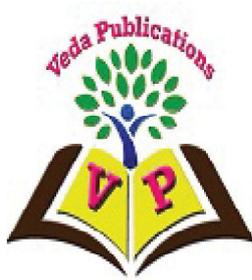




DR. AMBEDKAR AS THE MODERN MOSES : THE VOICE OF THE OPPRESSED

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(English Professor, Editor & Publisher : Veda Publications)



ABSTRACT

Born in a socially backward community, but exposed to a highly forward system of education, rational in outlook and rebellious in temperament, Ambedkar appeared on the scene at the appropriate moment to assume the national leadership and participate in the social struggles and constitutional matters in a strategic way. He was the unrivalled champion of the depressed classes, dedicating his life to the cause of their amelioration. Like Moses who led the Israelites from the Egyptian slavery to the door steps of the promised Land and gave them their religion and law, Dr. Ambedkar tried to instil in the vast masses of India's outcastes a sense of confidence, defiance, dignity, freedom and hope. He catalogued, expanded and interpreted the code of the laws of a nation. The present paper is a modest attempt to study the work of Dr. Ambedkar in parallel to the life of Moses, the greatest leader of the Children of Israel at a pivotal time in history: the Exodus from Egypt and the forty years of wandering in the desert before the people entered the Promised Land.

Ambedkar was born in an untouchable caste. In those days persons born in such a caste were called out-castes, untouchables, pariahs, panchamas and so on. The untouchables were denied the use of public wells and were asked to drink only filthy water they could find. Their children were not admitted to schools. The Hindu temples were closed to them. The caste Hindus did not show any sympathy for them. Even the barbers and the washer men refused to render service to them. For ages they were denied admission to all public services including police and military services. D.R. Jatava in his book quotes: "In short there was absolute lack of social humanism....they took birth as untouchables, they lived as untouchables, and they died as untouchables."¹

Ambedkar's thinking arose out of his acute dissatisfaction with the anomalous treatment meted out to the people of his community. He was born an untouchable and, therefore, he had an intense yearning to see that the untouchables are better placed in social, political and economic fields. He had a deep faith in fundamental human rights, in the equal rights of man and woman, in the dignity of the individual, in the promotion of better standards of life and, above all, in peace and security in all spheres of human life. He dedicated his life to the cause of removal of untouchability and completely identified himself with the socially segregated section of Indian society. He categorically declared:

"It is my solemn vow to die in the service and cause of those downtrodden people among whom I was born, I was bought up and I am living."²

He launched a life-long crusade for liberating them from their centuries old enslavement and ostracism. It is this crusade which "lifted him up high from a mere ghetto boy to a legend in his own lifetime."³

Ambedkar was totally committed to annihilation of the caste system. The caste system deprived the untouchables for centuries the basic human rights that an individual must enjoy even for his bare existence, let alone accessibility to power, wealth and prestige. Dr. Ambedkar, born himself as an untouchable, therefore, rebelled against the caste system and sought its total destruction. He said,

"You cannot build anything on the foundations of caste. You cannot build up a

nation; you cannot build up a morality. Anything you build on the foundations of caste will crack and will never be a whole."(2002:102)

Ambedkar's philosophy was that self-respect and human dignity were of paramount importance in a free republic. He told his followers two years before his death:

"Ours is a battle not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation of human personality." (Keer 1987, 351)

It is interesting that Ambedkar, a devoted student of the Bible, who possessed a huge collection of Biblical literature, was led to compare himself to Moses. Moses was brought up and educated by a princess. Ambedkar was provided with educational facilities by a Maharaja. Moses learnt at the University Temple of On, then a famous centre of learning. Ambedkar received his education at three world famous universities with an inquiring, searching and acquisitive mind. Like Moses, he was strong, determined and courageous. But Moses was humbled by his respect for and worship of God. Ambedkar was learning this attribute at the feet of his man-god, the Buddha, both led their people out of bondage and brought them to the door-steps of the Promised Land. Moses was eighty when he liberated his people, and Ambedkar was sixty-five. Like Moses, Ambedkar catalogued, expanded and interpreted the code of the laws of a nation. The talent and ability which Dr. Ambedkar showed as the Chief Architect of our Constitution crowned his work as a constitutional authority of world fame.

Dr. Ambedkar in his article "Moses and His Significance" published in the Bombay Sentinel probably the year, 1941 exposes to the roots of his special attitude towards the Jewish people. Ambedkar compared himself with Moses who led his people from Egypt to Palestine, the land of freedom.

"The story of the Jews told in the Old Testament is a moving tale. It has few parallels. It is told in a simple but thrilling language. The pathos inherent in the subjugation and ultimate emancipation of the Jews cannot, but affect the

emotions of those who are as depressed as the Jews were in Egypt in the days of Pharaoh. But the heart of everyone who is working for emancipation of a depressed people is bound to go to Moses, the man who brought about the emancipation of the Jews.”

“What did Moses not do for the Jews? He led them out of Egypt, out of bondage; he laid the foundation for their religion by bringing the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai. He gave them laws for social, civil and religious purpose and instructions for building the tabernacle.”

“What did Moses not suffer at the hands of the followers “? When the children of Israel left Egypt and were pursued and attacked by the army of Pharaohs they were sore and said unto Moses, “Because there were no graves in Egypt, has thou taken us away to die ? It has been better for us to serve the Egyptians than that we should die in wilderness.” (Exodus14:11)

The marching Israel came to Elim and camped there. There was not sufficient water for them all. They all shouted, “give us water wherefore is this that thou hast brought us out of Egypt to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?”(Exodus 17:3) .They were ready to stone him because there was no water.

Moses went up to Mount Sinai and delayed to come down. Immediately the Jews went to Aaron and said unto him. “Make for us Gods, which shall go before us; for as for this Moses the man that brought us out of the land of Egypt,’ we woe not what has become of him.”(Exodus 32:23)

Even his leadership was challenged. The Old Testament records that Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman he had married and they said, “Hath the Lord indeed spoken only by Moses? Hath he not spoken also by us? Yet Moses bore their calumny, their abuse, tolerated their impatience and served them with the fullness of his heart.

As the Old Testament truly says: ‘There arose not a Prophet since in Israel like unto Moses,

whom the Lord knew face to face’. (Deuteronomy 32:10)Moses was not merely a great leader of the Jews. He is a leader whose birth, any downtrodden community may pray for.”

Referring to the Biblical story of Moses, Dr. Ambedkar remarked that the leadership of Moses had been to him a source of perennial inspiration and hope. He said,

“I believe that just as there was a land of promise for the Jews, so the Depressed Classes must be destined to have their land of promise. I trust that just as the Jews reached their land of promise, so will be the Depressed Classes in the end reach their land of promise.”⁴

Dalit theologian Anthony Thumma also tried to apply the Mosai mantle to Ambedkar, referring to him as a ‘modern Moses’⁵ However, Ambedkar neither parted the Red Sea nor led the Dalits out of captivity. Moses was the lawgiver. Dr.Ambedkar, the champion of the Dalits, also gave the law. But when Jesus came, he nullified all laws and gave us Grace and his grace saved mankind from degradation.⁶

It keeps us wondering why then didn’t Ambedkar embrace Christianity? To which we find the answer in Ambedkar’s own words as he believed “if one converts to Christianity he ceases to be an Indian..... so, I will convert to one of the religions that is born here, in this country India. Of all the various Indian religions, Sanatan Dharma, Arya Samaj, Vaishnavism, Savaism, Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Veeravism, etc. Buddhism appeals to me most. It is all humanity embracing. He wanted to remain Indian even in religion.

Truly, Dr.Babasahed Ambedkar was one of the most outstanding sons of India who has left an indelible mark on the history of mankind. His life is a saga of great struggles and achievements. He waged a relentless struggle against the caste system in India. In his famous speech on the 101st birthday celebration of Mahadev Govind Ranade at Gokhale Memorial Hall, Poona on Jan18, 1943, Dr. Ambedkar put the question, “Who can be called a Great Man?” and continued to answer,

"A man is Great because he finds a way to save society in its hour of crisis..... A great man must be motivated by the dynamics of a social purpose and must act as the scourge and the scavenger of Society. These are the elements which distinguish an eminent individual from a great man and constitute his title-deeds to respect and reverence."

Indeed, he himself fulfilled all the conditions of being a great man. His title to this dignity rests upon the social purposes he served and in the way he served them. Ambedkar always emphasized principles of equality, fraternity, liberty and also universal humanism. Dr.Ambedkar's message to his people was: "You must have firm belief in sacredness of your mission. Noble is your aim and sublime and glorious is your mission. Blessed are those who are awakened to their duty to those among whom they are born."

Dr.Ambedkar was much more than a leader of the depressed and the backward classes. His primary concern was, no doubt, to emancipate the downtrodden, oppressed and servile classes in the country. But at the same time he had a much wider perspective of his mission in life. He must be recognised not only as a great champion of the human rights of the depressed classes but also a great political thinker, social philosopher, religious leader and in many other roles for nation-building. Mahatma Gandhi aptly describes him as "a man who has carved out for himself a unique position in society", adding further that "Dr.Ambedkar is not the man to allow himself to be forgotten."

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