

DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR : TRANSFORMING A RENUNCIATORY PARADIGM INTO AN INSTRUMENT OF SOCIAL ACTION

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ABSTRACT

The pernicious practice of casteism is intrinsically rooted in the socio-cultural milieu of Indian society and has nurtured fundamentalist attitudes and intolerance towards indigenous subaltern cultures. The ardent human rights advocate Dr. Ambedkar's passion to liberate Indian Dalits from the hierarchical clutches of casteism which "pervades everywhere and which regulates thoughts and deeds of all classes" made him identify it as running counter to the Dalit cause. The great civil rights activist realized that casteism was sustained by deep-rooted religious prejudices based on Hindu scriptures which proscribed interdining and intermarrying, promoting social segregation. He was thus convinced of the need for social democracy to precede political democracy; of the need for social disabilities like casteism and untouchability to be eradicated to enable all to enjoy political freedom of the country. So he aptly viewed conversion to any egalitarian religion as a great political act and propagated that such conversions would help Dalits break off from oppressive religious structures and to lead dignified lives as human beings. In a complicated social system, Dr. Ambedkar strove to establish liberty, equality, and fraternity derived from Buddha's teachings.

This Research paper attempts to convey that though Dr. Ambedkar's primary concern for a reformulation of Buddhism, a faith to which he converted to after considerable deliberation, was inarguably to make it intelligible and relevant to the subordinated, the structurally oppressed & the marginalized and to assist them to reclaim their rights as human beings, his reinterpretation of the traditional Buddhist doctrines resulted in widening its ambit to transform it into a vehicle for reconstructing human society and the modern world at large. What emerges from this profound reconstruction of Dr. Ambedkar is a religion for the modern, civic society, the scope of his objective going beyond catering to a specific community. That notwithstanding, Dr.B.R. R Ambedkar's re-rendering of Buddhism is a seminal contribution towards Dalit liberation and along with his iconic writings has left a rich legacy of Dalit aspirations for equality.

Keywords: *Casteism, Navayana, Subaltern, Ambedkar, Dalit.*

INTRODUCTION

Dr. Ambedkar, the great civil rights leader was a visionary insofar as his reformative ideology envisioned alleviating human suffering and

augmenting human rights of the society at large, the manifestation of the vision being the re-rendering of Buddhism—the application of Buddhist teachings to the resolution of social problems which has emerged in the context of a global conversation on human

rights, distributive justice and social progress. In keeping with his lofty aspirations, Dr Ambedkar reconstructed Buddhism not only as a religion for the untouchables but as a humanist and socialist religion, combining scientific understanding with universal truth. Indeed, Buddhism so designed if seen as serving Dalit interests has to be appreciated as part of the bigger picture wherein Dalit liberation achieves the end of contributing to the upliftment of humanity as such. Ambedkar's importance thus clearly transcends the Dalit issue-the intention clearly being to reconstruct human society, the modern world at large.

Ambedkar uses "liberty, equality and fraternity" as the three chief signs, even touchstones of a compassionate and even-handed religion: they represent to him everything that Hinduism, in his reckoning was not. (Gupta.2000). He said "Religion is a tool for the transformation of the minds of people for setting up moral ideals and motivating them in the society. I do not hold this view. I consider the foundations of religion are essential to life and practice of society." (Keer, 1990, p.58).

Ambedkar saw an appeal and political application in the "new paradigm" of Starke and Finke in their economic theory of religion wherein they propose that individuals should make choices of religious attitude guided by their preferences and tastes, following the dictates of reason in an effort to achieve their desired goals rather than religious adherence being an "opium" used by the few to brainwash the many. (Starke, Finke, 2000). In the *Manusmriti*, Manu states that "castes are inherited by birth and they cannot be given up."(Mishra, 1997, 214-215.) Following this tradition, one's ability to make choices based on "preference and taste" is greatly circumscribed. In such a setting, how one makes a living, where one worships, and who one is allowed to dine with is not decided based on personal convictions, but according to the immutable law of caste. When Ambedkar makes the distinction in this speech between the fear mongering of the "priestly class" and the aspirations and needs of the people, he is looking to the "new", anthropological paradigm as the model which

undermines these traditionalist claims. In short, Ambedkar's rebuttal to traditionalism opened the door to both Hindu reform and, eventually, conversion to Buddhism. By placing the *Manusmriti* in a historical context and re-evaluating it as a self-serving tract, Ambedkar delegitimizes and desacralizes it.

THE VISIONARY SHIFT TO A SECULAR DISCOURSE AND SOCIAL ACTION

When Dr. Ambedkar embraced Buddhism in 1956, his appreciation of *dhamma* was founded on a fundamental dismissal of Hinduism and the outright rejection of the caste system as well as a serious & comprehensive appraisal of existing Buddhisms. (Rodrigues, 1993). For many scholars it appears bewildering that one so dedicated to liberal democratic ideals should eventually take recourse to religious conversion as a solution to the subjugation of the dalits. His conversion to Buddhism was the consummation of years of profound analysis of the caste system. He believed that religion, in the broadest sense of a transcendental morality is indispensable for methodical social sustenance and his belief of what was known as "Hinduism" or more appropriately "Brahmanism" could not measure up sufficiently to meet that end; in fact, it fell woefully short.

Dr Ambedkar, through the example of Hinduism and the caste system was painfully aware of the entanglement of religion and society; therefore, he intended to reconstruct Buddhism not only as a religion for the untouchables but as a humanist and social religion, which combined scientific understanding with universal truth. His Buddhism projected a religion for a modern, civic society. (Fuchs, 2001, 250-273). There is a shift from a religious to a secular discourse as Dr Ambedkar attempted to bring Buddhism to the realm of social action where it could be employed to effect change. (Omvedt, 2003). Religion for him was not a private affair but a public concern.

On 14 October 1956, Dr. Ambedkar publicly adopted Buddhism at a *deeksha* (conversion) ceremony held in Nagpur, (Lynch, 1969), a move that shook Hindu society by its separatism and militancy. On that day and the next, he led the conversion of a large number of followers, most of them from the group of Mahars who had come only for that purpose. A Buddhist scholar who was a part of the mass conversion movement wrote that “after years of unsuccessful struggle for the basic human rights of his people, he was forced to recognize that there was going to be no change of heart on the part of caste Hindus: if the *dalits* wanted to rid themselves of their “age old disabilities they had no alternative but to renounce the religion into which they had been born.” (Sangharakshita, 2006, p.59). For him “what the Hindus call religion is really law or at best legalized class ethics”. Its main drawback is that it tends to “deprive moral life of freedom and spontaneity and to reduce it to more or less anxious and servile conformity to externally imposed rules” (Ambedkar, 1936, p.76))

The mass conversion of *dalits* brought about a new emphasis on the secular ethics of Buddhism that took the campaign against Brahmanism to a wider Indian stage.

A DALIT NEO-BUDDHIST POLITICAL THOUGHT

Many scholars argue that developing a theoretical framework for Buddhism’s engagement with social issues, social justice and rights is not in the nature of Buddhism: it is an ontological discourse that aims at individual salvation through inner transformation. (Cho, 2002). Others are reluctant to identify any notion of human rights as “both human and nonhuman beings are equally subject to transiency or impermanency.” (Abe, 1986, p.202). Damien Keown questions whether the idea of human rights can find a “philosophical justification within the overall Buddhist vision of individual and social good.” (Keown, 1998). Thus because of its emphasis on individual salvation through detachment,

Buddhism is often seen as a religion that fails to consider societal problems.

For the Dalits, as for many other subalternized minorities-the internally colonized, who do not inhabit a geopolitical space that provides easy grounds for a politics of separatism or of independent nationalism-it has never been a straightforward task to mark out a sequestered domain of an autonomous “culture”. The claim of a unified and alternative culture and tradition established here, if it is established, is only through long and hard struggle. (Pandey, 2013, p.44). While Dr. Ambedkar’s attempt was to give an ethical underpinning to the *dalit* movement, Buddhism emerged from this makeover permeated with nationalist associations and political aspirations that moored it in many civil movements across India. (Verma, 2010). “Unlike an institutional approach that treats people as if they were only products of institutions, this approach emphasizes people’s influence over the institutions they create. In this way Dr. Ambedkar has raised a new set of questions about the role of religion in social life as the individual becomes the main point of reference in the shaping of values, attitudes and beliefs. He thereby effectively particularizes politics as a vibrant and unique human activity and thereby develops a critique aimed at freeing the subject from domination and violence of coercive traditions. It is a central feature of Dr. Ambedkar’s political vision that for power to be chastened, political institutions must redress social inequities in civil society. In championing a conception of politics which embraces diverse activities (apart from electoral politics) he makes politics coextensive with concerns in the social, cultural and economic life and opens these domains to public scrutiny which is not the same as collating the political and social.” (Verma, 2010, p.57).

CULMINATION OF THE STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY-THE CONVERSION

To begin with Dr. Ambedkar redefined Buddhist liberation as the amelioration of material conditions

and social relationships in this life. He was inspired by a need to give a new doctrinal basis to religion that according to him “will be in consonance with liberty, equality and fraternity, in short, with democracy.” (Ambedkar, 1936, p.77). This meant a “complete change in the values of life. But a new life cannot enter a body that is dead. New life can enter only in a new body.” (Ambedkar, 1936, p.78). Hence the choice of Buddhism was a secondary principle in order to usher in liberal principles so woefully wanting in Hinduism which was viewed by Dr. Ambedkar as a “religion of rules.” More significantly it was a religion “that could be conceived as rational, ethical and unburdened by sacerdotal hierarchy”. (Dirks, 2001). The choice for Buddhism in this reinterpretation was based on “reason” and not “revelation.” (Fuchs, 2004).

A second view upheld by Eleanor Zelliot maintains that conversion reinterprets a historical past; it has given Buddhist communities “a new set of religious ideas, a thought provoking image, a series of occasions around which to rally which have no historic overtones of caste hierarchy”. (Zelliot, 1998). In addition to the sense of release from being untouchable, “there is a sense of belonging to a great past”. The theory of previous Buddhist identity fits well into the untouchables “need of an honourable past, a cultural heritage that can be claimed with pride”. Another approach supports the view that conversion furthered some ideals and it was desirable from the point of view of its consequences for the *dalit* identity as a group. Ambedkar desired a religious identity for dalits since he had an enduring respect for and emotional commitment to a religious and cultural tradition. (Gokhale, 1993).

Indian political thought believed that ultimately the values guiding our behaviour must have some basis independent of and outside human desires. Buddhism differed from most other Indian schools of thought insofar as it did not assume the “existence of an eternal material or spiritual primary substance out of which the manifold world evolved.” (Klostermaier, 2006, p.32). At the same time questioning the spiritual and metaphysical elements

of Buddhism Dr Ambedkar also “shunned the esoteric other- worldliness of religions, as well as their orthodoxies, doctrines and dogmas.” (Tejani, 2007, p.63). His investigations led him to believe that Buddhism offers an ethical ideal of living honestly according to principles that require no sustenance from the wider cosmos; it undermined the idea of divinity as it never claimed any status for a prophet; the focus was on the “agency of the individual”. (Fuchs, 2004, pp.253-254). It was this character of “worldly rationality”, “the emphasis on the will and judgment of the individual” that Ambedkar believed could provide the basis for a renewed moral code in society. (Tejani, 2007, p.63). He was influenced by the ideas of social improvement, democratic faith in the power of human leaders and communities to solve their own problems without divine intervention.

A RE-RENDERING OF BUDDHISM

The persuasive quality of Dr. Ambedkar’s formations however rests in the investment of Buddhism which originally was about engagement with the world besides the practices of truth, compassion and contemplation, with a fundamentally new enunciation and orientation. Dr. Ambedkar should be ranked amongst those Buddhist thinkers who have reframed and reinvented central tenets of Buddhist teaching for their community. His interpretation shows how a theory of social action can be acceptable ground for a Buddhist concept of social justice without compromising in any manner with the primary focus on individual salvation.

Dr. Ambedkar was at ease in the role of consciously reordering and rearranging his chosen religion to meet the needs of the Dalit community he advocated for. (Queen, 196). While endorsing Buddha’s teachings, Dr. Ambedkar was extremely eager to distinguish his approach by discarding four positions of Buddhism before reformulating a theory of social action. Ambedkar made changes to customary presentations of the Buddha’s teachings so that these changes might support *Dalit* activism. Dr. Ambedkar’s first major reinterpretation pertains

to Buddha's renunciation of worldly life. Whereas traditional biographies of the Buddha underscore the empathy the young prince felt when he first chanced upon human suffering, Dr. Ambedkar highlights the strength of the Buddha's social conscience during a conflict over water rights. According to Dr. Ambedkar, the Buddha advocated a rational and peaceful resolution of inter-tribe water conflict but was unable to gain the necessary political influence because he lacked majority vote. After his initial wandering, on hearing that the two warring tribes had made peace, Gautama resolves to continue renunciation and search, because "The problem of war is a problem of conflict. It is only part of a larger problem. The conflict is going on not only between kings and nations but between nobles and Brahmans, between householders, between [friends and family members]. The conflict between nations is occasional. But the conflict between classes is constant and perpetual. It is this which is the root of all suffering in the world. I have to find a solution to this problem of social conflict." (Ambedkar, 1957, pp.57-58). Ambedkar omits any mention of old age, sickness, and death (the forms of suffering the Buddha is usually understood to have encountered). In this way the Buddha's renunciation is driven more by social and political emergencies rather than a desire to find the ultimate truth. The discussion of water rights was also a relateable topic after the Mahad Satyagraha. Though unorthodox, these fresh and innovative interpretations on the motivations of Buddha create a character for him that might be easily comprehensible by oppressed communities, specifically Dalits. (Hancock, 2004, pp.17-25).

Ambedkar effects many modifications to early Buddhist even suspecting if the Four Aryan Truths on the existence, origin and overcoming of suffering and the path to be followed form the original teachings of Buddha as they deny hope to mankind and very likely offensive to people who suffered subordination and structural oppression. Richard W Taylor is of the view that Dr. Ambedkar's reading of the Four Truths is "little short of an emasculation of the Buddha's

Dhamma". (Taylor, 1972, p.142). In Ambedkar's reformulation, the first Noble Truth that life is suffering becomes the "second postulate," and the most important characteristic of Buddhism becomes its concern for human relationships. The second Noble Truth, that suffering arises from mental craving, is also described in social terms as "sorrow, misery and poverty." In turn he refers to the third Noble Truth regarding the cessation of suffering as the "removal of suffering." Christopher Queen's detailed analysis of Dr. Ambedkar's presentation of the Four Noble Truths reveals still more ways in which they have been altered to create a message of social activism. Queen notes that as the Buddha's teachings continue, it becomes clear that the Path of Purity is the Five Precepts, the Path of Righteousness is the Eightfold Path, and the Path of Virtue are the Ten Paramitas, or perfections. (Queen, 1996, p.56).

Yet Dr. Ambedkar does not present any of these concepts in their traditional format. The goal of the Eightfold Path, for example, is "to remove injustice and inhumanity that man does to man," rather than nirvana. (Queen, 1996, p.57).

Nirvana itself is then described as: (1) a fundamental understanding "that there was suffering in the world, and (2) a proactive knowledge of "how to remove this suffering and make mankind happy." (Queen, 1996, p. 57). These changes speak specifically to Dalits in a number of ways. There is a distinct element of anti-Brahmanism in Ambedkar's rendering of the Four Noble Truths. "Nothing else is Dhamma," he states "and a religion which fails to recognize this is no religion at all." Here, Ambedkar again legitimizes the use of Buddhism to oppose traditions that are unsatisfactory. Second, as Christopher Queen notes, Ambedkar seems to believe that the traditional presentation of suffering—which places the "blame" on the cravings of each individual— would alienate Buddhism from the socially and politically oppressed. (Queen, 1996, p.59g). Thus suffering is described in transitory, but more graphic, terms as "sorrow", "misery", and "poverty." wrought by social and economic injustice. These largely social

conditions are remedied quite differently from the traditional Buddhist understanding of suffering as an intricate network of mental cravings. Dr. Ambedkar has the Buddha say in his first sermon, “no doubt my Dhamma recognizes the existence of suffering but forget not that it also lays equal stress on the removal of suffering. My Dhamma has in it hope and purpose. Its purpose is to remove Avijja, by which I mean ignorance of the existence of suffering. There is hope in it because it shows the way to put an end to human suffering.” (Ambedkar, 1957, pp.130-131).

According to Fuchs, the recognition of the existence of suffering is counterbalanced by an “equal stress on the removal of suffering.” Nibbana is not about liberating the soul from the material world as for Ambedkar it is “vain to escape from the world...what is necessary is to change the world and make it better.” (Fuchs, 2004, p.312). The five *Parivrajakas* greet his first sermon by saying, “never in the history of the world has salvation been conceived as the blessing of happiness to be attained by man in this life and on this earth by righteousness born out of his own efforts!” (Ambedkar, 1957, pp.130-131). This change also speaks of the fact that the traditional focus on craving might have lent itself to manipulation by people in power, who could advocate renunciation instead of response to the materially based claims of the dispossessed. Third, by placing the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the Ten Perfections in a social context he provides religious justification for peoples’ social movements. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, his definition of nirvana is not only easily understandable but also theoretically attainable within a single lifetime. (Hancock, 2004, p.19). Thus the tenor of Dr. Ambedkar’s ‘Buddha and his Dhamma’ is an assertion of Buddhism as a religion (or Dhamma) that is capable of solving problems of social and natural suffering. Dr. Ambedkar’s explanation of karma and rebirth further legitimizes both the source and the goal of social action. He defends the concept of rebirth but changes the concept of the soul. Each time a person is reborn his or her soul is divided and recombined with parts of many other peoples’ souls. There is

thus no single soul that is reborn over and over again. (Ambedkar, 1992, p.333). In this way Dr. Ambedkar establishes that there is no inheritance of traits from one lifetime to the next—a direct rebuttal to the widespread views of caste. This in turn negates the idea that current social injustices are a result of past misdeeds and assures *Dalit* converts that their new framework does not contain the possibility for religiously sanctioned hierarchy. He also explains that karma works only within one lifetime and cannot affect future lives. (Ambedkar, 1957, p.340). A this-worldly emphasis on karma gives added significance to societal changes, as each life is now a unique and unrepeatability opportunity for change and growth, Ambedkar’s reinterpretation implying that material changes actually have ultimate importance, vindicating the oppressed peoples in their sense of social outrage and reinforcing the importance of political or social struggle.

Thus Ambedkar’s Dhamma ‘provides the socially and politically excluded with critical, alternative public spaces in which they can re/construct culturally stigmatized, or even vilified, identities and claim a “right to have rights” not just to social services but to human dignity, cultural difference, and /or social equality’, to cite Alvarez in the context of movements in Latin America. (Alvarez, 1997, p.109).

Ambedkar’s reinterpretation of the role of the monk provides a final illustration that Buddhism takes a proactive stance towards radical change.

Monks should not be content merely to serve society— they are instead the active participants and creators of history. He writes that the bhikkhu’s duties are to proselytize for Buddhism and serve the laity. The bhikkhu is commanded specifically to “fight to spread Dhamma. We wage war, O disciples, therefore we are called warriors.” Ambedkar’s Buddha tells his disciples, “Where virtue is in danger do not avoid fighting, do not be mealy-mouthed.” (Ambedkar, 1957, p.447). Monks are not hermetic ascetics who are focused on the attainment of otherworldly states. Rather they constitute the driving force behind a revolution in

mind and body. He goes so far to assert that “a bhikkhu who is indifferent to the woes of mankind, however perfect in self-culture is not at all a bhikkhu.” (Ambedkar, 1957, p.435).

It is in the various departures invested by Dr. Ambedkar in dhamma’s origins in social concern, its non-Aryan character and the ambiguous role of the sangha that the converts find appeal and affinity with. Thus Dr. Ambedkar’s dhamma is a social teaching directed to the dispossessed presented as social injunctions. According to Queen he consistently addresses the physical and spiritual sufferings of historical communities with scant reference to a life to come (Queen, 1996).

Anchoring himself solidly on the resonance of the Buddha’s social message to that of modernity, Dr. Ambedkar retrieved and reconstructed an alternative form of Buddhism by investing it with a shift in perspective, projecting it as a sine qua non for the working of the society and formulating it as a moral code both in terms of an individual’s conduct of life & social interactions as well as a constitutional necessity for the society. Dr. Ambedkar did not merely dwell on concepts of subalternity but was unremitting and singular in his efforts to bring theory and political praxis in conjunction and make them responsive and relevant to those who had been marginalized by the reigning theory and policy makers. Although he stressed Buddha’s attack on caste and the *Dalit*’s historical connection with Buddhism, it should be noted that Dr. Ambedkar’s social concerns, as is evident in the story of the “going forth” were much wider and involved a larger audience. The emphasis on social action and the rejection of belief in the supernatural are significant elements of Dr. Ambedkar’s Buddhism. The fundamental purpose of Dhamma is the recognition of and removal of suffering through human effort, an exhortation and a possibility that has universal appeal. He expects the state to perform a more interventionist role in opposing the ascriptive hierarchy of the caste system, to increase the level of security for the oppressed castes and to ensure equality of opportunity to public offices, to promote social justice and human dignity or in a more familiar

political parlance, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity tenets derived from the moral insights imbued in the teachings of the Buddha.

Dr. Ambedkar saw Buddhism as an ideology that engages with the world privileging the poor and exploited. His emphasis is on social gospel of the Buddha. According to him, to maintain purity in life is Dhamma, to give up craving is Dhamma, to believe that all things are impermanent is Dhamma, to believe that Karma is the instrument of moral order is Dhamma. And Dhamma is Saddhamma as it makes learning open to all as it teaches that mere ‘Prajna’ (wisdom) is not enough, it must be accompanied by ‘Sila’, ‘Karuna’ and ‘Maitri’. Dhamma is ‘Saddhamma’ as it breaks down barriers between man and man, it teaches that worth and not birth is the measure of man as it promotes equality between man and man and also between man and woman. In brief, Dhamma teaches equality in all respects. It is all embracing and for the entire humanity. (Ahir, 1994, pp10-11). Buddhism was not simply spirituality for Dr. Ambedkar, but a rational, psychologically oriented ‘Dhamma’ designed to help humans living in the world and transform that world into one free from Sorrow or Dukkha. (Omvedt, 2003).

CONCLUSION

Ambedkar’s reformulation of Buddhism has been deeply influenced by both the magnitude of social suffering in today’s world, and by the globalization of cultural values and perspectives, especially, the notions of human rights, economic justice, political due process, and social progress. Dr. Ambedkar aimed to provide, what might be called ‘Buddhist answer to Marxist question i.e. bloodless, peaceful and democratic revolution to establish classless and casteless society in India. His interpretation of the Dhamma is thus not to be ignored. Though it is talking of a redressal in the Indian context, the reinterpretation has a universal application. Dr. Ambedkar saw “equality and human dignity” as laws that would hold stronger and truer for modern Indians than the law of caste. Dr. Ambedkar saw that the ideal of democratic equality as very strong in

Buddhism. He thus emphasized the role of Religion as a revolutionary force in liberating the subaltern and the marginalized from the bonds of inferiority, submissiveness and to lead them from a cultural revolution to a social revolution based on the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity.

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