

THE LIFE AND WORK OF DR BR AMBEDKAR



Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar also known as Babasaheb Ambedkar, was an Indian jurist, economist, politician and social reformer who inspired the Dalit Buddhist movement and campaigned against social discrimination towards the untouchables (Dalits). He was independent India's first law and justice minister, the major architect of the Constitution of India.

Ambedkar was a prolific student, earning doctorates in economics from both Columbia University and the London School of Economics, and gained a reputation as a scholar for his research in law, economics and political science.

Ambedkar was the first Indian to pursue a doctorate in economics abroad

In his early career he was an economist, professor, and lawyer. His later life was marked by his political activities; he became involved in campaigning and negotiations for India's independence, publishing journals, advocating political rights and social freedom for Dalits, and contributing significantly to the establishment of the state of India.

In 1956 he converted to Buddhism, initiating mass conversions of Dalits.

In 1990, the Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian award, was posthumously conferred upon Ambedkar.

Ambedkar's legacy includes numerous memorials and depictions in popular culture.

Ambedkar was born on 14 April 1891 in the town and military cantonment of Mhow in the Central Provinces (now in Madhya Pradesh).

He was the 14th and last child of Ramji Maloji Sakpal, an army officer who held the rank of Subedar, and Bhimabai Sakpal, daughter of Laxman Murbadkar.

His family was of Marathi background from the town of Ambadawe (Mandangad taluka) in Ratnagiri district of modern-day Maharashtra.

Ambedkar was born into a poor low Mahar (dalit) caste, who were treated as untouchables and subjected to socio-economic discrimination

He described his situation during school such as not being allowed to sit inside the class, being given little attention by teachers, "No peon, No Water". Of his brothers and sisters, only Ambedkar passed his examinations and went to high school.

His original surname was Sakpal but his father registered his name as Ambadawekar in school, meaning he comes from his native village 'Ambadawe' in Ratnagiri district.

His Devrukhe Brahmin teacher, Krishna Keshav Ambedkar, changed his surname from 'Ambadawekar' to his own surname 'Ambedkar' in school records.

In 1897, Ambedkar's family moved to Mumbai where Ambedkar became the only untouchable enrolled at Elphinstone High School.

In 1906, when he was about 15 years old, his marriage to a nine-year-old girl, Ramabai, was arranged

In 1907, he passed his matriculation examination and in the following year he entered Elphinstone College, which was affiliated to the University of Bombay, becoming, according to him, the first from his Mahar caste to do so.

A public ceremony was evoked When he passed his English fourth standard examinations, to celebrate his success, by the community, and it was at this occasion that he was presented with a biography of the Buddha by Dada Keluskar, the author and a family friend.

By 1912, he obtained his degree in economics and political science from Bombay University, and prepared to take up employment with the Baroda state government.

His wife had just moved his young family and started work when he had to quickly return to Mumbai to see his ailing father, who died on 2 February 1913.

In 1913, Ambedkar moved to the United States at the age of 22. He had been awarded a Baroda State Scholarship of £11.50 (Sterling) per month for three years under a scheme established by Sayajirao Gaekwad III (Gaekwad of Baroda) that was designed to provide opportunities for postgraduate education at Columbia University in New York City.

Soon after arriving there he settled in rooms at Livingston Hall with Naval Bhathena, a Parsi who was to be a lifelong friend.

He passed his M.A. exam in June 1915, majoring in Economics, and other subjects of Sociology, History, Philosophy and Anthropology.

He presented a thesis, Ancient Indian Commerce.

Ambedkar was influenced by John Dewey and his work on democracy.

In 1916 he completed his second thesis, National Dividend of India – A Historic and Analytical Study, for another M.A., and finally he received his PhD in Economics in 1927 for his third thesis, after he left for London.

On 9 May, he presented the paper Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development before a seminar conducted by the anthropologist Alexander Goldenweiser.

In October 1916, he enrolled for the Bar course at Gray's Inn, and at the same time enrolled at the London School of Economics where he started working on a doctoral thesis.

In June 1917, he returned to India because his scholarship from Baroda ended.

His book collection was dispatched on different ship from the one he was on, and that ship was torpedoed and sunk by a German submarine.

He got permission to return to London to submit his thesis within four years. He returned at the first opportunity, and completed a master's degree in 1921. His thesis was on "The problem of the rupee: Its origin and its solution".

In 1923, he completed a D.Sc. in Economics, and the same year he was called to the Bar by Gray's Inn. His third and fourth Doctorates (LL.D, Columbia, 1952 and D.Litt., Osmania, 1953) were conferred honoris causa

Ambedkar viewed the Shudras as Aryan and adamantly rejected the Aryan invasion theory, describing it as "so absurd that it ought to have been dead long ago" in his 1946 book Who Were the Shudras?.

Ambedkar viewed Shudras as originally being “part of the Kshatriya Varna in the Indo-Aryan society”, but became socially degraded after they inflicted many tyrannies on Brahmins

He was appointed Military Secretary to the Gaikwad but had to quit in a short time. Thereafter, he tried to find ways to make a living for his growing family. He worked as a private tutor, as an accountant, and established an investment consulting business, but it failed when his clients learned that he was an untouchable.

In 1918, he became Professor of Political Economy in the Sydenham College of Commerce and Economics in Mumbai. Although he was successful with the students, other professors objected to his sharing a drinking-water jug with them.

Ambedkar had been invited to testify before the Southborough Committee, which was preparing the Government of India Act 1919. At this hearing, Ambedkar argued for creating separate electorates and reservations for untouchables and other religious communities.

In 1920, he began the publication of the weekly Mooknayak (Leader of the Silent) in Mumbai with the help of Shahu of Kolhapur i.e. Shahu IV (1874–1922)

Ambedkar went on to work as a legal professional. In 1926, he successfully defended three non-Brahmin leaders who had accused the Brahmin community of ruining India and were then subsequently sued for libel.

While practising law in the Bombay High Court, he tried to promote education to untouchables and uplift them. His first organised attempt was his establishment of the central institution Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha, intended to promote education and socio-economic improvement, as well as the welfare of “outcastes”, at the time referred to as depressed classes.

For the defence of Dalit rights, he started many periodicals like Mook Nayak, Bahishkrit Bharat, and Equality Janta.

He was appointed to the Bombay Presidency Committee to work with the all-European Simon Commission in 1925. This commission had sparked great protests across India, and while its report was ignored by most Indians, Ambedkar himself wrote a separate set of recommendations for the future Constitution of India.

By 1927, Ambedkar had decided to launch active movements against untouchability. He began with public movements and marches to open up public drinking water resources. He also began a struggle for the right to enter Hindu temples. He led a satyagraha in Mahad to fight for the right of the untouchable community to draw water from the main water tank of the town.

In a conference in late 1927, Ambedkar publicly condemned the classic Hindu text, the Manusmriti (Laws of Manu), for ideologically justifying caste discrimination and "untouchability", and he ceremonially burned copies of the ancient text.

On 25 December 1927, he led thousands of followers to burn copies of Manusmriti. Thus annually 25 December is celebrated as Manusmriti Dahan Din (Manusmriti Burning Day) by Ambedkarites and Dalits

In 1930, Ambedkar launched Kalaram Temple movement after three months of preparation. About 15,000 volunteers assembled at Kalaram Temple satyagraha making one of the greatest processions of Nashik. The procession was headed by a military band, a batch of scouts, women and men walked in discipline, order and determination to see the god for the first time. When they reached to gate, the gates were closed by Brahmin authorities

In 1932, British announced the formation of a separate electorate for "Depressed Classes" in the Communal Award. Gandhi fiercely opposed a separate electorate for untouchables, saying he feared that such an arrangement would divide the

Hindu community. Following Gandhi's fast while imprisoned in the Yerwada Central Jail of Poona, Madan Mohan Malaviya signed Poona Pact with Ambedkar On 25 September 1932, which gave reserved seats for the depressed classes in the Provisional legislatures, within the general electorate

Due to the pact, the depressed class received 148 seats in the legislature, instead of the 71 as allocated in the Communal Award earlier proposed by British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald.

The text uses the term "Depressed Classes" to denote Untouchables among Hindus who were later called Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes under India Act 1935, and the later Indian Constitution of 1950

In 1935, Ambedkar was appointed principal of the Government Law College, Bombay, a position he held for two years.

He also served as the chairman of Governing body of Ramjas College, University of Delhi, after the death of its Founder Shri Rai Kedarnath.

Settling in Bombay (today called Mumbai), Ambedkar oversaw the construction of a house, and stocked his personal library with more than 50,000 books.

His wife Ramabai died after a long illness the same year. It had been her long-standing wish to go on a pilgrimage to Pandharpur, but Ambedkar had refused to let her go, telling her that he would create a new Pandharpur for her instead of Hinduism's Pandharpur which treated them as untouchables.

At the Yeola Conversion Conference on 13 October in Nasik, Ambedkar announced his intention to convert to a different religion and exhorted his followers to leave Hinduism. He would repeat his message at many public meetings across India.

In 1936, Ambedkar founded the Independent Labour Party, which contested the 1937 Bombay election to the Central Legislative Assembly for the 13 reserved and 4 general seats, and secured 11 and 3 seats respectively

Ambedkar published his book *Annihilation of Caste* on 15 May 1936. It strongly criticised Hindu orthodox religious leaders and the caste system in general, and included "a rebuke of Gandhi" on the subject

Ambedkar served on the Defence Advisory Committee and the Viceroy's Executive Council as minister for labour.

After the Lahore resolution (1940) of the Muslim League demanding Pakistan, Ambedkar wrote a 400 page tract titled *Thoughts on Pakistan*, which analysed the concept of "Pakistan" in all its aspects. Scholar Venkat Dhulipala states that *Thoughts on Pakistan* "rocked Indian politics for a decade".

Ambedkar also criticised Islamic practice in South Asia. While justifying the Partition of India, he condemned child marriage and the mistreatment of women in Muslim society.

Upon India's independence on 15 August 1947, the new Congress-led government invited Ambedkar to serve as the nation's first Law Minister, which he accepted.

On 29 August, he was appointed Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee, and was appointed by the Assembly to write India's new Constitution

The Constitution was adopted on 26 November 1949 by the Constituent Assembly.

Ambedkar opposed Article 370 of the Constitution of India, which granted a special status to the State of Jammu and Kashmir, and which was included against his wishes.

Balraj Madhok reportedly said, Ambedkar had clearly told the Kashmiri leader, Sheikh Abdullah: "You wish India should protect your borders, she should build roads in your area, she should supply you food grains, and Kashmir should get equal status as India. But Government of India should have only limited powers and Indian people should have no rights in Kashmir. To give consent to this proposal, would be a treacherous thing against the interests of India and I, as the Law Minister of India, will never do it." Then Sk. Abdullah approached Nehru, who directed him to Gopal Swami Ayyangar, who in turn approached Sardar Patel, saying Nehru had promised Sk. Abdullah the special status. Patel got the Article passed while Nehru was on a foreign tour. On the day the article came up for discussion, Ambedkar did not reply to questions on it but did participate on other articles. All arguments were done by Krishna Swami Ayyangar.

During the debates in the Constituent Assembly, Ambedkar demonstrated his will to reform Indian society by recommending the adoption of a Uniform Civil Code

Ambedkar resigned from the cabinet in 1951, when parliament stalled his draft of the Hindu Code Bill, which sought to enshrine gender equality in the laws of inheritance and marriage.

He argued that industrialisation and agricultural growth could enhance the Indian economy. He stressed investment in agriculture as the primary industry of India

Later he was elected into the constituent assembly of Bengal where Muslim League was in power.

Ambedkar contested in the Bombay North first Indian General Election of 1952, but lost to his former assistant and Congress Party candidate Narayan Kajrolkar.

Ambedkar became a member of Rajya Sabha, probably an appointed member. He tried to enter Lok Sabha again in the by-election of 1954 from Bhandara, but he placed third (the Congress Party won).

By the time of the second general election in 1957, Ambedkar had died.

In 1951, Ambedkar established the Finance Commission of India. He opposed income tax for low-income groups. He contributed in Land Revenue Tax and excise duty policies to stabilise the economy.

Ambedkar was trained as an economist, and was a professional economist until 1921, when he became a political leader. He wrote three scholarly books on economics: Administration and Finance of the East India Company; The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India; The Problem of the Rupee: Its Origin and Its Solution.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI), was based on the ideas that Ambedkar presented to the Hilton Young Commission.

Ambedkar considered converting to Sikhism, which encouraged opposition to oppression and so appealed to leaders of scheduled castes. But after meeting with Sikh leaders, he concluded that he might get "second-rate" Sikh status, as described by scholar Stephen P. Cohen. Instead, he studied Buddhism all his life.

Around 1950, he devoted his attention to Buddhism and travelled to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) to attend a meeting of the World Fellowship of Buddhists. While dedicating a new Buddhist vihara near Pune, Ambedkar announced he was writing a book on Buddhism, and that when it was finished, he would formally convert to Buddhism. He twice visited Burma in 1954; the second time to attend the third conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Rangoon. In 1955, he founded the Bharatiya Bauddha Mahasabha, or the Buddhist Society of India. He completed his final work, The Buddha and His Dhamma, in 1956 which was published posthumously.

Ambedkar organised a formal public ceremony for himself and his supporters in Nagpur on 14 October 1956. Accepting the Three Refuges and Five

Precepts from a Buddhist monk in the traditional manner, Ambedkar completed his own conversion, along with his wife. He then proceeded to convert some 500,000 of his supporters who were gathered around him. He prescribed the 22 Vows for these converts, after the Three Jewels and Five Precepts. He then travelled to Kathmandu, Nepal to attend the Fourth World Buddhist Conference. His work on *The Buddha or Karl Marx* and "Revolution and counter-revolution in ancient India" remained incomplete.

After completing the draft of India's constitution in the late 1940s, he suffered from lack of sleep, had neuropathic pain in his legs, and was taking insulin and homoeopathic medicines. He was bed-ridden from June to October in 1954 due to medication side-effects and poor eyesight. His health worsened during 1955. Three days after completing his final manuscript *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Ambedkar died in his sleep on 6 December 1956 at his home in Delhi.

A number of unfinished typescripts and handwritten drafts were found among Ambedkar's notes and papers and gradually made available. Among these were *Waiting for a Visa*, which probably dates from 1935–36 and is an autobiographical work, and *the Untouchables, or the Children of India's Ghetto*, which refers to the census of 1951

His birthdate is celebrated as a public holiday known as Ambedkar Jayanti or Bhim Jayanti.

His reputation as a scholar led to his appointment as free India's first law minister, and chairman of the committee for drafting the constitution.

Many public institutions are named in his honour, and the Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar International Airport in Nagpur, otherwise known as Sonegaon Airport. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar National Institute of Technology, Jalandhar, Ambedkar University Delhi is also named in his honour

The Maharashtra government has acquired a house in London where Ambedkar lived during his days as a student in the 1920s. The house is expected to be converted into a museum-cum-memorial to Ambedkar.

Narendra Jadhav, a notable Indian economist, has said that Ambedkar was "the highest educated Indian economist of all times." Amartya Sen, said that Ambedkar is "father of my economics".