



Dalit Assertion and Nationalism: B. R. Ambedkar, the Depressed Classes and the Idea of True Freedom

Sushma Kumari

Research Scholar, P G Department of History, Veer Kunwar Singh University, Arrah, Bihar, India
Email - sushma20914@gmail.com

Abstract: *The history of Indian nationalism has long been narrated as a heroic struggle against colonial domination. Yet, this narrative often conceals the profound inequalities that existed within Indian society itself. Among the most powerful voices exposing these contradictions was Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. This paper analyses Ambedkar's conception of "true freedom" as the liberation of India's Depressed Classes from caste-based oppression. It explores how Dalit assertion under Ambedkar intersected with, yet often diverged from, mainstream nationalist politics. Through historical, sociological and ideological lenses, the paper demonstrates that India's independence in 1947 remained incomplete without the social emancipation envisioned by Ambedkar.*

Key Words: *Ambedkar, Dalit Assertion, Depressed Classes, Indian Nationalism, Social Justice, True Freedom.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The Indian freedom struggle is conventionally portrayed as a unifying movement that mobilised millions against British imperialism. However, this perception overlooks a parallel history of internal hierarchies—particularly the caste system—that divided Indian society. For the Depressed Classes, later known as Dalits, colonial rule was not the only source of subjugation; oppression from within their own society was equally brutal. Dr B. R. Ambedkar emerged as the foremost leader who articulated the pain and aspirations of these marginalised groups. Educated at Columbia University and the London School of Economics, Ambedkar returned to India with a vision that merged social reform with political modernity. His philosophy challenged both colonial rule and the hegemony of upper-caste nationalism. Ambedkar's fundamental question was: How can a nation be free if its people remain enslaved by caste? His political thought thus broadened the meaning of freedom—from the mere transfer of power to genuine equality in social, economic and moral terms.

2. Historical Context: The Depressed Classes under Colonial Rule The arrival of the British in India did not dismantle caste barriers; rather, colonial administrative systems reinforced them through census classifications and local hierarchies. The British Raj co-opted upper-caste elites as intermediaries, excluding the vast Dalit population from political representation, education and property ownership. While some social reformers such as Jyotirao Phule and the Arya Samaj sought to alleviate untouchability, most movements failed to dismantle caste hierarchies structurally. By the late nineteenth century, a new consciousness emerged among educated members of the Depressed Classes. They began to publish journals, organise associations, and demand equality before law. This environment paved the way for Ambedkar's rise as a transformative leader who could articulate Dalit demands in both political and intellectual language.

3. Ambedkar's Political Philosophy and Vision of Representation- Ambedkar's engagement with nationalism was rooted in democratic rationality rather than emotional appeal. He believed that genuine democracy required the participation of all citizens, especially those historically silenced. His demand for separate electorates for the Depressed Classes during the Round Table Conferences in the early 1930s was revolutionary. Ambedkar argued that political representation was essential for self-respect and agency. Although Mahatma Gandhi opposed this idea, fearing it would fragment Hindu society, Ambedkar maintained that political safeguards were not divisive but liberating. His assertion that "those who suffer from inequality cannot be asked to maintain unity" highlighted his principled approach to justice. Ambedkar also founded several organisations, such as the 'Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha' (1924), to promote education



and welfare among the Depressed Classes. His periodicals, 'Mook Nayak' and 'Bahishkrit Bharat', became intellectual platforms for articulating Dalit rights.

4. The Poona Pact and the Dilemma of Nationalism- The Poona Pact of 1932, reached between Gandhi and Ambedkar after Gandhi's fast unto death, remains one of the most debated moments in Indian political history. Ambedkar agreed to withdraw the demand for separate electorates in exchange for reserved seats for the Depressed Classes within the general electorate. While the pact prevented further alienation between reformist Hindus and Dalits, it left Ambedkar disillusioned. He later described it as "a moral defeat but a political compromise." The episode revealed the tensions between nationalist unity and social justice—two ideals that were often at odds within the Indian freedom movement. Ambedkar's criticism of the Congress Party stemmed from his view that it was dominated by upper-caste interests. He questioned how a movement claiming to represent all Indians could ignore the plight of millions of untouchables. For him, nationalism without social equality was hollow; liberation from the British meant little if Dalits remained enslaved within their own society.

5. Social and Religious Dimensions of Dalit Assertion- Ambedkar recognised that political reform alone could not destroy caste; it was deeply embedded in Hindu religious doctrine. Thus, he called for a cultural and moral revolution. His 1936 address, *Annihilation of Caste*, declared that Hinduism must undergo radical transformation if equality were to be achieved. When orthodox groups refused to reform, Ambedkar chose to renounce Hinduism altogether. On 14 October 1956, he and nearly half a million followers converted to Buddhism in Nagpur. This historic act symbolised liberation from religious slavery and the creation of a new collective identity based on dignity and rationality. Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism was modern and ethical. He viewed the Buddha not as a divine figure but as a social reformer who challenged hierarchy through compassion and reason. The conversion marked the spiritual dimension of Dalit assertion—a rejection of humiliation and an embrace of self-respect.

6. Ambedkar as the Architect of Social Democracy- As Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution (1947–49), Ambedkar embedded his lifelong vision of equality into the fabric of the Republic. Fundamental Rights guaranteed liberty, equality and protection from discrimination, while Directive Principles aimed at socio-economic justice. Ambedkar's insistence on constitutional morality reflected his belief that democracy must rest on respect for individual dignity. He warned that political democracy would collapse without social and economic democracy. The reservation policy introduced for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes was not a concession but a tool for historical redress. Through education and employment opportunities, Ambedkar sought to dismantle centuries of exclusion.

7. Contemporary Relevance- Continuing the Journey to True Freedom Even after seventy-five years of independence, caste discrimination persists in new forms. Dalit communities continue to face violence, economic deprivation and under-representation. However, Ambedkar's ideas have inspired generations of activists, scholars and political leaders to continue the struggle. Movements such as the Dalit Panthers (1970s) and the rise of the 'Bahujan Samaj Party' (1980s–90s) carried forward Ambedkarite ideology in new political contexts. In academia and literature, Dalit voices have redefined the meaning of history and identity, turning experiences of suffering into sources of resistance. Ambedkar's vision of "true freedom" was not merely political sovereignty but the eradication of inequality in all its forms—caste, class, gender and religion. His ideas resonate globally, linking India's Dalit movement with other struggles for human rights and dignity.

8. Conclusion :

B. R. Ambedkar's contribution to India's national and social transformation cannot be confined within the boundaries of political biography. He was a philosopher of democracy, a crusader for equality and a moral conscience for a divided nation. While India achieved political independence in 1947, Ambedkar reminded his compatriots that the deeper challenge lay ahead—the creation of a society where liberty, equality and fraternity become lived realities. Dalit assertion under Ambedkar was thus not a peripheral movement but the very essence of India's democratic promise. True freedom, as he envisioned, is not the privilege of a few but the birth-right of all. The ongoing relevance of Ambedkar's message urges modern India to confront its inequalities and fulfil the uncompleted task of social emancipation.

REFERENCES:

1. Ambedkar, B. R. (1936). *Annihilation of Caste*. Bombay: Self-Published.



2. Ambedkar, B. R. (1945). What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables. Bombay: Thacker & Co.
- Brown, J. M. (1994). Modern India: The Origins of an Asian Democracy. Oxford University Press. Jaffrelot, C. (2005).
3. Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability: Fighting the Indian Caste System. New Delhi: Permanent Black. Keer, D. (1954). Dr Ambedkar: Life and Mission. Mumbai: Popular Prakashan. Omvedt, G. (1994).
4. Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India. Sage Publications. Rodrigues, V. (2002).
5. The Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar. Oxford University Press. Teltumbde, A. (2001). Ambedkar on Nation and Nationalism. New Delhi: Critical Quest.1.