

Ambedkar and Buddhism: Construction of an Alternate Ideology

RAJENDRA KUMAR
Research Scholar
Deptt. Of History
UNIVERSITY OF DELHI

ABSTRACT

An attempt has made here in these pages to understand Ambedkar's conversion of Buddhist. Ambedkar was belonged to untouchable Mahar community of Maharashtra. It was considered that this attempt embraced by Ambedkar to convert to Buddhism, was merely to strengthen the Mehar community to provide them and his followers an identity against dominant Hindu social and political gradation prevalent in Brahmanism. The Buddha provided one of the earliest critiques of orthodox Brahmanism, which for centuries propagated social and spiritual inferiority of women and the lower castes. Buddhist conversion means to him was 'The Universal Spirit' with remembering the fact that equality and 'innate sameness' are the fundamental characteristics of humanity. As this community and whole untouchable class was regarded impure, to eradicate this poisonous discrimination among the society Ambedkar viewed on Buddhism as a tradition of social reform rationally. It can be said a religious revolution a social reform movement which redressed inequalities in caste and gender relations.

Keywords: Buddhism, Mehar, Equality, Casteism, Conversion, Dalits, Identity, and Cultural Milieu.

INTRODUCTION

Buddhist conversion of Ambedkar is seen as a political project that was employed by him to build a religious, cultural and philosophical alternative against the existing dominant Brahmanical ideology of the same period. W.N. Kuber in his observation on Ambedkar's conversion noted it as 'his reactionary step' and as a result of 'his wrong approach towards Marxism. However, conversion represents targeting of the mainstream ideology that is of Gandhi's religiosity and Marxian materialism. Ambedkar realized that neither of them was sufficient in bringing about a change in Hindu society. Ambedkar used Buddhist ideology for the liberation of Dalits, from the fallacies of the caste Hindu's political constructions which utilized the broader framework of nationalism, religion and revolution to avert the debate over the dehumanized conditions of Dalits.

For Ambedkar, it became imperative to liberate the Dalit masses from the clutches of such a complex paradigm of false religiosity so that they can explore and enjoy the benefits of the new democratic political system. Thus, Ambedkar decision to convert to Buddhism which finally materialized in 1956 should be viewed from the instance of a larger debate over the creation of modern state and not in the narrow sense of religious conversion. Apart from Ambedkar movement there were other social liberation non-brahmanic movements in other parts of the country led by stalwarts such as Jyotiba Phule in Maharashtra, Mangoo Ram in Punjab, Swami Achchutanand of United Province Shri, and Narayan Guru in Kerala and Pundit Ayothee Thass in Tamilnadu. These leaders demonstrated an intellectual capability of the lower castes in countering the Brahmanic hegemony and to radicalize the existing thoughts on social and political development. These movements identified themselves as 'original habitants' or non-Aryans and created an Adi notion to assert a status as a people subordinated by later Aryan immigrants to India.

“The Aryans -your ancestors- conquered us and gave us unbearable harassment. At that time we were your conquest, you treated us even worse than slaves and subjected us to any torture you wanted. But now we are no longer your subjects, we have no service relationship with you; we are not your slaves or serfs ... We have had enough of the harassment and torture of the Hindus. ”

Ambedkar opposed Hinduism on the basis of the wrong ideals and tendency. He was not against Hinduism and Hindu leaders. Ambedkar never wanted to destroy Hinduism, but his main concern was to reform and reconstruct it. He said Hindu society should be reorganized in two main principles *“equality and absence of casteism.”*

Ambedkar's ideal society was based on three values: liberty, equality and fraternity, Ambedkar's decision on religious conversion was not sporadic or sudden, and should be seen in the context in which he decided to act. Ambedkar obtained his Ph.D. from Columbia University and returned to Bombay in 1923 to begin his organizational work among untouchables, and soon came in close association with caste Hindus, who encouraged his leadership. The initial stage of Ambedkar's activism was reformist in nature, and his programs were influenced by ideals shared by Gandhi as well in certain respects. He clarified the motives behind the Satyagraha. He said:

“It is not that you can solve all your problems by Satyagraha. This is only a request to the upper-class Hindu mind. This Satyagraha movement is going to prove whether

Hindu mind treats human beings as human beings. This Satyagraha is to change the heart of Hindus. This movement will decide whether Hindu mind regards humanity in the new age.”

However, Ambedkar's effort of social reform did not succeed in changing the Hindu social order which Gandhi argued was possible by moral persuasion. For Ambedkar conversion was not a just a political 'gimmick' to show his opposition to Gandhi by using communal character of religion, but emancipatory project for the Dalits to make them aware about the social, religious and political limitations they faced in their life. He argued that economic status of an individual is not the sole criteria for establishing power, but the status in society and religion are two other important elements that define the power structure in society, especially in a country like India. The established graded inequality and the denial of freedom and equality are permanent and eternal.

Thus, the solution that Ambedkar proposed was that of the annihilation of the caste system. For him, the problem of untouchability was a matter of class struggle. It was a struggle between the caste Hindus and the Untouchables. He altered his belief from those of social reformism towards those of social transformation. The conversion thus demonstrated a creation of a modern state for Dalits which is based on rational and ethical values. The adoption of Buddhism has brought about a revolution in the attitude of followers of Ambedkar. They have liberated themselves from the strong hold of dominant caste Hindus and elated by the new feeling of pride, identity, and cultural milieu, they do not brook any indignity over their rights.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar is probably the most polarizing figure in the modern Indian history who wrote *Annihilation of Caste* in 1936 which is an audacious denunciation of Hinduism and its caste system. It offers scholarly critique of the sacred scriptures of Vedas and shastras that sanctions the world's most hierarchical and iniquitous social system. The scholarship of Ambedkar is best illuminated by the body of work he produced. Rarely has someone written with such conceptual clarity and political understanding. His engagement and subsequent disillusionment with caste is best articulated in backdrop of political struggle beset by sectarianism and obscurantism. The caste as identity determines the future of at least one third of the Indian population on daily basis. As Amartya Sen quotes Robert Putnam and others in his book *“Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny”* explore the concept of *“social capital”*. They brought out clearly enough how an identity with others in the same

social community; a sense of belonging to a community is thus seen as a resource-like capital. That understanding is important, but it has to be supplemented by a further recognition that sense of identity can firmly exclude many people while it embraces others warmly. The adversity of exclusion can be made to go hand in hand with the gifts of inclusion.

Ambedkar was disenchanted with Hinduism, its system of entitlements; he turned towards theosophical study of religion and its functionality. As Ambedkar exhorted that he was born as Hindu but will not die as one. After twenty years of contemplation, during which he studied Islam, as well as Christianity, he turned towards Buddhism which he took up Buddhism just before his death. This, too, he entered in his own scholarly fashion. He was wary of the classical Buddhism, of ways in which the Buddhist philosophy could, had and continues to justify war and unimaginable cruelty. He presents innovatively the *Dhamma* of Buddha in his “Buddha and his Dhamma” wherein he is preoccupied with providing an account of Buddhism that can serve his broader political ambition: the liberation and emancipation of the dalits. Ambedkar’s Buddhism, called ‘Navyana Buddhism’ or the Fourth Way distinguishes between religion and dhamma. Ambedkar didn’t have money to publish the book which was published posthumously and was immediately attacked by the Buddhist scholars. Ambedkar died before he was able to polish his nearly completed manuscript which has always been published references in any form. His book which came out fifty years ago was highly criticized for ‘fabricating truth’ since there was no reference which Ambedkar cited. It was written for the laypersons rather than the scholars of Buddhism.

His seminal work has been ignored for the Buddhist studies by the scholars of Buddhism as they deem it to be irrelevant as being a political treatise in theological garb or a wholly unorthodox text inconsequential to the quality scholarship. Unlike India, in Germany this work has received a lot of attention in academic circles. Even in the post-colonial studies, Ambedkar have been ignored which can be attributed to the fact that the study is dominated by the high-caste intelligentsia.

Nevertheless, it cannot be doubted that Ambedkar has single handedly revived Buddhism at grassroot level. His contribution in Buddhist studies has been excluded and its exclusion is often attributed to his unorthodoxy in terms of treatment of Buddhist text and his interpretation. This lacuna of no study of Buddhism by Ambedkar is travesty since his analysis of Indian culture; caste system, authority and religious power, and the religious

foundation of the Hindu social order are significant contributions to contemporary sociological debate. The term ‘enlightenment’ serves the Ambedkar’s preoccupation with providing an account of the Buddhism that could serve his broader political agenda of the liberalization and uplifting of the Dalits, has led to the post-colonial theorists ignoring Ambedkar and his contribution.

Ambedkar , who was sadly struggled relentlessly with the social, economic, political, religious, cultural, and historical exclusions, with no little success his entire life, has altogether taken new incarnation through contemporary academic, scholarly exclusion of his writings across educational institutes as well as research.

Thus, I seek examination of the different theoretical perspectives of the relevancy of Buddhism as postulated by Ambedkar and its value to the Indian academia. I wish to interrogate the understanding of Buddhism in light of the work of Ambedkar.

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