

**SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRI PRANAB
MUKHERJEE DELIVERING DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR MEMORIAL
LECTURE 2014 ON 'VISION OF INDIA IN 21ST CENTURY, AS
ENVISAGED BY DR. AMBEDKAR'**

Vigyan Bhavan, New Delhi: September 4, 2014

I am happy to deliver the fifth Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Memorial Lecture for the year 2014 being organised by the Dr. Ambedkar Foundation. I am grateful to Hon'ble Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment Shri Thawar Chand Gehlot and the organisers for giving me this honour.

2. Dr. Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar, was an outstanding leader of our freedom struggle and a staunch crusader for the rights of the down-trodden and backward sections of our society. A recipient of the Bharat Ratna, he was a scholar, journalist, educationist, legal luminary, social reformer and political leader. He was the principal architect of the Indian Constitution and shall always be remembered for his role in painstakingly drafting our founding document.

3. Dr. Ambedkar's philosophy and life are a profile of courage and conviction. He dedicated himself to the pursuit of knowledge overcoming many adversities on account of his caste and poor economic background. He graduated from Elphinstone College in Mumbai and thereafter was awarded a scholarship to attend Columbia University in New York from where he obtained his Doctorate. Then, he moved to the United Kingdom in 1916 where he studied at the London School of Economics and was subsequently awarded the degree of Barrister-at-Law by Gray's Inn. After his return to India, Dr. Ambedkar became the voice of the depressed classes and started many organisations to promote their cause.

4. Dr. Ambedkar's legacy and contribution to India can be seen in many fields. His PhD thesis of 1923 titled "*The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India*" provided academic basis for the Finance Commission of India which was subsequently established through Article 280

of the Constitution to address problems of vertical and horizontal imbalances in finances. Similarly, the Reserve Bank of India was conceptualized based on the guidelines presented by Dr. Ambedkar to the “*Royal Commission on Indian Currency & Finance*” in 1925. Commission members found Dr. Ambedkar’s book “*The Problem of the Rupee- Its Problems and Its Solution*” an invaluable reference tool and the Central Legislative Assembly eventually passed these guidelines as the RBI Act 1934.

5. As Labour Minister in the Viceroy’s Council, Dr Ambedkar successfully led the struggle for reduction of work from 12 hours a day to 8 hours in 1942. He contributed the idea of setting up of Employment Exchanges in India. He was almost single handedly responsible for establishing the Central Technical Power Board, the National Power Grid System and the Central Water Irrigation and Navigation Commission. Dr.

Ambedkar played an important role in the establishment of the Damodar Valley project, Hirakud project and Sone river project.

6. A voracious reader Dr. Ambedkar saw education as a tool for the liberation of the socially backward from illiteracy, ignorance and superstition. He founded the People's Education Society in 1945 with the aim of advancing the educational interests of weaker sections of society. Dr. Ambedkar was also a crusader for gender equality and fought for equal rights for women in inheritance and marriage. He resigned from the Cabinet in 1951 when his draft Hindu Code Bill failed to receive the support of the Parliament.

7. Undoubtedly, Dr. Ambedkar's biggest and most important contribution was in his role as the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution of India. With tremendous foresight and erudite scholarship, Dr. Ambedkar not only piloted an outstanding draft through

the Constituent Assembly but also outlined the philosophy and wisdom behind the various provisions.

8. The topic of today's lecture is the 'Vision of India in 21st Century, as envisaged by Dr. Ambedkar'. Dr. Ambedkar was clear in his mind that he wanted to see a socio-economic and political transformation of India. He wanted the vast multitude of people of India to enjoy freedom and equality of opportunities. He wanted to rid India of casteism and communalism and bring education and development to every corner of the country. He wanted India to emerge as a modern state where liberty, equality and fraternity flourishes and backwardness is wiped out. Dr. Ambedkar believed in radical change, but he did not want this change to happen through bloodshed. He wanted transformation through parliamentary democracy and rule of law.

9. Dr. Ambedkar saw great potential in using the Indian Constitution as a powerful instrument of socio-

economic transformation and with this intention, introduced into the draft Constitution a variety of provisions which would enable full accountability of the Government, checks and balances, protection of fundamental rights, independent institutions and consistent movement towards social democracy.

10. Dr. Ambedkar's speeches in the Constituent Assembly are of great educational value to students of our Constitution and modern political history. Dr. Ambedkar explained to the Constituent Assembly in a speech introducing the draft Constitution on November 4, 1948 the pros and cons of the Parliamentary form of Government vis-a-vis the Presidential system. He also explained why the Draft Constitution, in recommending an Executive based on the Parliamentary system preferred 'responsibility' to 'stability'.

(Quote) *"Both systems of Government are of course democratic and the choice between the two is not very*

easy. A democratic executive must satisfy two conditions – (1) it must be a stable executive and (2) it must be a responsible executive. Unfortunately it has not been possible so far to devise a system which can ensure both in equal degree. You can have a system which can give you more stability but less responsibility or you can have a system which gives you more responsibility but less stability.....Under the non-Parliamentary system, such as the one that exists in the U.S.A., the assessment of the responsibility of the Executive is periodic. It is done by the Electorate. In England, where the Parliamentary system prevails, the assessment of responsibility of the Executive is both daily and periodic. The daily assessment is done by members of Parliament, through questions, Resolutions, No-confidence motions, Adjournment motions and Debates on Addresses. Periodic assessment is done by the Electorate at the time of the election which may

take place every five years or earlier. The Daily assessment of responsibility, which is not available under the American system, is, it is felt, far more effective than the periodic assessment and far more necessary in a country like India. The Draft Constitution in recommending the Parliamentary system of Executive has preferred more responsibility to more stability¹ (Unquote)

11. Dr. Ambedkar described how the President under the Constitution will occupy the same position as the King under the English Constitution:

(Quote) "He is the head of the State but not of the Executive. He represents the Nation but does not rule the Nation. He is the symbol of the nation. His place in the administration is that of a ceremonial device on a seal by which the nation's decisions are made known...The President of the Indian Union will be

¹ Speech of November 4, 1948 introducing the Draft Constitution in the Constituent Assembly
Constituent Assembly Debates (CAD) Vol VII

generally bound by the advice of his Ministers. He can do nothing contrary to their advice nor can he do anything without their advice.”² (Unquote)

12. Commenting on the unique nature of the federation proposed in the draft Constitution, Dr. Ambedkar explained why a federal form of government tailored to suit the exigencies of the Indian situation was the need of the hour.

(Quote) “The Draft Constitution is, Federal Constitution in as much as it establishes what may be called a Dual Polity. This Dual Polity under the proposed Constitution will consist of the Union at the Centre and the States at the periphery each endowed with sovereign powers to be exercised in the field assigned to them respectively by the Constitution. The Draft Constitution can be both unitary as well as federal according to the

² CAD Vol VII

requirements of time and circumstances. In normal times, it is framed to work as a federal system. But in times of war it is so designed as to make it work as though it was a unitary system.”³ (Unquote)

13. Dr. Ambedkar was at pains to emphasise that the new republic would be a “*Union*” of States, as opposed to a “*Federation*” of States. The States would have no right to secede. He said:

(Quote) “The Federation is a Union because it is indestructible. Though the country and the people may be divided into different States for convenience of administration the country is one integral whole, its people a single people living under a single imperium derived from a single source.”⁴ (Unquote)

14. Dr. Ambedkar ensured the inclusion of a well-defined and comprehensive chapter on Fundamental

³. CAD Vol VII

⁴. CAD Vol VII

Rights which specifically abolished untouchability, guaranteed equal rights to all citizens and prohibited discrimination of all kinds in social relations. Dr. Ambedkar believed that protection of minorities and their religion was of paramount importance. Thus, the Constitution grants each person the freedom of faith, religion and worship and gives the minorities freedom to manage their religious affairs. Dr. Ambedkar justified such protection on the following grounds:

(Quote) "It is wrong for the majority to deny the existence of minorities. It is equally wrong for the minorities to perpetuate themselves. A solution must be found which will serve a double purpose. It must recognize the existence of the minorities to start with. It must also be such that it will enable majorities and minorities to merge someday into one. The solution proposed by the Constituent Assembly is to be

welcomed because it is a solution which serves this twofold purpose."⁵ (Unquote)

15. Dr. Ambedkar played a crucial role in laying down the Directive Principles of State Policy, a unique feature of the Indian Constitution. These principles mandate that the State shall strive to promote the welfare of the people by securing and protecting a just social order. These principles lay the foundation for a social democracy. In Dr. Ambedkar's words

(Quote) *"We must make our political democracy a social democracy as well. What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity are the principles of life. These principles of liberty, equality and fraternity are not to be treated as separate items in a trinity. They form a union or trinity in the sense that to divorce one from the other is to defeat the very*

⁵ CAD Vol. VII

*purpose of democracy. Without equality, liberty would produce the supremacy of the few over the many. Equality without liberty would kill individual initiative. Without fraternity, liberty and equality would not become a natural course of thing. It would require a constable to enforce them.....On the social plane, we have in India a society based on the principles of graded inequality which means elevation for some and degradation for others. On the economic plane, we have a society in which there are some who have immense wealth as against many who live in abject poverty How long shall we continue to live this life of contradiction? We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy....."*⁶

(Unquote)

⁶ Reply to the Debate by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, November 25, 1949.
CAD Vol XI

16. The Directive Principles of State of Policy were criticised by some and termed mere “*pious declarations*”.

Responding to this criticism, Dr. Ambedkar said:

(Quote) *“Whoever captures power will not be free to do what he likes with it. In the exercise of it, he will have to respect these instruments of instructions which are called Directive Principles. He cannot ignore them. He may not have to answer for their breach in a Court of Law. But he will certainly have to answer for them before the electorate at election time.”*⁷

(Unquote)

17. Dr. Ambedkar was firm in his belief that our judiciary must both be independent of the executive and must also be competent in itself. He did recognise however that tussles between the executive and the judiciary were inevitable, and were in fact necessary to

7. Cad, Vol VII

ensure that each acted as a check and balance on the functioning of the other. He observed:

(Quote) *“For myself I cannot altogether omit the possibility of a Legislature packed by party men making laws which may abrogate or violate what we regard as certain fundamental principles affecting the life and liberty of an individual. At the same time, I do not see how five or six gentlemen sitting in the Federal or Supreme Court examining laws made by the Legislature and by dint of their own individual conscience or their bias or their prejudices be trusted to determine which law is good and which law is bad.”*⁸ (Unquote)

18. Dr. Ambedkar called upon the socially and economically disadvantaged to ‘*educate, agitate and organise*’. Nevertheless, his commitment to constitutional

⁸ CAD Vol. VII

methods was unwavering and he advocated a path of informed and reasoned public engagement. He said:

(Quote) *"...we must abandon the bloody methods of revolution.When there was no way left for constitutional methods for achieving economic and social objectives, there was a great deal of justification for unconstitutional methods. But where constitutional methods are open, these can be no justification for these unconstitutional methods. These methods are nothing but the grammar of anarchy and sooner they are abandoned, the better for us".⁹*

(Unquote)

19. Dr. Ambedkar believed that strong independent institutions constituted the fundamental pillars of a democracy and it is they who would ensure its survival.

He ensured that the Constitution provided for an

⁹ CAD Vol XI

independent judiciary and that the right to Constitutional Remedies was a fundamental right.

20. Speaking about Article 32 – the Right to Constitutional Remedies, Dr. Ambedkar said :

(Quote) “If I was asked to name any particular article in this Constitution as the most important – an article without which the Constitution would be a nullity - I could not refer to any other article except this one. It is the very soul of the Constitution and the heart of it.”¹⁰(Unquote)

21. Dr. Ambedkar called for an independent Election commission and instituted the same through Article 324 of the Constitution. In his words:

(Quote) “the greatest safeguard for purity of elections, for fairness in elections, was to take away the matter

¹⁰. CAD Vol. VII

*from the hands of the executive authority and to hand it over to some independent authority”.*¹¹ (Unquote).

22. It must be mentioned in this regard that the Election Commission of India has since gone on to win widespread and appreciation within the country and across the praise world. Our very first Chief Election Commissioner Shri Sukumar Sen was invited to supervise the elections in Sudan and since then, the services and expertise of our Election Commission has been sought by many countries. We have also just witnessed the efficiency and independence with which the elections to the 16th Lok Sabha was recently, held despite the enormous diversity of our nation and an electorate size of around 834 million people. The Election Commission was a single member Commission till October 1989 when two additional Commissioners were appointed for the first time making it a multi-member commission.

¹¹ CAD Vol. IV

23. Similarly, on the post of Auditor General, he said:

(Quote) “I am of opinion this dignitary or officer is probably the most important officer in the Constitution of India. He is the one man who is going to see that the expenses voted by Parliament are not exceeded, or varied from what has been laid down by Parliament in what is called the Appropriation Act. If this functionary is to carry out the duties and his duties, I submit, are far more important than the duties even of the judiciary..... I personally feel that he ought to have far greater independence than the Judiciary itself.....”¹² (Unquote)

24. Dr. Ambedkar was clear that no Constitution is perfect and ultimately the working of the Constitution will depend upon the people, the political parties and

¹² CAD Vol VIII

their politics. He stated emphatically about the Constitution:

(Quote) *“It is workable, it is flexible and it is strong enough to hold the country together both in peace time and in war time. Indeed, if I may so, if things go wrong under the new Constitution, the reason will not be that we had a bad Constitution. What we will have to say is that man is vile.”*¹³ (Unquote)

25. It must be noted in the above regard that in practice our political system has been innovative and flexible. Dr. Ambedkar’s commitment to the building of strong institutions and constitutional methods has resulted in many interesting modern day manifestations. For example, the Right to Information Act is a unique and powerful instrument created by law to empower people and enable them access information from any department of the Government on any subject advancing

¹³ CAD Vol VII

thereby openness and transparency. Similarly, the Supreme Court of India through Public Interest Litigation has enabled the common man access the highest courts of justice by just sending a post card. High Courts and Supreme Court have also taken *suo motu* cognizance of violation of fundamental rights and initiated action on their own setting aside the conventional notions of *locus standi*. Finally, we witnessed recently the phenomenon of a popular agitation led by Shri Anna Hazare resulting in civil society gaining direct voice in the legislative process hitherto reserved only for elected members of the Parliament and state Legislatures. A draft Lok Pal bill was finalized through consultation between representatives of civil society and senior members of the Government prior to presentation in Parliament and subsequent adoption as law. All the above reflect the strength of Indian democracy and the dynamism of the Constitution.

Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen,

26. India's journey since independence has seen many successes. The greatest challenge for our founding fathers was to come up with a viable system of government. We have in the last 67 years established a successful parliamentary democracy, an independent Judiciary and strong institutions like the Election Commission, CAG etc. to sustain and support our political system.

27. The biggest and the most complex issue that independent India had to address was the issue of the political, social and economic exclusion of a significant segment of our population. A unique and comprehensive policy of affirmative action was adopted through the Constitution to empower members of communities which were socially excluded and to bring them into the national mainstream.

28. India is, today recognised across the world for our democratic and secular values as well as for establishing an inclusive and modern social order. On the economic front, we have made many significant gains, taking a substantial segment of our people from below the poverty line to a level of dignified existence. India is now the third largest economy in the world terms of PPP. In last six decades, the poverty ratio has declined from over 60 per cent to less than 30 per cent. India has become a nation of considerable economic strength, admired for its advanced scientific and technological capabilities, industrial base and its world class human resources.

Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen,

29. It is a reality, however that despite all the achievements in which we can take legitimate pride, our democracy continues to face many challenges. Large number of Indians still live in poverty, deprivation and

want. Casteism too sadly remains a phenomenon we are yet to wipe out from our country and society.

30. Dr. Ambedkar dreamt of an India in which all sections of society are empowered – socially, economically and politically; an India in which every section of our population believes that they have an equal stake in the country and its future and an India in which social status will be decided not by standing in caste hierarchy or economic wealth but by individual merit. Dr. Ambedkar’s vision was of an India where the social system and economy would permit the full development of human potential and ensure a dignified existence for all our citizens.

31. Each one of us has a responsibility to do our utmost to make Dr. Ambedkar’s dreams come true. We must do everything possible to preserve and strengthen our democracy. We must engage in combined and committed efforts to overcome poverty and prejudice. We

need to be constantly on the guard against divisive forces raising their heads in the country. We should address with utmost of speed the challenges of malnutrition, ignorance, unemployment and infrastructure. We must also ensure that untouchability or any form of disability based on caste, creed, religion or sex is not practised in any part of the country. It is only through these endeavours can we occupy our rightful place in the leading ranks of the comity of nations.

32. Dr. Ambedkar's message, work and life are a constant reminder of the outstanding Constitution, strong democracy and effective, independent institutions we have inherited from the founding fathers of our nation. At the same time, it also reminds us of the distance we still need to travel in building an egalitarian society where there will be no distinction between man and man.

33. Let me conclude recalling Dr. Ambedkar's words from his address to the Constituent Assembly on November 25, 1949:

*(Quote) "In addition to our old enemies in the form of castes and creeds, we are going to have many political parties with diverse and opposing political creeds. Will Indians place the country above their creed or will they place creed above country? I do not know. But this much is certain that if the parties place creed above country, our independence will be put in jeopardy a second time and probably be lost forever. This eventuality we must all resolutely guard against. We must be determined to defend our independence with the last drop of our blood."*¹⁴

(Unquote)

Thank you. Jai Hind.