

How BR Ambedkar has become a global icon in the fight against injustice

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Sumeet Mhaskar

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Fighting discrimination

The mobilisations by Dalit Ambedkarite diaspora in the West have received support from other socially marginalised communities and minority groups.



A vendor in Chennai displays a portrait of BR Ambedkar on his birth anniversary on April 14, 2022. | Arun Sankar / AFP

April 14 marks the 132nd birth anniversary of BR Ambedkar, India's foremost civil rights leader, scholar, statesman and the most powerful crusader against the inequalities perpetuated by the caste system. From the remotest Indian village to the major cities around the world, Dalit Ambedkarites observe the day as their most important festival. Ambedkar is the only Indian leader whose birth anniversary is celebrated globally by Dalit Ambedkarite groups.

This year is unique because the state of Michigan and Minnesota in the US have officially announced April 9-April 15 as "Social Equity Week." Likewise, the state of New Hampshire in the US and the City of Burnaby in Canada have declared April 14 the "Day of Equality." The state of Washington has gone further and decided to observe April 2023 as "Dalit History Month."

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These declarations have instilled a great deal of confidence among the Dalit Ambedkarite diaspora and their struggle to make caste a protected category.

In recent years, Indian immigration to the West has witnessed a phenomenal increase, especially among those in the Information Technology industry. The growth in the overall South Asian population has also resurfaced the caste problem. The problem of caste is, thus, no longer the problem only of the Indian government. For nearly two decades, the Dalit Ambedkarite diaspora has been mobilising in West to highlight the persistence of caste-based discrimination.

For instance, in the United Kingdom, Dalit Ambedkarites took the opportunity of the Equality Bill (which became an Act in 2010) to make their case for prohibiting caste discrimination. However, the opposition from upper-caste Hindu diaspora organisations stalled the inclusion of caste in the Equality Act.

STATE OF MICHIGAN



CERTIFICATE OF PROCLAMATION

ON BEHALF OF THE PEOPLE OF MICHIGAN,
I, Gretchen Whitmer, governor of Michigan, do hereby proclaim:

April 9 – 15, 2023

as SOCIAL EQUITY WEEK

WHEREAS, the life work carried out by Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Bharat Ratna Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar has elevated the lives of millions of marginalized people and women across all classes of society to live their lives with social, political, economic, and religious equity and an opportunity to live with dignity and honor in modern India; and,

WHEREAS, the work of these social reformers is recognized for reviving democratic principles in modern India to embrace compassion and non-violence, leading to a society built on equality, liberty, justice, and fraternity; and,

WHEREAS, the week-long awareness activities are to honor all social reformers in India who worked towards the betterment of social changes and inculcating democratic values in the social strata of the Indian populous; and,

WHEREAS, this event allows the State of Michigan to participate and celebrate the liberation and emancipation of marginalized people in India and join people from this diaspora living and thriving in Michigan; and,

WHEREAS, Social Equity Week is an opportunity to remember and honor the legacy of dedication to equity, social justice, human rights, and dignity, which continues to inspire around the world;

NOW, THEREFORE, I, Gretchen Whitmer, governor of Michigan, do hereby proclaim April 9 – 15, 2023, as Social Equity Week in Michigan.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Gretchen Whitmer".

Gretchen Whitmer
Governor



Michigan and Minnesota in the US have officially announced April 9-April 15 as “Social Equity Week”.

In contrast, Dalit Ambedkarites successfully lobbied in Seattle, which became the first American city to include caste as a protective category. Since December 2022, Brown University, California State University and Harvard University have added a clause to their non-discrimination policy by explicitly prohibiting caste-based discrimination. Several companies in the US have taken similar measures. The Californian senator of Afghan origin, Aisha Wahab, has tabled a bill to outlaw caste discrimination.

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Even though these efforts have met staunch opposition from the upper-caste Hindu diaspora organisations, the mobilisations by Dalit Ambedkarite diaspora in the West have received attention and support from other socially marginalised communities and minority groups. Ambedkar has been the central binding force among the South Asian diaspora, who have asserted their right to live in an environment that protects them from caste discrimination. Today, prominent universities in US and Europe and Dalit Ambedkarite organisations will celebrate Ambedkar’s birth anniversary. The Dalit Ambedkarite diaspora is playing a crucial role in installing busts of Ambedkar in various institutions. Through these initiatives, more people outside of South Asia are becoming aware of caste-based practices.

Ambedkar has truly become a global icon to fight injustice. A little over a decade ago, the British newspaper, *The Guardian* remarked along these lines. *The Guardian* editorial [“Unthinkable? An Ambedkar Memorial”](#) dated April 30, 2011, noted the remarkable journey of BR Ambedkar. It detailed Ambedkar’s role in the emancipation of the untouchables and his fight “for a free India, and for the freedom of all castes within that state”. It concluded that Ambedkar’s “message intended for 20th century India, is just as relevant for 21st century Britain” and proposed a public memorial to him in Great Britain.

A decade later, one can safely argue that Ambedkar’s message is not only relevant to Great Britain but also globally significant where the South Asian diaspora exists. A public memorial of Ambedkar in the West, especially where Indian diaspora is present in large numbers, would play a vital role. It would remind the world that a deeply hierarchical, exploitative and unequal structure such as the caste system can be challenged through democratic means.

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BOOK EXCERPT

How one social entrepreneur and his organisation are helping communities revive degraded ecosystems

An excerpt from 'Ideas that Are Changing the World: Leading Social Entrepreneurs'.



The new idea

Jagdeesh Rao Puppala is working to end the spiraling modern tragedy of these villagers' forests and other commons and move instead to "the promise of the commons." His organisation – The Foundation for Ecological Security (FES) – helps secure rights to the land and assists the local communities in strengthening and building local institutions, restoring degraded ecosystems, and cultivating local volunteers to take on the stewardship and preservation of the forest and water resources around them. These common property resources provide a single platform that anyone can leverage to address issues of social justice, ecological restoration, and poverty alleviation.

These activities also reduce hunger and poverty while reviving democratic functioning in the village. Jagdeesh ensures that the local communities that use “common” lands have the information needed to choose options and run ongoing decision-making wisely. That’s the only way to get sustainable decision-making reliably that will ensure ongoing livelihoods and ecosystems. By recognising that the forests, water, and other natural resources are part of the village’s ecological, social and economic landscape, conservation efforts are always informed by local needs and contexts. Instead of considering farming as crop production alone, FES works with communities, so they see the interconnections between the larger farming system and resources beyond the farm, such as forests, pastures, bodies of water, livestock, pollinators and pest predators more clearly. This kind of systems understanding is innate and latent within farming communities, so efforts to connect agriculture, livestock, pastures, and forests have resulted in vastly improved collective decision making on crop choices, the treatment of groundwater as a common property, and the nurturing of pollinator and pest predator habitats to improve crop productivity. Besides scaling up such measures, FES also plays an equally important role in motivating government and research institutions to integrate the commons into their systems thinking and to screen their sector-based programs for any unintended and undesirable consequences. ...

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[Avoidable deaths](#)

‘Man-made disaster’: Could the 13 heatstroke deaths at Maharashtra state event have been prevented?

Lakhs were seated in the harsh afternoon sun for nearly seven hours. Opposition says the massive event was organised for ‘political gain’.



Lakhs of people gathered to watch Appasaheb Dharmadhikari receive the Maharashtra Bhushan award. | @Dev_Fadnavis via Twitter

On Sunday, an hour after midnight, Gulab Patil packed two litres of chilled water, some laddoos, chapatis and a vegetable dish and boarded a bus from her village in Virar in Maharashtra's Palghar district.

With her were 31 others from her neighbourhood, all travelling to Kharghar, 80 km away, to watch their spiritual leader receive Maharashtra's highest civilian award.

"Our entire family follows him," said Baban Patil, Gulab Patil's husband, of their faith in the Raigad-based spiritual leader Dattatreya Narayan Dharmadhikari, also known as Appasaheb Dharmadhikari.

At 2.30 am on April 16, by the time 55-year-old Gulab Patil arrived in Kharghar, where a long queue had already formed to enter the massive open ground where the awards ceremony was being held. Patil and her neighbours were among the estimated 15 lakhs-20 lakh crowd that had gathered to watch Dharmadhikari receive the Maharashtra Bhushan award from Union home minister Amit Shah at an event organised by the state government.

Twenty-four hours later, after a frantic search of many hospitals, Patil's sons found her at the intensive care unit of a hospital in Kamothe, 5 km from the Kharghar ground....

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Fact check: Modi's claim that BJP received over 50% votes in several states needs some context

BJP independently secured more than half the total vote share in 11 states and two union territories in the 2019 general elections.



Chandan Khanna/AFP

On March 28, Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the new extended central office of the Bharatiya Janata Party in New Delhi. Modi addressed the party leaders present at the occasion and acknowledged the accomplishments of BJP governments at both the Centre and state levels. He spoke about BJP's journey from two to 303 Lok Sabha seats and claimed that BJP receives more than 50% votes in many states.

PM Shri [@narendramodi](#) inaugurates newly constructed BJP Central Office (Ext.) in presence of BJP National President Shri [@JPNadda](#) in New Delhi. <https://t.co/T31WugjM5o>

— BJP ([@BJP4India](#)) [March 28, 2023](#)

The Prime Minister's statement however lacks context as it is unclear whether he is referring to General Assembly Elections or State Legislative Assembly Elections.

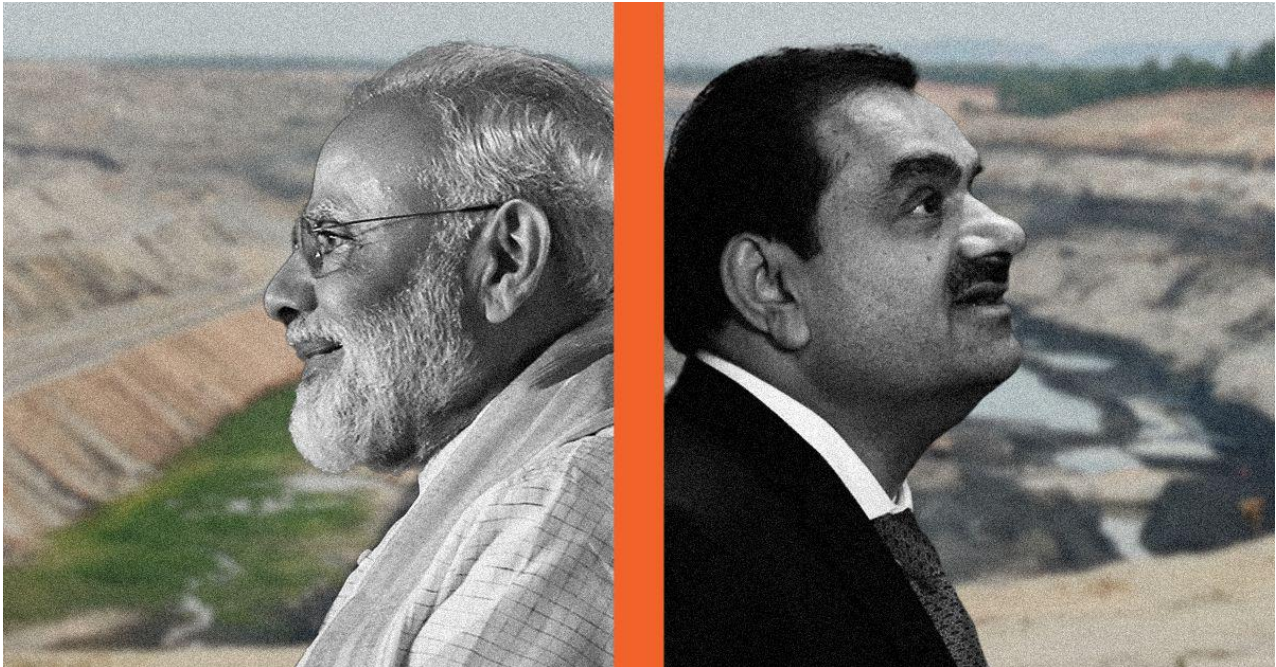
To verify the claim, *FactChecker* analysed election results published by the Election Commission of India to find out how many states had received 50% or more share in votes. We found that the BJP had secured over 50% of the votes independently in 11 states and two Union Territories in the [2019 General Assembly Elections](#). In two states, Uttar Pradesh and Tripura, the BJP received nearly 50% of the votes.

The BJP also received over 50% of the votes in Gujarat and Arunachal Pradesh in the State Legislative Assembly Elections....

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Modi government allowed Adani-run mine to expand even when it hadn't run out of coal

A government study found coal lying unextracted at the bottom of the Parsa East and Kanta Basan coal mine in Chhattisgarh.



Design: Rubin D'Souza | Photos: Reuters, Special Arrangement

The Modi government greenlighted the clearance of about 3,000 acres of forest land in Chhattisgarh for the expansion of a coal mine operated by the Adani Group, even though a government-funded study found millions of tonnes of coal lying unextracted at the bottom of the existing mine.

Between May 2019 and February 2021, two government institutes – the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education, and the Wildlife Institute of India – conducted a biodiversity study in the Hasdeo Arand coalfield in north Chhattisgarh. The coalfield gets its name from the Hasdeo Arand forest, one of the last unfragmented forest landscapes in Central India.

Among other things, the study examined the ecological impact of the Parsa East and Kanta Basan mine, one of the two operational mines in the forest. Allocated by the coal ministry to Rajasthan's state electricity company, the mine is operated by the Adani Group, which also holds 74% stake in its profits.

The study noted that the mine had yielded a smaller-than-expected volume of “overburden”, or soil removed to access coal seams. This was because the bottom-most seam of the mine had not been excavated, the study said....

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Madras Christian College, Chennai. | University website

There are various types of stories which are frequently associated with educational institutes like colleges and universities. Thousands of pupils come in every year to study, to progress towards achieving their dreams, and they graduate after completing their education. The unspoken stories remain scattered across classrooms, corridors, canteens, libraries, and reading rooms. The primary difference between workplaces and educational institutes is that unlike workplaces, the faces around the campus change every year and the characters in the story are more numerous and diverse. Every institute has their own sad stories, funny tales, and gossips with a bit of both.

Madras Christian College's story has an element of fear that stands out from regular ghost stories. This college is situated in Tambaram East in the district of Chengalpattu in Tamil Nadu. Tambaram lies close to the highway connecting Chennai and Trichy. This college is pretty old and it has gathered a lot of strange stories over time....

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Investing in public well-being is not 'populism': Why the 'freebie' debate is flawed

Instead of being limited by fiscal deficits, governments should instead raise tax the super rich to raise funds for healthcare and other welfare measures.



A volunteer from a non-profit distributes food in Mumbai during the Covid-19 lockdown. | Indranil Mukherjee / AFP

Shortly after the Rajasthan government passed its Right to Health Act last month, economist Aravind Panagariya, who served as the first vice-chairperson of the government think tank Niti Aayog, launched a blistering critique against the state's "populist" policies.

The law enables any patient to seek emergency care for free at private and public hospitals and healthcare facilities.

In an article in *The Times of India* on April 10, Panagariya extended the "revdi" (sesame candy) argument advanced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi that approvingly looks upon any largesse to the rich as "incentives" but considers spending on the public as "freebies".

Panagariya's dismissal of the Rajasthan legislation as an example of "irresponsible populism" is shocking in a country where the financial burden of healthcare continues to push over 55 million people into poverty every year, according to a study by the World Health Organization in 2022. The study says that nearly 70% of all outpatient care and about 60% of all inpatient care is provided by private healthcare facilities. ...

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Politics of neutrality: Why countries have refused to take a stand against Russia

Non-alignment allows countries to avoid becoming entangled in the rising geopolitical tensions between the west and Russia.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Russian President Vladimir Putin in New Delhi in this photograph from 2018. | PTI

After over a year of the Ukraine war, efforts at building a global consensus against Russia seem to have stalled, with many countries opting for neutrality.

The number of countries condemning Russia has declined, according to some sources. Botswana has edged towards Russia from its original pro-Ukraine stance, South Africa is moving from neutral to Russia-leaning and Colombia from condemning Russia to a neutral stance. At the same time, a large number of countries have been reluctant to support Ukraine.

In Africa, for example, despite the African Union’s call on Moscow for an “immediate ceasefire” most countries remain neutral. Some observers argue that this is the result of a tradition of left-leaning regimes that goes back to the cold war period. Others, indicate that the current unwillingness of African countries originates in the history of western intervention, sometimes covert and others overt, in their internal affairs.

The reluctance to condemn Russia, however, goes beyond Africa. In February 2023, most Latin American countries supported a United Nations resolution to call for an immediate and unconditional Russian withdrawal. Yet, despite Brazil’s support for several United Nations resolutions in Ukraine’s favour, it has not condemned Russia outright. ...

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[History revisited](#)

How an early version of UK’s national flag helped Bombay merchants grow their business

A pass for 'Monnock Parsee' and 'Pendia Pattell' sailing aboard the Tiger was issued at Fort Bombay carries an impression of the 'Union Seale'.



British Library IOR/E/3/43 f. 323 (Public Domain)

Would it surprise you that there is an early representation of UK's Union Flag on a pass issued in Bombay in 1684?

Bombay, now known as Mumbai, became an English colony on May 11, 1661, as part of the dowry of Catherine of Braganza when she married Charles II. On March 27, 1668, the King leased Bombay to the East India Company for an annual rent of 10 pounds. By 1683 dissatisfaction with the Company's rule culminated in a rebellion, with Bombay's inhabitants appointing Captain Richard Keigwin to govern on behalf of Charles II. Keigwin issued passes to local merchants allowing them to trade outside the Company's monopoly as part of his policy to encourage economic growth in Bombay.



Pass issued by Richard Keigwin for the ship Tiger, owned by 'Monnock Parsee' Bombay, with impression of 'His Majesty's Union Seale' Credit: British Library IOR/E/3/43 f. 323 (Public Domain)

A pass for “Monnock Parsee” and “Pendia Pattell” sailing aboard the Tiger was issued at Fort Bombay on January 6, 1684. Valid for one year, it was signed by Governor Keigwin on behalf of Charles II. It requested ship commanders and British subjects allow the Tiger and its passengers “to passe without seizure, molestation or trouble, nor offering any abuse or incivility”. The pass carries an impression of His Majesty’s “Union Seale” in addition to the signatures of Keigwin and his secretary. ...

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[BOOK EXCERPT](#)

Romance fiction: Will the budding love between Ana and Luqman survive the double whammy of fate?

An excerpt from ‘Loving You Twice’, book two of the Jasmine Villa series, by Andaleeb Wajid.



Ana Hasan was having a really good day. She smiled to herself as she tucked her luggage in the overhead compartment and sat down quickly so that other passengers could walk down the aisle to their seats. She was nervous but she hoped it didn't show on her face and she tried to pretend she had been flying all her life. After all, she was good at that.

Pretending.

Taking a deep breath, she observed the other passengers as they found their seats. The flight to Kuala Lumpur was filling up slowly, with families and businessmen who would be changing flights to travel on ahead to other destinations. She still couldn't believe she was doing this. Her father had been wary and not willing to give in when she had spoken to him about it. It had been just a few months since she had got a job as a behavioural counsellor at an international school and she knew it had been a stroke of luck that she had been chosen to attend this conference.

"Abbu, please. It's a great opportunity," she had told him. He had looked at her, helpless and uneasy....

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[Indian railways](#)

What can be done to reduce train derailments in India

According to experts, over a span of four years, derailments accounted for 70% of railway accidents.



Photo for representation only. | PTI

Seven in 10 railway accidents over a four-year period were derailments, owing to multiple factors including track defects, maintenance issues and operating errors, according to an analysis of 1,129 inquiry reports by the Comptroller and Auditor General. A decline in fund availability and non-utilisation of available funds for track renewals led to 26% of these derailments. Decrease in passenger and freight earnings have constrained Indian Railways's capacity to spend on safety, data show.

Railways have been the “lifeline” of the country with more than 22 million passengers travelling in trains every day, according to the Comptroller and Auditor General report. The network also transports 3.3 million tonnes of freight daily (as of 2022) and earns more than Rs 1 lakh crore annually. However the modal share of railways, that is the preference for railways, is still only 14% for passenger traffic and 26% for freight movement, as per a 2015 study and the Economic Survey 2021-'22.

The Comptroller and Auditor General audit report shows that derailments are the major cause of accidents, resulting in loss of property and life. The economic cost of derailments (measured as a sum of loss of rolling stock and tracks) between 2000 and 2016 is estimated to be Rs 86,486 crore, which translates to a loss of Rs 5,087 crore per year, as per a 2018 study by the Indira Gandhi Open University....

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