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Religion as Humanism: Contemporary Relevance of B.R. Ambedkar's Buddha and his Dhamma

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ABSTRACT

The post cold war period brought back the phenomenon of religion to the centre stage of human affairs in general and identity formation of communities in particular. Ethnic nationalism inspired by religious beliefs gained momentum in the recent past. Domination from the perspective of majority and minority acquired higher degree all over the world. This trend resulted in hostile relations among various social groups. In this turbulent context, it is useful to see the relevance of Ambedkar's Buddha and his Dhamma and its potentiality in addressing the crisis and vision for future it offers. This paper is a humble attempt to revisit the Buddha and his Dhamma a monumental text written by Ambedkar and identifies its relevance in offering an alternative socio-spiritual system capable of stimulating harmony in the society within the framework fraternity. The central contribution of Ambedkar to Buddhism has been that his ability to simplify Buddhism as a gospel of humanism rather than a metaphysical belief system. This paper proposes that Ambedkar attempted to evolve an organic relationship between religion and society by focusing on Buddhism. This kind of thought is very much useful for the contemporary society wherein the social harmony gradually losing its ground.

Key Words : Ambedkar, Buddhism, Dharma, Religion, Caste

INTRODUCTION

The Buddhist revival movement in modern India has been one of the important aspects in the socio-religious history of modern India. Attempts were being made by intellectuals and activists to revive Buddhism which gradually lost its presence from the land of its origin. Undoubtedly the encounter of India with the British resulted in reformist outlook at one level and revival outlook at another level within the intellectual circles of India. This process resulted in emergence of socio-religious reform movement all over India. Buddhist revival movement was also a part of this process. This paper attempts to explore the engagement of Ambedkar with Buddhist revival movement and the nature of revivalism that he had attempted to bring about. The main argument of this paper is that the version of Buddhism that Ambedkar had reconstructed and propagated consists of deep humanist and ethical values and very much relevant to the contemporary conditions.

This paper has mainly depended upon the secondary sources such as books and papers which throw light on the engagement of Ambedkar with Buddhism. The main source for this paper has however been drawn from the book written by Ambedkar entitled *Buddha and his Dhamma*. By

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focusing on the books and paper written on Ambedkar and Buddhism and by Ambedkar on Buddhism, this paper proposes following findings: the humanist values of Ambedkar played a major role in reconstruction of Buddhism, by engaging with Buddhism, Ambedkar also attacked caste based inequalities in India society and finally Ambedkar version of Buddhism mainly reflects the human equality as socio-cultural gospel.

This paper has been divided into four sections: the first section mentions about the context which made Buddhism as a religion which address the crisis in the contemporary world in a more penetrating way: the second section documents the revival of Buddhism and role of Ambedkar in that process: the third section documents a brief review of literature on the question of Ambedkar's engagement with Buddhism and in the forth section offers a narrative on the way Ambedkar attempted to reconstruct Buddhism as a solution to some of the problems of Indian society.

Contextualising Ambedkar's engagement with Buddhism :

The contemporary world is surrounded by crisis in humanity in terms of economic inequalities, ecological crisis, ethnic-religious conflicts, refuge problems etc. It never means to say that there was no crisis in the past. But the higher degree of crises has been accelerated by ethnic, racial, religious and other forms of conflicts. This phenomenon reflects the words of the Buddha, who said that the world is surrounded by *Dukkha*. Especially after collapse of the Soviet Union, the secular credential of modern society has been shaken to the higher degree. The liberal democratic ideology which acted as vehicle of for democracy driven socio-economic and political progress of humanity has taken severe beatings. On the others hand, Marxism which is as gospel of equality gradually lost its relevance. The crisis in ideologies resulted in crisis in individual social psychology as well (Robinson, 2014). It was in this context that the process of dominance and resistance acquired religious colour. This global trend is witnessed by the surge of religious and cultural fundamentalism as a tool of powerful to dominate powerless in different parts of world. A paradigm of hate for other human begins acquires higher proportions. This hate based upon race, culture, religion, region, gender, class, ethnicity and others. The paradigm of hate gradually emerged as epicentre of major problems such as genocide, ethnic clashes, communal riots, etc. These problems cannot be solved over nights. The reversal of attitude in individual self is required. This change can only come in the presence of a positive ideology which promotes love and annihilate hate. It is this context that creates a fertile seeds for Ambedkar's version of Buddhism. I endorse the view of Kataria that the relevance of Ambedkar gaining momentum rapidly in the contemporary times (Kataria, 2015).

Buddhist Revival Movement and Ambedkar :

India is a land where Buddhism was born. Gradually lost its significance due to several reasons and by the middle of 19th century its revival begun to take shape. Commendable job was played by individuals like Col. Alcott, D. Kosambhi, Iyoti Thass, Anagarika Dharmapala, Laxmi Narsu to name a few in this direction (Ahir, 1990). These scholars attempted to revive Buddhism in India as emancipatory and progressive religion capable of promoting equality in Indian society which is divided into several castes. In short, Buddhism was structured as anti-thesis to traditional Hinduism which is hierarchical in nature (Narasu, 2011). On account of its disposition towards equality, Buddhism gained prominence among Dalits in different parts of India. This revival process attempted to reconstruct Buddhism as religion and spiritual system suits to the needs of emerging Dalit assertion particularly in urban areas. Buddhism is projected as egalitarian religion which transcends caste boundaries and provides equal treatment to all human beings. The quest of Dalits for a religion

capable of providing equal treatment made to them undertook diversified strategies in the domain of religion.

Dalits in all over India engaged in search for suitable religion generally having four following qualities: denial of caste based hierarchies: capable of providing respectable identities, emancipator from oppression and exploitation of traditional value system and a value system that provide inspiration to positive future. This search of Dalits for religion made them to invent new forms of Hinduism such as Adi Hindu movement in Utter Pradesh, Adi Dharm movement in Punjab, Satnami Movement in Madhya Pradesh, Kabirpanthis in Maharashtra, Adi Dravda movement in South India are some example (Gooptu, 2001). Besides this, large numbers of Dalits were converted to Christianity and Islam. In this context, Buddhism had attracted the attention of Dalit intellectuals as a religion capable of providing eamnicaptory framework for Dalits. Hence, and engagement of Ambedkar is a natural outcome of the social history of Dalits in modern India. Ambedkar's seminal contribution to Buddhism can be witnessed with the fact that Maharashtra a state he belongs to having 6,531,200 Buddhist population which constitutes roughly 80% Buddhist population of India. This is sufficient to prove the impact of Ambedkar on revival of Buddhism in India.

Representation of Ambedkar and Buddhism: A Review :

It is interesting see that writings on Dalit issues in general and Ambedkar in particular evolved into a formidable literature in India in the last four decades. These writings not only emerged as a separate genre, but also became a potential emanicpaory project for the marginalised sections. Several books and papers have been written on engagement of Ambedkar with Buddhism. With potential risk of over simplifying I would like to classify the representation of Ambedkar views on Buddhism into four categories: The first category consists of classical writings on the engagement of Ambedkar with Buddhism. These writings mainly focus on the detailed version of Ambedkar's engagement with Buddhism in general and the event of his conversion into Buddhism in particular. Writers such as D.C. Achir's *Buddhism and Ambedkar* (Ahir, 2011), Bhagwa Das's *Buddhist Revival Movement* (Das, 1998), Sangharakshita's *Ambedkar and Buddhism* (Sangharakshita, 1986) represent classic example of this approach. This approach has mainly been chronological in nature and attempt to document the important events that associated with Ambedkar's engagement with Buddhism and his conversion into it. This approach is very important category of writings on Ambedkar and his association with Buddhism on account of the factual details, incidents and events etc. documented by them.

The second approach is that of social perspective of Ambedkar's Buddhism. Authors such as Omvedt (2011), Mani (2005), Jelliot (2004) etc advanced the approach of looking at Ambedkar's version of Buddhism as socio-spiritual systems that was designed carefully to emancipate the marginalised sections of India general and Dalits in particular. This approach focuses on the social meaning and massage that the Ambedkar version of Buddhism imbibed and its potential role as a liberator of marginalised sections in general and Dalits in particular.

Thirdly, social hermeneutic approach has been used by some scholars to identify the main massage of Ambedkar's version of Buddhism. Rodrigues attempted to study the inherent feature of rationality that guided the spiritual engagement of Ambedkar with Buddhism (Rodrigues, 1993). Pilchick's study proposes that Ambedkar's version of Buddhism is a salient revolution for social justice and equality (Pilchick, 1988). Joseph's paper underscores the intellectual background of Ambedkar and its influence in construction of Ambedkar's version of Buddhism as an emancipatory religion of the marginalised (Joseph, 2013). I myself in fact, demonstrated the ecological dimension

of Ambedkar's ideas in general and his ideas on Buddhism in particular (Ravikumar, 2016).

Finally we do have writings on emotional reflections on neo Buddhism. These writings are basically eulogy of Ambedkar and his engagement with Buddhism. This category of writings mainly written by Dalit scholars who wanted to spread the message of Ambedkar's version of Buddha Dharma among the oppressed masses in general and victims of caste and religious based oppression (Lal, 2008). Karunyakara passionately represents Ambedkar's engagement with Buddhism not only emancipatory but also a alternative to caste based Hindu religion in India (Karunyakara, 2002). Anand Teltumede represented Neo Buddhism as a means to spiritual emancipation of Dalits in India (Teltumede, 2016). The fact to be noticed here is that writings on various aspects related to engagement of Ambedkar with Buddhism have been documented by the aforementioned writings.

Ambedkar, Buddhism and Modernity :

This section concentrates on the core features of Ambedkar's version of Buddhism and his attempt to create a spiritual ideology for emancipation of Dalits at one level and Indians at another level. He attempted to invoke and create a compassionate orientated spiritual system of thought which is more concerned with material world than transcendental world. Ambedkar hoped that this experiment at some point of time may inspire Indians to rethink Brahmanical beliefs which promote hierarchical based society in India.

The main purpose of Ambedkar's version of Buddhism can be captured form the 19th oath which he chanted while converting into Buddhism which as follows: 'I renounce Hinduism, which disfavours humanity and impedes the advancement and development of humanity because it is based on inequality, and adopts Buddhism as my religion'. This expression attests the primary reason why Ambedkar relinquished Hinduism and converted into Buddhism. He strongly believed in humanism which was product of western enlightenment and of course has remarkable proximity with Buddhist thought. Ambedkar was attracted by the radical advocacy of egalitarian ethics of modernity and cherished its relevance throughout his life.

The strong exposure of Ambedkar to international academia from 1920s certainly moulded his convictions and thinking. Ambedkar got himself exposed to the sociological theories of religion. Especially of Weber's notion of religion as facilitators of modernity, religion as cementing factor of human experience and action by Durkheim and finally his guru John Devy's notion of common religion for common hood of humanity (Thomas, 2008). This intellectual background made Ambedkar to evolve his ideas on religion and obviously he reconstructed Buddhism as a not merely a transcendental spiritual system, but also a belief system capable of promoting harmony within not only human society, but also between human beings and natural world.

Forcefully advancing the anthropocentric religion Ambedkar proposed that religion is for man and not man for religion. He has an interesting idea on the question of what is the purpose of religion. The purpose of religion according to Ambedkar is 'the centre of religion la not in the relation of man to God. It lay in the relation between man and man. The purpose of religion is to teach man how he should behave towards other men so that all may be happy' (Ambedkar, 2005: 254). For Ambedkar religion is not an end with God, rather is beginning of the ethical world which trains human being to live peacefully without troubling others. For Ambedkar, religious should not be obsessed with life after death, rather should train and guide human beings to live a better life.

Prioritising reason over belief, he created a rationalised Buddhism free from myths, mystics, and metaphysical beliefs, particularly of divinity. For him the Buddha and his religion is a science of man and code of conduct of how man should behave towards fellow human beings. Rejecting all

mythical reasons responsible for transformation of Siddhartha Gautama to the Buddha, Ambedkar presented that it was his challenge with his kinsmen over water dispute, Gautama chosen the path of recluse and eventually became the Buddha. The fact is that Ambedkar wanted us to believe that emergence of Buddha did not have any supernatural dimension, rather driven by a cause of human welfare and peace. Ambedkar being a critical and modernist thinker, viewed religious systems in India, particularly of Hinduism as a phenomenon incapable of promoting brotherhood which is a critical condition for emergence of genuine nationalism. His concern can be captured from the following narration he offered in the constitutional assembly:

> The sooner we realize that we are not as yet a nation in the social and psychological sense of the world, the better for us. For then only we shall realize the necessity of becoming a nation and seriously think of ways and means of realizing the goal.... The castes are anti-national. In the first place because they bring about separation in social life. They are anti-national also because they generate jealousy and antipathy between caste and caste. But we must overcome all these difficulties if we wish to become a nation in reality. For fraternity can be a fact only when there is a nation. Without fraternity, equality and liberty will be no deeper than coats of paint.[1]

As a responsible intellectual and statesman, Ambedkar was in search of an overarching socio-spiritual ideology capable of uniting Dalits castes under one religion at one level and sowing seeds of fraternity among non Dalit sections. He even rejected the divine status to the Buddha and projected him as an exalted one who engaged in finding solutions to the crisis that humanity was facing. The question naturally comes to us how can religion, essentially a transcendental experience between human and superhuman can be reduced to a science of human beings? This question was brilliantly in fact cleverly handled by Ambedkar in his Buddha and his Dhamma.

Religion has always been and will be an omnipresent ideology which critically conditions the outlook and behaviour of individual. What could be an alternative to such as formidable force? Even entire left movement world over in general and India in particular encountered this question. The alternative to religion was proposed by Bhagat Singh, one of great sons of socialist thought in India. He proposed that serving humanity with dedication is the religion that he would like to embrace and live in (Waraich, 2007). Ambedkar even though a keen reader of Marxism and favourably disposed towards its ideology, he did not appreciate its advocacy on violence as a means to achieve egalitarian society. He declined to endorse Marxism in his text Buddha and Marx. With a comparative study of both Buddha and Marx he preferred the Buddha's model of social progress which facilitate actualisation of egalitarian and enlighten society in a more acceptable way. Ambedkar believed in the potential of Dhamma evolved by the Buddha as force capable of promoting fraternity which for him foundational principle of Indian nation.

Ambedkar's version of Buddha and his Dhamma as means for Fraternity :

Ambedkar reconstructed the Buddha Dhamma into his own preference however with strict adherence to the Buddhist scriptures. The conventional Buddhist Dhamma mostly emphasised on *Karuna* as foundational principle for Buddhist religion. But Ambedkar added another principle *i.e.*, Maitri. Here I would like to cite Ambedkar's own reflection: 'Karuna is only live for human beings. Buddha went beyond and taught Maitri. Mairti is live of living beings. The Buddha wanted man not to stop with Karuna but to go beyond making and cultivate the spirit of Mairti for all living beings'

1. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's last speech in the constituent assembly on adoption of the constitution, November 25, 1949. Taken from www.sodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in

(Ambedkar, 2005: 297). Hermeneutically the word *Maitri* carries different meanings. At one level Ambedkar wanted to evolve a unified spiritual thought to unite non-Brahman castes in general and Dalits castes which are roughly 1100 in number in particular. At another level, he wanted to evolve a common brotherhood between Dalits and non-Dalits and within Dalits with the framework of Maitri. Ambedkar thus wanted to evolve such as religion which promotes universal brotherhood among Indian transcending caste, class, gender, region and other categories.

Ambedkar's Buddhism and Caste System :

Caste based discrimination and its impact on Dalit society has been one of the centralities of Ambedkar's thought throughout his life. His book *Buddha and his Dharma* implicitly and explicitly reflects his engagement with caste system. Ambedkar followed the approach laid down by Laxmi Narsu who reflected the position of the Buddha and his teachings on caste based inequalities. Doctrinally Buddhism rejects the caste based inequalities determined by the birth of individual. Ambedkar in fact highlight radical position of the Buddha on equality by the way of rejecting caste. Ambedkar quotes Buddha on equality in the following lines: 'No caste: no inequality: no superiority: no inferiority: all are equal. That is what he stood for. Identify yourself with others. As they, so I. A I so they so said Buddha' (Ambedkar, 2005: 306). It was this kind of egalitarian value system Ambedkar wanted to highlights in Buddhism.

Ambedkar vehemently opposed the birth based membership in caste and status ascribed to individual based upon his caste. He rather advocated for reorganisation of innate qualities and virtues of individual for judging character of individual. He highlights the outcaste as a; concept defined by the Buddha in the following lines:

- The man who possess perverted views and deceitful
- The one who harms living beings
- The one who appropriates wealth by theft what belongs others
- One who refuses to pay the loan borrowed from others
- One who indulge in pillage
- One who lies
- One who does not care parents
- One who teaches wrong things to others
- One who is an adulater
- One who oppresses other (Ambedkar, 2005: 307-8)

For the Buddha a person became untouchable not on account of his birth in a caste, rather on account the practices he or she indulges and cause harm to others. This process of a long cherished dream of Ambedkar on *guna* should be determining factors on individual character rather than *jaiti* which is a core doctrine of Hindu religion. Finally Ambedkar's fascination for democratic socialism reflected in his conception of who is the best man for society. Invoking the Buddha he proposed that: 'One has striven for the welfare of others at the cost of his own' (Ambedkar, 2005)

Conclusion :

Undoubtedly the experiment undertaken by Ambedkar with regard to reconstruction of Buddhism to suit the needs of entire Indian society in general and Dalits in particular is a remarkable one. It provides a unique opportunity to individual to gain spiritual experience at one level and gain access to training in moral engagement with larger good of society. It is religion based upon not superstition rather a rational cultivation of mind and chanalsing the potential of individual for creation

of society based upon the value of fraternity. Ambedkar visualised an active role for Buddhism in India society which is deeply divided into multiple castes which are many a times hostile to each other. This hostility Ambedkar rightly identified as bottleneck for development of genuine democracy and nationhood. The version of Buddhism that Ambedkar advances thus consists of potential emancipatory vision for emergence of India not only as superpower but also a country and civilisation upholds and value of fraternity. Achievement of fraternity feeling in India what Ambedkar strived though out his life. Undoubtedly, Ambedkar's Buddha and his Dhamma critically required for the society like India to march towards a goal of unity, fraternity and progress.

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