

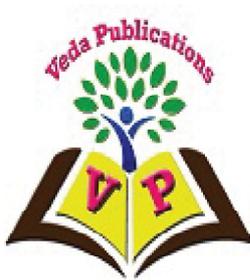


## CURING THE ROOTS: DR. AMBEDHKAR AS AN ENVIRONMENTALIST

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### ABSTRACT

The constitution drawn by India under the headship of Dr. Ambedkar had stayed much longer than those drawn by other democratic countries wherein the life of any constitution is just two decades. This stands as a touchstone on which the validity of his views can be tested. The constitutional framework that he designed has broken many codes of social, economic and environmental conduct which existed till then, filtered into the society corrupting its progress. The world today speaks a lot about sustainable development. The world as such is focused on balancing the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental. Any plan of action for the betterment of the people, planet and prosperity has environment at its core. And Dr. Ambedkar is found in this regard to be an inspiring leader. When one attempts to understand Ambedkar's views on environment and development, one finds deep-set ideologies, which refer to layers and nuances to Indian environmental thought. They in fact, extend to the roots of environmental justice movement in India, which involves Dalits' rights over natural resources, and a huge cry to seek emancipation for them through procuring right to development especially via the natural environment. Ambedkar felt that the sharing of water with no caste imposed restrictions alone can dilute the menace caused by caste-ism.

**Keywords :** *Constitution, Sustainability, Environment, Environmental Justice, Water Sharing*



## INTRODUCTION

Many leaders have walked upon this earth leaving their footprints on the sands of time. Dr. Ambedkar has left a legacy which is unchallenged by the rest of the world. The constitutional framework that he designed has broken many codes of social, economic and environmental conduct which existed till then, filtered into the society corrupting its progress. It is seen that the constitutional frameworks drawn with all insight, in most democratic countries have stood valid only for a period of twenty years. But it's a surprise to the rest of the world that the constitution drawn by India under the headship of Dr. Ambedkar had stayed much longer and still remains good enough. This again stands as a touchstone on which the validity of his views can be tested. "It is estimated that one-third of all reef-building corals, a third of all freshwater mollusks, a third of sharks and rays, a quarter of all mammals, a fifth of all reptiles, and a sixth of all birds are headed toward oblivion." (Elizabeth Kolbert 17-18) and many democracies also have moved to oblivion but not that of our nation and the credit goes to the deep foresight of the greatest of statesmen Dr. Ambedkar.

## SUSTAINABILITY

The world today speaks a lot about sustainable development. All academic bodies are evaluated for 'sustainability'. Every administrative body is concerned about sustainable development. The world as such is focused on balancing the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental. Any plan of action for the betterment of the people, planet and prosperity has environment at its core. Protection of the planet by creating a health-hazard free environment and providing dignity and development in harmony with nature is expected. And Dr. Ambedkar is found in this regard to be an inspiring leader and is also an outstanding example of what Antonio Gramsci called an organic intellectual, that is, one who represents and articulates the interests of an entire social class. The United Nations observed the 125<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of Ambedkar in April 2016 with an intention of focusing on achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). And the views and guidance extended with

great forethought by Ambedkar stands as a testimony for perfect sustainability in all walks of lives in a society which was very badly in need of the same.

## ENVIRONMENTALISM: MEANS TO EQUALITY

From a historical perspective, environmental scholars have placed Gandhi, Nehru as well as Indira Gandhi as inspiring the rest of the nation as environmentalists. However, Ambedkar's views on environmentalism seems to have been neglected. His views and struggles which relate to agriculture, villages, land, water management, science and technology are undoubtedly long lasting issues of India's environmental and political norms and traditions. Mahatma Gandhi has been credited as having an intuitive critique of modern civilization but on the other hand Ambedkar has often been seen as a visionary with modern ideals and criticized as having been inspired by the west for inspiration.

When one attempts to understand Ambedkar's views on environment and development, one finds deep-set ideologies, which refer to layers and nuances to Indian environmental thought.

...history is not at all related to Biology and Bio-Geology, but it is related to the human activities guided by his economy, sociology, philosophy, religion, political thinking etc. all these first rule of Theory of Orient, human mental disposition evolves from the local soil and ecology. In the end of every argument, it is Bio-geology and nothing else. (Baldwa 194)

They in fact, extend to the roots of environmental justice movement in India, which involves Dalits' rights over natural resources, and a huge cry to seek emancipation for them through procuring right to development, especially via the natural environment. While looking at Ambedkar through an ecological lens, it is imperative that the social, material and environmental perspective of looking into affairs is seen.

Pruning of the top called *mundaka* in Sanskrit helps in the lush growth of the tree. Similarly, futile thoughts in man's mind are culled away through discrimination against good and bad, aided by the proper choice of man's will. Courageously discarding

many false assumptions and preconceived ideas, truth emerges on its own in the filled silence of his empty egoless mind, says Mundaka Upanishad. Ambedkar always insisted on a development which involved both destruction and construction of natural and social worlds, because he believes that human nature is fortunately against a one-sided development and has huge promise for an all-round development in a congenial environment. Heidegger, the German philosopher who has the basic premise of his philosophy based on “the irreducible givenness” of human existence-‘dasein’ as he calls it. Heidegger partly de-centers the human subject and recommends an eco-centric existence. “Man must turn to the earth, the inexhaustible mother who is the primary fount of all meaning” (Kurup 36). A complete picture of the treacherous world of deals and surreptitious contracts and treaties rampant among the men at the helm of affair, has plunged the law-abiding citizens into a nadir of despair. It was in such a condition that Ambedkar stepped in and helped them with the ‘same’ law.

#### INDIAN AGRARIANISM

Land and agriculture which are crucial for the transformation of Indian agrarianism was strongly proposed by Ambedkar. He formulated an intelligent and thoughtful agrarianism that encompassed a broad range of values. He was the one who laid the foundation for a democratic rural development, by launching a general attack on caste society. He was a staunch exponent of a set of ideas and actions designed to change systems of land holdings from the perspective of farmers, landless, and untouchables. Ambedkar’s focus on land ownership developed and strengthened a major strand of Indian intellectual and agrarian tradition breaking the codes of the basic economic and moral thoughts underlying the agrarianism in the Indian past. Through resolutions and legislations, he made various efforts in the Indian parliament and also amidst the general public, to abolish the oppressive *Mahar* system in Maharashtra of which he himself was an acute victim. Similarly, he began to challenge the *khoti* system, a land tenure system in the Bombay Presidency.

#### POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC ARGUMENTS

Babasaheb wanted to form a collage of his agrarian and environmental philosophy wherein, environment is not denied based on caste injustices and where development of rural landscape is not disconnected from social relations and structures of power. Issues of land revenue, land holdings, land acquisition, land records, forest land, small farms and farmers, and cooperative farming, formulated his future vision for a rural society with an ecological sensibility.

Amongst ecologists, a sharp difference exists between those who subscribe to what has been called the fences and fines approach – the strict policing of protected areas and the exclusion of human activity from them – and those who advocate a more inclusive, landscape-centered paradigm: one that supports protected areas, but looks beyond them to the wider landscapes of which they form part; to engage with people living in these landscapes, the problems of poverty and social justice, and seek their consent, however grudging, to conservation goals on pragmatic grounds. (*Nature without Borders* 79)

Though the anti-interventionist eco-radicals hold to ‘Nature knows best’ attitude, Martin Lewis’ Promethean environmentalism maintains that, “for the foreseeable future we must *actively manage* the planet to ensure the survival of as much biological diversity as possible. No less is necessary if we are to begin atoning for our real environmental sins” (qtd. in Garrard 20), setting a “moderate manifesto for progress” (qtd. In Garrard 20), called for by Richard North’s *Life on a Modern Planet*.

Ambedkar was very much bothered about the excessive sub-division and fragmentation of agricultural holdings and serious suggestions were extended by him, to have a comprehensive scheme of consolidation. He gave a clarion call on the acquisition and improvement of land for village sites and the allocation of tracts of forest land to the depressed classes. His quest for agrarian justice centered on land, led to political action for revitalizing society. He even insisted that the untouchables should leave the villages

and wherever they find fallow land, they should capture it and start farming. If anybody tries to stop them they should resist he stated. This way they should live with dignity in their own new society Maintenance of land records, concern regarding insufficiency of useful cattle and organic manures, advocating state owned agricultural sector, collective farming, state sponsored cultivation through the supply of water, manure and seeds were noteworthy reformations that Ambedkar suggested.

Ambedkar's environmental experiences as an untouchable, with many stories of horrors and hardships that passed through generations are very distinct. "The inter-generational tensions engendered with the changing ethos make increasing demands on the individual and contribute in creating a void which is nothing but a chaotic feeling of rootlessness in life, incessantly haunting their psyche and corroding every sphere of their life. (Swain 131) Nearly every aspect of his experience put him in contact with the natural environment, bestowing him with practical knowledge. All aspects of his relationship with the environment were necessarily mediated through ties of caste, while also being social and political in nature. Ambedkar questions thus: What kind of unified society, can promote a new solidarity? Will conversion spell the end of discrimination? What new social vice might arise instead? Will technological development lead to individual empowerment and remove community and caste society? "It is our humiliations, my friend, and not the conquests that dominate our memories. And there are memories whose sting neither time nor words can heal. They burrow in the body of your soul, like maggots, wriggling, mocking, green forever" (Apprentice 21).

### **WATER AND COMMUNITY**

The right to the distribution and access to water has been the central concern of Ambedkar. Ambedkar's relationship with the natural world was the way in which he perceived the *village*. Mahad *satyagraha*, asserting untouchables' rights to take water from the public watering places, was one of the defining moments in Ambedkar's political thought and action which led to massive changes in the outlook and status of the untouchables.

Mahad *satyagraha* and the burning of *Manusmriti* are symbolic of Dalits' and Ambedkar's struggles with the right to use water irrespective of one's caste. Ambedkar felt that sharing of water with no caste imposed restrictions alone can dilute the menace caused by caste-ism. This struggle also symbolized a communal link between untouchables, agrarian and environmental ethos and traditions. The centrality of water for untouchables, and the abuse and misuse of public water bodies became a converging point for divergent traditions, putting forward a humane theory of democratic agrarianism. He reiterated that ours is an agricultural country and our soil is exhausted and that the salvation lies not in increasing the size of farms, but in having intensive cultivation that is employing more capital and more labour on the farms such as we have.

The only grounds of optimism lie in comparison with other countries. Our environmental record is better than China's – helped by strong cultural taboos on food (reducing hunting for meat over much of the subcontinent) and the fact that our polity has traditionally been less centralized (making wholesale social and environmental engineering more difficult). Unlike Latin America, we are free, for the most part, of the curse of natural resources. (Eduardo Galeano 21)

Thus Ambedkar stands as a defining force who worked with vigour for the betterment of the nation as a whole.

### **CONCLUSION**

Goldsmith in his "The Deserted Village" says that, "Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey, / Where wealth accumulates, And men decay" (*The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* 230) Each community, whether high or low, is complementary to one another in a balanced society. Sovereignty and the slum are the two poles of the same stick. The slum dwellers provide the nation with their sweat spilling hard manual labour while the elite ones advance the nation in higher fields. Deep valleys are caused only by rising mountains. Taking care of the welfare of the socially

downtrodden is to be one primary concern of any ruler, whether he is a monarch or a democrat.

“...an ontological dimension has been forced out of consciousness by the systems of a society which overvalues rationality, will power, acquisitiveness, productivity and technological skill. Because of this ... they have been thrown into a world of reified fragments which say nothing, into a world of men who talk past each other and into a time-stream of disconnected present moments without past or future.(Fowler 80)

In all the practices of four categories of yoga, the hands in Karmayoga, head in Gnanayoga, heart in Bhaktiyoga and inner spiritual energy in Kriyayoga is utilized to attain the spiritual goal. There is nobody who is all head, or all heart or all hands or all energy. Man is a combination of all the following dimensions. Pathanjali's Yoga Sutras encompass all these four, judiciously to be mixed in one's life to attain full growth. And Ambedkar stands as a greatest yogi who exercised all the power bestowed by democracy to realize a holistic growth for the nation.

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