

Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891–1956)



Introduction

Dr Bhimrao R Ambedkar (1891–1956) is known internationally as an extraordinary academic, writer, politician, socio-political reformer, economist, and jurist. He also revived the Buddhist movement in India. As the chief architect of India's Constitution, he abolished Untouchability, secured social and fundamental legal rights and equality for its citizens. As India's Minister of Labour under the Britain's Viceroy's Executive Council, between 1942 and 1946 he secured significant legal protections for workers including a reduction in factory working hours, compulsory recognition by employers of Trade Unions, a requirement for settlement of industrial disputes and a minimum wage. He also secured maternity benefits and equal pay for equal work for working women. He was independent India's first Minister of Law and Justice. With the Hindu Code Bill, he helped pioneer reforms which abolished polygamy, gave women the right to divorce, and the right to inherit property.

For a number of years, I discussed with The Honourable Society of Gray's Inn ways in which we could raise the profile of Dr Ambedkar who trained as a barrister at the Inn in 1916 and from 1921 to 1922 while concurrently studying for a Master's degree at the London School of Economics. There was already a portrait of Dr Ambedkar at the Inn, donated in 1974 by the Ambedkar Memorial Committee of GB, and an Indian bean tree (*Catalpa bignonioides*) in *The Walks* donated by the then-High Commissioner of India in 1997. The Government of India donated a further portrait in 2016. Over the years we discussed a number of proposals and decided on naming a room after Dr Ambedkar which would give those who used its space an introduction to the great man, and maybe arouse their curiosity to look into and learn from his remarkable life, works and accomplishments. The *Ambedkar Room*, was unveiled by Mr Ali Malek QC, Master Treasurer, The Honourable Society of Gray's Inn on 30 June 2021 to mark the centenary of Dr Ambedkar's return to Gray's Inn in 1921. FABO UK commissioned and donated artist David Newens' new portrait of Dr Ambedkar for the *Ambedkar Room*. This also marks Dr Ambedkar's 130th birth anniversary.

Ms Santosh Dass MBE, President, FABO UK, June 2021

Mr Ali Malek QC, Master Treasurer, The Honourable Society of Gray's Inn

Today we proudly celebrate the connection Dr B R Ambedkar had to Gray's Inn.

Dr Ambedkar would recognize much of the Inn of 2021 despite the changes it has seen in the past one hundred years; and surely would have been drawn first to the Library in whose predecessor he studied as a young student. Already committed to social change due to his harsh experiences as an Untouchable, he could not then have known that over half a century after his passing, his Inn would be graced by his portraits, that the Walks would boast a tree dedicated in his name, and people would gather to dedicate a room to his memory. Even for a man of his talents that may have seemed too much – but one does not shape a nation in the way he did without the capacity to dream.

Like the nation Dr Ambedkar shaped, the Inn has its traditions, some of which are very old, some of which are surprisingly new and some of which have changed over time. The process of change is often unsettling. The weight of history or society or culture can combine to generate a mighty friction against it. But change can reinvigorate those living through it, and at its best preserves what is worthwhile in society whilst allowing that which no longer serves to fall away. Dr Ambedkar was an agent of change and from today he will be woven that much deeper into the fabric of his Inn, reminding us that no challenge is insurmountable and that the law can be a vehicle for social evolution that may previously have been considered impossible.

Our Members are what makes our Inn the institution it is. It has long been a place where people from diverse backgrounds come together to share ideas, united by the appreciation of the Rule of Law and its various facets; the integrity of the legal system; equality before the law and access to justice. Despite his professed belief that “*everything, you see, is impermanent*”, Dr Ambedkar would understand our shared commitment – as individuals and as a community – to maintaining these traditions and ensuring they move with the times.

30 June 2021

Margaret Bourke-White

Margaret Bourke-White (1904–1971) was one of the most respected photojournalists of her time. Like her compatriots Dorothea Lange and Lee Miller, she shattered gender role stereotypes. Passionate about the natural world, as she wrote in *Portrait of Myself* (1963), she turned down an offer from New York's Museum of Natural History because photography crooked its lucrative finger.

Bourke-White lived through many an epochal historical event. She was the witness in situ with cameras, lighting equipment, tripods and an unswerving eye. She captured the Depression-era, its Dust Bowl victims and chain gangs, and its poverty and New Deal hopefuls. The Soviet Union granted her permission to document the Five Year Plan's progress during the summers of 1930 to 1932. When the Nazis marched into the Sudetenland in 1938, she was there. Likewise in the Soviet Union when the Nazis tore up the non-aggression pact. She photographed Stalin, saw newly liberated Buchenwald, and witnessed the Partition of the Raj.

Between 1946 and 1947 Bourke-White lived and travelled in India. On assignment for *Life*, she photographed Dr. Ambedkar, Gandhi, Jinnah and Nehru. Bourke-White's portrait of Dr. Ambedkar was taken in May 1946. Unlike his usual formal patrician poses, her photo shoot captured him in relaxed mood. He is at home at 26 Alipur Road, Civil Lines, Delhi on his veranda with a cascade of bougainvillea beside him. Family lore recalls his love of bougainvillea's magenta pink form.

David Newens

David Newens (*b* 1945) is a noted portraitist in oils. He paints from life or, as with his commission from Commonwealth Parliamentary Association to paint its former Secretary General, William Ferdinand Shija, posthumously from photographs. The original image selected of Dr. Ambedkar was one of a sequence Margaret Bourke-White shot now in the LIFE Picture Collection. Its monochrome bougainvillea enabled Newens to deploy another side of his artistic palette. Two of his 'Greenhouse Interior' floral scenes were hung at succeeding years' Royal Academy Summer Exhibitions.

Ken Hunt, Writer and historian, June 2021

Federation of Ambedkarite and Buddhist Organisations UK

Established in 1985, Federation of Ambedkarite and Buddhist Organisations UK (FABO UK) is an umbrella body for a number of organisations following the teachings of Dr Ambedkar and Buddhism. The Federation's key aim is to raise awareness of Dr Ambedkar's life, works and achievements. It also lobbies for Caste-based discrimination to be outlawed in Britain; raises its voice on issues relating to equality and against human rights violations and atrocities against Dalits; and for 14 April (Dr Ambedkar's birth date) to be recognised as 'International Day of Equality'.

FABO UK raises awareness of Dr Ambedkar by making donations of busts and statues of Dr Ambedkar and his writings, as well as organising and hosting conferences, including ones in the both Houses of the Parliament. In 1992, FABO UK donated busts of Dr Ambedkar to the High Commission of India in London, the London School of Economics, Columbia University New York, and Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. In 2018, the Federation donated a life-size statute of Dr Ambedkar to the Ambedkar Museum, London. Over the years the Federation has donated hundreds of sets of *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Writings and Speeches* to universities and organisations, including Gray's Inn, universities in Oxford, Cambridge, Bonn and Paris, and both Houses of Parliament. During the Ambedkar Centenary Celebrations in 1991 under the auspices of FABO UK, a number of events were organised in such prestigious venues as both Houses of Parliament, the LSE, Gray's Inn, and the Commonwealth Hall.

In 1991 FABO UK installed a blue plaque outside 10 King Henry's Road, near Primrose Hill in London, NW3 where Dr Ambedkar had lived in the early 1920s. After the property came on the market, in September 2014 FABO UK submitted a proposal to the Government of Maharashtra (GOM) that they fund its purchase in order to turn it into a memorial. After a year of lobbying, GOM bought the house in 2015. It is now officially the *Ambedkar Museum*. The *Ambedkar Room* at Gray's Inn is the culmination of discussions with Gray's Inn. We acknowledge their generous and wholehearted support.

Arun Kumar and C Gautam, Joint Secretaries, FABO UK, June 2021

Dr Ambedkar Quotes

“However good a Constitution may be, if those who are implementing it are not good, it will prove to be bad. However bad a Constitution may be, if those implementing it are good, it will prove to be good.”

“So long as you do not achieve social liberty, whatever freedom is provided by the law is of no avail to you.”

“I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved.”

“Caste is not just a division of labour, it is a division of labourers.”

“My five years of staying in Europe and America had completely wiped out from my mind any consciousness that I was an untouchable, and that an untouchable wherever he went in India was a problem to himself and others.”

“My final words of advice to you are educate, agitate and organise.”

Acknowledgments and thanks

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Gray's Inn and The Walk at Gray's Inn



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