

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: His Relevance in Today's American Social Politics



(first from left with sign board) Indian Consul General in New York, Randhir Jaiswal and NYC Councilwoman Julie Won (second from left with sign board)

MANDAR A. PATTEKAR

The announcement that the intersection of 61st Street and Broadway in Queens, New York, has been officially designated as Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Way filled me with an overwhelming sense of joy and immense pride. Despite being born into a marginalized community in colonial India and facing discrimination and social exclusion throughout his life, Dr. Ambedkar rose to become an advocate for the rights of the oppressed, particularly those categorized as belonging to the Scheduled Caste, who are India's most socio-economically disadvantaged people. His relentless struggle against the caste system and his role in drafting the Indian Constitution have cemented his legacy as the architect of social justice in India.

Babasaheb arrived in New York in July of 1913 to join the Political Science Department of Columbia University as a Post Graduate Student. He had passed the B.A. Examination in Economics and Politics from Bombay University, after which he was awarded a scholarship of 11.50 British pounds a month, for three years, by Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad of Baroda, through the efforts of Babasaheb's teacher Krishnaji Arjun Keluskar. Using these funds, he spent three years in the United States. Having a road named after him in the country, which had a paramount role in framing his worldview, is an appropriate tribute to him. Similarly, every American activist who aspires to achieve equal rights and opportunities should study Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's balanced, nuanced, and patriotic approach to achieving social justice.

This article is my attempt to explore the applicability of Ambedkar's method to achieve social justice in present-day America.

Education as the Foundation for Empowerment

Ambedkar recognized the significance of

education in dismantling social inequalities. Ambedkar's approach emphasizes the need to provide equal access to quality education, irrespective of socioeconomic background or race. In America, efforts should be made to bridge the education gap, enhance educational infrastructure in underprivileged areas, and ensure that all students receive an education that equips them with the skills necessary to succeed. In addition to legislation, a grassroots person-to-person volunteering effort in underprivileged schools by Americans from outside the deprived areas will have tremendous results. The profound impact on children's psyche, resulting from the subconscious recognition that someone from a different background is dedicated to investing their time and effort into uplifting their future, is immeasurable.

Affirmative Action and Reservation Policies

Ambedkar strongly advocated affirmative action policies and reservations to address historical injustices marginalized communities face. The recent Supreme Court decision to end race-based preferences for admissions at educational institutes but leave preferences intact for athletes, people related to faculty, alums, and major donors, highlights the constant uphill struggle faced by the underprivileged. Barriers due to implicit and explicit biases are fairly common if consciously observed. In post-affirmative action America, other programs should be formulated and implemented to enable the underprivileged to break free from the cycle of poverty and marginalization.

Legal Reforms and Protection of Rights

Ambedkar played a pivotal role in drafting the Indian Constitution, which enshrines principles of equality, justice, and protection of individual rights. Similarly, the United

States can learn from Ambedkar's vision to strengthen legal frameworks that safeguard the rights of all citizens, particularly marginalized communities. The U.S. can strive towards a more just society by addressing discriminatory practices within the criminal justice system, like the cash bail system and mandatory minimum sentencing. They can ensure equal access to legal representation and reevaluate other policies like stop and search.

Empowering Grassroots Movements

Ambedkar's struggle for social justice was driven by his belief in the power of grassroots movements. In the current U.S. context, social movements such as Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ+ rights advocacy, and women's rights campaigns emphasize the interconnectedness of various forms of discrimination, similar to Dr. Ambedkar's inclusive vision. Involvement in these movements of people from all strata of society, including the privileged class, is vital. This parallels Dr. Ambedkar accepting the help of supporters from the so-called upper castes to organize and sustain his mission. The long-term effect is an achievement of social harmony among all. By slowly eroding the barriers of preconceived perceptions, empowering and amplifying the voices of marginalized groups, encouraging civic participation, and fostering solidarity, the U.S. can progress toward a more inclusive society.

Eradicating Discrimination

Whether discrimination is based on race, ancestry, religion, or sex, it damages the entire nation, including both the oppressed and even the oppressors at some level. Applying Ambedkar's method involves exposing the deep-rooted biases and airing the festering prejudices perpetuating discrimination in society. By consciously promoting awareness, education, and cultural exchange at a personal family level, the U.S. can work towards eliminating discriminatory practices

and fostering harmony among diverse communities. Inviting families of classmates or colleagues from the marginalized community to your home for festivities will go a long way compared to pontificating on social harmony on social media.

Conclusion

Dr. Ambedkar's method for achieving social justice through education, affirmative action, legal reforms, grassroots empowerment, and eradication of discrimination provides valuable insights for the contemporary United States. By embracing these principles, the U.S. can strive to create a society where opportunities are accessible, marginalized communities are empowered, and equality and justice prevail. Through collective effort, legislation, and a commitment to inclusivity, the United States can continue to evolve toward a more equitable future. Drawing inspiration from Ambedkar's tireless fight for social justice in India, we Americans can continue to be motivated to persistently pursue the noble goal of equality and justice for all.

Bio

Mandar A. Pattekar, MD, a retired physician, is a community organizer and volunteer Hindu spiritual care

provider. Alongside his wife Mugdha, he has volunteered last 15 years at an underprivileged school in Peoria, IL, offering tutoring, reading support, and organizing food and educational drives.

His active involvement with Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, USA, reflects his admiration for its principles of social harmony and Universal Brotherhood.

