

REPUTATIONS: *Then and now*

No.10 DR BHIMRAO RAMJI AMBEDKAR

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Long before he reached England during the First World War and was admitted to Gray's Inn as a student, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956), the distinguished barrister, politician and social reformer, had undergone shattering experiences in India that would influence the rest of his life. The root cause was that he was born an 'untouchable' or dalit, a word derived from Sanskrit meaning crushed or broken.

Though the most painful event that lived long in his memory occurred when he was only nine, Ambedkar never felt capable of writing about it until nearly 50 years later. In about 1900, his father, then a widower, was sent as a government cashier to a posting some distance from Bombay. He went ahead of the family but soon called for his children to join him. They travelled unaccompanied by train to the station nearest to their new home. Unfortunately, because of a misunderstanding, no one was there to meet them. The stationmaster approached ...

'We were well-dressed children', Ambedkar wrote later. 'From our dress or talk no one could make out that we were children of the untouchables. Indeed the stationmaster was quite sure we were Brahmin children, and was extremely touched at the plight in which he found us ... the stationmaster asked us who we were. Without a moment's thought I blurted out that we were Mahars (a community treated as untouchables). His face underwent a sudden change. We could see that he was overpowered by a strange feeling of repulsion ... He went away to his room and we stood where we were ... the sun was almost setting. Father had not turned up ... We were quite bewildered.' The children had no option but to see if they could continue their journey in a bullock cart available for hire outside the station. By now it was known they were untouchables and not a single cart man was prepared to 'contaminate' himself by driving the children. Eventually a solution was found whereby the children drove the cart and the cart man walked beside them and received double the normal fare. They set off as night fell. During the long journey the children were refused water (because they were untouchables) and slept in the open air. The cart man slept apart. The children reached their destination by noon the following day, dehydrated and greatly scarred by their experience. They had always known of course that they were members of a pariah sect, but within their own community they had been protected from many of the consequences. Now they had seen what it meant in practice.



The story is almost biblical and some of Ambedkar's subsequent writings and speeches do appear to have a Christian content but then the basic message of all religions is the same: do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

While he received some formal schooling, where he was segregated from others not of his caste, Ambedkar was largely self-educated, matriculating in 1907. The following year he entered Elphinstone College, affiliated to the University of Bombay (Mumbai), the first untouchable to do so. His further scholastic and academic career was quite remarkable. In 1912 he received a degree in economics and political science from Bombay University and the following year he moved to the United States on a Baroda Scholarship to undertake studies at Columbia University. There in 1915 and 1916 he received two Masters degrees in Economics and later was awarded a doctorate. Meanwhile, he travelled to England in 1916 and joined Gray's Inn where he was called to the Bar in 1922. He enrolled at the London School of Economics and received a doctorate from the School in 1923. Back in India, he practised law in Bombay.

During the 1920s and 1930s he became the leader of the untouchables and a legislator, fighting to remove restrictions to which the untouchables alone were subjected. While he

agreed that colonialism needed to be confronted, Ambedkar mocked Gandhi for pioneering the village as the centrifugal force that would generate India's future prosperity spreading out into the cities. The economist in him saw clearly that to revere village society was backward looking: 'What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism?' The two men were opposites: Gandhi reinvented himself in the dhoti, shawl and staff that conjured up rural life, while Ambedkar, on the other hand, wore three piece suits and spoke in the perfect English of the courtroom that identified him with the city.

He became Principal of the Government Law College in Bombay in 1935 and, the following year, founded the Independent Labour party. In 1947 he was appointed the Minister for Law and Justice in the first government post independence, being entrusted with the task of drawing up the new Constitution. This was his chance to correct all the unfairness of Indian society. In its final form, the Constitution abolished untouchability and henceforth the Indian citizen could no longer be turned away from a shop, hotel, or public well on grounds of sex, race, caste or religion. It was a start.

Ambedkar also sought to introduce a new Hindu Civil Code that would abolish, among other things, polygamy and restrictions on inter caste marriage and legalise divorce. These steps were bitterly opposed as 'an atom bomb on Hindu Society'. The legislation was shelved and Nehru (the Prime Minister) resolved to introduce the reforms piecemeal, causing Ambedkar to resign as Law Minister in

1951, believing that Nehru had capitulated to Hindu pressure. He had not or, if so, only temporarily. By the end of the 1950s, most of Ambedkar's social reforms contained in his original code had been adopted, though unfortunately he did not live to see it.

Until relatively recently, Ambedkar was largely sidelined in the history of India and even the best educated knew little of him. If his name was mentioned, it was in muted tones as an inconvenient figure best left in the past. But reputation is never static: it is constantly being reassessed so that now the landscape is completely changed. Ambedkar's birthday is an annual holiday in India; there are memorials and statues of him in many places across the country and the 125th anniversary of his birth is the subject of national celebration in 2016. He is greatly admired. Even the home he occupied while he was studying to be called at Gray's Inn has been acquired lately by the Indian Government and is being renovated for possible opening to the public.

The Inn too has played a role in preserving his name. We have a portrait of Dr Ambedkar presented to the Inn by the Ambedkar Memorial Society in 1974 when tributes were paid by the Treasurer (Master Hugh Francis QC) and His Excellency B K Nehru, the High Commissioner for India. In 1997 Master Lord Bingham, then Lord Chief Justice, planted a catalpa tree in the Walks in honour of Ambedkar. This autumn it is hoped that the History Society at the Inn, in conjunction with the Indian High Commission, will host an evening lecture about him in Hall on 8 November followed by a reception. This will mark the centenary of Dr Ambedkar's admission to the Inn. ■



Dr Ambedkar being sworn in as independent India's first Law Minister by President Rajendra Prasad. Prime Minister Nehru looks on.