

Finding Ambedkar: Crises in 'Ambedkarism' That Merit Deeper Reflection

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April 14 this year will be celebrated as the 140th birth anniversary of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, famously known as 'Babasaheb' across India.



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One might argue that Ambedkar's work, legacy and contributions to independent India's social, legal, economic and political foundations remain incomparable to, perhaps, any other national figure (some might even argue for the addition of the phrase, 'including Gandhi').

As historian and Gandhi biographer Ramachandra Guha observed in the chapter titled 'Arguments with Ambedkar' in his book, *Gandhi The Years That Changed The World (1914-1948)*:

"The transformations in Gandhi's (own) view of caste, his increasing willingness to challenge its prejudices and proscriptions, were a direct consequence of his encounters with reformers more radical than himself – namely, Narayana Guru and his followers, and more recently, Ambedkar. The birth and subsequent career of B.R. Ambedkar had a far greater impact on Gandhi than he was sometimes willing to acknowledge."

Ambedkar was not a socialist in the typical sense of the term. Though he was inclined towards 'evolutionary socialism', he developed his own ideas and emerged a 'socialist' in his own way. His views on understanding/addressing caste-induced social and economic inequality or caste-based exploitation of communities were brought forth in an empirical and critical manner in all his work.

"Ambedkar's socialism," as Vivek Srivastava argues, "was innovative and indigenous... It is pragmatic, not dogmatic... It is humane, not violent."

An inspirational quality of Ambedkar, according to many scholars, was his ability to look at critical social problems from an academic perspective and write about them while also discovering practical solutions to them through law and policy.

For example, during a budget debate in the Bombay legislative council in 1927, he raised a vital question in the context of issues around land reforms and taxation:

"Every farmer, whatever may be his income, is brought under the levy of the land tax. But under the income-tax, no person is called upon to pay the tax if he has not earned any income during the year. That system does not exist as far as land revenue is concerned. Whether there is a failure of crop or abundance of crop, the poor agriculturalist is called upon to pay the revenue. The income tax is levied on the recognised principle of ability to pay. But under the land revenue system, a person is taxed at the same rate whether he is the owner of one acre of land or a *jahagirdar* or an *inamdar*. He has to pay the tax at the same rate. It is a proportionate tax and not a progressive tax as it ought to be. Again, under the income-tax, holders of income below a certain minimum are exempted from levy. But under the land revenue, the tax is remorselessly collected from everyone, be he rich or poor."

Ambedkar's effort to progressively realise a 'social democracy' for all within India was, thus, based on the collective realisation of seeing 'economic equalisation' as a critical prerequisite.

This practical approach shaped his ideational-philosophical disposition, applying it in practice while being made responsible for drafting the constitution, influencing the lives of millions of Indians through positive affirmative action.

Also read: Is India Still Searching for Ambedkar?

When the Congress introduced the 'Labour Policy of the Government' on August 17, 1937, Ambedkar examined it critically and elaborated his concept of a 'social welfare state', which was far more extensive than any social security system present in scope during colonial times. His idea of a social security plan, combining the basic tenets of food security with accessible public health to *all*, remains a work in progress, even today, in India's 75th year of independence.

Another critical contribution from Ambedkar's applied thesis and pursuit of evolutionary socialism revolved around the need to visualise and understand the close link between 'class structure' and poverty; especially for the poor from socially and economically marginalised communities. Correcting this, according to him, required that a nation-state use tools like taxation – not as a fiscal requirement, but as a primary means to 'redistribute' revenue from the rich for the benefit of the poor.

The structural concern behind class/caste-allied poverty as a vital causal force driving inequality is (unfortunately) still entrenched in India's socio-economic landscape, where those from 'lower'-backward castes remain trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty. Upward mobility is a concern for most marginalised communities whose access to factor endowments (land, capital, market, entrepreneurship, technology) remains discriminately limited, despite decades of legal and rights-based provisioning and constitutional safeguarding of affirmative action for affected social groups.

One of the key reasons for the poor condition of many Dalits in India has to do with the crises observed in the practice of 'Ambedkarism' itself.

Crises in Ambedkarism(?)

In popular Dalit discourse, post-Babasaheb's passing, Ambedkarites and Ambedkarism became involved in disseminating his ideas and teachings, while seeking (like him) to apply those to the fight for the rights, lives and livelihoods of marginalised communities.

Ambedkarites have been in vogue in a variety of arenas, such as politics, academia, social organisations, literary and cultural organisations, employees' organisations, NGOs, virtual social networks and more. The last few decades have also seen a greater emphasis on Ambedkar's ideas in the reimagining of critical social and economic policies across India.

Nevertheless, as scholar Anand Teltumbde argued in one of his Ambedkar Memorial Lectures at Bangalore's Ambedkar Habba on April 14, 2011: "Every Ambedkarite (across the above fields), whether (s)he is conscious of it or not, experiences some crisis".

These crises are enumerated below:

- Crisis of Identity
- Crisis of Ideology
- Crisis of Leadership
- Crisis of Politics
- Crisis of Morality
- Crisis of Living
- Organisational Crisis

It is beyond the scope of this reflective essay to go into each crisis that Teltumbde discussed in his speech. Rather, I shall take the illustrative case of four of these crises points



Dr Anand Teltumbde. Photo: Youtube screengrab

Crisis of identity

According to Teltumbde, ‘identity’ should serve the purpose of distinguishing oneself – either as an individual or some aggregate of individuals – from their counterparts in larger society. But when all kinds of people, located in dissimilar camps, claim the same identity, it naturally entails an identity crisis.

“In what way, a politician with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that professes right-wing Hindutva ideology; or Shiv Sena, which follows parochial politics, identifying people on the basis of their language, religion, region and even sub-castes, is to be identified with a landless Dalit struggling to eke out his living in a field of an Other Backwards Class (OBC) farmer, or a Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) politician who professes ‘85% versus 15%’ calculus and seeks to combine them (the OBC farmer and a Dalit farm labourer) together, overlooking material contradictions between them? Obviously, there is little in common between a Dalit bureaucrat and his Dalit maid servant or his people whom he has left behind in village. Ambedkarite identity fails to serve as a viable identity to various interest groups as listed above,” Teltumbde said in his lecture.

While the Ambedkarite identity is flaunted by Dalits within themselves, many of them tend to hide it while interacting with others.

“Since (the) Ambedkarite identity is synonymous with ‘low-caste’ untouchables, many upwardly mobile Dalits have changed their caste-indicative surnames and adopted ‘upper-caste’ names. They would not have Ambedkar’s picture in their drawing room, lest

others identify their caste. Many of them even go further to adopt the language, behaviour, culture, and to observe traditions and rituals (of ‘upper castes’) merely to hide their caste identity.”

To a large extent, these “schizophrenic behaviours”, as Teltumbde calls them, of the upwardly-mobile Dalits also have created a disconnect between them and the common Dalit masses. We have seen this more lucidly in recent decades when many Dalit intellectuals of a richer class, while waxing eloquent on Dalit history, do little for the upliftment of the common Dalit masses.

This only accentuates any perceived discontentment against highly entitled (Dalit) intellectuals, expressed by those leading a less-entitled life.

Crisis of politics

“Shiv Sena, which at one point publicly denigrated Ambedkarite Dalits and even Ambedkar, distinguishing them from the other Dalits, could be expected to be just an anathema but no more.,” Teltumbde said, while discussing the crisis of politics.

Even the BSP’s entire politics, in the face of huge contrary data, according to him “was resting on the apologia that political power will automatically mean Dalit emancipation.” The recent electoral results in Uttar Pradesh indicate how the political model, earlier championed by leaders like Kanshi Ram and Mayawati, has waned in importance now. The mere representation of a Dalit leader at a higher political pedestal does not lead to ‘Dalit emancipation’, nor does it unite all Dalits.

Also read: The Hinduisation of Ambedkarism

The experience of the last seven decades; of utter non-representation of the concerns of Dalit masses in policy formulation, exposes the pitfalls of representative, parliamentary politics that our constitution strove for. Most Dalits, even today, find little to no solution in the current upper class-caste-nexus -led paradigm and may see few prospects of changing it.

Crisis of morality and organisation

In Ambedkar’s schema, ‘morality’ occupied a central position. Buddhism was not only meant to serve as an escape from the tyranny of Hinduism, but as the catalyst for the moral armament of Dalits and larger society.

As Teltumbde states:

“Alas, Buddhism failed to bring in any such change in Dalits. It has merely become an additional identity marker for an Ambedkarite. It is no more a doctrine of social morality; Buddhism is used merely as a cultural identity. There is so much activity among a section of Buddhists, who argue that Ambedkarism should be equated to Buddhism, in the sphere of learning *Pali*, building *viharas*, singing prayers, observing rituals and, lately, going for *vipasana*. Their entire emphasis is on individual deliverance through spiritual

sublimation of mind. Their conscience is not hurt to see the misery of their own brethren around. Rather, the kind of Buddhism they follow distances themselves from the world. The social becomes irrelevant for them.”

A cumulative crisis of identity, politics and morality exacerbates an organisational crisis, where Dalit organisation is often seen to be characterised by the propensity to split. For Ambedkar, going beyond the Dalit identity to see its nexus with other quasi-class limits, economic and social discriminations, was essential, both from an ideological and an organisational standpoint.

Before consolidating Dalits, the “Dalit political entrepreneurs”, as Teltumbde calls them, ventured to create a larger constituency for themselves by combining with other backward castes, as pioneered by leaders like BSP founder Kanshi Ram. His ‘bahujan’ strategy led to the BSP’s success in Uttar Pradesh, not on the basis of unifying all Dalits but in solidifying –for electoral gains – a large enough population of a ‘politicised single Dalit caste’, which now seems to have abandoned the party’s current leader, Mayawati, too.

Also read: Remembering Bhagwan Das’s Immense Contribution to Ambedkarism

Notwithstanding the anti-caste posturing of Dalit organisations, most remain heavily based on ‘caste identity’ in their organisational functioning. Many practice feudal principles in politics, rallying masses against a given leader, as against seeing a natural process of a rise in Dalit leadership amongst the community.

Organisationally, it is important for Ambedkarites – and those seeking to apply Ambedkar’s ideas and teachings in practice – to realise how any Dalit-centred movement must go beyond a caste-centred calculus for its reasoning in unifying Dalits and other marginalised groups that face deep exploitation and discrimination on other social grounds, such as those of class, gender, ethnicity and the like.

Babasaheb was deeply concerned about the gender-based discrimination of Dalit women in society; he wrote and fought about it extensively. Dalit Feminist discourse needs to go beyond the eco-chambers of classroom discussions and work for the greater representation of Dalit women in education, healthcare, employment and politics.



Babasaheb Ambedkar with the leaders and activists of the 'All India Untouchable Women's Conference' held at Nagpur in 1942. Photo: Wikimedia Commons/ CCo 1.0.

These crises, as well as Teltumbde's other points which I have not touched upon, merit deeper reflection, not just by Ambedkarites, but all those who truly believe in Ambedkarism.

The foremost challenge before Ambedkarites going forward is to construct Ambedkarism as a guiding philosophy for the struggle of the Dalit masses while recognising the reasons behind structural crises that Teltumbde describes. We can't continue basing an entire movement on the past alone; we need to take the present conditions of marginalised communities as a statement to project a vision for a better, more aspirational future for all marginalised communities.

Ambedkar, for this exercise, is not to be confined to the historical Ambedkar; he is to be the complete armour for Dalit struggle.

In conclusion, as Teltumbde puts it:

"There is much in Ambedkar that is still profound; that could be used to forge this armour. Much of it has been mishandled by people; soiled, distorted, blunted and corroded. We may have to clean it up, repair it, sharpen it and reconstruct it. One must understand that Ambedkar's has been a dynamic thinking; any snapshot of it could only

be misleading. Ambedkar's has been a great search because nothing in the traditional repertoire of philosophies he found useful for the problem at hand. One cannot say that his search ended with his life. One will have to fathom the undercurrents behind his search, weigh them out and construct a viable philosophy. It will have to be extrapolated to deal with the contemporary problems. In process of this construction, we would precisely come to know the limitations thereof and way to overcome them."

Our philosophy should provide and fight for these struggles.

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