

LEADERSHIP FOR A NATION

Roxana-Elisabeta MARINESCU¹
Mariana NICOLAE²

Abstract

*This article is based on two speeches held at the seminar **Ambedkar and Social Change**, to celebrate 125th birth anniversary of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, organized by the Embassy of India and the Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication, ASE, on 14 April 2016 at The Bucharest University of Economic Studies. It presents Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's groundbreaking work in laying the foundation of the new Indian state at the dawn of Independence. The article emphasizes the postcolonial perspective of bringing peripheral groups in central position in a shift of power relations triggered by a new social, economic and political reality. The principle of intersectionality is privileged in this analysis of caste and gender, as constituents of Dr. Ambedkar's servant leadership style.*

Keywords: postcolonialism, social change, gender, caste, intersectionality

1. Introduction

Modern India has emerged from the work and struggle of various of her leaders who have contributed to her development. Among those leaders a special place is given to Dr. Ambedkar's work as the nation's first Law Minister and afterwards as the Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee, with the task of writing independent India's new Constitution. In 2015 Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, one of India's most important and charismatic leaders, was the 3rd most searched historic personality on Google, after Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. Google search trends reflect his timeless relevance and popularity.

So who was this important leader of modern India? Dr. Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar, was an outstanding leader of India's struggle for freedom and a strong crusader for the rights of the socially underprivileged classes of Indian society. He was a scholar, journalist, educationist, legal luminary, social reformer and political leader.

¹ Roxana-Elisabeta Marinescu, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies,
roxana.marinescu@rei.ase.ro

² Mariana Nicolae, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies,
mariana.nicolae@rei.ase.ro

As a Labour Minister, he led the struggle for reduction of work from 12 hours a day to 8 hours in 1942. He contributed the idea of setting up of Employment Exchanges in India. He was almost entirely responsible for establishing the important organizations and projects such as the Central Technical Power Board, the National Power Grid System and the Central Water Irrigation and Navigation Commission. Dr. Ambedkar saw education as a tool for the liberation of the socially backward from illiteracy, ignorance and superstition, reason for which he founded the People's Education Society in 1945. He resigned from the Cabinet in 1951 when his draft Hindu Code Bill failed to receive the support of the Parliament. And above all he was the principal architect of the Indian Constitution.

In the words of The President of India, Shri Pranab Mukherjee, Dr. Ambedkar's vision of modern India was an all-inclusive nation, transformed politically, economically and socially through the rule of law:

Dr. Ambedkar was clear in his mind that he wanted to see a socio-economic and political transformation of India. He wanted the vast multitude of people of India to enjoy freedom and equality of opportunities. He wanted to rid India of casteism and communalism and bring education and development to every corner of the country. He wanted India to emerge as a modern state where liberty, equality and fraternity flourishes and backwardness is wiped out. Dr. Ambedkar believed in radical change, but he did not want this change to happen through bloodshed. He wanted transformation through parliamentary democracy and rule of law. (Mukherjee, 2014)

2. Leadership for personal and community development

Dr. Ambedkar's legacy should be read through postcolonial lens, as his main body of work had to do with readjusting the Indian state within the new independence framework. Thus, the power relations within the new state were reinterpreted, with a view to political, social and economic justice. Equality and equity were Dr. Ambedkar's concerns regarding the peripheral and underprivileged strata of society – especially Dalits, but also women, Muslims, etc. – their rights in the new democracy becoming the core of his leadership.

As a true leader Dr. Ambedkar had a vision for India's development for which socio-economic and political transformation were needed. He placed liberty, equality and fraternity in the centre of his philosophy, in a postcolonial context in which he envisioned radical change not through bloodshed and violence, but through parliamentary debates and the rule of law.

In Dr. Ambedkar's words:

We must make our political democracy a social democracy as well. [...] What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity are the principles of life. These principles of liberty, equality and fraternity are not to be treated as separate items in a trinity. They form a union or trinity in the sense that to divorce one from the other is to defeat the very purpose of democracy. [...] Without equality, liberty would produce the supremacy of the few over the many. Equality without liberty would kill individual initiative. Without fraternity, liberty and equality would not become a natural course of thing. It would require a constable to enforce them. [...] On the social plane, we have in India a society based on the principles of graded inequality which means elevation for some and degradation for others. On the economic plane, we have a society in which there are some who have immense wealth as against many who live in abject poverty. [...] How long shall we continue to live this life of contradictions? ...We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy. (Ambedkar, 1949)

Dr. Bimrao Ramji Ambedkar's groundbreaking work in drafting the modern Indian Constitution, adopted in 1949, as well as in opposing discrimination against untouchability and in redefining the caste system is at the basis of the system of reservation of jobs in state institutions, such as the civil service and education, for members of "scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and other backward classes" – a system which we now call 'affirmative action'. His actions in this concern were prompted by the following belief:

The castes are anti-national. In the first place because they bring about separation in social life. They are anti-national also because they generate jealousy and antipathy between caste and caste. (Ambedkar, 1949)

3. Empowerment and rights for Indian women

Dr. Ambedkar's famous words "I measure the progress of community by the degree of progress which women have achieved" state the high status he attributed to women in society. These words were pronounced at the "Mahad Satyagraha" on 20 March 1927, the march to allow lower castes access to a water tank and are relevant for the utmost importance women had in his grand scheme of moving India forward.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's vision of Indian women's rights is at the intersection of gender, caste, social group and religion. He construed the category of *Indian woman* under the sign of oppression and tried to simultaneously empower them through his speeches and through his deeds, as well as legislate in their favour while he served for the Indian government.

In this position, as we now know from history, he was the promoter of social reforms. When he did not gather support in Parliament, he resigned, such as in the case of the Uniform Civil Code (1951), following his Hindu Code Bill. This promoted gender equality in the laws of inheritance and marriage and sought to put an end to different personal laws existing at the time in India. It would have meant in fact prohibiting practices permitted at the time by the so-called ‘personal laws’, such as polygamy and unilateral divorce. Moreover, it would have established the basis for secularism and gender equality of inheritance, marriage, remarriage and divorce. Laws based on this Bill were later passed: The Hindu Marriage Act (1955), The Hindu Succession Act (1956), The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act (1956) and The Adoption and Maintenance Act (1956). All helped towards the emancipation of women in India, as they stipulated rights for women regarding guardians for minor children, adoption, alimony, etc. (Das, 2015: 191-195).

Dr. Ambedkar managed to impose other measures, as well, such as the Maternity Benefit Bill (1942) or family planning measures. In the Indian Constitution, which he drafted, the articles referring to women’s rights are: Equal rights and opportunities in political, economic and social spheres (Art. 14), Prohibition of discrimination on the ground of sex and affirmative discrimination in favour of women (Art. 15), Equal means of livelihood and equal pay for equal work (Art. 39), Human conditions of work and maternity relief (Art. 42), Fundamental duties to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women (Art. 51) (cf. Singariya).

Women were an oppressed group as such, in Dr. Ambedkar’s vision, but also, Hindu women or Muslim women or Dalit women faced different types of oppression, in addition to the ones to the category *woman*. Therefore, he addressed these issues separately.

Thus, regarding Hindu women, in his well-known paper *Caste in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development* (Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: *Writings and Speeches*, first ed. 1987 by the Education Dept., Gvt. Of Maharashtra), he described the practices of Sati, enforced widowhood and child marriage as power and control instruments over women. His explanation comes from the “superimposition of endogamy on exogamy”, which “means the creation of caste”. His claim is that the caste system is not divine or natural, but it is a means of Brahmins of oppressing, controlling, subjugating and exerting power over their women. When there is numerical disparity in marriage and women and men become a surplus due to death of spouse, regulation is imposed through three means.

In the case of women, through sati (the immolation of the widow on her husband’s pyre) and enforced widowhood (together with all sorts of restrictions, such as a shaven head, restriction on diets, wearing of colourless saris and no intermixing with other members of her group). In the case of surplus men (widowers), the

corrective measure is recruiting another marriageable woman in the group, thus resorting to child marriage, which in fact, is another instrument of control over women. So, in his speech entitled *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), Dr. Ambedkar gives the solutions of education, inter-caste marriages and inter-dining to eliminate castes and patriarchy (cf. Usha, 2009). Concerning equal education for men and women, as early as during his studies in New York, he showed his preoccupation, as he stated in a letter: “We shall see better days soon and our progress will be greatly accelerated if male education is *persuaded side by side with female education.*” (cf. Katulkar)

In the case of Muslim women, Dr. Ambedkar has a similar position: in his writing *Pakistan or The Partition of India*, he shows that oppression is even worse for Muslim women, although their private law, the Sharia, claims differently:

Take the position of women. It is insisted by Muslims that the legal rights given to Muslim women ensure them a greater measure of independence than allowed to other Eastern women—for example, Hindu women—and are in excess of the rights given to women in some Western countries. (...) Take the caste system. Islam speaks of brotherhood. Everybody infers that Islam must be free from slavery and caste. Regarding slavery nothing needs to be said. It stands abolished now by law. But while it existed, much of its support was derived from Islam and Islamic countries. While the prescriptions by the Prophet regarding the just and humane treatment of slaves contained in the Koran are praiseworthy, there is nothing whatever in Islam that lends support to the abolition of this curse. (Ambedkar, 1945)

But the greatest empowerment work was for the so-called untouchable women. It suffices to describe one episode and its consequences to illustrate this. It refers to the Mahad Satyagraha, the march for water on 20 March 1927. The day is now celebrated as Social Empowerment Day in India. In this march more than 5,000 men and women gathered with sticks in hand, the stick being the symbol of the mahar’s caste-based labour. In the evening of the march, Dr. Ambedkar held a speech in front of the women, urging them to conduct the struggle against the caste system together with men, by joining the local parliaments (the Parishades). Ambedkar asked the dalit women to renounce their markers of caste and gender (jewellery and ways of wearing their saris) and also to remove the stigma of untouchability in the education of their children:

The problems of living have to be tackled by men and by women together. If men alone undertake this task (annihilation of castes) they will, I have no doubt, take a longer time. If women, however take this up, I believe that the task can be successfully completed sooner...Therefore, you must attend the Parishads. The task of ending Untouchability is a woman's question. You gave birth to us and you know how people grade us and treat us even lower than animals...When you know this all how would you answer people who will raise questions about why you gave

birth to us at all? (...) Then why must children born to you be insulted? (...) So take a vow that you will not live with the stigma. Give up your old habits...It is these customs that mark the stigma of untouchability. These customs were forced upon us at some point in history. Under British rule, you can no longer be forced. All those things that mark you as an untouchable - you must drop them. The way you drape your saris marks you as untouchable...Similarly the neckful and handful or artificial jewellery marks you...Clothes bring more grace than jewellery...Knowledge and education are nor for men alone. They are essential for women too. Our forefathers have recognized this. Those who went into the army, educated their daughters...I hope that you will take my advice seriously and implement it without delay. (Pawar and Moon 2000: 57-9, apud Rege, 2006: 53).

As a result of this speech, many women threw their jewellery and began to drape their saris down to the ankles. Also, women leaders emerged: two women were appointed on the executive committee of Janata, the periodical started by Ambedkar in 1930. Seats began to be reserved for dalit women in the Provincial Legal Councils and dalit women were appointed as honorary magistrates. There were other important resolutions against, for example, the cuts in wages of women textile workers, promotion of compulsory education for dalit girls through freeships, appointment of dalit teachers and ban on marriage of girls until the completion of education (Pawar and Moon, 2000, apud Rege, 2006: 54).

It is through actions and speeches such as this one that Dr. Ambedkar succeeded in inspiring Indian women to fight for their rights. Thus, for example, they founded a Dalit Mahila Federation in 1942 at Nagpur. They passed resolutions regarding better conditions for mill worker women, hostels for dalit girls, scholarships for school and higher education and argued for the right to divorce and a law against bigamy. In their speeches they argued that there was no longer any reason for remaining under the domination of men in the community and claimed adequate representation for women. Moreover, in 1948 at a meeting organized at the Siddharth College in Bombay, women underlined the need to spread Ambedkar's message of "Educate, Organise and Agitate" through separate Dalit women's organizations (cf. Pawar and Moon, 2000: 81-84, apud Rege, 2006: 55).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, we could state that the foundation of the modern Indian state is based on the work of visionaries, such as Dr. Ambedkar. As he created the legal framework for emancipating Indian women, especially those of lower castes, whom he regarded as oppressed, Dr. Ambedkar also inspired them in their fight for equal gender representation and rights. Of course, there is more to do still, but today, as we celebrate 125 years since Dr. Ambedkar's birth, we can only stress his epochal role in the struggle for social and political rights for women in India.

As a true leader, Dr. Ambedkar developed himself and made incredible efforts to develop his community – from the closest one to the largest – his country, India. And he did all this through what we call today servant leadership – leading while serving our communities.

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The authors

Dr. Roxana Marinescu is an Associate Professor in Business Communication in English and French with the Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania. She holds an MA in British Cultural Studies and a PhD in Philology ("Magna cum Laude") from the University of Bucharest, with a thesis on identity and postcolonialism in novels by authors of South-Asian origin. She has published a number of articles on a variety of topics, including intercultural communication, cultural studies, multilingualism, education for democratic citizenship, gender studies, and foreign language education. Also, she published several books and textbooks, among which: *Violated Bodies: A Cross-Cultural Reading by Writers of South-Asian Origin* (2009), *Self-Constructs of Identity: The Case of Northern Ireland* (2012), *Northern Ireland. Border Country* (2013), *Salman Rushdie and Multiple Identities* (2013) and *Intercultural Communication in Contemporary Society* (2013).

Dr. Mariana Nicolae is a Professor of English and business communication with the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE-Bucureşti), Head of the Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication and the Director of the Master in International Business Communication programme delivered in English. Besides teaching, research and academic management, her current duties involve institutional building, coaching and mentoring, networking with people and organizations, publishing, travelling both in-country and abroad to attend conferences and seminars and organizing (inter)national conferences in Romania. She was a Fulbright senior scholar in 2005 and participated as an expert evaluator in the Framework Programme FP7 of the European Union. She is a founding member of the English-Speaking Union-Romania and of the Association for promoting performance in education, an honorary member of Phi Beta Delta, Gamma Lambda CSUSB, a member of the Romanian Association for American Studies, of the Association for Women Entrepreneurship Development, of the Society for Business Excellence and of the professional association Lingua Economica.