

Ambedkar's election manifesto holds good even for today's politics



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Political activists and people believe that caste, untouchability and discriminations that afflict the society can be eliminated through political participation. That is why they don't give importance and priority to social and cultural changes. Just as Dalits are neglected on social and cultural planes, so the Dalit parties are not given a toss in politics. While the society does not see a Dalit-led political party as common to all, it accepts a party started by non-Dalits as an outfit for all.

These factors explain why the All India Scheduled Castes Federation floated by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in 1942 could not make a big impact on the society. Yet all the same, the election manifesto released by Dr. Ambedkar in 1951 on behalf of his Federation, put forward visionary plans for the development of the country and progress of the majority people. All those plan proposals hold good even today.

Ambedkar's ideals

Ambedkar says that the foremost of his Federation's action plans is the uplift of the backward, untouchable and tribal people through higher education and employment. Noting that the amount of cultivated land per capita has continued to decline, Ambedkar argues that on the one hand, there are poverty and complex issues caused by overproduction in agriculture and industry and, on the other, there is a challenge of restraining population explosion. He says the Scheduled Castes Federation will fight poverty from both fronts. Any plan for production growth without considering Indian agricultural reform will end in disappointment, he remarks.

Even though India is an agrarian country, it is landless agricultural laborers who form a major chunk of the workforce in the country. They have very poor living conditions, exploited as they were by the landlords. Most of them belong to the untouchable, backward and oppressed classes. In these circumstances, the landless agricultural laborers are neglected as lands are. Therefore, Ambedkar says that a part of the uncultivated land will be registered by the Scheduled Castes Federation for the landless laborers.

Ambedkar's election manifesto discusses, among various things, the issue of linguistic provinces, lack of corruption in administration, inflation and Kashmir problem.

Support for power concentration?

There is also a criticism about Ambedkar that he thought the Central government should be strong. On the contrary, he asserted that the Scheduled Castes Federation did not believe in centralization of power and emphasized the need for the Scheduled Castes Federation to work in tandem with the backward classes and tribals, who form a majority of the people. He also expressed his wish to have both categories of people work under one umbrella. If they desired, the Scheduled Castes Federation could be renamed as Backward Classes Federation, he said. However, this Federation could not taste electoral victory eventually.

Political power

Ambedkar, who established two political parties – Independent Labor Party in 1936 and All India Scheduled Castes Federation in 1942 - set forth a viewpoint in 1949, which assumes great significance now. "Politics, in fact, has never swayed me. It has only

been an occasional activity (for me). As a student of history, if the issue is approached with an intellectual outlook, it seems to me that no matter how important politics is for revitalization of a society, it is only the social and economic principles which take precedence over anything else. From the beginning I have given more importance to social movement than political movement.” (English version of Ambedkar Collected Works: 17 (2) p: 446).

There is a widespread perception around that Dalits can solve the problems they face, only by seizing political power. But 24 per cent representation for Dalits and tribals in Parliament has already been ensured and the same provision has also been officially made in state Assemblies too. So, it is not that political power for the oppressed is completely absent. But what is to be taken note of is the fact that with the help of the political power in vogue for the past 75 years, the social problems of the oppressed have not been solved at all. The reason is that people without social status and power cannot be made powerful only by making them participate in active politics. In this dangerous situation wherein caste is overshadowing politics, how can politics be the cure for disease?

Ambedkar subtly explains what the Constitution of this country is built on: “No arguments are needed to prove that the Constitution is built on the social structure. There is no doubt that social structure has a profound effect on the Constitution. Social structure can change the functioning of the Constitution, invalidate it and even make it an object of ridicule. As far as India is concerned, the social structure system has been built on the caste system.” (English version of Ambedkar Collected Works: 1, p: 167)

Power and political activities

Today those elected from the ‘reserved’ constituencies are unable to speak about the problems facing the Dalits, overcoming the restrictions clamped by the high command of the parties they belong to. In spite of this adverse situation, welfare schemes for the Dalits have been brought in. However, these are only remedies, not solutions, to the sufferings caused by an unequal social structure.

Today’s political situation has been so re-designed that it takes strenuous struggles for getting increased funds for the Dalit welfare schemes and for getting legal security for them. To launch agitations

pressing demands and then get relief and security is not tantamount to political power. Since there is no political solution to this problem, Dalits have to identify themselves with other strong minority communities. Therein lies their security and self-respect, said Ambedkar who, in the twilight of his life, gave an operational form to the idea.

Fruits of power can be enjoyed only by a few people of privileged castes. That is the main characteristic of power. That was why Ambedkar's struggle was not directed towards power. Rather, it was to democratize the entire society irrespective of caste, religion or class differences. Therefore, Ambedkar made it clear that democracy is not a political activism, nor a form of government and stressed that democracy is rather a collective life, giving a new dimension to the concept of democracy. Through the Constitution, he proclaimed the need to transform political democracy into social democracy soon. Moreover, when Ambedkar, in his last days, completely freed 10 lakh people from the yoke of caste, he was without any political power.

(April 14 marks the 133rd birth anniversary of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar)

Translated by V. Mariappan.