

BR Ambedkar in London: A thesis completed, a treaty concluded, a ‘bible’ of India promised

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Ambedkar House in Camden, London. | [Bh Prashil Ratana Gautam/YouTube](#)

About two decades ago, when [Subhash Chandra] Bose was still at Cambridge, a letter dated September 23, 1920 arrived at Professor Herbert Foxwell’s office at the London School of Economics. It was written by Edwin R Seligman, an economist from Columbia University, introducing an exceedingly talented scholar – Mr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. Two months later, Foxwell wrote to the secretary of the School that there was no more intellect that the Columbia graduate could conquer in London.

The first Dalit to study at Bombay’s Elphinstone College, Ambedkar, was awarded a Baroda State Scholarship that took him to Columbia University in 1913. Three years later, he found his way to London, desirous of becoming a barrister as well as finishing a doctoral dissertation on the history of the rupee. Ambedkar enrolled at Gray’s Inn, and attended courses on geography, political ideas, social evolution and social theory at London School of Economics, at a course fee of £10.10s.

In 1917, Ambedkar was invited to join as Military Secretary in Baroda, earning at the same time a leave of absence of up to four years from the London School of Economics. Back in India, he taught for a while as a professor in Sydenham College in Bombay, while also being one of the key intelligencers on the condition of “untouchables” in India for the government, during the drafting of the Government of India Act of 1919.

In late 1920, Ambedkar was to return to London, determined more than ever before, not to spare a farthing beyond his breathing means on the city's allurements. Each day, the aspiring barrister woke up at the stroke of six. After a morning's morsel, he moseyed into the crowd of London to find his way into the British Museum.

At dusk, he would leave his seat reluctantly – after being made to scurry out by the librarian and the guards – his pockets sagging under the notes that would finally become his thesis, *The Problem of the Rupee*, some of whose guineas would eventually find their home in the Constitution of India that he was going to author about three decades later. Back at his lodging at King Henry's Road in Primrose Hill, mostly on foot, Ambedkar would live on sparsely whitened tea and poppadum late into the night.

It was here that the daughter of Ambedkar's landlady, Fanny Fitzgerald, a war widow, found her affections strangely swayed by the Indian scholar. Fitzgerald was a typist at the House of Commons. She lent him money in difficult circumstances and volunteered to introduce him to people in governance, with whom he could discuss the Dalit question that was raging in India.

An apocryphal story goes that Miss Fitzgerald once gave Ambedkar a copy of the Bible. On receiving it, the future Father of the Indian Constitution promised to dedicate a bible to her of his own authoring. True to his commitment, he would fondly dedicate his book *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables* (1945) to "F". The incident, when that promise was exchanged, occurred after Ambedkar was called to the Bar in 1923.

In March that year, his doctoral thesis ran into trouble possibly because of its radical approach to the history of Indian economy under the British administration. He might have taken the subtle hint that passages in his work needed tempering – a notion that a man of his vision was likely to have quietly pocketed more as a compliment than an insult.

Ambedkar would have been happy to chisel the nose from his David for the show, like Michelangelo had four centuries ago in order to appease the connoisseur-like pretense of Piero Soderini, who had quipped, "Isn't the nose a little too thick?" That done, Ambedkar resubmitted his thesis in August. It was approved two months later and published almost immediately thereafter. He expressed gratitude to his professor, Edwin Cannan, who, in turn, wrote the preface to his thesis, before Ambedkar travelled to Bonn for further studies.

Babasaheb, as he was now beginning to be called, was to return to London for each of the three Round Table Conferences held between 1930 and 1932. Two months before the Third Round Table Conference – in which both Labour and the Congress were absentees – Ambedkar and Gandhi reached a historic settlement in the Poona Pact. In September 1932, from the Yerwada prison near Bombay, Gandhi began a fast unto death protesting against the Ramsay MacDonald administration that was determined to divide India into provincial electorates on the basis of caste and social stratification.

In the pact signed with Madan Mohan Malviya, Ambedkar settled for 147 seats for the depressed classes. But the pact to which he was forsworn – tacitly made in London with Fanny Fitzgerald – that of writing the bible of modern India, was brewing like a storm that would take the form of an open battle between him and Gandhi, in the years of the Second World War.

Despite the strong network of Indians at the London School of Economics, Ambedkar chose not to hobnob with India League members. What might have been a sort of marriage-made-in-heaven between him and [VK Krishna] Menon was forestalled. If Menon was Nehru's alter ego, he would also be instrumental in shaping the early career of the man to become an alter ego – principal secretary –to Indira Gandhi.

In the winter of 1935, a twenty-something Parmeshwar Narain Haksar arrived in London, enrolled as a student at the University College. The following year, he made an unsuccessful attempt for the civil services. In 1937, Haksar became a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute, a distinction conferred on him with support from noted anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski.

Although Haksar also studied at the London School of Economics, it probably never became public knowledge if he had acquired formal degrees from either university. Whether or not he did, as a scholar he commanded great attention from British intellectuals, especially in his arguments on the crisis of education in India, which he reckoned had been tailored to perpetuate British imperial interests and low levels of literacy in the colony.

Haksar was to be called to Bar at the Lincoln's Inn, but, at the beckoning of Nehru, he would join the Indian Foreign Service in 1948. His red days in London were to yield him lifelong companions. In the 1930s, the Comintern came up with the policy of hatching popular fronts all across Europe with which to counter the growing threat of Nazism and Fascism. It was a phase in European ideologies that strongly affected British politics, and popular movements led by Labour leaders and student communists in London – a cosmopolitan and unswervingly left-leaning outlook that shaped much of the administration and policies of independent India until the years of the Emergency.

A socialist himself, Haksar held an influential position in the Federation of Indian Societies in UK and Ireland besides becoming the editor of its magazine, *The Indian Student*. His links with the Communist Party of Great Britain, Rajani Palme Dutt and the Soviet undercover agent at Cambridge, James Klugman – indeed with almost anyone of some consequence who supported the cause of Indian liberation – was more than enough for Scotland Yard to keep him closely watched in London.

In September 1941, when the India League organised a commemoration at the Conway Hall in Red Lion Square for the late Rabindranath Tagore a few months after his demise, Scotland Yard obliged by adding a leaf to their surveillance files. Inaugurated by M Maisky, a Russian ambassador, it was just one in a sea of events concerning India that

the Yard and other intelligencers of His Majesty's Government would tolerate during the interwar years. Almost all such gatherings featured subversive pamphlets and books published by the League and similar organisations that were openly lauded by Soviets and Soviet sympathisers.

It was just as well that Nehru also had to tolerate that under the shield of Haksar's own watch a new romantic plot thickened around Primrose Hill, that of his daughter Indira and future son-in-law, Feroze. Feroze had his flat at Abbey Road and Haksar lived half a mile away, at Abercorn Place. Haksar was befriended by the Gandhis – Indira and Feroze – who introduced him to Sasadhar Sinha of the Bibliophile Bookshop. That, besides the India League and Allahabad connection, not to mention Haksar's enviable culinary skills, ensured that he was soldered to the future of the Gandhis.

The future of the man who had leant the family his coveted surname would also take a blow on the burning issue of caste. Gandhi was not to be remembered as the sole nemesis of the British Empire. In an interview given to the BBC in 1955, Babasaheb indicated that one of the biggest reasons behind Clement Attlee handing over the reins of the Indian administration so suddenly was the persistent fear of a massive armed uprising in the colony.

He implied that the road to independence had already been paved by the Azad Hind Fauj brigadiereed by Netaji. Bose had departed from London during Ambedkar's days in the London School of Economics. But, he would return in Haksar's time.