

a Tribute to Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar - Architect of the Indian Constitution and the country's first Law and Justice Minister

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, who is known as the architect of the Indian Constitution and as a lifelong champion of civil rights for the "untouchable" dalit caste, received his PhD in Economics from Columbia University in 1927 and an honorary degree in 1952 as "a great social reformer and a valiant upholder of human rights.

Ambedkar belonged to the Mahar caste, one of the untouchable/Dalit castes in India. After completing his B.A. in Mumbai, Ambedkar earned his Ph.D. at Columbia University in New York (1913–1916). He subsequently obtained master's and doctoral degrees in economics from the London School of Economics (1916–1922).

Ambedkar was the first highly educated, politically prominent member of the Hindu "untouchable" caste. He is best remembered today for leading colonial India's only autonomous struggle for Dalit rights and social recognition; for his extensive writings that reprised caste as a form of inequality and historical injustice; and for his role as Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution, which allowed him to leave a profound and enduring mark on Indian trajectories of democratic justice and affirmative action policy.

As a student at Columbia, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar studied with some of the greatest figures of interwar American liberalism, such as John Dewey and Edward Seligman, and the American historians James Shotwell and James Harvey Robinson. John Dewey, an American philosopher and educational reformer, was Dr. Ambedkar's intellectual mentor at Columbia University. Under his guidance, Ambedkar formulated the blueprints of his ideas for social justice and equality.

"The best friends I have had in my life," he told the New York Times in 1930, "were some of my classmates at Columbia and my great professors."

Like his near contemporary, W.E.B. Du Bois, Ambedkar was an insurgent thinker whose writings consistently engaged European and American history and political thought. This allowed him to explore the universality of political concepts, as well as to expose the dark histories of Euro-America with regard to its histories of injustice and dehumanization. It is this doubled character of Ambedkar's thought—its deep globality, as well as its persistent concern with the specific distress of untouchability that distinguishes him from other anticolonial thinkers of his generation.

In 1936, Ambedkar wrote the Annihilation of Caste for a 1936 meeting of a group of liberal Hindu caste-reformers. However, the group withdrew their invitation after seeing the draft of his speech. As a result, Ambedkar published the work himself, and it became an instant classic. The Columbia Center for New Media Teaching and Learning offers an annotated version of the work at their Annihilation of Caste website. Columbia's celebration of its 250th anniversary in 2004 included a profile of Ambedkar on its website.

Ambedkar's mark on Indian trajectories of democratic justice based on the ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity could be heard during US President Barack Obama's address to the Parliament of India in 2010. President Obama invoked Ambedkar's contribution to the Indian constitution and Indian society, saying "We believe that no matter who you are or where you come from, every person can fulfill their God-given potential. Just as a Dalit like Dr. Ambedkar could lift himself up and pen the words of the constitution that protects the rights of all Indians. We believe that no matter where you live – whether a village in Punjab or the by lanes of Chandni Chowk, an old section of Kolkata or a new high-rise in Bangalore – every person deserves the same chance to live in security and dignity, to get an education, to find work, and to give their children a better future."

Ambedkar saw the caste system as an unequal mode of organization of social relations, with the pure and the impure at either extreme. He argued that this system was sanctified through religious codes that forbade intermixture of castes and confined social interaction to a regulated structure. Ambedkar became a staunch anti-oppression advocate for Dalits through his politics and writing. One of his critical works is *The Annihilation of Caste*, which was an undelivered speech he wrote in 1936.

Father of the Constitution

Elected to chair the drafting committee of the Constituent Assembly in 1947, Ambedkar abandoned many of his radical convictions as he steered the Assembly through the process of drafting India's constitution. His contributions can be seen in some of the special constitutional provisions for social equality for the Scheduled Castes (the term for untouchables first used by the British). The practice of untouchability was "abolished" in the constitution of independent India (articles 15 and 17), and the Untouchability (Offenses) Act of 1955 makes such discriminatory practices punishable by law. Article 46 provides the Indian version of affirmative action, specifically the promotion of educational and economic benefits for the "weaker sections" of the society.

Ambedkar and Gandhi

Ambedkar became quite critical of the lack of commitment to untouchables' rights on the part of the Indian National Congress and the outcome of the so-called Poona Pact of 1932 made him an implacable critic. Dalits continue to feel that Gandhi betrayed them with his denial of the right of separate electorates, which for them meant genuine political power.

Gandhi was a caste Hindu, a Vaishya. Ambedkar was a Mahar Dalit and knew discrimination firsthand. Gandhi never repudiated the varna theory of four major groups, although he fought against the idea of a group below the varnas and he held all varnas to be equal. Ambedkar repudiated the entire caste hierarchy, dismissing what was a current effort among untouchables to "sanskritize," that is, adopt upper-class customs in order to raise their status. Gandhi did not believe in political battles for untouchables' rights or approve their attempts to enter temples

unless the temple authorities agreed. Ambedkar felt political power was part of the solution to untouchability. Basically, Gandhi's faith was in change of heart; Ambedkar's trust was in law, political power, and education.