



Research Paper

Buddhism towards Egalitarianism: Interpreting Social Work Discipline through Dr. Ambedkar's Perspectives.

Sandeep Chopra

DOCTORAL FELLOW, DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK
UNIVERSITY OF DELHI

Abstract

The paper "From Buddhism to Egalitarianism: Understanding Buddhism as a way of life with the lens of Dr. Ambedkar" deals with Buddhism both as a socio-political model and operational phenomenon through the lens of Baba Saheb Dr. Bhim Rao Ramji Ambedkar. Dr. Ambedkar who was read scholar in almost all the fields ultimately concluded his religious inclination towards Buddhism (1956) not merely as a matter of worship and devotion but as a matter of critical thinking and intellectual approach towards the Indian society, especially the Hindu caste social order which is based on such a Structure like 'Caste'. In his writings and speeches, he covered a huge philosophical geography to map out the scientifically devised concept of Buddhism and its relevance in the state and society in all possible dimensions (social, political, Economic, religious and Spiritual). He concluded that Buddhism is not merely a process of following a particular 'deity' but to follow the path of scientific temperament which leads to intellectual growth and Enlightenment. He advocated in favor of Buddhism and claimed that Buddhism is the only religion which ensures the idea of Egalitarianism and Utilitarianism in the Indian Society.

Key words: - Buddha-ism, Pragaya, Kruna, Seelas, Nirvana, Yanas, Egalitarianism, Communism.

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Buddha and his 'ism'

The term 'Buddha' represents a human being who is having 'Buddhi' i.e. Knowledge and the one who knows how to use that knowledge for the wellbeing of humankind. Siddhratha¹ was born to 'Suddhodhana' (son of 'Sinahu') and 'Mahamaya' (daughter of king Anjana and Sulak-shana who were the residents of 'Devadaha') in a non monarchical state in the 'Sakya' kula (which was a tribal republic) in the capital Called 'Kapilavastu' situated on the northern borders of India. He was married to 'Yashodhara' (Daughter of 'Dandapani') and they together gave birth the 'Rahula'. He left his home in the search 'truth' and 'purpose' of life. He attained Enlightenment at the age of 35 after wandering for a few years in the search of 'truth'. In this process he questioned the validity of 'Vedas' and the practice of sacrifices and rituals which promotes the 'Varna System'. Buddha² said that humans life is circumferenced in the endless chain of cause and effect. Everything which takes birth is full of sorrow ('Dukkha') is impermanent ('Anicca') and lack in the self essence ('Anatta'). 'Nirvana' is the ultimate goal of life. He rejected the theories of god, soul, magic and ritualism. his teachings are can be traced through the three baskets i.e. 'Tripitikas' which are divided into 'Sutta pitiki', 'Vinaya pitika' and 'Abhidhammapitika'

He preached the four noble truths:

- 1) Life is suffering.
- 2) Suffering is caused by craving.

¹Ambedkar, D. R. (2014). *Buddha and his Dhamma, Dr. Ambedkar Writings and Speeches Volume-11*. Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, Govt. of India.

²(2017). Indian Intellectuals Influence on Ambedkar. In P. S. Upadhyay, *BAB-101, B.R Ambedkar: Thinker, His Time* (pp. 37-44). Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Open University, Delhi.

- 3) Suffering can have an end.
- 4) There is a path which leads to the end of sufferings.

Buddha after diagnosing the problem of human life suggested some solutions in the form of 'PanchaSheelas' and the 'Eight Fold path' through which one can attain 'Nirvana'(Salvation). Buddhi-ism in the form of religion is propagated by the Emperor 'Asoka' who spread his teachings not only in India but into the various parts of the Asia. He constructed thousand of 'Buddha Stupas' in the various parts of the country. Three important schools who developed Buddhism in the course of time were the

- 1) 'Theravada'(the doctrine of elders) – which claimed to be based on the original teachings of Buddha.
- 2) 'Mahayana'(the great vehicle) – which did not considered Buddha as a person but established him as the purest form of god.

3) 'Vajrayana'- which developed the features of 'tantras'. It rejected the puritanical attitude of 'Theravada' School towards women and considered the unity of both male and female for achieving salvation.

The decline of Buddhism in India is subjected to many theories given by the thinkers out which Muslim invasion theory is the most prominent. A.L basham writes that Buddhism faced a lot of challenges from the 'Brahmin-ism' as they came out with theory of reformed 'Hindu-ism' and called Buddha the 9th 'Avatar'(incarnation) of 'Vishnu'. It is also stated by Carl Olson³ that the decline of Buddhism took place mostly in Gupta period due to lack of proper leaderships and support from the respective kings of that particular point of time.

Dr. Ambedkar and the 'Navayana Buddha-ism'

Dr. B.R Ramji Ambedkar , born on 14th april, 1891 in mahu village of Central province who was trained Anthropologist, Sociologist, Barrister and a profound Economist. He took the legacy of his ancestors along with him in the form their wirings which he used for his understanding of society. He followed Buddha, Ravidas, Kabirdas, Jyotibha and saviribaiphule due to their valuable contribution they have made for oppressed classes of this country. He was the one who worked very hard in clubbing the Subaltern history through his profound Writings and Speeches. Being a person with a 'Mahar' identity (Untouchable), he elucidated that 'Castes in India⁴' in all its Normical, legal and penal form is the biggest Curse to India as it discriminates people on the basis of birth into a certain Caste group. He himself faced discriminations in all the parts of his life stating from the primary education to the political platforms. In his writings 'Waiting for the Visa' he shared his experiential scares which got from the upper caste. He diagnosed that 'Caste' as a structure is based on the platform of Religion which continuously nurtures it. The Religion which waters 'Castes' in India is 'Hindu-ism in the form of Brahmin-ism which follows the 'Varna' system. He read almost the religions of the world from the genesis to operationality and was not able to connect any of them with the Ethnography of India. He started working on Buddhism when he first received a book on the life of Buddha in 1908. He worked a lot on Buddha-ism both as a rational religion and a way of life. It reaches at its climax when he announced in Yeola, Nasik on 13 October 1935 that "I solemnly assure you that I will not die a Hindu⁵". In his writing on religion Dr. Ambedkar also targeted the other religions that were equally responsible for the petty condition of the Untouchable in the Country. He⁶ questioned the Christian Missionaries for the bad condition of untouchable who converted to Christianity with a hope that they will get rid of their untouchability after getting converted to Christianity. The then Christian Depressed classes of south India submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission in which informed the commission that the socio- Economic conditions lower castes in Christianity is the same as the Hindu Castes due to the parallel conversion done by the upper castes from Hindu-ism to Christianity. Christianity tried to change the Caste but the Caste changed the Christianity. He further extended his critique towards to missionaries who were infamous for for their improper attitude like bad drinking habits, Competition of conversion between Catholics and Protestants, Wrong approach followed by the missionaries in terms of

³Olson, C. (2005). *The Different Paths of Buddhism:A Narraitive-Historical Introduction*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

⁴Ambedkar, D. B. (2014). Castes in India: Its Genesis, Mechanism and Development. In D. B. Ambedkar, *Dr.Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Volume-1, section-1, Chapter-1* (pp. 3-22). Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, Govt of India.

⁵Ambedkar, Dr. Bhim Rao. (2004). *Conversion as Emancipation*. Delhi: Critical Quest.

⁶Ambedkar, D. B. (2014). Christianising the Untouchables. In D. B. Ambedkar, *Dr.Ambedakar Writings and Speeches, Volume-5, Section-4, Chapter-29* (pp. 426-444). Delhi.

conversion as they first called the upper caste especially the Brahmins to get converted into Christianity. The same pattern of conversion was followed by the mohommadians in various parts of south India where the parallel conversion took place and the norm of Caste was displaced from Hindu-ism to other Indian religion through the upper castes.

Even when Ambedkar had become convinced about the greater appropriateness of Buddhism, he didn't adopt it simply. He radically reinterpreted Buddhism in the light of modern ideas and imbued it with a post enlightenment sensibility where secularism stood along with the ideals of equality, liberty and fraternity. For him Buddhism was based on reason, not on revelation or rituals. His reinterpretation of the Buddha's teachings are being derived from the disciple, Ananda, not to rely on any scripture or paths shown by others but to find one's own path based on reason and experience.

7“O Ananda, be your lamps unto yourselves. Be ye a refuge to yourselves. Betake yourselves to no external refuge. Hold fast to the truth as a lamp. Hold fast as a refuge to the truth. Look not for refuge to anyone besides yourselves. And how, Ananda, is a brother to be a lamp unto himself, a refuge to himself.

He distinguished between the 'mokshdata'(the provider of salvation) to the 'margdata'(the path provider). According to Ambedkar, the Buddha wanted each individual to find his or her own path. He declared that the purpose of 'Dhamma' is to reconstruct the world and presented Buddhism as a religion which transforms the world. He didn't adopt the four noble truth theory by declaring that they were not the part of original teachings of Buddha but later added by upper castes an argument that sorrow in the world is self-inflicted by the individuals but by the fact that suffering in the world arose due to oppression of one group or individuals by another group. Also he rejected the conceptual notion of rebirth and 'Karma' as the ideational property of 'karma' indicates the Caste system. He was convinced with the idea that Buddhism was capable of delivering liberation to the people who have been oppressed by the Hindu Caste social order. Also he looked at Buddhism as a theory of social action which has the capability to make positive transformation in the world. He gave this radicalized and reinterpreted ideational phenomenon of Buddhism as 'Navayana Buddhism' due to its logically driven and experientially stimulated tendency to reconstruct the society and the whole world.

The omnipresence of Buddha-ism: Ambedkar's lens.

Dr. Ambedkar throughout his life struggled with the 'Caste' through his activism, writings and speeches and in his opinion (which he derived after understanding the genesis on which Buddhism is based) that individual or a group of individuals in a society are derived by certain needs like individual material needs, power needs, Physical needs and Spiritual needs. Also, these needs are fulfilled through the mechanism of social intercourse and the attributional social endosmosis. Indian Caste based Hindu Social order is based on the platform of Brahminically derived Hindu-ism which is based on the principles of Graded Inequality, oppression, discrimination and exploitation. We need an antidote to this venom and that we will receive in the form of Buddhism in its 'Navyanic' Form. The only solution to get rid of this untouchability is to get converted into Buddhism. Buddhism is the only religion which assures Equality, liberty, freedom and justice in all its practicable forms. This religion is not new to this country. even India introduced Buddhism to the world. If the untouchables of this country want to get liberated from this tyranny of brahmin-ism and untouchability they have no other choice than converting themselves into Buddhism for their ultimate emancipation.

Dr. Ambedkar's Perspectives on Buddhism in linkage with social work Discipline.

Dr. Ambedkar as one of the leading advocates of social change in India understood and interpreted Buddhism as a model of social transformation and development. Through all his studies on Buddhism, he connected all its links with the society. From an individual unit in the society to all the population, he joined all the threads to understand the socio-spiritual needs of individuals in the society.

Social work as a discipline and profession came out with certain explanations regarding the above-mentioned needs. It divided the social work profession into sub domains through which one can deal with all the units and phenomena's taking place within the society in interaction with the human beings.

When we decode Dr. Ambedkar's view on Buddhism and then connect them to the domain of social work, we can easily trace how Buddhism as a transformational and emancipatory model has so much in common with the principles, values and the Primary and secondary methods used in the social work domain for the wellbeing of the society. He interpreted Buddhism as a tool which keeps an eye on all the human systems through social intercourse and endosmosis.

⁷Ambedkar, Dr. Bhim Rao. (2014). *Buddha and his Dhamma, Dr. Ambedkar Writings and Speeches Volume-11*. Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, Govt. of India.

Following are some of the aspects through which we can understand Buddhism with the lens of Dr. Ambedkar using social work as a connecting medium of ideational exchange.

1) **Individuals:** - At individual level, Buddhism is a way of life to be lived by following the attributes of Knowledge, Character, Behavior and the idea of 'Madhyamarg' (middle path) and the 'panchseelas'. Dr. Ambedkar broke them into 22 vows through which he cleared that following Buddhism with the tendency of scientific temperament and the reason based approach is the best way to follow it. There are some set of rules for the 'Bhikkus' and 'Upasaka' so that they can work on their 'want' and focus on their 'needs'. Buddhism promotes the idea of 'love all' which is indicated through three philosophical terms given by 'Buddha'. Those⁸ terms are 'Pragya'(Knowledge), 'Karuna'(Character), 'Seela'(Behavior) which later Ambedkar interpreted in his own writings. He writes that "Knowledge, Character and Behavior are interconnected with each other. If someone is loaded with knowledge and s/he is not having a good character and behavior then all is knowledge is useless. Also good character with proper knowledge and behavior is useless."

2) **Society:**- Dr. Ambedkar looks at a Buddhist society as a society which is derived with the values of Democratic state, social equality, liberty of all kinds and fraternity among all the members of the society in terms of their social intercourses. Individual's identity in a Buddhist Hindu caste social order which is based on the graded inequality attached with the identity of an individual by the accident of birth. There is no scope for social justice and equality among Caste Hindus as they are driven by their privilege-based attitudes. In Ambedkar's opinion, a society which works on the principles and values of Buddhism automatically attains self-sufficiency as it is based on the ideas of "Bahujan Hitaya, BahujanaSukhaya"(Taking care of the Rights and Welfare of the masses) and "Bhavatusabbamangla"(goodness and happiness for all). Following these principles, a society can attain Equality, liberty, fraternity and justice in all its forms. Further Ambedkar in his writings clarified the reasons due to which the 'Sudas'⁹(Tribal Kshatriya Clans) turned into 'Shudra' and then into untouchables. It was a counter revolutionary action of the brahminically charged 'Savarnas' who were not ready to accept Buddha and his teachings as they are based on the principle of equality and the Hindu Caste Social order rejects it in all its structural and operational form. Buddha as per Ambedkar is his spiritual master and his principles are worth following.

3) **Political:**- Dr. Ambedkar amalgamated the idea of politics with Buddhist philosophy. His inclination towards Buddha and his teachings is clearly visible in the Constitution of India in its preamble where the terms REPUBLIC, DEMOCRATIC, EQUALITY, JUSTICE, LIBERTY, FRATERNITY are used to represent India as by default Buddhist nation. Further the Fundamental Rights are eclecticized from the 'PanchaSeelas' which given certain rights to the masses and prohibited discrimination and exploitation of any kind by one individual to another. The part four i.e. the Directive Principles of State policies are loaded with the Welfarist and Utilitarian idea which indicates Buddha's principle of 'BahujanaHitaya, BahujanaSukhaya'. In his speech in the constitution assembly, he said that, this system of parliamentary democracy, Federal form of governance is not new to India it is something we are taking from 'Buddhist Sanghas and Parliaments' which used to be participative and democratic in their structural and mechanical form. It is something which we gave to the world in form of political philosophy of 'participation of all' in the state affairs at all level. In his writings, he clarified that democracy is of no use if it is only written and not practiced. Democracy as an ideational asset, philosophy and a working model is justifiable only when it is practiced in all Social, economical and political platforms. It's the people who are at the driving seat to direct the values of constitution and democracy. Their handling will decide the direction of the philosophy and democracy.

4) **Economic:**- 'Yoval Noah harari'¹⁰, in his book 'Sapiens' talked about the evolution of human beings from Hunter gatherers to Domesticating being who used to keep animals. In this chain they evolved from cognitive revolution to agricultural revolution where they learn the skills of farming and later established themselves by holding lands through physical encroachments and bordering. It is the process through which they started surplus production and learnt marketing. 'Karl Marx' in his writing calls it surplus accumulation of wealth where few people control the wealth of masses by holding the trigger of surplus wealth. They use it for the purpose of making maximum profit and make surplus resources out of it for further accumulation of wealth.

⁸Ambedkar, Dr. Bhim Rao. (2014). Gandhi, Ranade and Jinnah: On hero and hero worship. In D. B. Ambedkar, *Dr. Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Volume-1, Section-3* (pp. 205-242). Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, Govt. of India.

⁹Who Were the Shudras, Dr. Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Volume-7, Book-1, Dr. Ambedkar Foundation Delhi, India, 2014

¹⁰Harari, Y. N. (2011). The Agricultural Revolution, Part-2. In Y. N. Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (pp. 87-180). London: Penguin Random House, U.K.

This process goes on which further leads to the class struggle between the 'haves' and 'have nots'. The demand for equal resources and shares in profit for all leads to an socio-economic and political revolution he denoted as "Communism"(Revolution by the 'Communes' i.e. the masses). Dr. Ambedkar re-interpreted it by giving the references of Buddhism as a socio-economic and political philosophy and ideology. In his views 'Buddha'¹¹ had established the 'Communism' in India a long way before 'Karl Marx'. He rejected the comparison between the two and projected them and their thoughts separately. He further writes that 'Buddhist communist revolution was bloodless and the Marxist revolution killed millions of people as it was less ideological cum intellectual and more of assertive in nature.' 'Buddhas Sanghas' and its practices teach communism at a very unit level as there is no space for personal private property in the Buddhist philosophy, even the 'Upasakas' have to keep a limited property which is sufficient for their survival. If all the units of the society follow the same principles, then automatically a society can attain 'Communism' without having any bloodshed. Ambedkar as an economist was in favor of controlled capitalism and the nationalization of public institutions which works on the principles of 'Welfarism' for all the people.

5) **As a Social Action model and approach:** -¹²Social action is a phenomenon used for mobilizing masses in order to bring about structural changes in the social system or to prevent adverse changes. It is an organized effort to change or improve social and economic institutions. In Dr. Ambedkar's views, Buddhism is much more than a just a religion. He interpreted as a social action model as it directly targeting the social evils in the forms of 'Varna System', Patriarchy, and all the social injustices. Buddha came with the term 'Dhamma' which itself was a social action move and a way of life which people can follow to construct a just welfarist and happy society. Buddha formulated his philosophy out of all the observations he made during his field work. He spread this philosophy by reaching the medium of mass. This whole process was ideated to bring the social transformation in the Indian society which is so based on the Hindu Caste Social Order. The way initiated by him was Non Violent in its nature and so are his ideas which were totally based on the values of acceptance and tolerance towards each other.

6) **As an Egalitarian Social Development Model.**

Buddhism emerged in India as a practice based emancipatory model. It trajectories the world to the path of 'Dhamma'. 'Dhamma' is a process through which individual struggle with oneself for self-betterment and growth and move towards the society to make a more livable place for all the beings around.

Development as a phenomenon which starts from individual at unit level. From unit level, it slides forward in the direction of society to it a pace. Social development as continuous process works with the objectives of improving the well being of all the individuals so that they can attain their maximum potential. To attain this state, we need to revisit the philosophical framework on which Buddhism is based on. The very basic principle of "Bhavtu Sabba Mangala" (Advocating for the well being and happiness of all).

Dr. Ambedkar talked about Buddhism as the first communist model which spread the message of not accumulating wealth more the requirement of an individual. It was communism at unit level. This chain leads to distribution of all the resources of all the beings on the planet on equal basis.

Conclusion

Dr. Ambedkar in his re-interpretation of Buddha-ism as a ideology, philosophy, structure, religion and a social action model projected it as a way of life which human beings should follow at all the levels (Individual to international level). It teaches us to practice the constitutional principles of Equality, Liberty, Justice and fraternity and ensure utilitarian principle of "happiness for all". Buddha's through his 'Panchaseelas', eight fold path, the theory of 'Madhayama Margas' (Middle paths), Critical approach towards all the social customs and practices teaches us to be a radically charged and intellectually upgraded human beings who can make positive change in the society through their Education, Character and Behavior, ('Pragya', 'Karauna', 'Seelas'. Buddhist way of life is the way towards collective Enlightenment and salvation of Humankind towards a more egalitarian society.

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