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# Identity, Assertion and Legacy of Socio-Political Movements of Ambedkar

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17805709>

**ABSTRACT:**

This article examines the identity, assertion, and legacy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s socio-political movements. It highlights the perceived failure of post-Ambedkar Dalit movements to meet the community’s expectations and address their enduring issues of caste oppression and discrimination, despite constitutional safeguards. The text positions Ambedkar as an iconoclast and scholar, detailing his relentless struggle for the identity, rights, and political representation of the Untouchables (Dalits), tracing this from pre-Ambedkar activism to his pivotal role in the Communal Award and the drafting of the Constitution. Key moments like the Mahad Satyagraha and the burning of Manusmriti are discussed as acts of self-assertion. The enduring legacy of Ambedkar’s emphasis on education and the symbolic power of his statues as icons of liberation are explored.

**KEYWORDS:**

Ambedkar, Dalit Movements, Identity Assertion, Caste Oppression,  
Legacy.



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**Introduction: The State of Post-Ambedkar Movements**

Post Ambedkar's Dalit movements have not tried to the expectations of Dalits and failed to address the grievances, issues and problems of the most oppressed bottom of Indian society. Not only Dalit organizations and even the political outfits of different ideological backgrounds, leftist and rightist wings, are on their toes to appropriate Ambedkar for their political agenda and selfish interests and ulterior motives. In view of this, the entire Dalit community is in a fix as to whom they have to rely on for their emancipation from the caste oppressions and atrocities.

Indifferent attitude of Dalit organizations and their activists and the callous attitude of the political parties, rulers and the opposition have rendered these oppressed bottom helpless and hopeless and further, they have been subjected to the caste based discriminations leading to the denial of basic human rights and basic resources necessary for their existence and sustainable life conditions. It is pathetic despite the constitutional guarantees and safeguards the Dalits are experiencing the discriminatory practices, caste prejudices and caste based atrocities due to their poverty, economic backwardness, socio-religious handicaps, non political mobilization, co-educational backwardness, unemployment, illiteracy, lack of basic resources etc culminating into their despair.

Post Ambedkar, Dalit movements all over the country have not taken Dr. Ambedkar's ideologies and philosophy of Dalit emancipation and the initiatives to make them self reliant and self sufficient. In view of this, let us introspect where we have failed to continue his struggles, social, political and religious, to ensure the betterment of the Dalits in the contemporary India.

**Dr. Ambedkar: The Iconoclast and Scholar**

Dr. Ambedkar is an iconoclast who had waged war in favour of suffering masses against those who had propagated the discriminatory system entrenched in the caste system. His relentless fight against caste based discrimination and oppressions had earned him a unique position as a crusader of human rights. Dalit to which Dr. Ambedkar belongs to had undergone all sorts of insults, deprivations, discriminations at every stage of his life. His right from childhood made him to continue the social struggle against the caste based disparities, inequalities and deprivations.

Dr. Ambedkar as an academic did not spare the opportunities and he had systematically utilised the rare opportunities to study the caste system in depth and evolve a social movement to question the graded

inequalities and deprivations of rights, privileges, resources to the most oppressed bottom, Dalits, in the contemporary India. Indeed, the effort by Dr. Ambedkar to gain identity for the depressed classes was a Herculean task as it involved serious attempt on his part to re-establish the and reclaim the lost identity to the Untouchables. It was a serious crusade against the Brahminical superiority, mostly they have gained it from the Scriptures, the Shastras and categorically initiated a movement of self assertion for identity for the Untouchables. In this task of reassertion of the identity for Untouchables was an attempt by him who had earned him as a crusader of caste inequalities.

Dr. Ambedkar made outstanding contribution as an economist, sociologist, anthropologist, educationalist, journalist, as an authority on comparative religion, as a policy maker and adviser, administrator, and also parliamentarian; besides being a jurist who became the Principal Architect of the Indian Constitution. He wrote extensively on varied topics. He was a prolific writer of international reputation. His engagement in active politics and the drafting of the Constitution has not deterred him from writing the great works which needs to be read and re read, which are relevant even today. His outstanding contributions to Indian sociology, Castes in India – Their genesis, mechanism and Development and Annihilation of Caste are important and provocative. These two works apart from these books on Anthropology have highlighted the problems of the Indian caste system. It also identified the main issues of the caste based discriminations and handicaps arising out of the perpetuated caste system in India. Ambedkar's writings are an eye opener to the most oppressed bottom and helped them to understand, develop a sense of deprivations and slavery; not only that even it has helped them to assert their rights to reclaim their identity.

Ambedkar defined caste as an endogamous unit, an enclosed class further he described the caste system as an 'according scale of reverence and descending scale of contempt' (Das, Bhagwan, 2010). Underprivileged constitute a class of people 'outside' of the varnas are ('Avarna' castes, like Ati-Shudras, subhumans, the Untouchables, Unseeables, Unapproachables, whose presence, whose touch, whose very shadow is considered to be polluting by privileged-caste Hindus (Roy, Arundati, 2014).

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**The Historical Context: Pre-Ambedkar Struggle**

History of Untouchables' own struggle to overthrow their slavery begins from the life of Gopalbuwa Walangkar, began in 1886. While serving the British army he received education in normal school where he read Hindu religious books. He learnt that the Hindu religious books supported the caste system and the Untouchability as God ordained (Ambedkar, B.R. Mook Nayak, 1920). Gopalbuwa Kalangkar launched anti-Untouchability movement and it was first movement to be launched by the Untouchables themselves. He asserted that the Untouchables were non-Aryans whom the Aryas (Caste Hindus) had conquered and enslaved by imposing Untouchability on them. He therefore, founded an organization called a "Society to remove the faults among the Non-Aryans," at Dapoli, his birth place. He wrote articles in Dinbandhu against caste system and the practice of Untouchability and ask the Untouchables to rise and fight for their rights. He wrote a book called Destroyers of Polluting, got it published in 1886.

Shri Shivaram Janba Kamble, an Untouchable social activist, founded the first news paper in 1908 under the title "Somavanshiya Mitra," which was a first news paper of the Untouchables (Ambedkar, B.R. Mook Nayak (1920) P. xx). Further, he founded "The Somavanshiya Hita Chintaka Mitra Samaj" in 1904. He started library, abolition of Devadasi system, and opposed the practice of Untouchability. He wrote articles in news papers like Dhyannprakash, Deccan Herald, Dinbandhu, the Times of India, Dalit bandhu etc and played a great role in the awakening of the Dalits in pre-Ambedkar era (Pantawane, Gangadhar, Journalist, Dr. Ambedkar (Marathi) pp. 27-38). In Vidarbha Dalit leaders like Kisan B. Pasjhuji Barasode and Ganesh Atarkaji Gavai created much unrest among the Untouchables against their slavery and the attitude of Caste Hindus towards Untouchables through writings (Ambedkar, B.R., MU 1920 xxiii).

The seeds of this notion were sown in the pre Ambedkar Dalit movement to claim separate identity from the Hindu society. When the Indian National Congress demanded for the inclusion of Indians in administration and governing bodies, Dalit leaders also demanded their share proportional to their population. The seeds of separate political identity had sown by the Dalit leaders in pre-Ambedkar era.

**Early Political Mobilization and the Clash with Congress**

Non Brahmin Party was formed in Maharashtra in 1917. Montague, the Secretary of Indian Affairs came to India on visit to study the issue

of representation to Indians. Both Montague and Chelmsford, the Governor-General visited important places to seek opinion across the country. In Madras Panchama Kalvi Abhivardhi- Abhivason Sangha – Untouchables Association opposed transfer of power to the Brahmins. They appealed the Government to save them from the tyranny of the Brahmins. Madras Adi-Dravida Jana Sangha representing 6 lakh abseignees made a vigorous protest against the caste Hindus who hated them as lepers and denied them any chance of betterment in their life. Bengal too had such opposition. In Bombay, it was Sir Chandavarkar who met Montague on behalf of the Depressed Classes Mission which was the organization of the Depressed Classes social workers (Keer, Dhananjaya, Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission, p. 33).

The Indian National Congress Party spearheading for political representation to Indians did not utter a word in favour of Untouchables. When Untouchables opposed the INC stance, the INC organized a meeting of Depressed Classes at Bombay under the Chairmanship of Sir Narayan Chandavarkar on 11th November 1917. The main organizers of this meeting were Shri Vittal Ramji Shinde, Depressed Classes Mission and Sir Chandavarkar was its Chairman. The meeting passed seven resolutions in which they sought grant of political concessions to Untouchables on a par with the Caste Hindus by their nomination to the various legislative bodies to ensure to them their civil and political rights, the Government should make primary education both free and compulsory, to provide basic and special facilities by way of scholarship to the students of Depressed Classes. First meeting was held under the nose of INC and their would political concessions to be granted to them by the upper caste dominated political forces. But it was opposed by the Dalits themselves. The INC did not succeed.

At a time the INC made a suggestion through Vittal Ramji Shinde of Depressed Classes Mission the representatives of the Depressed Classes should be elected and nominated by the elected members of the caste Hindus (INC) to the Legislative Councils. The Untouchables opposed this and Dr Ambedkar too opposed the move of the INC. Precisely, this stand of Ambedkar had gone into history that Untouchables as socio-political identity was aspired for the first time and the Untouchables gained an independent socio-political identity.

Dr Ambedkar wrote an article in the Times of India of 16th January,

1919, “Before demanding Home Rule it was the duty of advanced classes to put the lower and the depressed classes on social equality who belonged to the same region, followed the same customs, lived within the same borders with the same aspirations of liberty and Home Rule. For everybody recognised, he observed, that ‘Home Rule was as much the birth right of a Brahmin as that of a Mahars.’ The Home Rule without the present natives of the depressed classes is not at all acceptable.”

Further, he appeared before the Southborough Committee (Franchise Committee) and submitted a written memorandum in which he argued for the caste-wise representation in the ensuing Legislative Councils. He strongly advocated for the widening of franchise to cover the poor and deprived people in a big way as the cultural elevation of these people is a major role of democracy. Ambedkar’s memorandum asserted that the Untouchables should be treated as independent identity from the Hindus and political representation must be ensured proportionate to their population.

### **Organization and Self-Assertion**

At this juncture Shri Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaja of Kolhapur who was championing the cause of the Non-Brahmins and the Untouchables was making efforts to secure the representatives of the Untouchables elected by the Untouchables themselves. Hence he was happy over the efforts of Dr Ambedkar. The INC proposal was rejected in a conference of the Depressed Classes which was presided by Dr Ambedkar and addressed by Shri Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaja took a historic resolution that the representatives of Untouchables should be elected only by the Untouchables and their numbers should be in proportion to their total population. Another All India Depressed Classes Conference was held at Nagpur in 1920 in which the move of the INC through Vittal Ramji Shinde was rejected outright. The Conference was presided by Shri Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaja, hailed Ambedkar for his stand.

With this background Dr. Ambedkar thought that urgently the Untouchables need an organization of their own to establish a separate socio-political identity and also socio-cultural transformation to assert their rights. In view of this, Dr. Ambedkar founded Bahiskrit Hitakarini Sabha in 1924 with the aim of spreading education among the depressed classes, improving their economic conditions, advocating for their rights, socio-cultural identity etc. The quest for socio-cultural identity

independent of Hindu society is a step forward to assert socio-political rights.

Dr. Ambedkar gave a clarion call educate, agitate and organize while establishing Bahiskrit Hitakarini Sabha is to make the depressed classes to educate themselves, develop a sense of deprivation and organize on a political wing to fight for the rights, foundational aim of this organization, he emphasized the socio-cultural identity for the Untouchables to enable them to ascertain independent existence and thereby fight for the equal rights. This was a move to resist and oppose caste oppressions and assert for the equality of opportunities and bare human rights.

Dr. Ambedkar believed in 'self help is the best help'. He diagnosed the disease correctly. He knew from history that injustice is not removed till the sufferer himself does away with it by his own exertions and actions. As long as the conscience of a slave does not burn with the hatred for his slavery, there is no hope for his salvation. "Tell the slave he is a slave and he will revolt" was the slogan raised by Ambedkar (Kees, Dhananjaya, Dr Ambedkar: Life and Mission, pp. 60).

Further, to make his people to realise their miserable life and their efforts ascertain an independent identity that is sine-quo-non to achieve self respect Ambedkar remarked:

"My heart breaks to the pitiable sight of your faces and to hear the gross sad voices. You have been groaning from the time immemorial and yet you are not ashamed to hope helplessness as an inevitability. Why did you not perish in the pre-natal stage instead? Why do you worsen and sadden the picture of the sorrows, poverty, slavery and burdens on the world with your deplorable, despicable, and detestable miserable life? You had better die and relieve this world if you cannot rise to a new life and if you cannot rejuvenate yourselves. As a matter of fact it is your birth right, to get food, shelter and clothing in this land in equal proportion with every body – high & low. If you believe in living a respectable life, you believe in self help which is the best help." (Kheer, Dhananjay 1971) pp-60).

### **The Struggle for Civic Rights: Mahad and Manusmriti**

The Untouchables who were segregated, had no civic, religious and political rights. It was now Ambedkar's aim to create these rights, to prepare his people's heads, hearts, and hands to secure Man's rights, & and to make them real men, real countrymen out of sixty million virtual

slaves. This is how Dr Ambedkar instilled the confidence among Untouchable to develop identity of their own and fight for rights on their own strength.

Yet another important initiative of S.K. Bole, a social reformer moved a resolution in the Bombay Legislative Council on August 4, 1923 that all public places run by the Government funds be open to all sections. It was accepted and the Government Order was issued. Accordingly, Mahad Municipality which in 1924 had declared to have thrown open its tank to the depressed classes, it was now decided to take water from the Tank and establish the right of the Untouchable. Unfortunately, the initiative of the Municipality was opposed by the orthodox.

Meanwhile, Ambedkar started his fortnightly Marathi paper, Bahiskrit Bharat on April 3, 1927 and explained the aim of the journal. It is intended to give vent to the feelings and opinions of the depressed classes in ascertaining political and civil rights of the depressed classes. Further he remarked “The temples and water courses should be open to the Untouchables because Untouchables were Hindus.” He wrote editorials after editorials in his short, crisp and fearless style, asking Government to bring into force, the Bole Resolution, and not to trust the good sense of the local bodies for its implementation as they were dominated by persons who were narrow-minded, old fashioned, orthodox, reactionaries and antagonistic to the interests of the Depressed Classes (Kees, Dhananjaya, 1971, pp-81). Ambedkar’s militant move has evoked response among the upper castes and Tilak too criticised Ambedkar.

Ambedkar retorted Tilak and remarked “If Tilak had been born amongst the Untouchables,” Ambedkar proceeded, “he would not have raised slogan: ‘Swaraj is my birth right,’” but he would have raised the slogan: Annihilation of Untouchability is my birth right” (Kees, Dhananjaya, 1971, p. 82). It was in this circumstances of dire need the newspaper called Bahiskrit Bharat (Untouchable India) was born in 1927. Dr. Ambedkar himself was its editor, and his writings in the paper inspired the depressed classes people with new zeal of self-help, self respect and the spirit of fighting for social justice and equal rights in every small span of time (Ambedkar: B.R., Bahiskrit Bharat, A Fortnightly in Marathi, (1927) Ed. by B.R. Kamble) pp. xliii).

Ambedkar spearheaded the social movement to assert specific rights and dignity of the Depressed Classes at Mahad of Maharashtra.

Under his able leadership and Chairmanship Kolaba District Depressed Classes Conference (Session first) was organized at Mahad on 19th and 20th March 1927. Leaders across communities not only Dalits, even non-Dalits like G.N. Sahasrabudde, Anant Vinayak Chitre, Sitaram Narveer Shvetatekar, Balorao Ambedkar, Pandurang, Kathuram Rajbhoj, Shantaram Annaji Upasani, Rameshwar, Ramchandra Shinde, Dhoridaram Narayan Gayakwad, Shivramn Gopal Jadhav etc. attended (See. Ambedkar: B.R., Selected Speeches of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in Bahiskrit Bharat, pp. 23–24).

Shri Vinayak Chitre made an epoch making suggestion. He said, "Today we have met in an historical conference of a rare significance, and the thought that the conference should not end without doing any work of significance." In this city of Mahad, he said, "there is a scarcity of water for the Untouchables. To end this scarcity as a policy, the Mahad Municipality had already declared that the water tanks in Mahad are open to all the people irrespective of their caste, creed and religion. But the practice of Untouchables drawing water from the tanks not yet started. If this conference helps in starting the practice it will be a work of importance." Hence the will (including to the President (Dr Ambedkar)) of this conference will go to the Chavadar tank could double water. Then all delegates under the leadership of Ambedkar went in a procession to the tank to taste the water. About 2000 besotted caste Hindus broke the shackles of orthodoxy and tasted the water. Ambedkar's gesture shook the historical stability of Hindu society.

Later Ambedkar was persuaded that it was premature to enter the Mahad temple and offer worship to God. Ambedkar and some young aged companions entered the temple but soon withdrew. Ambedkar did not lose his temper and preferred to wait. A group of people with non-violent principles of with a sense of religious struggle made a bonfire of Manusmriti in the conference of December 1927 and during the bonfire thousands people shouted two slogans (on this occasion Ambedkar and his followers publicly burnt a copy of Manusmriti).

Ambedkar at a point of time asserted that the depressed classes are not made of dung and wax. They are steel-sturdy and marshal race which has shown bravery in the battle field. (B. R. Bahiskrit Bharat, 1927, Part 1, pp. 22). Further he asked his people to revolt and resist the obnoxious attitude of caste Hindus. He remarked:

"If anybody slaps on your right cheek one opens him our left cheek

for slapping. But we never raise our hands up to resist the slapping. Even if the sky fall on our head we helplessly keep quiet enduring it. We should give up this attitude as early as possible. I, therefore, felt that we should make efforts to lift up the ban on our army entry." (Ambedkar, B.R., Bahiskrit Bharat, 1927, pp. 22).

By drinking water from the Chavadar tank Ambedkar asserted equal rights for the Depressed Classes and by burning Manusmriti he sent message to the public that we no more tolerate the iniquitous system to operate based on the Shastras, particularly Manusmriti which has institutionalized caste system and Untouchability.

### **Political Identity and The Communal Award**

By this time, Ambedkar assumed the leadership of Untouchables. The British Government invited him to attend the Round Table Conference at London as a sole representative along with M.C. Rajah of Madras. Ambedkar had vociferously pleaded that the Untouchables must be treated as a separate and independent element for the purpose of the political representation. His ideas have been accepted by the Govt and granted the communal award to the Untouchables on a par with the Sikhs, Muslims, Anglo Indians.

Gandhi opposed the Communal award and proceeded to London to oppose British in the Second Round Table Conference. But the Imperial Government had accepted in principle to grant the Communal Award by the way of Separate electorates and Joint electorates to the Depressed Classes. Subsequently Gandhiji felt this would result in the disorganization of Hindu society and decided to do undue Fasting at Yerwada Jail. The fasting lasted for 22 days but Ambedkar was under pressure and ultimately he agreed to sign 'Poona Pact'. The present political representation to SC's after Independence owe to this.

While pleading the Communal award Ambedkar asserted an independent identity for the Untouchables. It was a real achievement of Ambedkar to assert identity of Untouchables independent of Hindus. He played an important and pivotal role to assert independent identity for the depressed castes through his socio-political struggle spanning three and a half decades.

Dr. Ambedkar argued that the Untouchables should be considered as non conformist Hindus and should be treated as a separate unit or group for the purpose of political representation per se communal award

for the political representation.

### **Legacy, Education, and Symbolism**

#### **Ambedkar's Legacy as a Social Reformer:**

Ambedkar in his three and a half decades of struggle for the upliftment of the most oppressed bottom, Dalits, reveals a saga of relentless efforts of a committed social reformer. Ambedkar's role as a social reformer is seen in his commitment for securing identity, rights, privileges, resources and position for the down trodden is overwhelming and unprecedented. For Ambedkar the education is an important tool of social transformation. He believed knowledge is panacea for ill treated and discriminated masses to realise their highly deplorable conditions and understand social slavery in which they have been segregated and kept out of the purview of the fundamental human rights. It is an important means to achieve the goal of understanding one's position and make them to realise the means of overcoming it by asserting rights and reclaiming identity. As a social reformer, Ambedkar's emphasis on education as the passport to social advancement and economic empowerment for subalterns continues to inspire people to see the social slavery through a lens of social justice.

History has been unkind to Ambedkar, first it constrained him, and then it glorified him. It has made him India's leader of the Untouchables, the King of the Ghettos. It has hidden away his writings. It has stripped away the radical intellect and the searing insolence (Roy, Arundati, 2014, 43).

All the same, Ambedkar's followers have kept his legacy alive in a creative ways. One of these ways is to turn him into a million mass-populated statues. The Ambedkar statue is a radical and an animate object. It has been sent forth into the world to claim a space – both physical and virtual, public and private that is Dalits due. They have used Ambedkar's statue to assert their rights, to claim the land that is owed them, to hold that it theirs, commonly denied access to. Ambedkar statue that is planted in the commons and rallied around always holds a book in its hand. Significantly, that book is not Annihilation of Caste with its liberating & revolutionary rage. It is a copy of the Indian Constitution that Ambedkar played a vital role in conceptualising—the document that now, for better or for worse, & governs the life of every single Indian citizen. (Roy, Arundhati 2014:44).

The statues of Ambedkar planted across the country have evoked a range of responses, opposition and resistance to the earliest ones. It symbolises the existence of Dalits, who not only asserted their rights of a public property and access to the space that is monopolise by them. It is not merely a statue, but it is an icon of liberation from the cliches of the caste based inequalities. Therefore, statue of Ambedkar is a revolt against the caste oppressions & proud assertiveness of Dalits. Ambedkar's greatest legacy lies in the liberation of the most oppressed to them.

### **Conclusion**

To understand Ambedkar in a holistic manner, one must see him beyond the Principle Architect of the Constitution of India, his views on caste and Untouchability, political democracy, religious ideas, his educational ideas and the status of women etc. All these were part of a larger vision for just society. He envisioned a society based on the egalitarian principles. His relentless efforts to bring radical changes in Hindu society have been shelved. He waited patiently for two decades from 1935 to 1955 for change of hearts of Hindus to treat the depressed classes as equal went in vain.

#### **Funding:**

This study was not funded by any grant.

#### **Conflict of interest:**

The Authors have no conflict of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.

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