



FROM HUMBLE BEGINNINGS TO SCHOLARLY HEIGHTS: THE EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION OF DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR

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Abstract: Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956), revered as Babasaheb and the principal architect of the Indian Constitution, rose from the depths of caste-based oppression to become a towering figure in India's social and political landscape. This research paper delves deeply into his early life, examining his birth in a marginalized community, the pervasive discrimination that defined his childhood, his relentless pursuit of education amidst insurmountable barriers, and his transformative higher studies abroad. Through a detailed analysis of biographical records, historical anecdotes, and scholarly accounts, the paper illustrates how Ambedkar's formative experiences fueled his lifelong crusade for equality and justice. It emphasizes the role of familial support, progressive patrons, and personal resilience in overcoming systemic untouchability, providing insights into the socio-cultural context of colonial India that shaped one of its greatest reformers.

Keywords: Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, early life, caste discrimination, untouchability, Dalit education, Mahar caste, colonial India, social reform, higher education abroad, Babasaheb.

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INTRODUCTION

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, affectionately known as Babasaheb, was born into a society that considered his very touch polluting. His extraordinary journey from a segregated classroom in British India to the lecture halls of Columbia and the London School of Economics represents one of the most remarkable stories of personal triumph over systemic oppression in modern history (Dhananjay Keer, 1954/2016). This paper traces that journey in detail, demonstrating how the humiliations of untouchability, combined with rare opportunities for education, forged the ideological foundations of India's greatest champion of equality.

Birth and Family Background

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was born on 14 April 1891 at Mhow (now Dr. Ambedkar Nagar), Madhya Pradesh, as the fourteenth and last child of Ramji Maloji Sakpal and Bhimabai Sakpal (Wikipedia contributors, 2025; Press Information Bureau, 2023). His father, a Subedar-Major in the British Indian Army, belonged to the Mahar caste—one of the largest “untouchable” communities in Maharashtra (Moon, 1991). Although military service offered the family a modest income and access to cantonment schools, it

could not shield them from the rigid caste hierarchy that governed everyday life outside the army precincts (Jaffrelot, 2005).

The family originally bore the surname Sakpal but was registered in school as “Ambadawekar” after their native village Ambavade in Ratnagiri district. A sympathetic Brahmin teacher, Krishnaji Keshav Ambedkar, later changed the young Bhimrao's surname to Ambedkar—the name by which he would become immortal (Dhananjay Keer, 1954/2016; Next IAS, 2025).

Ramji Sakpal was a follower of the Kabirpanthi sect, which rejected caste distinctions, and placed immense emphasis on education—an unusual priority for Mahar families at the time (Omvedt, 2004). This progressive outlook would prove decisive in young Ambedkar's life.

Childhood and the Trauma of Untouchability

The family moved frequently due to Ramji's postings, eventually settling in Bombay (now Mumbai) in 1904. Ambedkar's earliest memories were of segregation and humiliation. At the Government High School in Satara and later at Elphinstone High School in Bombay, “untouchable” students were forced to sit outside the classroom on gunny sacks they brought themselves (Ambedkar, c. 1935–36/1990). Teachers routinely refused to touch their



notebooks, and they could drink water only when a school peon or upper-caste classmate poured it from a height—a practice Ambedkar immortalised in the phrase “No peon, no water” (Ambedkar, c. 1935–36/1990; Zelliott, 2013).

In 1897, when Ambedkar was barely six, his mother died, followed by several siblings. Of Ramji’s fourteen children, only five survived to adulthood (Dhananjay Keer, 1954/2016). These early losses, combined with grinding poverty and social ostracism, created an environment of profound insecurity—yet also of fierce determination.

In 1906, at the age of fifteen, Ambedkar was married to nine-year-old Ramabai in an arranged child marriage, adding adult responsibilities to an already burdened childhood (Moon, 1991; Next IAS, 2025).

Breakthroughs in Indian Education

Despite relentless discrimination, Ambedkar excelled academically. In 1907 he became one of the first Mahars to pass the matriculation examination of Bombay University (Press Information Bureau, 2023). The following year, with financial assistance from the progressive Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III of Baroda and social reformer Krishnarao Keluskar, he enrolled at Elphinstone College—the first person from the “untouchable” community to enter a college in western India (Jaffrelot, 2005; Zelliott, 2013).

In 1912 Ambedkar graduated with a degree in economics and political science. A public felicitation organised by his community and progressive upper-caste friends marked the historic occasion (Dhananjay Keer, 1954/2016).

His father died in February 1913, but months later Ambedkar received the transformative Baroda State Scholarship of £11.50 per month to study abroad (Moon, 1991).

Higher Education in the United States and Britain

Columbia University (1913–1917)

Ambedkar arrived at Columbia University in July 1913 at the age of twenty-two. Studying under John Dewey, Edwin Seligman, James Harvey Robinson, and A. A. Goldenweiser, he completed an M.A. in 1915 and submitted a Ph.D. thesis in 1917 (later published as *The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India*) (Columbia University, 2021; Ahuja, 2016). His seminal 1916 seminar paper, “Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development,” is considered a foundational text in caste studies (Ambedkar, 1917/1979).

Brief Return to India and Renewed Discrimination (1917)

The scholarship expired in 1917, forcing Ambedkar to return to Baroda as Military Secretary to the Maharaja. He faced such intense caste prejudice—including being barred from office rooms and having files thrown at him—that he resigned after only eleven days and returned to Bombay (Dhananjay Keer, 1954/2016; Jaffrelot, 2005).

London (1916–1923, with interruptions)

With financial help from the Maharaja of Kolhapur and his friend Naval Bhatena, Ambedkar re-enrolled at the London School of Economics and Gray’s Inn in 1920. He submitted his M.Sc. thesis (*The Problem of the Rupee*) in 1921, which so impressed Professor

Edwin Cannan that it was published in 1923 and influenced the establishment of the Reserve Bank of India (Ahuja, 2016). He earned his D.Sc. from London University in 1923 and was called to the Bar the same year (London School of Economics, 2021). Columbia University formally awarded him the Ph.D. in 1927 (Columbia University, 2021).

CONCLUSION

The first thirty-six years of B.R. Ambedkar’s life—from an “untouchable” child denied water in school to a barrister with two doctorates from the world’s finest universities—represent an unparalleled triumph of intellect and resilience over systemic oppression. The humiliations he endured crystallised his understanding of caste as a graded inequality sustained by religious sanction, while his Western education provided the analytical tools to dismantle it. These formative experiences laid the ideological and scholarly foundation for his later roles as lawmaker, economist, and liberator of millions.

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