



AMBEDKAR, MEDIA AND DALITS: A PERSPECTIVE

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Preamble

The central and state governments have emphasized the role of communication in the process of development and established various media units in order to take the programmes of development to the door steps of the people. The government departments, non-government organizations, universities, training institutions and other agencies have borrowed the experience of these scholars and adopted communications strategies in the implementation of various development projects in the country. The crucial role of new media in the development of women and weaker sections becomes clear since the society moves towards a knowledge – based and development – oriented society. The communications media have to rise to the occasion in meeting the needs of the people in the new age of inclusive development. Ambedkar's perspective on the role of media in the lives of Dalits is explored in this article on the basis of qualitative research methodology.

Ambedkar, Media and Dalits

Ambedkar wanted the formal and informal educational institutions to provide life-oriented, mission-oriented, emancipation-oriented and empowerment-oriented education to the Dalits and other oppressed sections of Indian society. He firmly argued that the oppressed sections of India society would compete successfully with the upper classes if they are given better environment, resources, opportunities and facilities. In his writings Ambedkar emphasized that there is no genetic discrimination inflicted by Divinity on the SC/ST and other weaker sections of the society. It is society, the disabling environment, the penurious privations and the long distance from intellectual, industrial, educational and cultural opportunities and social suppressions for sinful centuries which have kept these millions of Indian humans in dark and depressed serfdom.

Ambedkar used his papers and other media effectively to expose the numerous Hindu myths, mysticisms and mumbo-jumbos justifying the injustices of Indian society. He broke the shackles of traditionalism, religious orthodoxy and blind superstitions. He bluntly rejected the whole system of Brahminical religion – the infallibility of the Vedas, transmigration of souls, the efficacy of rites and rituals, the 'moksha' after the cycle of births, and 'Iswara' as the creator of universe. He also rejected the whole of Upnishadic thought as mere imagination. He opposed out and out the 'Chaturvarnya' system, which was made a 'sacred institution' and a 'divine ordination'. He concluded that there cannot be a more degrading system of social organization than 'Chaturvarnya' which deadens, paralyses and cripples the people from helpful activities in Indian society.

Ambedkar firmly advocated 'Freedom of the Press'. He had a clear vision of the importance of the 'Press Freedom'. He accorded a pride of place to 'Freedom of Speech and Expression' which is the mother of all liberties while drafting the Constitution of India. One of the main objectives of the Constitution, as envisaged in the preamble, is to secure liberty of thought and expression to all the citizens. In order to give effect to this objective, 'Freedom of Speech and Expression' has been guaranteed as a fundamental right under Article 19(1)(a) to all citizens, subject only to the reasonable restrictions which may be imposed by the State under clause (2) of that Article.

Ambedkar propagated his revolutionary ideas, views and experiences through his newspapers namely – Mookanayak (Leader of the Dumb), Bahiskrit Bharat (Excluded India), Samata (Equality), Janata (People) and Prabuddha Bharata (Enlightened India). Ambedkar started 'Mookanayak' on January 31st, 1920 by securing financial support from the Maharaja of Kolhapur through Dattoba Pawar. How violent and unfavorable were the times can be seen from the fact that the 'Kesari' refused even to announce its publication although solicited to do so as a paid advertisement. This happened when Tilak was yet alive.

In the first issue of the Mookanayak Ambedkar brilliantly propounded the aim of the paper in a very simple, convincing and forceful language. He wrote that India was a home of inequality. Hindu society, he observed, was just like a tower which had several storey without a ladder or an entrance. One was to die in the storey in which one was born. Hindu society, he continued, consisted of three parts: the Brahmins, the non-Brahmins and the untouchables. He pitied the souls of those persons who said that according to their philosophy there existed God in animals as well as in animate things and yet treated their co-religionists as untouchables. He lamented that not the spread of knowledge and literacy but accumulation and monopoly was the aim of the Brahmins. In his view the backwardness of the non-Brahmins was due to lack of education and



power. In order to save the depressed classes from perpetual slavery, poverty and ignorance, herculean efforts must be made, he asserted, to awaken them from their disabilities.

In another article the Mooknayak asserted that it was not enough for India to be an independent country. She must rise as a good State guaranteeing equal status in matters religious, social, economic and political, to all classes, offering every man an opportunity to rise in the scale of life and creating conditions favorable to his advancement. There did not exist such a despicable man, who, continued the voice in the article, would object to the statement that if the Brahmins were justified in their attack upon and opposition to the unjust power of the British Government, the depressed classes were justified a hundred times more so in their opposition to the rule of the Brahmins in case the transfer of power took place. The article asserted that if the protection of the British were withdrawn, those who did not condescend to look at the untouchables would trample upon them. In another article Ambedkar stated that the Swaraj wherein there were no fundamental rights guaranteed for the depressed classes, would not be a Swaraj to them. It would be a new slavery for them.

Ambedkar advocated that the uplift of people in India should take place on the basis of equality and humanism. He had vehemently criticized the Brahmin monopoly over education, media and polity. His perception of humanism in the Indian context was par excellence. He rightly argued that individual should be the unit of national development and that caste based backwardness and exploitation should not continue in India. He waged a relentless war against the politics of oppression through his writings and speeches. He heralded a new era of social justice-oriented mass communication in India through Mookanayak. He could not continue this paper since he wanted to accomplish educational progress with a view to liberate the depressed classes from all oppressive forces in India.

Ambedkar established 'Bahiskrit Hitakarini Sabha' in order to sustain his social movement for the uplift of downtrodden communities. This organization strived for securing a status of social, educational, economic and political equality to the untouchables. He put forth his efforts toward preparing the downtrodden communities to secure human rights and equal growth opportunities. He had to face the flood of criticism for his continued struggle against caste system and other disabling factors and forces. He felt the need for a mouthpiece as never before. He realized that a leader without a paper is like a bird without wings. Hence, Ambedkar started a fortnightly Marathi paper, 'Bahiskrit Bharath' on April 3, 1927 in Bombay.

Explaining the aim of the journal, Ambedkar observed that he had taken to the profession of a lawyer because he felt that one's attempt at conducting a newspaper for the welfare of the people should always be backed up by an independent profession for one's personal livelihood. He had realized that financial independence facilitated the work of a public worker. It was time that the financial condition of newspaper concern in India was not then good and is not still so. To those who stood in the way of radical changes by saying that people were not prepared for social change in the society, Ambedkar hit back by asking them why they clamored for the independence of the country when the people as a whole were neither prepared for it nor deserved it.

Keer (1981:06) a close associate of Ambedkar makes the following observation on the role played by Ambedkar as the editor of 'Bahiskrit Bharat': "Ambedkar now began to explain his views, define his aims and reply to the critics of his movement through the ne journal. He said that the temples and water courses should be open to the untouchables because the untouchables were Hindus. He wrote editorial after editorial in his short, crisp and fearless style, asking Government to bring into force the 'Bole Resolution' and not to trust the good sense of the local bodies for its implementation as they were dominated by persons who were narrow-minded, old-fashioned, orthodox, reactionaries and antagonistic to the interests of the depressed classes. He also appealed through his paper to the Government to punish the wrong-doers and trespassers who opposed the execution of the above cited resolution.

Ambedkar argued that if Tilak had born as an untouchable, he would have stood in the forefront of social revolution and organized the people to burn the roots of untouchability in India. He did not spare those who raised violent protest against the insulting treatment meted out to the Indians in South Africa and to the Indian students in Britan. He wrote that untouchability was primarily responsible for the destruction of the untouchables; Hindu's and entered in India. He also strongly argued that the depressed classes would die for that religion which took care of them, but would not care for the religion which did not care for them. Thus, Ambedkar emerged as a great media activist and spokesman of the dumb and downtrodden.

Ambedkar called upon the Government to achieve genuine progress by weeding out self-centered and nation destroying forces. He cautioned that no real progress could be made in the field of education if it was entrusted to the teachers coming from the Brahmin community whose minds conceived abhorrence for the lower classes and who showed callous disregards for the intellectual uplift of any other class. He was not against Brahmins who controlled educational institutions and media



organizations. What he hated was the man who possessed the spirit of Brahmanism-the idea of high caste and low caste which implanted the idea of pollution from human beings and implanted social privileges and inequality.

Ambedkar (1936:01) was highly critical of 'Satyagraha', a means which did not bring about the empowerment of the oppressed Indians in letter and spirit. He observed: "Wagging in life somehow or to live like a crow for a thousand years is not the only and the worthy way to live in this world. Life can be enabled and immortalized by sacrificing it for a lasting good such as the cause of truth, a vow, honor or country. For the protection of human rights several great men immolated themselves at the altar of duty. Better to die in the prime of youth for a great cause than to live like an oak and do nothing. This was a fervent appeal he made to untouchables to put forth determined efforts to wipe out untouchability so as to establish a new social order based on equality as a pre-requisite to the development".

Ambedkar (1944:02) had to face floods of criticism from caste Hindu institutions and media which attributed motives to him. He bounced back and wrote: "the religion which discriminates between two followers is partial. The religion which treats crores of its adherents worse than dogs and criminals and inflicts upon them insufferable disabilities is no religion at all. Religion is not the appellation for such an unjust order. Religion and slavery are incompatible". Ambedkar used media for propagating revolutionary ideas and approaches which liberated the mankind from the exploitative tendencies carried out in the name of religion and god. Ambedkar's movement gathered force and attracted plenty of disciples and millions of followers who were wedded to social justice.

Ambedkar organized Dalits, backwards, minorities, women and other oppressed sections against social injustice, economic inequality, political deprivation and cultural exploitation. He championed the cause of the untouchables and other depressed sections through journalism, for the first time in the history of media in India, which reveals the struggle of Ambedkar for equality, fraternity, freedom and justice. Unfortunately, the writers of the history of media in India have not adequately investigated and documented the media perception and contributions of Ambedkar for obvious reasons.

Ambedkar was highly critical about the media contents and skeptical about their outcome. He strongly argued for the abolition of caste system in India and emulated the thoughts and deeds of Buddha and Kabir in integrating the people of India since they were guided by reason and right kind of thinking about the betterment of the deprived sections of society. He was convinced that the new social, economic, political and cultural order cannot be achieved in India without the annihilation of caste system which had no scientific and rational basis. He rightly observed that Gandhi did not play either the role of a friend or foe of the depressed classes honestly. Gandhi's Congress was called a Fascist organization and Gandhi, as super – Egoist. He called Gandhi's views as opium to mislead the exploited and oppressed people.

In the struggle for the freedom of the country Gandhi had the support of the millions of Indians, but in the struggle for liberation of untouchables millions opposed him. Not even those for whom he struggle and bore patiently the humiliations and accusations hurled at him fully appreciated what he was doing, mainly because of the ignorance and lack of understanding. Ambedkar wanted to secure social and economic independence to his people. Once he wrote: "Political power cannot be a panacea for the ills of the depressed classes. Their salvation lies in their social elevation. They must cleanse their evil habits. They must improve their bad ways of living. The movement will result in the emancipation of our people and the establishment of such a state of society in this country of ours in which one man will have one value in all domains of life, political, social and economic".

Ambedkar was not able to sustain the journals mainly due to economic constraint. He could not bring out his papers regularly because many people including his own followers did not read them mainly due to immaturity and helplessness. Ambedkar brought out the journals as the mouth piece of all oppressed sections of Indian society. That apart, Ambedkar was not prepared to compromise with the professional ethics. He did not become an agent of the capitalists like most of the editors of his time. He never had any inclination towards commercialization of his papers.

His lieutenants Deorao Naik and Kadrekar started a new fortnightly paper called the Janata - the people. There was indeed, a strong and notable evolution of Ambedkar's role in the social, political and journalistic spheres of India Samata (The Equality) and Janata (The People) were the third and fourth papers edited by Ambedkar. The leader of the dumb made a stir and described the sufferings of the outcastes in the first stage. He made wrote plenty of things and condemned the persecution of depressed classes in the second stage. He gave expression to their aspirations for equality in the third stage. He expressed the desire of his people for assimilation into Hindu society on the basis of equality, liberty and fraternity in the fourth stage.



Ambedkar categorically advised the depressed classes to give up the ideas of temple entry and idol worship and concentrate their intelligence and energy on capturing political power which was the master key to all kinds of progress. He had reminded his people that Mahatmas have come and Mahatmas have gone. But the untouchables have remained untouchables and victims of circumstances in Indian society. The people, media and patriots were made to realize that the stigma of untouchability would destroy the nation. He observed that all movements of the poor and downtrodden had very small beginnings and a very tortuous course, many ups and downs and he expressed his belief that he had no doubt that the ultimate issue would not be failure but success.

The fiftieth birthday of Ambedkar was celebrated throughout Maharashtra and felicitations were showered on him for his historical services to the cause of the depressed classes in 1941. Almost all leading newspapers appreciated the scholarship, courage and conviction of Ambedkar. The Times of India (1942:07) Bombay, observed: "Without political and economic power the Harijans will find it hard to attain social equality, and Ambedkar has done well in realizing this fact". The Bombay Chronicle said that Ambedkar breaded day in and day out over the unending inhumanity to his community and it was no wonder therefore that his devotion to the Harijans was equaled, if not exceeded. The Maharashtra of Nagpur said that Ambedkar was one of the few Maharasthrian leaders who came to the forefront in India politics by the sheer force of their personality, struggle, sacrifice and scholarship.

Ambedkar consciously supported the British during the World War –II since he was a born democrat. Many people and papers called him as the stooge of British. Ambedkar considered that it was a war between dictatorship and democracy. Nazism was the menace to the future of mankind, and so it was the duty of every lover of democracy to see that dictatorship vanishes and democracy grows. If democracy dies, he observed, 'it will be their doom'. Ambedkar firmly believed in democracy as a means of self-respect, equality and growth.

Ambedkar's writings duly emphasized the importance of education, agitation and organization which were the principal tools of social justice, economic uplift and political democracy for the oppressed classes in India. He ridiculed the Congress Press which constantly indulged in criticizing, rebuking and reviling Ambedkar for everything. Ambedkar (1956:03) observed: "Nothing I do, pleases the Congress Press. This animosity of the Congress Press towards me can to my mind not unfairly, be explained as a reflex of the hatred of the Hindus for the untouchables. That their animosity has become personal is clear from the fact that the Congress Press feels offended for my having criticized Mr.Jinnah who has been the butt and the target of the Congress for the last several years. However strong and however filthy be the abuse which the Congress Press chooses to shower on me I must do my duty. I am not worshipper of idols. I believe in breaking them. I insist that if I hate Mr.Gandhi and Mr.Jinnah – I dislike them. I do not hate them – it is because I love India more. That is the true faith of a nationalist. I have hopes that my countrymen, will someday learn that the country is greater than the men, that the worship of Mr.Gandhi or Mr.Jinnah and service to India are two very different things and may even be contradictory of each other".

Ambedkar was a true nationalist. He did not demand any separate state for the depressed classes. But, he strived his best to secure due representation to Scheduled Castes in the Executives and Legislatures. He also prepared a memorandum in March 1947 in which he proposed that the Scheduled Castes should have a separate electorate only in those constituencies in which seats were result for them and in others they were to vote jointly. He did not want the election of the slaves of the ruling class under the quota for Scheduled Castes. This was strongly opposed by Gandhi in the name of national unity and solidarity. He observed: "My definition of democracy is a form of Government whereby revolutionary changes in the economic and social life of the people are brought about without bloodshed". He also vehemently opposed Marxism since it was preaching violent means and mechanisms to establish new economic and political order at the cost of fraternity and freedom.

Ambedkar gave to this country not just a Constitution but a Constitution based on great human values and experiences which sought to create a bulwark against divisive and anarchical forces. He was a global visionary and statesman of the world whose life and works have influenced and inspired everybody in India and abroad in general and the downtrodden and weaker sections of society in particular. Ambedkar provided a new dimension to Indian education and media systems on the basis of tested and tried values and approaches. Ambedkar's approach to issues relating to Indian media is not merely reflected in the provisions of the Indian Constitutions, relating to social responsibility of media but also in the views that he expressed in various fora.

Ambedkar's quest for social justice through constitutional safeguards and media services remain as the milestone of Indian media system. He was the most articulate spokesman of the exploited and downtrodden in Indian society and media. He constantly reminded the government, media and society of their responsibilities towards the depressed classes through his forceful speeches and writings. Ambedkar's philosophy of communication and journalism revolved around social justice and empowerment through constitutional and democratic means. Ambedkar rightly emphasized that the lofty ideals expressed in



the Constitution would remain as they were, given the nature of contradictions inherent in Indian society, polity, media and economy. He called upon the media institutions to strive for the attainment of social and economic equality. He also cautioned the rulers to wipe out social and economic inequality which would eventually blow up the structure of political democracy which was laboriously built up by the Constituent Assembly.

Ambedkar constantly upheld Buddhist way of life which was based on fraternity, equality, liberty and collective welfare. He strongly opposed Marx method which brought about equality at the cost of fraternity and freedom. According to him, Buddhist system was a democratic system where as the communist system was based on dictatorship. His spirituality was based on the Buddhist principle of non-violence. His historic observation highlights that Ambedkar was wedded to non-violence. It reads: "Had my mind been seized with hatred and revenge. I would have brought disaster upon this land in less than 5 years". His writings and speeches have rightly exposed the philosophy of equality, fraternity, liberty and justice upheld by Buddhism. To him, Buddhism is the panacea for all societal ills. He embraced Buddhism in 1956 along with lakhs of followers as a symbol of revolt against Hinduism. It was unique and historical. It was not only a religious conversion but a revolutionary movement, the real purpose of which has not been understood by the people. He seriously warned his followers that a great responsibility had fallen on their shoulders with respect to seeking emancipation from slavery and exploitation by following Buddhism.

Ambedkar's (1956:04) 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". He firmly believed in national unity. He worked for the eradication of social and economic inequality which was the greatest threat to Indian democracy and national integrity. He called upon the leaders and people to shed narrow outlook and think in terms of the welfare and prosperity of the nation as a whole.

Ambedkar (1956:05) was a great communicator with a difference. His observation on Indian press provides a glimpse of his perception and practice which are upheld with great reverence by those who consider media as the instruments of human progress. It reads: "Journalism in India was once a profession. It has now become a trade. It has no more moral function than the manufacture of soap. It does not regard itself as the responsible adviser of the public. To give the news uncolored by any motive, to present a certain view of public policy which it believes to be for the good of the community, to correct and chastise without fear all those, no matter how high, who have chosen a wrong or a barren path, is not regarded by journalism in India its first or foremost duty. To accept a hero and worship he has become its principal duty. Under it, news gives place to sensation, reasoned opinion to under reasoning passion, appeal to the minds of responsible people to appeal to the emotions of the irresponsible. Salisbury spoke of the Northcliffe journalism as written by office-boys for office-boys. Indian journalism is all that plus something more. It is written by drum boys to glorify their heroes. Never the hero ship became so blind that as we see it in India today. There are, I am glad to say, honorable exceptions. But they are too few and their voice is never heard. Entrenched behind the plaudits of the Press, the spirit of domination exhibited by these two great men has transgressed all limits. By their domination they have made half their followers fools and the other half hypocrites. In establishing their supremacy they have taken the aid of 'big business' and money magnates. For the first time in our country money is taking the field as organized power. The questions which President Roosevelt propounded for American public to consider will arise here, if they have not already arisen: Who shall rule - wealth or man? Which shall lead - money or intellect? "Who shall fill public stations, educated and patriotic free men or the feudal serfs of corporate capital?"

Ambedkar dedicated his life to the cause of millions of oppressed Indians including untouchables. He breathed his last on December 6, 1956. The nation mourned the death of Ambedkar who had played a historical role for over four decades as the emancipator of oppressed class and champion of the have nots in Indian society. Ambedkar is rightly regarded as a global visionary and statesman by the right thinking people all over the world. He is one among the very few statesman who earns millions of followers all over the globe in recognition of his struggle for the welfare and progress of the mankind in different capacities.

Ambedkar utilized the newspapers as channels of spiritual communication which intended to create a just society in India. He also addressed millions of people through radio and enlightened them through his thought provoking speeches. He utilized public meetings and group discussions as prominent channels of communication. He published several books which provide better food for thought and action. He accorded great importance to mass communication with a view to propagate his revolutionary ideas and justify his actions inside and outside the Parliament. He educated, organized, motivated and guided millions of Dalits, backwards, minorities and all oppressed sections of Indian societies all through his life. He provided a great scope to make use of his channels of communication to the oppressed class as their mouthpiece. He never thought of making money or gaining power through his communicative efforts.



While most of the communicators of his times did their best to champion the cause of the haves, Ambedkar put forth his best efforts to champion the cause of the have nots. His innings as a mass communicator was superb. His writings and speeches were based on systematic research and evaluation. Even his critics were impressed by his thought provoking communication in various media. The greatest contribution of Ambedkar to Indian media was his attempt to create a parallel media in Indian society on the basis of standardized principles and practices of mass communication and journalism. The basic message of his works is that control of minds by some powerful individuals, press and other media is bad as such control retards movement. He felt that mind control by mass media and drug is the awesome reality.

Conclusion

Ambedkar argued that commercialization of media is highly detrimental from the point of view of establishing an egalitarian society. He suggested that the remedy lies in making knowledge free and in widening the frontiers of practical social wisdom. It is in this context that the rationalism of Ambedkar is revealed to all of us who prize the liberty to know, to utter and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties. He advocated that mass media should not be allowed to become the handmade of the corrupt and dominant section of the society. Ambedkar occupies a position of high eminence among the communicators, scholars and statesman for his revolutionary thoughts, deeds and contributions. His name will remain ever green in the history of mankind as a symbol of revolt and champion of the downtrodden communities.

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