



Ambedkar Times

Editor-in-Chief: Prem Kumar Chumber

Contact: 510-219-8920

Fax: 916-238-1393

E-mail: Ambedkartimes@gmail.com

Editors: Takshila & Kabir Chumber

VOL- 5

ISSUE- 9

July 16-31, 2013

www.ambedkartimes.com

www.ambedkartimes.org

Historic Centennial Celebration of Ambedkar's Journey to Columbia University



Arun Kumar

In a corner of Lehman Library at the School of International and Public Affairs of Columbia University sits a stately bronze statue of one of the most prominent intellectual giants of India who laid down the foundation of modern democratic country. Dr. Ambedkar was the father of the

Indian constitution, jurist, political leader, philosopher, anthropologist, historian, orator, economist, editor, prolific writer and one of the champions of human rights who transformed the lives of millions of people in South Asia. He was born into an Untouchable caste which was considered to be so inferior that their mere touch polluted others. Untouchables were prohibited to acquire education and were not allowed to do any profitable profession. They were forced to do menial jobs and serve others.

During early 20th century, it

was not possible for a child of an Untouchable to have even a dream to get higher education in a foreign land. It was a coincidence that Ambedkar came into the attention of the ruler of a princely state where a liberal minded ruler was ruling. Maharaja of Baroda had a genuine concern about the down trodden people and adopted a policy to relieve them of their sufferings. Following his policy of uplifting of the oppressed, he granted a scholarship of £11.50 per month for three years to Ambedkar for his studies in the Columbia Uni-

versity. At that time Maharaja didn't have even a slightest inkling that young Ambedkar would become one of the principle law makers of the country and turn out to be the icon for the neglected and suppressed people all over the World. He earned his MA in 1915 and PhD in 1927 from the Columbia University.

At the age of 22, he left Bombay on 15th June, 1913 for higher education and landed foot on the soil of USA in the third week of July, 1913. He joined Political Science
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The Indian Buddhist Society of Canada (Vancouver) deploras and condemns the terrorist attack on the holiest shrine of worldwide Buddhist community located at Bodh Gaya (Bihar state, India)

It is strange the terrorists were able to plant 13 bombs at various places in the complex, both inside the main temple and its surroundings. In fact one bomb was placed near the statue at the height of 20 feet, obviously with help of a ladder, and nobody, neither of the security staff nor the monks, accosted the perpetrator.

The whole accident has taken place because nobody, neither the district administration, nor the state administration, nor the government of India, nor the local Buddhist management looking after the day-to-day working of the temple, have ever felt concerned about the safety of the temple complex in spite of suspicion expressed by security organisations of the state and the central governments for sometimes past. This is the direct result of the management of temple not being in the hands of dedicated Buddhist organization exclusively. The Hindus and government hold a big share in the administration of complex but do not seem to worry about its safety. Even the security cameras installed there have given a hazy picture of people scanned at that time.

Now that the government of India has taken over the investigation into the matter (state government has shamelessly washed their hand of any responsibility), this Society requests that the culprits should be located and punished, even if it takes long time. They should also install adequate security arrangement at other Buddhist holy places like Sanchi, Sarnath and Kushinagar etc.

NEW MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE OF SRI GURU RAVIDASS TEMPLE, PITTSBURG (CALIFORNIA)



Pittsburg (O. P. Balley & Ramesh Suman)- The new Management Committee of Sri Guru Ravidass Sabha, Pittsburg (California) was selected on July 21st, 2013. The new members were chosen with the help of a panel of four members Sh. O. P. Balley, Sh. Shashi Kant Paul, Sh. Sohan Singh Damria and Mrs. Gina Bhatia.

This is the first time in the history of all Sri Guru Ravidass Temples in California that a woman (Mrs. Debo Bains) has been chosen to be the chairperson. This is a matter of pride for the whole community and a distinct honor for the entire womanhood, providing a spirit of encouragement, inspiration to the future generations. The President and the Treasurer from 2012 committee remain at the same positions.

The list of all the Board of Directors of Sri Guru Ravidass Sabha, Pittsburg (California) as follow: Abhishek Paul, Ajay Kumar, Baksho Jaggi, Balbir Paul Bagha, Bhupinder Goldi, Debo Bains, Dilbag

Singh, Faqira Mehmi, Gurnam Rattu, Gyan Rattu, Gyan Suman, Harmesh Bangar, Jagtar Bhatia, Kewal Jakhu, Kulwant Kaur Banga, Major Singh Bhatia, Narinder Chahal, Nirmal Rattu, Prem Lal Saroya, Ram Kumar Thind, Rani Narabut, Salinder Bhatia, Santokh Madhar, Surinder Rattu & Vijay Paul.

Debo Bains (Chairperson) & Harmesh Bangar (Vice Chairman).

Executive committee: Salinder Bhatia (President), Nirmal Rattu (Vice President), Surinder Rattu (Vice President), Abhishek Paul (General Secretary), Kewal Jakhu (Assistant Secretary), Gyan Suman (Treasurer), Kulwant Kaur Banga (Assistant Treasurer),

The advisory board members were also selected on the same day (Sunday) July 21st, 2013. The members are Sh. O. P. Balley, Sh. Shashi Kant Paul, Sh. Sohan Singh Damria, Mrs. Gina Bhatia, and Sh. Hem Chand Rattu.

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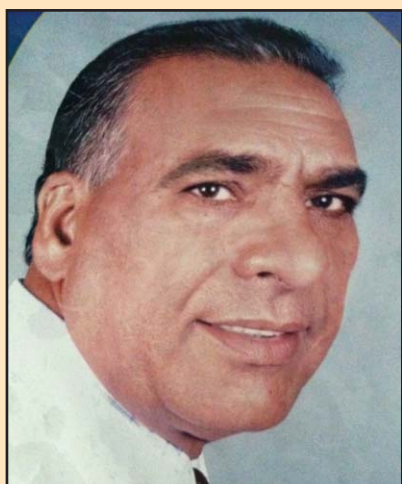
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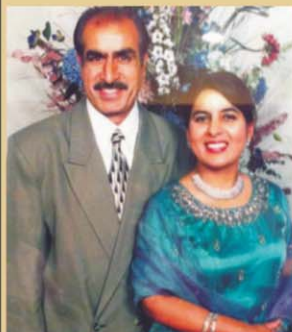
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Department of Columbia University as a Post Graduate student. Arriving in this country, he breathed a fresh air of freedom after choking with prejudice since his childhood. He found a new sense of independence where on the basis of his caste; nobody directed him what to do or not to do. On contrary, he had to face discrimination at every juncture in his own country. He struggled to overcome rebuff and prejudice to acquire education. He found that there was no such thing in America. Everything was different. He didn't have to sit separate from others. There were no separate utensils for drinking water. Nobody asked his caste. New found freedom gave him an opportunity to develop his personality by making intellectual connections which shaped his rest of life. Had he not come to Columbia University, the Indian nation would have deprived of this democratic constitution and the Untouchables would have remained Untouchables with no rights.

During his years in the Columbia University, Dr. Ambedkar formed many of his ideas about equality and social justice under the guidance of Professor John Dewey, a reputed scholar whose ideas about democracy and education helped to shape American democracy and education system. It is Dewey's impact on Ambedkar that explains his faith in Constitutional democracy, which in turn is one of the main reasons for the stability of the Indian political system. Without Ambedkar, it is difficult to imagine that long history of the oppression of the untouchables could have been so easily contained in the workings of a democracy. He also worked under Professors Seligman, Clark, Seager, Moor, Mitchell, Chadwick, Sinkortell, Giddings and Goldenweiser. He admired his teachers who had great influence on the making of his personality. In one of the interviews he gave to the New York Times on November 30, 1932, he stated "The best friends I have had in my life were some of my classmates at Columbia and great professors, John Dewey, James Shotwell, Edwin Seligman and James Harvey Robinson"¹.

Education at Columbia University changed him in many ways. Dr. Vivek Kumar explains, "Being at Columbia, Babasaheb Ambedkar learned to read Indian history with an alternative perspective. He analysed each and every institution of Indian society and showed how exploitive they were in their functioning because of which ex Untouchables were denied every Human right." He further states, "Because of his training at Columbia, he launched first-social movement, then educational, then political, movements for constitutional and then the religious movement with conversion to Buddhism in

1956"².

US democracy had a profound effect on Ambedkar. In his closing address to the Constituent Assembly of India on November 26, 1949, he quoted extensively US democracy and its founding father, Thomas Jefferson. In the Constitution of India, he enshrined the principle of 'Checks and balances', judiciary and declared India as a republic based on the US constitution. The idea of liberalism he acquired from his alma mater, Columbia University and was often termed as a 'classical liberal'. Because of his contribution to the Indian constitution, he was rightly honoured as the chairman of the Drafting Committee for India's constitution, a kind of Indian Jefferson. During his stay in Columbia, he became interested in matters of African American politics and culture. He studied about slave trade in US. He saw blacks enduring the same mental and physical tortures inflicted upon Untouchables. After discovering black liberation struggles in the USA, Ambedkar was inspired and moulded to devote his life for the emancipation of the Untouchables of India. He encountered American civil rights movements and saw strong parallels between the plights of blacks and Untouchables. Quotations from the writings of black civil rights leaders reflect his deep study in the black civil rights movement. In his book, 'What Congress and Gandhi done to the Untouchables?' he gave references widely from Herbert Aptheker's 'The Negroes in the civil War'. Aptheker was an important figure and one of the best known professors of black history. In 1946, writing to W.E.B. Du Bois, a prominent leader of the 'Negro movement', Ambedkar requested him for help to raise the question of Untouchables in the United Nations. In his letter he says, "I have been a student of the Negro problem and have read your writings throughout. There is so much similarity between the position of the Untouchables in India and of the position of the Negroes in America that the study of the latter is not only natural but necessary.

I was very much interested to read that the Negroes of America have filed a petition to the UNO. The Untouchables of India are thinking of following suit. Will you be so good as to secure for me two or three copies of this representation by the Negroes and send them to my address?"³

Even the black historians couldn't ignore Ambedkar's movement. One of the pioneering professors of black history, C. Vann Woodward was greatly impressed by Ambedkar. In his autobiography (Thinking back: Perils of Writing history), Woodward said that Ambedkar's description of the oppression of untouchables encouraged him to

write about the oppression of blacks. He narrates an encounter with Ambedkar:

"A new extraordinary foreign perspective came my way during the second World War, while I was on duty as a naval officer in India. With a letter of introduction in hand, I sought out Dr. Bheem Ramji Ambedkar, acclaimed leader of India's million of Untouchables and later a figure of first importance in Indian constitutional history.

He received me cordially at his home in New Delhi and plied with questions about the black 'untouchables' of America and how their plight compared with that of his own people. He also took the time to open to me the panorama of an ancient World of Indian segregation by caste and to show me how it appeared to its victims."

Dr. Ambedkar is a symbol of social change. He has inspired many people to fight against social injustice. No Indian university recognised Ambedkar's services to the nation, democracy, constitution and to the protection of human rights. In 1952, Columbia University became the first and perhaps the only university which bestowed upon him an honorary degree of Doctor of Law in its Bi-Centennial Celebrations Special Convocation for his service as "a great social reformer and a valiant upholder of human rights". In 1995, a bronze bust of Ambedkar was gifted to the Lehman library of Columbia University by the Federation of Ambedkarite and Buddhist Organisations of the United Kingdom (FABO, UK).

The University authorities gladly accepted this present and the bust was installed in the Lehman Library at the School of International and Public Affairs. Prof. E. Valentine Daniel, director of the Southern Asian Institute, said in a statement "Dr. Ambedkar was Columbia's most remarkable international alumnus. He achieved his greatness not because of any affirmative action, but against unspeakable odds and prejudices." Followers of Ambedkar from numerous countries participated in the function. Late Savita Ambedkar wife of Dr. Ambedkar especially came from India to attend the function. A delegation of the members of FABO, UK was also present.

Columbia University completed 250 years of its establishment in 2004. To commemorate this event, a committee of scholars was formed to enlist 100 pioneering students who made extra ordinary contribution to the society. It is a matter of pride that Dr. Ambedkar was also chosen and included in elite list of those statesmen who helped changing the history of mankind. To continue Ambedkar's legacy, the Government of India has

gifted to endow the Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Chair in Indian constitutional Law at the Columbia Law School which will present a series of lectures exploring significant influences of Ambedkar on Indian society. The formal announcement was made on 1st April, 2010 by Meera Shankar, India's ambassador to the US. The lecture series will help to understand Dr. Ambedkar's views on democracy, constitution, the problem of Dalits and his contribution to the human rights and equal justice.

Millions of Dalits face atrocities on the basis of their birth. Even the Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh became the first leader of his country to compare the condition of Dalits with that of black South Africans under apartheid. On 27th December, 2006, he declared, "Dalits have faced a unique discrimination in our society that is fundamentally different from the problems of minority groups in general. The only parallel to the practice of untouchability was apartheid"⁴. Apartheid in South Africa is abolished and caste based discrimination in India needs to be dismantled. Let us get together and work to eradicate this evil and set up a society based on Dr. Ambedkar's dream of equality, liberty, fraternity and equal justice.

World renowned institutes such as Columbia University, London School of Economics and Simon Fraser University, Vancouver have accepted Dr. Ambedkar as the most prominent democrat who believed in bringing change through democratic means. India has still to accept and recognise his contribution as a nation builder and protector of basic human rights. It is also a time that Indians give same respect and status to Ambedkar as is given to Martin Luther King in America and to Nelson Mandela in South Africa.

1. Seldon Charles A. 'Prince and Outcast at Dinner in London', New York Times, November 30, 1932

2. Dr. Vivek Kumar, New Way to Read History of Buddhist and Ambedkarite Movement Celebrating Centenary of Babasaheb Ambedkar's Journey to Columbia University Barcelona, Spain **Ambedkar Times**, http://www.ambedkartimes.com/vivek_kumar.htm#special

3. Letter from Daniel Immerwahr to Mangesh Dahiwalé-On B.R. Ambedkar and Black connections <http://faculty.wcas.northwestern.edu/daniel-immerwahr/Ambedkar.pdf>

4. Indian Leader Likens caste system to apartheid regime. The Guardian, dated 28th December, 2006 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/dec/28/india.mainsection>