
UNIT 14 DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR

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14.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit deals with the thought of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. The purpose is:

- to introduce Dr. Ambedkar's political ideas,
- to outline the ideological basis of his struggle for abolition of the caste system, and
- make you understand the significance of Dr. Ambedkar's social and political thought.

14.1 INTRODUCTION

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was born on 14 April, 1891 in Mahar caste. The Mahar caste was one of the 'untouchable' castes. This created many difficulties in Ambedkar's higher education. With the help of a scholarship from Sayajirao Gaekwad, Maharaja of Baroda, he attended Columbia University, USA, and later on with hard work managed to study at the London School of Economics. In England he attained a doctorate and also became a barrister. On returning to India he virtually dedicated himself to the task of upliftment of the untouchable community. Soon he won the confidence of the untouchables and became their supreme leader. To mobilise his followers he established organisations such as the Bahishkrit Hitkarni Sabha, Independent Labour Party and later All India Scheduled Caste Federation. He led a number of temple-entry Satyagrahas, organized the untouchables, established many educational institutions and propagated his views from newspapers like the 'Mooknayak', 'Bahishkrit Bharat' and 'Janata'. He participated in the Round Table Conference in order to protect the interests of the untouchables. He became the Chairman of the

Drafting Committee of the Constituent Assembly and played a very important role in framing The Indian Constitution. He was also the Law Minister of India up to 1951. Right from 1935 Ambedkar was thinking of renouncing Hinduism. Finally, in 1956 he adopted Buddhism and appealed to his followers to do the same. He felt that the removal of untouchability and the spiritual upliftment of the untouchables would not be possible by remaining a Hindu. Hence, he embraced Buddhism.

Ambedkar was not only a political leader and social reformer but also a scholar and thinker. He has written extensively on various social and political matters. 'Annihilation of Castes', 'Who Were the Shudras', 'The Untouchables', 'Buddha and His Dharma' are his more important writings. Besides these, he had also published many other books and booklets propagating his views. His thinking was based on a deep faith in the goals of equity and liberty. Liberalism and the philosophy of John Dewey also influenced his thinking. Jotirao Phule and Buddha have exercised a deep influence on Ambedkar's ideas on society, religion and morality. His political views were also influenced by his legal approach. Ambedkar's personal suffering, his scholarship and his constant attention to the problem of bringing about equality for the downtrodden untouchable community forms the basis of his thinking and writings.

14.2 AMBEDKAR'S VIEW ON THE BRITISH RULE IN INDIA

Ambedkar was aware of the drawbacks inherent in foreign rule. The British government had introduced some representative institutions in India. But full self-government could not have any alternative. Besides, Ambedkar always complained that the plight of the untouchables did not change under British rule. The British rulers were not interested in removing untouchability. Their policy had always been cautious in the matter of social reform. Reforms were likely to anger the upper castes and give them an opportunity to rally against British rule. Therefore, British rulers did not encourage rapid social reforms. Even in the field of education, Ambedkar felt that the government was not sincere in spreading education among the untouchables. All educational facilities were utilized by the upper castes only. Moreover, the interests of the upper castes and those of the untouchables were opposed to each other. Ambedkar wanted the British government to mediate on behalf of the untouchables. But the government neglected this responsibility. Because of this attitude of neglect, the untouchable community could not get any benefit from the British rule. He was also not very happy about British administration. He was particularly critical of the administration on account of its over expensive character and general neglect of public welfare.

But he knew that abrupt departure of the British would result into political domination of the upper castes. Therefore, a political settlement was necessary clearly mentioning the powers of and safeguards for the untouchable community. Without this, independence would be meaningless for the untouchables. In short, Ambedkar criticized the British rule for failing in its duty to uplift the untouchables. For this reason he supported the cause of self-government. But he insisted that in free India, the untouchable community must get a proper share in the power structure; otherwise independence would merely mean rule by the upper castes.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

1) Briefly discuss Ambedkar's views on the British Rule in India.

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14.3 AMBEDKAR ON DEMOCRACY

Like many other national leaders Ambedkar had complete faith in democracy. Dictatorship may be able to produce results quickly; it may be effective in maintaining discipline but cannot be one's choice as a permanent form of government. Democracy is superior because it enhances liberty. People have control over the rulers. Among the different forms of democratic government, Ambedkar's choice fell on the parliamentary form. In this case also he was in agreement with many other national leaders.

14.3.1 Meaning: Social and Economic Democracy

Ambedkar viewed democracy as an instrument of bringing about change peacefully. Democracy does not merely mean rule by the majority or government by the representatives of the people. This is a formalistic and limited notion of democracy. We would understand the meaning of democracy in a better fashion if we view it as a way of realizing drastic changes in the social and economic spheres of society. Ambedkar's idea of democracy is much more than just a scheme of government. He emphasises the need for bringing about an all-round democracy. A scheme of government does not exist in vacuum; it operates within the society. Its usefulness depends upon its relationship with the other spheres of society. Elections, parties and parliaments are, after all, formal institutions of democracy. They cannot be effective in an undemocratic atmosphere. Political democracy means the principle of 'one man one vote' which indicates political equality. But if oppression and injustice exist, the spirit of political democracy would be missing. Democratic government, therefore, should be an extension of a democratic society. In the Indian society, for instance, so long as caste barriers and caste-based inequalities exist, real democracy cannot operate. In this sense, democracy means a spirit of fraternity and equality and not merely a political arrangement. Success of democracy in India can be ensured only by establishing a truly democratic society.

Along with the social foundations of democracy, Ambedkar takes into consideration the economic aspects also. It is true that he was greatly influenced by liberal thought. Still, he appreciated the limitations of liberalism. Parliamentary democracy, in which he had great faith, was also critically examined by him. He argued that parliamentary democracy was based on liberalism. It ignored economic inequalities and never concentrated upon the problems of the downtrodden. Besides, the general tendency of the western type of parliamentary democracies has been to ignore the issues of social and economic equality. In other words, parliamentary democracy emphasised only liberty whereas true democracy implies both liberty and equality. This analysis becomes very important in the Indian context. Indian society was demanding freedom from the British. But Ambedkar was afraid that freedom of the nation would not ensure real freedom for all the people. Social and economic inequalities have dehumanized the Indian society. Establishing democracy in such a society would be nothing short of a revolution. This would be a revolution in the social structure and attitudes of the people. In the place of hereditary inequality, the principles of brotherhood and equality must be established. Therefore, Ambedkar supported the idea of all-round democracy.

14.3.2 Factors Necessary for the Successful Operation of Democracy

We have already seen that Ambedkar favoured the parliamentary form of government. For the successful functioning of this form of government, it is necessary that certain other conditions must be fulfilled. To begin with, political parties are necessary for the effective working of parliamentary democracy. This will ensure existence of the opposition which is very important.

Parliamentary government is known as responsible government mainly because the executive is constantly watched and controlled by the opposition. Respect and official status for the opposition means absence of absolute power for the executive. The other condition is a neutral and non-political civil service. A neutral civil service means that administrators would be permanent — not dependent on the fortunes of the political parties — and that they would not take sides with political parties. This will be possible only when appointments of civil servants are not made on the basis of political consideration. Success of democracy depends on many ethical and moral factors also. A country may have a constitution. But it is only a set of rules. These rules become meaningful only when people in the country develop conventions and traditions consistent with the constitution. People and politicians must follow certain norms in public life. Similarly, there must also exist a sense of morality and conscientiousness in the society. Law and legal remedies can never replace a voluntary sense of responsibility. No amount of law can enforce morality. Norms of honest and responsible behaviour must develop in the society. Democracy can be successful only when every citizen feels duty bound to fight injustice even if that injustice does not put him into any difficulty personally. This will happen when equality and brotherhood exist in the society.

To make democracy successful in India, Ambedkar suggested a few other precautions also. Democracy means rule of the majority. But this should not result into tyranny of the majority. Majority must always respect the views of the minority. In India there is a possibility that the minority community will always be a political minority also. Therefore, it is very essential that the minority must feel free, safe and secure. Otherwise, it will be very easy to convert democracy into a permanent rife against the minority. Caste system could thus become the most difficult obstacle in the successful functioning of democracy. The castes which are supposed to be of low status will never get their proper share in power. Caste will create barriers in the development of healthy democratic traditions. This means that unless we achieve the task of establishing democracy in the social field, mere political democracy cannot survive.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

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1) Critically examine Ambedkar's views on democracy.

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14.4 ON STATE SOCIALISM

From this discussion, you will realize that Ambedkar was not only a scholar with a firm intellectual grip on concepts, but he was also aware of the practical social difficulties in the way of democratic functioning. Therefore, he emphasises that mere liberty cannot be an adequate goal. Liberty is meaningful when accompanied by equality. We want a democratic government which will uphold the idea of equality also. The western ideas of liberal democracy and parliamentary form of government do not ensure equality. So Ambedkar turned to socialism.

14.4.1 Inclination to Socialism

In those days, two varieties of socialism were prominent. One was Marxist Socialism. Ambedkar studied various aspects of Marxism and favoured some Marxist principles. He generally subscribed to the material view of history and agreed to the need for a total change for bringing about equality. He also accepted the idea of public ownership of property. However, he did not become a Marxist. The other important variety of socialism was Democratic Socialism. Ambedkar's firm belief in democracy attracted him to this ideology. He felt that socialism must function within a democratic framework. Democracy and socialism need not be opposed to each other. Thus, in 1947, Ambedkar propounded the idea of 'State socialism'. Even earlier, when he established the Independent Labour Party in 1937, he had adopted a broadly socialist programme. The name of the party itself indicates that it was to be a party of all depressed classes. Its programme included state management of important industries and bringing about a just economic system. The party wanted to ensure minimum standard of living for agricultural and industrial workers.

14.4.2 Meaning of State Socialism

In 1947, Ambedkar suggested that the Constitution of India should incorporate the principle of State Socialism. State socialism means that the state would implement a socialist programme by controlling the industrial and agricultural sectors. There are two major aspects of Ambedkar's State socialism. (a) Key industries and basic industries will be owned by the state. There will be no private ownership of such industries. This will help in rapid industrialization and at the same time, benefits of industrialization will be distributed among all the sections of the society by the state. Insurance will also be entirely under state control; (b) Agriculture will be treated as a state industry. This means that the state will initiate collective farming. Farmers will be allowed to enjoy part of the agricultural produce and the state will get some share in the form of levy. Foodgrains procured by way of levy will be used for distribution at fare prices. In other words, the state will actively control both the industry and the agriculture. This will ensure equitable distribution of wealth and protect the needy and the poor. Rapid industrial progress and welfare of all the sections of the society will be the responsibility of the state. However, the democratic institutions such as the parliament will also remain intact.

In the parliamentary form of government, the same party may not remain in power permanently. Different parties with different programmes may come to power. Therefore, Ambedkar suggested that the programme of State Socialism should be made an unalterable part of the constitution, so that any party which comes to power will have to implement that programme. This idea of State Socialism shows that Ambedkar was aware of the problems of poverty and economic inequality. He laid great emphasis on industrialization. He believed that India needed rapid industrial growth. This will help to ease out the burden on agriculture. But merely of wealth, the menace of capitalism had to be avoided.

14.4.3 Role of Government

This was possible only if the state functioned as a major partner in the field of industry. Ambedkar believed that the state operating through government will be a neutral agency looking after the interests of the entire community. Therefore, he attached much importance to the role of the government. Government, according to him, has to perform the role of a welfare agency. It has to ensure rapid progress and just distribution of the fruits of that progress. The role of the government was not restricted to industry only. It was expected to be active in the area of banking and insurance. Moreover, the government must also control the agriculture. By owning major industries and controlling agriculture, the government will curb economic injustice. In other words, changes of a revolutionary nature are to be brought about through the efforts of the government.

Check Your Progress 3

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.
 ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.
- 1) Discuss Ambedkar's concept of State Socialism.

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14.5 AMBEDKAR AND DRAFTING OF THE INDIAN CONSTITUTION

In 1947, Ambedkar became Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constituent Assembly of India. His contribution in this role has become immemorable. Ambedkar's legal expertise and knowledge of constitutional laws of different countries was very helpful in framing the Indian Constitution. His deep regard for a democratic constitution and insistence upon constitutional morality also helped in this process. In this sense, he is rightly regarded as the architect of the Indian Constitution. There are many administrative details in the Indian Constitution (e.g. provisions regarding the Public Service Commission, Attorney General, Comptroller and Auditor General, etc.) which have made the constitution a very lengthy document. But Ambedkar defended inclusion of such details. He argued that we have created a democratic political structure in a **traditional** society. If all details are not incorporated, unscrupulous rulers in the future may misuse the constitution without technically violating it. Thus, formally the constitution may remain in operation but its real purpose may be defeated. To avoid this, the best safeguard is to write down all necessary details and to bind future rulers to these details. In a society where the democratic tradition is weak, such safeguards become essential. This shows that Ambedkar was a staunch constitutionalist. He believed that a government must be constitutional and that constitution must be treated as a basic and sacred document. There was no room for extra-parliamentary activity in constitutional politics. He also attached much significance to the evolution of constitutional norms and public practices consistent with the constitution.

Dr. Ambedkar's most important contribution to the Indian Constitution may be seen in the areas of fundamental rights, strong central government and protection of minorities. As a liberal, Ambedkar believed that fundamental rights constitute the most important part of the constitution. But mere listing of these rights is not sufficient. What makes fundamental rights really fundamental is the guarantee of constitutional protection to these rights. Ambedkar was proud of Article 32 of the Indian Constitution which guarantees judicial protection to fundamental rights. Such protection makes the rights real and meaningful. There was general agreement in the constituent assembly that India needed a strong central government. Ambedkar shared this view. But his chief reason for advocating a strong central government was slightly different from that of the others. He was aware that India was a caste-ridden society in which lower castes have always received unjust treatment from the higher castes. He was afraid that casteism would be all the more powerful at local and provincial levels. Government at these levels would be easily subject to casteist pressures and it would fail to protect the lower castes from higher caste oppression. The national government would be less influenced by these pressures. It would be more liberal in its approach than the local governments. Only a strong central

government, therefore, will ensure some protection to the lower castes. This was Ambedkar's most important reason for creating a strong central government. He knew that the minority communities in India were in the most vulnerable position. In India, there was a tendency of a communal or caste majority becoming a political majority also. Thus, a minority will be both a caste minority and political minority. It will be subject to political as well as social harassment. The democratic rule of 'one-man-one-vote' will not be sufficient in such a situation. What we need in India is some guarantee of a share in power for the minorities. Minority communities should get an opportunity to elect their representatives. The views of these representatives must be fully respected. Ambedkar attempted to incorporate many safeguards for the minorities, including definite representation in the executive. He was successful in creating provisions regarding political reservations in legislatures and the appointment of a special officer for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Commissioner) under Article 338 etc. He would have liked to create many more safeguards but for the unwillingness of the majority in the constituent assembly. What is significant here is Dr. Ambedkar's view that democracy is not merely majority rule and that caste-communal minorities must be fully protected to make democracy meaningful. He was, in other words, against the 'Majoritarianism Syndrome'.

Check Your Progress 4

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

1) What role did Ambedkar play in drafting of the country's constitution?

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14.6 ON SOCIAL CHANGE

Ambedkar made ceaseless efforts for the removal of untouchability and the material progress of untouchables. From 1924 onwards, he led the movement of untouchables till the end of his life. He firmly believed that the progress of the nation could not be realized without first removing untouchability. Ambedkar held the view that the removal of untouchability was linked to the abolition of the caste system and that it could be only by discarding the religious notions from the basis of the caste system. Therefore, in the course of his analysis of the caste system, he examined the Hindu religious philosophy and criticized it. He did this boldly, often facing strong resentment from the orthodox Hindus.

14.6.1 Priority to Social Reform

Social reform was always the first priority of Dr. Ambedkar. He believed that the economic and political issues should be resolved only after achieving the goal of social justice. If priority is given to the issue of political emancipation, it would mean transfer of power from foreign rules to the upper caste Hindus, who are equally distant from the lower castes. Thus, injustice against the untouchables would still continue. Similarly, the idea that economic progress would resolve all social problems was also ill-founded, according to Ambedkar. Casteism is an expression of mental slavery of the Hindus. It made them

insensitive. Therefore, no real change could take place without doing away with the evil of casteism. Social reform was the precondition of revolutionary changes in our society.

Social reform consisted of reform of the family system and religious reform. Family reform included abolition of practices like child-marriage etc. This was important mainly because it involved upliftment of women. Reforms regarding marriage and divorce laws for instance, would benefit women who were as oppressed as the untouchables. Ambedkar strongly criticized the degradation of women in the Indian society. He believed that women were entitled to an equal status with men and that they must have the right to education. He lamented that the Hindu religion had deprived women of the right to property. In the Hindu Code Bill which he prepared, he took care that women should get a share the property. While he organised the untouchables, he always called upon women of the untouchable community to come forward and participate in social and political movements.

14.6.2 Attack on the Caste

Ambedkar's main battle was against the caste system. Caste had made Hindu society stagnant. Due to the caste system, Hindu society is unable to accommodate outsiders. This drawback poses permanent problems for integration. Even internally, the Hindu society fails to satisfy the test of a **homogeneous** society. It is only a conglomerate of different castes. Caste is an obstacle in the growth of national spirit. Most importantly, caste system perpetrates injustice on the lower castes. It does not allow progress of the lower castes. Lower castes receive nothing but contempt. This has resulted in moral degradation and demoralisation of the lower castes. The untouchables, in particular, are the constant object of injustice. They are denied education, good livelihood and human dignity. The caste system has dehumanized them thoroughly. The very idea that the mere touch of one human being pollutes another shows the gross level of inequality and brutality to which the caste system had sunk. Therefore, the battle for the removal of untouchability becomes the battle for human rights and justice.

14.6.3 Origins of Caste and Untouchability

The caste hierarchy and the practice of untouchability finds justification in religious scriptures. The Hindus widely believed that persons belonging to the untouchable community were originally from non-Aryan races, that they were of lowly origin, they have no capabilities, etc. Ambedkar wanted to refute these misunderstandings and create self-respect among the untouchables. For this purpose, he made extensive study of Hindu scriptures and the ancient Hindu society. In his books 'Who Were the Shudras?' and 'The Untouchables', he dispelled many misconceptions about untouchability. Through research and interpretation, he made scholarly attempts to prove the origins of untouchability. He argued that originally only three Varnas existed: Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas. The Shudras were a powerful tribe belonging to the Kshatriya Varna. Conflict between the Shudras and the Brahmins resulted in the Shudras' degradation from Kshatriya status because the Brahmins denied them the rights of Upnayana, sacrifice and kingdom. Thus, the Shudras became the fourth Varna below the other three. He shows how the religious and ritual power of Brahmins caused the downfall of the Shudras.

This indicates the overall supremacy of the Brahmin Varna in the ancient society. Untouchability was also partly a result of this Brahmin supremacy. Untouchability resulted from the conflict between Brahminism and Buddhism.

Ambedkar denies that untouchables were originally non-Aryans. In fact, he argues that in the Indian society, we find a mixture of various races. Therefore, the idea that the untouchables belonged to some inferior or defeated race was untenable. He provides a sociological answer. Originally there existed a number of unsettled tribes. They came into conflict with other wandering tribes. These wandering tribes were defeated and their members scattered. These scattered

people finally became attached to various settled tribes. However, their status remained subordinate to the settled tribes. Thus, the wanderers stabilized as outsiders. The next round of conflict between these outsiders and the settled tribes took place on the issue of religion and subsequently beef eating. Ambedkar argues that to meet the challenge of Buddhism, Brahminism adopted complete non-violence, total renunciation of meat-eating and deification of the cow. The outsiders who were followers of Buddhism, traditionally ate meat of dead animals including cow. Since they did not suspend the practice of beef-eating, they were ex-communicated by the settled tribes under the influence of Brahmins. This ex-communication was later justified by incorporating it in religious scriptures. Thus, untouchability became a permanent and sacred part of religion.

Although some of Ambedkar's interpretations have been debatable, nobody denies that untouchability first came into existence and then became part of religion. Moreover, the most important task that Ambedkar's research has fulfilled is to create self-respect among the lower castes and untouchables. He convinced them that there is nothing shameful in their past, nothing inferior or inglorious in their heritage. He convinced them that their low status was not due to any disability on their part, but it was a result of social mechanism under the influence of Brahminism. His interpretations, above all, convinced everyone that a scrutiny of the religious foundations of Hinduism was necessary.

Check Your Progress 5

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.
 ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

1) Critically examine Ambedkar's views on the caste system.

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14.7 REMOVAL OF UNTOUCHABILITY

How can untouchability be removed? Untouchability is the indication of slavery of the entire Hindu society. If the untouchables find themselves chained by the caste Hindus, the caste Hindus themselves live under the slavery of religious scriptures. Therefore, emancipation of the untouchables automatically involved emancipation of the Hindu society as a whole. Ambedkar warns that nothing worthwhile can be created on the basis of caste. We can build neither a nation nor morality on this basis. Therefore, a **casteless** society must be created. Intercaste marriages can effectively destroy the caste but the difficulty is that people will not be prepared to marry outside their caste so long as casteism dominates their thinking. Ambedkar describes such methods as inter-caste dining or marriage as 'forced feeding'. What is required is a more drastic change : liberating people from the clutches of religious scriptures and traditions. Every Hindu is a slave of the Vedas and Shastras. He must be told that these scriptures perpetrate wrong and therefore, need to be discarded. Abolition of castes is dependent upon destroying the glory of these scriptures. Till the scriptures dominate the Hindus, they will not be free to act according to their conscience. In place of the unjust principle of hereditary hierarchy, we must establish the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity. These should be the foundations of any religion.

14.7.1 Self-respect among Untouchables

However, Ambedkar knew that all this involved a total change in Hinduism which would take a very long time. Therefore, along with this suggestion for basic change, he also insisted on many other ways for the uplift of the untouchables. Under the influence of tradition the untouchables had completely surrendered to the domination of the upper castes. They had lost all spirit to fight and assert themselves. The myth of inherent pollution also considerably influenced the minds of untouchables. Therefore, it was necessary to arouse their self-respect. Untouchables should realize that they are the equals of caste Hindus. They must throw away their bondage.

14.7.2 Education

Ambedkar believed that education would greatly contribute to the improvement of the untouchables. He always exhorted his followers to reach excellence in the field of knowledge. Knowledge is a liberating force. Education makes man enlightened, makes him aware of this self-respect and also helps him to lead a better life materially. One of the causes of the degradation of the untouchables was that they were denied the right to education. Ambedkar criticized the British policy on education for not adequately encouraging education among the lower castes. He felt that even under the British rule education continued mainly to be an upper caste monopoly. Therefore, he mobilized the lower castes and the untouchables and funded various centers of learning. While a labour member in the executive council of the Governor-general, he was instrumental in extending scholarships for education abroad to the untouchable students. Ambedkar wanted the untouchables to undergo both liberal education and technical education. He was particularly opposed to education under religious auspices. He warned that only secular education could instil the values of liberty and equality among the students.

14.7.3 Economic Progress

Another very important remedy which Ambedkar upheld was that the untouchables should free themselves of the village community and its economic bondage. In the traditional set up, the untouchables were bound to specific occupations. They were dependent upon the caste Hindus for their sustenance. Even for meagre returns they had to submit themselves to the domination of caste Hindus. Ambedkar was aware of the economic dimension of their servitude. Therefore, he always insisted that the untouchables should stop doing their traditional work. Instead, they should acquire new skills and start new professions. Education would enable them to get employment. There was no point in remaining dependent upon the village economy. With growing industrialization, there were greater opportunities in the cities. Untouchables should quit villages, if necessary and find new jobs or engage themselves in new professions. Once their dependence on caste Hindus is over, they can easily throw away the psychological burden of being untouchables. In a realistic evaluation of the villages, Ambedkar graphically describes them as 'a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism'. Therefore, the earlier the untouchables become free of village-bondage, the better. Even if the untouchables had to live in the villages, they should stop doing their traditional work and seek new means of livelihood. This would ensure their economic emancipation to a considerable extent.

The mainstay of Ambedkar's argument was that the oppressed classes must generate self-respect among themselves. The best policy for their uplift was the policy of self-help. Only by working hard and casting off mental servitude, they can attain an equal status with the remaining Hindu society. He did not believe in social reform on the basis of humanitarianism, sympathy, philanthropy etc. Equal status and just treatment was a matter of right and not pity. The downtrodden should assert and win their rights through conflict. There was no short cut to the attainment of rights.

14.7.4 Political Strength

As a step in this direction, Ambedkar attaches much importance to political participation of the oppressed classes. He repeatedly emphasized that in the context of colonialism, it had become imperative that the untouchables gain political rights by organizing themselves politically. He claimed that by attaining political power, untouchables would be able to protect safeguards and a sizeable share in power, so that they can force certain policies on the legislature. This was so because during the last phase of British rule, negotiations had already begun for the settlement of the question of transfer of power. Ambedkar wanted the untouchables to assert their political rights and get an adequate share in power. Therefore, he formed political organizations of untouchables.

14.7.5 Conversion

Throughout his life Ambedkar made efforts to reform the philosophical basis of Hinduism. But he was convinced that Hinduism will not modify its disposition towards the untouchables. So, he searched for an alternative to Hinduism. After careful consideration, he adopted Buddhism and asked his followers to do the same. His conversion to Buddhism meant reassertion of his faith in a religion based on humanism. Ambedkar argued that Buddhism was the least obscurantist religion. It appreciated the spirit of equality and liberty. Removal of injustice and exploitation was the goal of Buddhism. By adopting Buddhism, the untouchables would be able to carve out a new identity for themselves. Since Hinduism gave them nothing but sufferings, by renouncing Hinduism, the untouchables would be renouncing the stigma of untouchability and bondage attached to them. To live a new material life, a new spiritual basis consistent with the liberal spirit was essential. Buddhism would provide this basis. Therefore, at the social level, education; at the material level, new means of livelihood; at the political level, political organization and at the spiritual level, self-assertion and conversion constituted Ambedkar's overall programme of the removal of untouchability.

Check Your Progress 6

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

1) Discuss the efforts made by Ambedkar to help remove untouchability.

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14.8 EVALUATION

Nineteenth century Maharashtra witnessed reform activity on a large scale. Under the influence of British liberalism and in response to the criticism by Christian missionaries, many intellectuals started looking critically upon their religious ideas. This led them to a re-examination of the nature of Hinduism. The most radical among them was Joti Rao Phule. Ambedkar's thought is the continuation of this radical search for an alternative to Hinduism. It is a continuation of Phule's ideas in one more sense also. Ambedkar's thought has essentially a liberal basis. The influence of Dewey, the British Educationist and the parliamentary system, along with his legal training created an inclination towards liberalism. Although Ambedkar was aware of the limitations of liberalism, he never ceased to be a liberal. His faith in democracy, his insistence on discussion as a method of decision-making and above all, the belief in the ability of law and constitution are all instances of his liberalism.

14.8.1 Political Awakening among Untouchables

His writings and activity greatly contributed to the resurgence of the untouchable community. He created a sense of political awareness among the downtrodden. This resulted in the emergence of Dalit power in the Indian society. Ambedkar realized that the most oppressed section of the society was that of the untouchables. Therefore, he insisted upon the progress of this section as a condition for the development of Indian society. In order to create a spirit of self-assertion among the untouchables, they had to be given their own identity. This task of their mental liberation was fulfilled by Ambedkar's criticism of Hinduism. He touched upon the most basic feature of Hinduism: the authority of the Vedas and Shastras. He argued that Hindu religion was merely a set of meaningful rules and regulations. It was devoid of any philosophical basis. He demonstrated that Hinduism had come to be identified with Chaturvarna and Brahminism. By Brahminism he meant negation of the spirit of justice.

14.8.2 Liberty, Equality and Fraternity

What was the basis of Ambedkar's political ideology? He was deeply influenced by the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. These are the guiding principles in all his writings. He visualized a new society based on these principles. He was aware that liberty alone would not be sufficient. Liberty and equality must exist simultaneously. This alone will ensure that the quality of moral and material life of all individuals will improve. Economic disparity and social injustice are negations of liberty. Therefore, as we have seen earlier, political democracy without social democracy and economic justice is meaningless. But equality and liberty will be realized only when there is a strong sense of unity among members of the society. People must first realize that they have common interests, a common future. In a society divided by caste and class barriers, people of one caste or class will be suspicious of people of other castes or classes. A society can have a common goal only when its members share the sorrows and joys of their fellow beings. This sense of brotherhood — a feeling that we belong to the same social fabric — must emerge in the society. Fraternity, thus, becomes a necessary condition for equality and liberty. Ambedkar made it clear that the ideal society of his conception would be a society based on liberty, equality and fraternity.

14.9 LET US SUM UP

Finally, what is the relevance of Ambedkar's thought? In his lifetime Ambedkar was constantly responding to contemporary issues. Therefore, his propagation of separate electorates or reservations, his views on linguistic states, etc. have a specific context. It would be wrong merely to take up the same programmes which Ambedkar had to take up in those circumstances and try to delineate the essence of his political ideology. We have seen that Ambedkar steadfastly held the image of society free from injustice and exploitation. Therefore, he repeatedly announced that an ideal society will be based on liberty, equality and fraternity. What are the forces operating against these three principles? Casteism and communalism on the one hand, and economic exploitation on the other continue to provide strength to the prevalent inequality in the Indian society. Ambedkar fought for a society free from caste-domination and class-exploitation. So long as these two machines of exploitation — caste and class — are in existence, Ambedkar's thought would be relevant as an inspiration in the fight against them.

14.10 SOME USEFUL BOOKS

- Bharill, Chandra, *'Social and Political Ideas of B. R. Ambedkar'*, Jaipur, 1977.
 Keer, Dhananjay, *'Ambedkar — Life and Mission'*, Bombay, 1961.
 Lokhande, G.S., *'B. R. Ambedkar : A Study in Social Democracy'*, New Delhi, 1977

14.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Section 14.2

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Section 14.3 and Sub-sections 14.3.1 and 14.3.2

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) See Section 14.4 and Sub-sections 14.4.1 and 14.4.3

Check Your Progress 4

- 1) See Section 14.5

Check Your Progress 5

- 1) See Section 14.6 and Sub-section 14.6.2

Check Your Progress 6

- 1) See Section 14.7