A Leader for Every Generation

Ananya Vajpeyi
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Bharat Ratna Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was an Indian jurist, economist, politician and social reformer who inspired the Modern Buddhist Movement and campaigned against social discrimination of Dalits, women and labour. The principal architect of the Constitution of India, was an intellectual whose scholarly aptitude saw him accomplishing graduate degrees from Columbia University and the London School of Economics. Apart from a double MA and PhD and a degree in law, he also penned several learned books. Ananya Vajpayee writes a piece on his life

Bharat Ratna Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar is one of those figures in the history of modern India about whom many people know a little bit, and very few understand anything much. Most educated Indians are aware that he played a prominent role in the making of India’s liberal Constitution of 1950, as a member of the Constituent Assembly and the Chairman of the Drafting Committee.

Fewer Indians might also know that Ambedkar founded a sect of protestant Buddhism, Navayana, the New Way or the New Vehicle.

The phrases “founding father” in the American sense, and “maker of modern India” have become really substantively deepening—our casual perception of his historic role. Those who follow him, as Dalits, as Neo-Buddhists, as political activists—the faithful, if you will, whatever the reason for their adherence to his persona and his ideas—refer to Dr. Ambedkar as “Babasaheb”, an address used with as much respect and affection as “Mahatma” and “Bapu” for Gandhi.

Many who do know of him believe in him passionately, and speak of him with the kind of fervour normally reserved for religious figures—prophets, saints, those who uttered revelations and those who brought deliverance. Babasaheb Ambedkar is one of the most luminous figures in modern Indian history.

Ambedkar’s life was punctuated by a series of setbacks and disappointments, each of which propelled him towards loftier goals, more difficult challenges, and stronger assertions of the will to overcome inimical circumstances and a hostile world. He was born in April 14, 1891. He was gifted with extraordinary intellectual powers, an ambitious father, encouraging teachers, and a royal benefactor, all of which together ensured that he went to college in Bombay and then won a scholarship to Columbia University, a first for any one of his background.

But despite those talents, advantages and lucky breaks, and despite his innate drive, Ambedkar’s childhood and early youth were marred by visceral experiences of the prejudice, bigotry and violence of an untouchable existence. He couldn’t sit next to his upper caste classmates; he was denied food and water for long days at a time. He couldn’t even get a lamp at night to read by; once more he got no water to drink nor tea, or a house; no one wanted to share office space with him; once more he got no water to drink nor tea, nor lunch with colleagues nor dinner from his landlord (who only admitted him to his boarding house under a false identity as a Parsi gentleman). He couldn’t even get a lamp at night to be able to read in his room after the workday was done. For all his qualifications as the most educated individual in the whole principality of Baroda, he was right back where he had started—an Untouchable.

The story is that one day he was discovered and thrown out of his hotel, and slept the night in a municipal park, under a tree, burning with humiliation very much like the young Gandhi 30 years earlier who was off-loaded from a train at Petemartaburg station in Natal, South Africa, on a winter’s night in June 1893 for being a black man—even if a qualified lawyer and the owner of a first-class ticket. Gandhi had faced the white colonial master’s racism, Ambedkar was insulted by his fellow Indians, fellow-Hindus. Neither man

Dr. Ambedkar raced through on MA and a PhD in anthropology and political economy, writing Masters and Doctoral theses that would in very short order be published as his first scholarly article and book, respectively. His advisor was Edwin Seligman, but as luck would have it, who should be spending those years on Columbia campus but John Dewey, the great American educationist, pragmatist and liberal philosopher. Dewey remained an important influence on Ambedkar to the very end of his life (they both died two years apart in the mid-1950s). Ambedkar’s amazing progress sent him next to the London School of Economics (LSE), where he began a second MA in the fall of 1916.

Things only got worse, though, when he arrived in Gujarat to serve as the Maharaja’s military secretary. No one would rent him a room or a house; no one wanted to share office space with him; once more he got no water to drink nor tea, nor lunch with colleagues nor dinner from his landlord (who only admitted him to his boarding house under a false identity as a Parsi gentleman). He couldn’t even get a lamp at night to be able to read in his room after the workday was done. For all his qualifications as the most educated individual in the whole principality of Baroda, he was right back where he had started—an Untouchable.

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never forget the lesson he learned on that fateful night, and both these experiences proved to be life-changing in each case. Uprooted and frustrated, Ambedkar quit his job and went back to Bombay to regain his family. Fortunately, he was appointed as a professor of political economy at Sydenham College and soon saved enough money to go back to London to resume his studies. Between 1920 and 1923, he earned a second MA and a second PhD at the LSE, as well as a law degree from Gray’s Inn in London. He even spent a few months at the University of Bonn, in Germany, working towards a PhD in Indology—the very same subject he had been disallowed from studying as an undergraduate. The over-qualified 32-year-old was called to the Bar, and went back to Bombay to rejoin his family.

Unfortunately, he was appointed professor at the Government Law College and publishing his various scholarly dissertations, was over-qualified. Ambedkar really did run out of time and money, and could not look out and without stairs to carry one up or down from the level at which one happened to be. He could have added that there were no doors, either, for entry or exit. By mid-1923, Ambedkar really did run out of time and money, and came back to Bombay. In the remainder of the 1920s, he would have described the Hindu society as a tower divided into floors of caste, with windows to look out and without stairs to carry one up or down from the level at which one happened to be. He could have added that there were no doors, either, for entry or exit. By mid-1923, Ambedkar really did run out of time and money, and came back to Bombay. In the remainder of the 1920s, he published various scholarly dissertations, was appointed professor at the Government Law College where he would eventually become a named chair, and later Principal, was nominated to the Bombay Legislative Council, and appointed as the representative of the Untouchables at the three historic Roundtable Conferences held between 1930 and 1932 to enable the British, the Congress and other third parties, like himself, to sit down and discuss increasingly volatile Indian demands for self-determination.

Matters came to a head when Ramsay MacDonald proposed a “communal award”, creating separate electorates for Muslims on the one hand and Untouchables on the other. Ambedkar was in favour; Gandhi was opposed. Ambedkar saw Untouchables as a type of minority, like Muslims; Gandhi felt that British machinations had already divided Indians into Hindus and Muslims, and now threatened to further break Hindus up into upper castes and so-called “depressed classes” or lower castes and Untouchables. Neither man yielded.

Gandhi raised the stakes by going on a fast unto death if his views were not respected. He pledged to educate, harass and shame caste Hindus until they ceased and desisted from practicing Untouchability. He proclaimed himself the spokesman of Untouchables. Public opinion and political pressure were unequivocally in Gandhi’s favour; Ambedkar had to back down and enter into the “Poona Pact”, in September 1932, to keep Untouchables together with other Hindus within joint electorates. This agreement broke Gandhi’s fast, but it also broke Ambedkar’s faith in Gandhi, in the Congress, and in caste Hindus.

In October 1935, at Yela, outside the city of Nashik in northern Maharashtra, Ambedkar declared at a public meeting that he might have been born a Hindu, but he would not die one. He did not himself fully know yet what exactly this statement implied or entailed, what it was that he could or would do, concretely, to redeem his vow, but he put it out there, and he never looked back.

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