

THE MESSIAH OF THE OPPRESSED

— Prof. Dr. Olivinho Gomes

The famous Konkani poet who brought international attention to his language, the late, lamented Dr. R. V. Pandit, in one of his very perceptive verses, makes a brilliant assertion: "Sonvsarant donuch zati/ /Chidd'ddo'lo and chidd'ddupi" (Only two castes the world has/ the oppressor and the oppressed). In his poetry as well as in his own real life he set out to restore the lost dignity and give powerful voice to the neglected and the oppressed in Goan society that was the 'Gauddi' aboriginal who toiled incessantly in his salt-pans and paddy-fields, all the time plucking and gathering the rice and the salt, the mango and the cashew, the coconut and the jack-fruit, the guava and the chikoo for his masters, while he himself tightened his ever-shrinking belt and sought depressing relief in chewing the wild berries, munching the husk of the paddy and quaffing the brew from the toddy and the cashew. He embodied their miserable plight in several books of poems, notably in 'Mhojem Utor Gavdeachem' (I am the voice of the Gauddi) in all the pristine vigour of that timeless man.

Much worse than theirs was the condition of the so-called 'untouchables' in Indian society, tolerated as a necessary evil and treated as sub-humans, eking out their hard existence on the leavings that the puritanistic order threw at them to appease their own pricking conscience. They dragged on, and still do, their pitiable life hovering on the periphery of the village in squalor and abject poverty, while doing all the cleaning and scavenging and providing for the varied needs of their masters and mistresses bent on bleeding them to the last ounce of their sickly blood. Their mere touch provoked pollution, which required a lot of sanctimonious cant and hypocrisy to 'purify', while the hearts and souls of these self-same honourable gentlemen festered in putrid sores of the worst kind known only to their secret selves, while mouthing blandly supposedly sacrosanct verses to propitiate some imagined divinity.

It was this intolerable condition that a man of rare courage and steely determination sought to remedy and change for the better, and asked for nothing more than the right due to his paralytic people to live as normal human beings, and dismantle the unequal and iniquitous system that rode roughshod on their submissive heads, keeping them in perpetual bondage, tied to the feet of their masters. Though spade work of considerable magnitude had been done by his predecessors in the matter of attacking and making a dent into this inegalitarian network that denied them their rightful due for centuries of oppression and injustice heaped on them, it was left to this man to strike the decisive and what was considered a final blow on the

reactionary citadel and free his people from the slavery they had been condemned to.

That messiah was Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar or Ambavdekar, as his original patronymic was designated, born in Mhow in what is today Madhya Pradesh, on 14th April, 1891. He was later to become the only Indian politician-statesman to be actively associated in the discussions on constitutional matters from Montford Reforms to the Cabinet Mission proposals for an independent India. The whole long struggle for the emancipation of the depressed classes from the twenties to the fifties of the twentieth century in India, takes shape around his towering name. He was one of the very few men of our modern public life whose social and political thought ranged over a wide spectrum of subjects, all geared to the overall and paramount objective of uplifting the downtrodden and those wallowing in ignorance and vice arising out of their wretched woes.

This was the man who had predicted that the British system of parliamentary democracy we had inherited from our erstwhile rulers, would not produce a stable government in the country. He had remarked that it would be the easiest thing for groups to align and realign themselves at frequent intervals for petty purposes to bring about the downfall of government, that constant overthrow of governments would lead to nothing short of anarchy. The happenings during the last few years in the country both at the national and state levels, are too loud and clear confirmation of his prognostications. The low level to which the political life of the country has sunk, is a grim reminder of Ambedkar's warning.

Whether in the legislature to which he had found admittance as a nominated member or in trade unionism which he toyed with for some time, in his overwhelming bid to improve the lot that had befallen his 'banished' brethren, he took up cudgels in their defence without fear or favour of anyone. He did not cringe before any authority with a begging bowl and shunned the obsequiousness that was condescended to be shown to him by some highly-placed people. He rather preferred to be offered his due as rightfully owing to him for the services rendered and did not plead for out-of-turn favours and other inducements that were extended to him. He felt intensely the discriminatory treatment that was meted out to him and his people and rose hammer and thongs in revolt against these tormentors whom he located in a particular community that wanted to perpetuate its hegemony over the rest of its fellow beings with impunity. He found too friends among them and sought their advice and assistance in his herculean endeavours.

He felt that high-caste Hindus had a trait of character that often led them to behaviour that had the seed of disaster in it. That was the acquisitive instinct of a high order which was ingrained in them and their aversion to share with others the good things of life. They held the monopoly of education, wealth, and all the means in the

socio-economic sphere, and had captured the machinery of the State to serve their own ends, excluding callously the lower classes from those privileges and denying them their share of the cake. He boldly put forth his findings on this score in the various journals which he helped found or edited in English and in Marathi, being a crusading journalist too. The titles of his periodicals highlighted the mute protest of his suffering tribe unable to articulate effectively its woeeful tale.

Dr. Ambedkar had always affirmed that the type of the executive the British fostered in India would not be conducive to the well being of the minorities in general and the untouchables in particular, however much the protestations of the Indian leaders asserted to the contrary. For the majority would not countenance the claims of the minorities and the backward classes for sharing power or a portion of that power which the latter felt they were entitled to as free citizens of a democratic State. Hence his repeated pleading for separate electorates for his people along with the minorities, which stance he abandoned later bowing to relentless pressure from the Congress leaders.

He went about touring the country and urged on his people to fight for their rights and not to fall prey to the inertia and submission that had characterised them for centuries. He exhorted them to rise from their lethargy and stupor and realize their true selves by a determined effort at self-development and that could be done by disciplined behaviour and higher education. He clearly saw education as an important instrument for his people's advancement and he went out of his way to promote that endowment in his people. His efforts at establishing the Siddharth College named after the great Buddha himself showed his zeal in this herculean task he undertook for the uplift of the downtrodden.

The people responded enthusiastically and very warmly indeed. Their hopes and aspirations were being fulfilled through this prophetic espousal of their cause which had been given up as lost. They rallied round his initiatives to give them teeth in their struggle against the forces of reaction which were on the alert and would have liked to nip in the bud any upsurge on the part of these helpless sections of society. He got reservation secured for them in the civil services in the State and Central cadres, so that they could catch up with their more forward countrymen towards a more integrated society on modern lines. He was acclaimed as a saviour, a latter-day Moses come to their rescue, to lead them on to the Promised Land of the future, where no one would be denied the basic rights of human beings merely on the basis of his or her birth in humbler strata of that social hierarchy.

Several of the disabilities his 'boycotted' people laboured under, were either mitigated or done away with, thanks to his enormous influence and prestige which he lent towards that missionary task. They could unhesitatingly walk side by side with their fellowmen, not looked down upon any more but in a position of respectability that was

won at great sacrifice and even taunting ridicule to his moves in that direction. But he was made of sterner stuff and resistance or opposition to him, had to yield in his favour ultimately.

The struggle against oppression of all kinds, particularly of big business hand in glove with some bureaucrats and wily politicians, continues unabated and has in fact exacerbated all the more in recent times. In the incisive terminology of the Shetkari Sanghata leader, Sharad Joshi, there are two distinct counties in the country, the 'India' of the rich and the powerful, and the 'Bharat' of the poor and the oppressed that includes the lower middle classes also dependent for employment on the same weighty elements. Dr. Ambedkar's struggle against such oppression is a constant inspiration to those active in this uneasy sphere.

