

Concept

The making of the film 'Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar', right from its conception to its creation was for me an experience in itself. The concept that was just a dream in the beginning finally came true and I saw myself living it. Recreating the life of one of the greatest visionaries of Indian History was an experience of a lifetime.

This huge tree has its roots in a documentary film I made on the life of Dr. Ambedkar for the Films Division in the year 1989. Shooting for this documentary was also done part in the US and the UK and mainly in India when I met the many people who were in actual contact with Dr. Ambedkar. The incidents that were related to me by these people and also their fond memories of the learned visionary were so touching and exciting that I thought, the only true tribute to the great man and also to these people would be a life size sketch of Dr. Ambedkar on the silver screen.

A Centenary Committee was set up to celebrate 100 years of birth of Dr. Ambedkar in the year 1991-1992 which had Mr. Sharad Pawar as its Chairman, the then Chief Minister of Maharashtra. The seed of this huge tree was sown by M/s. Mrinal Gore, a social worker who gave the committee the idea of my dream. And thus an amount of Rs 1 crore was sanctioned for the fulfillment of my dream. The Centenary Committee of the Government of India under the Chairmanship of the then Prime-Minister Mr. Chandrashekhar contributed Rs 5 crores and then the research began.

The research included a rigorous work of five years under the able guidance of Dr. Y.D. Phadke a well-known historian and Academician and thus emerged a script written by three equally able writers, Late Daya Pawar, Arun Sadhu and Sooni Taraporevala. The Script Committee appointed by the Government of India included eminent Indian historians and prominent Ambedkarites. The script was approved and freedom of creativity of the director was agreed upon by this committee.

The recreation of the period in India and abroad as well, was a huge task. Institutes like the Columbia University New York and the London School of Economics where Dr. Ambedkar had studied, gave their full support and the shooting was done free of cost, though some architectural parts had to be recreated. We faced a similar problem in India as well, only on a much larger scale, especially as a feel of Old Bombay was needed. The buildings had to be re-erected and the whole period of the early 1900 had to be re-created.

The ordeal of recreation did not limit itself to just the architecture or the period but it went as far as the actor who had to live the role of Ambedkar. The search for the actor did not limit itself to India but was also carried out on the other side of the Atlantic as well. But finally it was the face and the talent of the Southern Superstar Mammooty that had the potential to relive the life of Ambedkar. The rest of the cast too included a lot of care and precision.



The choice of Mammootty to play the role of Ambedkar was so appropriate that the hundreds of untouchables or Dalits who would come to take part in shooting would be emotionally so moved that they would come to Mammootty with devotion in their hearts and tears in their eyes. This was the greatest success and achievement of the talented actor.

The technicians working for the film had an ambition. They wanted to achieve technical excellence, a film that was made on International Standards and that would stand the test of an International audience. And so the style of production was lavish with no stone left unturned for the achievement of technical success. This proved the prime feature of the impact the film has on the audience. Fluency of the camera, unique music and an equal quality of sound in Dolby Digital Sound Systems rendered the film its international standing.

People from various strata have already seen this film in special screenings and have appreciated it to a great extent. These include people from the field of art, literature, law and politics. And their reactions have been favourable. Some representing the common stratum of society have also previewed the film and their reactions have been touching and overwhelming especially that age group of people which has seen and met Dr. Ambedkar personally. They have reacted with no less than tears in their eyes. Political leaders like the Prime Minister Mr. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, The Home Minister Mr. L.K. Advani and Mr. Sharad Pawar have watched the film and have described it as an excellent film. Leaders of the Republican Party of India like Maisaheb Ambedkar, Prakash Ambedkar, Late Dadasaheb Rupavate, R.S. Gawai too have admired the film. Literates like Vijay Tendulkar, Pritish Nandi, artists like Shreeram Lagoo, Satyadev Dubey, Adoor Gopalkrishnan, Shekhar Kapoor, Madhuri Dixit have spoken as 'Watching this film is like the rewriting chapters of Indian Social History and that every Indian must watch this film.'

Appreciation has not come from only these quarters, but also from a very vulnerable corner which is the young generation of the age group of 18 to 30 years, especially the Non Ambedkarites who bear strong prejudices against Dr. Ambedkar. After seeing the film they expressed that through this film they got to know about the humiliation and the sufferings Dr. Ambedkar had to undergo in spite of his high educational qualifications. They admit that they must re-evaluate the role of Ambedkar in the Indian Social History in a positive way. In fact it's the image of the complex character of this man who has a global outlook, that's most appealing to the new generation. Applause also comes from an unexpected quarter: The women. They are touched by the efforts Dr. Ambedkar took, to uplift the cause of women and give them an equal standing in society through the introduction of the Hindu Code Bill.

After these few trials it is very evident that people appreciate the content and the purpose of the film, rationally and emotionally. They are impressed by the cinematic technical excellence, stunning performances and the honest re-creation of History through the script, sets, costumes and the music.



Synopsis

This film holds its significance due to the fact that, though the ethos contained is Indian, it has its equation in the political and social disparity all over the world. The basic aim of the social revolution is to uphold the meaning of humanity in its true sense.

The film spans between the years 1901-1956, takes us through 60 years, two world wars, three countries- India, America, Britain. Both a personal portrait, as well as a record of the times, it is above all one man's fight against the tyranny of the Hindu orthodoxy, against tradition, against Indian political heroes and saints such as Mahatma Gandhi, who were more interested in political reforms than social reforms. Dr. Ambedkar walked a lonely path; he never once strayed from, even though in the process he became the most hated man in Hindu India

Born in an 'untouchable' family at a time when untouchables were forbidden education, Ambedkar bore many insults and humiliations at the hands of his fellow students and became the first graduate of his community. Later on while studying at the Columbia University, New York, Ambedkar was able to rid himself of the stigma of untouchability and breathe in the air of freedom. But at the same time living next to Harlem he could equate the fate of his people with that of the Afro-Americans. The 14th Amendment to the US Constitution granting rights to the African-Americans and the views of his philosopher-guide teachers in Columbia supporting the Human Rights brought about in him the strong internal desire and the spirit to fight back the prevailing social injustice in his country.

In India at the same time two struggles were being fought simultaneously; one, well known throughout the world was India's fight for political independence spear headed by Gandhi, against the British Colonial powers. And the second struggle, lesser known, led by Dr. Ambedkar, was an internal struggle. 70 million untouchables were fighting for their social rights against the Upper caste Hindu society. For the millions of untouchables their oppressors were not the British but rather their own co-religionists, their fellow high caste Hindus.

Though they belonged to the same religion, untouchables were treated worse than the lowliest animals. Sanctified by religion and centuries of tradition, high caste Hindus considered themselves polluted if an untouchable were to touch, speak or even cast their shadows over them. Though they worshipped the same God they could not enter the temples. All public services including the police and the military were closed to them. They were permitted only to follow their hereditary occupations of scavenging, street sweeping, skinning and tanning animal hides.



Gandhi appealed to Hindus for a change of heart. On the other hand Ambedkar wanted political rights. Gandhi saw untouchables as an indivisible part of Hindu society. Ambedkar disgusted with Hinduism saw the depressed classes as separate. Gandhi thought once the British left, India would right itself. Ambedkar was not willing to take chance. He did not want the simple change of masters. This confrontation with Gandhi, which made Ambedkar the most hated man in India, was resolved with Indian Independence when Gandhi insisted Ambedkar to be inducted into the first cabinet. Even though they had been on opposite side of the fence, Gandhi respected his former adversary. Thus Ambedkar became India's first law Minister under Prime Minister Nehru and it fell upon him to draft India's Constitution.

Throughout his life Ambedkar's endeavors to reform Hindu society had borne stubborn resistance and he had been on a life long search for a religion, a moral social order that would not sanctify the exploitation of man by man. His search led him to Buddhism, which he regarded as rational, egalitarian religion. In Buddha's philosophy of equality, compassion and non-violence lay the hope, not only for the depressed classes but also for the whole world.

On 14th October 1956 Ambedkar renounced Hinduism and embraced Buddhism. Millions of untouchables followed him, threw away their Hindu idols, embraced en masse this new religion. This perhaps was the biggest social revolution witnessed by the subcontinent in a millennia.

Though this story is particular to India, it is also universal. While Dr. Ambedkar was rooted in India, he also had an international outlook. There will always be people like him who struggle to better the lot of the exploited, the downtrodden, and the forgotten. His was the universal fight of the underdog, to gain his people a rightful place in the sun.

