *Mook Nayak*, Ambedkar conveys this reality of segregation through the imagery of a tower. "Hindu society was just like a tower which had several storeys without a ladder or an entrance. One was to die in the storey in which one was born."<sup>16</sup>

DuBois moves on to show the intellectual and psychological interaction with the situation of the Blacks who had their lives shaped and manipulated by the way the white world treated them. And the interpretation of their situation kept changing: it was social, biological or cultural. DuBois proved through his character and achievements that such an interpretation was a contrivance. He could beat them in every department of life in which he participated. Similarly, Ambedkar questioned and rejected the religious interpretation of the depressed classes based on the theory of birth and karma. He called such an interpretation a ruse to keep his people in thralldom. In fact, he went to the extent of saying that "if Hindu religion is to be their religion, it must become a religion of social equality."<sup>17</sup> Not many savarnas could match his scholarship. He could stand up to any savarna leader and interact with them on the level of equality. Until Gandhiji met Ambedkar he thought that he was a savarna fighting for the cause of the depressed classes. The speech he made at the Round Table Conference for self-governance and communal award was praised by all, including the Britishers.

Having exposed the falsity of interpretation, DuBois moves on to deal with the real problem which began with Reconstruction: how to deal with the damaged psyche, the 'double consciousness, the twoness of their existence'. There were "two un-reconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanise America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro world has a message to the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face."<sup>18</sup>

The problem of reconciling the two selves could not be solved so easily. A large majority of Blacks wallowed in misery and ignorance and time and again, despite the fact that they were now free, relapsed into the old pattern of submissiveness of the 'Yes Sir, Massa' variety. DuBois knew that the only way they could understand their situation and the possibilities of existence was through education. And the kind of education he had in mind was different from the kind of education Booker T Washington was propagating, that is technical skill. DuBois was very clear in his mind that technical skills produced only artisans and not men. "Men we shall have if we make manhood the object of the work of the schools – intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world that was and is, and of the relation of men to it – this is the curriculum of that higher education that must underlie true life."<sup>19</sup> He did not leave education entirely to school; he wanted family and social group to contribute to their growth. For this he had a specific plan in mind which he outlined in his famous essay, 'The Talented Tenth'. The plan was that 10 per cent of bright young Blacks would be trained in the best manner possible so that they in their turn bring the others up and provide leadership. "Men of America", DuBois said, "the problem is plain before you. Here is a race transplanted through the criminal foolishness of your fathers. Whether you like it or not, the millions are here, and here they will remain. It is if you do not lift them up, they will pull you down. Education and work are the levers to lift a people. Work will not do it unless inspired by the right ideals and guided by intelligence. Education must not simply teach work; it must teach life. The Talented Tenth of the Negro race must be made leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among other people. No other can do this work and the Negro colleges must train men in it. The Negro race, like all other races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men."<sup>20</sup>

The assumption was that the elite of their race would be alive to their social and ethical obligations and would provide an overall leadership, directing their thought and movements. DuBois had obviously placed responsibilities in them which they were not equipped to bear. The danger in such a plan was that they might end up by imitating the standards of the other race placing their interest above the interest of their community. DuBois was later charged with encouraging elitism and was forced to examine his thesis, which he did in a

memorial lecture at the Grand Boulds Conclave in 1948. Among other things he said: "I assumed that with knowledge sacrifice would automatically follow. In my youth and idealism, I did not realise that selfishness is even more natural than sacrifice. I made this assumption of its wide availability because of the spirit of sacrifice learned in my mission school training."<sup>21</sup>

In his modified lecture he moved from individuals motivated by personal freedom to group leadership. Such a leadership, he believed, would take care of economic and cultural aspects of their race. Lest people misunderstand him, he made it explicit that he was not advocating pride in biological race but pride in a culture group, integrated and expanded by developed ideals. In such a leadership, it would not remain a simple thing of colour but would include a deeper and broader matter of social conditions, including economic conditions. "Here comes a new idea for a Talented Tenth: the concept of a group leadership, not simply educated and self-sacrificing, but with clear vision of present world conditions and dangers, and conducting American Negroes to alliance with culture groups in Europe, America, Asia and Africa, and looking towards a new world culture."<sup>22</sup>

Like DuBois, Ambedkar identified the problem of his people in his longish essay, 'Annihilation of Caste', which was initially written as a presidential address but later published by Ambedkar on his own. The booklet was sold out immediately and, what was more, was translated into a number of Indian languages. According to him "caste is a notion, it is a state of the mind. The destruction of caste does not therefore mean the destruction of a physical barrier. It means a notional change. Caste may be bad, caste may lead to conduct so gross as to be called man's inhumanity to man. All the same, it must be recognised that the Hindus observe caste because they are deeply religious." Thus he attacked the religious basis of caste. Fighting against it involved fighting against the authority of the Shastras. This religious sanction was responsible for creating not only separate enclosures in society, but also separate enclosures in the mind. Despite the fact that the Jat Pat Todak Mandal was working against the annihilation of caste, it did not go along with Ambedkar in denouncing religion, at least the parts that sanction untouchability. Pushed to the wall, they gave excuses and finally cancelled the meeting.

Gandhiji agreed with Ambedkar that caste was evil and must go but he made a subtle distinction between caste and varna and said that the latter was the basis of Hindu society and had nothing to do with caste. Even Sant Ramji of Jat Pat Todak Mandal questioned this distinction. In a letter to Gandhi he wrote: I wish to bring to your notice that your philosophical difference between caste and varna is too subtle to be grasped by people in general, because for all practical purposes in the Hindu society caste and varna are one and the same thing, for the function of both of them is one and the same, i.e., to restrict intercaste marriages and interdining."<sup>24</sup> Ambedkar was more forthright. He accused Gandhi of 'terminological inexactitude'. He countered this distinction at a more rational level. Questioning Gandhi's emphasis of following ancestral calling, he wrote: "When can a calling be deemed to have become an ancestral calling so as to make it binding on a man. Must one follow his ancestral calling even when it does not suit his capacities, even when it has ceased to be profitable? Must one live by his ancestral calling even if he finds it to be immoral? To me the ideal of following one's ancestral calling is not only an impossible and impractical ideal, but it is also morally an indefensible one."<sup>25</sup> Nor can the distinction between varna and caste on the basis of worth and birth be defended. Besides, who is going to decide and in what manner the existence of worth in a person. Thus, for all practical purposes, worth is associated with birth and that is what has happened all along.

That is why he did not go along with Gandhi, despite the latter's messianic zeal, in the abolition of untouchability. The basis of caste is a lie and must be exposed for what it is. It is to be fought not only in the minds of the people, but also in the realm of the abstract which is so dear to Hindus. Like Jyotiba Phule, he saw the danger of following the line of converting a social problem into a moral problem. It is a social problem supported by religion and must be accepted without prevarication. "The power of the privileged class", he wrote in the same essay, "rests upon lies, which are sedulously propagated among the masses. No resistance to power is possible while the sanctioning lies, which justify the power, are accepted as valid. While the lie which is the chief line of defence remains unbroken there can be no revolt. Before any injustice, any abuse of oppression can be resisted, the lie upon which it is founded must be unmasked, must be clearly

recognised for what it is. This can happen with education.”<sup>26</sup>

Ambedkar, like DuBois, believed that part of their problems emanated from ignorance. They must be brought to a level where they become critically aware of their environment. The consciousness-raising strategy could be effectively achieved through education. As early as 1924 he helped establish Bahishkrit Hitkari Sabha which, among other things, aimed at promoting education among the depressed classes. Apart from starting Industrial and agricultural schools, it also opened libraries, social centres and study circles and through them promoted the spread of culture. He firmly believed in a kind of education that helps people to blow up the caste system. “Giving education to those who want to blow up the caste system will improve the prospect of democracy in India and put democracy in safer hands.”<sup>27</sup> Later Ambedkar helped establish the People’s Education Society and schools and colleges under its aegis. Once people began to see things for themselves, formed ideas of their own, they would willingly cooperate in creating a common front, which would lead to agitation. In the field of education Ambedkar was following the broad direction that DuBois had given in his famous essay on the ‘Talented Tenth’. His hope that the educated men of his community would take up the leadership of the people was belied. Most of them forgot all about their obligation and moved to become ‘dalit brahmins.’ They lacked commitment and fell into the trap of middle class respectability. Like DuBois, who edited *The Crisis*, Ambedkar also brought out a fortnightly paper called *Mook Nayak*, although he was not its official editor. It underwent a number of mutations: it became *Bahishkrit Bharat*, *Samta*, *Janata* and finally *Prabuddha Bharat*. He also prepared a blueprint for the formation of a political party, the Republican Party of India, which was formed after his death in 1956.

Ambedkar was convinced that without social emancipation of the depressed classes, political emancipation had no meaning. He went to the extent of saying that no economic or political reform would be successful unless the monster of caste was destroyed. For this it was imperative that the depressed classes were treated not as a religious minority, but as a political minority. Here the approaches of DuBois and Ambedkar towards the liberation of their people diverge. Whereas DuBois emphasised cultural and racial aspects, not completely ignoring the political aspect,

Ambedkar believed that liberation could be achieved through political means. His demand for a separate electorate for his people which was conceded by the British and his disagreement with Gandhi over it shows the direction in which he wanted his struggle to move. One doesn’t know what direction dalit politics would have taken if the communal award had been implemented, but the course of dalit situation would have certainly been different. Under moral pressure from the people throughout the country following Gandhi’s fast unto death, he was forced to sign the Poona Pact instead of the Communal Award announced by the British government. Ambedkar had already earned the displeasure of the people and the charge was that he was working against the interests of the country. Even when he sought support of the British for getting political power for his people, he knew that they were helping him out of political compulsions. I believe Ambedkar was more sinned against than sinning. It is true that the cause of his people was uppermost in his mind but time and again he had given evidence of his loyalty to the country. The letter that Ambedkar wrote to Alexander, a member of the Cabinet Commission, and somewhat sympathetic to the cause Ambedkar represented, after the British had decided not to give representation to the depressed classes in the interim government, shows Ambedkar’s bitterness and the wily character of the British. This is what he wrote: “The despotism of the Hindu continued as ever before. Far from being curbed by the British High Command, it was pampered. From a social point of view, the British accepted the arrangement as they found them and preserved them faithfully in the manner of the tailor who, when given an old coat as pattern, produced with pride an exact replica, rents and patches and all. The result is that though 200 years have elapsed since the establishment of the British rule the Indian wrongs remained unaddressed and their progress hampered at every stage.”<sup>28</sup>

### Campaign to Secure Rights

Like DuBois, Ambedkar was impatient to get his people not only civil rights, but also human rights. Despite the fact that Nehru made efforts to secularise Indian politics, Ambedkar was sceptical of the role of caste Hindus. He saw some hope to translate his ideals into practice when he was called upon to be the chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee. He firmly believed that through the statutes

and law the status of his people as equal citizens would be upheld which would pave the way for their final assimilation into the Hindu society. Then the slogans of equality, liberty and fraternity would become facts of life. His speech at the Constituent Assembly spelt that out.

These principles of liberty, equality and fraternity are not to be treated as separate items in a trinity. They form a union of trinity in the sense that to divorce one from the other is to defeat the very purpose of democracy... We must begin by acknowledging the fact that there is a complete absence of two things in Indian society. One of them is equality. On the social plane, we have in India a society based on the principle of graded inequality which means elevation for some and degradation for others. On the economic plane, we have a society in which there are some who have immense wealth as against many who live in abject poverty. On January 26, 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. In politics we will be recognising the principle of one man one vote and one vote one value. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man one value. How long shall we continue to live this life of contradictions? How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life? If we continue to deny it for long, we will do so only by putting our political democracy at peril. We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which this assembly so laboriously built up.<sup>29</sup>

It is apparent that Ambedkar was redefining the concepts in the light of his reading in Buddhist philosophy and his experience as a leader of the depressed classes. He not only pointed out the contradictions in social and political life, but also identified the two enemies that had come in the way of their liberation. The two enemies were: brahminism and capitalism. By brahminism he meant not brahmins as a community, but all those who negated the spirit of trinity. And such people could be found in all sections of society including the communists who were at times guided by the spirit of brahminism. Ambedkar knew that economic deprivation was as real as social degradation. And he made a beginning in this regard when he collaborated with the communist in the strike against the Industrial Disputes Act. But such collaboration was short lived.

True, he realised the limitations of liberal democracy but kept on working within

its framework for whatever benefits he could get for his people. Besides, those who were at the helm of affairs in the ruling party were not radical enough to bring about revolutionary change in their situation. He became painfully aware of this when he piloted the Hindu Code Bill through which he wanted to correct some of the ills of Hindu society. Initially he had the support of Nehru but when the parliamentary party opposed it, he was forced to modify it and finally withdraw it at the behest of Nehru himself. The orthodox elements were too powerful for him to resist. On this issue he resigned from the cabinet.


Both DuBois and Ambedkar were working within the Enlightenment worldview – Ambedkar modifying it a bit but still reposing faith in liberal democracy – which defined man and society in human terms. Both worked indefatigably for change in the social, political and economic conditions of their people without spelling out institutional change. DuBois unwittingly became part of the elitist culture which aimed at correcting things through excellence for which criteria came from the others. Cornel West in his reevaluation of DuBois points out two defects in his endeavour. “First he believed that the highbrow culture was inherently humanising and that exposure to and immersion in great works produce good people. The other was that the educated elite he had put his faith in could transcend their individual and class interests and move easily on behalf of the common good than the educated classes.”<sup>30</sup>

Ambedkar is being subjected to a similar reevaluation. Anand Teltumbde is one such critic. But he is guarded in his reevaluation although he announces those who have used different icons of Ambedkar to further their own ends. According to Teltumbde “although there cannot be any doubt that he stood against capitalism, he could not articulate a sound theoretical basis for doing so”. At another place he writes: “Babasaheb Ambedkar, in his own way, has been in search of a suitable ideological carrier for the dalit movement”.<sup>31</sup> The consequence has been that in the Post-Ambedkar dalit movement the revolutionary character of Ambedkar has been overshadowed by “prejudiced social identities in worn-out casteist phraseology”.<sup>32</sup>

But Ambedkar could not be charged with elitism as he always kept contact with his people who came to him in large numbers for advice and guidance. According to Keer “he was the voice of their woes,

their view and their vows”.<sup>33</sup> Ambedkar’s tragedy was that he trusted for a while the existing political system to go along with his line of thought. Despite the fact that he never gave up his fight against economic exploitation, he could not free himself from the stranglehold that Hindu social system had created for his class. He looked for and found some solace in religion. At best he shuttled between religious and economic reorganisation of society which could not be combined as one finds in his comparison between Buddha and Karl Marx. In one of his speeches in 1953 Ambedkar said that the present generation and the future generation would have to choose between the gospel of Buddha and the gospel of Marx. But if one chose the former, which some of them did, one could not change the material conditions of people except through moral force.

The strategies adopted by both DuBois and Ambedkar did not emanate from an ideological framework that encompassed all aspects of human activity. That was one reason why they were disillusioned towards the end of their life. At the ripe age of 91 DuBois left America for Africa. He wrote in a letter: “I cannot take any more of the country’s treatment. We leave for Ghana October 5 and I set no date for return...Chin up and fight on but realise that American Negroes can’t win.”<sup>34</sup> He died soon after.

Ambedkar was similarly disillusioned with the system after he was made to withdraw the Hindu Code Bill. After resigning as minister of law he wanted to make a statement but he was not allowed to do so by the deputy speaker on the ground that he had not submitted a copy of his statement earlier. When Kunzru and Kamath, two members of the House, pointed out that it amounted to pre-censorship, the deputy speaker said since he was the custodian of the rights and privileges of parliament, it was necessary for him to see that the statement contained nothing irrelevant and libelous. On this Ambedkar left the House and immediately afterwards gave his statement to the newspapers. His faith in parliamentary democracy was shaken. His end came soon after. 

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## Notes

- 1 See Volume 5 of *Ambedkar Writing and Speeches* compiled by Vasant Moon, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1989.
- 2 Initially written in 1977, revised in 1979 and

later included in her book *From Untouchable to Dalit*, Manohar 1988, pp 79-85.

- 3 *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Penguin 1976, pp 79-102.
- 4 Arthur Schlesinger Jr, *The Disuniting of America*, Norton Edition, USA, 1992, p 19.
- 5 V S Naipaul: *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, Minerva, India, 1990, p 115.
- 6 Fred L Standly and Nancy V Burt (ed), *Critical Essay on James Baldwin*, C K Hall and Co, Boston, 1988, p 256.
- 7 Ambedkar Speeches and Writings, Vol 5, p 15.
- 8 Dhananjaya Keer, *Dr Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1994, p 31.
- 9 WN Kuber, *BR Ambedkar: Builders of Modern India Series*, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, December 1990, p 22.
- 10 A K Rajsekhariah, *BR Ambedkar: The Politics of Emancipation*, Sindhu Publication, Bombay, 1971, p 11.
- 11 Ibid, p 216 Rajsekhariah found this letter in the files containing his correspondence with the Cabinet Mission and with other leaders at Siddharth College Library, Bombay.
- 12 W E B DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, A C McClurg and Co, Chicago, 1931, p 1X.
- 13 Lorraine Hansberry, *The Last Collected Plays of Lorraine Hansberry*, Random House, New York, 1972, p 122.
- 14 Keer, p 525.
- 15 W E B DuBois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*, Shocken Books, New York, 1968, pp 131-32.
- 16 Quoted by Keer, p 41.
- 17 Quoted by Keer, p 229.
- 18 *The Souls of Black Folk*, pp 3-4.
- 19 Henry Gates Jr and Cornel West (ed), *The Future of the Race*, Alfred A Knopf N Y, 1996, p 132.
- 20 Ibid, pp 156-57.
- 21 Ibid, p 161.
- 22 Ibid, p 168.
- 23 *Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol 1, p 68.
- 24 Ibid, p 84.
- 25 Ibid, p 90.
- 26 *Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol 5, p 399.
- 27 Quoted by Keer, p 491.
- 28 *Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol 10, pp 497-98.
- 29 Quoted by V R Krishna Aiyer, *Ambedkar and the Dalit Future*, B R Publishing Corporation, New Delhi, 1990, pp 32-33.
- 30 *The Future of the Race*, p 68.
- 31 Anand Teltumbde, *Ambedkar in and for the Post-Ambedkar Dalit Movement*, Sugawa Prakashan, Pune, 1997, p 55.
- 32 Ibid, p 23.
- 33 Keer, pp 302-03.
- 34 *The Future of the Race*, p 118.

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